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With false ambition what had I to do?
Little with love, and least of all with fame-
And yet they came unsought, and with me grew,
And made me all which they can make -a name.
Yet this was not the end I did pursue;
Surely I once beheld a nobler aim.
But all is over -I am one the more
To baffled millions which have gone before.

~~Byron

I. Salvage

"Give me that! --Hey!"

The cadet was on her way out when she heard a laugh. Starting at the sound, she only saw at first a soft gold head of hair atop a long, well-formed frame in an officer's uniform, surrounded by others as they all jostled their way through to the main path. Probably en route to the transport, she surmised.

Despite her shrugging them off, her stare was caught on them for a long moment. Their familiar jests and carefree laughter rang in her ears. When the female ensign threw a particularly pointed quip, the fair-haired man flung back one of his own without missing a beat.

When the ensign glanced over her way, however, the cadet killed her distraction. Collecting her PADDs more closely to herself, she strode away in her own right, taking the path that cut through the same field to the warp laboratory. Her crisp black uniform snapped with her pace; her heels sounded evenly beneath her small feet. Her eyes were nailed upon her destination.

She couldn't help but glance aside once more, though. The young ensign, still in possession of his friend's PADD, had shot off in a full sprint, leaving the other ensign to run after him.

"Come on, Macarden, you're faster than that!" he called back to her.

"We don't have time for this!" she protested.

The young man didn't care. He danced around on the grass as if he'd known no other life, totally free,

with nothing to lose.

"You want it, you'll have to catch me!"

The cadet watched, betrayed by jealousy. She didn't want to--she tried not to, and cursed herself for being childish when she did--but she wished for a moment that she'd ever had that kind of friendship, could prance around like that, would feel so liberated. Stupid behavior, really...that she knew she'd never enjoy.

It was possible; she retreated, cursing herself again for being so pessimistic. It was only her second semester, after all, and though she'd had fallouts with her instructors and a few more other cadets and recently ousted her boyfriend, she was getting good grades, had made the track team and was starting to get herself into to the routine, if not the Starfleet culture.

She wanted it to work. It had to. She couldn't go back home.

She could still hear their laughter long after she passed.

It *would* work. It was possible.

The sounds of the laughter never left her.

Not three years later, she knew exactly how much was possible. Her hands ruined with grime and overwork, clenched beneath the remains of a engine drive that had finally blown and now spit coolant over the deck in spite of her efforts, she sucked a breath and prepared her explanation to the captain, that in no uncertain terms would another rebuild save them. While she knew he wouldn't listen--which was just as aggravating--she wasn't about to let it go.

Then she heard the laughter, and she saw them on that bright green lawn. She paused.

Why the memory found her then, she didn't know. She didn't try to figure it out, either. Instead, she wiped her sweat-slicked arms and straightened her back to stretch it.

It wasn't worth the work, she told herself as her stare locked upon the shambles.

She didn't bother trying to figure out how she'd gotten herself in that mess--not anymore. It wasn't worth the energy.

Not worth much at all, considering the bright future she'd thought she'd have not four years ago, when she left her homeworld, only to see all that idealism rot; to feel that crushed pride, to realize she'd screwed that up so badly, thinking she could have anything to do with Starfleet. She was too frustrated to care whose fault it was the day she left, not bothering to say goodbye. Not that anyone was expecting the sentiment.

Then, finally free of the mistake she'd gotten herself into, she soon realized she had nowhere to go. She had no plan, only knew she wanted to work, do what she knew how to do. That would give her at least some satisfaction, some experience to build on while she decided what to do with it all. She didn't need a textbook for that.

What she needed was to feel busy.

So, she wandered, not asking for much while looking for better. A few months into her travels, she got lucky and landed a position at the maintenance facility at Kabol-Five. It was often beneath her, but it

was an occupation and a good chance to study different ship designs up close and continue her education in her off time. Only a year and a promotion later, the facility was dismantled due to the tensions in the area. With only two weeks' warning, the junior engineer found herself without a job again, as the Kaboli government chose not to keep on any alien workers. She left before her last scheduled day, cursing the Kaboli, her useless supervisor--who had quickly made arrangements for himself without thinking about his so-called team--and especially cursing the stupid idea that she might get somewhere with that job.

Drifting for a month or so, her money and her temper running short and finally being dropped off at the Ulinas Trade Station, she discovered a sign-in for tradeship applicants. Not seeing much other choice, she submitted herself to the degrading process of interviewing with ship captains only to end up on grime-coated salvage rejects with too little light, rotten food and no respect. One bad situation into an even worse one, and every ship she happened to get a job on couldn't prevent making her situation bitterer still.

Worst part about it, she'd asked for that, too. It didn't take long for her to learn there wasn't much for any Academy dropout without more than one real job under their belt to do but slag around on frontier tradeships for little more than living expenses, looking and feeling about as promising as any greasy warp coil, stuck with herself and her none too glorious path there...

No, it wasn't worth the trouble to ruminate on, but she couldn't quash those memories, that hope and promise, prancing and laughing on a bright green grass. That she would ever attain such an unguarded disposition was now farther away than she ever imagined it would be.

Such was her memory, so perfect, that as she strode away from her last hire at the Minjau Trade Base, her bags in her hands, she didn't place it with the dirty blond-haired man at the foot of an old freighter, casting a hard glare at the hull from bridge to stern as he tapped on a PADD. In fact, she hardly noticed him at all when he waved in a load of supplies with a lazy hand, then walked into the belly of a freighter, slapping the door control when he got inside.

Her eyes on her destination, she didn't look over again, mostly for the unremarkable qualities of the ship and the fact that it was readying for takeoff. They'd already gotten what they came for. Making her way around the drydocks, trying not to look lost on a station she'd not yet been to, she finally found a guide and followed it to the main building.

As the pigeon of a ship she'd passed floated upwards from its dock and turned slowly in the air, she moved into the registration alcove and punched her name and status, "for hire," into the visitor's log.

She didn't pay attention to the atmospheric boom behind her. Instead, she grabbed the handles of her small satchel and tool kit and moved herself into the corridor of the base. Nothing new there, she knew with just a glance. Just another crowded, stripped-down trade depot, the fifth she'd had to sign in to in six months.

After that half year of freight work, everything already looked the same, right down to the slate gray bulkheads, flimsy kiosks selling local and "exotic" wares, the smells of the various peoples combined with the easier mix of system emissions and the occasional fried circuit. Men and women alike checked out the new face, though the former often did with more than a cursory stare, maybe even a grin they were too stupid to withhold.

She disliked them all--everything there--immediately, and she knew none of those people were really worth her time. Not that she had many choices in the matter until she found an opportunity worth more than temporary status that wanted her as well. She'd formed a particular distaste for those layovers, mainly because she did have to deal with those people eventually. After finding an assignment, she found

it easier to relax--alone in her work, the way she preferred it. The work would come to her soon.

Or at least she counted on that much. She'd waited for two weeks on one station and quickly learned that the worst thing that could happen to a contract-seeker was to let the station leeches get to know their schedule.

She was lucky to still have her few belongings and tool kit. They'd taken everything else, forcing her to fix replicators on that lousy station to pay her way until an opportunity came up. She came out of that experience determined to get in and out of those ports as quickly as possible.

Thankfully, Minjau looked busy, which spoke for that region of "frontier" Federation space. She'd seen the number of ships on the docking field, mentally counted how many people there looked like captains--who didn't look too busy, but walked the corridors, coolly curious. With her growing résumé, it wouldn't be too long before someone contacted her. If she managed to keep herself centered during the interview, they would be less unsure about hiring a half-Klingon--not that all of them minded. Some of them actually thought they could get something useful from that slice of genome.

She hadn't expected much different--or at least she tried not to go into anything anymore with the same idiot optimism she'd had when she went to the Academy.

So, she propelled herself beyond the busy causeway, through the central terminal and to the living spaces, where she found her assigned room within another minute. Dropping her bag inside the door, she walked across the small space and let herself fall onto the bed, turning onto her side once there.

Her eyes closed, she drew a deep breath, feeling the relief of both rest and solitude, both of which had been rare during her last assignment. It'd been a hard two-way job, three weeks stuck beneath a hissing warp chamber for most of that time, trying desperately to keep it working. The captain of that ship managed to scrape enough out of that deal to drydock his freighter--and rotate his crew.

The engine room hire had no problem with that and caught the next transport without more than a nod of goodbye. Twelve hours later, she was at square one again.

Soon enough, she'd be contacted. With any luck, it'd be a better place than the last. It was all she could hope for.

She breathed again, stretched her slim, muscular arms above her head to relieve an unusual bout of stiffness.

Her eye twitched at a light in the corner of her eye. Blinking, she glanced to a porthole window. The clouds had pulled away, revealing a clear, sunny day.

"Computer," she muttered, closing her eyes again, "close window blind."

Six months and three ship assignments later, she could at times still feel the sunshine warming her soft hair and clean clothes; hear their laughter reverberating in her ears as they jostled on the manicured lawn.

Covered with sweat and streaked with black soot, hungry and overtired, she forced a compositor alignment with her bare hands and prayed it would work long enough for her to reactivate the warp drive.

They had everything to live for; at the time, she thought she could have it, too, if only...

"We'll never make our deadline! Where is our warp drive, Torres?!"

Anger flared into her temples as she heard Mesler's whining over the comm. As she considered jumping up and beating the snot out of that stupid, sniveling Bolian, that memory insanely decided to invade her again.

"I thought you said you were an *engineer*!"

The lawn, so green, the air, crisp and fresh, the smell of the cool dew, and their laughter echoed as she watched her grease-stained hands pull open a relay socket and tried to breathe in that stifling hole. That mixed with Mesler's incessant screaming and a ship that was about to fall apart at the threads made her temples pound with stress.

She recalled all too clearly the mingling tinges of jealousy and hope, and actually, stupidly, trying to radiate a little of that cheer, opening up to people who ended up being worthless or not understanding her as much as they thought they did.

She tried anyway, just so she could be more disappointed than before--with *that* memory, too, to carry with her.

Coolant steam hissed in tune with Mesler's curses over the crackling comm, and the memory of the laughter echoed behind it all.

Something's got to stop this, she thought, cringing to try and push the laughing, happy images away. *I can't keep doing this. I can't keep doing this...*

She never forgot wanting it; recalling it again made the lack of having it all too plain, again and again. She'd wanted it. Really wanted it.

You do this to yourself. You bring this on...

"More speed, Torres! What are you *doing* down there?!"

Throwing down her tools, she spun to find and shut off the most annoying noise up first.

As she strode across the bay to disconnect the comm control, she could not have known that her captain's curses over the comm were probably his last.

Nor could she have known the reason Mesler was screaming at her to get the ship moving faster, even as an approaching Cardassian ship shot a clean phaser stream from its forward banks into the ship's belly, knocking her forward. Hitting her knees, she whipped her head back and saw the ricocheting charge begin to sizzle through the engine's useless core. Then, the impulse generator she'd been fighting with throughout her assignment groaned and shorted, popping off a housing cover in the death throes. A low hiss followed, and an entirely different and insidious sort of steam began to crawl from its grave.

Without the briefest thought to try to avert what was happening at that point, she scrambled to the automatic firewall. The doors slammed shut behind her as she skidded into the manual control panels there. Staring wildly at the greasy display and her two choices there--shutdown or self-destruct--she glanced through the grate at the drive plasma, quickly filling the deck. With a few taps, she shut off the plasma injectors and antimatter chamber.

To her surprise, the engines did exactly as she asked. "First time for everything," she smirked, shutting down a few more systems before giving up the panel. She knew there was another one in the

forward hold that would give her more information, like any possibility of getting to a supply station without help.

Before she could turn for the access corridor, she saw the light in the corner of her eye--streams...a transporter, nothing like anything powered by that wreck, she knew in a glance. It took only a couple quick heartbeats to figure out what was going on that time, and to remember she didn't have a weapon.

Then she heard the voices.

"Check the cargo. Scan for weapons materials. Look for any surviving crew and dispose of them."

"Yes, sir."

She'd never heard those dialects before. Ducking into an open hold behind a stack of empty canisters, she did manage, however, to peek around and get a glimpse of the forms that had come with that light--and she *did* recognize that, what they carried in their gray, ridged hands, and where they were now heading.

"Shit."

"Got it. Yeah, that's Mesler's cruddy warp signature, all right. --Time to pay up, ol' buddy. We got you."

"Can you put the barge onscreen? Mesler wouldn't have stopped without a reason."

"I might if I reconnect...Hold on a sec. Yeah, that should do-- Crap! They're not alone! Get us--"

"Have the Cardassians spotted us yet?"

"Screw the Cardies! There's *another* ship on approach!"

"I see it....This is turning out to be a interesting game of tag. They're locals."

"Are you trying to make me feel better?"

"No. --Let's hold up a bit, see what they're up to first before we give up...*That* was an interesting move. I didn't know people pulled Kresjii maneuvers anymore."

"I hate you sometimes, you know."

"I know the feeling. Easy, now."

She groaned when she moved, but sucked back the sound when she heard new echoes forming in the hold. It was like water in a pipe at first, and then coupled with voices. The steady hiss of steam masked

the words at first. But she knew they were voices.

She wondered who the hell it was this time.

Not that she would have been able to prevent a second set of visitors. Obviously, no one had stopped the first ones--the Cardassian ship that had effortlessly disabled Mesler's barge, killed Mesler and the others, then came for her.

Blood trickled from her mouth and over her brow ridge and temple. Her arms shook as she tried futilely to push herself up, but her torso and everything past it felt like a ton of duranium. Her body, already caked with soot from that horrible engine Mesler probably never did intend to fix, bore a cold layer of sweat, more weight still upon her as she heard, barely, the movements in the hold just ahead.

The Cardassian had left her to bleed merely for lack of time. She wondered bitterly what she was thinking when she actually thought she could escape, hide just long enough for them to deal with Mesler and go away. Even if she'd had the bridge to herself, any decent *shuttle* could have blown that crummy little freighter to dust. She tried to crawl around the intruders anyway; after being found, she was stupid enough to try to fight him, and so the man twice her size struck her to the floor with a single swat--and didn't stop there.

Indeed, she had been stupid enough to piss him off when she *knew* she didn't have any way out, learned with painful accuracy that sparring at the Academy was very different to being beaten to the ground by someone who didn't care about his victim's survival. Oddly, the pain wasn't as troubling to her as the inability to push herself up.

Gratefully, in her last bits of consciousness, she'd seen the shimmer of a transporter take them away as a crack and rattle shook the bulkheads. Another attacker.

Just what this piece of crap needs, she'd thought as her head fell to the deck.

Minutes later, still trying to force herself to stay awake, she knew what she heard ahead wasn't anything Cardassian. She'd memorized their inflection and would never, never forget the sounds they made and the officer's snide smile.

Still, she wasn't so naive to think that just because the Cardassians were gone everything was okay. There were several varieties of scum in the quadrant, of equal and varying degrees and all wanting something. Unfortunately, she had already run across more of those sorts than not. There were several *humans* she'd prefer not to meet again.

She heard a familiar systems whirr, then, "Hey, come take a look at this."

"That's some of it at least," was the response a moment later. "Good thing, too. We're really needing it."

As if she hadn't already thought it was as bad as it could get, but to be at the so-called mercy of whoever won the day there. She didn't even have stinking Mesler to back her up--as if he would have in the first place.

Hell, he'd have probably sold me off, too--or tried to.

She took a couple breaths, stuffing down the heat that came with those thoughts, which really weren't worth thinking.

What *was* worth thinking about was trying to figure out how to get out of it--again. Protecting herself and what was left of the ship--even if what she was *in* it wasn't hers and was apparently illegal--somehow became a priority within the very little she had left.

She didn't bother to wonder why.

Rather, she tried again to peel herself from the ground, blinking away the stinging blood from her eye, and ignoring the pain, the anger, the fear...

"Damned Mesler," came another voice, a thin growl around the corner--maybe human. The accent was strange, so she couldn't be certain if it was a human dialect or translation. "Should have known he couldn't keep this jug strung well enough to finish the job."

"Pays to be cheap," said another man, likely human, more cautious, appraising...nearing. His heels were like wood pipes, a hollow pang with each step upon the grate floor, slow and rhythmic. Then they stopped, scraped slightly, then silenced again. "Something's held it together long enough to get it this far, though."

Yeah, me.

Her arms buckled, sending her down to the deck again. She grunted with frustration, but stifled any further noise. They knew Mesler--which wasn't exactly something that earned her trust right off.

"Well, there's nothing we can do for him now. Might as well get what's ours."

"The Cardassians take much?"

"Not that I can see. These crates are still packed in. I don't think our heavy parts were here in the first place, though...No, I think those other visitors distracted them in time."

"Think we should grab it all, then, before that other ship comes back?"

"I'm not about to make any enemies. But we can finish Mesler's job--if that other ship isn't already looking for their share. I don't want any more trouble than we've got already."

"Gotcha."

**Another* ship?* She blew her breath against the deck. "Damn, damn, damn you, Mesler."

"Let's get to work. --And get Savan down here to look at these holds, tell us where they're from. You get on the circuits back there, get the computer up before either one of those ships come back. Upload the crew records and dump us from the mainframe. Use what you need to do it--quick and dirty if you have to."

"Will do."

A couple moments passed, with a shuffling away and then several seconds of silence. She waited, trying futilely in the dark to spot something to grab hold of--if she could even reach that far.

The steps came closer, and she felt her heart pounding again, half with anxiety and half with the pain, steadily increasing. Bruises had formed where she'd been kicked and struck. She was starting to get a good mental image of what they'd done to her.

*Better than what they *could* have done*, she reminded herself.

Unfortunately, her lousy day wasn't over yet.

She saw the light, a glimmer of yellowish white in the dark amber emergency lights. It stilled for a moment, then flickered around, searching, then pointed ahead again. With an effort, she pulled her sprawling leg closer in; out of the path of the light was apparently following. At the same time, she wondered why they hadn't detected her lifesign yet.

Tricobalt signatures, she answered herself. The idiot Mesler hadn't bothered, but the Cardassian was more than happy to inform her that her dead captain had been carrying weapons. Not that it surprised her. She hadn't taken the job for his virtuous reputation.

The light danced around the corridor, finding nothing much on that end but some spare stores and sooty bulkheads, products of an owner who didn't care much about the holds as much as what he'd get out of them, which was at least part of his undoing. The light showed that keeping a good ship was more important than the prize that could come from it. The ship was what kept a body alive in that unforgiving space. The light bounced, but slowed for a moment for an odd shadow at the side, an unusual curve on the angular ship, perhaps only a shadow that shouldn't have been...

Her eyes fluttered; her head spun anew. The stress and the pain were starting to get to her despite her natural resistance. Her heart flickered weakly, too drained to do much more.

But everything else in her mind told her not to...not to...

The light came, turned...

"We have a survivor!"

The sudden noise startled her eyes open again, and she blearily looked past the light to the figure looming above her, a steady form silhouetted in the dim light, then quickly crouching down beside her. He looked human. He smelled of something vaguely stale.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Eh...Engineer," she gasped.

"Got a name, Engineer?"

"B'Elanna...Torres."

A pause, then a quick nod. "My people are on board. You're safe now."

She didn't say anything--couldn't, really--but squinted to try to focus on the man. He was still only a shadow in that corner, though he checked her over briefly, laid a steady hand on her arm.

"We've got some medicines in stock and someone who knows how to use them," he told her. "If necessary, we can find a doctor. You'll be okay."

"Thanks," she coughed.

Without warning, he ducked around to peer out of the hold. "You have the medkit?"

There was no answer, though a lighter patter echoed down the corridor. Quick yet perfectly timed, it seemed as though the person approaching had calculated an appropriate pace and obeyed it.

The steps halted at the entrance to the hold.

"Jerod asked me to inform you that the Cardassians have left the area, and that the 'tag team' has returned--alone," a female stated.

Just great, B'Elanna thought, growling as a new slice of pain ran up her leg.

"I'll handle it," the man replied, easing his hand off her arm to stand. "Take care of her."

"Our transporters are still offline," the woman told him as she knelt with the kit.

"Not that they were much to begin with."

"My point remains: She will be unable to climb out of the hold."

"I guess it was too much to hope Mesler's were any more useful. I'll send Ridge to carry her up."

As quickly as he'd lowered himself by her, he was gone again, moving off towards the main cargo bay, where several other voices had started up.

"Look, we're not here to take anything that's yours," came a lean voice down the corridor. "We came to get what's ours, and that's all."

"That was convenient," was the suspicious reply.

"What, you don't believe us?"

"I think you're too interested in this storeroom for someone who's already found their part of the cargo."

"We didn't know this was yours," the first man insisted. "We came because Mesler was late and we were nearby--just like you, I guess."

"Or you could have been tracking Mesler."

"You think we're stupid enough to take on the Cardassians, you've got to fix more than your--"

"Jerod." It was the man who had left--calm, but with an edge that spoke of having the last word. "I'll take care of this. Do me a favor and trade off with Ridge. I need his hands for a minute. Savan needs help."

"You got it," Jerod responded sourly. "I was already sick of this, anyway."

Though it was painful, B'Elanna tried to turn her head, perhaps to get a glimpse of what was going on. Several more people had come into the storeroom and sounded busy. Just as she began to get a good look inside the hold, though, the woman who had already opened a medkit and a tricorder easily pressed the engineer back to the deck.

"Do not attempt to move," Savan said, her tone as even and impassive as the rest of the ship was excited. "The captain will take care of the situation. You are safe with us."

Another instrument came out and was activated. It was aimed at B'Elanna's bloody brow a moment later.

"Anything bad?" Torres asked, still trying to look around.

"You have a concussion, several lacerations, two broken ribs and a fractured knee," was the answer. "You have lost a notable amount of blood. You will require more than I can treat here, but will on our ship. Please remain still."

"What's going on in there?" she asked. She could hear a couple people coming close again. "Who's collecting the cargo besides your people?"

"If you remain quiet, perhaps we will find out," Savan answered. "And I would recommend silence. Allow our captain to deal with the other crew as he is best able. More, not exerting yourself further will assist in your recovery."

"Sorry, not my specialty," Torres returned.

The other woman didn't acknowledge the sarcasm. "This does not surprise me. However, it would be the wiser thing for you to do."

The nearing steps, heavy and deliberate, stopped. For several seconds, the commotion in the main bay took precedence, many voices in several dialects, mostly roughened and tired, cursing and even laughing, too. People who knew each other and yet the conversations were not too casual as they opened cases and moved them around.

Torres hardly breathed in those seconds; more curious than she wanted to admit, and also realizing how tired she was once she'd stopped trying to move. Still, she listened, waited and then saw...

The men released each other's hands after a firm but quick handshake--as much respect as could be had between strangers with competing interests.

Their appraising stares did not break for as long as they had stopped in the dim, musty corridor, too. One saw a man around forty, with salt and pepper hair and a dark tattoo on his forehead. Wide-shouldered and dressed in earthy browns and leather, his eyes were like a turtle's, solid and unblinking. He stood evenly on his feet. From what she could see of him, the other man had rumpled dark blond hair, was a little taller, leaner, and had his weight shifted, which added a certain swagger to his well-postured frame. Torres watched his head tilt as he briefly scanned the room.

The other man remained hard and solemn. The men's eyes met again, less challenging that time, but still cautious.

"You're the captain?" the fairer man asked.

"Yes." Sober, curious, the older man seemed as cautious as the others were. "I get the feeling we're sharing space for our purchases."

"Actually, the cargo is mostly yours. Ours are barely here, from what I can see. I'd like to see if there's anything else, though."

"You might already know why that could make my people uncomfortable."

"That's the way of the world out here."

"And what way do you want it to be?"

"The easiest one. You get yours, we'll get ours--and the salvage of the ship, if you don't mind, and we'll be on our way. Good enough?"

"The salvage?"

"Mesler didn't only owe us a few supplies," the fair man said. "He owed a portion of a profit we helped him to last time we came through here. It's why we decided to catch up with him. But I think we can make up for some of it with some key parts from the ship--granted any of it works."

B'Elanna sniffed for want of a laugh.

"I'd like it if we could discuss some of those systems," the older captain said, cautious again. "I happen to be in need of a memory core."

"Yeah, I'm sure you could use it--and keep it out of anyone else's hands. I'm not going to want it, so we don't even have to make that deal. The last thing I need is a point inspection to turn up anything in a spare memory core that'd implicate my crew. The Federation is getting paranoid enough that they'd look for it."

This interested the darker man. "You think?"

"I take it you haven't been around zero-zero-one in a while. Well, I'll admit I haven't either, but certain...factions are making themselves pretty well-known, and making Starfleet nervous--as you've probably noticed. Word is they might start doing something about it."

"It's what I've expected," the captain said, still appraising the man before him. Finally, he gave another nod. "Thank you."

"Let me know if my crew can help you in any way while we're all here," the fair man said graciously. "My ship doesn't deal in the sort of cargo the Mesler was willing to, but we're not blind to what's going on, either. We're careful, but we get by all right."

"I don't want to insult you, Captain, but judging by the look of your ship, you're just doing that." The tattooed captain turned his gaze. "You could do more."

The fair man showed no reaction, even as he said, "We could also land ourselves in a Federation penal resort according to the new treaty--which is the last thing I'll let happen to myself or my crew. There're plenty of other traders in this area willing to make deals inside the region. I think you should assess the conditions of *their* ships before looking at mine, much as it might want for better."

"I understand."

"I'm glad you do. So, why don't we check our stores and see how much Mesler cheated us?"

"Good idea." The Maquis extended his hand once more. The other man shook it. "Hope you don't mind we don't introduce ourselves."

"You know the look of my ship well enough and you've probably scanned it to dust already. And I'll know you in a crowd. That's more than enough for me."

With a pat on the Maquis' shoulder, the younger captain led them away and back to the main cargo

hold. On the way, he waved to his technician, a dark, husky man who had to duck to miss the coolant pipes after he leapt down from the docking ladder.

"Where do you need me?" he asked.

"In the forward hold," the fair captain told him, pointing. "Help them out, will you?"

"Will do, Tom."

He rolled his eyes, but let it go with a shake of his head as he leaned against a ladder and contacted his bridge.

The Maquis captain had likewise not missed the name, but said as much about it as he continued into the next hold to ask about their progress.

Meanwhile, the burly technician made his way through the darkened corridor of Mesler's ship, ducking under another cross of pipes and hoisting his toolbox sling more comfortably onto his shoulder. Looking around, he snorted. "Never thought this old barge could get any worse."

But he forgot that long standing joke as soon as he saw the skirt of Savan's tunic, just visible inside the next juncture--and forgot about his tools, too, when he saw what his captain really needed him to do. His burden was lying below Savan's typically plain stare.

The kid was just that--barely old enough to be out of college; small-built and sort of pretty, for what he could see of her past the mop of short, dark curls that were half-crushed against her face. Despite her disarray, she looked totally out of place--at least to him--on Mesler's barge. She wasn't all Klingon, either, he could tell, not only by her appearance, but also in her expression. Bruised and ripped, covered with engine slag, the young woman still had an oddly peaceful look on her face as she slept.

"Use caution with her leg," Savan told him, tucking away the hypospray she had utilized moments before Ridge's arrival. "Her knee is broken."

"Damned Cardassians," Ridge muttered as he knelt down beside his Vulcan crewmate. Easing the patient into his powerful arms, he lifted her effortlessly from the deck. "Wish they'd find someone their own size to pick on--leave us alone."

"Unfortunately, that is not the case," Savan replied, rising to her feet and slipping around the bulky man to lead the way out to the main hold.

He turned the limp form onto his shoulder and followed without another word. Thankfully, the Maquis there all but ignored them. They had their own business to deal with. Catching Tom's glance, he blinked a reassuring nod as he approached. Tom had a thing about injured people--normal, of course, but he tended to take it too much to heart. Ridge understood why well enough, so as came to the ladder, he told the captain, "We'll take care of her."

"See if she's got any personal belongings, a bunk or anything," Tom ordered quietly. "She won't be staying here."

"I'll send Maryl," Ridge said, reaching up for the highest rung of the ladder to pull himself and his burden up.

After the technician disappeared into the docking hold, Tom Paris remained near the ladder. His arms crossed as he watched the other captain's crew quickly assemble their cargo and beam it out of the bay,

bit by bit. Their banter both rough and good-natured but not distracting from their business for an instant, they were like army ants on a watermelon.

It was a bad business, Tom knew, and the Maquis were increasingly a bad sort to mix with. A few of them had already stared him down, thinking who-knew-what about why he was there and waiting as he was, though a couple of them gave him some ideas.

"Don't forget to scrub the floor when we leave," a Bajoran woman smirked at him as she turned an assembly on its side. "Cardassians like to train their servants on squeaky tile."

"Guess you'd know," Tom replied coldly, turning his stare askance when her eyes narrowed. "Tell me, you like it doggie style or with your wrists tied to the girders?"

She snarled and jerked her attention back to the remaining inventory. "You'd better watch yourself," she muttered.

"Just do your work," Tom told her. "Your fight's not with me."

"It could be," she warned.

"Much as you seem to enjoy Cardassian booty, I don't think you or your captain would appreciate the Federation crawling up your ass for knocking off a registered tradeship in what should have been neutral territory when you're supposedly defending some colonies no one seems to agree on. Do your job and take your fight back where it belongs."

A few of the others mumbled some choice words his way for that one.

Tom didn't care. He hadn't come there for the congeniality prize, and tradesmen in general weren't usually respected, even when they were honest. Rather, a straight tradesman was more a liability to the Maquis, who depended on silence and underhanded deals to get by. So, he didn't try to convince them otherwise. He just wanted his materials and what parts could make up for Mesler's ineptitude in actually finishing a bargain honestly, and he wanted to get the hell out of the DMZ. Were he very lucky, he wouldn't have to bring the ship back to that part of space.

With that thought in mind, he tapped his shoulder to activate his communicator. "Maryl, you have our docking at Podala worked out yet?"

"I haven't been able to patch in again since we got in this mess," was her clipped reply, "and I haven't gotten a reply yet. You'll know when I do."

"Okay." Pushing himself from the wall, he moved aft to see how Jerod was coming with accessing the optical data network. The technician was hidden behind the main computer core, doing just that. Grabbing a demagnifyer, Tom moved in to start on the sensor grid and prioritize what else they might salvage from engineering. Having already breezed through there, he knew it was a mess, but it wasn't a total waste.

He knew it again when he returned to the organized chaos still steaming and sparking but otherwise dead. Looking around at the many attempts to string together that battered rig, Tom knew that Mesler had somehow picked up a good engineer.

Tom grinned to himself as he tapped a dim monitor to life. Maybe the young woman now lying in the lab on his ship was crazy enough to take the job he had open. She'd worked for Mesler, after all.

He shrugged about it a moment later. Whatever she might be, she wasn't in any shape to do much there and then.

He tapped his shoulder again. "Ridge. --Care to come down to share the grease in Mesler's bucket?"

"Just put the cricket down, actually," the man answered. "I'll be there in two minutes. --Though, I'll still wish it were the grease at the bottom of a bowl of fried oysters. Have I told you recently how delicious they were?"

Tom managed an uneasy grin at that, shaking his head as he turned to the impulse housing--the first thing he decided should come out. "Asshole."

"And cute as hell to boot. Be down in a bit."

The comm was cut, but Tom was already elbow-deep in the bulkhead, staring in awe of the work he saw there. It was almost a shame to take it out.

A moment later, however, the disengaged grid housing was in a crate to take back to his ship and he was working on the next one. The juncture would come next; the manifold itself would follow. It was usually an easy extraction.

The thought playing in his mind, and looking around to see that he was indeed alone, he walked around to the hold to find Jerod. Crouching down, he saw two boots and a set of hands stuck up into the ODN's main access panel. "How's it coming along?" he asked.

"Almost done," the technician replied, not looking away from his work.

He nodded to himself, said quietly, "I need you to do something else--now, if you can."

"I'm in right now. What is it?"

"Your tea okay?" Tom asked as he motioned to the teapot he'd snagged from Jerod's quarters on his way up to the lounge.

The effort was a sort of thanks, even if Tom had been ticked off when the Maquis asked for more than was originally requested--first the memory core, then the primary power nodes, and then the central isolinear matrix. Meanwhile, the way his crew stuck so closely to him, he'd half expected the Maquis captain to hold their meeting in public, too.

It seemed the tan and tattooed man was wiser than that, however, and carried his carefulness over to his dealings. Simple and direct without giving anything away but what he wanted, he also had a talent for extracting information without asking for it. None from his surly group had accompanied him; he chose to let his singular presence do the work.

Tom likewise asked his crew to leave that meeting to him. They were more than happy to.

"I'm fine, thank you." Captain Chakotay leaned back in the chair he'd chosen, a wide, spare rack with a back on it, facing the door. He watched the other man nod, more to himself as he warmed his hands on the sides of his mug.

The young captain wasn't a bad dealer, Chakotay surmised. He was deceptively casual, easy-going, subtle in the negative, generous in the positive. He knew where to draw the line, and that in a pleasantly tenacious way that was slightly annoying--a part of his method, Chakotay understood.

"I hope you don't mind my taking the hull for scrap," Tom said, finally leaning back in his seat to drink the cup he'd made for himself, as Irish a coffee as he could manage so far away from anyone who knew what a good whiskey might be.

Chakotay shook his head. "Saves us the time and trouble," he answered. "For that matter, you still have some latinum coming to you."

"Thank you," Tom said, simple yet sincere. He really did want to make up for what he could. They'd lost two weeks when Livich cut out on them, not to mention forty bars of latinum for Mesler's double-playing them. Worse, Tom felt like an idiot for allowing Mesler to convince him he'd follow through.

"You're welcome," Chakotay replied. "To be honest, I'm glad we were able to work out our mutual problem. I think we're all getting as much as we can with this arrangement. It's good to know we can be reasonable, in spite of our different priorities."

Nine out of ten says he was Starfleet somewhere along the line, Tom smirked to himself. "Nice to know we agree."

They'd finally agreed to split both the power nodes and the parts from the central computer. The Maquis would have the main unit and the memory core. The trader claimed to be satisfied with the distribution matrix, comm relay and sensor manifolds.

It wasn't a bad deal, Chakotay knew, considering how much Mesler had cheated the tradeship. He had become unused to dealing with traders who wanted equal outcomes--or maybe the younger man just wanted to be on his way without earning a grudge. Not a bad idea. Cargo vessels like that one didn't need enemies, though many of them had made quite a few for their necessarily underhanded dealings. Those sorts did whatever they could to get by.

The Maquis employed quite a few of them.

Still, Chakotay honestly didn't suspect that this was the case, even if the other captain hadn't yet mentioned the casualty from Mesler's ship that hadn't been "buried."

"I was told your technician carried a body out of one of the holds."

Tom finished his sip and swallowed with a nod. "One of my people was injured while investigating the forward compartments." It wasn't a complete lie: Jerod cut his finger on a casing while working on the central subprocessor. Either way, just for that the Maquis captain thought to ask after something that shouldn't have concerned him, Tom wasn't about to confess it.

"I hope she's recovering," Chakotay ventured, his eyes hunting over the other man's reactions. "They said she was bad off, dirty compared to the rest of your crew."

"Can't expect much different from a determined engineer--especially on *this* ship," Tom said lightly, adding a chuckle for effect. "Just got too far into a dark hold, knocked over some containers and hurt her knee, bumped her head. I haven't heard the whole story yet. Luckily, my science analyst did some time in medical school. I'm lucky to have her."

"You are." Chakotay finished off his tea. It wasn't very good, but it was better than he'd had in

weeks. He could tell the man had diverted his question nicely, but he was content to drop his curiosity there. Maybe the captain was telling the truth about the crewperson--and if he wasn't, it didn't mean she knew anything about the Liberty. If necessary, however, he could find them again. The trader was quite correct in that the Liberty had scanned the little freighter down to the screws, thanks to Seska, her tenacity and her fast-acting hatred for the young captain.

In fact, the ship and its crew might make such an effort worthwhile. They had a few well-sealed cargo bays, a decent staff and a workable leader, all things Chakotay knew were worth their weight in latinum. Indeed, he would remember them.

"I wouldn't mind getting my hands on a medic," he continued, setting the cup on the table.

"I'll bet," Tom said, meaning it. "The colonies see a lot of action these days. You've got lots of reasons to need one." He held Chakotay's stare. "I hope you find someone soon."

"Thank you." A pause, then a press on his knees, and Chakotay stood. Regarding the younger captain anew, he offered his hand. "It was good doing business with you, Captain. I hope we have the chance to deal with each other again."

"Let's hope we stick around that long," Tom grinned, rising from his seat to shake the man's hand. "Thanks for making this as easy as it was. I wasn't expecting it."

"I wasn't, either. It's a nice surprise."

"Good luck to you, Captain."

Chakotay gave a nod of thanks and moved a step back. Tapping his commlink, he said, "Seska, has our salvage been transferred?"

"*Yes,*" came the reply, sounding none too happy with it. "*I noticed there wasn't much of it. How much did you give them?*"

"I gave them what was fair." Chakotay didn't address it further--wouldn't address it there, anyway. "One to transport."

"*Just a second. I have to reset the targeting frequency.*"

Chakotay furrowed his brow. "Is something wrong with the transporter?"

"*No,*" the woman replied. "*I'd just finished a decontamination analysis. I'm diverting power back to the transporters.*"

"I thought we irradiated the supplies already."

"*It's nothing you need to worry about,*" she insisted, then confirmed, "*It's ready now. Prepare for transport.*"

About ten seconds later, the Maquis captain dematerialized in a river of light, leaving the other captain alone in the lounge, his glass and an empty cup on the table at his side. A beat of silence filled the hollow room; the thrum of the engines followed it.

"About time," Tom muttered.

Glancing out the viewport to see the Maquis ship begin to turn off, he backed off to the door and strode the short distance forward to the small, worn bridge that had mostly been his home for the past two years. Some days, it felt like decades. That day was one of them.

Peeking over to a monitor to check their preset coordinates, he nodded and shot a glance to the ops station on his way to his seat.

"Maryl, get us the hell out of here, warp whatever you want."

"Gladly," she replied and tapped the initiator.

"We're about a light year clear of the DMZ," said a man, "so I think we're safe. We'll be at the Kimoa station in nine hours to drop off Mesler's bucket. I'll be getting a short rest, if nobody minds."

"This would be good for all involved," a calm female voice replied. "I cannot see any objection."

She breathed as she realized the voices were real and vaguely familiar. Quiet, ordinary, they were also moving around her. Sounds of metal objects being placed on surfaces echoed in the warm, slightly thick air. She thought for a moment she smelled moss.

"They were asking about her condition. They'd seen you and Ridge. The captain probably wanted to see if she had any information on him or his ship."

"It is unlikely she did. The records from the database Jerod uploaded suggests she was relatively new and not in Mesler's circle."

"Yeah, well I didn't think she looked like the type. --I know, appearances and all. But she didn't strike me as anything more than a hire."

She could feel a hand, warm and barely touching, rest upon her hair briefly. Then the touch was gone.

"She looks better." His voice was farther away that time, and the tings of small items being picked up and set down could be heard soon after.

"Indeed. Her Klingon physiology was helpful, as was her relatively good health."

"Relatively?"

"She has had prolonged exposure to dichromide gas, likely from Mesler's ship, where we found notable leaks and traces of the raw element in their holds. I have treated the cellular damage successfully."

"Good."

There was a shift of some objects behind her, and then a soft touch on her leg...a pained leg.

B'Elanna's eyes fluttered open. They first found a Vulcan woman who in human years looked in her thirties. Her age was likely twice that if not more. She had typically almond-shaped eyes, dark olive skin and a full mouth that was set as straight as her back; her hair was longer than most Vulcans wore it.

Average in stature but small-framed, her hands were likewise slim and careful as she realigned the device at work on her knee.

Glancing around the brightly lit room, B'Elanna knew it wasn't a sickbay or clinic. Plants burrowed in casings partially hid the drab, gray-green walls and rickety equipment on small bays sat in seemingly unplanned locations throughout the rest of the space. She was on a table across from an open passageway, where there seemed to be a corridor. It could have been any ship, but it sure wasn't Mesler's.

Then she remembered...

She remembered the voices, trying to pull herself up from the deck without success, the silhouette of the man, apparently the captain. She remembered the firm and quiet voice of the woman who had begun to treat her...then pressed something against her neck.

Her half-focused eyes narrowed to remember that. The Vulcan had sedated her. She didn't exactly recall fighting it, but even so...

"Do not attempt to sit yet," said the Vulcan. "Your globulin treatment is nearly completed, but your knee still undergoes regeneration."

"What did you do to me?" B'Elanna growled--or tried to. Her voice wasn't nearly as strong as she'd have had it. Not that it seemed to affect the woman either way.

The answer was simple. "I have treated your wounds."

"What happened to the ship?"

"It has been permanently disabled," she told her, examining the regenerator's power level for a moment. "We are taking it for salvage."

"Salvage?" Her brow drew down. "It wasn't yours to do anything with."

"Its captain and crew, aside from yourself, have been killed with none other but my crew and the Maquis crew holding interest in recovering their losses--Captain Mesler's debts to us."

"Strip the corpse," the engineer concluded darkly.

"A corpse has little use of its encasings," Savan replied truthfully. "The only logical course of action is to take the hull to those who might make use of it."

"If that's at all possible."

Savan acknowledged the sour edge of the young woman's statement with a bow of her head. "Your personal belongings have been collected, as has much of the work you put into your assignment." She met the woman's returned attention. "You have been given lodging in a former colleague's quarters for the duration of your stay."

B'Elanna hadn't expected that, or the sincerity in the Vulcan woman's voice. Nor had she thought about the few things she had managed to hang onto. "Thank you," she said. With another breath, she then asked, "Can you also tell me where I've ended up this time?"

Savan looked to a point behind B'Elanna's head. "Would you prefer to inform her, Tom?"

"You're on the Guerdon," he complied from where he was, still apparently moving items in the room.

B'Elanna blinked and tried to look around. The work stopped. Whatever the man had been doing behind her was given up to move into her field of vision.

She tried not to be surprised at his appearance. From his smooth tenor and her foggy memories from Mesler's dim cargo bay, she'd expected someone less intense--or at least his stare was that, surrounded by chiseled features that would have been handsome had it not been for his haggard facade. Darting her eyes over the rest of him, she quickly cataloged his rugged brown coat, hanging open and smudged with a long day's work and a greenish gray shirt that had likewise seen better days. The body they covered was a little lean, his skin slightly colorless. Still, his posture was straight, his slight turn on his mouth seemed friendly enough, and she sensed nothing in his presence that put her off right away.

"Sorry you're out of a job and a ship," he added.

B'Elanna nodded a brief acknowledgment. Being sorry wasn't much use to her. "So what's your plan?"

His brow flicked up with her question. "With Mesler's old barge? We've gotten everything we could from it--this divided with the Maquis group. Like Savan said, it's no good to anyone anymore, and Mesler did owe us our cargo, which wasn't there. He let his license go null a few years ago, but we did have formal agreement. So, Bolarus gave us permission to scrap it--which we would have, anyway. It's barely a repayment, but it'll have to do. We're on our way to Podala, with a stop at the Kimoa Range to drop the rig off."

His explanation was plainly put. He had no questions about what they were doing.

"Convenient enough." Still, it seemed right, the engineer mused, thinking again on the shrill curses about her former captain's cheating them and their relief in finding at least a few spare parts of their deal. Mesler had likely sold the supplies the Guerdon's crew had needed and used the latinum in his trust to buy the weapons that almost got her killed--and sent him most certainly to his grave.

She'd felt sorry for the annoying little man for a while, but now she had little problem knowing he'd earned it.

"You'll get your share when we get the sale," the captain assured her. "It won't be much, but--"

"My share?" B'Elanna asked.

"It only seems fair, since you're the one out of a job and not getting your pay from Mesler any time soon." He waved a hand behind him. "This ship works like a cooperative. Our licenses and the ship's registry are maintained on Bolarus, but our actual business and route is unaffiliated with any organizations or federations, so we control how the moneys are distributed. We split all earnings evenly among the crew, with a double share put into the pot for parts and supplies. But Mesler owed you, too, and so you get one share, like everyone else."

The engineer found herself in another pause. She hadn't expected that, either.

"In the mean time," he went on, "you're our guest, so make yourself at home while you're here." Hearing someone else come in, he looked back and gave a nod. "This is Maryl, our contract liaison."

B'Elanna glanced over and saw a blonde Bajoran woman standing in the entry. She was not much shorter than the captain.

Maryl gave her a blink of greeting. "I put your belongings in our old engineer's quarters," she told her.

Tom rolled his eyes, but quickly looked to B'Elanna again. "They're yours for as long as you need them to be. I know you're out of a job pretty suddenly and I'd like to help, if maybe there's a station you want to be dropped off at, or whatever."

B'Elanna snorted, picking up the hint that the Bajoran had so solidly dropped. "Well, I'm out of a job. Can you help with that?"

Tom immediately held a finger out towards Maryl, though his stare was still on the younger woman. At that angle, the shadows beneath his eyes were deeper than they had appeared before, ominous below his steady stare. Then he turned back to her. "As a matter of fact, we could use another set of hands in the engine room. --But I don't want you to jump right into that idea and I'll be the last to sell you to it. Be the guest for now, check things out, see how you feel about it."

"I can do the job," B'Elanna told him, irked with his caution and also with the Vulcan woman, who began to wave a tricorder around her head. She resisted the urge to swat at it. "Just because I was working on that piece of crap doesn't mean I couldn't have gotten anything else."

"Hell, the fact that it was still *moving* tells me that much." Ducking back to grab a box of loose parts, he caught her gaze once more, then gave her a single nod. "Fine. Have Ridge take you down to the engine room when you're up to it. But don't feel obligated to anything. There's plenty of time for making decisions."

With that, he turned and started out, looking at Maryl for a moment. "Let her get some rest, Maryl, when she's ready to go to quarters. I'll be doing the same soon after I drop this off."

Maryl's eyes grew as narrow as her grin. "Yes, Captain."

"Don't call me that," he said, heading out. "Just give her some time, okay?"

"Why wouldn't I?" the Bajoran replied archly, followed by a smirk once he was gone. Turning her attention to the engineer again, she shrugged and approached the table. "Don't mind Tom. He's just being polite."

"Oh?" B'Elanna asked, glancing to the door, then back to Maryl. "He seemed pretty straightforward to me."

Maryl snorted. "He's lying--badly, as usual. We're *desperate* for an engineer. He just won't go so far as to beg, or grab the first person available. He also wants to know you're not just talk, in spite of what we found in Mesler's engine room. Could've been the person before you that did all that work, for all we know."

B'Elanna had no response for that at first, but rather kept that curse to herself. She did need a job, after all, and she couldn't say she wouldn't want proof of a new person's talent before hiring them, too. "Those were my repairs," she said, "and I wouldn't mind proving it if it meant I could pick up another job without passing through the station system."

"I don't doubt that," Maryl returned. "If you'd take a contract on Mesler's barge, it's no question you're in it for the work." Seeing the twitch in the young woman's eye, though, she smiled understandingly. "Since he's the owner of this ship--and the official captain, like the title or not--Tom *is* the final say on who gets hired here and who doesn't. So you're going to have to play it by his suggestion."

"That's nice to know," the engineer said dully.

"It's just his style," Maryl dismissed. "If you stay, you'll learn pretty quickly that he's the most indirect when he *really* wants something. Hard lesson learned when he first came on board--which we all paid for dearly. Since he managed to scrape us out of that mess, he doesn't give away his hand until he's ready to, even if you're screaming in his face--which actually makes him worse. That said, I don't think he'd have told you anything if he wasn't interested."

B'Elanna turned her stare. "You say you're desperate for an engineer, but you seem willing to share the dirt on the captain. What's the deal?"

"The deal," Maryl told her, "is that if you're thinking about taking a position on this ship, you need to know what you're dealing with. As for dirt, I can tell you he's fair to a fault, flies the ship well and he's usually not an asshole. But he's got his share of problems, and he does his best to drown them with whatever's available on the open market. He's a highly functional drunk, though, so if you just accept it for what it is, he won't bother you."

"I'd be here to work," B'Elanna stated. "I'm not bothered by other people's problems."

"Maybe. Maybe not. But the last thing we need is to lose another person because they can't handle it--and need to drive everyone else crazy in the meantime."

B'Elanna frowned as she finally managed to sit up with the help of Savan, who wisely did not involve herself in the conversation. "I don't give up on my contracts just because things get dicey, whether it's because of a person or whatever piece of crap I have to work on. When I make an agreement, I stick to it."

Maryl laughed. "Anyone that could deal with Mesler for more than a two-way mission is honorable to the core."

At that, she cracked a grin. "Well, the plus side was that they usually left me alone otherwise," she admitted. "Just let me do my job, leave me alone when I ask and I won't have any issues that anyone else has to deal with. If that's all right with everyone here, I'll fit."

"I think you and I will get along just fine," Maryl said, visibly pleased with the engineer's crisp statements. "Welcome aboard... ?"

"B'Elanna Torres," she supplied, realizing that she hadn't even bothered to introduce herself before then. Even more proof she'd been in a dank engine room too long. Then again, the captain hadn't asked her, either.

"Maryl Hana. You've already met Savan, I suppose."

"Yes." B'Elanna looked at the Vulcan woman. "When can I leave?"

Savan blinked slowly, seeming to think in that second. "If the pain is manageable, you may leave now. As your blood loss was extensive and you are yet anemic from this and other chemical imbalances caused by your former environment, I suggest you rest, allow my treatments time to complete. Keep the regenerator on your leg. I will examine you again tomorrow to assure your recovery is continuing well."

B'Elanna hadn't even needed that much. She slid her legs off the table, sucking a breath for the sharp twinge in her ribs and knee, but wanting to get going more than it hurt. For that matter, she had a few things to think about, such as that "decision."

With a nod of thanks to Savan, she looked up at Maryl. "Where now?"

After checking in with Ridge and looking over the full stock they'd extracted from Mesler's barge, Tom arrived on the bridge and stepped down to the captain's chair. He found a blue-cased PADD sitting in the center of the seat. Looking across, he saw their Bajoran part-time hire typing quickly into Jerod's panel. In the systems closet outside the main bridge, he could hear Jerod cursing at his own rigging.

"How's it coming along, Nadrev?" Jerod asked over the comm.

"Good. We're almost there," the man answered. "The flux sensor is reading at full power."

"Keep an eye on it while I reroute the aft lateral array. Make sure the output doesn't drop below...let's go with seventy percent."

"I'm watching it now."

Tom didn't disturb them, but their dialog reminded him that they'd be dropping Nadrev off in only two more stops, at Deep Space Nine. He hoped they'd be able to afford to pick him up again, if he was available. They could live with their six specialized crew on the small ship, but the extra hands were usually worth their reserve funds.

Maybe get one or two cheap hires looking for training, he mused, picking up the blue-cased PADD so he could sit. Pulling up the console, he checked the Guerdon's coordinates and patched out a message to the Kimoa Salvage Range. They had already transmitted their request and list of sale, but the Kimoan manager always liked being contacted a few times before choosing to respond.

The message sent, Tom leaned back in his seat and considered what had been left for him. The PADD contained the Federation newsfeed, which Jerod regularly grabbed from the nearest station and uploaded it to the innards of that unmistakable shell. Drawing out a hand to pick it up again, he knew it had already been passed around to and digested by the rest of the crew. He never minded being the last one to see it, though. If there was anything the Guerdon needed to worry about, Maryl, usually the first to read the newsfeed in full, always felt free to tell him. If she happened to miss something, Savan would not.

With a click, his eyes darted over the headlines. It was nothing new: Just the Federation-Cardassian treaty going another round in the public eye, that time highlighting the colonists' negative reaction to the evacuation orders and the newly established Demilitarized Zone and some more information about the reaction from a "fringe group" who lately had given themselves a name for Starfleet and everyone else to remember: The Maquis. The allusion was not lost on Tom; his dabbles in Earth history and France made him well aware of its meaning--for the rebels and for the Federation.

About time Starfleet caught on, he thought, having known about those pockets of colonists for months. The discontent and insecurity on the border had long been news on the stations outside the so-called DMZ, and about six months ago, trades of basic supplies and rations became increasingly common--and larger. At first, of course, the traders didn't see it as anything except good preparedness on the colonists' part. Then came the requests for heavier inventories, such as defense materials, alloys and particular chemicals. Most recently, weapons and power supplies were the trade of choice for those willing to make those deals with customers bold enough to ask for what they needed outright.

Even so, only in the last few weeks had the Maquis found certain definition and recognition outside that region, since the treaty was signed. More, Starfleet officers were resigning and crossing over, as well as Bajorans not quite ready to sign *anything* with the Cardassian Union--for good reason. The "confidential" and failed mission of the USS Enterprise, where one of their best-trained crewmembers, also a Bajoran, crossed over right under their noses, had been the best piece of gossip to hit the stations in years. Even Tom had been surprised to hear about it when they passed through Ibaten.

The Maquis were up for a fight, ready and willing to defend the colonies against the blatant attacks by the Cardassians. Word had it that they'd fight the Federation with as much vigor if they had to.

Little wonder the media's going crazy, Tom smirked to himself as he scrolled through the outdated maps the article had supplied for its readers. The Federation hadn't much anarchy in a long while, especially among colonists, who preferred to live well out of the Federation's attention span.

Not that it made *his* job any easier, but he hadn't lied to the Maquis captain when he wished him well. Now that the Federation was in it legally, and personally, things were going to get dicey for the people out there. For his part, Tom was just glad that he and the crew weren't involved on either side of the issue, but affected only by the tighter trading of late. It'd probably get worse, he knew, but they'd survive. No one would waste a torpedo on the Guerdon.

Clicking through the usual statements and analyses, not looking for anything, really, he noted some of the quotes and the people who'd made them. He knew all the names.

Maybe we should wait a few more stops and get a new part-timer at Velir, he considered. Velir-Prime was as far away from the DMZ as the Guerdon's route went. *We can hold off that long if we get those parts installed right.*

A beep sounded on a panel nearby, and in the corner of his eye, he saw Nadrev move to the next console to look at it. "Captain--"

"Tom," he corrected, putting down the PADD.

"Tom, we're getting a transmission from the Kimoa Salvage Station."

"Open the channel on my monitor." Pulling his console closer, he activated the personal console. A moment later, the Kimoan manager appeared. "Hello, Sila," he said, merely polite. He'd learned well when to summon up a note of charm. Sila was among those he considered not worth much effort.

"Captain Paris," she acknowledged with a thin smile. "What can I do for you and the Guerdon?"

Tom checked his first reaction to the woman's desire to have him ask a fourth time. He really did want to unload Mesler's ship. She, of course, knew this. "We're towing the salvage of a medium barge in to you for trade. The hull is complete except for disruptor damage on the mid-below deck and is still has half its original components, including the nacelles and warp matrices."

"A nice find," Sila hummed.

"A former debtor."

Her thick brow twitched. "I see."

Tom managed a meaningless grin. "We're five hours away. Would you like me to transmit the parts and suggested price list to you?"

"Thank you."

With a click, Tom resent the transmission once again. "You're welcome."

"Contact me again when you enter the range," Sila told him. "I will review your request."

"Will do."

Slapping down the console, Tom heard Jerod's unmistakable chuckle echo to his right. Several strings of wiring hanging over his arm, the lanky technician was standing next to Nadrev, wiping soot off his hands.

"Tom, to this day, I don't know how you do that straight-faced."

"Nothing my father couldn't teach me," he muttered and pulled himself to his feet. "I'm getting some dinner. I'll be in engineering with Ridge after that, working on those shield matrices."

"You mean they're good?"

"Ridge says they check out. We'll be installing the housings tomorrow if we get them refitted all right." With that, Tom started towards the corridor. "Call me when we're a half-hour out."

"I'll be here," Jerod said with a nod. "Save some for me."

"I still have two cases left," he said over his shoulder. He was already in the corridor.

Her eyes opened with a shot in a dark room.

"Computer: Lights."

With a slight delay, they rolled on, one set at a time around the sleeping area and in the adjacent living space. B'Elanna blinked to remember where she was at first, focusing on the items around her.

Dull like the rest of the ship but clean, her quarters were nestled on the front wing of the craft, as displayed through two trapezoid windows. There was the corner-set console bed she was in, a table, a small bench to sit on and the bathroom behind. Past the half-wall, in the "living" area, there were a few boxy chairs, a table and a corner terminal and desk by the entrance. Everything there made the most of the space. The flat carpet was dark blue.

It reminded her of her quarters at the Academy without the sunny window. However, it suited her few needs and was more than she'd had before.

Careful for her sore knee, beeping with the regenerator, she slid out of the small bed and tapped on the closet door. It slid into the wall slot, revealing the little she had. True to Maryl's words, her belongings had been dutifully taken from Mesler's barge, decontaminated, cleaned and set in its present place. Her small duffel bag was folded on the floor. With some relief, she noticed again that her tool case was beside it. It had been wiped off on the outside, but they hadn't tried to open it. She made sure of it by doing just that and making sure all her equipment was in there.

Satisfied with what she saw, B'Elanna pulled out an outfit, laid it on the unmade bed, and then turned towards the tiny bathroom. The sink was just outside it, set in the back corner of the sleeping area. Looking at her reflection in the mirror above the sink, she decided that washing her face wasn't going to do it. She stepped into the bathroom, which was equipped only with a retracting toilet on one side and a box shower on the other.

"Computer, what time is it?"

"*Specify time standard,*" came a deep male voice.

B'Elanna then realized that she didn't even remember when she came to those quarters. "Cancel and tell me how long it's been in Federation standard since I last deactivated the lights."

"*Seventeen hours, seventeen minutes, forty-three seconds.*"

"I couldn't have slept that long!"

"*The time is Federation standard,*" the computer replied. "*Would you like me to compute the duration in another mode?*"

B'Elanna sighed to herself. *Great. Bolian mainframe.* "No. Computer, disengage."

A beep was the welcome response.

Shaking her head, she moved to have a look at the shower. It was an old, low-power kind, twice as loud and long to be effective. But at least it was there. One of the ships she'd worked on only had public cubicles for support crew. Pulling off her pajamas, she moved herself in.

"Activate shower."

With a high whine, the contraption drug itself to life. The engineer within it felt her shoulders tighten. It was louder than she'd expected--not exactly how she wanted to start the day.

Turning to lean against the wall as she felt the pulses begin to work on her dull skin, she put the shower repair at the top of her list, with adjusting the ship's mainframe directly behind it.

"Ridge, you got it yet?"

"Working on it."

Tom flexed his hand, feeling several muscles begin to burn with the effort of holding a shield generator housing in place a few minutes too long. "What I wouldn't give for an automated defuser wrench right now."

"Good for the soul, doing it yourself," Ridge huffed as he heaved the assembly into place. Glancing up, he saw his scarlet-faced captain holding the long manual wrench through the grate. At that angle, he didn't spot the petite form that had entered through the main deck of engineering and stopped to watch what the men were doing.

Rather, Ridge focused on getting the assembly snapped back into place, and he did so as carefully as he could. Tom didn't look like he'd be happy with a second attempt. "Savan, get ready to magnetize the grid. --Just about there, Tom. Just another few seconds."

Tom rolled his head to relieve the crimp in his shoulder, nodding tersely after that. "Just tell me when to let--"

At that, he noticed B'Elanna Torres at the entrance--looking a lot better than she did the day before. Her lips parted when her eyes met his...

"Tom!"

"Damn it!" The pilot flexed his arm again with a groan, pulling the housing back for another few seconds. He knew he wouldn't manage much more than that.

"All right...a little...more. --Got it!"

"Savan--now!"

A welcome hum filled the section: The sound of the salvaged shield generator coming on line. For his business connections, Mesler's were superior--and a lot newer. It was the only thing Tom had *really* bargained for with the Maquis captain. He got one of three.

"The generator is operating; shields are at one hundred percent," Savan informed them, as pleased as she could be for their accomplishment.

"For now," Ridge added as he sealed the last frame bolt. "Okay, Tom, you're clear!"

"Aaagh!" Tom rolled away from the assembly, clutching his arm and turning his gaze again to the engineer that had entered. In a brown and sage outfit with dark ankle boots, her bobbed hair brushed neatly to a side, Torres proved she could clean up well and look the part. Though her stare was as warm as a black hole, she seemed alert and interested as she inspected the engine room for the first time.

"Good morning," he puffed, pulling himself off the grate floor. "Sorry you caught us in the middle of this."

B'Elanna took another step in, noting with some satisfaction that the captain had recently shaved and his clothes were relatively clean compared to the day before. Yesterday had been the end of a long day for him, she surmised. She felt safer. "Sorry to have distracted you," she said.

Tom shook his head. "Not a problem. I was expecting you'd find your way down eventually." He waved a hand around. "Welcome to hell. And since you're checking the place out, let me introduce you to Ridge, our lead technician."

B'Elanna nodded and followed the young captain, doubling a step to catch up with him. His walk was relaxed but quick, probably for his long legs. "Do you always install your shield assemblies manually?" she asked, looking around at their half-completed job.

"We don't have an anti-grav right now," Tom told her. "We had to trade it off a couple months ago for some deuterium. I'll get a hold of another soon enough. For now, we've got the next best thing."

He led them around to a man at least a head taller than he was and twice the width--enormous to B'Elanna. She didn't even know a Klingon that could have matched the man's brawn.

Tom bowed his head slightly to present him. "Ridge McCauley, this is B'Elanna Torres."

"The cricket in the hold," Ridge grinned with crinkling eyes. "It's good to see you up and around--and good to meet you, B'Elanna." Extending his hand, he was careful not to grip hers when she returned the gesture, though the little lady did have strength worth remembering.

"Ridge," she replied with a nod.

"Why don't you show her around?" Tom offered, already backing off. "I'm going to go start us up again."

"Sure, Tom."

A moment later, the captain strode away, still rubbing his hand.

B'Elanna's brow furrowed slightly; she blinked when he glanced back before disappearing.

Ridge watched her stare hang onto that exit well after the captain was gone. "We've all had a long week, him especially," he explained with a wave of his hand. The young woman's eyes did not avert. "Really. You don't need to worry about Tom. He's an all right guy."

She shook her head, turned back to the technician. "It's not that. I just thought I remembered him from somewhere."

"Well, we've all been around the circuit for a while. You probably crossed paths at one of the stations."

"Probably."

"All I know is that he doesn't know *you*, since he'd have said so by now--at least to me."

B'Elanna grinned despite herself. Such a large man might rather have been foreboding, but Ridge was more like a happy Buddha in an oversized jumpsuit.

"So, let's get you acquainted with what we affectionately call an engine room," Ridge said.

"I'd like that."

Gesturing towards the main row of the bay, Ridge let the young woman go before him. "My wife tells me you're looking at the job we have open."

"I'm considering it," B'Elanna replied, mentally inventorying the hodgepodge of systems the Guerdon had on hand. Bolian by design, they had Federation, Bajoran, Aldebaren, Barolian, even a little Klingon technology melded into it. She could be certain there was more.

Now, a few more Bolian parts had been put back in the shield array...by hand.

The engineering area itself was two open decks of clutter shoved into the back quarter of the overused, twenty year-old hull. Most of the system casings were clunky blocks settled unceremoniously around the space; the access walks seemed to be second thoughts arranged on a false level above them. Every now and again, Ridge had to duck under the junction supports. He seemed perfectly used to it. In all, there seemed to be no sensible order; things had just been put where there was room.

A mess made to work, she surmised. It wasn't a total waste, though. Some of the systems didn't look too bad, only sloppy and old. It was workable, and she did like work.

"I wouldn't mind investigating it, anyway." Reaching out absently, her hand slid over the side of the warp reaction chamber's outer frame, where she heard a slight buzzing. "It's running rough," she noted.

"Always been like that," Ridge acknowledged. "It doesn't like the intermix ratio we use to manage warp eight." He nodded proudly to her reaction. "Yeah, believe that? Tops at warp eight--outside the border, of course. One of Tom's personal buys, that reactor. Frankly, I think he had something on Captain Coliras, 'cause he never did admit what he paid in the end, and I happen to know how much he spends for his personal supplies. In any case, we got it. Unfortunately, we *only* got the reactor, which means the Bolian injectors are constantly trying to merge with Vulcan initiators, funny as that sounds."

"No, it doesn't." B'Elanna thought for a second, examining the design of the chamber bearings. "Give me a laser wrench. I didn't bring my tools with me this time."

Ridge turned his gaze askance. "B'Elanna, you don't have--"

"Yes I do," she replied and rolled up her sleeves. "You said you'd give me a tour. This is it. Get me a laser wrench."

The technician turned to open a nearby tool case, chuckling to himself. "I love it when my wife is right."

"How are the sensor inputs coming?"

"Another day," Jerod said from underneath his panel. "Maybe--ugh! ...Maybe two."

Tom leaned back in his seat, clicking off the usual inspection list the Podala Station had sent to them. "Okay. Now that we're clear of the DMZ and have Mesler's barge dropped off, we won't need them right away."

"Would've been nice to have the long-range sensors *in* the DMZ, though. We'd have seen that Cardassian ship before we almost knocked on their door."

"Guess the timing was on our side for once," Tom replied, closing his eyes. Fifteen hours after waking with a headache he was starting to get sick of, he was about ready for another try at sleeping. He knew that wasn't going to happen soon, though. He and Jerod had finally given up the forward hold, where the dorsal assembly was housed, tight within a protective bulkhead. As soon as he finished the contracts Maryl left for him to put his approval on, he'd be right back under the consoles with Jerod, finishing up those juncture replacements. Then they could install the new grid.

Tom turned his head to glance at the chronometer. It was nearly sixteen hundred hours. "One of these days, I have to get back on a clock," he said to himself. It'd been months since he was aware of the relative night and day, an easy enough thing to do with his itinerant schedule on that ship. It still disoriented him, though.

"When Nadrev gets up, this'll go quicker," Jerod said. He reached up and felt around for a juncture casing, then pulled it down to where he was.

"I'll take the deck two relay when he does," Tom replied, his eyes shut again.

"Too bad we can't keep him. He's quick. Good guy."

"Yeah. Maybe next round, we'll look him up."

"Let's hope he's available."

"Yeah."

Tom heard a series of beeps sound from the console Jerod was working on--the EM scanners coming on line. It was good to hear.

His temples pounded; his tongue felt sticky. He drew a deep breath to try to ward it off. He knew he should stop. He knew it wasn't helping him kill what he knew would never go away. Not that much else he was doing was all that great, either, aside from keeping a job well away from the public eye. Even his family didn't know what he was doing, which was fine with him.

He *had* sent a few letters home, but just to let his family know he was alive and all right. He was traveling, he'd told them, detailing his explanation for staying "abroad" just enough to keep his mother from worrying any more than she naturally would and to ensure his father would be less angry than if he'd avoided all contact. If he ever returned to Earth, there'd be less to make up for there. A little less, anyway.

Somehow, he couldn't see himself going there again. It seemed so far away from him now.

He drew another breath, flexed his still sore hand and rolled his shoulder. His heart was still thrumming. His head hurt. He wanted a drink.

He opened his eyes and picked up the tray of PADDs Maryl had left for him. He had to get it done sooner or later...

Then, he heard it--or *didn't* hear it, as it were.

Since assuming his place on that pile of parts, there had always been a particular rumble, and the nozzles Livich installed at Velir-Prime had added a counter to that melody. Each ship had its own sounds. The Guerdon's were certainly as distinctive, though not necessarily in a good way.

Now, both were gone. In fact, the ship was all but silent.

Glancing down, he confirmed that they were still at warp.

Tom looked around and saw that even Jerod had poked his thin head out from his work to better hear the smooth hum that had replaced the grumbling. Getting up, he moved off the bridge and into the corridor. Peeking into the lab, he didn't see Savan. The lounge across from there was empty, too.

Another thirty meters down the corridor was the entrance to the upper engineering level, but he heard them well before he got there.

"We'll need a phase compensator," came a distinctly assured female voice, "and some fresh deuterium to help stabilize the input ratio." The woman came around a corner, clicking on her PADD, still limping but each step as purposeful as any engineer's could be. "As for the rest, I can tune it, but with that force-fed dilithium, it'll never be right."

"Not that easy to get," Ridge said, following behind and punching at his PADD. He looked like a clumsy giant in her shadow. "Costs a lot to get a hand on the good stuff these days out here."

"I'm telling you what you need, Ridge." She came to a grid ladder and pulled herself up it, favoring her left leg but otherwise unstopped.

"But I'm telling you what we'll need to get it--latinum, which we're short on for a few more runs."

"Well, then, we'll just have to find another way around it in the interim," she replied. "You also shouldn't be running an engine on that little drive plasma. You'll never get the pressure up to spec."

"This is one heck of a list, B'Elanna."

"I'm just getting started," she returned and turned at the top of the access walk.

Tom watched from the door as Ridge caught up and as their guest continued to sort out their engine room from front to back. He couldn't help his grin. Only a day on his ship and she was already laying out her grand scheme of resurrecting it. --Not that he hadn't wanted the same, hadn't been trying to set aside funds and make his own deals, but only hadn't majored in engineering, or had a good enough engineer to make up for that. Now, it looked like he was in for one.

He couldn't have gotten luckier.

She couldn't have been unluckier.

"What the hell are you doing here, Torres?" he breathed, his grin gone, his eyes growing heavy.

"You need to keep the compression levels between eight-point-four and nine-point-three to get any kind of efficiency out of this kind of impulse generator," B'Elanna told Ridge, reading the actual measurements off a flickering tricorder. "We can shape this up without new parts, just some tuning--even if a replacement here and there wouldn't hurt. --And speaking of replacements, how does the crew feel about that Bolian mainframe?"

"Please tell me you have reprogramming skills?" Ridge answered gamely.

"I won't *have* to tell you once I find the central core, if that's okay with everyone."

With her skill set, there could be only one reason why she was on the Guerdon--why she'd been on Mesler's barge, too, among others of similar quality.

She had nowhere else to go.

He blinked.

She'd hopped down again, landing on her good leg, still verbally inventorying what she and Ridge were already planning with the salvage and with what Ridge said the ship's share could afford. Torres, crisp and quick in every assessment and wanting to work on those parts herself, seemed perfectly content in the business, energized to see that there was so much business there.

She was in a place where she could feel at home. Keep busy. Be on the move.

Tom's eyes drew down before he turned to return to the bridge.

He poured his wine. Finally.

Also finally, she'd come out of engineering long enough to have a meal, he noticed when he glanced towards the figure that'd entered the lounge. Warmly colored against the stark metal tables and chairs and gray walls, her dark eyes scanned the interior in a single sweep, her steps slowing appropriately in that unfamiliar room, meeting his eyes shortly before glancing back at the entrance. Ridge and Maryl followed, arm and arm, explaining what cuisine the replicator doled out. For power conservation purposes, there were not many choices at a time.

"I can fix that," B'Elanna told them.

"You can fix that when we can afford to commit extra power to something that does its job well enough already," Maryl corrected then shrugged at B'Elanna's sharpened glance. "We save the good food for stationside. Let the ship systems use the power instead. Trust me, they burn it up easily enough."

B'Elanna frowned. "Not that I'm a picky eater," she muttered.

"Just don't let Ridge fix you any fried oysters."

Tom's stomach churned and he killed it with a gulp of the Talarian wine he'd picked up at Ulinas.

B'Elanna chose a sandwich and a mug of coffee, and with Ridge's encouragement, she joined him and Maryl at the table by the window. Wordlessly, she took her seat and let the other two talk, taking her knife and fork to cut her sandwich into quarters. She gripped both utensils and sawed them through the layers, scraping the knife hard against the plate with but two strokes. Ridge shivered at the sound, but continued to dig into his pasta as he nodded at his wife.

Seeming to feel attention aimed at the corner of her eye, B'Elanna darted a glare across to Paris, her knife in mid-cut of the second half. "Is there a problem, Captain?" she asked, slightly clipped.

"Not if you don't plan to eat the plate, too," he replied, but didn't add anything to it. He'd already guessed that his overstuffed engine technician had coaxed the young half-Klingon away from her desired mainstay. She didn't seem the type who'd be happy about it.

With another glance, he saw her put down the knife and start eating. He relaxed again, picked up his PADD. Reaching out with his other hand, he wrapped his fingers around the decanter and refilled his glass. He hadn't finished filling it before he felt a firm, thin hand squeeze his shoulder. It was Jerod, who came around with his tray and took the seat opposite.

Jerod took one look at the decanter and sighed to heave himself to his feet again. "You drink too damned much," he said, moving to grab another bottle.

"I'm buying," Tom smirked, trying some bread to mix with it. Talarian wine was smooth, but didn't settle too well.

"You'd better be. You'd drive a Tursk widow to the poorhouse if she was half as generous as you're thirsty."

"That's an idea I haven't considered." Leaning back in his seat, he pulled a long sip and a breath in afterthought, his eyes following the blueshift outside the viewport.

"So how long now to Podala?" Jerod asked as he dug through the crate.

"Four and a half days," Tom answered. "Six if we stop at Dirud on the way."

"Let's not bother," Maryl said over her shoulder, annoyed by the mere mention. "We never get strip for strip there--and the quality doesn't show for it."

Tom turned an eye at Ridge and then Jerod to check for any differing opinions. There were none. He peered over to Savan, silent beyond her PADD. She barely looked up. "Four days to Podala, then," he shrugged. He didn't much like stopping at Dirud, either.

Jerod reclaimed his seat, notably pleased. "It'll be nice to dock for a few days," he said as he poured himself a glass. "Relax--maybe with someone."

Tom breathed a little laugh. "Shouldn't be a problem there. Watch those Ferengi this time, though. No Dabo girls."

"Yeah, yeah," Jerod responded, digging in to his meal. "What about you? Savan and Maryl already have our deal contracted, so you only need to press your thumb to the PADDs. Have any plans yet?"

"Actually, I was thinking about checking out those upgraded holosuites. They sound like something I could work with."

Jerod aimed a wolfish grin at him for that. "Fed up with the real thing?"

"Something like that," Tom returned, fiddling with his bread. "That and I have to check up with some contacts, see about some supplies, maybe hunt some more for a navigational relay assembly."

"You might as well give it up," Maryl grinned, leaning back to eye the captain. "It's not going to happen."

"I got a warp reactor," he reminded her.

"Pure luck. Besides, you'll never find a navigational *node* good enough for you--and even if you did, you'd never get it to work the way you want it to. Accept it."

His lips turned up slightly. "I've had to accept a lot with the Guerdon, but there are some things I won't. I'll upgrade that system one of these days if it kills me."

"Kills you from old age," Maryl smirked and looked at B'Elanna, who had glanced up at the mention of the upgrade. "Tom used to be a crack pilot, you see," she told her, "and ever since he got the Guerdon, he's wanted to make it do things it'll never do--like go warp nine-point-five and maneuver like a squadron fighter."

B'Elanna shrugged, turning her eyes back down to her meal. "Nothing wrong with trying to improve things," she said.

Tom was the one to look up that time, but he quickly reverted his attention to the bottle in front of him. Considering her statement and his glass for a moment, he topped the latter off.

"True," Maryl conceded, "but he'd have to knock off the best of Starfleet to get it--and that's *definitely* not going to happen."

B'Elanna did not reply, though with another small glance, she noticed the captain taking another large swig from his glass. Not ten minutes in the lounge and she'd already seen him polish off a bottle. His eyes were heavier because of it, and he certainly wasn't reacting to Maryl's bait, which, if he was as good as she'd suggested, was probably a little cruel. He was either wise to her or numb to the fact by then. Probably it was both.

Even so, she had to wonder what a pilot of reputed talent and seeming intelligence would be doing on a ship like that, pulling a trade route on the Federation border. Though he looked a little young for such a captain, he fit with the Guerdon well enough, rough for the wear and comfortable with his people. Apparently, it hadn't always been that way...

She shook her head and speared another piece of her sandwich. It didn't matter. What landed him there was probably what landed her there: Rotten luck and a system that wouldn't budge. B'Elanna tasted her coffee. It was good.

Far more to her interest, anyway, was Ridge and Maryl's talk about Jerod's refitting and installing a new sensor network--more salvage from Mesler's ship--which Jerod nodded in response to and said it'd be done before they got to Podala. They were already working on installing the comm systems, which Maryl agreed would be an improvement.

B'Elanna couldn't help but snort. "Yeah, Mesler's comm system worked perfectly."

"You want to have a look at that?" Ridge asked.

"Sure," she said, purposefully offhand. More than before she started her day, she did not intend to be just a guest. "I'd also like to check out the RCS before you get to Podala," B'Elanna continued a minute later. "From what I could see, they're better than I expected, considering how the rest of the impulse drive is tied together."

"Blame that one on Tom, too," Ridge grinned, "and an all-night poker game a couple months ago. But then, we *had* to get new thrusters or go straight to warp from the station. They were shot."

"Can we go back after dinner?" B'Elanna asked.

"Aren't you tired yet?" Maryl scowled.

"This is all the break I need. I don't tire easily."

Ridge considered it for a moment, obviously wanting to oblige her, but knowing how long he'd been working that day. Then his glance bounced across the room. "Hana and I need some rest, but Savan can show you. --Can't you, Savan?"

"This evening is my watch," the Vulcan replied, not looking up from her reading. "I will take you after I have reassessed your recovery."

"Thanks," B'Elanna said and stuck her fork in the last piece of her sandwich.

"While you're at it, Savan," Tom said, pulling himself up from his chair, "be sure to give B'Elanna her share for the barge sale."

B'Elanna looked up in mid-bite. She'd almost forgotten about that.

"I will, Tom," Savan answered, still otherwise undisturbed.

With nothing more, the captain left the lounge as though no one else was in there, turning towards the bridge. More, nobody missed a goodbye, not even Jerod, who continued to eat as though he'd been alone the whole time.

B'Elanna continued to chew, feeling the side of her mug to see if it was still warm. She didn't mind that at all, the fact that everyone there was comfortable enough with each other that they didn't expect much in the way of manners, could talk and plan and still leave each other alone. Meanwhile, they worked hard and tried to keep their riffraff of a ship in some kind of working order while making what deals they could to keep going, maybe make a profit here and there.

Her heart fluttered slightly and she breathed to ward it away. The realization remained: It was just what she was looking for, ready for her to take.

It was about time she found it.

II. Orientation

Dark and quiet, save his own breathing and a small spotlight to keep him from squinting at his reading, the room held a heavy silence that he had somehow grown accustomed to. Only sometimes did that strike him as strange. He once was social, liked to be among the throng, making himself an object of attention in one way or another. He liked music, diversions.

He couldn't tell when that had changed. Maybe it was when he finally accepted being on a freighter with only five other people, plus the part-timers when they had them. Maybe when he stopped counting the long hours he worked, when he started making repairs alongside everyone else without need for levity or distraction; when he made deals wherever he could, found the bar eventually and usually had to be transported back from wherever he ended up after that. At some point in the past couple years, he'd stopped craving the light.

Maybe he was just tired of the show. Maybe he was just tired, period.

It wasn't that comfortable, but he'd somehow adopted the oddly shaped chair that faced the viewport. His legs were a little too long for the seat. Bolians were generally a little shorter than humans were. It was a little too hard, but Bolians also had more natural cushioning, too.

I could stand to put on a few kilos, Tom reminded himself, seeing too well the veins in his hand as it lifted the tumbler from the table. Pulling a full swallow, drawing a slow breath after it, he knew there were a lot of things he could stand to do if he felt like those things were more worth what was already going on in his life.

He wasn't doing nearly as badly as he could, he knew, though it wasn't much.

He blinked, shook his head at his thoughts, set aside the PADD with their updated inventory on it aside for another. The oblong datapad clicked to life a moment later and he let his eyes fall down the lengthy list. He'd seen it probably a thousand times before: The inventory of needed materials, parts and upgrades--a wish list of sorts that he'd been collecting since he got there.

Every time he knew they would be coming upon some money, he tried to pick up something he could afford--or try to deal for things they couldn't. It was a piecemeal job, and the ship would always be a twenty-something year old b-grade freighter with a long reputation, but it was something he could look forward to.

Much as he tried not to, he could still remember times when he didn't *have* to make such lists.

He remembered the day he left to transport up to the Copernicus. He'd forgotten all about his "officer's posture" and played on the Headquarters lawn with his friends, full of himself and his assured fortune in his second run with the science vessel. He was already slotted for a promotion to lieutenant and chief conn officer, and he'd already secured his place as squadron leader at the Caldik Prime starbase. It was the best he could have wished for in a Starfleet career. His father would leave him alone about his lackadaisical sense of ambition, and he'd meanwhile be doing what he enjoyed. It was all set.

Three months later, it all came apart.

Not two years after running around like a kid on his virtual backyard, his bright eyes had dimmed, his fortune was null and void, and he dropped his duffel on a Minjau drydock to behold what was before him: His ship...such as it was. Staring up at the boxy freighter, he still didn't understand how he'd managed himself into *that* situation. Pieces of the night before were starting to come back to him, though, despite his lack of effort. What met him was hardly surprising, considering.

He had been drinking, naturally, which made retrospect a tricky thing at best. He did recall the hot, dark corner of the rag-tag station, which sat on an otherwise misused ball of crabgrass called Minjau--a popular station on the route because it was in Federation space but still ignored by Starfleet and a happy nine light years from the Cardassian border, a little farther out than other stations. Tom had been unceremoniously dumped there when his hire was up and the ship's regular pilot was finally released from the brig there.

Getting back the devil they knew, Tom figured. He found the unofficial business end of the station only ten minutes after registering on the "for hire" logs with the station manager and got his drink about two minutes after that. He came to know the lounge better than the meager bunkroom he'd rented during his time at the station. But then, he didn't have much with him, and he wasn't much for sleeping.

Despite its being the most popular place there most nights, the lounge was just big enough for a bar, a couple rows of bistro tables and, of course, dabo. He recalled the properly over-proportioned and skillfully underdressed female at the wheel, her happy cry and the hearty whirr when she spun the wheel. He also remembered giving her a wink and slipping her a nice tip before the night's round began.

The gesture wasn't as much for her personally, however. His sense with money wasn't really trained from birth; being buzzed on top of that, he simply turned a few slips of latinum her way without actually asking what he owed. Downing another gulp of the noxious ale he'd been enjoying that week, he felt a crawl upon his slightly sticky skin that centered to his spine and then his head, swirling there...

It tasted like poison, but it did the job rather well--just the way he wanted.

How the night turned into a job interview with an equally drunk and thrice as old Bolian was a little less distinct--though Tom could guess that the stocky, bad-tempered Bolian captain had probably bullied a few bets in his life. The old man swooped in after the swerving pilot had boasted about one of the "famous" maneuvers in his resume--though not as much for any potential employers in earshot, but because the drink really had made him stupid.

The Bolian seemed interested enough despite the swagger and doubtless exaggeration.

"Think you're a hot target, Freddie boy," the old man taunted. "How about a friendly wager between friends with nothing to lose, then?"

"Find me a couple friends in this hellhole and maybe I'll consider it," Tom replied, not glancing over at

the man a second time. Rather, he'd tried not to look at him. The Bolian wore an expression that picked at his nerves; something the very former Starfleet officer didn't need help with. The stocky old man wanted something.

"Yeah, when I came in," the Bolian sneered. "I got the impression you had more dick than balls."

"I'm not selling either."

Snorting to himself, the older man laid a portion of latinum on the table. "I'm after someone who's able to fly. You're after a job, right?"

"You could say that."

"I just did, Freddie boy."

Peering his way again, Tom shook his head. "Just what I wanted, another opportunity to fly around an asshole. Biggest commodity around here." Tom took another drink, let his head roll a little with the rush of the liquor and the cheers of the onlookers, who neared at the whiff of a rivalry. With half-dead senses, it was somehow even more worth the trouble he'd likely get into if he didn't win a couple rounds.

"Say it like you care, Freddie."

"The name's Paris," he muttered and met the ante, dropping his credits on the table. "Call it."

He did, and Tom returned his own bet. The dabo wheel spun.

Some people gathered behind the captain to watch the action, but the pilot didn't share the same interest, even with his so-called money and maybe even a job on the line. Rather, he was increasingly bothered by the feeling of his clothes, damp and heavy against his prickly skin. He pulled at his sleeves and collar in a futile attempt to relieve the feeling, arched his back uselessly only to note he smelled like he'd spent the last month in a mine.

"Dabo!"

"Bastard!"

Realizing a moment after the fact that he'd somehow won the round, Tom coughed a laugh and pulled his doubled worth towards his end of the table. Maybe there was something to be had in tipping the hand at the wheel.

"Place your bets, gentlemen."

Tom did just that and the captain followed suit. As the wheel's whirr filled the lounge, he found his stare starting to lock on the old Bolian's steely one.

"You think you can manage a freighter?" the captain asked, ignoring the wheel for the moment.

"I've survived worse," Tom answered blandly. It was a stupid question. "What the contract?"

"One year term with shares."

"Dabo!"

"Damn!"

The shrill cheers from a growing crowd echoed as the captain growled and scratched in his pockets, offering up another cube, another strip, as others wagered around the table.

"Half-year term," the pilot said, then added to the table. "Double down."

The captain shrugged. "Fine. Whatever you want."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "Sound pretty desperate."

"I wouldn't be here soliciting a slob if I didn't need what I'm asking for."

Tom pushed his winnings back into the pot--taking back a few strips, just in case.

He wasn't all *that* inebriated--yet. Then he wondered why he wasn't.

They placed their bets. The wheel spun. The pilot slugged down the last in his mug and waved an arm behind him for another before looking at his new employer.

"When do you need me?"

"I'll send my tech for you tomorrow morning. He'll take care of your papers."

"Afternoon," Tom told him. "I sleep in."

"Very well," the captain grinned.

"Dabo!"

Tom barely caught the dabo girl's returning wink as the Bolian took back a large share of his previous losses. He slid a meager two strips of latinum into the ante. Tom watched in a pleasant sort of dizziness as the wheel spun...

"Dabo!"

Tom pulled four back.

"So what's your answer?" the captain sneered, his hard eyes pinned on Paris.

The pilot blinked wearily, though a sloppy grin creased his sweat-flushed face to see the old man patting the flattened openings in his coat. "Guess it's nothing or nothing now?"

"Watch it, Freddie--"

Tom's hand shot out for the other man's collar and he ripped the old man up close to his face. "I told you before, the name's Paris," he told him, dangerously quiet as the room suddenly became. Seeing in the corner of his eye the curious stares around them, he released his grip. "You want a pilot, you'd better remember that."

The Bolian grinned. "Paris, then," he said, mocking sincerity as best he could, then shaking off Tom's grip. "How about one more round?"

Tom snorted, barely glancing at the ante. If he knew what it was at the time, he wouldn't remember later that he did. "Yeah, fine," he chuckled, swallowing the aftertaste of his drink behind it.

"Triple over, Nija."

"Your choice, Trusket," she smiled back at him.

"You're nuts," Tom muttered.

"No worse than you." He fished into his pocket for a small credit PADD and a loop of data chips. "All for nothing...Feddie boy?"

The pilot growled and gave the girl at the wheel a nod. "He's got a bet."

The wheel whined into its final spin, and it seemed like half the station had crammed into that dank corner, throwing wagers and latinum across and around the table in a fashion only a Ferengi could adore. Tom drew up his mug and took five concerted swallows.

"Oh God," he groaned, feeling *that* wash into his head--and rise in his throat. He could smell the sickened backwash already...

"Dabo!" cried the crowd, and the pilot felt a few hands shaking him by the shoulders with congratulations. He forced the ale to stay down, feeling it swoosh around in his belly, feeling his eyes roll back and his body numb...

"Karjinko, Trusket," the Nija mewed with a saccharine smile. "Payoff time. All bets are honored at this table--though you can take your own chances later." "Take it!" the old man barked, shoving his losses into the younger pilot's jacket pockets even as he swapped the money. "Paid in full!"

He'd spat the capitulation, but didn't seem too bothered by it as he filled his waist pouch and emptied his glass in a single swallow. Then he turned his stared back over at the swaying pilot. "Enjoy your ride, Paris."

With that, he jerked on his coat and pushed through the crowd.

Tom hardly registered it. He was still trying to figure out what in the world he'd won in place of his money, why the dabo girl's laugh was suddenly so annoying and how the hell he'd get back to his bunk that night. In the end, he didn't remember anything past stumbling away with his PADD and chips in an honest attempt to transport himself, and the view of the corridor deck from between his outstretched hands. How he got back to his bunk would remain a mystery, too.

What he did recall with painful clarity was a husky man about ten years his senior greeting his morning with a throaty laugh that was about sixty decibels too loud.

"Kid's alive after all! --Up, Paris! Time to collect and get us the hell out of here."

Tom's eyes opened only enough to note that at that angle, the bear of a human looming above was somewhat frightening. Dark-skinned, bald and packed into an enormous pair of coveralls, his shoulders appeared twice the breadth of Tom's own. One of his hands might have plucked the pilot from the floor by his head.

Turning, Tom saw a tall but slight Bajoran with blonde hair and arched eyebrows. The dark eyes beneath them narrowed into slits as she examined the groggy man still mostly under his blanket.

"We're dead, you know," she stated.

"No deadder than we were with Trusket," the man returned. "Besides, this is a Starfleet boy we've got, though he doesn't look like much yet."

"Yes, but there's probably a good reason why he's not in Starfleet *now*," she pointed out. "We don't know anything about him."

"We didn't know much about Trusket, either, when we signed on."

"Mm hmm. And look what happened--took the ship's repair money, his own and this idiot drunk's too. He's retiring in style somewhere and we're stuck with worse than we ever had."

"Well he's already gone, Hana," he sighed, "so there's not much we can do now. Anyway, I've got a good feeling about this one."

A moment of silence, then, "You'd better."

With that, the pilot felt the man's large hand on his shoulder, peeling him up from the sweat-soaked sheets. Tom groaned aloud and screwed his eyes shut. "Look," he croaked, "you can have it, okay? Take it and go. Just let me sleep."

"Don't know as much about navigating as your resume says you do, kid," the man grinned. "Besides, you said yourself you needed work. Well, we have that, and it comes with a profit for the one who knows how to get around."

That got Tom's attention.

The large man noticed it. "Sorry, but Trusket won you the deed on his freighter," he told him, "and we're needing that deal to go through. You'll be doing us all--and yourself--a favor by getting up and getting what *is* yours. Considering the dust Trusket left behind getting out of here this morning, you've got no chance for a rematch."

Tom shook his head, breathing a laugh without feeling it--but feeling his head start to pound behind his eyes with the continued threat of waking up. "This can't be happening."

"It's real enough, kid. Now, come on. What do you have to lose?"

"Good question," Tom whispered as his eyes focused again. Though, for a moment, he couldn't help but think it might be wiser not to collect, considering that the "lucky winner" wasn't in enough shape to walk, much less fly.

Pilot's ego or no, Tom did know when he wasn't capable of simple functions. For the past seven months, since arriving in that part of space, in fact, he'd been wandering into and out of one-leg jobs, from spaceport to trade station, drunk more than sober and...well, not much of anything, really. For the same amount of time, and though he'd been soliciting that work, he hadn't been anywhere near his capacity as a pilot.

He did need the money, though, especially after giving that dabo girl way too big a tip after a week of binging in an open bar...

"Fine," he muttered, daring another glance at the unmoved Bajoran woman. "I'll give it a shot."

"It's all we ask," the man smiled and clapped the pilot's shoulder with a seemingly sadistic enthusiasm. "Hana, go take care of his contracts and bills--we'll dock it from his share later--and I'll shove him into the shower. --Just a little alliteration, Paris. But you really do reek of that nasty Mizarian ale. How'd you drink that slime, anyway?"

"Can't taste it after the first sip," Tom replied, a little gamer without the woman's glare tearing holes into his side.

The man snorted, nodded and helped his new friend up from the bunk. "I'll see about getting you something to detox it. And cheer up! Your luck's not that bad--just that you don't know it yet."

"Yeah, that makes it better."

"The devil's advocate that just walked out is my wife, believe it or not, Maryl Hana. My name's Eldridge McCauley--but everyone calls me Ridge. We've been with Trusket for three years--and though Hana doesn't show it, trust me, we're *all* glad he's finally spending our shares elsewhere."

Nodding absently, Tom eyed the passageway to the bathroom and an awaiting shower. The thought of sloughing off the layer of slime from his day-after body was actually looking more and more worth standing up. Getting off that station had always been the plan, too, as was a job.

Finally bringing himself out into the painful sunshine of that station's drydocks, however, and coming around the corner to squint at his "prize," Tom knew exactly why he'd "won." That crusty, old Bolian just wanted to get rid of the damned thing, and the crew left in a lurch by that outbound captain was plainly desperate for someone, *anyone*, who could keep it moving.

Still, having nothing else to do just then--though for no more reason than that--Tom shrugged, picked up his duffel and walked up the cargo ramp after Ridge.

Tom poured another glass, still pondering his list. Since the moment he first saw the Guerdon, he knew what it needed--a complete rebuild, if it was worth it at all. Still, not all of it was bad; with a little extra attention, some of the systems had improved nicely. When it managed its potential velocity, however, flying that collection of odd angles was like swimming in lard--nothing like the swift fighters he still missed when he felt like torturing himself and let himself remember how it was all in his hands once.

He wondered more often than not why he bothered keeping the list--adding to it. Maybe it was some twisted remnant of the optimism he wanted for but didn't dare put too much stock in to save his disappointment.

"You can give up whenever you want--but don't do it at our expense."

Tom could hear Maryl's snarl so clearly, see her fury-stained face as she pulled together their few remaining supplies into the deck four bay.

"I never asked for this," he shot back, not bothering to help the Bajoran move the cases, "and I never wanted it, either. Find someone to replace me and trust me, I'll go."

He hadn't lied about that. Worse than how he had been tricked so easily, he'd never asked to be

responsible for people again. Unfortunately, he did everything to show them why once he realized what that crew needed--a captain, a leader, especially in the sense of representing their interests, on top of flying the ship.

He still felt the lurch in his heart when he remembered what he'd done to them.

When he first walked on board, and even though they all knew that Trusket had robbed and abandoned them, they gave him a long look and didn't ask him any questions. They just went back to business as if it was all understood.

"Oh no," Tom said immediately when he saw the seat he was to take: The main couch with the swing-arm control board, dead center in the bridge, slightly elevated. He knew Bolian layouts. It was the captain's chair. "This is *not* what I dealt for."

"How the hell would you know?" Maryl snapped. "I just paid your bills--out of *our* pockets--you worthless ass. The least you can do is *pretend* while we complete our deals. You can even have a relaxing drink while we underlings work. You don't have to do a damn thing--and it'd probably be better if you didn't."

Her sarcasm stiffened him, but considering the rest of what she'd said, he managed to take a breath and step up to the helm. Without a doubt, he knew how to pretend.

There was no way he was willing to captain a freighter, however. Ridge had convinced him in the bunkroom that he had nothing to lose by taking the ownership and being the pilot, but learning he would actually be in command--even in a figurehead capacity--of that piece of junk was too much, both a responsibility and a dead end he just couldn't, wouldn't, walk into. As he inspected the ship's rusty, outdated systems, the more he knew it. Everything he'd known about the trade circuit reinforced the urge to make his escape as soon as he got a few assignments and enough share money for transport elsewhere.

Sold on that plan, he steered them to the next station without a word, then spent the bulk of his time at Dirud station asking questions about opportunities, advertising as usual and looking for another pilot stupid, drunk or desperate enough to fill in for him. Not surprisingly, they weren't forthcoming. He must have been the only pilot on that side of the Federation who hadn't heard of the Guerdon. No one would touch it.

During that time, he shared a few drinks with another pilot he'd met when he first arrived on the border, a Corian named Limar, who'd helped him find his first assignment. As they grazed through their recent histories and news of the day, Tom meanwhile learned a little more about "his" ship's reputation.

"Trusket?" Limar snorted. "A pain in the ass we're all glad to see off the circuit. He's managed to make an enemy of half the unaffiliated traders and most of the syndicates with his backhanded deals and under the table so-called agreements. Cheap old bastard probably spent only a fifth of his net profit on his crew and that ship--which kept them on and kept them going, but it wasn't near to democratic, if you know what I mean."

"It shows--in more ways than one."

"That mechanic of yours, Livich? --Yeah, she's not much help. She and Trusket didn't argue about all things commercial. I'd unload her when you can. Just a thought." Limar swirled his drink in the glass, waving off the waiter with his other hand. "Anyway, word has it that Trusket bought into a small colony five light years away from Bolarus, a part shared with the rest of his greedy little clan."

Tom bit his lip, pulled it loose then downed his drink.

"So I guess he took you for a ride, too," Limar smirked, "and netted himself a cozy retirement package in the bargain. A last hoorah after thirty years of pissing people off, off to sip drinks on the beach."

"Thanks for the clarification."

"Hey, nothing out of the ordinary, here, Paris. Just all the more obvious when you're the one who's gotten taken." The other man eyed him. "So, what're your plans if you can't break out of the contract?"

Tom shrugged. "Guess we're off for Podala next, then taking the back circle to Velir-Prime, following up on a few deals. That's not my job, though."

"Going for taresium this route?"

Tom shook his head, pouring another glass for himself and topping off his companion's. "Pre-mined salicite ore."

"Why the hell are you guys wasting your time on salicite? Nobody buys that radioactive crap."

"We have the facilities to transport it, amazingly enough. Trusket used to trade heavily in it during the border wars, so the Guerdon's got three ready bays. In any case, some freelance geologists are building a small science station outside the Betreka Nebula, so I guess they need the resistant hull shell. In any case, we'll be picking up the salicite on the way around the Kalandra-Bajor route, then back to Ulinas."

"That's a long trip in a mid-warp freighter."

"Got nothing better to do."

The other man nodded with a snort. "You can say it, Paris--it's boring as a Vulcan symposium. But it does pay the bills." He shrugged. "Maybe you'll get a vacation at the end of it all. Ulinas has a good share of well-off scientists and it's got some nice resorts." For the first time in a while, Tom smiled. "Yeah, they do. That's something to look forward to. Thanks."

"I almost wish we weren't heading the other way." Limar leaned back in his chair. "Captain...and your own ship. That's a change for you--though it can't be all bad. I'm surprised you're not feeling it."

"Barely," Tom replied with a laugh he didn't feel. "This ship needs a hell of a lot more than it'll ever afford. It's not that much of a prize...unless *you* want it."

"Ha! I'm not that drunk yet, Paris." Tom shook the bottle towards him and he laughed again. "--And I won't be *that* drunk tonight." Shaking his head, he leaned a little closer. "Come on, Paris. You've got a crew that'll do the work; all you have to do is steer and speak for them. That's not a bad way to get by, even if it *is* a relic."

"Well, that's not really what I was looking for, Limar." Tom pulled his stare up to meet the other man's, though doing so was getting a little tough. "You know about anything?"

"Nope," he said. "But I'll contact you if I hear." Glancing across at a chronometer, Limar grabbed his drink and finished it in a few swallows. He then stood up and gave Tom shoulder a firm pat, grinning. "Gotta run for inspection," he said apologetically. "Good luck, Paris. --And enjoy Ulinas."

Tom nodded and continued to nurse his drink.

The next morning, he barely remembered the conversation. He pulled himself from his bunk, got dressed and dragged himself up to the bridge, stopping en route to get a cup of coffee from a twitching replicator in what they with great charity called a lounge. Swallowing the hot, black liquid as quickly as he could to give his system a shock, he sat down at the conn and started checking out their route, all without a word to anyone save a groggy hello to Ridge in passing.

Three days later and arriving on the bridge in the same fashion, Tom steered them towards the Podala trade station and opened a channel to get docking instructions. Glancing up from his monitor, Tom was instantly uninterested. Just another space dock that he barely recalled passing through before.

The station manager's ridged brow drew up when Maryl transmitted their materials list to him. "Well, there's none of that here--none left since two days ago."

"Damn," she muttered, looking at Savan. "The Ulinian scientists must have shared out the deal."

"It appears so." Savan tapped calmly into the pads at her station. "We should dock, however, for supplies."

Haggling for a while on the station itself, Maryl managed to deal to transport a large stock of Risan berry wine instead, which was not very lucrative, but would be enough to support them through the next couple ports. Meanwhile, Savan carefully purchased their power stores and equipment.

"Since the ship's holdings got swiped by Trusket," Ridge told Tom while they made their way around the main promenade to the main holds, "even with the Ulinian deal, we'll be scraping by for a while. Hana knows better than to be too proud--even if you probably think that's surprising."

"You know her better than I do," was Tom's reply as he caught a glance of the tavern and made a mental note of where it was.

While the men were hauling up the supplies Savan had purchased, Livich bought some much needed dilithium, a difficult substance to procure of late with the Bajoran resistance snatching up resources as quickly as they could buy them--not to mention the traders buying up supplies to sell to those customers. For the Guerdon, the purchase drained the ship's pot. Rarity never failed to jack up the cost, Livich explained shortly to the new captain when she met him at the bar to get her purchase signed off.

"Bastards can't save a little for the people who're keeping *them* supplied in the first place," she spat, hands on her hips as she waited for the new captain to get up.

Tom pulled himself to his feet, dragging his bottle along with him as he tossed back a few slips to the waitress, then followed Livich to the upper decks to authorize the transactions. He set the empty bottle on a panel ledge before following her into the offices and registering a retinal ID with the station manager. Finally pressing his thumb to the PADD, he shoved his copy in his coat pocket and moved to leave.

"You're new," the manager grinned.

Tom scowled back at him. "Are you care because...?"

The other man's greasy grin didn't fade, though a spark lit his eye when he said, "Just an observation, Captain Paris."

Tom shook his head and turned back for the docks and to the Guerdon's cargo bay, pitifully quiet. There, he met Ridge and a young tech returning from a visit home, who introduced himself as Cameron Jerod. Tom acknowledged him briefly, handed Jerod the PADD for input and made his way back up to the bridge.

Jerod and Ridge shared a shrug and followed. "Look, don't let Gil get to you," Jerod told him. "All the managers are like that until they get to know you. They like to see if you squirm."

"Great," Tom replied. "Make me love this shit job even more."

"We gotta keep up the morale somehow," Ridge returned.

"You're a better technician," Tom replied and pressed the bridge door to open.

A week and a delivery later, the station at N-6 told them much the same thing as they'd heard at Podala: No salicite.

"So why even bother going through with the deal?" Tom asked. "Obviously, it's already been covered by someone else."

"Because we have a contract with Ulinas, you fool," Maryl told him. "Don't you know anything about the trade business?"

"I'm new here, remember? Besides, I'm just a pilot. The rest shouldn't be my concern."

"I know what I said--and maybe I still mean it." She leaned over the other side of the conn to try to catch his eyes. "That said, it's going to have to *become* your *concern* if you're going to stay here, Paris."

"Who said I was sticking around this bucket any longer than I had to?" Tom looked down at some incoming readings. "You were the one who suggested I pretend for the meanwhile, and that's just what I plan on doing. Don't let my charm convince you I care any more than I did the first day I came on board."

Maryl's eyes narrowed to slits. "I guess you have a point."

"Better get to work," Tom concluded, "else you won't even have Ferengi ear muffs to give away."

The Bajoran clenched her fingers around her satchel, visibly resisting several other courses of action.

Tom leaned back in his seat.

It wasn't the whole truth, what he'd said. He didn't want them to suffer. He wasn't that far gone. But it wasn't his problem, either--or at least it shouldn't have been made his. Nor should they have expected the loser of a con job to pop out of his shell and become some sterling captain.

Much the opposite: Maryl had guessed it right when she and Ridge invaded his quarters on Minjau.

"We can't keep going without another share of dilithium," Livich warned Paris, having come forward not long after Maryl had left. "We got a little, but it's not going to do the job we need. It'll break down faster than the last batch did."

"You shouldn't have let the supply get so drained in the first place," Tom said, not bothering to hide the fact he wished she'd have taken her complaints elsewhere--like to Maryl.

"I've been *trying* to keep the rest of that derelict engine in one piece!" she snapped, squeezing her hips with her hands. "Sorry, but it's hard to perform miracles when I'm stringing together that piece of shit warp reactor on a daily basis!"

"I didn't build the damned thing," he returned, "and I sure as hell didn't poke a hole in the reaction chamber. Besides, what do you expect me to do about it?"

"You're the captain," she told him. "I don't give a damn how you got it, but you can't just let the ship stop *moving*. You won't have much to fly at all if that happens."

With a heavy sigh, Tom reached into his pocket and pulled out a thin case of latinum. Reserving enough to buy another bottle of rum before they left, he handed it to her. "Buy what you can and leave me alone," he said, then turned back to his monitor.

She snorted. "Yeah. Thanks a lot, Paris."

He whirled around and glared into the woman's steely eyes that time. "What do you want from me, Livich? I'm not getting paid as much as you aren't."

"I expect you at least give a damn about our *surviving* out here!" she retorted.

"Now that's a problem: You're talking to the wrong person."

She shook her head in disgust as she backed off a couple steps. "I never thought I'd wish we had Trusket back."

"Well, you should've worked harder to keep your captain satisfied," he replied.

"Fuck you."

He shrugged as her heels clapped up the grate steps behind him. "I prefer brunettes."

Over the next few weeks, as the ship's systems slowly pattered and powered down, as Kytrel, Zarilar and Miga all reported the same lack of salicite ore, the dread of their situation finally started to sink in. Tom had thought like the others, that another station would surely have what they needed and hadn't invested in hauling. Instead, there was nothing--no salicite and nothing the Ulinian faction would find acceptable in a compromise. Worse, tensions at Bajor and beyond were causing a pause in the usual business the region enjoyed, so Maryl's work was triply difficult.

"This is a bad deal, Tom," Ridge told him as they fiddled with their rations--all the replicators could provide at that point. Sighing, he pushed his plate aside. "Hana and I, well, we've struggled before, especially in the beginning, when we were really young. She was still a fugitive and I didn't have the means to pay both our ways for a while. That was a rough time. Cardies like to keep their assets and their reputations in check, you know? Anyway, we'd have gotten out of here altogether, but she couldn't leave her family far behind. Yeah, that was rough--but this really isn't looking good, either. It's sad, but I like it here. I don't want to lose what we've managed to make."

Tom said nothing at first, staring at his water. Water. He hadn't had a drink in three days and he was really feeling it. For that alone, he wished he could reverse the situation. "I just don't know what to do," he admitted. "I know you took a chance on me and I appreciate you standing up and trying me out, but I've never been interested in command, and I don't have that many connections in this part of space--only bills."

"Not to mention you hate the fact you got bamboozled into this in the first place," Ridge grinned, shaking his large hand at Tom's response. "Nah, don't worry about it. You never asked for this. I don't blame you. --But if you get any snap ideas, trust me, I'll be willing to hear it. Anything's better than listening to Livich bitch and moan all day and night."

Tom snorted. "Yeah. Problem is, she's right. No juice, no go."

"Yeah." A moment later, he drew an affirmative breath. "We'll find a way out of this. Hana's good at what she does, knows darned well how to dig. We'll figure it out. You just keep us flying and we'll get through it. I just can't help but think sometimes about if worse comes to worse, you know?"

"Yeah, well I'm already there. If you need any pointers, I'll be glad to show you around."

Ridge tipped his head to reexamine him. "You really are in a bad space, aren't you, Tom?"

Tom paused, noting that the shakes had returned to his fingers. Worse, he didn't know how long it'd been like that. "Nothing more unqualifies a man to act with prudence than a misfortune that is attended with shame or guilt." He glanced up. "An old Earth saying. A friend of mine had a list of them tacked up in her quarters. She loved to read." He breathed a small laugh. "Can't get it out of my head today."

"I'm sorry," Ridge said, meaning it.

"You don't need to be," Tom told him. Reaching out, he started pushing the glass of water from side to side with a finger. "There's nothing that'll change it."

"But I am, anyway. You're too young to have to think like that."

"Well, there wasn't an age requirement. Just the way things turned out--not as if I didn't have it coming. Hell, I should have known I'd end up out here, the way I used to be."

"Why's that?" Ridge asked.

Tom snorted to think they hadn't even bothered to check him out--or at least Ridge seemed like the type who wouldn't ask if he knew already. Then again, the Federation news wire wasn't exactly a priority out there. "Look me up sometime. Trust me, they had no problem going public with it."

Pressing himself upwards, Tom left the table. If he had to give up his last pair of boots, he would recycle *something* for a drink.

"*Maryl to Paris.*"

Tom closed his eyes. "Yeah, Maryl. What?"

"*What do you mean, 'what'? I need to be signed off.*"

He met Ridge's attention. The larger man shrugged. "Well, at least she got *something*."

Ridge had assumed correctly. Maryl had put together a decent deal for a routing drop off at a mining station five light years away from the Velir system. It was quick latinum--not much, but enough to keep them going...again.

"I don't know how you do it," he admitted to her as they walked through the corridors of the station, back towards the docks and the Guerdon. Catching her hard eyes, Tom tried again. "I mean it, Maryl. I wasn't raised here, and as much as I used to hear about the trade circuit, I never understood how much went into it. Hell, all I've done here the past half year is fly people's stuff around. I didn't learn anything but how to fly really old ships."

"You're a pilot," she shrugged, relenting in her glare a little, "and you were born and raised on Earth. I guess we can't expect you to get used to the way it is out here right away. But if you stay --whether it's on our ship or somewhere else--you'll eventually have to. This isn't a playground. Life can be tough on the border, and it takes a lot of work to get us from place to place."

"I don't mind the work. I like that part of it, actually."

"Then what the hell's your problem?" Maryl asked him, stopping their quick pace for an answer.

Tom met her stare. "I've failed enough people already," he told her. "I don't want to be in the position to repeat that."

"In other words, you'd might as well be dead." Maryl nodded. "Sounds like you're no better than the rest of us."

She started off again. Tom looked after her, unable to follow as her words registered.

She had never sounded more welcoming.

They had come around to the Veliran mining station within another ten days to drop off their cargo and collect their meager eight bars for the deal--but even four bars of latinum would buy a cache of deuterium and another chunk of half-decent dilithium, Tom knew as the ship sputtered into communications range of the next station at Velir-Prime. He felt his pockets. The crew had agreed to put the bulk of payment into the ship's pot that time, leaving everyone with a meager thirty strips each. Tom had already decided he'd give half of that up as well. He'd sell his socks for power at that point, after not being able to replicate himself a cup of coffee for two mornings and being without a drink for even longer.

Steadying himself on the darkened bridge, he tried to straighten himself even as he heard what he fully expected--more of the same bad news, again.

"I'm afraid we hadn't stockpiled but a small amount of salicite, Captain. It's not common on this side of the route, after all. We've been out for a week and don't expect a shipment for another quarter."

Maybe it was being dry between stations, because before Maryl had a chance to curse it again, Tom suddenly felt a nag of curiosity flicker in him. "But you did have some, didn't you?" he asked and held his hand up to Maryl when her mouth opened.

"Last week," the station manager told him, then grinned a bit. "You're new, aren't you?"

Tom blew a slow breath through his nostrils, well beyond sick of that particular observation. "I've been a pilot, but not out this way," he said. "So let's play some catch up. You say you have no salicite ore, but you carried it. When did you run out?"

"A week ago," the manager told him, "as I already told you."

"Your whole stock?" Tom asked.

"Yes."

Maryl looked up from her station. "Paris, this isn't helping," she said. "Let's just dock and try to--"

"Shut up and let me talk," he cut in with another flick of his hand. Taking another step closer, he kept his eyes on the man in the viewscreen. "I'm new here, after all. Would it be too much to ask who was so interested in a whole store of salicite, since it's not a big commodity around here?"

The manager snorted. "Now you can't be so stupid to think I'd just tell you."

Tom reached into his pocket and moved to the ops station. Placing a few strips of latinum on the panel, he diverted a little power, tapped in some coordinates and beamed the strips over to him. "How stupid do I need to be?"

Seeing the pieces appear on his console, the manager shrugged. "Not like you wouldn't find out once you got here. The stock was transferred to the Zalista six days ago."

Maryl came out of her seat. "Higra's ship?" she demanded. "That fool couldn't seal a deal with Ulinas if he whored himself!"

Tom had paled upon hearing the name. When it clicked, a pool of dread spun around in the backwash. "The Zalista's pilot is Colian?"

"Limar? Yes, he's Colian."

Tom heard nothing for several seconds, save the sound of his teeth grinding between his clenched jaws. "Request for standard orbit," he muttered, walking back to the conn.

"Granted," the manager said graciously. Tom flicked off the screen before he could gratuitously welcome them.

Tom fell into his seat. "Shit."

Maryl didn't need an explanation. "You," she breathed, unable to voice anything else.

Tom's eyes closed. He felt that. He felt that a hell of a lot more than he was prepared for, or ever wanted to feel again.

All over again. It was happening all over again.

An hour later, he was packed. Back to square one after over two months of sheer, stupid

uselessness, he was more than ready to end that unfortunate adventure and move the hell on. Leaving a few standby credits on the table for Maryl to find--he knew she'd rummage through the room after he left--he pulled the strap of his duffel onto his shoulder and strode out.

His only regret about ditching them was leaving them worse off than when they got him. Then again, Ridge should have listened to Maryl in the first place and not picked up a drunk already guilty of neglect and made him a captain.

"Oh no, you're not getting off that easily," came that same jovial voice just as he turned for the transporter.

Tom squeezed his eyes shut. If he didn't think the man could squash him like a bug, he would probably have barreled around and hit Ridge in the teeth. Instead, he growled, "Get off my back, Ridge."

With only a few quick steps, the man was beside him, stopping him with a hand on his shoulder. Looking down at the younger man, he said, "You didn't know what you were dealing with. You pilots get to talking over drinks, just like anyone. You couldn't know your old buddy was ferreting you. It's not completely your fault."

Tom laughed bitterly. "Yeah, not completely my fault that I almost killed your ship because I was too stupid to keep my mouth shut. --And I *do* know better...or I should have. Now Maryl wants to kill me, Livich'll probably suck the air out of my cabin if I sleep there another night--"

"Livich traded off a full flat of warp coil casings for a bucket of pickles her first week on the job!" Ridge returned. "We've all made mistakes, Tom."

"None of you were expected to be a goddamned captain!" Tom retorted.

"Oh, that's just a formality."

"Not where I come from." His glare nailed Ridge's easy gaze at that, probably the first sure and solid look he'd given anyone in over a year. "Not where I come from," he repeated.

Ridge took that in with a slow nod. "Yeah, you were Starfleet, weren't you." He sighed. "You must have screwed up big time to run this far."

"I didn't run," Tom said. "I just didn't want the reminders. There was nothing left but that." Watching that register on the man's face, Tom secured his duffel strap. "You don't want me here," he assured the technician. "I'm nothing but bad luck for all of you, definitely not reliable, and you don't need me screwing up your deals even on an unofficial basis. You guys can send the Bolian lawyers after me if you want, but I won't stay here and kill you all off."

With that, he turned again and tapped his request for transport to Velir. Glancing back at Ridge, he gave a slow nod of goodbye. "Sorry."

"Dabo!" rolled the echo around the smoky lounge--but that time Tom was nowhere near it. He had dumped half of his few remaining credits on the bar and ordered them to fill it until the tab was up. They did just that, with Romulan ale and a bowl of salt sticks he didn't try to stomach.

Actually, he didn't want anything on his stomach *but* that ale. It'd been a long time coming and too much of a relief to feel his extremities lose a little sensation, his brain follow closely behind. He even sent the bar girls away. He meant to get drunk and he didn't want to pretend to enjoy it.

It was working well enough by the time he noticed in the corner of his eye someone sit by him. He didn't bother looking, though, and hoped whoever it was didn't want to talk.

"Konar," ordered the woman. It was Savan.

"Damn," Tom muttered and almost stood.

"You need not leave, Tom," she told him, then laid her credit down for the wine when it was handed to her. "I only want to make one request."

Tom's head sank. "What this time?"

"Will you remain long enough for us to find the Zalista?"

"We don't have the power to chase them," he told her, feeling the crawl in his chest to repeat it, knowing how he got them to that point. For a moment, he couldn't believe she was asking him to. "The ship's stores are all but gone. Time to give up, just try to get something else."

"Something else will not matter when we lack a pilot," Savan told him and caught his eyes before he could respond. "Your error was not unique, Paris. Maryl and Livich, I believe, forget that they have made similar ones. It is different in your position, I understand; however, we do need your skills."

"Or what's left of them."

"I believe you are a capable pilot, even in a state that Starfleet would never allow you on duty."

"You'd be surprised what I got away with," Tom replied and swallowed another gulp of ale. He looked over at the Vulcan woman, her cool brown eyes and straight posture. "Starfleet?"

Savan turned her head slightly. "The Academy. I lost interest in my studies and so chose not to complete the regimen. Thus, I sought another career." She blinked at his shock. "Because I am Vulcan does not guarantee that I will be exceptionally careered."

"But the *trade* circuit?"

"It offers...sufficient satisfaction," Savan answered without complication. "It would likewise bring me satisfaction to find the Zalista and...correct them for their neglecting what few rules are generally respected among our profession and status. Moreover, for their flouting of Federation regulations, I have already informed our Ulinian contractors that the ship bears no deradiative holds and that they will need to inspect the Zalista's cargo for flaws due to chemical breakdown; they should suspect what sound ore remains if they are going to use it for more than four years. I also suggested they might hold the Zalista for orbital inspections, as they are exposing themselves and all they come in contact with to hazardous conditions."

Without his wanting it, a grin pulled at the corner of Tom's mouth. "You enjoyed that, didn't you?"

"I did not lie," she stated, then looked at the young man again. "Will you help us find the Zalista? Certainly, its pilot has served you an insult. Or are you, as they say, 'too dead' to desire recompense?"

Tom sighed, returned to his drink. "Even if I wanted to, we don't have the power."

Had her bloodlines been anything but Vulcan, she might have responded with a wicked smile. Instead, she merely blinked. "I still have some stores that will trade for enough deuterium and plasma to bring us up to full power for a time." She took another sip when Tom's eyes came up again. "I have been on the circuit long enough to learn frugality."

"Why the hell didn't you say so before?" Tom demanded, suddenly feeling something that time--the desire to knock the snotty Vulcan off her stool.

Savan's brows rose. "So you *are* interested."

Tom gnashed his teeth, drew a breath. "I just want..." He shook his head. "I don't want to be a captain of anything. I go back on board, that title goes out the window."

Savan considered that. "As captain, as well as owner of the ship--regardless of how this came to be--you will be able to design the role as you please, while using the title when it is necessary. I think we all would like to develop a more egalitarian structure aboard the Guerdon. If you want to make those changes, then you will meet little resistance."

"Aside from Livich."

"Livich uses titles for what blame she desires to pass on," Savan informed him. "Regardless, your position's influence would be whatever you make of it."

"I don't want to 'make' anything, Savan," Tom told her.

"Then what precisely *do* you want, Tom? I would like to know."

He paused, swishing a sip over his tongue before swallowing it. "So would I."

"I believe you know, only it is something you believe you cannot obtain."

"If you're going to drink with me, don't psychoanalyze."

"My apologies." Savan sipped her wine; let the silence stand for a moment. "May I take you back to the ship when you are sufficiently intoxicated?"

Tom sucked down the remainder of his tumbler, then tapped it with the stirrer for another. "Just make sure Livich doesn't try to kill me when we get there, okay?"

"I will speak with Livich," Savan assured him.

Considering what else she had up her sleeve, Tom decided he didn't want to know.

As for the rest...

He blinked, focused. "I don't think we should catch up with the Zalista first, though. We should skip Kalandra-Nine Station. --That is the next planned stop, right?"

Savan turned her gaze to the pilot, intrigued. "It is."

"Okay. So we should go straight to Irtrin."

"Why would we go there? They do not regularly stock salicite ore. Would they have any, it would be minimal."

"But they deal in ore casings and a few other things the Zalista needs to take care of their stocks. If they don't have deradiative holds like you say, they'd have to make up for it by changing out their plating before they have a spill-out. Right? I know someone working on Irtrin who owes me an out from the brig and happens to work the stocks there. Meanwhile, we need to get ahead of the Zalista. If we get the power we need, do you think we can handle a short speed run?"

"I believe so." The Vulcan considered him anew. "*You* have a plan?"

He shrugged. "Maybe I'm more interested than I was before. --Just please take the credit for this, or else Maryl and Livich'll never go along with it."

Her eyes closed slowly, then opened again. "Let me hear what you propose."

"I still don't know why we're bothering wasting our power here," Maryl muttered as the Irtrin Station docking clamps popped and rumbled against the hull. "They don't have anything we need."

"You do not have to go into the station," Savan said, tapping on his console to acknowledge their secure hold.

"I *will* go," Maryl returned, clipped with annoyance. "It's my *job*, which I do whether or not it's a tough call."

"Nice to know that," Tom commented, then looked at Savan again. "Have a walk?"

The Vulcan moved from her seat. Before following the pilot, she leaned toward Maryl as she passed. "Only do not attempt to purchase any salicite."

"Like we can afford any at this point."

"For the first time in this run, that will be a good thing. I will make certain of that."

"You'd better. We can't keep on like this." Maryl watched them leave as she patched a line through to the station liaison. "Piece of crap Starfleet brat."

Jerod glanced down the hall from his place near the door, where the pilot and Vulcan shared a few quick, quiet words. "I dunno, Maryl. Savan's doing the talking, but I think they're both up to something."

"How relieving," the Bajoran mewed, turning back to her own work.

"Nice to see you again, Limar," Tom said, leaning on the side of the captain's seat as he regarded the other man through the viewscreen. He did not smile, his voice held no humor, but a small part of him was enjoying the angry look on the fellow pilot's face, not to mention the others' frustration. It was a

pleasing irony to know his ship was enjoying adequate power while the Zalista didn't look too hot. Tom turned his attention to the captain. "Captain Higrá."

"You must be Captain Paris," Higrá mumbled, staring hard through the viewscreen. "I expected someone at least old enough to shave a full beard."

Tom resisted responding to the weak insult, but instead commented, "Looks like you're in need of some repairs."

The captain flinched. "We've had a full drive failure due to a radiation leak in our holds. Three quarters of the ship are sealed off."

"Radiation? That wouldn't happen to be salicite radiation, would it?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I wonder what kind of dealer would trade out salicite without ore casings, unless there weren't any to be had. Need the casings to seal the cargo, right? Sure, they could get a few light years, maybe to the next station to see if they had some casings to spare, but without proper holds, they'd never get back to Ulinas with that much radioactivity melting through unprotected bulkheads. Even with the right holds, they'd have some damage. But everyone knows you don't have the right holds." Tom looked over at Maryl. "Do you remember picking up casings at Irtrin? Maybe we can lend them a few."

"I don't know," Maryl replied. "I'm not the one who controls the inventory."

"I'd have to look," Jerod supplied with a snort.

"I think you're aware of our cargo and our dealings," Higrá cut in, "so let's quit the game. I'm trying to avert a core overload and as much as I don't want your help, I'm asking for it."

"I might spare my technician for a price."

"If you think you're going to get my cargo--"

"You can't carry it as it is, and even if you do make it to Ulinas, it's likely they won't take it because it'll be half rotted by the time you get there." Tom shrugged. "But if you want to breach on top of all that, that's your choice."

"You lousy bastard, when I catch up with you--"

"After you recompile yourselves," Tom cut in. Turning, he took his seat and checked their coordinates. "We're just far enough off to enjoy the show." He looked back at Jerod, ignoring the increasing commotion on the other ship. "How much does a half-smashed nacelle go for on the open market?"

"About ten bars if all the pieces are there," Jerod told him, notably more amused than Tom looked at that point, "but that's Maryl's department."

"Ten bars sounds about right," Maryl said.

"That's enough to buy some more deuterium and me a bottle of real scotch," Tom nodded. "Any way we look at it, we win. That'll be nice for a change."

"You are not getting my cargo!" Higrá snapped across the comm.

Tom looked at him again. "Since I'm new in the circuit, you might need a hint at this point: I don't

give a damn if you give me your cargo or not. I've got nothing left to lose in watching your ship blow to chunks and collecting debris when the sparks sizzle down. Nothing left to lose *at all*. So you can do whatever the hell you want. I'll still be flying away."

With that, he pulled his hand away from the keypad, leaned back and crossed his arms.

In the corner of his eye, he saw a broad grin form on Maryl's mouth.

He didn't share the expression, but it was good to see Higrä blink.

Cool drinks were poured around the large mosaic table, which was nestled in the back corner of the leaf-canopied outdoor lounge. The city facilities could not be seen or heard from there, save the occasional hum of an ascending craft. The weather had grown mild at sunset and was pleasantly moist. The respite was almost as nice as the flatcase of latinum Maryl was resting her feet on.

She wasn't about to leave it on the ship with no one else there.

"God, I love Ulinas," Jerod grinned as a busty waitress bent over to set a folded napkin on the table before him.

"You'd love any block of soil we'd to land on after the last few months," Maryl returned.

"No way. This place beats the hell out of Minjau any day."

"It is hospitable," Savan agreed, taking in the view of the gardens. She glanced at the waitress. "Are there obtainable samples of this flora?"

"In the central arboretum," the woman answered as she finished her pouring.

Once the waitress was gone, Ridge picked up his glass and raised it for a toast. "To bad luck," he deadpanned.

Maryl whacked his arm. "To a good profit and a ship that moves!"

"That's more like it," Livich said assuredly. "Now if only we can actually get it to *do* that."

"That's *your* job, Livich," Jerod smirked.

"Up yours, Treevis," she returned and clinked her glass against Maryl's.

Tom shared the toast absently, then continued to look around.

"Hey, Tom," Ridge said. "Come on, enjoy yourself. It's not often we land on a planet with actual civilization."

"It's fine," Tom dismissed. "I was just thinking..." His voice drifted off as he brought his glass to his lips.

"About?" Savan asked.

"How little it's changed. My father brought me here once when I was a boy. My sisters and I played in that park over there when he was in the conference."

Jerod peered over. That late into the evening, all he saw were long shadows beyond a row of fluffy purplish trees. "Was your dad a scientist?" he asked.

"No. A Starfleet officer."

Maryl eyed him. "Little wonder you got into all that, because your father was in it, too."

Tom nodded and leaned back in his seat. "He still is," he said, looking back down to the oblong PADD in his hand. As the others went back to their conversations, he pulled a long sip of his wine and continued to tap a few more items into the list he'd begun to put together....

Two years after starting that list, Tom added what he remembered Torres rattling off in engineering that morning and clarified a few he had down already using her wording.

He still sometimes shook his head to recall how he'd been stupid enough to land himself in a captain's seat--and crazy enough to settle into it. On the other hand, he'd long stopped caring that Trusket barreled out as he had, particularly when he came to understand the nature of the contract that the crew had signed with him.

In return for their service, the crew agreed to share all portions of any gain--a true cooperative, with some leeway given for necessary repairs, which the captain had the authority to take. Unfortunately for Trusket, the cooperative's contract was Bolian--written by one of his many cousins, in fact, and ratified by the punctilious Jildwan Court, apparently at a time when he wanted to be a captain and to secure a motivated, long-term crew.

The Jildwan group was notoriously unswayable by offers of compensation or protection, so there was no way he could scam his way out of it with his own people, once he lost the taste for his career. Worse, Bolarus IX was a part of the Federation, so any matters involving other Federation citizens, *and* involving Federation trade laws, could be taken to one of their JAGs instead if need be.

Thus, if Trusket did not live up to his part of the agreement--finding himself a replacement to complete the contract he entered into--his crew members were perfectly justified in suing him--or his family if he was "unavailable"--for his net worth for damages incurred by his breach of contract. If the plaintiffs could not be satisfied, Trusket could be given a work-lease as punishment and to pay off the debt. All of Trusket's crew had long-term contracts, with several years left before resigning was necessary.

Apparently, Trusket didn't want to wait that long or fight the Jildwan court, so he had tried to get rid of his crew himself. He tried to induce them to take other positions with his ever-worsening temper and treatment, and then by openly sabotaging their deals by trading under the table on behalf of another ship. His efforts were useless. The captain simply hadn't anticipated that his five crewmembers liked the ship better than he did--or at least were comfortable where they were. Later, Ridge admitted they were indeed unwilling to start fresh again. This was coupled with Maryl's wise advice to hold out on Trusket until he gave in. She knew perfectly well that the man couldn't break his contract--and she and Ridge

both had another four years left in theirs.

So, frustrated in his attempts, the captain kept setting aside his small fortune while he cheated on repairs and made some deals to secure his retirement, then set about finding himself a successor.

Per the contract, the prospective new captain would have to be capable of running the ship and carrying on the command, which would likewise be transferred. Looking over the PADD Trusket had shoved in his pocket after "losing" his ship, Tom discovered that the man had gotten his name, description and numbers from the "for hire" list. Likely, he'd been waiting a few days, checking Tom and his record out, finding the right moment to complete the transfer, such as it was. He forwarded the contract for approval before ever coming to the dabo table. While Tom was struggling to adjust to his new life and rank, the Jildwan Courts were ratifying his contract--and locking him into it with the assumption that he had agreed to it all.

The "witness" to the "agreement" was Nija--the dabo girl, who could truthfully attest to Tom's accepting the "deal." Being that the contract had weight in Federation courts in the absence of a Bolian citizen, the crew could sue *him* instead of Trusket for not obeying the terms of the contract and would probably win, particularly considering Tom's history. The Federation wouldn't show him much mercy, if any.

But again, it didn't matter. He'd already decided to stay before he learned the details.

What was curious sometimes was what his father would think, knowing his "gifted" son, whom he'd built up to be the next admiral in a long line of industrious admirals, was working on a beat-up tradeship somewhere between nowhere and Cardassia, dealing in low terms with low characters and running his life much on the same level. It was probably how he would see it. There was some truth in that.

Some, but it wasn't the whole story. Though Tom hadn't wanted or asked for it, he *had* earned some respect as a captain in that corner of space. Not one deal from the Guerdon since the Ulinas mess had ended up short--a big change from the last captain's reputation. For a politically unaligned freighter, which aroused suspicion as a rule and were more heavily inspected station-side, they had gained a good deal of trust and had built good connections along the border circuit. He and the crew didn't have to share their pay cuts with anyone but each other and could indeed make their own contracts now. Still, life could be hard going out there, especially of late, with the DMZ about to be lit on fire.

The work had paid off, though. They were getting by all right.

Even so, Tom knew there wasn't a chance in hell the admiral would be pleased with the command his son had been suckered into and eventually didn't try to escape. More correctly, the more time passed, the less Tom thought about his options. He got used to his position, got to know the crew, the business, the stations and the dealers, the routine at dock and the long, empty space between them. To stay put and not give a damn about what people thought otherwise was not a bad option at all, in the end. There, he was just another trader in the circuit trying to get by in a ship that'd seen better days itself.

It was a hell of a lot more than he deserved, he still thought, when he let himself think about it.

He sometimes asked himself why he kept that list. Maybe it was the want for an ounce of hope, of improvement, or fulfillment; the idea that he hadn't completely wasted what was left of his talents. Maybe he just needed something to do.

Little wonder he felt a lot older than he was.

Finishing off the rum, he set the PADD aside, pushed himself up from the uncomfortable chair. Turning a bit at the waist, he popped a few vertebrae back in place and moved to his bunk in the adjoining room. Pulling off his vest, toeing off his boots, he eased himself onto the mattress, leaned back and scooted up to the pillow.

He stared at the ceiling for a while before closing his eyes. Willfully concentrating on the heavy haze behind his lids, the rum finally took full effect. He was asleep within a few minutes.

III. Poetry and Plasma

"Morning, Tom."

Tom nodded to Jerod's greeting as he paced groggily into the lounge. Their operations technician was rubbing his eye with his arm as he tinkered with a small juncture, probably a part of his work to come that day. Jerod liked to bring his smaller projects to breakfast, not for being prone to overwork, but simply because he couldn't resist a puzzle. Tom honestly didn't want to know what his quarters looked like.

"You mind getting me a mug of coffee while you're there?" Jerod asked, leaning in closer to see inside an open module.

Tom didn't answer but with a blink to himself. Crossing to the food replicator, he reached up to tap in the code for coffee, thinking belatedly to make his double strong that morning. It'd be another long day under the consoles and his "good night's sleep" had left him foggy-eyed, a little weak in the knees. He had the feeling that rum was not quite the "find" that the vendor had told him it was. Not that he was angry or surprised about it--he didn't pay much for the case, after all--but he knew his day would be that much longer if he didn't wake up a little.

Looking at the panel to reprogram the consistency, he blinked, squinted.

The same device was burrowed in the bulkhead--a replicator old enough that some of the standard LEDs had begun to flicker from too many taps on the surface. Or at least it had been.

The LEDs *weren't* flickering. His first impulse told him they were going to burn out once and for all, after that last ditch effort at functionality. But they were pretty steady.

He looked over at Jerod again. "Did you mess with the replicator?"

"No. Why? Something wrong with it?"

He shook his head to jog his eyes, then rethought what he saw. "Anyone else been in here?"

"Maryl and Ridge were already on when I got up here," Jerod told him, then remembered, "Torres was on her way out when I came in." He glanced back at the captain. "Why? What's up?"

"Nothing." He turned back to the replicator and programmed in two mugs, one extra strong.

"You going to hire her?"

"See if she's a fit first, then I'll decide."

"Tom, we need an engineer--and she's definitely that."

"I noticed. And for the moment, we *have* an engineer." Considering that again, he finally shrugged. "I'll send Maryl after her, give her the treatment. If she doesn't drive her off, you can have her for a while. Will that shut you up?"

Jerod grinned. "You're starting to sound like a regular recruiter."

Tom ignored the joke. His head was starting to throb slightly and whoever fooled with the replicator hadn't made it any faster. "I just don't want another Livich," he said.

"Point taken." Jerod resumed his work.

The computer finally decided to go through with the command and two mugs appeared. Tom ran his hand over the brightly colored panel again before picking them up. Moving to the table, he set one in front of Jerod, who nodded his thanks as he pulled a swing bolt out of the latch. Tom then pulled a chair for himself across.

"So what's up for today?" Tom asked quietly, pulling the mug to his lips.

"Hey Torres!"

The engineer looked up through the cloud of plasma coolant vapor she'd discovered on deck two only a minute after arriving that morning. On the upper deck overhang, a tall form stood, leaning slightly forward. Between puffs of steam, B'Elanna saw the woman's earring glint in the light of the churning warp core.

"Maryl?"

"Yeah. Can you come up here when you're done? We need to meet."

"I don't think that's going to be too soon, with these vents spitting like this. We'll lose compression--"

"Oh, it does that all the time," Maryl dismissed. "It'll still be there when you get back--and so will the warp core. We need to meet. --Or don't you want this glamorous job?"

B'Elanna wiped her hands on her tool vest as she walked through the steam to see the Bajoran more clearly. "You're not the one doing the hiring. What gives?"

"Standard procedure, Torres. Forward communications room--second door down the left forward corridor, deck one. Sooner you get there, the sooner it'll be over."

With that, Maryl turned and left.

B'Elanna blew a breath, shook her head and moved to stow her tool vest for the time being. "Better

be necessary," she muttered as she went to tell Ridge.

As the young woman moved across the deck, she didn't notice the captain near the top of the forward access staircase, a load of isolinear wiring looped over his shoulder. Watching her small boots thump each step, her hands balling up, he pulled himself up the last few steps.

"I have not loved the world, nor the world me," he said, aloud without meaning to. Glancing around, he breathed a humorless laugh, then crossed behind the engineering bulkheads to the narrow corridor which lead to the field sensor platform. "...but let us part fair foes..."

He couldn't get it out of his head, now that it'd come up.

Not that it'd ever really gone away.

"There are ten trade stations along what used to be the Federation-Cardassian border--what's now the Demilitarized Zone. All of them deal in latinum, and they largely keep their business with non-Federation races between Ecelor and Andal, and Irtrin and Zarilar. Our shares are paid in latinum for the same reason: Federation credits aren't usually worth anything outside the frontier..."

Seeing a slightly tired stare above a straight mouth in response to her start, Maryl nodded quickly. "Yeah, yeah, I know you've been around the block already, and you engineering sorts don't care about where you're going as much as much as the crate that's getting you there. But there are things I'm *obligated* to make you know if you're sticking around."

"I really don't see the point in wasting our time here when I could learn it along the way," B'Elanna insisted.

"The point is, while Tom doesn't mind answering stupid questions, he doesn't like us to be left open for mistakes or missed opportunities--and that can happen as soon as Podala. As for myself, I *do* mind stupid questions, and I will make you miserable if you screw up station-side and ruin one of my deals. Anyone who's dealt with me can vouch for that."

B'Elanna ground her teeth together, feeling the undeniable will to bite back at Maryl's hard line. No matter why the contract liaison's so-called rules existed, the engineer who could care less about the route as much as the boat didn't appreciate being treated like an idiot. Worse was that she had no idea what had changed between yesterday and the present that had inspired Maryl to turn into some self-styled professor.

Still, Maryl *had* been fair with her, upfront from moment one, and B'Elanna keenly understood her distaste for idiots.

"Fine," she finally replied, though coolly. "This is your department."

The clipped response seemed to soften Maryl, who decided to take a seat on the next stool rather than walk around the tensing engineer. Seeing the woman relax a little at that, she laughed lightly. "You don't like that, do you?" she said. "People pacing around you?"

B'Elanna blinked herself out of her frown to consider that. "I guess I don't," she admitted. "I never really thought about it."

"I don't like it, either. Makes me feel like I'm on the chain. --And here I'm doing it to someone who's

probably less inclined to put up with it."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Probably about what you think it means. --Don't worry about it. I'll try not to do it again." Giving B'Elanna's shoulder a pat, she turned the chart and highlighted their last year's routes. "So, let's start with the usual suspects: Minjau and Velir Prime."

"Federation friendly, planet-based, run by native populations," B'Elanna recited.

"That's what the Federation database would tell you," Maryl smirked.

Her stare turned askance. "What is it, then?"

"Native populations who otherwise keep the hell away from our kind of business. Minjau's not only good because it's centrally located on the route. You won't get any pain in the ass Minjans hitting you up for a deal or selling their wares. You only have to worry about the crooks at the station."

B'Elanna snorted. "So I've noticed."

"We've all been hit once," Maryl shrugged and drew a circle in the air before the highlighted route. "Minjau is in Federation territory, though, so we usually pick up and drop off pre-paid cargo there, but try to get paid at Irtrin or Velir Prime, which doesn't have to follow the Federation trade standard." She ran a finger around the hairpin of Cardassian territory, which was buffered by the new Demilitarized Zone. "The Federation's granted us a license to deal with all the rim stations in their territory, we're registered at all the independent stations outside the border. We have a regular Hidirin deal that we drop off at Velir, for instance, which pays us in latinum though Hidirin is a Federation member. We're also licensed to deal through Cardassian space. --I prefer we don't for all the obvious reasons, though it's nice to have the ID with them. We're usually on the route running from Zomir to DS-Nine, because the business is mostly there--middleman shipping, really. Not the good stuff I'm hunting for, but it keeps us running. Beral, Miga, Sicira and Gimol-2 are our common stops outside Federation territory on the Bajoran side of the route, depending on what we're doing or if the climate's not good."

"The what?"

Maryl snorted. "You've been out of the loop. The Maquis."

"I've heard of them. I just didn't know what you meant by 'climate.' Now I do."

"I'll give you the Federation newsfeed, let you get caught up on that side of it. Suffice to say, since the Federation outlawed the colonies' resistance, the stations around the Federation border have become dicey."

"Dicey's nothing new."

"True, but now there's a new agenda behind it, not to mention some certain retribution. It's why Tom was so spooked after we found Mesler's barge, having to deal with that Maquis ship. They know who we are now."

Nodding, B'Elanna noted Maryl was almost sympathetic for the captain, there. "Ridge told me you and the captain had to do a lot of talking to get what systems you did."

"The Maquis are like Gobaran vultures--and twice as tenacious," Maryl acknowledged. "I understand

the mentality, though. I know why they rat around for whatever they can get and grab whatever they can. They even tried to get their hands on *you* when you were out cold in the lab."

B'Elanna's frown slackened to see Maryl wasn't kidding. "Why me? I've never met any of them."

"The Maquis captain spotted Ridge carrying you out of the holds, Tom said, so they wondered if you knew anything about them."

"I wouldn't have known what *quadrant* I was in, for all Mesler cared." B'Elanna told her. "I was there to keep the ship at warp."

"That's what we figured. --Don't worry. Tom covered for you, said you were with us, told Jerod to wipe your records before the Maquis got Mesler's memory core."

If her attention hadn't been piqued by the first admission, B'Elanna's stare was locked on Maryl with the next one. "He did?"

"He wasn't about to let those snakes pull you off his ship. He's a little funny about things like that."

"And the other captain bought it?"

"Enough to get out of our hair."

"What would they have done if he *didn't* cover for me?"

"They'd probably have just talked to you, tried to find out if you knew anything about their business with Mesler. Even in that case, I don't think Tom would've let them take you off the ship, though I can be sure they'd have been tempted, especially if they'd found out you were an engineer. They need engineers and doctors more than weapons, I've heard."

B'Elanna stifled the cold shot in her spine. It wasn't as frightening a thought as it was insulting.

Maryl only shrugged. "As they say: Whoever has the guns usually feels it's their right and has a tendency to get their way."

"They don't have anything big enough for me," B'Elanna insisted.

"You don't know that," Maryl told her and met the stare aimed back at her. "Trust me, as a Bajoran, I know you *don't* know what you will or won't do to keep going, not until you get there."

"Well, I can say what I think about right now."

Maryl snorted. "Yeah, and you're good at it. In any case, it doesn't matter, because you're here and they've gone back to their lair, such as it is. But it's a good lesson to keep in mind: Any person around these stations could be trying to sell you or your services into the Maquis these days. They're more paranoid about strangers than we'll ever be, but that doesn't mean they won't use the system to get what they need, either."

"How so?"

"By using the border stations as a go-between, slipping the materials into the DMZ while no one's looking. The Ovisar's a good example. Captain Pachig thought they were making routine runs from Irtrin to Dirud before Starfleet pulled them in to interrogate them. Seems they'd been helping supply the

Maquis with materials to build weapons systems, but the parts were so scattered on other ships doing the same thing they didn't realize it. Happened not two weeks ago."

"What'd Starfleet do with them?"

"I heard they were let go with a warning and a free escort out of the area to cool off. Pachig could have lost his freighter for it, though, if his record hadn't been as clean." With that, Maryl shook her head. "But we're getting off track. You can hear all this gossip in the lounge. Must be that coffee Ridge is feeding me."

B'Elanna smirked. "Well, I feel like I've learned something. Can I go now?"

The Bajoran nodded slowly. "Oh yeah, you'll fit in just fine around here. --And no, not yet. Sorry, but we're not done until I know I've gone over the route with you." She pulled up a set of specs. "Okay, then, here's where we're off to now: Podala. Standard free-floating space station. You've been there?"

"Once, for an overnight," B'Elanna replied as she slumped back into her chair. *The sooner I let her get on with it...* she reminded herself.

"The station manager is an ass," Maryl stated, "but they're on the distal end outside the DMZ and it's five light years to Dirud, two to Starbase 211--though we don't go there--and ten to Ulinas, so Podala's always on our schedule. They usually stock supplies you'd probably be interested in. Tom likes to hunt for supplies there, too. I'm sure he'd take you around, get you connected to the better vendors, if you wanted."

"I'd like that."

"What we're usually there for, though, is to pick up the canisters of tellerium that goes to Gimol-Two."

"Well, I might be interested in that too, for the reactor regulators."

"Sit through the rest of this waste of your time," Maryl grinned, "and I'll see what I can do."

B'Elanna pursed her lips to consider it, then gave the other woman a nod. "You've got a deal."

"There you are!" Ridge laughed as the narrow-eyed engineer stomped onto the lower engineering platform. "I thought for a minute there Hana had gone into the history of Bajor."

"She did everything *but* that," B'Elanna snapped, ducking into a cubbyhole for her tool vest. "We were in there at least three hours!"

"Four and a half, actually," Ridge grinned, then held up his hands to the glare B'Elanna shot back. "Hey, it's just a part of the job."

"I'm starting to rethink it," B'Elanna growled. "There are a lot better things I could be doing with my time. What's the deal with locking me in a room for the better part of the day just to tell me about the routes I've been working on for two years? If I wanted a lecture, I'd have stuck around Starfleet."

Again, Ridge laughed. "Come on, it's not like she had you hauling crates and reciting the Federation trade regulation ordinance. Not all of it could have been useless."

B'Elanna pulled out her hyperspanner to adjust the frequency. "No, not all of it. --But it could've waited."

"You never know, B'Elanna." Patting her shoulder, he jerked his head towards the impulse generator. "Come on. We'll *not* waste the rest of the day and get these guys tuned up *before* we get to Podala for a change. What do you say?"

B'Elanna cracked a little grin. Ridge was definitely a source of light on that barge. "That's the best thing I've heard all day."

As they treaded through the section, which darkened with every meter for the lack of extraneous lighting, Ridge popped on a portable work light. "Look, you're coming on the Guerdon at a relatively good time. We got some salvage parts that we can use, a little extra latinum with the junker and a part-timer who's competent. We're relaxed right now, got fun stuff to do. But I have to be honest with you B'Elanna, we've had some tough times."

"You forget where I've been recently."

Ridge snickered. "Yeah, I don't think it'll ever get *that* bad. Tom's too stubborn to let the Guerdon go to hell if he can help it. I guess what I'm trying to say is that things *do* get a little rough, supplies get thin and we're scraping for repairs or swerving around more trouble than we can handle. So, someone who can't take the lows isn't going to fit. Know what I mean?"

"Pressure doesn't get to me."

"Yeah, but we don't know that."

B'Elanna considered him for a moment, his matter-of-fact grin, and finally relented. "I guess I'm just used to working alone, not having to go further than the captain's interview--which is bad enough."

"I remember those," Ridge acknowledged. "Look, kid, just let us get to know you a little and then you can bury yourself in this pit as much as you like. Wait and see. You've got nothing to worry about."

"But what if I put up with all this crap and the captain decides he doesn't want to hire me in the end?"

Another chuckle rumbled out of the burly technician. "Then Hana'd kill him and we'd need a new *captain*, too."

Finally, B'Elanna laughed. "Okay."

Arriving at the impulse generator, she immediately crouched on a knee as Ridge sat on the floor and unlocked the driver coil cover. Heaving it up, he glanced at B'Elanna, who had already pulled a demagnetizer from another pocket. "Sorry we don't have replacements for these."

Shrugging at first, B'Elanna coughed when she saw what Ridge was talking about. The coils were badly corroded and she could see in the work light alone a few cracks in the shell. Tracing one with a finger, she could feel a little excess electric charge leaking through, growing stronger as her finger moved down. "What kind of filters do you have on your plasma relays?"

Ridge bit a lip. "I don't know."

"They must not be much. Who in the world had these engines before? Trilateral filters aren't hard to get."

"If that's the case, we can pick them up at Podala."

Sighing, B'Elanna shook her head and ran the tool over the apparatus again. "That won't help these coils, though. They need to be replaced."

"Now those *are* hard to get."

"Well, Maryl says the captain has some connections." Resetting the frequency on her tool, she glanced up at Ridge. "Do you have a multispectrum fuser? I can patch it for now."

Ridge nodded. "Yeah, I'll go get it. Thanks, B'Elanna."

"Thanks?" She furrowed her brow. "For what?"

He shrugged. "For helping--doing something. It's just thanks."

She glanced up at him again. His round, friendly face, looking down from far above her, was as easy as before. "You're welcome," she replied then went back to the coil.

As Ridge pulled himself to his feet, a set of lighter footsteps echoed behind her.

"Hey, Torres." It wasn't Ridge.

"Yes?" She didn't look back.

"When you get a chance, can you meet up with me in the aft subprocessor access juncture?"

"Which one are you? Jerod?"

"Yep. I'll be there the rest of the day. Come when you can."

"I've got a repair on these coils underway." She bent a little further down to reach the base of the driver manifold. She didn't feel like experiencing any more surprises. A jolt from the base of that piece of junk would definitely be that. "You sure you'll be there that long?"

"You can't replace them," he assured her. "I know because I control the parts inventory; there's not a coiled snake in there, much less a coil you can install in this scrap pile. So all you're doing is sealing them up--again. That only takes an hour or so."

B'Elanna finally looked back. The lanky operations technician stood leaning on a strut, holding his hands behind his back as he looked at her.

"Livich sealed those suckers about a hundred times," he finished.

"I can tell. They're crap."

Jerod snorted. "You haven't been here long. You'll find much worse once you really dig in. Livich was the queen of patch-and-go. She was more interested in power... Heh. Never associated it like that before." He pushed himself off the strut with his elbow. "Anyway, when you're done, have Ridge point out the aft subprocessor access platform."

With that, he turned to go.

"Can't we do this tomorrow?" B'Elanna suddenly asked, stopping him. "I'd like to make sure this is done right, if we can't replace the coils."

"Got to do this before we get to Podala," Jerod answered, grinning again. "Captain's orders--and don't tell him I called him that."

"Captain's *orders*?" B'Elanna retorted before she could check herself, remembering the serious face on the young captain as he escaped engineering the day before. "*He* told you all to check me out?"

"Got to haze the rookie before we give them a jacket," the man shrugged. "Don't worry, Torres. No classroom, no boring lectures. In fact, bring that fancy tool kit of yours. It's way better than mine."

Ridge approached with a small case. "At least it wasn't Savan," he chortled, putting the requested tool in her waiting hand.

B'Elanna rolled her eyes and flipped on the fuser.

Four hours later, Ridge finally convinced B'Elanna to get something to eat. To her surprise, as Ridge described a host of selections that they *could* get out of those cut-rate replicators, she felt her stomach grumble a bit. Then she remembered that she'd only had a cup of coffee that morning and a sandwich the night before--and maybe being on a ship that didn't have her running and screaming throughout the shift was shocking her system into considering regular nutrition. Then again, Ridge did seem to know the menu pretty well and was good at describing it. The only thing he didn't recommend was plomeek soup.

"Makes my fried oysters sound like fine cuisine," he snickered.

Either way, she finally assented to Ridge's suggestion, and was glad she did when she remembered she'd be helping install Mesler's communications array into the Guerdon's core subprocessor--a cruel little irony, that. She knew she should have at least a snack while she had the chance.

For that matter, she had a little time. Jerod had been right. Patching the impulse coils was as good as it could get without ripping the whole assembly out. There was nothing more she could do to them for the time being.

Maybe I can reconstruct the lateral drive conduits, take some of the pressure off... she mused as she climbed the access staircase, ignoring the remaining twinge in her knee, which had gotten worse since that morning. She'd tried not to push it, not wanting to end up in the lab again. She could tell the Vulcan was watching her gait every time they crossed paths. *The ship doesn't need all thirty. I can re-route the port conduits, pull three and weld them...*

Just as she'd expected and somewhat designed, she was neck-deep in repairs and plans, as she liked to be, but with one lingering problem: It wasn't really her job--not yet, according to their circumspect captain. Ridge and Jerod seemed happy to have a new engineer on hand, though; Maryl told her outright already that she wanted her there. B'Elanna didn't see anything negative in Savan so far.

In fact, she found herself liking the crew already, which was as surprising as it was...nice. Not that she could say she'd call any of them a friend so soon, but they were all agreeable and didn't seem fazed by her forthrightness. Rather, they seemed to appreciate it.

That didn't matter, though. The captain made the final decision. No matter what Ridge said about it, how Maryl felt about, they all admitted that the captain had the final say--the captain, raised Starfleet according to Ridge, and who could polish off whole bottles of scotch for dinner. The captain, who wouldn't give her a clear answer when they met, never asked her name, hardly met her eyes, escaped as soon as he could all three times she'd seen him, then sent the crew to "interview" her.

She could have cared less about his spotty appearances if she knew what was going to happen to her when they got to Podala, if she'd have to go sign in on the for-hire list or go hunt parts.

She hated that. Really hated it. Maryl had warned her, told her upfront what she was in for, but she still hated it. What made it worse was that Maryl had turned right around and played along with it--meaning, in the end, they'd be on his side. No surprise, that, though: They'd been a crew for a while, knew each other well, had gotten through a lot together. She was just "a guest."

Passing by a dry sink, she stuck her arms in and tapped the initiator in the back. Gradually, the contraption whirled to life and began to peck the grease and soot off her hands and arms.

"Great," she said to herself, bouncing her sore leg as she waited. "One more for the list."

But at least they have one here, she answered herself. Sighing, she waited the four times longer than it should have taken, then turned the unit off.

She finally resolved herself to go ahead and just ask for the job, get it done with, as Maryl had first hinted she should. The captain would have to be an idiot to not see she was capable, and she didn't take him as one so far. Much as she hated the idea of having to, she wasn't too proud to ask for what she wanted. It was a lot more dignified that signing the for-hire list and sitting around like cattle waiting to be called to a dabo table of potentially rotten jobs. With the Maquis situation she'd been told about, it might not be a good idea to stick around there as it was. Podala, Maryl pointed out, was one of the nearest stations to the outer end of the DMZ.

She wanted it. It was just a matter of getting it.

Moreover, she wasn't going to make the same, old mistake again--get into a lousy situation with her eyes shut hard, act off her quick feelings rather than her head. This time, she knew it'd be a right decision. She'd watched the crew working before they knew she was there, listened to their conversations and even overheard communications in passing. They spoke to her much as they spoke to each other--casual, matter of fact, without any airs or false courtesy or tiptoeing. As for the Guerdon and its systems, while it needed a lot of work, it wasn't a total piece of garbage, either. The captain at least scored points for being interested in upgrades, too.

Instead of her Klingon temper getting her kicked out of a place, a little of that temper had finally gotten her *in* to a situation that she couldn't have expected a week ago, the way things had been going.

Nodding to herself, she crossed into the main corridor to get to the lounge. She could eat and formulate an approach that wouldn't piss the captain off and at the same time wouldn't be embarrassing.

Arrogant bastard just needs to feel important, she concluded. *Fine. I'll hardly see him once it's over. If he rejects me, that'll be his problem.*

More determined with every step, B'Elanna entered the lounge and turned straight for the replicator. Checking it first to see if her spot repair was holding, she clicked through the choices. She chose a pasta salad--it'd fill her and stay there, she figured--and coffee.

Maybe get that comm system and sensor relay installed first, then arrange to talk to him.

Waiting for the replicator and ticking through her priorities, B'Elanna turned to lean on the wall, rest her knee a little.

Her back didn't touch the wall before she jumped away from it.

Across the lounge, she saw a man slumped over on the table. His arms were hanging flaccid below him and his feet were sprawled in such a way that he was dangerously close to sliding off the chair.

"Captain...Tom?" B'Elanna moved across the room and quickly investigated the table. There was nothing there but him. Careful not to push him off his seat, she shook his arm. "Tom?"

If he was breathing, she couldn't tell. B'Elanna drew a quick breath and decided to pull him up. Ready herself to catch him, she moved behind him and got him under the arms to haul him back. His head slid off the table and his chin hit his chest.

"Damn," B'Elanna hissed, checking her breath as she eased the captain away from the chair, lifting him to the ground as gently as she could. Kneeling on the deck, she put her hand in front of his nose and open mouth. Relieved to feel some air, she looked him over again. He was paler than he had been the day before, but not ghostly.

With a few sharp breaths, thinking quick and hard in a place still new to her, B'Elanna got to her feet again and left the lounge. She looked right and left--engineering, bridge--then crossed the corridor when she recalled another option. Retracing a few more steps from two days ago with Maryl, B'Elanna passed the forward cross-corridor and hurried to the doors to the right.

Tapping the door control, she looked inside and found Savan at work on a plant.

"The captain's passed out in the lounge," she told her.

Peering back at B'Elanna, the Vulcan woman rose from her bench and moved to the counter at the side of the room. Opening the cabinet above it, she pulled down a flat case and spread it apart. "Has he injured himself?" she queried.

B'Elanna blinked. The ship's so-called medic wasn't in any rush. "Not that I can see."

"Thank you." Selecting then loading a hypospray, Savan gestured to the entrance. "I will need your assistance. Please return with me."

B'Elanna did, two steps behind the Vulcan as they moved down the middle of the ship. Arriving at the lounge, she watched Savan walk across to where Paris laid, just as she had left him. Kneeling beside him, Savan placed her hand on his throat and tapped the control on the hypospray. Moments after she administered a dose, the captain coughed, then gagged on his bile. Savan nodded.

"Assist me in supporting him," she told the younger woman, gesturing to his right side. B'Elanna moved all the way in and bent over to take an arm and a shoulder. Together, they pulled the tall man to his unsteady feet and secured his arms over their shoulders. He began to breathe normally then, though still a little rough. "We will take him to the lab. Please remember to put the weight on your opposite leg when we do so. I notice you are favoring your left leg again."

B'Elanna snorted. The last thing she was thinking about was her knee. "What's up with him? Is he drunk?"

"He will not be soon," Savan answered, then exhaled when her captain's long legs buckled underneath him. "Tom, please help us lead you to the lab."

With a groggy shake of his head, he managed to keep his feet under him as they moved forward. His eyes remained closed, though, as they maneuvered him around the table and towards the door. "Gimme break, Cass," he slurred, then choked a laugh.

"Tom, we are taking you to the lab," Savan repeated. "Please maintain your pace."

"Yeah...some grieve...sincerely grieve..." He shivered a little, jerked a foot forward, then the other. "Snares..."

B'Elanna scowled over to the flailing head beside her own. "What the hell is he talking about?"

"Gimme a break, Cass..."

Savan turned them once they were in the corridor. "He is delirious."

"I...not loved the world...fair foes..."

"I got that much. *Why* is he delirious?"

"He makes the occasional mistake of purchasing poor quality alcohol. He will recover."

B'Elanna shook her head at the explanation. "How can you not be concerned about this? What if he's flying the ship and he has one of...these?"

"It has not happened, and the ship will respond appropriately if it should."

"Does he know this happens?"

"I have been careful to inform him."

"I...do...believe...Cass...don't..." With a groan, he quieted. His feet stumbled under him and the women yanked him up again. "Happy...no dream...don't..."

B'Elanna breathed a laugh as they came into the lab with their burden. "Well, there's the *one* thing wrong with this job--a suicidal captain."

"That is an incorrect assumption," Savan replied, moving around a medical table to pull Tom onto it.

Taking her cue from there, B'Elanna pulled his feet up and around to rest on the bed. "Hasn't anyone tried to help him?" she asked as she pushed his boots to the middle. "Not that I know him or anything, but I think I have the right to ask if I might be offered a job here."

"In a case such as this," Savan told her, "the decision to tend to his health is his. There are complexities of which you are ignorant and which I am not at liberty to disclose. Your concern, though admirable, will be of little consequence until he chooses how he will treat himself in the future."

B'Elanna took a step back from the table, still staring at the man, who was unconscious again. He looked younger than when she saw him last, almost innocent there, though without a doubt strung out. The memory of him sucking down that bottle of wine the night before, his heavy eyes intent of only what was right in front of him and little more, flashed behind her eyes. He might have been handsome if he

took care of himself. He was apparently intelligent, good at what he did, well liked by his crew for what she could tell.

She definitely didn't understand it, and she chose not to try to figure it out. Savan seemed confident about what she was saying and used to what she was doing. For that matter, B'Elanna had no problem agreeing that it wasn't her problem.

"I should get my lunch," she told Savan with a nod. "I have to meet Jerod later."

Savan blinked in assent. "Thank you for your assistance. Tom will recover presently."

"Okay."

"I would like to meet with you tomorrow morning."

B'Elanna was halfway out of the door when the request was made. She closed her eyes for a moment, somehow managing to swallow her first response. "I'll try to be unbusy. Any particular time?"

"Eight hundred hours would be convenient."

"I'll be here."

B'Elanna returned to the lounge, still shaking her head at the strange event and not nearly as hungry as she'd been. She couldn't even remember what she'd ordered to eat. Whatever was the issue with the captain wasn't upsetting, but it ticked at her, stuck to her. It was just weird, maybe a little unnerving. She didn't know why.

On top of that, the "interview" process had finally swung over to the Vulcan.

Nevertheless, as she'd told Savan and reminded herself again, she did have a long night coming up, so she set her mind back on getting something to eat, having the break that she should have before starting another shift. Turning into the rectangular room, first glancing at the place where Paris had been to see if anything was dropped, she spotted Ridge on the other end, pulling her selections off the replicator tray.

"Hey there," he said cheerfully. "All that talk about food got me hungry, too--not that I'm on any diet." He watched her cross her arms as he put her meal down. "What's wrong, kid?"

"Nothing," B'Elanna replied and moved to the table. "Thanks."

"Here we go. Finally in. --Heh. You'd think since this is a Bolian ship that they'd make these conduits a little more accommodating."

"Just because it's Bolian doesn't mean a Bolian designed it."

"Damn, do you always make sense? --Ah, yeah, shine it right there. Great."

Cameron Jerod was a spare-set man, about her age; not too tall, not short, with long, muscular

fingers, an average face and an expression that only straightened when he was concentrating. In B'Elanna's eyes, he was about as normal as normal could be for a human, everyday without being plain. She'd gotten unused to that sort of person in her travels.

It was a nice change, as was the nature of that "meeting." Even if she was just holding the light like some level-two tech assistant, being in the guts of a ship was far more her speed than sitting in a bright, boxy room staring at star charts. Rather, to her pleasant surprise, the time passed quickly as they lay on their backs in the aft juncture crawlspace. He chatted and prodded at the ancient comm assemblies with the tools she'd brought while she watched and pointed the light where he needed it.

"I still can't believe Tom's not got you signed yet," he said, a light chuckle in his voice. It seemed to be the norm with him. "I gave him hell about it this morning, but he really wants to make sure it's a good fit, you know--on both sides. Savan feels pretty strongly about it, too--a decent fit for the engines and for the rest of us. But they were brought up in the Starfleet system. They consider things like that pretty heavily, when they can."

Drawing a cool breath, B'Elanna said nothing to that, but angled the light a little closer in as his attention turned into another part of the shaft section. "Your last engineer must have been a rough experience."

"Livich? Eh, she was fine--when things were going okay. When they weren't, she'd make life a living hell for everyone. Made Maryl look downright giddy and she drove Tom crazy, much as he made an effort to piss her off. It was about all he could do besides kill her--when he felt like giving a damn, anyway. And oh, she *hated* him. I never saw anyone so venomous about a fellow human--ever."

Jerod snorted, pushing the laser wrench into the open slot. "But in the end, she got us good--told Tom and the rest of us she'd be signing on a new contract then jumped ship without a word. Here we were with a crapload of repairs to be done and a haul to DS-Nine coming up--the run we're on now--and all that was left of her was a poof of smoke. She had a good job lined up even while she had Tom updating her terms, so she managed to grab her share from the Hidirin job and make him look like an ass. --Give me another relay switch?"

B'Elanna reached over and felt for it, then handed it over.

Jerod continued, "It was tough on Ridge. He's a great tech--and I'm a good tech--but we're neither engineers. Tom had to hire a station hack at Hidirin to get us going, swearing he wasn't going to make the same mistake twice. Tom's a great guy, but you can only break his trust once. Livich did a pretty good job of that."

B'Elanna thought about that for a moment and the first question that came to mind with that explanation. Peering over at Jerod, she figured he wouldn't mind telling her--or not answering. "So Paris doesn't have any other problems besides that?"

Jerod returned her glance. "If he does, I don't know about it. Either way, he's going to be careful. Desperation doesn't make him do what a lot of people do--solve a problem with the first available solution."

B'Elanna snorted despite herself. "If you say so."

Jerod adjusted the laser wrench. "Yeah, I heard he ended up in the lab again. Sorry you had to go through that so soon. He can be a mess."

"It was nothing."

"Still no fun to deal with. Believe me, B'Elanna, he's--can you move that over there a little? Thanks. --He's usually a fully functional drunk." Squinting at his work, he looked over at the case B'Elanna had drug into the conduit with her. "You have a phase calibrator in there?"

B'Elanna put the light down and got onto an elbow to look inside her kit.

"It's no secret on the route," he continued, nodding when she handed the tool to him. "He can outlast just about anyone at the table, though I'll admit we sometimes have to drag him home, too. But despite what it can do to him, I'd pour his glass any day of the week without a blink."

B'Elanna smirked, readjusting the light's setting so it would cover more area. "Even if you're the first to criticize him?"

"Eh, that's not criticism. I'm just joshing around with him, which he sort of prefers. Keeps his brain alive, so he says, and it's good for the rest of us, too. If he's not in the mood for it, he'll say something or leave. He doesn't hold a grudge. Even Maryl gets to mess with him. He doesn't care."

"Maybe that's the problem," B'Elanna observed.

"Yeah."

B'Elanna glanced over at Jerod. His agreement was casual, almost unconcerned. He set aside some relay wires and began to plug in the new ones. She went back to fiddling with the light. It wasn't an effective model to use in such a tight space. Too much glare. Thankfully, it had some resolution adjustors. "And so he drinks because he doesn't care?"

"Nope. He doesn't care if people give him hell. He's had to deal with much worse from people who you'd expect would be a little more courteous. What he *can't* deal with, can't get out of his system, is why he drinks. Nothing new. But don't mistake that for him not caring in general. He'd put his life on the line for any one of us, including you, if it came to that. You can count on it."

"Well, he doesn't have to worry about me," B'Elanna asserted.

"Yeah he does."

She looked at him again, not asking--not having to. Jerod had already turned a look back at her.

He held her attention several seconds before asking, "Hand me the next bundle?" She jerked her stare away to the tray they'd pulled in with them, grabbed the isolinear bundle. Taking it from her, Jerod gave her the end with the connector rods. "Just set the light on the floor. I can tell you're bored."

"It's going in by your spec."

"Screw the specs. You could do this in your sleep." He chuckled. "Hell, you could probably throw together a robot that could do this better than I could, seeing how you work so far." He gave the calibrator back to her. "Plus, it'll make it go faster."

"Thanks," B'Elanna said, meaning it.

Gladly reaching up into the assembly Jerod had just cleared, B'Elanna cleaned each of the plugs with the laser, and then rechecked each connector for the correct converter. With so many alien systems

working together, she knew she couldn't be too careful.

"So, why does Paris have to save my life?" she asked. She didn't necessarily like to talk while working--usually didn't--but as Jerod had pointed out, it was a simple job. For that matter, he had already made her curious.

"Aside from his being the captain?"

"That's what I thought you meant."

"Yeah, it is," Jerod replied with a short nod, then answered, "Because a few people under his command got killed. It wasn't pretty, screwed him up bad. He feels responsible."

That was much simpler an answer than B'Elanna had expected, but it was the most understandable thing she'd heard about the man so far.

"So how'd a mechanic like you end up on Mesler's old garbage pail?" Jerod asked as he tapped a few commands in the adjoining panel.

"Wrong station at the wrong time," B'Elanna said. "I'd been through a lot of assignments and didn't feel like hanging around. Mesler made an offer and I took it."

"Mesler. Hate to say it about anyone who gets whacked off by the Cardies, but he got what was coming to him."

B'Elanna breathed an ironic laugh. "Did Mesler have *any* allies out here?"

"Hell, no--not with the independent traders, at least. He had a knack for trying to double shift his deals--use one deal to pay for another before following up on the first one. The fact you're here is a result of it...so maybe we can't be too sorry. His cousin was the original owner of this ship, actually. It's why he kept ticking at us for a deal, because apparently we were legally bound by Trusket's old contract. Tom had to follow through sooner or later."

"So he hasn't had the Guerdon for long."

"A couple years," Jerod answered. "And trust me, it's a hell of a lot better than it was without him. You think it needs upgrades *now*?" Jerod blew a whistle through his teeth. "We were missing *nacelle plating* when Tom got the Guerdon dumped on him. But then, Trusket was *trying* to run the ship down so he could get out of his contract. The only reason he picked *me* up was because he was contractually obligated and was sure I couldn't cut it."

He caught B'Elanna's stare again and shook his head. "I wasn't mad about it. I knew I wasn't experienced. I needed to work to support my family on Ronara, pay for protection, all that. I didn't really care what I was doing. Stupid old bastard didn't count on Livich and Ridge training me, or the fact that I knew how to read."

"Your family still lives in the DMZ, then?"

"Yeah. They're among the groups who don't want to give it up. I mean, I grew up there, so in a way I can't blame them, but if it were up to me, they'd be taking a nice, long vacation on a no-charge Federation colony, hell and far away from there. But since they won't go for that, I decided to come out here and do what they can't right now. It's been working out pretty well, though it's been a little thinner for them since the Federation cut off their support. It's hard rationing your everyday life when you've

never had to, you know? The Federation believes that'll get them to change their minds, when what they're really doing is just pissing everyone off."

"And they're their own people," B'Elanna growled. She hadn't heard about that part of the issue yet.

"Well, also they're trying to avoid another bloody war and help secure Bajor," Jerod shrugged. "Sounds about right. The treaty's crap, of course, since the Cardassians could care less about it--and get away with not caring about it. That's the real problem. Anyone could argue about parsing off the colonies like they did, but the Fed's intentions were good."

"Cutting people off because they won't leave their homes isn't exactly a charity."

"True. But I can see how they'd be ignorant enough to do it. They don't live out here. They sent stuffy old captains to survey the region and send back reports. They didn't know anything. Anyway, it's a long, old fight they'd been fighting for years before we came around and started yelling about it, and we can curse it all we like. In the end, I'll have my family. After all the knots are settled out--either by the Maquis or someone else--we'll all be together and home, wherever that is."

She blew a breath in the air, setting the laser down so she could inspect the node one last time. "It's still not fair," she said, adjusting the light a little.

"Nothing's really fair, when you get down to it. Just got to make the best of what *is* good about it, as they say. You're the only one who can do that--and I'm happy with what I've done. Life could be a hell of a lot worse. --Done already? Give me another minute and we'll get to the fun part."

"Okay." She couldn't help her grin that time. He certainly knew her brand of fun.

"Actually, while I finish, could you go back out into the access juncture and grab another row of seals? I've still got some, but not enough, I think."

B'Elanna flipped onto her belly. "No problem. One or two packs?"

"Two. Better too many than too little. You remember your way around?"

"Yes. I'll be right back"

Crawling out the way they came in, B'Elanna grinned to realize why Jerod had taken over so many of Ridge's small maintenance tasks. The bulkier man wouldn't have been able to fit an *arm* in those tubes, much less the rest of him. Like everything else on the Guerdon, everything was a little out of place. She was already starting to enjoy discovering them--including the realization that the upper access tubes' juncture was right above the lounge. As she neared it, she could smell the coffee and hear the voices...

She couldn't make out the words at first, but as she dug into Jerod's parts box, she recognized Maryl's voice, a drawl like a cat's with clips at the ends of her sentences. It was unmistakable. The other voice wasn't as easy at first because it was so quiet, but then she heard:

"You want coffee before we go forward?"

"Yes. Thanks." The replicator whirred to life and added more coffee smell to the air. "So, when is it going to be final?"

"Can't say. It's still in the air."

B'Elanna blinked. It was the captain. *Savan was right. He recovers quickly.* She pulled another pack of seals and stuffed them in her work belt.

"In the air? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean I don't know if she's right for the job yet. I'm waiting on Savan."

B'Elanna froze.

"Come on, Tom! It's not like she's not good enough."

"That's my problem, Maryl: She's *too* good. Smart as she is, how long do you think it'll take her to realize that? She's busy for now, but after the coils are repaired and the shields are reworked, once the routine starts setting in, she's going to be bored as hell." Sighing heavily, he continued, "She needs a job now, but what about after she looks around and realizes she's got nothing better to do?"

"I see your point," Maryl admitted. "But wouldn't that be her problem?"

"It'll become everyone else's soon enough."

"You don't know that--"

"Maryl--"

"You can't tell me that you--"

"Hana!"

Silence.

"Have I asked much since I became the captain?"

A pause. "No. --Except that we didn't call you that."

He snorted softly, then said, "I'm asking this--just this. I refuse to fly another circuit in a fight. When Livich left, I swore I wouldn't put up with that crap again. I'm going to hear what Savan's impression is, and then I'm making up my mind. If I have to make do for the time being and drydock at Ulinas until we find the right person, I'll do it. You and Ridge can decide not to re-up when your contract comes. Much as I'd hate it, that'd be fine, too. Either way, I'm not going to put up with another engineer who takes her hostility out of everyone around her, no matter how good she is at keeping this ship going."

Another pause. "Okay."

"You see what I'm talking about, right?"

"Yes. --But I'll still say you're an idiot."

"Well, seeing as you already think it, that won't take much more effort, will it?"

B'Elanna realized she was sitting with her back to the juncture wall, barely breathing. Her blood felt frozen. All the work she'd been doing, everything she was planning, and he couldn't see for a case of bad scotch and what an incompetent bitch had left behind--a far worse situation than she'd thought.

"Did you get the checklist from Podala yet?" the captain asked, obviously changing the topic as they moved out of the lounge.

"No. Gil's probably sitting on it, ignorant bastard."

Their voices continued to fade as they continued to the bridge.

B'Elanna numbly turned on her knees and returned to the tubes and to Jerod, who was putting down his tools as she approached. She handed him a case of seals. "I have the other pack in my belt," she told him.

"Great. Thanks. Now, how about I get a look at how that fancy field-dichrometer works?"

B'Elanna pulled it from its bearings in her kit. "Node four first?"

"Yeah, that'll be a good start."

Silently gnashing her teeth, B'Elanna activated the tool and gladly let their sounds be replaced by the dicrometer as it remagnetize the matrices one by one.

The sun, clear and cool, the sky was sapphire blue. Stone buildings, and that lawn...

"Give me that! --Hey!"

She was so pretty. She probably knew it.

"Come on, Macarden, you're faster than that!"

His laugh almost made her laugh, too. Over the green grass--so green it almost hurt her eyes...It glinted in the sun as they ran over it, turning sharply, laughing so loud she started a bit and looked back.

It could be like that. She could be like that. She just had to...If only she would...All she had to do was...

B'Elanna's eyes shot open in the dark room for the third time. A quick, deep breath followed that disruption of the dream. "Lights," she ordered and scooted her feet off the bed. There, she stilled.

They were probably off for the transport, ready to set their hopes and dreams into action. But they played on the grass before they went, free, happy, ready for the galaxy to come and find them...

She shook her head, shook it out from behind her eyes. It wouldn't go.

"Damnit."

Moving to the corner sink, she activated the tap and dipped her hands in to scoop the water onto her face.

She had calluses on her hands. The calluses were stained with soot. She had a blister on her index finger.

She looked up.

Her face was a little thin, showing her cheekbones more than they used to a couple years ago. Her eyes a little sleep-swollen, a little dark, were plainer than ever.

I can't screw this up.

She could feel the hot steam sticking to her bare, dirty arms, crouching deep in the belly of a ship, screaming at every part she yanked away to replace with a captain or first mate screaming at her over a comm or a few meters behind her. "Get it *done*, Torres! What's the matter with you?!"

She got herself into those situations. She fed on it, felt so dark sometimes that she *wanted* to hurt, to scream, to be challenged and berated so she *could* fight back. On worse days, she wanted to chuck it all and give up. Give up for what--go where--do what? End it? No. Just get out, get away, move on...To go where--do what? But she got up for the next shift, got to work, started over. When they dumped her, she'd start the pattern all over again.

Nine assignments in eighteen months. The same thing every time.

I can't keep doing this.

She pulled a few deeps breaths, calming her quickening heart. Leaning down, she splashed her warm cheeks with a few more handfuls of the water, breathing the cool air in the basin before tapping the plug off. Looking at her reflection again, she gave herself a nod.

She turned took the few steps back to her bed.

"Deactivate lights."

"Hey B'Elanna!"

She jumped a little at the cheerful greeting, but then saw Jerod ahead of her in the corridor, one foot into the bridge.

"Nice work last night," he told her. "Feel like giving it another shot later?"

"I..." She thought quickly, then finished, "I'll have to check with Ridge, see how long we'll be today."

"Going after those inverters?"

She shook her head. "Impulse generator, then we plan to go after the inverters."

"Don't get sucked too far in. They really are crap. Just let me know when you're free a while and we'll give the sensor network a go-through. --And thanks. Your help with the comm systems really helped get it done."

She gave him a brisk nod, then remembered to reply. "You're welcome."

"Getting some breakfast?"

"Yes. --Coffee."

"Don't order Ridge's brew," he chuckled. "Keep you up for days straight. See you later."

With that, the comm tech disappeared.

B'Elanna shook her head, a little smile finally reaching her as she continued forward.

"Morning, B'Elanna," said Maryl when the half-Klingon entered the lounge. "Grab some coffee and come sit down. I've got the latest newsfeed."

She paused. Much as she preferred quietly gearing up for her work when she had her first cup of coffee, and though Maryl's expression gave no indication of her conversation with the captain the evening before, there was something nice about being treated like a person. Maybe Maryl had worked on him some more? Maybe she had a good facade.

"I don't have time to read it," she said as she tapped in her order for a mug. "I'm about to see Savan, then I've got to help tune up the impulse engines with Ridge."

"Meeting with the professor, hmm?" Maryl scrolled down a little. "Well, next time you have a break, let me know and I'll give it to you. They're finally talking about something besides the Maquis this time around."

Pulling her coffee off the replicator shelf, B'Elanna turned and reconsidered, seeing the flaxen-haired Bajoran bent over her cup, a blue-cased PADD in her slender fingers. Inviting her over to share a cup of coffee and the news...like anyone on the crew...

"Like what?"

Maryl glanced over and grinned. "Well, Tagra's in the middle of some deals to open up their inner colonies to the circuit. That's for me to remember, though you'll probably like to know they mine some good boronite out of the cluster--at a very low cost. If they open their plants up to general trade, we could get licensed there, get in on the good deal."

B'Elanna pulled a chair for herself and sat down. "When do they expect that to happen?" she asked and took a sip of her coffee.

She had a little time, she figured.

When she entered the lab, she was greeted by as plain a gaze as she'd ever seen on a Vulcan. That particular one was seated on a stool, a set of tweezers in her hand, perched over what looked like a blue dandelion. Her brown eyes floated up from the bloom to take B'Elanna squarely into focus. Her mouth was ruler straight. Her fingers did not so much as twitch from her work.

Not the warmest welcome, though B'Elanna didn't expect her to be Ridge in a lab coat.

"Please be seated. I am almost finished."

B'Elanna chose a stool at a nearby table and waited. Her stare drifted over the hearty wall plants and instrument tables. She remembered waking up to them days ago. It felt longer than that--though the moment she thought about that, it didn't seem like much time at all. By the time she brought her stare back down to the business in the room, Savan had plucked several white buds out of the fluffy flower and placed them in a tray.

Setting the tweezers onto a dish with a light clink, Savan turned on the bench to face her visitor.

"I have been told by Ridge and Maryl that you still desire the position in engineering."

"Still? Why would I have changed my mind?"

"I did not think you would, in spite of the unfortunate event yesterday." Savan examined B'Elanna another long moment. Then, she continued, "When I examined your file from the central database, I noticed that you were raised on the colony at Kessik-Four." B'Elanna pulled a breath, already a little put off by the other woman's studious gaze. Suddenly, it was starting to feel like a real interview, starting with the dive into her history. "I was," she answered slowly, slightly warning the Vulcan not to go any further on that topic.

With a slow blink, Savan seemed to read her, and so she asked, "You also attended Starfleet Academy."

"Yes. I was there for two years."

"Your concentration was in physics and engineering, your minor in quantum mechanics."

"Yes."

"An ambitious course of study," Savan commented. "Yet you chose not to graduate."

"I quit."

A blink. "I am curious why."

"I was having trouble there."

"Trouble."

"I didn't agree with my instructors."

"May I ask about what?"

"A lot of things." B'Elanna blew a short breath. "Look, what's the point in asking me any of this? I quit and got a job doing what I wanted to do."

"I was not interrogating you," Savan replied. "I only thought your record ironic, as I too was raised on an outer colony and attended the Academy for two years. I did not see their regimen as one I could prescribe to. However, I left without incident. As Humans like to say, it was not for me."

B'Elanna couldn't help the stare she gave the Vulcan for that. Though the other crew had each managed to surprise her, she'd at least expected Savan to be...ordinary. "*You're* an Academy dropout?"

Savan came as close as she could have to rolling her eyes. "Yes. Vulcans are permitted to 'drop out' of

our studies. It does not please our parents, but the right and decision is ultimately ours. It is curious to me how shocking this information is."

"I guess I'd just never heard about it before," B'Elanna shrugged. "Sorry."

"I was not insulted." Letting an appropriate pause pass, she moved on. "Your record also states that your first position after leaving the Academy was at the facility on Cabol-Five."

"Yes. I started as a shift technician, then I was promoted to first assistant."

"Impressive. You learned a great deal in your year there."

B'Elanna nodded, a little thoughtful. "More than I expected. They had a good system for training their employees. I took courses in my spare time and worked on a lot of different designs and ranges of models. It wasn't a perfect facility, but it was good experience."

"It is unfortunate that the Cabol-Five facility was forced to close."

B'Elanna shrugged. "We were expecting it after the scuttles in the rim colonies, and when we heard about the petition on Cabol-Three, after Starfleet had to come and mediate. The Caboli decided the station was a liability."

"You enjoyed your work there and did well. I assume you were not happy to leave."

"I thought the Caboli were idiots," B'Elanna responded, not nearly as subtle as Savan chose to be, dredging up the not-too-old memory. "They put over three hundred people out of work and refused to place them. It's how I ended up on crates like Mesler's."

"The departments were all disbanded?"

"The whole facility was taken apart the day I left. Only the Caboli workers were given positions on the homeworld. The non-Caboli workers were released, as I said."

"I remember their facilities manager--Caron Rial," Savan continued. "He was not Caboli."

"He moved on to Sorvos-six after the shutdown," B'Elanna nodded with a smirk. "He was glad to go."

"Did you know him well?"

She snorted. "Well, I fought with him every day I was there to get my section supplies on time and I had to show him a couple doors to get my point across. If that's knowing a person, then I knew him very well."

A pause, and then Savan gave her a single nod and reached over to pick up her tweezers. "Thank you, B'Elanna. You have been more patient with this process than I expected."

B'Elanna blinked at the quick dismissal and felt a small burn in her gut to realize that Savan had ended the meeting on that--*that*. "Is something wrong?"

"No. You may remain, though it is not necessary. I believe I have taken enough of your time."

B'Elanna slid off the stool to her booted feet. They thumped dumbly on the metal deck.

The Vulcan returned to her pod collecting as though she hadn't stopped.

"That's it?"

"Yes."

B'Elanna turned her stare. "If I've said something wrong, I'd like it if you'd tell me."

"You have not. I have enough information to make my recommendation to the captain."

The engineer, blinked a nod, turned, paused, and then walked out of the lab. As soon as she did, the doors swished shut behind her. She felt the slight breeze on her nape.

Her conversation with Jerod began to echo in her ears, how their former engineer made "life a living hell for everyone. Made Maryl look downright giddy." Then, the captain's, "I'm not going to put up with another engineer who can't resist pissing everyone off." B'Elanna realized a minute too late that she'd just shown herself to be capable of just that, even as she'd warned herself not to let that happen, been aware of what they were looking out for. Worse than that, she'd revealed it to the one person who not only would look poorly on such flairs of "emotion," but would be looked to by the captain for a final opinion.

"Stupid," she hissed.

Looking to her right, the bridge was only five meters away through an open passage. She could hear the captain talking to someone over the comm, something about trade shares. She vaguely made out some parts from Mesler's ship she knew had been stored but weren't going to be installed and something about Maryl's arrangements. He sounded like he did in the lab, when she woke up and he told her where she was, that was sorry she was out of a job, that she'd get a share from Mesler's ship. All business and just wanting to get it done.

To the left, a set of open grate doors thirty meters away promised engineering as it pulsed and whined. She knew that Ridge was there, still tuning up the impulse drive per her suggestions.

It still wasn't her job to do even that--and she just screwed up the meeting with the Vulcan.

With a breath, she started towards her left, pacing her breath and grinding her teeth against the humiliation she could feel down to her boots. She could hear her footsteps thrum in her ears, her pulse picking up.

She just screwed up the meeting with Vulcan.

She didn't even care that she gave a damn anymore--she'd have lost nothing if she had to get dropped at the station as a for-hire--but it was a point of pride to land that position to *spite* her inability to keep her stupid tongue straight. She'd let the other crew relax her, let Ridge encourage her, make her think she had the job by default.

Arriving on the overhang above engineering, B'Elanna continued along the guardrail towards the access staircase, looking over the main control panel wall below to the various systems behind it, the open casings and wiring, makeshift bulkheads, catwalks and hammocked emission tubes. Beyond, hidden by protective bulkheads, the light of the warp core and the steam from the coolant assembly bathed the deck. Her heart slowed; the feeling in her gut began to fade.

She slid her fingers along the rail then let them drop to her side. Slowly, her hand reached over to her

other arm, gently encircled her wrist. Taking another look around at some of the systems she'd inventoried a couple days ago, mentally noted as immediately repairable, her hand tightened slowly and began to push the sleeve on her arm up to her elbow.

Then, she moved again.

"Done already?"

Savan looked up from her project, her tweezers held precisely inside the flora. The captain had poked his head in the door, serious but curious and on his way somewhere else.

"Yes," she answered.

"How'd it go?"

"As expected," she replied. "My original recommendation stands."

Holding her stare for a few seconds after she spoke, Tom nodded, left her to her work and likewise returned to his.

"I have not loved the world, nor the world me," he whispered, his eyes following the subtle pattern on the carpet as he moved over it, "but let us part fair foes..."

"*Captain, my captain!*" came her voice in his head, clear and loud and ready for his rejoinder, ready to go.

Tom's eyes screwed shut as he paused in the corridor. "Go away," he muttered then started off again.

"Captain, my captain!" she sang from the copilot's seat of Starfleet's latest pet project. She peeked around a moment later, her round, green eyes shining with her smile. "About time you decided to show up. Do pre-flight from your bunk?"

"Got sidetracked," Lieutenant Paris grinned as he slid around to his seat and sank in.

"Was that Ensign Nicole Sidetrack? Or Lieutenant Lisal Sidetrack?"

"I couldn't tell you, Ensign Wishyoucouldgetsome. --Hey, what's that doing on the bulkhead?" He squinted up at the block of type attached with a magnet across from him. Focusing, he groaned. "Oh, no."

"Oh, yes. You know I never go anywhere without Byron," Ensign Macarden grinned. "I brought a whole canto, just so you know how special you are."

"Did I forget your birthday again?"

"No, I like to bug you for no reason at all. Keeps you fresh."

Paris sighed and began clicking on the controls of the new shuttle. "This study's going to be boring enough--"

"For *you*," she cut in.

"I still don't know what I did to tick off the commander."

"Considering how often you do that, I can see why." Her grin twisted. "At least you've got a day to think about it."

"Shut up." He grinned and flipped on the new initiators. "Wow, they really souped up this model. Look at those output levels. Smooth."

She nodded. "Yep. It checks out." Macarden eyed him. "Too bad, no hot-dogging for you."

"Well, maybe eventually, she'll get a proper ride."

She shook her head as she began to tick off their test list against the equipment Drake and Farrow had loaded on. "You should have been a test pilot, Tom."

"You know," Paris responded as he continued to tick off his checklist, "I think I should have, too. But that wasn't a part of the 'plan.'"

"You're almost twenty-three years old. How long are you going to stick with 'the plan?'"

"Long as I need to. Long as I..." He reached up to adjust the thruster response, a manual control on the shuttle to his pleasant surprise, "...need to get what I want."

"You've decided what that is?" she queried.

"No. Should be interesting when I do, though."

Macarden rolled her eyes and nodded behind her at Drake and Farrow, strapped in the back compartment. "We're all in."

"Locked and ready," he nodded, then hit the comm. "Paris to Copernicus, Viking away."

"Aye, Viking. Captain advises you keep the comm open until signal blackout around Persedi moon's plasma fields and reinitialize after completion of orbit."

"Copy, Copernicus," replied the pilot smoothly. "Estimated blackout in ninety-two minutes."

"Good luck, Viking."

"Thanks, Edon. See you on the other side."

The shuttle lifted off its sleek feet and cruised forward from the bay. The closing doors soon blocked the glare from the ship, revealing the pristine space beyond. He turned them as soon as they were clear of the Copernicus' shield range to get the full effect.

"In the mean time, Cass," Paris smiled at the view of the sunrise over Caldik Prime, "I think I'll just

enjoy this..."

Tom's eyes opened to a gray viewscreen. With a blink, he glanced down to his status monitor.

Three days to Podala. Finally.

He stretched in his seat, shook his head of his catnap.

It wasn't that he was unused to the legs. Despite the Guerdon's tenuous speed capabilities of late, it was usually just under a week between stations on that end of the route, which wasn't too long, really. They'd only done a few speed runs--top-warp legs back and forth between points--since he'd been there. He remembered a few more on his former assignments, too...a little. Still, despite the added "excitement," he didn't like putting the Guerdon through that. It usually burned out systems that the pot couldn't pay for.

It still inspired a smirk, that he'd become so conventional and careful. Somewhere between his disgrace and disillusionment, a modicum of common sense had crept in without his trying for it.

In any case, they trudged along as quickly as they could; warp five inside the Federation border, warp six outside it when the engines were operating and warp eight when they could get away with it. They waited and worked and kept up communications, did repairs and other housework, made plans for the next stop--and the one after that, and so on. It was an easy pattern to get caught up in once one's mind was set on it. For his part, Tom had spent the better part of the last few days setting up for their arrival at Podala, getting the latest vendor list for his usual rounds of supply scraping, preparing for inspections and looking over what Maryl had set up for them to load into decks three and four.

This time out, they were transporting organic materials for a cook on Deep Space Nine, which a cross-core tradesman had brought to Podala from Merak by way of Irtrin. Tom turned that inventory over to Savan and moved on to the heavy materials and technological cargo. Atmospheric condensers, geothermal stabilizers and core processor distribution networks en route to Gimol-Two would be the Guerdon's burden until they got to Zarilar, where a Gimolian ship would pick up its requested items. The mildly xenophobic race did not travel widely and did not care to roam into Federation space. Their stations were well furnished, but transports to their planets were strictly forbidden. This was fine with Tom and the rest of the crew. The Gimolians paid well enough for Federation equipment. That cargo was already slotted for the deck four forward hold, ready and waiting.

Three days from Podala, and he had just one more thing to take care of: The Guerdon's guest.

The day wasn't going to get any shorter if he didn't get it over with.

He pushed himself up from his seat.

Paris closed his eyes as he pulled the turn behind Caldik's third moon. His finely turned equilibrium could feel the slight shift. The dampers couldn't hide everything, on shuttles or even starships--something he was genuinely happy about. It was the feel, he believed, that helped him be as good a pilot as he was.

"How the intermix ratio holding up?" Macarden asked, tapping the dilithium output specs up.

"Right on the money," called Drake, far aft. "They did well when they designed this reactor."

The tiniest dip made Paris' eyes open. A sub-particle disturbance. He tapped on a scan and grinned to himself. Any other day, he'd have taken that shiny new shuttle surfing, skim along the waves and see how close in he could get. He used to do it at the academy between Plutonian exercises. Unfortunately, it wasn't another day. "Sub-particle eddies ahead, Cass. You want me to skirt it or go around?"

"Let's see..." She looked over the engineering readouts again, pulled up some other numbers. "I don't want to go too far off this run. We've got almost seventy percent of our data." She punched up another roll of numbers, then looked at him. "How close can you get without hitting the waves?"

"Wanna find out?" Paris grinned.

"Seriously."

"Oh, *seriously*, I think I can hold us at about five hundred meters if I kick in the filters. Will that interfere with what you're doing?"

"Actually, yes."

"Then it'll be about fifteen hundred meters."

Macarden nodded. "That's still pretty close, but manageable. Let's do that, then...Sir."

Paris pulled the shuttle off the wave, finding a comfortable place in between, where he could still feel the little tugs, but far enough that their sensor data wouldn't be corrupted. Certainly, he didn't want to sit through another day like that one was turning out to be. He glanced at the chronometer. Eight more hours before he'd meet Ensign Neal in the lounge for dinner and hopefully disappear afterwards. Eight very long hours, made longer still by Macarden's easy torture--revenge, he knew. Eventually, he'd figure out for what.

With a call behind her for Farrow to activate the new lateral sensor grid, Macarden began another diagnostic and continued from where she'd left off several minutes before:

"I have not loved the world, not the world me; I have not flattered its rank breath, nor bowed to its idolatries a patient knee, nor coined my cheek to smiles, nor cried aloud in worship of an echo; in the crowd, they could not deem me one of such; I stood among them, but not of them; in a shroud of thoughts that were not their thoughts, and still could, had I not filled my mind, which thus itself subdued."

Paris turned an eye her way. "So, he's feeling pretty good about now?" he quipped. He tapped the impulse engines up a notch, correcting their speed.

She smirked. "Really, Tom, you need to read more poetry."

"Only if it comes with pictures."

"Hmm...No, Blake would probably twist your brain out of its bearings."

"Wouldn't be too terrible, that."

"Yeah, probably *would* improve you." A beep. Macarden glanced down. "Tom, that eddy's coming

pretty close."

"Not a problem. I just corrected-- Oh. I see it. Just a minor ripple. Correcting again."

"Maybe we should move off a little more," Macarden suggested. "I know you like playing it tight, but I don't want this data to be compromised."

"We can hold here," Paris assured her, glancing her way as he nudged the shuttle back onto their original course. "It's not too rough."

"We can still go around."

"Oh no, I don't want to be here long enough for you to finish the canto."

"So, you *do* have a date."

"Sure do. You?"

She turned back to her console. "Shut up."

"I will if we can keep on schedule."

Macarden turned back to the scans. "Your luck's as good as ever, then. Looks like we've just about got what we need. Pull this orbit out, we'll finish the diagnostics and then we can head home."

"Sounds good to me."

"Let us part fair foes, I do believe," Macarden began again.

"Give me a break Cass. I'll give you my next shore leave if--"

"...I do believe --"

"You skipped a line," Paris cut in.

"It's *my* reading," she insisted.

He chuckled, giving up. "Okay."

"...Though I have found them not, that there may be words which are things, hopes which will not deceive--"

A jolt stopped her; she looked down when a beep followed. The shuttle lurched, then, making both Paris and Macarden grab their consoles as they heard equipment crashing aft. The creak of bending hull echoed through the forward hold.

He released a console to check his bleeping panel. "Plasma wave came up out of nowhere," he reported. "Knocked inertial dampers offline a second. Compensating and adjusting course. --Fiddling with my knobs again, Cass?"

She wasn't amused that time. "Let's just get on course."

"Really, Cass, you need to enjoy more of the unexpected," he grinned, tapping them back onto their

original trajectory.

Macarden turned in her seat to call back to Drake and Farrow. Her words were hardly formed before the unmistakable pull of a low gravity surge tugged the loose contents of the shuttle into the air and the pilot cried out--

"Plasma wave on top of-- Hold on!"

"Tom!"

"Tom! Pull it around!"

"Impulse is offline! Thrusters on! Navigation--"

"The moon's gravity is dragging us into a spin!"

"I can't pull us out of it! We're going down!"

"Keep trying, Tom!"

Tom stopped in the middle of the corridor.

"Stop," he whispered to himself.

He blinked slowly, willing down his fluttering heartbeat, thinking a moment. The forward lift to the crew quarters below was only a few meters away. His quarters was a minute's walk from there. The flask he kept on the shelf behind his table was just inside the door and a quarter full.

Or he could wait.

He drew another breath.

He'd be down to his quarters within another half hour to fill out the reports....

"Really, Tom, you need to read more poetry." She'd smiled at him, fingers on the diagnostic board. They'd slept together once, then decided they'd be much better off as friends--and friends they stayed, with pleasant tinge of intimacy always there but never bothersome. It remained as such until the end.

Why was I screwing around? Why couldn't I have just been serious and gotten the job done right, taken the safe route, taken another thirty minutes out of my precious life? Watch what I was doing when I corrected course? Why couldn't I have just done it right?

The old cycle of questions, four years old, never answered, took another turn as he turned back for the midship ladder.

It wasn't much of a detour, he figured.

"Copernicus won't hear us! We're in the pocket! They won't know--"

Persedi spiraled in the viewscreen as the klaxons screamed. Their voices barely rose above the chaos.

"Sending distress signal!" Macarden cried out. "Check-in's not for...five more hours. But maybe they'll get it!"

Paris' gaze hung on the view. His hands had stopped on his offline panels, he was dizzy watching the view and privately wished it'd render him unconscious. There was nothing he could do, nothing to stop what he'd gotten them into.

Good thing he wouldn't have to live with that one.

He couldn't imagine living with that one.

Coming down the starboard corridor and looking into the center engine room, the first thing Tom noticed different from a couple days ago was that a couple of the panels that had been inactive the day before were now blinking with relative cheer, displaying specs and layouts as they were supposed to. Then, he noticed that the air in the room was a little clearer that morning. They'd been at warp five for nearly five days straight despite an engine in crap condition and it wasn't chugging like his old Charger, either.

Shaking his head to himself, he moved a few more steps down the corridor.

The third thing he noticed as he came around another support pylon was that B'Elanna was wearing the same clothes as she had on the day before and she looked like she'd just crawled out of an Ilaran tar pit. Sitting in the middle of the lower engineering deck, bent over a disassembled injector port relay, her hair was sticky with sweat and grime. Her clothes were smudged with engine soot; her hands and nails were an unforgiving tint of black.

"She's been up all night. Can't tell if she's eaten. Every time she gets one thing done, she plows into something else."

Tom glanced behind him. Ridge only shrugged. "I tried to ask her why, but she wouldn't answer me. Just ordered me to get her some bolts."

Tom looked back into the section. He knew from his sorted travels that Klingons had great hearing. Either she didn't inherit that part of it or she hadn't bothered to notice them. "She's an engineer and she's in her element," he said, holding back the rest of what he thought.

"You going to talk to her soon?" Ridge asked.

"It's why I'm here."

"Okay."

With that, Ridge returned to impulse control.

She did hear that--not that Ridge's heavy steps were hard to miss.

"Where are those housings?" she demanded.

"They're still in the decompiler," he answered dutifully. "I'll bring them as soon as they're done, B'Elanna. Don't worry about it."

"I'll never get this thing back together if the decompiler runs as fast as everything else around here."

Unbothered, Ridge went to check on them.

He needs that, Tom knew, watching B'Elanna growl at yet another chunk she pulled out of their one spare inverter. *He needs a leader. --Though he can do without the veil of blame and hostility, too.* She was doing too much--trying to prove herself. He could tell from experience. Every terse move she made told him she was pushing it, every word--

"These wing casings are crap," she snapped. "Ridge!"

"Yeah, B'Elanna?"

"You *do* have some wing casings back there that weren't bought at an archaeology dig, don't you?"

The technician laughed. "I might. Let me check."

"And bring me a charge. This spectrometer's already dying on me."

If I wait too long, Tom smirked to himself, *Ridge will lose half his body mass for chasing parts around.*

"Sorry. Got to put some juice in it. Give it an hour."

"Damnit, don't you know you're supposed to keep the charges on active standby so they're ready when someone needs it?!"

"It's usually juiced, B'Elanna. We've just never had anyone use the tools for as long as you have."

"Obviously!" Shaking her head furiously, she set back into what she could do with the remaining power. "Stupid, stupid, stupid..."

Tom backed up to one of the repaired panels and gave it a couple taps. It was eleven hundred.

"Do something!"

"I can't!"

"You can't *fly* this shuttle like the hotshot you are?!" Macarden screamed. She tried to reach out and smack his arm, but the g-forces held her arm in mid-air. "You're the best pilot I know! *Do something! Anything!*"

"There...There isn't anything!!"

"The hell there isn't! Do it! Tom, please! *Please!*"

"The moon's gravity's too strong! Engines are down, the controls aren't responding!" Paris shot her a look as his temples swelled. Her eyes were bugging from the pressure, her knuckles were white, clawing

at the consoles. She was trying not to cry. He wished he could comfort her. He'd have done anything to be able to touch her, hold onto her. "I can't stop it, Cass!"

"Try again!" she pleaded.

Round, round, round, round...

He could only stare at her.

"Anything!"

Round round round round round...

"Prepare for impact, Cass! Close your eyes and get your head down!"

They were just formalities. Paris knew they were all dead.

Dead.

So much for getting back on time for his date.

Dead.

Because of him.

Dead.

When Macarden managed to pull herself into crash position, he stared full on at the viewscreen.

He blinked.

Drawing another breath, Tom started himself towards the entrance to the section, around another row of pylons and a corner support bulkhead, his hand sliding along the half-frame, until he was in the same room with the engineer. She still didn't see him. From there, Tom could see that her jaw was clenched. The muscles on her slick arms flexed with the otherwise delicate work of manually reconfiguring the inverter poles into the drive housing.

One more breath, one last look, and he said, "Torres."

Her head came up and she turned around to find the captain standing only two meters away. Cool and clean, hands in his pockets, his expression was intent. The toe of his boot turned slightly and tapped the edge of the plasma manifold.

"When you're at a stopping point, we'll need to talk."

B'Elanna was silent for several seconds, then asked, "About?"

"You," he replied simply. Taking another couple of steps towards her, he motioned to the spectrometer and offered his hand. "May I?"

Glancing at it, she placed it in his waiting fingers and watched as the captain took it across to a

distribution access panel. Flipping back the instrument's casing, he folded out a converter box and connected the spectrometer to the unit. Waiting several seconds, he walked it back to the mess in the middle of the deck.

"Ridge!" he called. The technician leaned out of the systems closet. "Jerod's got some wing casings in storage room two. Tell him how many you need."

"Sure, Tom. Thanks."

Looking back to B'Elanna, he offered her the spectrometer, waiting patiently until she took it. "You couldn't have known about the built-in charger. Neither could Ridge. Livich liked to keep things like that to herself."

"How'd you know about it, then?"

"I keep my eyes open."

She nodded. "Thanks."

"Meet me in my quarters at sixteen hundred. I'll be there by then. Have Ridge show you--"

"Maryl showed me around."

"Good."

"Why not somewhere else?"

"What?"

Her brow rose slightly. "Your quarters?"

"There are things I need to work on there. You can leave the doors open. It won't take long."

"Okay."

With that, he turned and left the way he came, slightly hunched over as he turned around the opening at one end of the section. Moving forward down the corridor, he soon disappeared. Her last glance at his face revealed the same offcast stare and a slight frown. He was back to square one, she knew immediately--as was she...once she got his ship's backup plasma inverter put together again.

B'Elanna turned back to her furious project, though the passion had dissipated, now that the captain had come and gone. Closing her eyes, she breathed, pulled her shoulders down. Usually when a captain graced her with the bad news, her mind would immediately set itself on her next immediate priorities--getting to the station, signing the for-hire list, getting quarters, getting another job. She'd done it enough times already to know the routine.

To her surprise and frustration, she couldn't that time. None of it was coming to her, even if she had a little currency and a better chance for a recommendation. All she could think about was putting that mess back together...making at least *one* thing right about the four days she'd let herself hope things would change.

Pulling another breath and letting it go, she started back into the inverter poles.

"Should have known better," she muttered to herself as she activated the newly charged spectrometer.

The quarters she'd stayed in weren't all that great. Better than she'd had in a couple years, but she could do better elsewhere.

She treaded numbly in and crossed to the back of the room to the corner sink in the sleeping area. She didn't look in the mirror.

In spite of the fact she was to be kicked off the Guerdon, B'Elanna had forced herself to take an hour to clean up and get a fresh change of clothes. Not only did she feel lousy, but also showing up looking like a strand of coil grease wasn't going to do much more for her ego. She did have some pride. She did know she was better than she'd made herself look...again.

Her hands in the basin, she looked at her fingers. Soot and grease had burrowed so deeply into the crevices of her cuticles and tips that the dry sink on deck one had barely touched it. Her nails were broken down to the quicks. She had a nagging cut on her middle finger.

She looked up.

Her face looked little better than her hands.

You do this to yourself.

It wasn't a loud voice, but a steady one. It'd been with her a long time through many versions of what she had gotten herself into.

You bring this upon yourself.

Again. She'd done it again. Not that it mattered there and then. She had other things to do...even if she had to admit, she'd wanted it. She'd tried.

Maryl got it right: The captain was an idiot.

Pulling off her vest and then her shirt, she looked around for the reclamation basket and tossed the items in. Slowly, her boots and the remainder of her clothes followed. Moving back towards the bathroom, she caught her reflection briefly in passing and stopped. The grease had been so heavy in spots that it'd stained her skin through two layers of clothing.

The last time she changed clothes on Mesler's ship, she remembered noticing the same.

B'Elanna's eyes turned away, then aimed at the waiting shower stall. "Well, at least some of it can be fixed," she muttered, taking herself inside.

Forty minutes later, she brushed her hair neatly to the side, checked herself in the mirror. The stains were gone; she was dressed, neat, the same way she'd looked her first day aboard the Guerdon.

Her tool kit sat by the nightstand, along with her duffel bag, packed but for the outfit she had on and

the clothes she needed to take to the reclamator before finishing the inverter, which still lay half-assembled on the center engine room deck. If anything, she owed Ridge that much for giving him so much hell when he really didn't have to take any of it.

Pushing the opening of her duffel aside, she tossed her brush in there, though she knew she'd use it again. She just wanted it in there. It didn't matter why.

Blowing a breath through her nostrils, she checked the time on the chronometer Ridge had given her that morning--a gift he joked she probably wouldn't need. Kind as it was, she didn't want to take it with her. She probably would, anyway, lose it somewhere along the line. She tended to do that.

It was fifteen hundred fifty-five.

"Get this over with."

The corridors on the Guerdon were pretty much the same as the quarters: Flat, dark blue carpet, light walls tinged gray blue, though a little in need of a cleaning, she mused, noting for the first time the slight haze of soot, residue that had crawled up the center corridor from the main engine room.

Turning there, she straightened her back as she walked the short distance from the forward intersection to the single door in that hall. She pressed her finger on the panel beside it. The door opened immediately.

A moment after that, B'Elanna breathed a little sigh of relief to see the lights were only a little dimmed and there was no sign of flowers or décor not spartan. In the center of the living space sat a dark, oblong table and two chairs. The only addition to the arrangement was a bowl of what looked like peanut butter, a small box of crackers, a glass of milk and a stack of beat up PADDs.

She couldn't help but continue to suspect something was wrong. Not that the captain gave off that sort of bad vibe, but the request to meet a captain in his quarters was a first for her, and she really didn't know him at all. So, she stood at the entrance, looking at his unusual dinner.

"Computer, hold door," came the captain's voice just before he rounded the corner from the bedroom, wiping his hands on a towel.

He too had cleaned up and changed, she noted; shaved, brushed his hair. Otherwise, he looked as he did the other times she'd seen him, just as straight with a purposeful stare when he chose to aim it at something. At that moment, they were fixed on her.

"I have not loved the world, nor the world me," he said quietly, holding her gaze, "but let us part fair foes; I do believe, though I have found them not, that there may be words which are things, hopes which will not deceive, and virtues which are merciful, nor weave snares for the failing; I would also deem over others' griefs that some sincerely grieve; that two, or one, are almost what they seem, that goodness is no name, and happiness no dream."

Silence held the room for several seconds upon his completion.

"Byron--what I was quoting yesterday," he told her, waiting for her to catch on. She did after a few more seconds, he could tell, when her lips parted slightly. He ghosted a grin to acknowledge it. "Thanks for helping. --Yeah, I remember. I sometimes do."

B'Elanna shrugged. "It was nothing."

He nodded and moved to the table. He did not sit though, but placed his hands on the chair back, contemplated the bowl and plate sitting before him. Then he glanced askance to her. "Read much?"

"What?"

His attention returned to the table. "Poetry. You read any?"

B'Elanna reared her head a little and answered before she thought the better of it, "I like prose."

"Romantic?"

"What?"

"Romantic period--or even just romances." He offered her another glance, appraising her briefly. "Or I should ask if you like old literature at all."

"A little."

"Earth literature?"

"Sure."

"Like what?"

B'Elanna shook her head to herself, squinting her eyes as she tried to figure out why he suddenly felt like so much conversation--just then--and worse, small talk. Despite that, she answered him again. "I've read some Fielding, Dumas--but I don't--"

"Dumas?" His brow flicked upwards. "I'm impressed. Did you know several of his pieces were turned into movies a century or so later? Some were a few times--and some are really good. I'd love to see holosuite programs go there sometime--"

"Look, as mu--"

"I like Collard, too." He leaned forward to prepare a cracker, continuing offhandedly, "It's better than history books a lot of the time, fiction that reads like real history. Though I know the Byron a little, I don't like poetry much, either. I never really knew why--"

"Excuse me," B'Elanna finally cut in. "Enthusiastic as we may be about literature, I don't see what that has to do with anything right now."

Tom's expression straightened and he set the cracker aside. "Yeah. Sorry. I don't know why I do that." Switching gears with a step around the chair, he gestured towards the table. "You're right, we should get to business."

"I'd like that," she replied, training the dryness from her tone. She'd wasted enough time as it was.

"It's pretty simple, really, though I'd like you to take as much time as you like to think about it--even if you need to stay on with us for another leg."

B'Elanna furrowed her brow. "To think about what?"

"The contract." Tom tipped his head to see her eyes twitch then widen slightly with realization. He

resisted the sudden urge to snort when he realized where her mind was. "You thought you were disembarking at Podala?"

"I was getting that impression," she stated, still reigning in her reaction to the flip in her mindset.

"You got the wrong impression, then." Watching her stiffen, he shrugged. "You have been pretty hard core the last day or so, though. I had to wonder if hiring you would be the right decision."

"It's just the way I am," she replied, crossing her arms. "I'm determined and I can be tough. I'm sorry if that bothers you."

"Actually, it does sometimes, but I think I can handle it." Watching her expression continue to shift as she furiously reassessed her situation, he found himself engaged. "That said," he observed, "I thought you might be trying to force the issue by taking apart half an engine room you really weren't obligated to touch."

"When I see a repair that needs to be done," she responded, starting to feel the weight of his stare, "I do it. I don't stop until I'm done."

"Are you done with that secondary plasma inverter?"

She pursed her lips. "Almost. I stopped so I'd have time to clean up and come here. I plan to go back to it when we're through...if that's all right."

"So you're saying I shouldn't worry about the shadow of effect?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" she returned, then a little defensive that he'd imply what he just did.

"Nothing, really. To get to the point of my problem, I just don't want to be disappointed down the road."

"Why do you think I'll disappoint you?" she demanded. "I've worked my ass off since I got here, put up with these 'meetings' you've ordered. If that doesn't convince you I'm serious--"

"I know you're serious," he cut in with a sigh. "It's not your ability I'm talking about." As interesting as she might have been, he didn't feel like playing tag with someone he needed and wanted to get along with this time around. To that point, he added, "Frankly, since you got here, I've felt more than ever that this piece of shit has a chance to be something again--if it ever was something."

B'Elanna growled, shook her head. "Then what *are* you talking about?"

Tom pulled a chair for her and moved around the table to take the seat opposite. While waiting for her to take the seat, he plucked up his prepared cracker. Sticking the square morsel in his mouth, he chewed a few times and chased it down with a couple swallows of milk. Finally, B'Elanna let out her breath and joined him. Welcoming her to his food with a gesture and seeing her shake her head politely, he nodded.

"When you were growing up," he asked as he prepared another cracker, "did your teachers ever say you had a lot of potential?"

B'Elanna suddenly remembered those kindly faces and shaking heads. So seemingly impressed. So inactive otherwise. "Yes."

"They did me too," Tom told her. "People used to tell me I'd do great things when I grew up. Personally, I thought I could do great things *then*. But apparently, it wasn't as important as later accomplishments *could* be, when and if I put myself on task and stuck to the plan they seemed to have so clearly laid out."

"Sounds about right," she acknowledged, mildly impressed with the captain's interpretation.

"But the worst part about it, B'Elanna, is that every last one of them were right, only that now I'm seeing how I *haven't* lived up to what they had in mind. There was a time when I tried to, honestly thought I should--and maybe I got there for a little while. In any case, I wound up out here instead, remembering those expectations and how uncomfortable I used to feel when people told me I had all that potential. I'm not even thirty years old and I'm already tired. Granted, I was never ambitious, per se, but trying to live up to what they saw: I've pretty much given up on it."

He held her stare again. "I don't want that to happen to you. What'll disappoint me would be to see you become half as disillusioned with the idea of getting it right--and pissed off at us for helping you to it."

Her brow furrowed. "Do you want me to work here or don't you?"

"I want to hire you," he assured her. "Hell, I'd be crazy as well as stupid if I didn't. It's just that I've already made the mistake of not considering the consequences for others--more than once, and I have to live with what came of that. I don't want to add to it. That I don't want a perpetual headache, too, is a part of it, but I can deal with that much more easily than I do my conscience."

She said nothing at first--couldn't find anything to say. Sad but straight-faced, it was the sentiment of a man trying to make good, both with himself and on his ship. In an upside down way, he was coming to her defense, just as Jerod said he would. She shook her head of it and took them back to the gist.

"I want this job," she told him, outright that time, just as Maryl had suggested--and only then did B'Elanna realize what the Bajoran had meant in her warning about the captain. "The conditions are good, the pay can't be any worse than I've had, it's a good crew for a change and I think I can do what you want to be done to this ship."

"Granted we could afford what I want done," he grinned.

"One thing at a time," she returned and put her hand on the table. "I know I can handle the position and what comes with it--and you want me in that engine room. It's that simple."

"That's also not a question."

"Then what is?"

"Whether or not I should seize the opportunity while you're still willing to go through with this."

She shook her head. "Why are you complicating things?"

He didn't answer her at first, but took another drink of his milk, leaned back in his seat. Finally, he shrugged. "Again, the last thing I want is another person taking out their frustrations on things here because they want better but can't bring themselves to act on it. If you get to that point, do me a favor and tell me. I won't laugh, I sure as hell won't tell anyone and we can rework your contract accordingly. Agreed?"

Slowly, B'Elanna nodded. "Agreed."

"You're giving me your word?"

Biting back her first response, she gave him another nod. "Yes. I'll let you know if I'm dissatisfied."

Tom nodded back, reaching over to pull a PADD nearer with his finger. Checking to see it was the right one, he slid it across to her. "Look it over. Tell me if there's anything else you want on there."

B'Elanna did then furrowed her brow a moment later. "A six-month contract?" she asked, not liking that part. Full contracts were usually yearly terms with conditions for release.

"You can renew it if you want when the time comes," Tom told her. "Everyone else here is on the same plan, except me." Watching her continue, he explained the next thing he knew she'd come to. "The shares are split evenly, nine and a half ways; one-half share goes to any part-timers, who work on a base rate, and three more shares are set for the ship. If we don't have part-timers to pay, then it's three and a half in the pot. If you want anything extra or if the others don't want to spend as much from the pot as you want, you can take the expense out of your share. But then it belongs to the ship as your donation. Anything for your quarters or yourself comes out of your share, and as long as it's not installed as a shared system, you can take that with you."

"Sounds reasonable enough," B'Elanna commented, still reading, at that point with more interest than to see her position description, including rights and duties.

Rights. She liked that word, as well as what came with it. As the lead engineer, she would have the final say in all technical matters for the ship, though the captain could countermand it if push came to shove. She did have to report to him, but the captain would otherwise stay out of her way--his only technical responsibility was navigation. She had complete control of the engine room in repairs, upgrades, replacements, stocks, maintenance, the transporter system's upgrades and maintenance, and overseeing Jerod and Ridge's different responsibilities. That was surprising. She didn't know she'd be their superior despite their time aboard. She would also train and supervise any part-timers they might get.

Procuring supplies, tools and equipment were her support duties, which she could delegate as needed. She was also responsible for ship-wide efficiency, power conservation and for overseeing--if not creating--all system installations and improvements. A list of needed replacements, which were too many to take in completely there, was attached, along with another list of upgrades to research and report to the captain. It was her job to prioritize and begin the repairs and replacements as time and expense permitted. The research she could do when she had spare time.

In essence, the ship and its future were being put in her hands--a heady prospect for someone her age with only few years of working experience. She could rebuild the Guerdon from the screws up if she wanted to and the pot could afford it. What was listed already of upgrades alone, though, would take a year to get halfway through between everything else she had to take care of. One of the changes--the reworking of the entire layout of engineering, which she'd thought of the moment she first entered the place--would take at least a couple months in drydock with only the crew working on it. Some of the research, mostly regarding design and warp drive changes, seemed beyond possibility. But it was neatly detailed and hung to her contract like a series of warnings. A list of download zones for Starfleet technology releases were listed in another addendum.

The wording was rather formal for such a ragged ship; it looked like a position memo from Starfleet command. Looking down, she saw by the timestamp that it had been finalized only an hour ago.

She glanced at the captain across from her. Paris' shadowed eyes and straight face gave away nothing, though he did offer, "At least you won't be completely wasted here in the meantime if you get to do some research."

"Have the others agreed to this?"

"There wasn't much to agree to. Since I have the final say, I'm responsible for it. Whatever happens, good or bad, it's on my head in the end, like everything else." He shrugged. "Not like anything worse could happen to me--or to you at this point. I just got to thinking that you'd be happier if you had a challenge that was tempting enough to try."

"That engine is challenge enough without what I could be tempted to do to it," she countered. Giving the captain a sidelong grin, she pressed her thumb to the signature pad and returned the PADD to him in the same manner as he'd given it to her, pushing it across with her index finger. "Looks like you've got yourself an engineer, Tom."

For the first time in her presence, he smiled. "I was almost afraid you'd call me captain."

"I learn quickly," she returned, once again taking in his features and his gaze, which she finally decided was a benign one.

Responding with a single nod, Tom stood and offered his hand to her. He was glad to see her stand and accept it. Squeezing her small, warm fingers, he said, "Welcome aboard, B'Elanna."

Paris' eyes opened to the dark...and wet...and pain, on his head, his chest and ribs, his knee. The pain radiated; he breathed into it, and then tasted...something. He reached to his face and felt the wet. Blood. He breathed again, stronger.

Then a sound, a hissing...Wheezing. A cough.

"T...T...ah..."

His brow furrowed.

"Taaaah..."

He turned towards the sound in the pitch black. "Cass?"

Another cough, a strangled gurgle, not more than two meters away.

Oh God, he thought with a flash of panic, a hot thud in his sore chest, then a warm flow of dread as his hand sank into more wet, a pool on the floor of the shuttle, *oh God, oh God, oh God...*

"Ta...aaah..."

I survived.

Sliding his new engineer's contract into the access slot for upload to the Guerdon's main computer, Tom reached back to the shelf and wrapped his fingers around the neck of a fresh decanter. He wasn't tired enough to sleep just yet.

Two and a half days to Podala.

IV. Dealing a Round

"Come on in, B'Elanna."

She took one step, looked around. Wide but short, it was an ordinary bridge, dull in its dark blues and yellowed grays, with a rectangular viewscreen forward, flanked by ops to the left and a comm array to the right, the captain's chair and conn at center--typical Starfleet knock-off with Bolian tags, two decades old.

"All the way in," Tom said, not looking around again. "Don't make me make it official."

B'Elanna furrowed her brow as she stared at the back of his rumpled head.

Before she could formulate her question, Maryl laughed. "You'd think she'd wilt if she gets too far away from the warp core. Come on, B'Elanna, come take a look at the comm station--so you'll want to fix that, too."

With a frown at the jibe, B'Elanna joined the Bajoran at her console. Looking down upon her arrival, she blinked at the configuration--another round of Bolian biases, this time in panels made for thick-fingered men. Maryl's fingers looked like chopsticks against the worn pads. "I guess I could add that to the list," she said, glancing at the captain again.

Paris was intent on his monitor, though, then the viewscreen after a couple taps on a panel. "Podala station, this is the Guerdon. Please respond." With a slow exhale, he leaned back and waited. "Come on Gil," he said aside. "Get off your ass."

Maryl leaned closer to B'Elanna and whispered, "Seven--hear a beep; six--calculate the distance across the relay room; five--put down coffee; four--pick up coffee and take another sip; three--take coffee across to the beeping panel, two--remember which button--."

"*Guerdon,*" came the reply.

Maryl snickered. "I'm too good at that."

A man with slicked-back gray hair and a thin brown beard appeared on the viewscreen and nodded at Tom, "We have you--and were expecting you five days ago."

"Could have been longer," Tom replied. "I have a cargo report for you and the rumor mill, Gil, and an updated crew roster."

The station manager nodded. "Yes. We heard about Livich from The Dulrad. Little wonder you were late, with only Ledge to run your engine room."

Tom jerked a thumb towards Maryl's station. "That's our new engineer--B'Elanna Torres. She'll be making supply runs with me and Ridge while we're here."

The manager tapped his panel. "On record." He looked across to the young woman at the comm station, drew his stare over her features and smiled thinly.

"Oh God, here it comes," B'Elanna muttered.

"Here comes what?" Maryl whispered.

"nuqneH! qaleghneS!"

Maryl snorted, turning away to stifle the laugh that wanted to follow.

B'Elanna was not as amused. "I don't speak Klingon," she coolly replied, "but thank you. It's nice to be here."

Gil blinked at her response, cleared his throat and recovered with a jut of his chin. "You are aware of the rules, then, I hope?" he replied. "We run a *reputable* station here at Podala. Any misconduct comes with the severest penalties."

B'Elanna pulled a steady breath. *Any reasonable misconduct would knock that slimeball out the most convenient airlock.* "I'm not new to the route. I know the rules."

The manager turned his attention back to the center of the bridge. "Captain Paris, you have been cleared for docking at platform fifty-eight-Theta."

"Thanks," Tom replied.

Gil bowed once more, glancing another grin B'Elanna's way. "Guerdon, old crew and new, welcome to Podala Sta--"

Tom clicked off the comm and opened up the forward view of the station. "Now we're even, Maryl."

"Even?" she returned, "Leaving that toady with a sentence you *know* he'll want to finish? Yeah, right." She looked at B'Elanna. "You don't speak Klingon?"

B'Elanna shook her head, driving her attention to the outdated control panel and its dim readings. "Only a little. Never picked it up."

"Just like me and the Janitsa dialect," Maryl nodded. "It's like talking with overcooked rice stuffed in my cheeks. My aunts never forgave me for not trying harder."

Tom peered back at the new engineer as he lined the Guerdon up with the docking clamps. "Maryl warned you Gil's an ass, right?"

"The captain didn't say how long we'd be here," she said, a question without the interrogative as she jerked her coat collar up around her neck with her spare hand. The whoosh of cool air from the station had given her a chill as soon as she came around the corner and made her even gladder she had a lot to do in the engine room.

"Three days," Ridge told her. "The trades are all set up; the paperwork takes longer."

"We'll use it," she replied. "If we get the parts, I'd like to replace the impulse coils and install a new system of trilateral filters while we're here. Three days is enough, granted we get what we need today."

B'Elanna felt herself smiling a little as she spoke. Strange as it was, she felt good. As she headed toward the docking ring, which had been opened in the middle of deck three's lower engine room, she couldn't help but remind herself that she'd never come into a port as a full-fledged member of a crew, an *employ* rather than a hire. Even on Cabol, she'd been what they called "accessory staff." Now she was the Guerdon's engineer, and no matter what kind of ship it actually was, namely one needing a lot of work, she could call it her ship and mean it. Definitely a nice change.

"Sounds like fun," Ridge grinned.

"I was hoping you'd think so."

"But you need to reserve tomorrow night."

B'Elanna looked back--then up--at him. With that youthful voice, she kept forgetting how large Ridge was. "Why?"

"Your welcome-in dinner," Ridge told her.

She shook her head. "You don't need to do that."

The technician laughed. "We *want* to, B'Elanna. Savan's already reserved the space and the food, and Maryl's made sure we won't get peddled on. Jerod's doing something--I don't remember what."

B'Elanna sighed quickly. "That's very nice of all of you, but I'm really not much for going out when I have other things to do. I'd really--"

"It won't take more than a couple hours," Ridge pressed with his usual friendly smile. "Good food, a little wine, people serving you for a change and giving everyone a chance to kick back. Then we'll go back to work. Easy as that."

Again, she blew a breath, more a resignation than spite. "Fine. I guess I'll need dinner at some point... And it is nice of you, I'll admit."

Ridge's grin grew as he patted her on the shoulder to enforce it. "You're one of us, B'Elanna. Gotta show you a nice welcome so you don't regret it right away."

B'Elanna finally laughed, though she shook her head of it as they came to the end of the hold. Dinner was later--and the station was decidedly cold. The sooner she got her immediate errands done, the better. "I also saw some decent tricorders up for offer," she said, "so I'd like you to go down and see what they'll take for one."

"If I trade off the extra converters," Ridge told her as they stepped over the threshold of the station docking clamps, "we might be able to add it to the pot and get the coils, too."

"We should get at least one in good shape without trading off stock we'll need sometime," she told him. "I don't want to have to run to the upper deck every time I need to do a field stress analysis--and we need to have the spare converters if the others blow out."

"It'll put a strain on our budget if you go for everything at once," he warned her. "Just 'cause things are good now doesn't mean it'll always be like that. We have to plan ahead."

"All the more reason we shouldn't give up our spare converters," she told him and sighed. "Look, Ridge--"

"I'll buy it."

B'Elanna swung around and saw the captain stepping over the hold, pulling a PADD of his own from the pocket of his coat as he sauntered through the bay.

Paris ignored the attention to activate his list and pull up the request for tricorders. He'd already had one on his list. Adding an extra one, he pursed his lips at the difference, then shrugged. "I'm sure someone here owes me a favor," he said, passing by with only a glance their way. "We'll take it out of my share."

"Thanks, Tom," Ridge said, then nudged B'Elanna as soon as she opened her mouth to protest. "Let him."

She shot a stare up to him. "I thought those things were supposed to come out of the ship's share."

"Tom always puts a part of his share in there," Ridge told her, shrugging. "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth--especially when it makes *him* feel good. Anyway, he's been saving up for one for a while."

Tom was several meters away by then and didn't look back or away from his PADD when he called, "You coming, B'Elanna? Parts hunting?"

"Yes," she responded and sprung forward to catch up with him. Looking back at Ridge, she told him, "Don't sell all our converters--just what you have to."

Ridge grinned and waved them off. "Yes, ma'am. Have fun."

Catching up to the captain, adjusting her usual quick pace to his careless stride, B'Elanna began typing on her PADD again. "Maryl says you have some connections, that you might be able to introduce me to some of the vendors here."

"I can," he said.

She nodded. "Good. I'd like to get as much knocked off this list as possible, starting with the impulse coils."

"I'd save a little if I were you," Tom replied, his stare vaguely pointed at the familiar metal tube of an access port, tinged slightly orange with cheap lighting and old access panels. "We can get the coils here, some maintenance parts; but the supplies at DS-Nine are generally a lot better if you can arrange them ahead of time and you should always keep a last-ditch reserve. --Just speaking from experience."

"Yeah. Maryl told me something about it."

A humorless snort escaped him. "I'm sure she did." Turning a corner, he finally averted his eyes from

their path and peeked down to her inventory. "Hmm."

B'Elanna scowled up at him. "What's the problem?"

"You forgot the deuterium," he replied and turned ahead again. "Not that it matters. That's not available here--at least nothing you'd want to use."

"Let me guess," B'Elanna returned. "DS-Nine."

"There's something to be said about Starfleet's taking over the station aside from kicking out the Cardassians: We don't have to go to Starbase 211 or 351 to beg for it anymore. Better still, we don't always have to deal with Starfleet at DS-Nine, which suits me just fine."

B'Elanna didn't glance up. "That's right," she said blandly. "You used to be an officer."

Tom did not reply, but raised his hand at just the right time to push the button for the lift as they came to the doors. "You also forgot the drive plasma. We'll be between stations that carry the good stuff for a while--and yes, that is one power supply that's good to get here."

That time, B'Elanna looked up. "Oh?"

He nodded. "They ship it out from the McAllister Nebula and process it at a floating facility near here," he told her. "It's a pure supply that usually doesn't get much farther than Podala, since Gil made it his biggest side-profit. Three-quarters of it is usually shipped back out to the Zedar Outpost." He glanced at her frown as she began tapping into her PADD again. "Don't worry about it."

"I'm not worried," she told him.

"I mean, you'll pick it up. Podala's one of our most common stops, mainly because--"

"Because it's near Minjau," B'Elanna finished, not wanting to hear it again.

He could tell. "Because it's in the middle of our usual route," he clarified, gesturing for her to go first when the lift doors opened. "I'm impressed. You stayed awake for Maryl's presentation."

"Barely," she replied, stepping into the lift. Feeling the converse motion of the old-fashioned lift pull slightly at her gut, she leaned against the back wall. "So, what's first?" she asked, as much for distraction as curiosity.

"First we're going to the basement to see Kitu. He's got a trade off waiting for me, but you'll have something to do, too." With that, Tom punched in their destination.

"What's in the basement?"

"A private deal I've arranged. I think I can trust you not to let on to Ridge or the others about it, Maryl especially. She tends to hound Kitu, which makes him a little harder to get in touch with."

"A private deal?" she queried, eying the plainly set face beside her as the decks whirled down around them. She didn't have to ask what that could be. Throughout their trip there, she'd heard the countdown of his liquor stash, a steady decrease the crew treated almost like a joke. "Do I have to be there?"

"Probably not. Again, you might be able to help, and you should meet Captain Kitu. If there's a connection to be made outside Federation space, he'll make it--especially if you play a good game of

dugrat... You play cards?"

"No."

"Don't like it?"

"Never learned."

"I'll teach you," he offered.

She suppressed her smirk. "No thanks. I think I can get by with purchasing what I buy."

"Who says using one's winnings to make a deal isn't making a purchase?"

"I don't gamble."

"Maybe you're right," Tom smirked, turning forward again. "You don't have much of a poker face."

B'Elanna's stare narrowed. "I could if I chose to. I just don't see the point in risking what you've got--and possibly end up losing more than you gain."

"That's assuming you have anything to lose when you sit down at the table."

She looked forward again. "Thanks for the offer, but I'll pass."

"Fair enough. Just let me know if you change your mind. I'm sick of beating Jerod."

Closing her eyes for a moment at his swift kill of the topic, B'Elanna opened them again to see the control panel, where a blue indicator displayed their location--Deck 112, it read, and continued to tick off their descent as she pressed her back to the wall. True, it was a tube-shaped station, but she didn't think she'd ever been so far down into the guts of *anything* before--quite a thought for an engineer.

Finally, the lift ground to a stop. Glancing to her side, she watched the captain slowly open his eyes, then press his elbow against the wall to propel himself forward as the doors opened.

"It's just around the corner," he told her, not looking back.

B'Elanna sighed and followed. "I still don't know why you have to bring me along for something like this."

"I want you to meet Kitu," Tom reiterated. He rolled his shoulders as he turned in the dim corridor, working out a knot, then slowed so she could catch up. "Come in *with* me, not behind me," he said quietly. "Last thing you want him to think is that I've got the only word in the process, even if he's dealing with me."

"Good point," she nodded, skipping two steps forward to pace herself at his side.

The arching grate corridor, loud with the echoes of their boots and the thrushes of their clothing, opened into a small cargo hold, wherein a tawny-skinned Otralan stood, arms crossed and ready for them. Above the garish collar of his black coat were a pointy chin and a thin mouth topped with an arching mustache. Two dark, almond-shaped eyes sat above a thin nose, which twitched as they came closer. Like a catfish, B'Elanna thought first, noting also how his eyes pinned on Tom and didn't waver to acknowledge her. At his feet sat a number of stasis crates, all closed.

"How're you doing, Kitu?" Tom said, giving him a nod.

"Well, Paris," the man replied. His voice had the timbre of a cello.

"Kitu, this is Torres."

Finally, the man turned a respectful nod her way, but his attention went back to Tom as soon as his manners had been served. "I have what you asked for."

Tom glanced at the numerous crates. "I only requested one."

A thin smile curled Kitu's lips. "I don't want you coming after me again, complaining that you didn't get the full share of your winnings." His hand drifted away from his other arm to gesture towards the box at his left foot. "My contractors will take what they can get. This one is yours."

Tom bowed his head slightly, then peered over to B'Elanna. "I don't know about this. Care to inspect the crystal yourself?"

She blinked, feeling her temples swell a little with the force it took her to catch up. She stared up at Tom, whose expression said nothing but for her to get going with it. "Yes," she blurted. "Of course I do. That's my *job*, isn't it?"

"It is at that," Tom grinned, returning his attention to Kitu. "She's going to have a look at it, if you don't mind."

Blowing a breath through her nostrils, B'Elanna moved forward and knelt to open the case. Erasing the remainder of her doubts about the nature of the deal, her eyes soon fell over the violet-white crystal in its protective casing. She pursed her lips as she drew her stare over the clean indentation running from the center to the top of the rock.

"How much are you paying for this piece of crap?" she demanded, turning a look back to her captain. It was bad enough that he saw no problem in screwing around with her head, but thinking that slimy little dealer had the nerve to try to pass off cracked crystals to pay his debt spoke volumes about the trouble she'd had on former contract ships. "It wouldn't last two weeks in our chamber."

Tom's squinted a stare askance at the trader. "You heard the engineer. It's crap. Is this how you keep me from complaining?"

To her surprise, Kitu laughed. "I see I've got a *real* customer today."

"A real customer who's not getting paid up with worse than we've got," Tom replied with a shrug. "Or you could just give me the latinum and I'll wait until we're at DS-Nine to get what we need."

Kitu's smile disappeared. Obviously, he'd already tried to sway the captain from that option. He caught B'Elanna's stare again. "Very well, engineer. Choose which crystal you like best. --But that will be the end of any debt to you, Paris."

"Until I whip your butt at the table again," Tom returned. He gave B'Elanna a nod. "Go ahead, B'Elanna. It's your call. We're not desperate."

B'Elanna bit her tongue to prevent replying and scooted over to the other cases, opening each, one by one, then closing them a moment later as soon as she spotted the flaws. In all fairness, they were better than the first sample, and she knew the hairline cracks and uneven cuts weren't too unusual. Dilithium

usually had to be adjusted by hand before being installed in a chamber, anyway. But if she had to play through that ridiculous meeting, she wasn't about to make it easy on either of them.

After looking through the ninth case, she growled to herself and shook her head. "These all look like they were shaped with a mallet," she stated, standing again. "I'd be surprised if they weren't Barian quartz instead of what we need."

"It is dilithium," Kitu told her, frowning.

"It's no use to us," B'Elanna returned, turning to return to Tom's side. "I don't like any of them."

"DS-Nine it is, then," Tom concluded with a nod. "Sorry, Kitu, but I guess you'll have to scrape up the latinum. I'll collect next time I'm--"

"Wait," Kitu said tiredly. Moving to the back of the room, he pulled out another case. "No one on Kakabo knows anything about high-yield." Presenting it to the woman standing by the other cases, he held her eyes. "If you please." Glancing at Tom, B'Elanna reached out and opened the case in Kitu's hands. She tried hard not to smile as her gaze drove over that sample. Wide and well ridged, the crystal looked like a watered-down amethyst. There were almost no chisel marks, not a single fracture. She wasn't sure what it should cost on the open market, but she knew it was worth a hefty investment. Then again, Kitu hadn't brought it because it was beyond his debt. He'd wanted to see if Paris was dumb enough to take less.

Rather, she realized as she reached into the casing and turned the crystal over, Tom was actually smart enough to bring an "expert" along, even when he claimed he didn't have to. He probably would have toyed with Kitu on his own if she hadn't been there.

"That's more like it," she said, turning a short nod Tom's way.

Tom finally took a step forward and looked at the crystal for himself. "That's worth more than you owe me," he noted, reaching into his bag. "We'll take it, with two bars as change. It's all I have on hand."

B'Elanna blinked and stared up at him.

"I'd like our debt to be settled, after all," he concluded before she could speak, "not transferred back to me."

Kitu's smile returned as he waved off Paris' effort. "Buy me a drink sometime and we'll be even."

"That should be easy enough to do," Tom said, gesturing to B'Elanna to take the case. "Until then, Kitu."

As they turned toward the lift, and slowing just enough that she could meet his stride, he nodded to the case and opened a roomy satchel he'd been carrying on his shoulder. "Stick it in there. We don't want to advertise." She did so, dropping the case in and immediately moving away from him. That done, he resumed his pace.

For her part, B'Elanna managed to wait until they were in the turbolift and the doors were closed before turning a glare towards the captain.

Tom turned a satisfied smirk her way. "See? A game every now and again isn't so useless after all."

"Getting what we need to survive out there isn't a *game*!" she snapped. "Why the hell didn't you tell

me we were going for dilithium?"

"You did come with me to go supply hunting, didn't you?"

"But you didn't tell me what it was!"

"So? Should it matter? What did you *think* I was going to the basement for?"

She shook her head with frustration. "Don't expect me to come on any more deals with you if you don't plan to prepare me. I don't like surprises."

"So I'm noticing." He shrugged. "Not that I blame you, but you're pretty wound up over a good deal."

"I'm *supposed* to be wound up about keeping us going, if I remember correctly."

Tom gave her another look. "If I'd told you exactly what we were dealing for, you'd have gone in with a field of expectations. He'd have never offered us what we got if you'd looked like you were asking for it upfront. I would've held out for the latinum if I hadn't had you with me and he'd offered me the same crap--which he would have. But I did have you, so I decided to give it a shot."

Her arms crossed upon her ribs. "Fine. You're the captain." That said, she hardened her stare and added, "But I don't appreciate being toyed with. You can screw with all the dealers you want. But if you want me on your side, you won't do that again."

Tom gave her a single nod. "Okay. Sorry if that upset you." Watching her return the nod and turn forward again. "I'll take Savan next time I need a ringer."

B'Elanna bit her tongue as that filtered in.

With nothing to say and little to look at even as they left the lift and headed back through the access corridor, she couldn't help but notice the way his hand remained casually clutched on top of his old-fashioned satchel, insuring no one would dip inside it. The arm of his rumpled brown coat had a single mark on it--a phaser shot? She hadn't seen that before. His pace was more like an upbeat stroll, covering a lot of distance in the dim, gray hall. Skipping a step to catch up with him, she glanced up to see his face set as always, surveying his path without any discernible emotion, though he did cast a glance through an entrance to a golden-lit promenade as they passed it.

"Wonder if they've replaced the table since we last passed through," he thought aloud.

That time, her brow furrowed. "What table?"

His lips twisted up. "We'll find out soon enough."

They stopped a bit short of the docking levels, but as soon as she opened her mouth to ask, Paris turned towards an open storage bay busy with traders and other captains, all buzzing in low tones as they clicked on beat up PADDs and looked through the stores.

"Next up is a flux sensor pallet for Jerod to play with," Tom said, not looking back. "Do you need a metallurgical breakdown before we go in, or should I take care of it this time?"

It began as a pinging aft; then it turned into a thrumming, rhythmic and growing louder by the second. Then it was accompanied by a sporadic grumble and hiss.

Maryl, taking the opportunity to relax in her husband's big arms as they waited for a communication from Jerod, turned an eye towards the sound and couldn't help but snicker.

Quickly approaching was their new engineer, returning not two hours after leaving with the captain. Her fists were clenched, one around the strap of the captain's black satchel; her dark eyes were bolted on her path and she was mumbling several pejoratives under her breath. Even her hair seemed to be sticking out at odd angles for all her fury. Her boot heels all but slammed holes in the deck as she made her way into the bay.

"The captain is *impossible!*" she snarled as she came near her technician and the Bajoran. "If he wants to make any more deals on Podala, *you* go with him. I'm not about to waste my time being hung on a wire like some damned toy while he gets his *entertainment* screwing around with every other vendor on the station!"

"Dom-jot or rummy?" Ridge asked.

"Dom-jot!" B'Elanna spat. "That bastard bet our *primary pressure regulator* for three out of four games!"

Maryl managed to stifle her grin. "What'd he win?"

B'Elanna blew a breath. "Three new tricorders--but what the hell's the use of *those* without a regulator to scan?" Growling again, she yanked the bag strap on her shoulder. "Connections, my ass!" With that and a jerk of her head, she started towards the engine room.

Ridge craned his head to look after her. "Starting the installations already?"

"Yes--going back to something I can *deal* with," she returned. "You don't have to come. I'll call you when I need you."

She was already gone by the time Ridge said, "Okay."

Maryl cut her eyes up to Ridge. "That didn't take long, did it?"

"You did warn her."

"No warning's enough sometimes," she returned, straightening her posture with mock importance. "Sometimes, you just have to embrace the experience."

"Poor cricket," he laughed and gave his wife a peck on the head. "Nice to know Tom's in a good mood, though. He hasn't played dom-jot in a few months."

"It's nicer to know he got some decent scanning equipment," Maryl told him, "since we'd never have bought it with everything else we needed to pay for, plus a new employ to divvy out to. Those old, Bolian cubes were making you blind."

"It'll be nice to read a diagnostic again," Ridge agreed.

"Once B'Elanna re-teaches you how to, that is," Maryl snorted. The comm beeped at a nearby panel and she leaned away from Ridge and walked over to tap the receiver. "Guerdon."

"*Hey, Maryl. I've got some purchases to deliver.*" It was Paris.

"Speak of the devil," Maryl mewed. "Your new engineer just blazed a trail of plasma through here a minute ago. Ridge is repairing the deck as we speak."

"*She doesn't believe in gambling,*" Tom dismissed. "*Did she go to the engine room?*"

"Yes."

"*Okay. I'll beam it there.*"

"You know, Tom," Ridge said, "You really should try to give the kid a break. She's not used to things, and her being excited about getting started and all..." He left the rest open for interpretation.

Pausing, Tom leaned back on the crates he'd just signed off on. "Guess she managed to bring out the worst in me, Ridge," he said. "I'll see what I can do."

Setting his flask on the edge of the counter, Tom picked up the brand new tricorders he'd won and set them on top of the pile. He was actually proud of himself, despite his new engineer's disapproval--not that it should have surprised him. What she probably didn't know was that pressure regulators were a lot easier to find than good tricorders--and cheaper. The idiot he'd been playing with probably had a black market stock of scanners. If it was a risk in the first place, it was a worthy one. It sure made up for the expense of the coils, which had easily taken up three-quarters of the ship's pot. Any more large purchases in the next month, he knew, would need to be funded from his own savings.

That in mind, Tom took up one of the tricorders and activated its note function, then wrote:

Fishing for your anti-grav. Won't bet the nacelles this time around. Will contact you later for routine sign off. Have fun with the coils.
-TEP

Reading it over, he nodded to himself and set in on top of the other two, then went back to pick up his flask and call out to the transporter worker, "Beam it over to our deck two tray. My engineer's ready for it."

Two minutes later, B'Elanna eyes focused on the tricorder's display. To her credit, she only sighed and erased the message.

"Whatever," she muttered and began to unlock the crates with a few concerted whacks of a half-functional hyperspanner.

She and Tom had perused several racks of coils and fittings in the Podala stock. Barely listening to the price lists and handing the inventory to her, he decided to "think about it a while" and took them back to the lounge area. Not an hour after he'd made her feel like an ass in front of Captain Kitu, his thought process dipped into the flask he'd had in his inside coat pocket, started a "friendly" game at the dom-jot table with a half-drunk Kendan smuggler, and then promptly wagered the parts from the engine she was *trying* to fix.

"Asshole," she grumbled.

Opening one of the crates, though, her shoulders fell a little to see the shiny black half-circles, pure duranium coating verterium cortenide, half a meter long each, with hand-tooled notch seals and extra thick stress plates on either end.

B'Elanna released her breath.

Her captain had bought the best coils in stock.

Four hours after she opened the first case, four of the coils had already been liberated. Crouching within the assembly below the hulking drive manifold, she yanked and replaced the heads from the next section--and as quickly as possible. Ridge was supporting the generator on its swing hinges, above and just out of the way of the driver. Old as the contraption was, stupid as an accessibility design could be, a slip of his big hands could pop the hinge system and bury her in a thirty centimeter high tomb until Ridge could manage to crank it up again.

In the corner of her eye, B'Elanna noticed Savan slowly enter the scene. "How are you progressing, B'Elanna?" the Vulcan asked. Her tone was curious but careful to distract the work.

"Pretty well," she answered with a grunt as she wheeled the new coil in place, then grabbed another. She could hear Ridge's breath by then. "Getting some of the cleaning and refitting done ahead of time helped. I'll have this done by tomorrow; the filters done before we leave."

"May I assist?"

"You can make sure Ridge doesn't drop the generator on my head," she answered, surveying the coil alignment with her equally new tricorder.

Savan gave a nod and lowered herself to add her hands to the effort. "This work has put you in good spirits," she commented.

"Nothing like working with parts worth working with."

"It is fortunate that Tom was able to find a good set at an affordable price."

"I hate to admit it, but he did pretty well," B'Elanna said, then ducked down to close the coil housing. The driver head complete, it was just a matter of digging in from the top. Reaching for the grate and kicking a leg up to the level, she pulled herself out of the pit, got to her feet and grabbed the lever end of the driver section. "Okay Ridge--Savan, you too--let's ease it back into place, until it locks again. Don't let go. I don't trust these swing hinges."

"Smart kid," Ridge grinned and grunted as he shifted the assembly around.

Shaking a bead of sweat from the corner of his eye, Ridge hiked himself from his knees to a crouch as the cylindrical assembly's hinges groaned for lack of use, and its burden slowly swung above its home. To his memory, Livich had never dug that deep into the impulse drive--and he correctly suspected he'd be lifting the thing out of place again, now that B'Elanna had gotten a good look at those hinges. Grinning to himself at that thought, he finally released enough to let the contraption click into place. The lower housings connected with the hinges, from which point, they could gently set the driver back into place against the main coil assembly with the help of the crane.

B'Elanna took it from there, guiding the assembly down into the deck in tandem with the automated system. It whined and ground harder than it did when it was pulling the generator up. B'Elanna's mouth turned down as she stopped it for a moment to check the alignment.

"*Paris to Guerdon*"

Ridge hopped over to a wall panel and punched the comm. "Yeah, Tom. What's up?"

"*Is B'Elanna there? I have some paperwork she needs to sign off on.*"

"I'll let her know."

"*I also have some drive plasma I need to deal for. She might want to get in on it. If she's not listening right now, tell her I'll be good this time.*"

"I'll tell her, but she probably won't believe me," Ridge chuckled.

Tom breathed what sounded like a half-laugh in response, then said, "*Have her meet me in admin in about a half hour.*"

"Will do." With that, Ridge clicked off the comm and looked back to the engineer, still moving around the assembly with a frown. "Good news, B'Elanna! You get to meet Gil on your first day in."

"I'm busy," B'Elanna called as she knelt on the deck to see if the crane wasn't jerking the alignment again.

"You should go," Savan suggested, still watching the procedure.

"I still have to pull and inventory the rest of the cases," Ridge added. "You can afford a break. It won't take long to sign off and stop in with a couple more vendors. I can finish the inventory in the mean time, send the junk for recycling."

B'Elanna sighed, wiping her brow with the back of her hand. "He doesn't really need me there, does he?"

"For tetrayon waste sign off, he does."

"I can't go in later?"

"It is likely a time which suits both the station manager and our captain," Savan stated, turning her gaze slightly as she continued, "Or is it that you might have a problem being with them?" She caught and held B'Elanna's return attention. "I suspected Tom's manner of making deals might be strange to you at first, despite the errand's successes. However, I can understand why you would not want to repeat the experience so soon."

"I have work to do," B'Elanna deflected, driving her stare back down to what she was doing. "That's all I'm thinking about right now."

"Indeed."

"A lot more if we get the rest of those housing junctures."

"Which requires more arrangements with other vendors." Savan let an appropriate pause pass. Her

brow flicked slightly and she drew a breath. "Would you like me to ask Jerod to take over your duty?"

B'Elanna's eyes popped back up. "I didn't say I wouldn't go," she responded. "Just because it's incredibly inconvenient right now doesn't mean I need other people to do it for me."

"Forgive me. I misinterpreted you." Savan offered a slight bow of her head. "Ridge and I will finish inventorying this shipment. They will be ready for you when you return, hopefully with the remainder of the parts we require."

Tom snorted when she told him--her response to his surprise to see her waiting for *him* in administration, which he'd put off as long as possible.

"Savan has that way about her," he acknowledged. "Problem is, she's good at it. --Don't look so put off. You're not the only one to get the Professor's treatment."

B'Elanna snorted. "Yeah, Maryl's already called her that."

"Actually, it's one of Ridge's terms of affection. Between Ridge and Jerod, everyone has one. If we get him sauced enough tomorrow night, he'll let loose and you'll get them all."

"I don't know whether to be anxious or scared," she grinned.

"Scared if Jerod's the one who coined it," he told her. Opening his arm for her to go ahead, he leaned a little towards her as he told her, "We'll make this as quick as possible, okay? Gil's got the paperwork. All you have to do is make sure the levels look right, put your thumb to it, give it to me and say goodbye. Then we'll head down for some drive plasma and hopefully an anti-grav, maybe a few other things. We'll see."

"You haven't found an anti-grav?" she asked, incredulous. For everything else he'd gotten on a seeming whim, such a common apparatus evading him seemed strange.

"They have them here, but they're not worth the price they're asking. Most of them are used; others just aren't what we want, either too big or not powerful enough. I'd like to try a few more people before I give in."

B'Elanna nodded. "Fair enough." Looking ahead, she saw through the glass the station manager preening as he inspected his monitors, then sliding his finger over the top of one. Turning and noticing the incoming traders, he straightened, repositioned himself more suitably to receive them, then wiped a loose strand of hair behind his ear. B'Elanna turned a weary look back to the captain.

"Fortunately, they're not all like that," Tom told her, "for the most part." He moved to open the door for her, knowing Gil wouldn't make the move from the inside.

Rather, the manager bowed from where he was. "Ah, Captain Paris. Good afternoon."

"Hey, Gil," Tom nodded as he strode a few more paces in, flicking a glance over the conspicuously neat workspaces. "Where's the paperwork?"

"Always your charming anachronisms, Paris," Gil grinned, "and never having enough time to stop and

talk."

"I've usually got a few things to do when I get here."

"Perhaps I should rather meet you at the bar."

"Maybe you should," Tom replied, finally meeting Gil's attention. "We could play some more poker. It's been a while since you've given me an account--which I don't remember spending in full, since you were on holiday last time I came through, and nobody seemed to know about our arrangement." Tom nodded to himself. "Yeah, you and I should get together and have a talk."

Gil turned his attention to B'Elanna. "Ms. Torres," he smiled, "it's both an honor and a pleasure to have a woman of such beauty and expertise on my station. Are you familiar with Podala? Have you had a tour of the facilities? I hope my staff has made you feel welcome."

"My captain's shown me around a little," B'Elanna told him. "What I'd really like to see is the tetryon waste figures so I can get back to my repairs."

Gil's smile flickered only briefly as he reached back for the data in question. When he held it out, B'Elanna moved forward, took the PADD without asking, then moved away from the man to study it.

"You've chosen your new engineer well, Paris," Gil commented, watching with obvious appreciation as she scrolled through the data tables. "I'm certain you two will be very compatible."

"I wouldn't have hired her otherwise," Tom replied.

"You and Livich didn't get on too well, I recall."

"Not my doing. She came with the ship. --How's it looking, B'Elanna?"

She shook her head. "The numbers are off."

"Conversion problems, Ms. Torres," Gil said. "I'm certain they can be worked out."

She turned a plain stare back at him. "I'll send the figures to you again, then."

"That won't be necessary," Gil said, his smile pressing up into his eyes. "I can simply credit you later, when I've recalculated the data Ledge sent me."

"The data *Ridge* sent you were fine," B'Elanna responded. "I checked them myself."

Gil didn't rise to her agitation, but held his smile and condescended her with a polite bow. "Perhaps you believed it so, but the interpretation is just what you see, and my systems are at peak efficiency. Nevertheless, I am willing to look over the calculations, perhaps tomorrow, after our port inspections."

Paris shook his head. "Don't think that'll work, Gil. I happen to be busy trying to get the Guerdon back on the track, so is my engineer, and I'm not paying you a half-slip more than absolutely necessary to recycle our waste. I think, instead, you need to fix your conversion problem and re-issue the sign off here and now."

"Better yet," B'Elanna supplied, finally catching on and moving to face the manager, "you can show me your scale and I'll do the math. Does that sound okay to you?"

Gil released a resigned sigh. "Captain Paris, we're old friends, or I'd like to think..." Stopping upon Paris' raised brow and frown, he tried again. "Recycling takes up a great deal of power and labor on my end, as you well know--"

"And the surplus power you gain by recycling it puts you ahead few gigajoules per transfer," B'Elanna cut in.

Gil laughed lightly. "Obviously, my dear lady, you don't know the extent of our power requirements. --But be that as it may, since I may indeed owe you a small credit here on Podala, consider the charge null, to clear that off our minds and as a gift of welcome to Ms. Torres."

Tom turned a glance towards B'Elanna's disgusted, but otherwise quiet response. "Sounds fine to me," he said. "Clear the invoice and B'Elanna'll sign off on it."

The manager did just that. B'Elanna rechecked his changes to make sure he'd indeed voided the charge, then pressed her thumb to it. "Thanks," she said and moved to lead the way out the door.

"I appreciate it, Gil," Tom added, trying hard not to look as pleased as he was that it'd been that easy.

Watching the man back off a step and prepare to turn, Gil cleared his throat. "You might want to know," he said, "that Dejin and her crew are visiting, looking for business."

That managed to hold Tom for the moment. "I thought she was dealing around Jaros."

"The opportunity to fulfill her talents there dissolved, I heard."

"Federation regulation," Tom clarified with a thoughtful nod. "But you know if she wants to throw some deals around the table, she'll already know I'm here. You didn't need to tell me."

"She had an eye out for you," Gil grinned, "as always. Give her my regards, when you see her."

"Yeah, thanks again." Turning again, Tom gestured B'Elanna to continue on her way out. He followed two paces behind her then returned to her side in the corridor. His mouth pursed with thought as soon as the bridge office's lighting had left them. "Wonder what she's doing this far north," he mused aloud.

"Who's Dejin?" B'Elanna asked.

"Yet another Starfleet dropout making a living off the frontier," Tom told her as he steered them down the central platform and straight towards the promenade. "She wheels and deals in about anything she gets her hands on, usually on the outer end of non-Federation space. She's got all the contacts you could dream for on the other end of the border, but she doesn't usually hit Podala unless she's got something cooking."

"Do you think she has something for us?"

"To offer and to ask for, knowing her," he answered. Turning onto the promenade, Tom crossed his hands behind his back and continued, "She'll probably have those converters, new ones, and your nodes--and you *can* deal for those, B'Elanna. She's not always cheap, so only get as much as we need. But we like giving her our money."

B'Elanna turned a look up at him.

"She's one of the good guys," Tom clarified. At the bar, he extended his hand to let her lead the way.

"We'll stop here, get something to drink and make a couple inquiries."

She looked around as they crossed to the bar. "Is this Dejin here?"

"She will be. She knows where to find me--and she usually will when she finds out we're on the same station."

Sliding onto a stool, Tom nodded to the bartender, a healthy, grayed Bajoran man with a towel slung over his shoulder and a PADD in his pocket. The captain had a tall glass of deep red ale a few seconds later. Sliding a portion of latinum across the bar, Tom jerked a nod at B'Elanna. "Get her what she wants and transport the remainder of what this buys to our cargo bay. No rum this time. That stuff makes me sick."

"We have another few cases of Salrian whiskey on hand."

"Sounds all right. Ask around about a reliable and reasonable anti-grav unit while you're at it and you'll get a finder's fee. I can't manage to get anything out of the usual crowd. Also, if you can get your hands on some of Gil's drive plasma at a cut rate, I'd appreciate it. You know he'll try to rob me for it."

"I'll see what I can do."

B'Elanna turned a stare over to the captain. "Tricorders at the dom-jot table and drive plasma from a bar," she said, more to herself as she shook her head. "I'm the one who'll have to work with it, you know."

The bartender grinned at her comments. "You're new."

Tom snorted at the lip of his mug. "God, I don't miss that."

"Not *that* new," B'Elanna argued, ignoring the man beside her.

The other man merely smiled at her hard stare. "New enough not to know who knows everyone's stocks and cargo," he replied, then pushed a coaster towards her. "What would you like?"

Still processing his condescending remark, she shook her head. "Anything. Water. I've got to work later."

Tom grinned. "Get her some fahal tea. --You'll like it, B'Elanna. Very flavorful with a little zip."

"I don't want a 'zip' right now," she replied.

"It's not a *drink* drink. Just citrus tea." Tom gave the bartender a nod to go and get it, then took a long sip of his ale. Resting his elbows on the maroon granite surface, he said, "That's Tibin Jall, by the way. He used to run a nice little trade ring off Dreon before the Bajoran provisional government had something to say about it. Contrary to what he'd like to believe, he *doesn't* know everything. But he's a good contact who'll find out all he can for you when you're willing to be generous. I wouldn't give him any more information than you're willing to have thrown around, though."

B'Elanna nodded. "Doesn't sound unusual for a bartender."

"He's worth knowing, though. Nadrev came on board as a part-time hire thanks to Tibin. The person and the timing were both better than I've had in a long time--before you came along, anyway."

Catching his small laugh as he pulled another sip, B'Elanna let herself grin at the quasi-compliment,

then nodded to accept her tea from Tibin. It wasn't steaming, but the long, metal-framed glass felt warm to the touch. Eying the suspicious burgundy liquid, briefly sniffing it, she brought it to her lips. She blinked at the strong citrus flavor, took another sip.

"This is good," she commented quietly, looking at Paris. "Thanks--for the tea and the information."

"I learn quickly, too," he returned, meeting her eyes as he moved his glass in a small toast her way. "Thank you, too, for getting under Gil's skin up there," he added, leaning in a little with a conspiratorial smirk. "You handled him like a pro and got us our tetryon dump for free to boot. Maryl will be so proud."

She laughed a little, but said nothing more on it. Maybe it was the tea, and likely it was his ale, but she could swear she felt his warmth when he leaned near to her. He hadn't been so relaxed around her yet. It was a nice change. Better, he was *bothering* to make up for earlier that day.

Joining his mood, she let herself relax as well, resting against the back of the stool and letting her eyes roam across the lounge. Nothing unusual was there. Just the same slit-eyed traders, husky captains and dusty crew, the same steady, drone of conversation and clinking glasses. All but one. One man, dark haired, huskily built and standing near the back entrance of the lounge, caught her eyes and straightened at her attention. He slipped what looked like an isolinear chip into the pocket of his brown leather vest, and then glanced again at the man beside her.

"I think someone wants you, Tom," she said.

Tom turned. "Who?"

"There's a man over..." As she spoke, the dark man moved out of the lounge and disappeared in the corridor. B'Elanna furrowed her brow. "I could swear he was looking at us."

"Probably one of the suppliers," Tom told her, trying to see what she'd seen for a moment before giving up and returning to his ale. "They all know I come here, but he probably saw you with me and didn't want to be overheard, you know?"

"Makes sense." Letting it go, she drew another sip of her tea and asked, "So, is Gil always that slimy?" she queried.

"Usually," Tom answered. "You get used to it. After a while, it's actually fun to watch him squirm his way out of his holes."

B'Elanna smiled. "Guess you were having fun back there, then?"

"More than you know," he answered, not hiding the satisfaction in his tone. When he brought the glass back to his lips, however, his eyes narrowed and focused on something past her, on the other end of the bar. Pulling and swallowing his drink once again, he set down his glass and slid off the barstool.

"Well, if they aren't still recruiting Academy brats," came a smooth alto from behind B'Elanna, who turned to see the woman still walking in, slowly extending her hand to meet Tom's. Her height was almost equal to his; her long blonde hair, tied back into a tight braid, laid in direct opposition to her black eyes, tan skin and dark clothing. Both her posture and her grin showed an unchecked confidence. Another trader. "What happened, Paris? Someone soak you in lye while I was gone?"

"Jerod's been fiddling with the sonic showers in his spare time," Tom shrugged. "Good to see they haven't caught up with you yet, Dejin."

"One of these days, but not today," she replied, turning her gaze with her next thought. "I heard you'd finally crawled back onto the route after Livich gave you a so-long screw. Glad to see you're still in one piece."

"Nice to know someone still cares."

"Just good customer service." With a laugh, he conceded, and so she glanced behind him to the woman looking intently on. "She's with you?"

Tom nodded quickly. "Yeah. This is B'Elanna Torres, Guerdon's new engineer."

Dejin's brows rose with a fresh smile. "Fast work, there, Paris. I'm impressed." She stuck her hand out. "Dejin Hirro," she told B'Elanna. "It's nice to meet you."

B'Elanna returned a polite nod as she shook the woman's cool hand.

"She'll be making the deals today," Tom told Dejin. "It's her engine room now."

She blinked another look of surprise, then let it fade to a sincere grin as she bowed to the engineer. "Excellent." Climbing up onto a stool on the other side of B'Elanna, she pulled a few PADDs out of her tunic pocket and snapped her fingers toward the bartender. "Tibin! Would you get me a-- That your usual, Paris? --Looks good. Get me a Korian ale, too." She smiled at B'Elanna. "Always good on a clammy day. Gil's been screwing with the environmental controls again. Use less power and drive people to the bar, likely."

B'Elanna blinked to realize the truth in it. "I hadn't thought to ask."

"Gil never fails to surprise even us, so don't even *bother* asking. He'll slide through another few idiot schemes before you come back through. --But we're not here for that, and I'll apologize right now: I don't have much time tonight. I've got to prep one of my shuttles for a speed run to Gimol."

Tom gave her a look as he retrieved his drink. "That's interesting," he commented. "The Gimolians or a faction?"

"My Gimolian contact has a pickup," she answered. "Jirren's running it up for me tomorrow."

"Give him my regards," Tom nodded, knowing better than to ask anything else. Even if he wanted to know, he knew she wouldn't say. "B'Elanna has a list. I'll be at the tables."

B'Elanna jerked her head around to see he was already halfway through the room.

"I do want to talk to you later," Dejin told him, casually, familiarly, as she activated a PADD, "catch up with life before you take off."

Tom didn't need a translation. "We'll be here for another day and a bit, and you know where I live. Savan wouldn't mind you dropping by, either."

"Tomorrow morning sound all right?"

"Yeah. Let Savan know when. She'll wake me up."

"I will. Good luck." As he continued away, Dejin pulled another grin onto her lips as she scrolled her inventories and nodded her thanks to Tibin when her ale arrived. "My money's on a new navigation

array," she said, turning her attention back to the departing captain.

Tibin laughed. "Still? --You'd better arrange to get back to the Guerdon on your own, Torres. He'll be here a while."

"Won't be the first time today," B'Elanna replied.

"Oh, you'd better get used to that," Dejin chuckled. "I've known Tom for on and off eight years now, since long before he got stuck with that rig, when he had what looked like a life. Since he's gotten it, though, I've known two things: One, no matter how much it seems otherwise, when he bothers to play, he plays to win. Two, he's *always* wanted a new nav array for the Guerdon. If he's snob about anything in this universe, B'Elanna, it'd be about a ship's handling--even on that flower box he's forced to fly. One of these days, he'll get himself in a good enough position to wager for it." With that, she pulled a long sip of her ale. "So what do you think, now? Think he's feeling it?"

B'Elanna glanced as the captain made his way into the smoky recesses of the lounge, patting a couple shoulders on the way as he eyed each table. "He mentioned wanting one a few days ago, but he didn't say anything about it today."

Dejin laughed lightly. "I'll bet you a brand new ramscoop he's thinking about it--the array surrounded by a new ship. But we take what we can get, don't we? Tom sure does." She nodded to B'Elanna's PADD. "Anyway, enough of that. What do you have there? I'll see what I can do while he's suckering rookies to pay for whatever they've got--and if I can't I'll give you a few connections."

"The captain says we'll have to wait it out for DS-Nine on a few of these," she told her.

Dejin scanned the chemicals section. "True. Better supply, Starfleet regulated, though Gil's drive plasma is pretty good. Tibin's probably better to take care of that. Tom ask him already, you know?"

"He did."

"We'll see what Tibin gets before I ask around myself." Glancing down, Dejin nodded quickly and tapped on her PADD. "The emission tubes, distributors and all these filters are in stock... My, my, you're not just in love, you're getting married." Her eyes scanned through her inventory again. "Give me just another minute and I'll work out a price list."

B'Elanna nodded and let the woman work.

Blinking at the silence, Dejin glanced up. "Right off, I like you, Torres."

"Why?"

"You're not trying to deal me already."

"I can't make a deal until you give me an opening offer, right? And even then, I either can take it or not take it."

The smile returned to Dejin's lips. "Let's hope I can make you a fair deal, then. Mind if I work up a price list and transmit it to you later? You'll need converters for a lot of this stuff, considering the can of worms you're working with."

"That'd be fine. Thanks."

"No problem. --And if you can't buy it right now, I'll hold it for a while if you want. The Guerdon's one ship I'd like to see out of trouble and on the upswing if at all possible, particularly of late." She looked down again to finish her own list. "You sure have your hands full," she said meaningfully.

B'Elanna merely shrugged at the other woman's quizzical tone. "It'll get cleaned up soon enough."

Dejin's mouth turned aside. "It just might this time. You consider upgrading your deflector grids?"

B'Elanna grinned. "My hands are full, remember? The shields just got an upgraded generator this week, so they're running pretty well right now. Besides, the pot can't afford it with everything else on the short list. Maybe later."

"I might be able to work something out for you." Seeing B'Elanna's distracted nod, Dejin nodded to herself. "Yeah, you're right. One thing at a time." She turned back to her inventories.

Glancing to the dark lounge again, B'Elanna noticed the captain pulling a chair and placing his ale glass on a table and nodding to the other men there, then kicking back in the seat as he was dealt a hand. A grin ghosted over her lips.

"On second thought, I'll get back to you on that."

The first round of the Guerdon's business crawled up the lift in cases, one by one in plain gray, space-worthy crates. Only a small plate on each end defined them. Inspected by Savan and relabeled as assigned to a hold by Maryl, Jerod tapped in the bay number and transported the crates accordingly. More fragile stock unable to handle dematerialization by the outdated transporter were loaded on top of a chunky, automated hand truck and led into the appropriate bay by Ridge. Bio-sensitive crates were sent to a special hold on deck four forward. Savan inspected those, sent her report to the suppliers, then took them back herself.

Wiping down her arms with a yellow solvent sheet Jerod had given to her, B'Elanna came in as Savan left with the step truck and the last crate. She looked around as Maryl checked off the list with Paris, Jerod and Ridge folded up the floor conveyor.

"Anything I can do?" she asked.

Ridge waved her over. "Lock it up when we get it turned in?"

She immediately moved to the end of the conveyor and crouched down as Jerod pulled the end over and Ridge snapped it together. B'Elanna grabbed the locks and snapped them, securing the flaps. Ridge then pulled the contraption onto his shoulder and lugged it into the corner by the cargo lock opening. Securing it to the wall, he clapped his hands at B'Elanna.

"Borrow your sheet?" He caught the yellow sheet a moment later and wiped the grunge off his hands with a few wipes. Then, pulling the corners with a couple snaps, the grime disappeared, revealing a fresh yellow cloth. Shaking his head, Ridge tossed the sheet back to B'Elanna. "Jerod, where you find this stuff, I'll never guess."

The comm tech grinned and shrugged. "I have my sources."

"Nonsense," Maryl scoffed, clicking on her PADD. "They're common as rain on Miga-five. They sponge

down their babies with them. Ridge, where have you been?"

"In the engine room, dear," he answered faithfully. "I won't ask why you didn't get me any, either."

"Damn, Maryl," Jerod sighed. "Can't get a break with you, can I?"

"Since when did you start expecting it?" she replied and gave Paris the PADD. "Done."

"I'll take it to Gil, then," he said, then glanced towards the engineer. "Unless you'd rather pay him some more compliments, B'Elanna. I'm sure he'd enjoy it."

"I think I have some nacelle coils I need to scrub down," she replied with a smirk.

"Actually, Dejin's going to have your list ready soon," Maryl said.

"I know. I'm meeting her in a while to go over it."

Tom nodded. "Shoot the figures over to me and put the parts in priority order and I'll sign off on what we can get. You won't have to go back and forth that way. If there's a problem, I'll let you know."

"Good idea," B'Elanna said. "Thanks."

He nodded again and left through the cargo lock.

B'Elanna hardly noticed him go that time.

"That just about does it, then," Dejin smiled, clicking off the items to be delivered to the Guerdon's upper bay, where Ridge and Jerod would inventory and store it. "Always nice doing business with Paris and company."

"I've heard the same about you."

Dejin snorted. "He always was a flirt."

B'Elanna shrugged.

"Oh, I know, he's deadwood now, but back in the day, he'd charm you right out of your tool belt. And he still knows how to pay a compliment." She clicked through the last of the list and sent it off to her first mate. "So it's done. Quite a good day at the store, and you only had a few to save for later."

"It'll be a good start," B'Elanna nodded. "As long as I can get the warp drive running with some efficiency, I'll be able to move on to other issues for a while."

"I will try to get you those constrictors parts, catch up with you on the other side of the loop, since we're going in approximately the same direction."

"The constrictors should manage a while longer when I get the secondaries cleaned out," B'Elanna told her. "Now that I've got those new coils and the plasma filters installed, I'll be able to focus on that."

"Gil's drive plasma is surprisingly pure, too, so you won't have as much more corrosion."

"Good to know."

"So, it looks like you've got a plan," Dejin commented. "Think you'll get that deflector upgrade if Tom manages to earn his pot back?"

"I'd like to. Though, it's not really a high priority right now."

"I'd rethink that idea if I were you," the trader said, her voice dropping to half the volume, "considering the Guerdon's leg's skirting some interesting activity lately."

B'Elanna gave a single nod in response. It was hard to remember that the scum factor on the stations and the route was increasing on a daily basis. It seemed all the same to her. "When we get the parts, I'll install them."

"I've no doubt of that," Dejin replied, easily ending the topic and glad B'Elanna seemed to understand. Peering around behind the end of the bar where they sat, Dejin called the waitress over. "I think some wine is in order."

B'Elanna shook her head. "I'll just have another tea."

"We're done for now and you're off duty, cadet. I know you'll like this." She nodded at the waitress and pulled a couple slips out of her pocket. "Yes, Bajoran Daular, twenty-three sixty-eight. Two glasses."

B'Elanna had already straightened at the label. "Cadet? What'd he tell you?"

"Tom didn't tell me anything," Dejin grinned. "Didn't have to. I looked you up. --Don't worry, I always do that when I do business with new people. I reek of the Academy, myself. My crew calls me 'Admiral Arduous' when they think I'm not listening."

"I thought for a minute there you were a special kind of Betazoid," B'Elanna said, still scowling at Dejin's admission.

"Oh, I'm special, all right," the other woman smirked, taking her wine the moment it touched the bar and giving it a sniff before sipping. "What about you? Must have been rather 'special' for you, too, growing up how you did."

"It was just any Federation colony. Nothing special about it."

"Aside from the fact that you're on the other side of the Federation *now*."

"Yes, I'm not there now--or in Starfleet. Let's leave it at that, all right?"

"We can." Dejin pulled another long sip. "I think I understand."

Coughing a small laugh, B'Elanna turned back to her glass and drew a sip of the wine. It was strong and woody, but smooth. She wasn't used to the real article, though, so she didn't drink again right away, but kept her eyes trained on the mirrored wall, the people moving in it.

"Try growing up on Betazed with absolutely no progressive empathic skills whatsoever," Dejin continued. "As far as they were concerned, I was a social charity." She grinned as the sharp flavors rolled over her tongue and she saw in the corner of her eye the engineer look at her again. With that, she

finished her thought. "I couldn't wait to get the hell away from there, either."

B'Elanna blinked a nod of apology. "So you joined Starfleet?"

"I thought I could work it out there, but I'm not the sort of person who likes to be held down. I loved everything about Starfleet but the regulations, always answering to a higher source, always under someone else's command. It wasn't for me. I did have fun for the duration, however."

"And you met Tom there."

"My third year," she confirmed, "his first, at the rec room dom-jot tables."

B'Elanna laughed. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"He beat the hell out of me, too, all with a smile on his face and a song in his heart. Then we went out on squadron runs and he did the same thing to us there. It was damnably annoying." Dejin chuckled. "At least he can still play the game. He's never lost his touch on that much. Lost enough otherwise...though that's under the bridge, as they say."

Though tempted, B'Elanna didn't ask. Dejin had planted her elbows on the bar and trained her stare elsewhere upon finishing her sentence. She'd probably said more than she intended. "When did you leave the academy?"

"End of my fourth year," Dejin grinned.

The engineer's eyes widened. "You got all the way through?"

"Almost. I was about to prepare for my final examinations, but like I said, I sat down and realized I didn't want to go through with it. I just couldn't do that with my life and be happy. So, I quietly packed, walked out and took the transport home. After my family's shock and horror wore off and I'd been able to see what was out there, my brother helped me get my little frigate, I made some connections and started the nice little business you've met today. That was almost seven years ago." She shrugged to herself, turned her stool so she could look out on the other denizens of the bar. Her dark eyes scanned the room in two passes. "It's not everything I could be doing, but it's satisfying and I'm usually in charge of my future."

"You haven't done badly," B'Elanna said, drawing on the wine again, letting it warm her. She realized that that was the first time she'd spent time in one of the station bars and found herself enjoying it. "It's not all that bad out here, once you get yourself into a good place."

"The trick is getting there, though."

"Yeah, tell me about it."

"Think you might ever get into the business too?" Dejin queried. "Maybe move up in the world? Get your own rig?"

"No way. I'm happy right where I am."

"Good. Less competition for me."

B'Elanna smiled and took another drink. "Do they have anything like pretzels here?"

"Has the captain gotten to Podala, yet?"

"Yeah, he got there last night."

"Next time, comm me in my quarters. I like to know where he is at all times. Got it?"

"Last time, you chewed me out for waking you up."

"And I will again. But I want to know where he is. Conversation over, asshole."

She smirked to herself. The crew was trainable. They were rough and they were stupid, but they could fall in line with just a little of the right pressure. She had become expert at doing just that in varying degrees, making herself quite the likable bitch, second in command and even the captain's lover. Not a bad deal for how she had to live there.

She let her fingers run over the fuses and remote sensors she'd so lovingly crafted during her downtime. The captain didn't appreciate her skills as much as she did, but he certainly didn't hesitate to use them when he last saw a worthy target. Rather, he correctly believed that she had little hesitation at all to test her work, and only asked she keep a regular inventory of everything she put together.

"So we know what we've got when we're going into a fight," he'd told her.

Like a good second in command, she *of course* kept an inventory...of the bombs she felt were worthy of transporting. The rejects, she "disposed" of well enough--where she wanted them to go.

She was paid to be mercenary and inventive, but even they couldn't know the depth of her thoroughness. Very few did.

She hoped as much as the captain did that they'd be able to find the little tradeship again. While the Liberty was under her command, she was most certain to be looking most carefully.

"I hope we have an opportunity to meet for more time next round," Dejin told Savan the next morning as Tom lead the trader towards the lounge.

"We can plan on it. I appreciate your advice."

"I'll try to get my hands on those geo-pods when I pass through Lyshan."

"Don't let me interrupt you two," Tom muttered, his eyes on the lounge doors.

"Don't be so jealous," Dejin grinned and offered Savan a slight bow.

As Savan turned back for the access ladder, Maryl came out of the forward cross-corridor. Turning aft,

she saw Dejin and Tom. "We're going down for another inspection," she told Dejin as she approached. "But I still want to talk to you later. I need to line up some upcoming vendors."

"I'm free in two hours," Dejin said as they passed each other. "Comm me."

"Will do." With that, the Bajoran disappeared in Savan's wake.

"You're as popular as ever," Tom commented, not trying for levity.

"Savan should wake you up earlier or send some coffee down to you ahead of time," she replied. "You're turning into a real grouch."

"I think I ate something bad last night. My gut's killing me."

"It's probably that case of whiskey you've got swimming in there."

He shrugged. "Maybe that, too."

Dejin continued with Tom to the lounge, letting her eyes roam over the dingy light blue walls and plain doors. Much the same as the last time she'd been there five months ago. The lights were working that time, though, and that strange chemical odor that had once crept dreadfully up from engineering was gone. Dejin didn't need to comment on the improvements. Tom's little engineer probably had fixed them while sipping her morning coffee. Which reminded her, as Tom pulled a chair for her in the lounge then moved with get them coffee and rolls.

"Did B'Elanna inspect the crates yet, make sure my crew got it all in order?"

"She just started," Tom told her, pulling his selections from the replicator--a tray of rolls and two large mugs of coffee. "It's why you saw Maryl on her way out just now. B'Elanna slept in a couple hours. Ridge said you kept her out late, got her drunk."

"She wasn't drunk when she left *me*," Dejin insisted with a laugh. "She got a headache from the wine. Ridge as usual is a fountain of imagination."

"I hope you don't steal her away just yet. I really need those repairs."

"I'm not her type," Dejin assured him, then reached over to comb down his fluffy hair with her fingers. "Really, Tom, you look like hell." Bringing her hand back to her pocket, she pulled out a PADD and laid it on the table for him. "You sure you're up for dealing right now?"

Tom slipped a light pour from a flask into his coffee. "I'm all yours."

"Your call." She took a roll from the plate and pulled it open to spread some honey on it. "About a month ago, I struck a deal with a scientist from Ligara. I'm assuming you're familiar with Ligara."

He glanced heavily at her, then stirred his concoction.

"As you know, their homeworld is on the outside border of the UFP."

"And not regulated by Federation law," Tom acknowledged.

"But they have managed to get authorization to work in Federation space. So, they'll need some big shipments to stock the science lab they're building. They need the power supplies to build the equipment

they use to collect the ores they need to work with. Without it, the science lab goes nowhere, as does the Ligarans' investment."

"What's the rush?"

"Funding is being decided on by the end of the Ligar political season. No lab results, no funding, the investors go away."

"Okay. What's the power source?"

"Bilitrium."

Tom glanced down at the PADD, but still hadn't activated it. "Bilitrium isn't used by many people in the Federation anymore," he said carefully, knowing she knew where he was going, "but could it be adapted for use in Federation-styled equipment?"

"Yes."

"Adapted by the Maquis?"

"You know it." She took a bite of her roll. "This won't be a simple run."

"Hmm." He drew the coffee to his lips, pulled a long drink.

Swallowing, Dejin tipped her head to give him the next bit. "They're paying five hundred bars of latinum per completed run."

Tom swallowed hard and coughed on it. Clearing his throat, he looked at her for confirmation. "Five hundred? They must be pretty anxious to get set up."

"Ligarans don't fool around, I can say that for certain." She eyed him again. "Well? Would you like a piece of it?"

"We still have our run to Zarilar," answered, thinking aloud. "After that, though, we have nothing on the roster but our usual route."

"We can wait until Zarilar's done. It gives me time to shore up the registrations on my end. It won't go over my promise date as long as you stay on schedule."

"Mm hmm."

"Look," she said, "I'm not dealing you and you know it. I'm giving you this offer because I know you won't be back-ending this offer on me in return. You're the only one I'll trust on this."

"Quite a compliment," he grinned, "since you jettisoned three techs in as many runs for their seedy connections."

"The field's crawling with Maquis, Tom," she sighed, "and with what I'm transporting, I can't take any chances these days. Neither can you. --Really, I'm telling you, hang on to your crew. You don't want to be recruiting anyone anymore. Not for a while, anyway."

"Yeah, I've been getting the feeling," he agreed, not elaborating.

"Speaking of which," she continued, "here's the downside to the deal..." She watched his eyes widen briefly, then blink in acceptance.

"It's a speed run," Tom concluded.

"Yes."

Pausing to let that sink in, he blew a breath through his nostrils. "Where to?"

"Six light years past Starbase 129," she told him, leaning back in her seat with her mug in hand. "It's called Norsa Station."

"That's a two-point-five sector jump." Tom paused. "And there's no going around."

"Straight through." Dejin shrugged. "That's why I've had trouble getting people. You've crossed through Cardassian territory before. Your licenses are up to date."

"They know the Guerdon, but I still have to register the flight and pay the levy." Tom's gaze drew out towards the bulkhead window. "How many others are in on this?"

"Four others--Ligaran frigates. We're the only two independents. I can get through Federation space easily; you can shortcut through Gul City. So, the Ligarans are more than happy to compensate us well, *if* we can stock up Norsa Station within the deadline. You'll have a mix of supplies, but most of it is bilitrium crystal and refined rodinium. You drop off at Andal, my people pick it up and take the rest of the way to Norsa Station. You'll be right on the border coming out of Saltok--"

"--Skirting the Hugora Nebula," he finished, nodding. "I know the route you're talking about."

"Get past that, you're good to go."

"Tell me more--like where you somehow set up a stock of bilitrium in the Kalandra sector."

Dejin grinned. "You expect me to tell you all my secrets?"

"No, though I think you want to."

She snickered. "Yes, I do like bragging rights. I've been investing some time with my old Beresian friends. They have some sources and don't mind selling it, since their ships and stations don't use it anymore. They'll be dropping it at Ligara soon, wrapped and ready for transport."

"Sounds reasonable enough."

"This one's important enough, too, that the Ligarans are willing to offer up a quarter of the fee as down payment." She nodded as Tom raised his brow. "Yeah. That means you could get your deflector upgraded, your engines ramped up, giving you that extra something before we even get started. That new mechanic of yours would have a field day at it."

"That's a nice way to sweeten the deal." He leaned back in his seat, his dark-circled eyes flicking over her expression. "Your idea?"

"You could say that." Dejin gestured to the PADD Tom still hadn't touched. "I have to give them my itinerary by tomorrow morning, station time. Can I count you in?"

Tom finally picked the PADD up. "I'll talk to the others, get back to you."

Her lips turned up. "Fair enough," she said then added, "I'd like to know you're on the other end of that run, Tom."

"And I'd like those upgrades," he returned, pressing himself to stand. "I'll get back to you."

"I'll be waiting." That done, she leaned back, crossed her legs and finished her breakfast.

The flask was empty by the time he found the bottom deck.

For over an hour, he'd been pacing the corridors, plotting out trajectories, remembering the Maquis captain's steely, clever stare. Tom knew he could make that flight, but he'd not forgotten the quietly palpable determination in that Maquis captain. It chilled him every time he thought of it. The rebels were in it to win.

Win what? Even Tom didn't know what they hoped to attain in the end. There was absolutely no way they'd turn off the Cardassians--and if the Cardassians didn't, the Federation would eventually snuff them out. Not that it was his concern...until now. He didn't tell Dejin about his foray into the DMZ, about Mesler. Eventually, she'd find out, but he didn't want her picking his brain. She was right about the climate, though, and she was right about not being able to trust people.

Perhaps he'd find the money to keep Nadrev. The young leg runner had expressed a wish to join the crew full time. Tom had already said he'd give it serious thought, but would have to wait until they were done with their Zarilar trip and they could afford another tech.

Maybe on the way back from Zarilar, he mused, stop by DS-Nine before meeting the Ligarán freighter. Nadrev should be ready to leave Bajor by then, and we'll have the funds...

By the trajectory he knew he'd have to plot, they'd have to run through the DMZ twice, once on each end of the Cardassian peninsula. This time, the Guerdon wouldn't be stopping. This time, the Maquis knew their signature.

Pros and cons, temptations and warnings. Part of him couldn't wait for the rush. Dejin knew her old friend all too well and wasn't above using it. Her grin alone remembered his instinctual desire to fly a ship to his ability, to experience the thrill of bait and escape. It had been a long time. On the other hand, his recent experience warned that it was also quite possible he'd get his ass soundly kicked, his ship raided and his crew put in serious danger. Their meeting with the Maquis ship was incidental, and the Guerdon had been carrying nothing they wanted. The Ligarán deal was completely different. Worse, even with speed and new deflector grids, the Guerdon flew like a brick, had no weapons and was not authorized to upgrade to defensible without a pile of legal consultation with not only Bolarus, but the Federation. Even had they time for that, Tom wasn't in the mood to go through it.

Very, very few deals paid off so handsomely. Was it worth it?

Tom turned at the bottom bay doors, hearing a little clinking going on. Not at all unusual, that and he found inside what he expected: Jerod tinkering away at yet another pile of parts. The captain tilted his head, furrowed his brow and crossed his arms. "Is that a shuttle?"

Jerod chuckled. "Maybe. Could be a great greenhouse for Savan, too."

"Where did you get it?"

"Off a junk dealer. I got to thinking when I saw it I'd never put one together before."

Tom sighed. "You should be running Daystrom, Jerod."

"Maybe when I finish my contract. Wanna help?"

"We'll probably have to move it." Tom thought for a moment. "B'Elanna just cleared out the deck two aft parts bay."

"You got it." Jerod pulled himself and moved to the nearby panel to initiate the transport. "Hey, what's supposed to come in, anyway? Maryl get some more lumber?"

"No. Something Dejin's working on. You'll hear about it in a while."

Several minutes later, the men walked into the junk pile's new home, looking at it anew and from another angle. It was little more than a dented, scuffed shell with engine parts piled as high as the windows inside. Tom could tell, however, that it'd been a runner, a triangle with a two-seat bridge and a box bay and hatch directly behind. It might have packed just enough power to go ten light years. "This comes out of your share?" Tom asked.

"As long as I get to name her 'Hilda.'"

"Hilda?"

"Reminds me of the opera."

Tom shook his head and said nothing more as he moved in and starting taking a visual inventory.

"What the hell is that?"

Tom looked back at the door and saw B'Elanna in it, PADD in hand. "Thought you said you wanted a new impulse manifold. We think there's one in here somewhere."

Jerod snorted.

"Whatever it is, keep it out of my way," she told them and moved to continue her path down the corridor.

"Yes, ma'am," Tom returned. Nodding to himself as he looked the little craft over once more, he moved back and looked out of the door. "Meeting in the lounge at fourteen hundred, by the way," he called to her. "You'll need to be there, B'Elanna."

She stopped and looked back at his steady gaze. "What's it about?" she asked.

"A deal," he replied.

"Okay."

With that, he disappeared.

Tom paused in his pitch only long enough to wet his throat with a drink from his mug. "Better still, we'll have twenty-five percent down payment to ensure we're able to bring it all through."

Ridge smiled at B'Elanna. "There's a quarter of your repair list, right there--half with the rest in the pot."

"They can afford this?" Savan asked.

"It's Dejin's deal," Tom said, "and rich as they are, the Ligarans don't mess around. So, yeah, I trust they'll come through." He looked around at his crew once again. "Now that I have you drooling, I'll give you the catch."

"No, no, no, no, no," Maryl instantly moaned.

Tom nodded. "Yeah, it's a--"

"Speed run," Maryl finished and hissed a curse through her teeth to punctuate it. "Why the hell couldn't it have been easy, just this once?"

"We'll use the down payment to improve our engines and do a full upgrade on our shields," Tom told her.

"None of that will matter after those DMZ vultures have picked us clean and you know it," Maryl returned. "You know it because you wouldn't have pitched to us like you did otherwise." "I admit it," Tom nodded.

"You think we can do it?" Jerod asked.

"I think I can get around the Maquis if I have a ship that'll respond to me well enough," Tom answered, looking pointedly at B'Elanna. "You think you could get the Guerdon up to what we need while we're to and from Zarilar? Install the new deflector grids, rebuild the reactor and finish the warp drive tune up?"

"How long?" she asked.

"Three weeks."

She thought about that. "I think so, with the right parts, Ridge and Jerod working with me." She glanced at them, catching their nods, then nodded back to Tom. "Unless anything major comes up, yes. We can get it there."

"You'll have the parts. Nadrev can work with you, too, before we have to drop him off at DS-Nine."

"I don't like it," Maryl said, shaking her head.

"Why not?" B'Elanna queried. "It's a straight shot. If we can get the ship to warp eight and stay there, not draw any attention, we should be all right."

"Their sensors will pick up bilitrium like a hawk spots a limp," Ridge said.

"It doesn't mean they'll *catch* us, though," B'Elanna responded. "Dejin's got a great deal here--"

"I'm all for the deal," Maryl assured her. "I'm just not for the speed run through the DMZ and Cardassian space. Things are getting too unstable in there, and our recent experiences, much as I'm glad for what we got out of it, are all the more reason why giving them a second impression isn't a good idea. I don't trust it."

"I don't either," Tom admitted.

"But you're going to take it." Maryl hadn't asked.

He paused, shrugged slowly. "It's tempting."

"You are going to take it," Savan calmly told him, "and we will need to prepare ourselves and the ship for it. That is the reason you brought us here, to talk about it and see our reactions."

"Well, I *did* want to see how much Maryl would fight me, too."

"You're an ass," Maryl smirked, following it with a sigh and a grudging shrug. "It *is* good money and Dejin deserves a little faith. But the first sign of trouble and I'm blaming you, Tom."

"I think I can deal with that." Tom looked at Jerod. "What about you?"

The comm tech grimaced. "Scary place to go racing through, but if I were in your shoes, I wouldn't be turning it down, either. I like the way that share sounds. It might even be fun. Who knows?"

The captain tried to resist grinning when he looked at B'Elanna again. "You think you can devise any tricks to mask our warp signature? Maybe throw them off before they can pick up our cargo?"

"I know some old tricks."

"Make sure they're not Starfleet tricks--or at least adjust them as best you can. The Maquis has its share of expatriates."

"Now that I think about it," B'Elanna added, "I can also rig a forcefield around the deck three bays. The specs I've pulled up show they've got some old wiring I can adapt. It might make it a little harder to spot. I can also devise a tachyon spread in case someone gets on our tail."

"After the upgrades are in," Tom said, "take whatever you need and get it set up." Drawing a breath, he nodded and pushed himself to stand. Moving across the lounge to the comm panel by the door, he punched in a few codes and asked for the Casiat's captain.

"Yes?"

"We're in."

Forty tables were arranged in semi-circular rows behind the station bar, where food was served alongside the drinks. Most the tables were filled; dealers moved in and out, captains and crews remained, coming in, finishing, getting a call and having to leave. A haze of noise rose and fell from the area, conversations on and off, laughter, complaints and words under the breath. Wait staff moved

between them all, weaving drinks and food through the fabric.

Off on the side, near the viewport, a few tables had been pushed together to fit the crew of six. A diverse group, comfortable yet relatively quiet, the most sober among them was the loudest.

A toast of cheap ale, a big bowl of spiced green puree and a plate of toasted flatbread punctuated the beginning of their meal. The engineer leaned back in her seat, wine in one hand and a piece of the bread in the other. She nibbled at it as her hulking assistant started off on his story. The captain pulled his drink down, held his glass up toward the waitress for another. He did manage to grin as the "Ecelor speed run story" progressed, and only shrugged when his engineer looked to him for confirmation. Then he whispered something to the waitress when she brought him another glass. She smiled and moved on.

His Vulcan science technician peered over at the next tray when it approached. She blinked her approval when she saw the orders had been filled correctly. The Bajoran contact liaison dug in immediately, shaking her head at her husband's retelling. It was a little different every time, but no one bothered to say so. The lanky communications technician, done with one serving, helped himself to another.

The young mechanic laughed aloud; the Vulcan glanced up from her meal. The captain rolled his eyes, chuckling a little. He really had no defense and didn't try for one.

The waitress brought the captain a bottle, then resumed her path to another table, where another crew was saying goodbye to a retiring technician. They'd been there a while and were feeling their drinks. She skipped by the next tables. She didn't want anyone to think she'd heard any part of those dealings. She made several more rounds in the same fashion.

By the time she'd brought the farewell party their last tray of Korian ale, the young captain passed by, trailing behind his crew. He was a little unsteady, but able enough to lean down and slip some credits into her hand.

"Thanks," he said, sliding his fingers around hers to close them on the slips; with a moderate grin, a sleepy glance, continued on to disappear around the corner with the others.

Tibin Jall finished wiping up the bar, readying for the next wave of customers, the post first-shift crowd, he confirmed, checking the chronometer with a glance behind him. Not that it affected him, either way. Day and night meant nothing there. They all had their own clocks but bought the same drinks. A few captains were there already, waiting for their contacts. A few others were strolling by, peeking in, wondering whether to have a drink or not. Eventually, they would come, so Tibin made no efforts to encourage them.

"What would you like?" he asked as a square-built man in a brown leather vest and coat slid onto a seat. Tibin instinctively knew better than to examine him any further.

"Iced kintar tea," the man said, slipping a few credits across the water-streaked bar. When the tall glass arrived, he nodded his thanks. Then, he said, "I was hoping you might help me. They said you know most of the tradeships around here."

"I know a few."

"It's not any kind of trouble," the man was quick to tell him. "I was told he was looking for a new sensor manifold and I happen to be selling. Problem is, my first mate dumped the communication from Zomir after I read it only once."

"I'd have him in hack for that," Tibin snorted.

"I gave *her* worse," the captain chuckled. "I know it's a Bolian ship, but the captain is Human. Tom Adams, I think. Ring a bell?"

Tibin shrugged. "Pretty common name for a human, isn't it?"

"Yes," the captain admitted, pushing a few extra credits across the bar.

Tibin pocketed the credits and pulled out some bread sticks. "What else about the ship?"

A few more credits were set down. Their numbers glowed a sum that made the bartender's lips twitch upwards. "It used to be associated with a trader named Mesler."

The Bajoran nodded, drying off the bar and taking the credits back with the rag. "That'd be Tom Paris you're trying to remember."

"Paris." The dark man nodded. "That's right. I wonder why I thought it was Adams."

"It *is* a common name for a human," Tibin reiterated, "and I'm afraid you missed him. They broke dock a few hours ago."

The captain stood and set one more credit on the bar for a tip. "Thank you."

Tibin slipped that credit, too, into his pocket, then dumped the untasted tea into his wash bucket.

V. The Border

"Thank you again, Captain Paris. Your shipment at Andal got us back on schedule."

"Glad to be of service," Tom returned, his eyes on the two, wheeled trim cases of latinum Savan pulled onboard. Behind her in the aft bay control block, Maryl was organizing the bilitrium transports, barking orders over the comm. Her mewing soprano bounced down the corridors in counter time with the hazy buzz of supply crates being dropped in the bay. Business as usual but for the man before him.

The Ligarán counselor wrung his gray-skinned hands, steady on the end of the access ramp jutting out from the bottom of the freighter. "You heard about our own envoys, I suppose?"

Tom nodded. "I hope they're all right?"

"They were fortunate to make it back into Federation space where they were aided, but their shipments were stolen and their ships were badly damaged."

"There's a reason we're getting paid well for this," Tom acknowledged.

"My point in telling you, Captain, is that this Maquis group now knows our business, likely, and will be looking for more of the same. The bilitrium would be of great use to them."

"Is there any other ore that would power this station?"

"No--or at least the adjustments would take too long for our schedule."

"Well, any power source on a speed run would be prey," Tom concluded, tapping the ramp lift panel, waiting for the other man to get off. His stare drifted back to the corridor as a new set of some thumps and grinds told him they had finished with another hold. Like the first time, they were taking more than bilitrium, but also a good deal of equipment, some medical supplies and rations.

More stuff to steal, he thought, frowning.

The Ligarán finally stepped away, a little unnerved by the sudden lack of conversation. "I hope to see you again soon, Captain."

"Twenty-eight days," he replied and slapped the button for the lift. It grinded into its bearings and snapped shut without grace or subtlety. Tom backed off from the door as soon as the seals sucked together. He turned immediately for the loading bay and ducked under an old brace support to look at

Maryl's monitor. "How long?"

"Fifteen minutes," she answered, resisting the urge to swat him away. "I've got it."

He grabbed a peek from her other shoulder. "Just checking the time."

"Savan has our payment?"

"Yeah. We'll share it out over dinner. Eighteen hundred."

Maryl smiled. "It'll be nice to see--much as I can't spend it. But the Ligarans do know how to make a deal I can warm to. --Chishat! I said to deck three, A-one-two! Are you not hearing me?"

Tom backed out of the control block. "Let me know when you're done."

She glanced at him. "You're going up?"

"With a swing through the engine room."

"Okay."

Tom got down and breezed through the bay with a nod to Jerod, who was likely on his way to deflector control again to reinitialize the long-range sensors. They'd all been there once already, so the preparation was going a lot better this time. For his own part, Tom could honestly say his mood had been pretty good. Though the crew hated them--in part, he did, too--speed runs did have a certain amount of excitement. True, he only had to fly a straight line and deal with the Cardassian checkpoints on the way through, but the suspense was...fun.

It'd been a long time since he'd been anxious to get out of bed--or at least curious enough to get himself going with something positive on his mind. Naturally, he wondered how long that was going to last.

For their part, the crew was starting to click again, and that in better fashion than before. B'Elanna had turned out well already. Able to pull her own strings and be completely in charge, she relaxed into her position as if she'd been there all along, not just two and a half months. She had Ridge, Jerod and Nadrev reorganized and reassigned so that they all could check each other but no longer overlapped. She also took full control of the inventory and soon could tell him the number of socket bolts they had in the stores at any given hour. Tom still believed she was wasting her time on the Guerdon, but he was happy enough to have her doing just that for the meanwhile.

Tom was anxious to have that deal done, so she could start attacking the other horrors that lurked deep within the Guerdon's systems, incompatibilities and worn parts just waiting to give out. When they did, they usually took out a primary system. It was a constant source of frustration to Livich--who'd been the one to plug in many of those wrong parts. One more leg after that one and they'd be back on their regular circuit--two months. Once they were back in the shuffle, there'd be plenty of time for them to start getting some real upgrades underway.

Stepping up onto deck two, Tom moved around the towering power assemblies to see his engineer going about her checklist. Prowling from one station to another, tapping into a PADD and talking to the comm all the while, she was just as he'd come to expect. Tom decided not to disturb her, but rather watch as he slipped across to the deck one access stairway.

"Did you need something, Tom?" she asked as he started up.

"No," he replied, only glancing back. "We'll be divvying out shares at eighteen hundred in the lounge."

"I have a couple power issues to bring up," she told him.

Tom stopped and looked at her. She stood in the middle of the bay, planted on both her feet, her PADD at her side, her face bright with purpose. "Can you send me a quick summary when you get a minute?"

"I can."

"Thanks." That done, he moved to continue up the flight. Behind him, the engineer returned to the comm and patched in to Jerod. She began relaying stats to him as he tuned the sensors. Tom crossed the access deck to the center corridor.

With a quick stop in the lounge, he reached the bridge in a few more minutes. Settling into his seat, he drew a deep sigh, closed his eyes for a few moments then opened them again to tap on his monitor. The stargate drew into focus. Their two-point-two sector path appeared in the black and gray grid, with projected speed and course corrections at various points in the liners.

Casual travelers--in the day when people became bored at Betazed and decided to wander through the "frontier"--were apt to comment on how different space looked when they finally were able to pass through it. It was almost as though they expected the region to be the same color as the handy blobs used in civilian maps to denote territory. Perhaps they thought there would be signs in space, a la ancient cartoons: "Entering Beloti--Watch for Mines." It sometimes seemed so, though the Federation space they had journeyed through was no more crowded. Rather, it was better known. Past the frontier, there was even less. The planets were, well, just planets, not many stations or venues were appropriate to travelers outside the Federation, and in-between those seedy locales, there weren't even nebulae to look at.

While Tom's expertise made him able to pick up the nuances of that open space, he held no illusions. He knew quite well that it was black, cold, unforgiving and definitely not for tourists.

Thinking on that and the Ligar's warning, Tom started reprogramming the numbers. He knew, of course, that warp generation and deflector output had to constantly compensate for each other: To bring one to its full capacity, the other must work around the changed frequencies. Nothing was unusual in that, only more complex in their situation and the Guerdon's tenuous consumption efficiency. If they had to raise defensive shields, they'd have a tough time sticking to full *impulse*, much less maintaining a warp bubble. As it was, power had been a little dicey on the first leg as B'Elanna tried to find a workable balance with the navigational deflector output. She'd been working on it all the way back to Ligar, too. He hoped what she'd be bringing up later involved a solution. Looking at the chart again, he found the DMZ border and upped the projected speed. Thinking again about the borders, he turned the display on his console to graphical and the new numbers began to scroll out for him. The plain grid chart morphed into a field of bluish black; at its center lay a magenta arm surrounded by a thick, black snake.

For the first time when looking at it, he felt his chest tighten.

"Nadrev already up?" Jerod queried as he jogged into the main engine room.

B'Elanna nodded and tapped a few last commands into the tricorder. "He had to finish the sensor loop replacements on the bridge."

"Good work for those little fingers, a little schoolwork in the bargain."

B'Elanna snorted. Jerod enjoyed teasing the young Bajoran when he took over busywork the comm tech didn't quite enjoy. "Good to cross train him," she corrected. "And at least he doesn't waste everyone's time complaining about it."

"Hey, I don't go on about how many parts and how many--" Jerod cut off when the engineer glanced a wry smile his way. He rolled his eyes. "Great. We got another one."

B'Elanna continued with the data input, briefly wondering whom else he was referring to. Knowing he was waiting for her, though, she quickly got the rest of it done and gave up the tricorder for the time being. Holding at warp eight along the edge of the Kalandra Sector, they had all week to prepare for the tough part of the leg, their journey through two ends of the DMZ with five days in Cardassian territory between them.

She did like getting her thoughts down, however, before moving on, particularly when moving on could mean one of a hundred things on that ship. Thankfully, for all his nervous energy, Jerod was a relatively laid-back guy. He did not so much as tap a foot. Finally setting the tricorder into its appropriate slot at her main station, she fell beside him to continue through the bay and up the stairs.

"Have you heard anything about Tom hiring Nadrev yet?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Nope, not yet. Tom's probably still tossing the pros and cons."

"I don't see any cons," B'Elanna told him as they rounded their flight and crossed to the center corridor. "He's a really good tech, a part of the team, and he really works hard."

"Yeah."

"I'm more than willing to give up a little share if our works gets done better."

"Tell that to Maryl," Jerod grinned. Looking over and seeing her arms cross and her mouth press together, he grinned and gave her a playful nudge. "Don't worry, B'Elanna, we all *want* to be able to hire him. Tom'll decide when the deal's done. He's got to think about the weather day-to-day. But I think it's looking good."

B'Elanna relaxed a little and nodded, dropping her arms as they continued forward. She almost wished she'd brought the tricorder up with her. It had the actual data she was working with on it and she found herself fumbling for something to occupy her hands. Thankfully, they got to the lounge within a minute.

Jerod stepped aside a pace to grab Tom's shoulder. As always, he was already there with his usual place setting. "You drink too damned much, Paris."

He pushed the second glass across the table. "More the merrier."

Jerod snorted and slipped ahead of B'Elanna for the replicator. "Hmm, tuna sandwich, or tuna sandwich?"

Their food replicator had finally blown out only days into the first leg. Restricted by time, compatibility and location, they were unable to get another one. Their equally incompatible parts

replicator in the engine room would spit out nothing but ration bars. Thankfully, the engineer was able to make a repair, but due to data instability and her patchwork parts, she had been forced to curtail their choices to only twelve simple items and ration bars. None was her fault, of course, but the crew hadn't missed the chance to bug her about it.

"Ridge was suggesting just this morning that I make a switch and try the tuna sandwich." Jerod snickered at her wearied expression. "Sorry, but you know I'm just kidding you. Computer: Tuna sandwich."

She rolled her eyes. "Shut up and get your dinner."

"You'll fall madly in love with me soon enough," he smiled. "They all do."

"Nice to know you're able to entertain yourself so easily." But a moment later, she laughed a little, letting it go and moving up to get her own tray. Unfortunately, she'd planned on tuna, too. She decided to eat later. "Computer: Coffee, black."

Jerod was already in his seat, accepting his drink as Tom halved a cracker. The captain's stare drifted over to the engineer, examining her for a moment as she turned with her mug in both hands. Holding her in his eyes for a few seconds, he motioned to the other seat there. B'Elanna shrugged, shook her head as she ghosted a smile and took the nearest table to her. Silently letting her off the hook, Tom popped the cracker into his mouth and chased it down with scotch.

She hardly looked up as she methodically sipped at her mug.

The others filed in soon after. First came Nadrev, carrying a small stack of PADDs. Spotting Torres, he asked with his eyes, got her nod and brought the work to the table. Ridge and Hana entered soon after and went straight for their seats. When the others all had settled into their separate conversations, Savan arrived. She rolled behind her the case of latinum that hadn't been split off for the ship's pot. Setting it beside her usual table, she walked to the replicator, ordered water, then returned to take her seat.

Savan then opened the case. Within were evenly divided rows of latinum bars, bound and stamped so each could be easily carried. It had been a matter of much consideration to Savan, in fact. She had never had to dole out such large shares before. Tapping the PADD within the case so it would record the session, she began. "Guerdon payment session, stardate 47295.7, Ligarán contract, leg one." She then looked out to the first person on the payment list.

"Jerod," she stated, "forty-seven bars, twelve strips."

The comm tech immediately got up and went to the case. His eyes widened and he looked to her again for confirmation. She nodded once. "Wow," he said. "Okay. Cameron Jerod, forty-seven bars, twelve strips." He choked a little laugh as he pulled his share out of the case. "Holy crap."

Several months after taking over the Guerdon, Tom had made payments a public event, so there were no questions and no misunderstandings--or if there were, they'd be handled on the spot and with an audience. Savan handled all moneys earned; she also recorded the share session and carefully filed it. The former captain's doings and Livich's tendency towards suspicion had made the procedure necessary. After the shares were dealt out, everyone was invited to raise an issue or make an announcement. Sometimes it went on longer than anyone wanted. Sometimes they took the money and left. Either way, it was as close to a business meeting as the Guerdon got and had worked out for everyone in the end.

"Torres, forty-seven bars, twelve strips."

B'Elanna got up and did as everyone else had by then and regarded the sum with some surprise before nodding and picking it up. "B'Elanna Torres, forty-seven bars, twelve strips." With a little breath, she brought her payment back to where she was sitting and set it on the chair beside her. Having been raised on a Federation colony and working within the Federation until only a couple years ago, the concept of currency was still somewhat odd to her. Glancing over at the captain as he accepted his share, then Savan, she wondered how they had adjusted to the change.

She knew painfully well how she had--or *hadn't* at first. She overpaid often, mixed up the difference between strips and bars in a quote and finally gave up the credit system for its ridiculous lack of logic. There was no standard with credit outside the Federation, and vendors seemed to make up their own rules for each transaction. Little wonder the Ferengi had the corner on that market.

Savan set the recorder on her table and closed the case. Giving Tom a nod, he leaned forward in his seat, leaning on his elbows as he perused the room. "Is everyone okay?" No one answered. "Guess that's a yes. B'Elanna has some issues, but we'll save it for last. Any other business?"

Jerod answered first. "I couldn't get the newsfeed this week--well, no, I got it, but I couldn't unscramble it. I'll try again tonight, but the bluebook's going to be late."

"It's probably interference," B'Elanna told him. "The new shields and increased warp output are probably messing with the SRN. I'll clean it up."

"I can do it if you tell me where to go," Jerod offered.

"I'd rather do it myself," she replied. "I don't want the other systems to be compromised by any adjustments--we're on a fine line as it is."

"Do you mind if I watch?" Nadrev asked.

"Actually, I want you to. It'll be useful next time we have to do it." She looked at Jerod. "You too?"

He grinned. "Yeah, sure." He gave Tom another nod.

"Anyone else?" Tom asked. After an appropriate pause, he leaned back in his seat again and ghosted a grin B'Elanna's way. "Your turn."

B'Elanna wasted no time. "I'm still having issues with the PTC and ODN--"

"Real words," Maryl cut in.

"The power transfer conduits and optical data network," B'Elanna clarified, then continued. "Systems aren't...turning over as they should. We constantly have to trade system power because they're not working well together."

"There's nothing new about that," Jerod smirked.

"True, but on this run, I'd prefer not to have to choose between breathing and deflector control again." She looked around. "I'd like to start shutting down a number of non-essential systems, try to cut consumption down as much as possible while we're in the DMZ and Cardassian space, so I can divert all that power to life support and communications and separate them from warp and deflector power."

"What do you want to shut down?" Maryl asked.

"All reclamators but main engineering's, all refreshers, unmanned panels and access tables, the bio-holds on deck three, the deck lift, cargo transporters--since we won't need them until we're at Andal--and use emergency lighting only in all areas but deck one forward, among a few other things. It's all written out. In the bargain, for a little inconvenience, we won't have the same problems we did on the first leg."

"Considering the Maquis have sniffed out the Ligarán deal," Tom told them, "I'm willing to be inconvenienced." He looked at the Vulcan. "Will you be able to store your samples in the lab for the time being?"

Savan paused, blinked. "I believe it will be manageable."

"But I thought you'd upgraded all those systems," Maryl told B'Elanna. "You got a slew of new equipment and we're loaded up with deuterium. What's the problem?"

"The upgrades are installed in a twenty year-old freighter with a part from every planet in half the Federation," B'Elanna returned. "You were right about the Guerdon's power consumption problems. Now it's handling new parts on top of increased shield capacity. I didn't have the time or the funds to completely rework the core or ODN. That has to come later, and that's the *first* thing I have to do. So for now, we have to shut down as much down as we can and get the job done." She shrugged. "It's only a week each way. Make sure you have changes before."

"But I sleep next to the man who goes through a lot more changes than me," Maryl complained.

"Aww, I'm as fresh as a flower," Ridge grinned.

"A Carpathian cabbage flower."

"B'Elanna," Tom asked, "you think this'll make us able to handle a shield generation upshift at warp eight?"

"Barring no other issues, yes," was her answer.

He nodded. "Okay. Savan, let me know if that's going to be a problem and we'll work something out. For the mean time, I opened up the replicator, hooked in an external core and programmed in the Federation menu. There are Bajoran dishes in there, too. I'm in the mood for shrimp fettuccine. Don't know why. Anyway, no limits tonight--and if it blows, you can all give me hell over rations from engineering for a few weeks, which you'd probably enjoy just as much." He turned his gaze back to the engineer. "That all right with you, B'Elanna?"

She couldn't help her grin. The captain was hard to know sometimes, but there was something endearing about his ingenuousness. She understood why he and Jerod were such good friends. That he was able to get into the machine and work it out, albeit temporarily, also impressed her. She didn't know he had programming experience. "I happen to like shrimp fettuccine."

Jerod stared at his friend. "You watched me eat that whole sandwich and didn't say a word."

Tom's lips turned up. "You were having so much fun ordering it, I didn't have the heart to stop you."

Ridge popped out of his seat. "Fried oysters for me!" he announced, ignoring his wife's groan of disgust and sliding over to the replicator in two strides.

"So what's up, Tom?" Jerod asked, pushing himself to stand. "You dying or something?"

"No. Just in the mood to eat a meal."

Looking over again, he caught B'Elanna's little smile as she waited for Maryl to get her tray, leaning against the bulkhead with her arms crossed. He stared at her for several long seconds, until Jerod and Nadrev filed in behind her and started talking about the SRN adjustment. Tom returned his attention to the glass in front of him, patient for his own meal. Though craving a dish, he wasn't actually hungry.

"Savan, do another long-range scan of the Hugora Nebula and surrounding space."

"Would you like different parameters?"

"Try concentrating on the distal edge and run a line out to Ronara."

The next thing he heard was the Vulcan's fingers tapping expertly on her panel. "Also," she said as she worked, "Jerod has finished the transceiver adjustments. The distortions should not reoccur."

Waiting to re-plot their course after Savan's latest scans rolled in, Tom allowed himself a grin. Savan's mentioning the comm tech reminded him of the latest potential biohazard on the ship: Jerod's nickname for their engineer, "Tuna Torres." As Jerod could still breathe, B'Elanna obviously had not yet discovered the moniker, though it was dangerously close to sticking. Ridge had wisely not let her in on it, either.

For his part, Tom hoped it'd fade naturally away, much as it would provide plenty of entertainment during the run.

Thankfully, it looked at last like that would happen in good time. B'Elanna's conservation was working. They hadn't had one issue throughout the first part of the DMZ, nor through Cardassian territory. They'd been at warp seven-point-eight for over seven days with shields at ready and they hadn't even blown a relay that time. Only the comm system had suffered from an unrelated issue. Moreover, squeezing every microjoule into the other systems had provided them with a better sensor spread, of which Tom was taking full advantage. They would be a day early getting to Andal, giving him time to find a new replicator for the lounge before they took off again. They just had to get over two more borders and they'd have that leg under their belt.

Five days to go.

Tapping on his monitor, Tom nodded at the telemetry. True to his suspicions, there was activity around Ronara that wasn't Cardassian and a couple ships popping in and out of the Hugora Nebula, through which area they needed to pass. They had Federation signatures, but that said nothing to him. Tom adjusted their course accordingly, even if he knew he'd have to do a few more times. Feeling his foot begin to tap as he thought of what else needed to be done, he decided to test the newly repaired comm.

"Hey Maryl, feel like coming out of your hole, give Savan a break?"

"*I'd love to, but I'm still trying to unravel this end-of-term contract.*"

Savan blinked. "Would you like me to review it again?"

"*You're going to *have* to. I can't make sense of this legalese. We've worked with Ligara before, but

the congressional regulatory section is making me blind. I'm going to kill Dejin for giving me this without warning me.*"

"Maryl," Tom grinned, "we need her alive in order to finish the deal."

"*Well, seriously injure should do it, then. And I thought the Ligarans were a simple brand of people.*"

"You think we'd be shipping bilitrium on a speed run to the other side of Cardassian space if that were the case?"

The woman over the comm growled. "*Shut up. --Why are you bothering me, anyway? Aren't you supposed to be flying this crate--or whatever it is you do with yourself up there?*"

Tom leaned down to examine a blip on his monitor. "I decided giving you hell was more satisfying," he replied. "Just come forward when you can. Savan needs a break before we leave Gul City."

"*I'll be there in a few minutes.*"

"I do not require rest," Savan told him when the line was cut.

"You'd might as well take it now," Tom said. "We'll get to the DMZ in a couple hours. I'd rather you be up here as long as possible once we're across the border."

Savan returned to complete her work. "Perhaps you are correct." A pause. "Will you be taking a break, as well?"

"No. I've only been here an hour and I need to go over these coordinates again."

She aimed a sidelong look at him, even though he wasn't looking at her. "You seem...nervous."

He shook his head. "Doctor Etakar got to me, I guess."

"I understand. However, the scans are as precise as we can make them."

Tom glanced back and gave her a nod. "Thanks, Savan."

She blinked her acceptance and looked towards the entrance.

Maryl arrived, still grumbling and placing a PADD on Savan's station as she passed. "*Please* explain this to me when we're clear for Andal. I give up." Tying her light curls back in a band, she slid into her station, leaned back on the seat and linked up with Savan's panel. "Bell scans?"

"Actually, now that we're approaching," Tom told her, "I want them every fifteen minutes."

"What's it going to matter right now?" she asked.

"I want to see where everyone's headed," he answered.

Maryl scowled at her screen, but decided not to venture further. She knew he'd get over his quirk soon enough--or at least they wouldn't need the extraneous sweeps much longer. For that matter, when she saw her husband enter with a couple mugs in his hands, she set aside the inconvenience and motioned him over. "What are you doing here in mid-shift?"

"Just had my dinner break," he told her, bringing her a mug. "Sorry it's plain."

"Better than *your* brew," she returned lightly. "Thanks, Ridge. I was needing this."

He nodded and watched her take a couple sips. Her smile in response to the taste satisfied him, so he finally asked, "You get through that big, scary contract?"

She waved a hand at him. "Let's not talk about it now."

"So, no," he chuckled and rubbed her shoulders encouragingly.

Quickly making sure he didn't go back to the topic, Maryl looked over at the comm tech, who leaned against the comm panel, sipping from his mug as though he were outside a café. "You don't have Ridge's excuse," she charged.

"Nope," Jerod smiled. "I just followed him from the lounge. Thought I'd gas up before joining the little admiral on her warpath."

"Take it easy on her, Jerod," Tom said, furrowing his brow at some spatial distortions. He tapped in a request for analysis. "One nickname's enough."

The other man laughed. "Come on, you know I like her a lot, but when she gets going on a job, she's hell on heels."

Tom turned a stare back his way. "Maybe you should help her get it done sooner, then," he told him, not a question. "Ridge, you too."

Seeing the unusually pointed look on his friend's face, Jerod's grin faded, and he understood. "Yeah, I guess we could."

Nodding at Jerod's glance, Ridge gave his wife a peck on the cheek, then trundled himself out behind the younger man. Tom finally turned forward again, checking his screen again.

Savan eyed him. "You *are* nervous."

"Third time's the charm," he replied, "and we've been lucky so far."

She gave up her station without further comment.

"We appreciate the safe passage, Gul Mekar," Tom said politely. He knew well how far it went--nowhere really, but it at least helped to keep up the façade of geniality as they sat on the edge of the Almatha Sector, waiting to be let go.

"I look forward to greeting you again, Captain Paris," came the gul's easy reply. Seemingly alone, Tom had no doubt half the crew was watching their captain. He snorted to himself to know that the same was true on the Guerdon. "We never take for granted your honest and efficient business through our space." He glanced down. "Ah, your clearance is in perfect order. Your Vulcan is to be complimented on her contracts skill."

"Glad we could make it easy on you," Tom acknowledged, knowing full well they were more pleased with the levies the Guerdon had to choke out to each regional guard, on top of the license renewal, which Savan indeed had worked long hours on to get right.

"Good luck on the remainder of your journey," finished Gul Mekar with a courteous nod.

"Thanks. See you soon."

When the comm was cut, Tom heard Jerod snort behind him.

"Oh, I think it's love," he intoned. "Stock up on the fish juice while you have the chance."

"He's just a tease," Tom smirked.

Turning the ship around, Tom checked their output ratios and with Torres' approval, brought the field generator to ready status and shot them into warp five-point-five, where they would stay until B'Elanna gave him the go-ahead to speed up. It usually took her a half-hour to make sure everything was running properly and nothing was interfering with the sensors. In a ship with parts from one source, this was not so much of a problem. Once again, the Guerdon was skidding over its hodge-podge.

They soon passed into the official DMZ, however, and started into the daylong journey with a clear sensor map. All the activity he had been monitoring over the last couple of days had moved into Federation or Cardassian space, or away towards Ronara. The slip between the outpost and the Hugora Nebula was entirely clear on their map. The nebula already had a reputation for hiding ships well, though, starting with a coup the Federation newsfeed continued to disseminate. For that reason, Tom was not as nervous about being near it. Starfleet had their eye on that gas ball and were probably lurking somewhere inside it. Tom planned to swerve wide around Saltok, however, so not to be randomly scanned by any apparatuses there, and then cross into Federation space. It was an easy jump, really.

"*Tom,*" came B'Elanna's voice over the comm, right on time, "*everything's clear down here. We can handle seven-point-six through the DMZ.*"

"Not up to eight?"

"*The long-range sensors aren't responding to the new frequencies as I'd thought they would, and I know you're using them a lot this time. I'd rather not lose them.*"

"Yeah. Seven-point-six is plenty if we're still able to see."

"*I'll keep working on it.*"

"Good."

Leaning back into his seat, his stare drifted back down to his console monitor, which he'd switched to forward view. One of Torres' power saving measures was to turn off unnecessary stations. This included the main viewscreen on the bridge. At warp, she insisted, "it's good for nothing but stargazing." Tom grudgingly agreed, though he did like seeing out the front window while driving, as it were.

He sighed a little to himself as his mind surfed that thought. The last time he drove his car, so lovingly preserved and tuned, he'd taken his mom for a spin out on the old Audubon outside DelÈmont. She laughed and screamed, holding on for dear life as he gunned the engine the way it liked, reveling in the g-forces as he pulled the turns. He was in his senior year at the Academy. He couldn't wait to get off Earth. He probably would never please his father, but the rest he could do--including get away. He knew

he'd miss his mother, though.

He wondered if his parents had gotten rid of it. His father never did like that garage, or the stench of the artificial petroleum. He wondered how his mother was doing. It'd been over six months since he put together a bland little travelogue for her and sent it back to Earth. Eighty light years away, and if something happened to her, he would never know. He made a mental note to write once they were done with the Ligarans. When he let himself, he did miss her.

"What do you have ready?" he asked Maryl, focusing on his readouts again.

"The USS Draden passed Ronara and is headed towards Starbase 129...."

"So what's with the continuous sensor sweep? --Computer: Coffee, black."

When Tom looked back from the lounge viewport, B'Elanna had her hand out for the coffee when it decided to materialize, but her dark eyes were upon him and expecting an answer. Her jumpsuit was a good indicator of where she'd been all day--or, better, what she'd been *under*--though her face and hands had been freshly scrubbed. She was a damned attractive woman. Little wonder Jerod was working on her.

"I want to see where everyone's going," he finally said.

She turned her stare askance. "You don't need a sweep every fifteen minutes for that."

"Maybe not."

"Don't get me wrong," B'Elanna told him, "I have no problem with it. They're not burning up any systems, but you're doing a lot of it."

Tom released his breath and leaned back on the plain steel table, looking out the viewport again. "Yeah, it's probably just paranoia," he shrugged. His own coffee wasn't quite doing it for him, nor was stretching his legs after six hours at the conn. He knew what he really needed, but he was trying not to be sauced when he had to focus on numbers. Just enough to stave off the headaches would have to do. Unfortunately, the absence of his sedative was distracting him in very different ways.

B'Elanna moved across and leaned against the bulkhead to look at him. His eyes were tired, his shirt and trousers rumpled but clean from sitting all day; his expression was almost in awe of what he saw streaming outside the window. "Just paranoia?"

He shook his head. "It's a pilot thing, when you feel like you've got a ghost riding your shoulder."

"A sixth sense?" she queried, her pursed mouth breaking into a grin. Pilots always were a strange sort, so it shouldn't have surprised her to see even the captain taking some stock in superstitions.

He noted her expression. "Something like that." But he shrugged it off a moment later. "Or maybe I really *have* been drinking too much. Can't say for sure." He sniffed at his plain coffee, then set it down. "Going into this defenseless isn't helping. We have a deflector beam and a couple pulse thrusters, but the best firepower on board is a old phaser I have stashed under the conn--and it doesn't work."

"I still have the tachyon spread," she told him. "It'll kill a warp bubble pretty efficiently, brown out systems for a while."

"How do I initiate that?" Tom asked.

"I have to do it. It takes only a few seconds. Just let me know."

"Okay. Thanks." He looked at her. "For everything, B'Elanna. This wouldn't have been possible without the work you've done. We're all still a little in awe of how you've thrown yourself into things here."

B'Elanna's stare darted down briefly to consider her mug, then pulled back up to regain his unwavering regard, so unusually intent just then, it almost made her move out of his line of sight. Her heels remained planted with a conscious effort. "Just doing what you hired me to do."

"You're doing it well." Pushing himself off the table, he stretched his arms over his head, then reached down to grab his coffee and down the rest of it. It was cold, but he could hardly taste it, anyway. "I have to get back," he told her and walked out, dropping his mug in the bin on the way out.

She watched him go and turned to gaze out at the same view he had been taking in. It was nothing new to her. Perhaps he could see something else in the streams of light. Then, blinking to replay their conversation in her mind, she snorted softly to realize it was the first time he'd announced his departure to her.

When he got back into his seat, Tom immediately looked over at Maryl. "Anything?"

"Just finishing up." She smiled. "Two minutes and we're clear."

"We'll be clear when we get to Andal," he returned, then added, "but it'll be nice to have the DMZ behind us."

"Your positive spirit is so infectious," Maryl smirked. "Long range scans look clear, but I'm seeing some interference, probably from the nebula."

He looked down to his monitor. Running through the EM lines, he spotted a few irregular dips followed by a slight spike, then the same again, just lightly off the last: A signature realignment. "Yeah, I'm seeing subspace distortions," Tom confirmed.

"They weren't there five minutes ago," she informed him.

"Check it out?"

Maryl nodded and went to it again.

"We have entered Federation space," Savan announced.

He ignored that but to slow the Guerdon down to warp six-point-one. B'Elanna's engine work, inspired by some research she'd downloaded when they passed Starbase 310 during the preparation for their job had helped them clear the warp field effect a little higher than before. Excited by that success, she had promised to upgrade the nacelles and get them cleared up to warp seven. Tom grinned to himself to recall their conversation. She'd called it "just a angular adjustment and a few reroutes." The Guerdon's

older configuration actually would be a benefit in that respect, which no doubt was a surprise to everyone. A drydock on Minjau for three days would do it if she had all the parts. They'd easily have the funds for that after the third run.

But that was later. Damning conservation for the moment, he activated the main viewscreen. He needed his windshield that time. The ghost was running its tendrils down his neck. "What do you see, Maryl?"

She scowled at the results of her scan. "Tom, we're receiving an incoming message from Gul Mekar."

He looked over at her. "Here?"

"Just what I said, it's...Oh, never mind. Bounced signal." She breathed a little laugh. "You ass. You're making *me* jumpy, now."

Tom wasn't relieved. Rather the opposite, in fact. Turning the viewscreen towards the source of the signal, his eyes narrowed on a flickering star. His fingers started tapping on his control panel. "I don't like this," he said, then jerked his stare down and started working.

Maryl frowned at his sudden course changes. He was taking them closer to the nebula. "Tom, really, it was a subspace echo. Maybe you should take another break."

"Changing course." Glancing up, he saw the star had grown in the field. "They got us. Damnit, they've got us."

"Who?" Maryl demanded. "I don't see anything on the sensors."

He punched the comm. "B'Elanna, get back below. We have company. Computer: Shields to full. --Maryl, forget the sensors. Find that Starfleet ship."

"Tom, *really*, there's nothing on any of the--"

The flickering star on the main viewscreen exploded into a hawkish ship that all but landed in their cargo bay.

Cursing, her fingers landed on both her panels. "Savan, take the sensors and stats. I'll find the Draden."

"I have the controls," the Vulcan replied.

"You're still to blame for this, Tom," Maryl spat.

"Glad to know something's like it should be," he returned, "because the rest just went to hell." With that, he swung the Guerdon onto a new trajectory.

The boxy ship turned in warp, bending the ship a little for a moment but catching up a split-second later. Where Tom had thought to give them a little room between the nebula and free space, Tom got them right on the skirt--as close as he could without letting the gas streams interfere with their systems. The energy emitted from that nebula could be unkind to warp bubbles.

Looking back on his sensors, he could clearly see the little ochre scout cruiser back on his tail. They were lining up with him--already.

"Tom, they're powering up weapons!" Maryl shouted.

"They don't waste time," he growled and changed course again. He glanced back at his contract liaison. Her face was tight and angry and scared all in the same moment. She'd been around the block, but it'd been a while, and he could tell in a glance that she really hadn't needed to go back. As for himself, he was gratefully alert and at least *felt* steady. It'd been too long since his last smack of real excitement to be certain if he was. "Maryl, just tell me when they do that and I'll try to move in time, okay? Just keep your eyes on those sensors. Watch their power levels, tell us when they're shooting and keep calling Starfleet. That's all you need to worry about. Okay?"

"They want the bilitrium," Savan added. "They will not want to destroy us."

"Think we can go there later?" Tom asked and swung them off the Maquis' line again. The little ship on their tail easily made the correction and got them in their sights again.

"They're activating weapons," Maryl announced.

Tom blew a breath and tried to maneuver them out of the other ship's sights again. "Two more tables and I'd have had that nav array," he muttered as he checked their stats. "B'Elanna, are you down there yet? The Maquis ship is... --Everyone, hold on!"

With the first hit, B'Elanna was knocked down the last several steps into engineering. Ignoring the shot of pain in her knee, she stumbled across to her main console and slapped the comm to active.

"I'm here! --Ridge, lock down all the bays and get to deflector control!"

"I got it!" came his response.

She whipped her head around to the sound of steam flowing somewhere behind the engine manifold struts. No klaxons accompanied it and containment was steady, so it'd have to come later. "Jerod, where are you?"

"Deck four main."

"Get to a control panel and keep an eye on the shields while I bring impulse back to full power."

"No problem. I'm there."

Another blast knocked her against her station, but she shook it off and kept working, cursing their attacker more with every tap. "Tom, warp drive's fine and shields are holding."

"*They won't let that last. We're going to need more speed, B'Elanna--and now.*"

She checked the EPS. "I can pull a little power for you, but it's not going to get us past seven-point-eight. If we get hit again, we won't have any cushion."

"*Drop the forcefields around the bays, then,*" he ordered. ""*They know what we've got. We don't need to hide anything.*"

"Shutting down now!"

"Tom," said Savan from her station, "the Maquis ship is positioning itself to our side."

He scowled at his readings and saw she was right. "They're trying to pull ahead of us." They were up to warp seven-point-six and the Maquis ship, while obviously more maneuverable, wasn't catching up quickly. They probably topped out at warp eight as well. "They're after our deflector," he deduced and threw down another evasion pattern. The Maquis ship kept up without missing a beat. He cursed under his breath and adjusted their course again. "They're going for a shortcut, through our shields."

"They're powering up weapons again," Maryl announced.

As he plotted in a few more maneuvers, he errantly wished he'd broken the law and gotten hold of a line of weapons--just one phaser array. "Who would have cared if I'd gotten one?" he muttered aloud. "Who the hell would have cared?"

Knowing his luck, a great many people.

"Firing!"

Tom braced his feet on the floor and steadied himself as the Guerdon took the hit, that time with more force and response. He heard Maryl grunt and curse behind him, but couldn't look at that point. His eyes were glued to his wildly scrolling numbers.

"Shields are reduced by fifty percent," Savan reported.

"B'Elanna..."

"*I'm diverting power!*" she answered instantly.

"Firing again!"

That time, they all held on as the blast caused a rupture that sent an array of sparks flying over the forward section of the bridge.

Below, B'Elanna had given up the main station to sprint back towards deflector control, where Ridge was losing his battle to keep everything online. The thirty second run was consumed with her plans to rewire another station so she wouldn't have to do that again. Once there, her eyes darted over the readings even as she worked the panel. "Tom, shields aren't going to take another hard hit right away."

"*I'll try to make them wait, but I think they're ready for the main course.*"

"*That wouldn't be tuna salad, would it?*" quipped Jerod from somewhere aft.

Ridge snorted.

"I've got this," B'Elanna told him. "Go forward and keep your eye on containment."

He was gone before she finished her sentence.

"Our position is steadily turning towards the Demilitarized Zone," Savan pointed out.

"I can't help it," he responded. "We were already skimming the border; now they're pushing us."

Every time he tried to nudge back towards their original heading, the smaller craft would nudge them back like a herding dog. Tom continued to parry, though, hoping eventually he'd angle them in a way the Maquis ship wasn't ready for, then manage to get some distance. Just as long as B'Elanna could keep them

running, they'd get far enough out....

An unwelcome realization hit him, then, that he'd never really been in a situation like that before, flying out from an attack totally unsupported. Sure, he'd flown a starship in scrapes along the Federation border at Caldik and teased a few cruisers while patrolling, but never anything like being completely on the defense and running like hell.

Why could the first time for everything been another damned time? he complained to himself as he tugged his ship around starboard.

The Maquis ship caught up with them again, firing as soon as they came close enough. "Sideswipe," Tom told them. "Yeah, they're driving us. I'll bet they're driving us straight to Saltok."

"You're not going to let them take us there, are you?" Maryl demanded.

"I haven't had time to negotiate that with them," he responded and changed course again.

Blowing a breath to see no break in the Maquis' pursuit, he punched his controls. "Switching to manual! No way I'll shake them with this standard navigation."

"Are you nuts?!"

Another lazy phaser miss crackled to their side.

"Great time to ask me, Maryl!" Guiding the Guerdon around against the Maquis ship's angle, he could see they were right inside a triangle of choices. Drawing a cool breath, Tom banked, slowed to warp two, turned around, then popped back up to warp seven and drove his ship straight toward the nebula. Ten blissful seconds passed over the bridge before they saw the Maquis ship upon them again. He grunted in frustration. "Why'd they have to be good?" he muttered.

"They're firing again!"

Tom popped them out of the way of the first fire line, but could not move quickly enough to miss the second, longer shot. The first had been another tease, he realized, and he'd been too hooked in to think ahead. "Damn!" he spat. A long groan and a pull in his chest followed as they literally skidded to a stop.

"We've lost warp engines!" B'Elanna announced. "Reinitializing."

"I recommend you concentrate on the field generator first," Savan said.

A pause, then, "Diverting more power to the shields."

"Going to impulse," Tom nodded, switching gears mentally as quickly as he had choices of engine. "At least this is a field I can play on." With that, he reeled the Guerdon around an arm of plasma. "Hold on!"

The slick little Maquis ship easily sailed around and caught up with the freighter, teasing its shield bubble by bobbing up, around, then back again. Tom grunted. "Cat swatting at a mouse."

"I've found the Draden!" Maryl announced.

"Put an urgent SOS on repeat until we get an answer," Tom ordered and drove another arc just outside the DMZ border, heading back out again. "And transmit the Maquis' warp signature while you're at it."

"Sent--and they're getting ready to fire again."

Tom's fingers flew over his board, plotting a spin to get out of their way. He didn't know if the Guerdon could actually *do* that, but he knew it was the best chance. The phaser fire aimed down, under their deflector grid. Gritting his teeth, Tom hit the command and swirled out of the way of three shots. Bracing himself, he switched them over in the opposite direction. Turning a wobbly spiral into a thick arm of gas, he coughed a laugh, impressed with that ugly, old crate for the first time in two years.

"We have lost two plasma conduits. The remaining three are undamaged."

Well, maybe not too impressed.

"*I hope you don't need to do that twice!*" cried B'Elanna from below.

"Yeah, me, too!" he returned.

"Firing again, Tom!"

Tom yanked them up and around into the Maquis' trail, but the cruiser hadn't yet revealed that it had rear phasers--until then. The shot drove into the Guerdon's underbelly.

Over the comm, the engineer's curse could easily be heard as the lights on the bridge flickered.
"*They've knocked a hole in our deflector pylon grid and we've suffered damage to the deck four hull. Forcefields are in place, but we can't take another hit down there.*"

"Our field generator is failing," Savan added.

"B'Elanna, get that tachyon spread ready!" Tom responded. Immediately, he saw his operations panel light up with the new data.

"*Let them get close,*" B'Elanna told him. He obeyed, dipping them just barely under full impulse.
"*Hold them there. --Mary!, tell me when they're about to fire their weapons*."

"They are now. --I mean it! NOW!"

A whiz echoed through the compartment as the tachyons were released into the space behind them. Looking up to the viewscreen, Tom saw the greenish particles shoot out of their dorsal field deflector and envelop the Maquis ship. At first, it brightened and glowed, then darkened and shimmered, lit only by the particles for a moment. Then the power returned. Finally, with a lurch, the ship quickly disappeared behind them as the Guerdon continued at impulse directly into the meat of the nebula.

"*Yes!*" came Ridge's voice over the COMM. Jerod and Nadrev's laughter followed.

"They are disabled," Savan noted for the record. "Readings show they have activated secondary power systems."

"Well, that was easy," Tom smirked. Locking his stare on his readouts, he scanned for a place to duck into. Anywhere as soon as possible, though it couldn't be too hot. The Guerdon's shields were all but gone and probably wouldn't take too much more abuse. That little cruiser knew just where to hit them and made the most of the Guerdon's weakness. *Cat and mouse, saving their dorsal phaser array for the kill...for what?* he thought as he turned them within one of the nebular arms and rotated what was left of their energy output to try to bury their tracks a little. *Why not just take us down and have it done?*

"Maryl," he said, "run a few new encryption patterns for when we get back out of here."

"Got it. Also, I'm compiling the information on that ship. Maybe we can find some weaknesses in..."

Tom glanced back to see Maryl purse her lips in disgust. "What's up?" he asked.

"You're not going to like this."

"You think I'm going to like anything right now?" After targeting a particularly thick ball of plasma to slip around, he looked back again. "What?"

"It's the same Maquis ship we met over Mesler's barge."

Holding her stare a moment, letting that sink in, he then turned forward in his seat again. "Well, we're screwed no matter who's after us."

"Do you need more time?"

Tom snorted and pushed himself off the back wall of the lounge. "To forget this Ligarán deal never happened?" he replied. "Yeah, that'll take me a while longer."

Predictably, she offered no response. Not that he wanted one.

Having found a comfortable hole in a thick of gas with impressive spectral instability, Tom finally stopped, shut down engines and stared numbly at the damage list Maryl had sent as his adrenaline petered off into a haze, allowing the slow recognition that what had just happened to them was real. Their bruises were everything he expected and some.

Because of the Guerdon's long history of borrowed parts and slipshod engineers, the ship was notoriously interconnected in odd ways--half the reason Torres had been having so much trouble controlling their power usage. Worse, when one system failed, something totally unrelated tended to follow. When warp drive had failed, so did environmental control on deck three-forward. When the plasma regulators had subsequently been shunted to secondary control, the ship's transceiver flickered and briefly failed, leaving the universal translator offline for several minutes until B'Elanna was able to run back and manually reset the main computer--cursing in perfect, standard English all the while.

Just as he began to digest and prioritize the repair list, however, Savan had reported a failure of non-essential isolinear junctions on deck two aft. For a moment, they all paused to see what would follow. As soon as they nodded to themselves and returned to their work, the guidance and navigation system crashed. The bright yellow blink on his board where his x-y function was supposed to be sent Tom to his feet and walking swiftly away. "I'll be in engineering in five minutes," he muttered back to Savan and Maryl.

"I will follow you momentarily," Savan told him, still working on her diagnostics.

"Meet me in the lounge."

He found himself there in less than a minute and slugged down a few shots of scotch by the time his

science tech caught up with him. He joined her in the corridor without comment. His head and hands were already feeling a twinge of relief from the little break and he didn't want to break that right away. His mood was no lightened in the process, however. He didn't want to lighten up. His ship was torn to hell and he'd gotten them into it.

And you'd enjoyed yourself out there in spite of it all, he grumbled to himself. Indeed, the rush had been a long time coming; piloting that ship a little more like he used to fly was as satisfying as he'd expected and left him insanely curious to see what he'd have to do to get them out of there. The challenge was fun, he knew--and knew equally well what *that* addiction had cost him. *And now it'll cost me my ship if I don't keep it together and stay straight.*

"We have four days overlay," Savan noted. "We should be able to complete repairs within a day, perhaps two. We have adequate supplies."

He nodded dismissively. "Yeah. I was hoping not to have to use our cushion, though."

"We will need to. There is no alternative."

Tom peered over at her. Though her face was straight, there was an undeniable mark of displeasure in her tone. "Nothing like stating the obvious to get us looking at the bright side." He shrugged at her return expression. The smell of the engine room preceded it by ten meters. Coolant steam laced with grease and the distinctive odor of boronite residue permeated the space and made Tom rub his nose when they got to the access stairway. Below, prowling her lair, Torres was on task, assigning her team their duties with every bit of efficiency she could muster as she tapped away at her PADD.

She moved across to a long panel she'd recently reworked. Tom reminded himself it was a full propulsion display. Before, thrusters, impulse and warp reported on three frustratingly distant panels. "Get back to me when you've replaced the primary port and I'll re-check the output levels," she told Nadrev. The young Bajoran moved without question and disappeared within the coolant mist.

"What else do you need?" Tom asked as they came onto the deck, thinking directness would be better appreciated.

Her response was hardly grateful. "You don't need to be here," she told them brusquely. "We can handle this."

"No, B'Elanna," Tom returned, his jaw tight as he glared back at her. "This what a crew does when they're in deep shit--they help out. Savan's worthy of this pit and I've got nothing to do until we can steer again. Now, where did you hide those fancy new tricorders? I need to get below before the whole GNS fizzles out for good."

She blew a sigh, assented with a shrug. She knew he was a competent technician and she didn't have time to get into the mess in navigation control. Savan's able hands wouldn't slow them down, either. "Take Ridge's. He won't need his."

"Thanks." Tom held up his hand when Ridge tossed his tricorder across the bay. It met Tom's hand with a smack. He regarded his catch. "Nice to know I still have that much."

"You won't have it for long if you do that again," Torres warned.

"It's just a little fun, B'Elanna," Ridge coaxed.

"Have fun with something we have a good supply of," she returned and strode into a row of steaming

pipes.

Tom shrugged when the tech looked his way again. "You're the one who wanted her."

B'Elanna crawled into the port access hatch and immediately began yanking out burnt isolinear nodes she'd just installed the month before. Withholding a sigh over the useless, she adjusted her hyperspanner and started cleaning out the ports. Nadrev could easily have done the job, but she needed a break, and that was better than sitting in the lounge knowing there was more to do.

The warp drive had finally cooperated and kicked up after she spent eight hours literally underneath it. Much of the damage was preexisting problems she'd been working on and some was the result of the blows on their warp bubble. The energy feedback had fed into the conduits and nozzles. The phaser frequency the other ship had used was particularly "sharp." It had even affected the thermal coating around the assembly.

That they'd stocked up for the possibility they were experiencing was the only reason she'd brought it back online in good time. No rerouting, no refurbishing burnt out parts, just pull, clean, install and test. She could and would refurbish many of those pulled parts later. It would make good work after it all was done with.

The repair still took time, though, and warp power was merely one big chunk on a list, so B'Elanna had grabbed a ration bar and sorted through their supplies for the parts she needed below.

Ridge, who'd already had a few hours rest, had tried to goad her into checking out for a while. "I won't sleep," she'd declined, "not yet. Maybe a little later, I'll be able to relax."

"You can't run on fumes, kid," he'd returned.

"Yes I can." Stuffing her tool belt as she glanced up to him again, she had moved to the port ladder and climbed down to deck three. It was not far to find the access hatch.

He'd said they'd known hard times, but I'll bet they'd never had to cower.

She inched on her elbows underneath the deck grate until she reached the portal to the ship's computer. Opening it, she slid in and sat down to address the blackened section. Willfully putting aside the question of how grime so thick managed its way into the ship's secondary computer core, she made a mental note of its layout as she began. She would need to return to that core to reprogram the mainframe--a project she'd planned to take care of after the Ligarán run. She still hoped she wouldn't have to delay it again. She'd been able to fix the cheery responses and the voice, but it was still a system mired in redundant functions.

At least the challenge of keeping that ship together in a crisis hadn't gone badly. It rather had gone just as she wanted. But then, she had a *team* working under her who wanted to keep them going, didn't talk back and seemed to actually like her...particularly Jerod. She grinned to herself. The communications technician was proving to be an amusement...and a nice guy, fun to be around and talk to. It'd been a long while since anyone had paid her that kind of attention. Much as she was there to work and didn't want any complications, it felt good to play. Then again, she would probably have to talk to him and ask him to stop. She didn't want him to get any real ideas.

Finished with the cleaning, she checked the sockets and began to reorganize the replacements she'd brought.

She wondered how they were going to get out of there. She hadn't had time to check the charts and see exactly where they were in relation to the borders, so she couldn't begin to guess which way they'd go, but then, it wasn't her job to guess at that. The captain was understandably upset about what'd happened, much as he'd predicted it. He was determined to get them going and get to Andal within their window, though. She believed him.

So much for refuting superstition. Her mouth pursed as she remembered the ghostly intensity on his face when he first mentioned his feeling, then tried to deflect his apprehension in the same breath. But he knew what he felt, knew he was right. Tom's instincts were rather sharp for someone who spent a good deal of time drowning them. She couldn't imagine what they'd been like before he was like that.

Either way, for more than the obvious reasons, she hoped those senses would stay on the upside as they traversed the nebula and sneaked back into Federation space.

Checking their labels once again, B'Elanna began to install the new nodes, nodding as each came to life inside that old, overused core. The hum of systems around her was soothing. She felt her shoulders relax as she continued the job with an easier hand. A small smile crawled to her lips.

Which way to go, which way to go... Tom's eyes scanned the star chart he'd put up on the viewscreen so he could get the full view.

Drifting along an arm of plasma near the edge of the nebula, shields at full, the Guerdon's sensors continuously pinged in every direction. They were creeping in fear and didn't care about showing it, moving outwards so that they would be further from the DMZ when they left those protective gases. Tom had considered taking them back into Cardassian territory and circling around backwards, but there was too much instability near the core of the phenomenon. It would take too long to get around it. So, he played the chess with the board he had and waited for the slightest blip to ward him in another direction.

"Don't worry," Tom said, hearing his engineer exhale behind him. "I'll turn the screen off when we get out of here. How are we?"

B'Elanna came forward. "Everything's online, but the warp drive's not going to take much abuse. The phasers that ship used did a lot of damage in a hurry."

"I'm not surprised, considering their line of work." He didn't break his attention away from the viewscreen. "Can you work on the rear deflector to repel that effect?"

"I've been working on figuring out the frequency pattern they're using. I'm going to have Ridge stay back there until we're clear and manually rotate our shield harmonics. Jerod's going back, too, to keep on the main board and divert power to the deflector when necessary. If we're attacked again, we'll lose warp power before we lose shields."

"Okay."

"Nadrev's staying here and coordinating. I'll handle the other systems, warp and impulse."

"Sounds good." Tom finally glanced over. The engineer wasn't in the habit of broadcasting details and almost never came to the bridge. His eyes narrowed at her appearance. "Have you gotten *any* sleep, B'Elanna?"

"I wasn't tired," she responded.

Tom nodded slowly. "Yeah, me too." With that, he turned forward again. "Thanks."

B'Elanna took that correctly as a release. She immediately moved back. Checking Nadrev's panel and giving him a few words, she left to return to her main console in the engine room.

A quarter light year one way or the other, he thought, makes all the difference. It's just a coin toss...a dabo spin. He snorted to himself and opened the comm. "B'Elanna," he said, "I forgot to ask: How fast can we go?"

Maryl snickered. "You're tired, all right."

"*We can manage warp five,*" the engineer answered. "*I'm working on six. The diagnostics should be done in a few minutes.*"

"Send me what we can do when we're ready to leave."

"Okay."

The triangle of space within the Hugora Nebula, the DMZ and Federation space was some of the most watched territory of late. The USS Enterprise, according to the newsfeeds and a few leaks, had seen some action there, much to their embarrassment, and the Saltok colony was quickly establishing itself as the worst kept secret in the region. They could find anything waiting for them there, so Tom finally decided to pull their trajectory outward, more into Federation territory. Through the gases and occasional instability, he rode the waves, letting himself enjoy the calm--essentially taking a break. It would give his engine crew a while longer to organize, too.

A few hours passed as he watched the streams pass by, hypnotized by their glow and pattern, but interested enough in them and his sensor sweeps not to sleep. Finally reaching their exit point, Tom looked back. He first saw Nadrev working the engineering panel, his eyes solidly on his work. The younger man had been very quiet since the first attack, but Torres obviously knew how to settle him down and put him in a place best for his skill level. He was, in fact, very quick in handling the upper level engineering matters and had become adept in maneuvering the ship's twisted command chain. If they got out of this with their funds half in tact, Tom mused, he'd gladly write up Nadrev's contract.

A couple meters to his side and directly behind Tom, Savan was likewise preparing, though her quietness was standard. To his right and behind, Maryl was also in her usual mode--talking mostly to herself and fussing over her readings. Tom nodded. They were ready to go. For that matter, he needed to get it done. If they got out of there in a clean shot, they'd still make their deadline with a little time to spare. They could grab the parts they needed to make repairs on the ways back to Ligara.

His fingers bounced off his panel as he brought the Guerdon out of the nebula and into the clear, black space. They were one and a half light years from the DMZ, cleanly in Federation territory. He positioned the ship, checked his board for a green light from Torres, then nodded.

"We're off," he said and popped his ship into warp. A whine, a whirr and a slight pull later, the stars streamed around them and all that lay ahead was more of the same vacuum.

Empty space never felt so good, he knew, almost managing a smile as his sensor grid went black and the DMZ clicked gradually off his map. *One way or another, I'm getting that replicator for us*, he promised himself, and he made a note for himself to contact Dejin ahead of their meeting at Andal. Knowing her, she probably had a few in her storeroom, waiting for someone as desperate he was becoming.

The business behind him picked up, too, as they started looking ahead again at last. Andal was still six light years away--nine days at their present speed. He could only hope B'Elanna could get them up to six as promised soon. That would nearly cut the time in half and keep them on schedule. Looking at the chronometer, he decided to give it another couple of hours before taking a real break. He would go down and bug her on the way to his quarters.

For the time being, he let himself lean back in his seat and cross his legs, relax a little as the stars streamed by. His hand fell to his pocket, where a handily refilled flask sat, cool against his work-worn fingers. He'd bought some excellent Devaran whiskey on their last stop before starting the Ligarán job, though cheap gin would have done just as well for him those last couple days. He certainly hadn't felt picky, anyway.

Giving the flask a little shake, he drew it into his hand...

"Damn," Maryl hissed through her teeth. "Tom, they've found us. I'm showing them catching up fast, too. Warp seven-point-eight."

Tom visibly slumped as he let go of the flask. *Why do I keep bothering to think we'll get a break?* he sighed to himself. Checking to see what Maryl did, he reopened the comm. "They're back," he announced and tapped in the first series of evasion patterns he's programmed in during their downtime. "Everyone get ready."

"How far into Federation space do you think they'll follow us?" Maryl asked incredulously.

"They've come this far," Tom told her. "I don't think they'll run unless they see Starfleet coming. How long until they catch us?"

"Thirty seconds."

"B'Elanna, is everyone set up?"

"*We're almost there!*" she answered. "*I'll try to give you more speed, but it'll take me a few minutes.*"

"I hope we *have* warp power in three minutes!" he returned.

B'Elanna waved Jerod off even as she typed in a set of command overrides. "Get to deflector control with Ridge," she ordered.

"I'll swing through the forward holds and make sure they're locked down."

She blew a breath. Internal sensor data in two sections of the deck three forward holds were one of the things they had to shortcut in getting the ship going. "Let me know when you're done." Looking at her board, she could see what Savan was looking at, a Maquis ship making a quick approach. "Ridge, are you ready?"

"I've got my fingers on the buttons," he answered with his usual zest.

She nodded. "Start pushing them now. I'll keep working on giving us a little more spe--"

"*Maquis ship firing!*" came Maryl's voice over the comm.

B'Elanna grabbed her console a moment before she smacked against it. She pushed herself upright as a shot of steam rushed out of the engines. She checked her board and started typing madly into it. "Tom, they've knocked out our auxiliary plasma injectors. I've compensated, but--"

"Give me the full story later!" Tom interrupted as he pulled the Guerdon up into another heading, and then shook off the spin in his head. He was too tired to handle the inverse forces as he usually did.

"*Try to keep them off our starboard,*" B'Elanna clarified.

"Got it! --Savan, how are our shields?"

"They have recovered. They stand at ninety-five percent."

"Maryl, where's the Draden?"

"I don't know. I can't see past this idiot ship. They're scrambling our comm."

"You sent the SOS again?"

"Yes, but I don't know if it's been blocked or not."

Tom changed their heading again. Like before, the little Maquis ship was trying to push them back to the DMZ. Unfortunately, protecting their starboard made that an easy game for them this time. *Why'd they hit us there first?* Tom wondered, not for the first time. *We're carrying everything forward...*

"They're powering up weapons, Tom!"

In a series of five jerky turns, the Guerdon switched directions again, that time, back towards the nebula; then it shot towards free space. The Maquis ship required only a half-minute to find catch up with them again. That time, their weapons were ready the moment they got close.

"Firing!"

Tom hugged his console as their aft shield bubble took a direct hit. "Damn, that hurt," he said to himself.

"Shields are compromised by fifteen percent," reported Savan.

Another shot flew out of the other ship, and Maryl cried out when she hit the floor. "So much for needing a recharge!" she spat, pulling herself up as the lights flickered and dimmed to half power.

"They never needed one," Tom told her, pursing his mouth. "They've been playing with us."

"Why the hell would they do that?"

He snorted. "Do you really care?"

"Shields are at fifty percent efficiency."

His eyes narrowed as he watched the Maquis ship veer and swerve behind them--playing their moves, seeing what they'd do. "Try this," he smirked and tapped a few controls.

Without warning, the Guerdon dropped out of warp and came to a full stop. Changing their heading, he popped them back up to warp five on a different heading.

"*What the hell kind of move was *that*?!*" B'Elanna yelled from below.

"Shaking them for a few seconds so you can work on the shields," Tom responded.

"*Try *warning* me next time you jolt the engine!*"

Seeing the Maquis ship come back on their tail, Tom blew a breath through his nostrils. "I don't have time to write you a report. Get ready for another--"

He popped them up only a little too late to avoid the shot to their starboard shields. He wildly tapped into his controls as the ship began to lose alignment.

"Starboard shields are recovered to only ten percent efficiency. Our starboard nacelle has been compromised."

"I can tell!" Tom retorted and he dug in with another series of attempts to stabilize their heading, lest they smack into a rock--which wouldn't be beyond their luck at present, he knew. Finally pulling them back together and shifting their bearing again, he soon saw the same buzzard back on their tail. Indeed, the little ship had quickly learned their moves, probably knew their every weakness by then. They weren't swatting this time, either. They meant to do some serious damage. Still, they seemed to be dragging out the kill...driving them. "What are you trying to do?" he breathed, then shot a glance down at their power levels. "B'Elanna! What's going on?"

B'Elanna reached over to the adjacent panel to tap more reroutes into their starboard power conduit. It was dying fast and without it, they weren't going anywhere. "Jerod, I need you in deflector control *now*!"

"*I'm almost done!*" came his response over a crackling comm. "*I need to lock down four through seven and then I'm back!*"

"Forget the lockdown!" she retorted. "There's nothing to protect when our rear deflector's gone! --Ridge, I'm reading a surge in our graviton emitters."

"*I've got them, kid!*" was Ridge's reply, almost cheerful as the levels re-stabilized. "*I could use some help back here, though!*"

"Jerod! Aft--*now*!"

"*On my way!*" Jerod called.

Tom nodded jerkily as it came over the comm, and he glanced down to see the starboard shields finally responding. Their warp drive was not enjoying the same fortune. B'Elanna was dumping everything she could into it and trying to keep their nacelles from an alignment breakdown. One more good hit and...

"Firing!" The shot hit them cleanly in the stern, slapping a row of klaxons on. They screamed out all over the ship, bouncing echoes up and down the corridors. Coolant spewed from every vent as the

lighting fell to emergency levels, making the corresponding sparks look like fireflies on a misty night.

"Secondary coolant assembly is now online," Savan told them, working steadily across her board.

"*Warp drive's not going to take another hit!*" B'Elanna reported loudly. "*The field is already buckling!*"

Tom rolled them around again, thinking hard and fast as his heart beat in his chest and sweat coated his sticky skin as the room temperature rose. *They want us back in the DMZ...and we sent our signal from near the triangle border...* "Changing course!" He banked the ship around and started setting up a new series of maneuvers.

Maryl immediately saw their course. "We're going back?!"

"I want to get as close as I can to where we sent out initial distress call," Tom told her. "If Starfleet's received our message, they'll start looking there."

"But you're also going where they want us!"

"We're going to get shot to hell no matter *what* direction we're flying in!" Tom snapped. "The rest isn't up for a vote!"

"You're right about one thing! They're lining up again!"

"Guess they have a deadline, too."

His sarcasm was short-lived. The Maquis ship suddenly ducked to the right.

She was in between panels when Maryl's cry sounded over the comm again, and she actually *heard* the phaser line as it cracked up against their weakened shields. It was too much to hold back. When it tore through the starboard shields, then into the hull, B'Elanna's grip on her panel rail wasn't nearly secure enough to ward off the inertia.

The engineer flew across the deck in line with a spray of sparks and the screams of alarms. Hitting the grate, she skidded and swung around headfirst. Instinct alone made her tuck her head down just as she slammed into the lower pylon control bulkhead. Her shoulder snapped and her ears popped hard as she coughed a sharp grunt. Before she could catch her breath, the air was almost blown from her lungs before a flicker of lights and a rush of air restored the deck's pressure.

The hull...

Then a far more familiar groan filled the deck, its pitch low and strangled as it fitted its way to a shutdown.

Pushing herself from the grate, B'Elanna dropped, rolled and inhaled sharply, tears stinging her eyes. The pain shot up into her ear and all the way down to her fingertips. She grimaced, trying to will down the pain with her usual skill with no success. Worse, her knee had taken yet another hit.

"*Warp drive is offline!*"

The unmistakable groan of the impulse engine whirring to life echoed across the deck as she tried to get to her feet. She'd messed up her shoulder in a similar fashion on a survival-training hike in her first year at the Academy. B'Elanna remembered how the third-year leader taught her to take care of it, but

she knew it'd be no more pleasant than the first time....

"B'Elanna! Are you down there?!" It was Maryl. Tom had obviously given up on communicating. "Are you okay? B'Elanna!"

"I'm here," she managed, dragging herself up with one arm, eyeing the bulkhead that'd done the damage in the first place. "I was thrown."

"*Do you require my assistance?*" Savan asked.

B'Elanna briefly wondered where Nadrev was before answering, "I'll be okay in a minute."

"*We'll be lucky if we *have* a minute!*" Tom yelled. "Get back to your station or let Savan help! I need someone on the engines!"

She coughed an angry laugh. "You've *had* me on the engines!"

"That didn't change when we got a can opener to the starboard!"

B'Elanna growled, sucked a deep breath and forced herself to relax as she as she grabbed the edge of the bulkhead. Pulling sharply with all her strength, she jumped towards it and whacked her shoulder against the frame.

"*Aaagh!*" she cried out and nearly fell to her knees for the lance of pain that followed the pop of the joint resetting. But holding on, breathing into it, the pain started to dissipate between throbs that time. One more breath and she stumbled back across the deck to her main console. Throwing a series of requests into the main control board with her better hand, her eyes grew wide.

Tom was pissed for good reason. The last blast meant business. The Guerdon was dying fast.

"*Impulse engines online! Switching to manual. Everyone hold on!*"

"*They're firing*!"

B'Elanna locked her arm around the rail that time.

"Port shields are down twenty percent; they are not rebounding." Savan tapped her console. "They are holding, however."

"Until they decide they want those, too," Tom scoffed and spun them away from another shot. The comm rattled with the commands and updates from the engine room; the room continued to hiss with blown circuits and coolant steam. Blocking it all out, he glared at his trajectory and set in a new set of evasions. In most other situations, flying at impulse would put him in his element. Instead, he watched the Maquis ship take to buzzing around the Guerdon's aft shield bubble like a bee, looking for a soft place to poke another stinger--likely right into their aft deflector grid.

"Just for playing with us," Tom said between his teeth, "I'm not letting you get it. No way."

He wished he could back that up. Built like an overlong brick with pill-shaped nacelle wings, the Guerdon was the least maneuverable ship he had ever flown. Every turn dragged the stern in an afterthought, forcing him to compensate when his natural instinct didn't know such a necessity. He'd try his damndest, though. He was *not* about to let that Maquis captain walk on his bridge if there was any way he could help it.

"No way in hell," he muttered.

Directing the Guerdon into a downturn, he flew into in an inverse loop and up again. To his surprise, the Maquis ship spun nicely around in the resulting wake and required a moment to recover.

"*Watch our plasma wake!*" B'Elanna warned from below.

"Does it affect the shields?"

"Not yet--but it's destabilizing our impulse reactors."

"It's the lesser of two evils right now," Tom returned and whipped them around again. Straightening their path immediately after, Tom saw they were still a full light year from their point of initial contact with the Draden. Cursing under his breath, he kept them on their path; when the Maquis ship returned, he flew them around that line again.

"They're firing!" Maryl announced.

They took the hit directly in the stern, throwing them forward again. Ridge yelled over the comm.

"Ridge!" Maryl cried. "Are you okay?!"

"*Yeah!*" he gasped. "*Yeah, Hana! --Yeah, I'm here! Just a...a hard bump.*"

"Maryl, what's on your board?" Tom asked tightly, getting her back in the room.

She snapped her attention back to it. "They're lining up again."

Tom spun them out of the way only to be rewarded with another shot to the port, which nearly knocked him out of his seat.

"Port shields down to fifty percent."

He braced his feet against the floor and turned the ship in another loop--doubled that time and inverted, forcing the Maquis ship to shimmy through their vented plasma. He could see on his lower board that the Maquis ship was feeling it and having to step back left they lose containment. Their engine was thankfully as susceptible as the Guerdon's.

"*Tom, you can't keep riding our impulse wake!*" B'Elanna insisted. "*We're losing--*"

Suddenly, the comm hissed and all the noise from engineering disappeared.

Tom couldn't help his smirk at the convenience. He plotted another loop.

Below, B'Elanna growled and set into the comm anew. "The one time I *want* the damned thing on..." she grumbled.

"*I'm having trouble getting the deflector stabilized,*" Ridge reported, puffing for breath. "*They're changing their phaser frequency. We're not going to take much more.*"

"Keep trying!" B'Elanna ordered. "We have to give them time for--"

She cut off as another alert warned them of a possible plasma backflow. Hissing through her teeth,

she fought the temptation to go up the bridge personally, but continued to reroute the comm's command protocols in the main computer so they could reconnect with deck one. Another blast struck the aft shields, shoving her away from her station. She held on, pulled herself back. "Still there, Ridge?"

"*Alive and kicking, Cricket!*" he answered.

"They're going back for our starboard!" Maryl said, wiping her brow with her arm and continuing to drive out their SOS. "Tom, we can't--"

"I *know*!" he snapped and turned the Guerdon around yet again. His fingers were too busy to wipe the sweat from his eyes, so he jerked his head to get rid of what he could. The heat of the room would only get worse, he knew. Their secondary coolant systems were lousy. He didn't want to know what else was going wrong beneath his chair. Worse, he didn't know how much longer he was going to be able to do that before their pursuer would call their hand and simply blow them straight to hell. *They really seem to be enjoying their work*, he smirked to himself. *It might be a while yet..*

"They're centering on... --No!" Maryl cried out, "Aft! Aft! They're going for the deflector again!"

"Evading again!"

"They're firing!"

Tom drove the Guerdon into an inverse semi-spin, punching off the impulse engine for a moment then restarting at full impulse as he pulled them up. The shot came out as hit their lower shield bubble, shaking them hard, but otherwise missing. Behind him, he heard Maryl blow out her breath. She was tired and more frightened than he'd ever known her to be. *Hell, none of them started here with this in mind.*

A crackle and a hiss, and the comm came back up again just as B'Elanna announced another line of power diversions. She was dumping everything but impulse, life support, the comm and sensors into the shields. It was all she had left.

"Firing again! --Tom, starboard!"

"Damnit!" His fingers raked over his panel, trying to dip them out of the way--or at least take the hit somewhere else that time. *Just a little more...*

Suddenly, the Maquis ship flew ahead of them and powered up their rear phaser bank. Tom's eyes shot open. "Forward starboard hit!" he called out. "Hold on!"

There was no way to avoid it: The phasers activated just a moment after Tom announced it, tore out of the Maquis ship and seared into their forward starboard hull. Tom's head hit the back of his chair as a billow of sparks and black smoke thrust itself up from the breach. Two seconds later, a second explosion popped them up in their seats.

"What the hell what *that*?!" Maryl screamed.

"Something exploded inside the cargo holds!" Tom yelled back, his eyes stinging as he tried to see his panel.

"*Breach on deck three forward, bays eight to eleven, one and the forward cross corridor!*" B'Elanna told them all. "*Fields are in place, but we're dead if they hit us there again!"

"You think?!" Tom coughed. "Savan! Cycle the air, damnit!"

"I attempt to do so now," she said, only loud enough to be heard.

While furiously trying to think of what they could be carrying that would detonate like that, Tom resumed his evasions, if only to give that ship no satisfaction of surrender. He knew by that point that, for whatever reason he couldn't guess, that ship wanted the crew dead. They'd take the salvage and dump the dead, just like with Mesler's barge.

"*Shields aren't responding!*" B'Elanna announced.

"Port shields remain at fifteen percent efficiency."

"Just a little more, damnit," Tom whispered as he tried desperately to angle them into another spin. The starboard shields gone and the aft dragging like an anchor, it was a clumsy roll if anything, but nothing else seemed to bother their attacker. It hardly did that time. The Maquis ship simply pulled back and waited for him to complete the move before pushing forward again.

"*Ridge! I'm shutting down the primary lines! Get ready!*"

"*I'm on it, kid! Go to it!*"

Behind him, Maryl slapped her panel. "We're half blind! Long-range sensors are gone. Damn it!"

"*It wasn't anything here!*" B'Elanna yelled as her deck came alive with more alarms. "*All the systems in front deflector except for inertial dampers and the field deflector in that section's damaged!*"

"I can see *that* much!" Maryl shot back.

The air began to clear a little, and Tom saw the explosion had taken out their new lateral sensor grid. The whole assembly had fried. Everything teetered but impulse and life support.

The Maquis ship passed beside them, then held on the Guerdon's starboard, waiting.

Tom blew a breath. "Glad you're enjoying yourself, asshole," he spat and turned them up and over the Maquis ship.

Maryl choked a breath for want to cry. "Damn them, they're lining up, again."

"So much for a goodbye." Tom dove the Guerdon around, letting the Maquis ship follow--as though he had a choice. "Ridge, take cover--they're right behind us!"

"*Already off the section, Tom!*" came his reply.

"Firing!"

They held on through the hit, grunting at the force and closing their eyes to the next series of klaxons and bellows from below. B'Elanna was literally throwing systems together even as they failed.

"Firing again!"

Another line of fire whacked them in the port shields again. "Shields are at ten percent, Tom," Savan grimly informed him. "We may want to consider surrender at this point."

He blew a breath and continued to turn his ship as much as it would go. "They'd have hailed us by now if they wanted that, Savan."

"Why the hell do they want *us* dead?" Maryl finally demanded.

"Watch your board!" Tom yelled.

"There's nothing left to see!"

He shot a glare back at her. Her eyes were red and swollen, for the smoke and grit as much as tears. They'd lost. There was nothing left. They both knew it. He didn't care. "Keep your eyes on your board!"

"Why?!"

"Because I'm *not* giving them the satisfaction if I can help it, Goddamnit!" he bellowed.

"*Ridge! Take down that power shunt! Now!*"

"*Got it!*"

"Get back on your board!" Tom repeated, not looking back again as he fishtailed the Guerdon, so the next hit grazed the port. It was hardly diverted.

"*Hull fracture on deck four!*" B'Elanna told them. "*Section is sealed! --Tom, we don't have any more--*"

"I know!" he barked. "Maryl!"

Shaking her head, cursing him under her breath, Maryl finally gave in and did as he ordered. Looking down, she squinted at her sooty screen, then coughed...then gasped. "Tom! Prophets find me! --Look!"

"What?!"

"Look!" Her tired fingers bounced across her board again. "I'm...I'm getting it! --There!"

Suddenly in the viewscreen, a familiar form popped out of warp and landed in their bloody field. The Nebula Class ship rose over them, bluing the bridge with its hull lights. With crisp efficiency and perfect protocol, they opened up a channel to the players there.

"This the Federation Starship Draden. Maquis ship, disengage immediately."

Starfleet.

Tom threw his arms on his panel as he slumped forward and emptied his crushed lungs. Had he any nerve endings left, he'd have cried outright. Dragging a few long breaths instead, he stared blearily up at the viewscreen again through the smoke and flickering lights. The Maquis ship had already vacated the area, as though they'd just been passing through.

Three shuttles dropped from the Draden's lower bay. Then, the starship rose, made some distance and popped to warp. Its light zeroed out in the black a moment later.

Tom sat and stared for a full minute at the point in space. His heart and temples thrummed, his hands were numb and his skin was slick with sweat growing cold as the environmental controls rebounded. For

that minute, he couldn't move but to breathe, and barely so. He didn't hear the alarms still whining or the frenzied buzz over the comm. Nothing but that welcome view registered.

The lead shuttle's pilot finally broke him away. "Cargo Freighter Guerdon, are you in need of immediate assistance?"

A derisive laugh died in his throat. "We're pretty beat up over here," Tom croaked instead, "but we're still breathing."

"Please come to all stop, Guerdon. We will defend you until the Draden returns."

Glad to comply, he flipped their whining impulse engines off and leaned back in his seat.

Drawing his stare up again as shuttles took their positions, Tom pulled the flask from his pocket and popped the top. Tipping it up to his mouth, he let the cool, bitter liquid wash into him, and then he breathed into the numb that followed. Another breath and he drank again, four long swallows.

"I might need some of that, too," Maryl told him, "when I'm done compiling this damage list."

"Just give me the summary when you get it, okay? I know they tore the living hell out of us." Turning, he saw Nadrev, ashen before his panel, drawing slow but steady breaths. "You okay, Nadrev?"

The young man jerked a nod. "Yes. I just...I've just never been through anything like that before."

"Yeah, me either. It's okay." Tom pointed with his chin to the corridor. "Mind going below and helping B'Elanna?"

"Good idea." Nadrev made his escape immediately.

Tom wished he could, too. Listening to the steady stream of orders and prioritizing on the comm, he could tell B'Elanna was still in her element, busy and efficient--able to deal with their situation because she had something to do and now could start working the repairs. Maryl and Savan were already coordinating with her. Meanwhile, he had to be the lousy captain and sit on his ass while he waited for an update from the Starfleet shuttles and Maryl's list of doom, soon to come.

He drank again.

Despite the relief, he doubted he'd be able to handle the stillness much longer, especially after he heard Nadrev arriving in the engine room. B'Elanna immediately began assigning him repairs and he jumped off to do it. He needed to get busy--do something with his hands....

Furrowing his brow on that thought, Tom re-ran the events and the passing sounds on the comm through his head--which still worked to digest the last fifteen minutes of his life--before he thought to ask: "B'Elanna, where's Jerod?"

She silenced, then answered abruptly, "'I don't know.'"

He looked back. "Savan?"

She abandoned her work immediately to run a scan with what little power was left. "The internal sensors are badly damaged and there is a great deal of interference in the forward holds," she told them, "but a faint signature had been detected outside A-four-three--the first bilitrium hold."

"*That's not possible,*" B'Elanna argued. "*We sealed that whole section off before we started out of the nebula.*"

"As I said, there is a great deal of interference."

Tom was already out of his seat. He nodded at Maryl when he saw her abandon her station as well. "B'Elanna, we're on our way down. We'll handle it."

They were off the bridge a second later. Walking quickly down the main corridor, they shared a few looks, asking, wondering, piecing together the spotty communications. Coming down to deck two, they passed by B'Elanna without a word, though she looked curiously at them. Ducking into the storage to seize a tricorder, Tom jogged a few paces to catch up with Maryl, who had already climbed down to deck three.

Descending the access ladder, he puffed a few breaths at the gush of heat. *So that's where the plasma's been venting instead.* Tossing his jacket on the rung, he opened the tricorder and followed Maryl into the dim recesses of their main hold facility.

"He'd said he was on his way right before the starboard blast," Maryl told Tom as they came around to the first corridor. Nodding, he led them toward holds one and two, where Jerod had been securing the atmospheric controls and hatch locks. They couldn't get but a few meters past hold two.

Tom pointed the tricorder and tapped in several adjustments to compensate for the triple forcefield blocking their way. He shook his head a moment later. "Nothing here," he told Maryl.

She nodded and turned around with him. "Let's see if the cross corridor three is open to hold seven."

He frowned. "Why would he want to go down there? There's nothing vacuum-sensitive in six and seven."

"I heard him say he was going to when B'Elanna said to forget it."

Tom shrugged and went along with it. "There are only so many places he can be," he conceded, wiping his face with his hand.

Crossing behind section three, they came forward to the far end of hold four, where that access corridor was blocked entirely. Their starboard hull had been grievously crushed in that section and forward; a line of the damage and the resulting structural integrity field could be seen even from there. Securing himself, Tom pointed the tricorder down that way, and then released his breath when nothing was detected.

He nodded and led them through an engine access tunnel to the middle of cross-corridor two, which ended near to where the internal explosion had originated. The sooty bulkheads boasted lines of dripping condensation at every coolant junction behind the shell. The chemicals from the explosion and resulting damage stung his eyes and throat as they came closer to it. A corner light was on at full power, and he blinked a few times at the sudden glare before heading past the bio-holds and back into the dusk.

"Bio-holds--medkit," Maryl blurted as they passed a supply cabinet. She doubled back to it as Tom went ahead.

"In the first locker," Tom called behind as he started scanning again. "Triceron signatures everywhere," he breathed, scowling. "What the hell...?"

Pressing the release, Maryl saw the familiar case. She'd secured thirty of the basic usage kits at Deep Space Nine the year before. The price had been nominal, and Tom and Savan both were keen on not having to run to deck one every time they got their fingers caught on a wire. She hadn't been glad to get them, though, until just then.

Turning with the case in hand, she heard Tom's footsteps moving around the corner to the starboard corridor, sloshing in the condensation that'd apparently streamed down to the deck and had helped baste her in a sticky film of ash and sweat--that on top of what she'd earned on the bridge. Worst part about it was knowing a shower was likely a long time away yet. But then she shook her head at herself. None of it was important until they found Jerod.

Tom's footsteps stopped and she sped herself to catch up. "I have the kit," she told him as she neared.

"You won't need it."

Maryl stopped, too, when she came around the bend.

A meter away from Tom's shoes was an unmistakable blue tweed cloth--Jerod's coat. His arm was still inside of it. The hand at the end was eerily in tact, stiff, reaching and white. Tom's own hand hung flaccid at his side, nearly as pale as the tricorder that still bleeped and whined at its find. Two meters before him, the forcefield hummed and crackled, taunting them for all it hid. The rest of Jerod wasn't anywhere to be seen. There was no power past the forcefield, and the dim light barely made it that far. But they both knew in a glance what lie just beyond, in the dark. Tom was standing in blood.

He didn't look back for a moment, but then slowly turned, breathing in small puffs.

"There's nothing we can do," she told him abruptly. "Not until the area's secure; then we'll recover him." He bent his head, tried to look away. "Yeah."

"They'll be contacting us, soon," she added and waved her hand, gesturing him out--getting him out of there. "I'll take care of it."

He shook his head. "I should--"

"I'll take *care* of it," she repeated sharply. "Go."

She closed her eyes in prayer as his breeze hit her a few seconds later.

A few minutes later, he strode by B'Elanna as well, stiff-jawed and with as many words. He eyes shot up from the deck as he passed, holding hers in a heavy glare for a moment before he broke it to jump up the access stairway. He disappeared on deck one seconds later.

B'Elanna felt the blood drain from her face. Standing in the middle of her wrecked engine room with fifty systems bleeping for attention, she froze to know what he meant--everything he meant in his look. Seeing Maryl's tears when she likewise emerged from the starboard ladder to find her husband, B'Elanna was certain of it. Jerod hadn't gotten out of the holds in time. Jerod was dead.

She looked out at Maryl again.

The Bajoran didn't bother looking her way when she ducked to move back to deflector control. She needed Ridge, wasn't going to cry for anyone but him. B'Elanna decided to give them a few minutes and cut off the comm. They deserved it, she supposed. They'd known Jerod a lot longer than she had, had started him out there, had taught him and helped him grow into a fine and confident technician...who

was now gone.

Gnashing her teeth, B'Elanna turned back to her station and continued trying to get their power conduits realigned.

She could go it alone. She'd done it before.

Her shoulders fell as she closed her eyes. She took a breath, straightened, opened her eyes and got back to work.

"I knew you got hit hard, but...Oh damn, I'm so sorry."

No response met Dejin's sympathy, nor did she expect any, for what she saw in the lounge over subspace. Exhausted, dirty and hard-eyed, the six there were an opposite picture to the last time she'd seen them. All the optimism that followed their first trip to Andal had vanished, leaving behind a crew as battered as the ship had been. They all flinched a little at her apology, too. Likely, they had spent the past several days pushing themselves in part so they could set their friend's death in the back of their mind. Now, sitting at mostly separate tables not eating their rations in the darkened lounge, they had welcomed the seeming numbness in their fatigue, or perhaps resignation.

"Have you contacted his family yet?" Dejin continued.

"I sent a subspace message yesterday," Tom answered. He'd brought an extra glass to the table out of habit. He pushed it around in small circles with his index finger. "He left no directions. Guess he thought it'd be safer here."

Dejin dropped it at that. "Look, I contacted you because the Ligarans are cutting their losses. The investors are pulling out and they're packing up. It's too hot and the timing's all wrong, not to mention they've lost four shipments already. I have your payment for this leg--this shipment gives them enough power to dismantle and get home. But the contract's null and void upon payment."

"And I was so ready to pummel you for it," Maryl smirked. It came and went unfelt.

"Have you anything lined up?" Dejin asked her.

"Actually, I've already contacted Ygrad," Maryl told her. "We'll get back on our regular route starting at Hidirin."

"You've confirmed it?"

"This morning, yes. I just sent back the contract. They were glad to get us back sooner."

The Betazoid blinked her approval. "They should be. Things are already getting rough along the border," she explained. "The Maquis are starting to gain a lot of sympathy--and business."

"Not on this ship," B'Elanna interjected, finally pulling her glare off the table. "Or there'd better not be. We're just trying to do a job and they picked off almost every one of our systems like it was a *game*, then beamed a bomb on our ship to finish us off." Stopping as soon as she started, she looked away again,

obviously having said more than she'd wanted.

Dejin's eyes widened instantly at the admission, however. "A *bomb*?"

Ridge nodded. "They got it through our shields during some part of the chase and detonated it before they broke off. There were triceron signatures all over deck three starboard."

"Which makes no sense," Maryl joined. "If they're after the cargo, why try to take out our holds? And if they're not after the cargo, then why bother at all?"

"What I want to know," B'Elanna added, "is how they got triceron out here and managed to work with it."

"None of that really matters now," Tom said, "does it?"

The engineer's lips pressed together again as she pushed herself back in her seat.

"What is your ETA, Tom?" Dejin asked, keen to get back to business. "B'Elanna pulled out the rubber bands and got us going again," Tom said. "If nothing else blows, we'll be there in four days." He'd meant the nod to B'Elanna as an apology for his remark, but when he glanced over, her stare was still nailed to some point on the floor. He shrugged to himself. He didn't have time for that.

"You'll be pegged in for a while?"

"At least a week if we get everything we need there. Can you arrange for a gross drydock?" Tom asked.

"As soon as I close this channel," she assured him.

Starships are made to live and die in space.

Many are built within giant pylons in the clean and weightless vacuum in planetary orbit. They are repaired in space, often while still moving, and they are decommissioned--or in unfortunate cases, destroyed--in the same vacuum. Even when a ship regularly flies into planetary stations, there is a great relief to be back out among the stars again after that stop. Atmospheres feel unsafe.

The oncoming entrapment of gross drydock feels far worse. After plunging through the atmospheric window as best it can, the damaged ship must fly--or be flown--into a massive hangar. For safety, security and gravimetric purposes, it is usually located on one of the planet's poles. The weather coming in is often extreme, making the crawl downwards a noisy, if not unsteady, experience. An encompassing shell surrounds the ship as it lowers, ever so gradually, into the docking clamps.

Once there, the hangar forcefield zaps on above, and the lateral clamping assembly is extended around the hull like tendrils, automatically making connections at selected power junctions. The suctioning sounds echo through the access tubes, one after another, until the docking unit finally shunts with the main computer access port. The crew is silent as they wait for that final insult to be done with, tenser still as the metallic hum rises from the guts of the ship to the bridge, then finally locks on topside.

Tom closed his eyes at the final clang, then pushed himself to stand.

He didn't speak as he left the bridge for the deck four hatch. But then, no one else was talking much lately, except when they needed to. This suited him just fine. Besides, they all knew what he had to go do and that he would do it as efficiently as possible. The dock was also expensive.

With a sigh through her teeth, Maryl finished the last of her license transmittals and moved to follow, leaving Savan to coordinate with the engine room. The Vulcan barely glanced as each of them exited. Several minutes later, seeing the repair approvals begin to scroll up on her screen, she opened the comm to engineering.

"I am able to accept the new sequences when you are prepared," she told B'Elanna.

"*I'm not nearly ready yet!*" the engineer responded, following her outburst with a heavy clash. "**Nadrev, get me the spectrometer. Yes, that one! --Savan, I told you it wouldn't happen before fifteen hundred. I'm just opening up the starboard field generator and it looks like someone dragged the whole grid through acidic sludge, so I'm not ready to start anything else.**"

"I have not forgotten your priorities. I simply wanted you to know you may begin at your convenience. I will continue with the deck three venting as our cargo is unloaded."

A pause, then, "**Thanks.**"

The comm was cut immediately afterwards. Savan did not mourn the silence, considering the opposite. Instead, she began to run through the procedure to transfer their cargo to Dejin, who was ready and waiting to take it. She did not open a channel to the Casiat, however. Indeed, she too was not anxious to speak with people. The quietude had provided her with time to settle her own well-tended Vulcan nerves.

You wanted that speed run, you craved the challenge and got it. Had you been in a better ship, you'd have probably cracked a goddamned joke while they were blowing us to hell.

Tom stood with his arms crossed, watching the latest load of bulkhead flats materialize in the back bay. Like ants on chunks of watermelon, three groups of Andalan workers activated the anti-grav dollies and set off for the forward sections.

"Another fifteen bars, right there," he mumbled as they disappeared into the corridor. They were set to repair the demolished bulkheads around holds four, five and six...where the rest of Jerod was found.

He hadn't been there. Savan, as science technician and the ship's medic, had insisted on the duty. Pressing her for details to save his excellent imagination, he soon learned that Jerod had not been killed in the initial starboard hit, but when the bomb detonated inside the forward hold five, near the end of the attack. There were no remains for suitable viewing, she added quietly, but they were indeed contaminated with triceron and should not be kept long on the ship.

He'd heard enough at that.

Maybe I should start a kill list, Tom mused sardonically as the workers disappeared. *Eventually, I'm sure I'll lose count, otherwise.* But he shook his head in the same sigh. He knew damn well he hadn't killed Jerod. He wondered why he always went there, anyway.

Because you're the captain, he answered himself, grinding his teeth as he spun away for the rear lift. There was no use staying down there and watching the ship's pot fly out of the hatch. Ridge would be calling him soon enough to help him with the isolinear bundle replacements. His chair topside was probably full of PADDs, too. Maryl had been her usual efficient self about getting their paperwork cycled as quickly as they could requisition supplies.

The response from the Jerod family was properly discomforting. Text only and in carefully controlled sentences, they thanked Captain Paris for his efforts and his friendship with their son, who had spoken often and well of him. They were sorry, too. They had no spiritual requirements for burial, so the Guerdon's crew could do as they saw fit with Jerod's remains. They added that the remaining family, in light of recent events, had finally decided to vacate Umoth and relocate to Varessi, an inner Federation colony where some cousins had moved the year before.

So it took him getting killed by the very people you swore were protecting you to do what he'd been asking you to do all along. He deleted the message with two clicks and told Savan to prepare a capsule.

Tom polished off what was left in his flask by the time he climbed into the middle of deflector control. The assembly sat in pieces around the deck, waiting on replacement parts being sent from Megra. Ridge must have been up all night, cleaning the components and reorganizing the pieces. The corrosion and blast soot was gone, leaving the duranium slightly blackened but otherwise ready. Just the day before, Tom had needed to sign off on a biohazard transport from the same section.

Ridge had been the only one to say anything at the funeral. No one else was up to so much. They weren't a Starfleet ship--they weren't even a Federation tradeship--so there wasn't really a set procedure in place. They had to get rid of the remains, but felt they should at least show a little respect for their friend. They were hardly poetic, though, and they showed even less emotion. Not that anyone expected much. They were, after all, just a freighter crew who knew they *should* say something, but couldn't collect words worth the air they used. They all seemed to figure their own thoughts were good enough. So instead, they stood around the small capsule in a long, awkward silence before Ridge muttered to himself a little, then spoke.

"We'll miss you, buddy," he managed, shrugging as he tried for more. "I'll miss you. You're...you were a great guy and, well, you're gone too soon. Sorry."

He put his arm around his wife when her hand rubbed his back.

Collecting a breath, Tom peered around for anyone else's offering and, not seeing one, walked over to the release button. Pressing it, the outloader creaked and cranked its small burden into place, aligned, then spit the capsule through the forcefield and into empty space.

He left the bay the moment the porthole slid shut.

A week later, Tom strode down the deck one corridor to the bridge. It was empty, but he knew where everyone was. Pushing the PADDs on his chair off to the console table, he sat and released a breath through his nostrils. Then he stopped.

What the hell am I doing? Why am I bothering to make any of this work?

That time, he had no answer for himself.

He had a pile of work to get done before heading off to help with repairs, he hadn't eaten all day and his to-do list wasn't getting shorter any time soon.

Why do I think anything's going to change?

He sat and stared at the black viewscreen for nearly a minute before shaking himself out of his pause. Even if he had a single answer for the uselessness his life had become, it wouldn't make any difference if he couldn't find someone stupid enough to replace him. On that route as it'd become in the past months, even fools were in short supply. And now a registered Maquis target, Tom knew better than to torture himself with impossibilities...though he knew he would, anyway.

Reaching over, he picked up the PADD nearest to him and settled himself into his work. Immediately, he snorted. He'd started on a positive note: A thirty strip credit for an overcharge on isolinear chips was the first thing for him to sign off on.

His lips turned down when he pressed his thumb to the ID field. It could only go downhill from there. Not a minute later, his assurance was confirmed.

"I have the list for sign off."

Tom glanced back and found his engineer in the jamb of the entryway, her angular features hard in the light above her, her mouth and dark eyes shadowed. "I can take them now." He held out his hand when she came down. "They start on the hull plating?"

"Just a few minutes ago," she confirmed.

"Thought that's what I heard." Wrapping his fingers around the PADD when it met his hand, he quietly pulled it in, clicked it on and let his eyes fall over the list. He could feel the engineer's eyes drilling into him as he clicked for detail on one, checked off another. Her arms crossed and she began to breathe slowly through her nostrils, an obvious attempt at patience.

Tom didn't care. The list was everything he dreaded--and more they couldn't afford--so he took his time picking through it. It made Maryl's initial list look cheerful. Starfleet had helped where they could, of course, but they couldn't replicate but the basic parts or refit what they had in stock to fit the Guerdon's various specifications. They did enough to help B'Elanna get them moving to Andar. It was still a lot, considering.

Looking at the primary items again, he shuffled them to the top and marked off one. "We can't afford the initiators this time out," he told her. "They'll have to wait."

"They *can't* wait," B'Elanna responded. "They're fried."

"They got us here," Tom noted. "What happened between drydock and now?"

"We were literally holding them together with glue. Once we shut down the engines, they cracked through the plating."

"The Draden's engineer didn't offer to repair them?"

"It's not something they could replicate--and even if they could, the shafts didn't crack until after the Draden was gone."

"You'll have to paste them together again. When we get some funds in the ship's pot again, we'll be able to deal for them." Blowing a breath, B'Elanna took a step closer. "You're not hearing me. The initiators are *dead*. We need new ones."

Tom looked at the PADD again. "I've just dumped the entire pot into our hull, deflector and starboard nacelle. This list takes us over my earnings. The Andalans don't work with credit. We're flying to Hidirin on an empty purse. What else can we give up on this list?"

"This isn't the wish list," she replied. "We need everything here if we're getting to Hidirin at all."

He shook his head, still not looking at her. In the corner of his eye, her frown and forward stance said enough. He didn't feel like dealing with that. "Really, B'Elanna, you'll have to patch them for now. It doesn't have to be pretty. Just enough to get us going."

"It can't be done."

"You did it before."

"We were lucky," she insisted. "The stresses on the engines nearly blew out the whole warp assembly as it is."

"Amongst a few other blows." He scrolled down the list again. "If you think we need them that much--"

"I don't 'think'--I *know* they're *not* coming back online."

"And I know we can't afford a new set until we have some fresh funds in the pot. Make your own deal for them and we'll work out the difference later."

"I can't throw this together like a flight plan," she instantly snapped back. "We're not going anywhere without a full replacement."

Finally, she gained his full attention. He peered up at her askance. "Excuse me?"

"I said we can't go any--"

"Flight plan?"

She tilted her head. She had nothing to retract. "Those initiators wouldn't have burned out without the stress you put on them pulling those Academy tricks."

His eyes narrowed. "As I recall, I was trying to get a fully armed Maquis ship off our backs."

"And you did a great job," she returned flatly.

"If you have a problem with how I fly this ship," he retorted, "I'll be happy to let you have the chair. I'll call the Maquis and *you* can shake them next time."

"I don't *want* your seat!"

"Then what *do* you want?"

"This list fulfilled."

"I can't afford it right now. Patch the initiators until we get to Minjau."

"I *told* you, I can't!"

"Be creative."

B'Elanna snorted. "I think we've had enough creativity on this ship."

"On that, I'd have to agree," Tom rejoined. "What the hell was he doing there when he was supposed to be back with Ridge working in deflector control?"

"I comm'd him three times!"

"And still couldn't keep your team in check! He'd been here long before you. It's not like he didn't know his way around."

"I knew what I was doing--and so did he! He was on the way back but obviously stopped to resecure the last forward holds. It's not my fault he didn't listen!"

"And it's not my fault the Maquis were somehow able to beam a bomb through our shields and blow our hull to hell both ways. But I'm starting to regret I got us out of there alive."

"Not all of us."

Tom drew a breath, leaving a hard silence on the bridge for several seconds as they held each other's glare. The hammering starboard resumed, its tinny echo bouncing around them like a gnat. He held out the PADD, waiting patiently for her to take it and back off a step. Finally, she did.

"Let's get something straight," he said, forcing a measure of calm into his tone. "I'm not your emotional trash can. You need to get it out? Go stationside and get laid or beat someone up--or whatever the hell you do to cool off. Don't ever bring it up here again. You buy the initiators with your own share and I'll pay you back. You have Savan write that up, I'll sign it. Outside of that, do your job. Get off what's left of my bridge and crawl back into your hole so I can start counting the days until your contract's up."

B'Elanna held his glare without blinking for several more seconds before finally pivoting on a heel and striding out to the corridor. Turning at the arch, she shouldered past Maryl with a growl. Soon after, a smack against a bulkhead echoed on the bleeping bridge. Tom's mouth tightened in his steady frown.

"What was that all about?" Maryl asked as she moved to her console.

"The reincarnation of Livich," Tom muttered and pushed himself to stand. "Give me a yell when Kokrit bothers to patch in. I need a break."

"Go," said the Bajoran immediately, not wanting a piece of it. She tapped in a message to her husband to make sure he didn't take one, either.

Savan reached up into the cabinet and extracted one vial from a set she'd begun to store more conveniently. Loading it calmly into the hypospray, she turned, checked that the level was set to full, then set the nozzle against the young captain's neck. Pressing the release, she patiently waited for the drugs to take effect. Eventually, it did: He breathed then gagged a little on his bile. Turning his head to the side, he unconsciously spit the offending mucus onto his shoulder and reached up groggily to wipe his mouth.

From this, Savan tactfully looked away and waited until Tom had rolled completely over to face her again. His appearance was no more pleasing than two hours ago, however. His bloodshot eyes were shadowed heavily against his pale skin; his mouth was slightly flaccid. He was rumpled from being out binging in clothes he'd worn since the day before. As for his particular odor, Savan had already rubbed a numbing agent in her nose after Ridge had transported him to her lab.

She opened her tricorder to confirm his recovery. She frowned at what she saw and diverted her stare to meet his. "I think it is time for me to lecture you, Tom," she started.

He groaned as he pushed himself to sit. "Look, I appreciate what you do, but--"

"You will appreciate far less when you are permanently debilitated by your addiction."

"Can't I have my vice and eat it, too?" he complained, trying to divert her even while he knew its futility.

"You have a number of vices less detrimental to your health." She set down the tricorder. "Your liver is not responding to my treatments as readily as in the past, and your episodes are increasing in frequency."

He watched her steady gaze for a moment longer, then nodded. "I'll go to the clinic on Minjau," he promised as he slid off the bed.

"You require a specialist in Human medicine."

"I'll run it by them. --Where's my coat?"

"On the table," she replied, pointing.

"Okay. Thanks." Collecting his coat over an arm and stuffing his hands into his trouser pockets, he started out.

"We will require a final sign-off before they begin the final plating installation," Savan said, stopping him. "Where may I find you, Tom?"

"The comm's still down?"

"Yes," Savan answered, her eyes following him as she added, "B'Elanna will have that cluster up again when she completes the initiator installation. This will not be until tomorrow."

Tom nodded, frowning at the reminder. He knew he'd come down on his engineer like a load of bricks. His engineer definitely knew how to cut, but pissed off was he was, he knew she'd been venting, needed to as much as he had. Still, she did exactly as he'd suggested: She bought the initiators herself, had Savan write up a debit to the ship's share, and he hadn't seen her since. It should have been more comforting than it was.

"Yeah, okay. Deck two aft."

Savan let him go that time.

On either side of the Guerdon sat a pill-shaped nacelle, which, through the power created in the warp coils, generate the fields necessary to go to warp. Within those coils, twelve plasma injectors sat at the end of the power transfer conduits, which extended from the plasma flow initiators. These were located at the hub between the conduits and the warp drive. The configuration was outdated, but the process was the same: The initiators got the plasma from the drive to the conduits. They were loud and clumsy, but when they were working, they did what that freighter needed: Generated bursts of power at the right levels to get the ship going.

When they weren't working, *nothing* moved.

B'Elanna personally whacked the lid off the first ringset. The initiators sat clean and shining black in the casing, ready for installation. The engineer only felt angrier to see them. For all her insult, she went out and bought the sets with, indeed, her own share from the Ligarán deal--and without Maryl's assistance. Rather, B'Elanna didn't want to deal with *anybody* at that point. She paid the price for it, too. Learning that she needed them, the supplier charged her exactly what he'd initially quoted. Three quarters of her earnings disappeared in a case with the supplier attached not an hour later.

Damn right, I'll get paid back, she growled to herself as she grabbed her tools and slipped through an access hatch to the ladder that ended on the warp core catwalk above deck three. The casing between the engine and the primary EPS had been disassembled the night before, thanks to Ridge. The initiators themselves were not too bulky, so she told him to keep going on with the deflector, then get some rest. She could handle that unit alone.

She distinctly remembered the look of concern he gave her before nodding and leaving. He wanted to say something, but didn't...like everyone else. No one was touching the issue.

The worst of it is knowing everything I installed to prepare for this deal got smashed, she finally admitted. She could handle stress without her pulse speeding a few beats, but discouragement blackened her mood without fail.

Activating her demagnetizer, B'Elanna started taking down the outer control rods they had drop-welded to keep together on their trip to Andál. They and the plates they were connected to came easily apart, clanging on the grate beside her boots. She sighed at what lay behind, rings half-rotted away and dripping with plasma residue. Pulling on a pair of protective gloves, she peered in to see if the notch housings were still in tact. They weren't. Instead, a series of laser scars marked where the rings had been re-ground and reset five times at least. Jerod's "queen of patch and go," echoed in her memory.

It'd been a full breakdown waiting to happen. Moreover, she'd had that assembly on her replacement list before the Ligarán deal even came up. Their ultimate failure wasn't Tom's fault. He did stress out the power distributors and nearly cracked their impulse driver coils with the jump-and-go and ducking tricks, but in the end, nothing he did caused any real problems.

She knew that, too, and attacked him, anyway. For his part, he'd seen through her all too readily: She'd used him as an outlet and she got just what she wanted when he railed back at her with equal force. Now he wanted her gone.

You just can't have a good thing and keep it that way, can you?

She still couldn't bring herself to apologize, however. The captain simply hadn't listened to her--refused to hear what she was saying. He just stared at the PADD like some officiating asshole shrugging her off because he could... But then, he'd given her the opportunity to take over the engine

room in her own way and made time for her when she requested it; he'd made sure she had what she needed to improve his ship when he could get it. She should have backed off. She shouldn't have blamed him. She shouldn't have secured an escape route when she didn't want one.

Not that that matters now, she snorted bitterly.

Just as she finished shaking her head at herself, the usual long tunic suit of the science technician appeared in her peripheral vision, approaching from the other catwalk access ladder. B'Elanna groaned to herself. As if her mood wasn't bad enough, she wasn't at all up for a visit. If she sent any such signals out, however, Savan did not pick them up. Instead, she drew near and stood next to the engineer, who studiously made herself careful in extracting the next chunk of wasted duranium. The Vulcan waited without so much as a breath. The woman knew her target was aware of her presence.

Finally, B'Elanna pulled her head out of the initiator core and looked up. "Yes?"

Savan wasted no time. "You have been favoring your left leg again."

"I banged it a couple times," she explained and shook her head. "It's nothing serious. Just a bruise."

"May I treat it while I have the time? I am en route to the bio-holds and have the equipment I need. This will not take long."

"You don't have to bother."

Savan kneeled beside her, then. "Please let me treat your injury, B'Elanna, before it is exacerbated. Your activity will not improve it."

Considering the other woman's steady gaze again, B'Elanna finally turned and offered her leg. Dipping her head a little, she offered a shrug of apology and said, "Thanks."

Savan set herself to work. A minute passed as she examined the renewed injury and activated the regenerator to heal it. With great care, she waved the wand over the engineer's knee, letting the beams' hum fill the area for a full minute before she spoke again. "I did not recommend you to be hired," she stated quietly, almost gently.

B'Elanna grinned despite herself, remembering. "I didn't think you had."

Another minute passed as the hums echoed around them and over her leg again.

"It is at times good to be wrong," Savan finally finished, taking up the tricorder again to see the result. She nodded at it. Then, the women's eyes met, one patiently searching, the other coming to understand. Satisfied with what she saw, the Vulcan blinked. "I am done."

The engineer got up and shook out the remaining sensation from the regeneration beam. "It feels better," she told her.

Savan bowed her head. "Good."

With that, she left.

She stretched her arms wide as she finally left her main station and started forward towards the crew quarters. She had another hour before Ridge would hunt her down for the final waste dump sign off. She could use a shower--and now that the ODN was doing what it was supposed to again, she could do so without worrying about a malfunction elsewhere--for the most part, anyway. She was more than due for a break, in any case.

A ping aft made her turn before she got to the forward entry, however. Though it was late and she was looking forward to getting clean, she knew better than to ignore *any* noise on the Guerdon, especially lately.

She and Nadrev had finally patched the comm together again--a little later than she had projected, but no one could have predicted the internal sensors would go down, either. Still, it was fixed, and the initiators were tucked neatly into their new housings and responding to her diagnostics just as she would like. The warp drive was unsteady, but operating well enough to check out for their run. The shields would handle the usual stresses. She would have time between there and Hidirin to keep working on those.

Continuing to follow the irregular pings and scrapes down the starboard corridor, then coming around to the supply section, she finally recognized the sounds: Tools on the deck. Quietly turning into the aft corridor, she continued through to the lit scrap room and stopped at the entry.

He was sitting at the other end, with his back to the entrance and a half-emptied flask at his knee. An empty bottle had already rolled away to the nearby wall. Bending over a control grid, he inserted new isolinear strands, tapped the unit to life, then shut it down and set it aside. Then he picked up another one. One by one, set by set, he rewired the small grids, tested them and stacked them up on his other side. She could barely see him breathing.

Before him sat the hull of a small, half-charred shuttle. The room was full of neatly organized pieces. She could tell in but a glance that the disassembly had been Jerod's work.

She'd almost forgotten about Jerod's junk pile.

The pings and beeps and hisses of connections finding homes echoed softly in her ears. He worked with an easy hand, but his process was mechanical.

Staring at the scene for a few minutes as he finished the stack, she turned and walked away.

VI. Beggars and Choosers

"*B'Elanna, I am reading a power loss in the secondary field conduits.*"

It took the engineer a few seconds to figure out where that was going. She grabbed her tricorder and jumped away from her console. "Warp drive's failing!" she responded. "Nadrev! Shut down the reactors--now! I'm on my way back!"

Instantly, the technician threw his hands up to the main board and manually locked down the matter-antimatter unit. The ship lurched to a stop, throwing the diminutive engineer forward a few steps as she arrived.

One deck above, Tom closed his eyes and sighed. "Not again." The little failures had been so common since they left Andal, they were doing everything but boring him. He brought them back up to full impulse and dragged himself out of his seat. "Savan, get Maryl out of bed, then give us a hand," he said on his way out. Jogging back to the engine room and down into the port corridor to the warp core, he was greeted with a flying lockbox. It clanked against his chest as his engineer came around the access grate she'd already opened on the other side of the propulsion system.

"Ridge is in port relay control!" she shouted over the coolant steam. The contents of her toolbox scattered across the deck, she was half buried in the drive control grid before he could make the turn.

Tom disappeared into the cold mist, emerging inside another grate cell packed full of half-functional drive units. There, he found the technician up to his arms in soot, reconnecting the secondary plasma relay t-junction manually. Tom cursed and jumped around it, then dug his heels in the grate to get the housing lined up. Blowing a breath, he heaved forward and snapped it in. Ridge nodded quickly as Tom yanked his hands away then tested the unit with a jolt of plasma.

"Port secondaries are ready to go, B'Elanna!" Ridge called toward the comm.

"*Install the new regulator bearings *before* switching over!*" she called back.

Tom came back around and picked the parts up off the deck. "Remember which is which?" he asked, popping open the nearby access hatch.

"Guess we'll find out," Ridge grinned and reordered the pieces.

"*The warp drive is still unstable,*" B'Elanna said over the comm from her station a few days later. "I'm locking it down before we land.*"

"Good thing we don't need it," Tom muttered, not caring if B'Elanna caught it or not.

"*Our fusion reactors aren't responding well to the deuterium mix, either. --Ridge! Keep your eye on those field output levels. We can't have them fail as we enter orbit.*"

"Good idea," Tom said, also under his breath. He wished he'd brought his coffee forward, lousy as it was. The cut-rate replicator they'd managed to install seriously needed reprogramming, but neither he or B'Elanna had the time to commit to it. *Though maybe just start with the coffee*, he mused. The bitterness seemed to have permanently coated his dry tongue.

Insisting he be on the bridge in case anything else happened on the rest of the leg, too, he hadn't slept in over a day--not that he'd enjoyed a good rest since the second leg of the Ligarán deal started over two months ago.

"*What was that?*" asked the engineer sharply.

Four light years from Ibaten to here and I've never been as glad to see a ball of dirt, Tom thought as he managed the Guerdon into orbit over a large, greenish ocean. "Do we have thrusters?" he asked over the growing racket in the engine room.

"*We have *that* much!*" B'Elanna responded.

"That's all I need," he replied and cut off the noise to patch in with the waiting station. "Guerdon to Minjau Base Four, requesting secondary flatdock."

"*Please stand by, Guerdon. --Is that you, Tom?*"

"Yeah, Toogar, it's me."

"*News on the line says you were hit by the Maquis out near Andal. You all okay?*"

"No," answered Tom simply. They'd get the details soon enough, once the ship's stats, including the crew manifest, was uploaded and reconfirmed at the control center. Tom wouldn't put a foot on the planet before half the base knew about it and only needed the gory details. He just hoped that a large part of those who cared wouldn't be stupid enough to ask him for any.

"*Sad to say you're in good company,*" the Minjan sighed. "*They look to be stocking up.*"

"Yeah," Tom said, snorting silently, "in more ways than one."

"*Are you very much set back?*"

"You know we are if you had to ask. Hopefully, we'll get what we need without cracking a debt."

"*I'm off after you land. Contact me when you're ready to go looking. I'll pull up the vendor list and see who's willing to work with you.*"

Tom's lips turned up. Such cheerful eagerness was a welcome change. "Maryl's going to transmit our list to you." He turned a nod her way, but she was already sending it.

"Toogar," Maryl said, "I'll like to know if the vendors need any items to ship. We have space and a few weeks layover."

"*Received. I believe there might be a few, Maryl. I'll ask them.*"

"Thanks."

"*Guerdon, you have clearance to land at Agarlinik Pad, slot one-six.*"

"Copy, Minjau Base Four. Entering atmosphere on steady approach."

"*We are monitoring, Guerdon; the beacon is set. Welcome to Minjau.*"

With that, Tom set his fingers onto the thruster controls, flipped on his guidance control, read his console once more, then cautiously pressed into Minjau's outer atmosphere.

As the unmistakable tug on their bad side forced him to compensate, he couldn't help but grin. The first time he landed a freighter, it'd been at Minjau, and he thought he knew all he needed to know about bringing a vessel in. He'd landed countless times in small crafts and shuttles, after all, in every manner and direction. With big ships, Tom quickly learned it was the difference between a dive and a belly flop. When that much mass and uneven weight suddenly met gravity, it took every puff of torque to keep a freighter straight, even on auto. The Guerdon still listing at the starboard, Tom had to compensate all the more carefully. It was very easy to flip a ship like that one with too much push in any direction, much less with one side's thrusters still twitching.

He managed it despite the drag, though he knew he'd be catching hell in the bar later. Any half decent pilot looking up would have spotted the tilt. "Couldn't wait to get that drink, eh, Paris?" rolled between his ears, but he shrugged it off a minute later. Even that would be a welcome change of topic, and in the end, he really didn't give a damn as long as he had the credits for the ale. Better still, Minjau did work on credits. He'd be able to afford more there.

"Stable dock at slot one-six achieved," Tom reported for the Minjan record alone. That anyone got down without incident was obvious at that point. "Shutting down, thrusters. Powering down systems to land mode. Minjau Base Four, Guerdon is down and signing off."

"Acknowledged," Toogar told them. "See you base-side."

Hana gave up her station as soon as the comm crackled off. "I'll be dealing," she told Tom and Savan, grabbing the PADD the latter held out to her as she passed.

Tom let her go without more than a nod. He didn't blame her for wanting off the ship as soon as possible. Not a technician, Maryl had been stuck on the bridge scanning and coordinating for most of their journey while everyone else was committed to repairs, which was stressful and boring in the same stand. Tom picked up his PADD and leaned back in his seat. "You going to be here a while?" he asked Savan, not looking up from his work.

"I would like to begin the clearance protocols with Nadrev, if he is available."

"I'll let him know."

He continued tapping into the PADD several minutes after they fell silent. After so much excitement about getting there, from warp drive failures to network outages, he expected something else to pop up, something else to get him running. His foot bounced--nervous energy, spare adrenaline not yet spent. He

needed to sleep. He wouldn't for quite a while yet. The first thing on his Minjau to-do list would go quickly.

"I'll be in the lounge, then. I'll take a trip through the station when I'm done, find Hana and get in some trouble."

"I will be here," the Vulcan replied, unbothered in her diagnostics.

Tom wasn't nearly ready to ask her what they were showing her. They couldn't afford to fix much of it, anyway.

The small-boned twenty-one year-old Bajoran was sitting at the center table in the lounge, sipping his coffee, a taste he'd acquired in the past year to nearly the degree Hana had over ten. His brown hair hung precariously near his same-colored eyes as he turned his stare the captain's way, offered a diffident nod rather than speak his greeting, very much not like Jerod had been. It made what Tom was doing a lot easier in at least one sense. Taking the seat across, he pushed the PADD across the table.

He didn't have to say much more, except, "Look it over, see if there's anything you need to know."

Nadrev was ready for the offer. Everyone around him *except* the captain had assured him he'd be the only sensible replacement, and Paris would be an idiot not to hire him. More, he had been part-timing on the Guerdon long enough to know the captain's particularly offhand way about things. That Tom *hadn't* been talking about the position gave Nadrev some indication that he was going to replace their friend. When Tom asked to see him in the lounge once they got to Minjau, he had only to remember to be there promptly.

Reading over the contract, Nadrev nodded quietly to confirm that in taking that full share, his position title would be the same as Jerod's: Communications Technician. Not quite what he set out to specialize in, he consoled himself to know that Jerod likely wouldn't have minded his replacement, rather than have a total stranger assume all that he'd done there. For that matter, it wasn't the *last* thing he could end up with.

"I was going to hire you before," Tom told him, "after the Ligaran deal, because I wanted to and could. Now, we *need* another man. The spot is yours if you want to stay on and train into it."

Nadrev nodded again, glad the captain had echoed his suspicions. "I accept, s--Tom. Thank you."

Tom motioned toward the PADD. "You have to sign, Nadrev."

"That's right. Sorry." The new comm tech scrolled down a little more and pressed him thumb in the allotted square. Looking up to make sure they were done that time, Nadrev grinned and reached out to shake Tom's hand. "Thanks again."

"I'm glad you're staying," Tom told him truthfully. "I was half afraid you wouldn't. Things aren't going to be easy for a while, the way it looks out there."

"It's not going to be easy anywhere I could go right now," Nadrev shrugged.

"Good point."

"It isn't very different for me, anyway."

Tom nodded. "Ridge and Savan are taking over your training," he then informed him, pushing himself

to stand. "Actually, Savan's expecting you on the bridge to start you on the clearance codes right now, since we'll need you under the panels as soon as possible."

"What about B'Elanna?" Nadrev asked.

"What about her?"

"Well, she's pretty particular about how things are done."

"Ridge is getting the hang of her," Tom said. "You can follow his lead and be on the safe side. Besides, she's too busy with primary repairs right now. I'm sure she'll take over again when she's able."

"Okay. Thanks again, Tom."

He was already halfway out of the lounge, but he looked back to see the slight young man standing, looking to him with gratitude, almost admiration. Unlike the others, save B'Elanna, Nadrev had never known anyone else in charge of the Guerdon, and though he'd very likely heard all the stories by then, he hadn't been a part of the experiences. However, he had been part timing with them for ten months, had lost a friend with whom he'd worked more closely than anyone and had appeared in need of a sure voice since the attacks.

Nadrev looked at him as one really would a captain, Tom understood and breathed against the lurch in his chest.

"You're welcome," he quietly returned, then left the room.

The worst thing about coming to a station empty handed was knowing that every dealer on the base could smell your poverty.

The best thing about having a Bajoran contract liaison was that they had been poor from birth, but could look like they didn't need a damned thing from the dealers, the other liaisons or anyone else. Tom and Maryl didn't always get on well, but he never underestimated her ability to kick the station vultures in the teeth when it counted and could get them a break.

He was thankful for her skills yet again at Minjau.

Heading to Podala after a boronite pickup at Betazed, the crew enjoyed a relative quiet for a couple weeks. Though both Minjau and Betazed could not supply many of the parts they needed, they'd managed to find enough compatible replacements to keep the warp drive going steady, the power ports functional and the deflector online. They'd called ahead and already arranged for more of the same at Podala, fixing their price ahead of time, as well.

Meanwhile, Maryl began to work on the potentially lucrative Tagran license, wanting the full pay they weren't getting as middleman shippers. Ridge and Savan continued working to get Nadrev up to par in his new concentration. Though not as intuitive as Jerod had been, Nadrev was a ready student, anxious to learn. B'Elanna maintained her semi-permanent stay in engineering as she cursed and coaxed the twitchy systems back to some stable order. Tom honestly had to wonder how long she could hold a grudge. Sure, she threw herself into her work with gusto and he was used to that now, but he'd not seen her at dinner

since they left Andal six weeks ago. Ridge assured him she was taking breaks, though, just not when Tom was, and she barely spoke to Tom whenever he needed to work in the engine room.

Apparently, she could hold a grudge a very long time.

What made him forget to care was learning that other factions had just as stubborn a train of thought--and a better network.

"Tom, I am reading a small ship on approach," Savan told him.

He furrowed his brow. "Where? --Oh." He scowled, then his eyes flew open. "What the hell are Maquis doing *here*? --Savan, shields up! Maryl, contact Starbase 211!"

"We will need to reduce our speed to impulse to maintain shields," said Savan.

"Yeah!" Knocking the ship down to full impulse, Tom drove them off their course and took them straight toward the starbase.

"*What's going on?*" B'Elanna demanded from below. ""*Why did we drop from warp?*"

"Another Maquis visit," Tom responded, grimacing for having forgotten to hit the shipwide comm. "Get Ridge out of wherever he is and seal the decks."

B'Elanna's yell down the center of the engine room was her only response.

"The USS Rissar is on its way," Maryl said.

"How long?"

Maryl blew a breath. "Forgot to ask. Damn it!"

"Not like it matters," Tom smirked, watching the small cruiser zoom in on their tail.

"I'm contacting them again. What *are* they doing this far out?"

"Shopping!" Tom yanked the Guerdon up just in time to miss the first shot, but was not surprised to see them compensate by lining up again directly afterwards. Bracing himself, he let the proximity alarm say the rest as their aft shields took a clean hit and threw out main power for a second. Without Jerod's help and taking care of so many other pressing issues, Torres had only been able to patch the ODN until they could afford new wiring. "Another hit like that..." he said to himself, trying to line up some evasion patterns. Completely useless, he knew, but he figured he should have *something* to occupy himself while his ship was blown to bits again.

"They are coming around to the starboard," Savan informed them.

"We're still weak over there," Tom nodded and struggled to swerve his freighter out of the Maquis ship's way.

He was not successful. The thinly-angled craft veered over and around the Guerdon's hull and lined up the shot with a casual flourish. A beat, and they fired directly into their soft spot.

Klaxons blared and the computer began its warning list, but he slapped them all over. Another hit and shards of sparks flew from the panel behind Maryl. "Ahh!" she yelled and jumped away from the

onslaught.

Tom jerked a look back. "Okay?"

"I need a new coat!" she huffed as the fire control did its work in that corner. She ran to the other comm control and patched in. "This one wants to beam from the bays, Tom," she said. "They're putting a hole in our lower starboard shields, where we're holding the boronite."

"We're so popular," he muttered and continued to duck them in and out of their own wake. Unlike their first attacker, that Maquis ship wasn't falling for any of his tricks the first time and was more maneuverable. The Guerdon was far from one hundred percent. He wouldn't hold them off nearly as long as he had their Hugora Nebula friends.

Thankfully, they were not so far away from civilization, either: "The Rissar's on approach!" Maryl announced. "One minute!"

The Maquis wasn't leaving without another poke, however. They threw another shot directly at their aft deflector then finally ducked away.

Tom was left to stare at their shield output level as it dropped to zero. His heart thrumming, sweating, he shut down the impulse engine as the small Starfleet cruiser passed, turned and jumped to warp after the Maquis ship.

"A repair vessel is on the way," Maryl read from her board, "if we need it."

"Think we *might*?" Tom retorted, then hit the switch to hear what was happening below.

Fifteen minutes later, he descended into the engine room yet again. Tom was beginning to think that he'd not been there so often in his near two and a half years there as he had been since they left Andal. The pleasant trip to Betazed easily spoiled him again, and he actually thought that maybe the Maquis were pulling back a little. *Boy, do I know how to be wrong*, he grumbled to himself as he came upon a now familiar sight: An engine-smeared Torres prowled around from station to station, tricorder in hand, listing off orders to Ridge or Nadrev over the comm as she prepared to get back to what she chose to tend to herself.

As usual, she had Tom's assignment ready for him, too, when he got there. "You can replace the starboard sensor relay control grid," she told him, grabbing a tray of charge bolts with one hand and slapping a portion of her hair off her face with her other thumb. "When is Savan coming down?"

"As soon as Nadrev's done and she's run the diagnostic."

"Good."

With that, Tom turned.

"You'll need the bolts," she told him.

He stopped, grinded his teeth, then doubled back to the shelves to load a tool kit.

"And a wrench. --And I have the bolts *right here*."

Tom pulled a long breath. Torres in a snotty mood was one thing, but it looked like someone had taken the tool reserve cabinet, rolled it down a hill and broke the light. "Thanks so much. You know, I'd have had to wing it without your careful guidance. Now, can you tell me which screwdriver I should use? Or maybe I should try a disruptor?"

"If you can't handle the repair--"

"I can *handle* the repair," he responded. "If you'd find the damned laser wrench, I think I can figure it out."

"It's in there--and I don't want you 'figuring' anything. I mean it, Tom. If you don't know what you're doing, then just leave it. I'll get to it myself. That *is* my job."

"You don't need to tell me what your job is," Tom snapped, digging into the shelf again. "I wrote your contract, remember?"

"Yes, I remember it well," B'Elanna replied, trying for more bite than she felt at the memory of that day, when she'd expected the worst and came out with the keys to the ship. But she recovered a moment later to note he'd taken the pains to remind her about her contract--and the coming end of it.

Yanking out the tool he needed, he straightened and grabbed the bolt set from his engineer's hands. Staring down into her hot glare, he added, "By the way, you can show me a little common courtesy any time it's convenient, B'Elanna. I'm not an idiot and I'm not the one who shot holes through your department. Aim it where it needs to go--or just aim it somewhere useful. Get off my case."

Her eyes narrowed and her body did not move a millimeter as she faced him down. "Yes, *Sir*."

Tom pivoted on a heel to leave.

"And don't leave your bottles lying around this time," B'Elanna continued, turning to get her kit. "They don't belong in the access tubes."

He made a mental note to leave coffee and a half-eaten jelly doughnut instead as he made good time aft.

Three days later, Tom leaned back in his seat as he tapped idly at the thrusters, too tired and too angry to do anything but sit still. He looked back to see Maryl's equally annoyed nod then closed his eyes as they continued to crawl forward. "Come on Gil," he mumbled. "Get off your ass."

The comm hissed on. "Are we there yet?" asked Ridge with mock complaint.

"Waiting for confirmation," Maryl returned. "Don't clog the line, Ridge."

"I'm not. B'Elanna really wants to know when."

"It's the usual delay," she told him. "You'll know when we dock. There'll be a big bump and a sucking

sound." With that, she slapped off the comm. "Tom, you've got to talk to her. Now she won't even call up here herself."

He eyes remained on his panel. "You have a problem with someone here, *you* go have a talk."

"It's not *my* problem to deal with," she shot back.

"Either deal with it yourself or drop it, Maryl." He punched the hail himself that time. "Damnit, Gil, finish your puff digu and let us in."

"So that's where he gets the grease," Maryl grumbled, silently relenting on the other issue.

Tom glared at the station in the viewscreen, watching it rotate in the vacuum of space. It seemed every time he got to Podala, their fortunes had changed. The last time they were there, B'Elanna had been on their bridge, newly hired and ready to go, already one of the crew. Took only a few months to kill that enthusiasm, he mused. She'd really wanted to do something for the ship and had started on the list he'd given her just to have that and more blown to hell and a new friend killed.

Maybe I'll drop by anyway, he sighed to himself. He knew from his initial conversations with her that she wasn't a Livich. She was smart and quick but didn't shortcut quality to save a second. She could be brusque and angry, but so could they all, save Ridge. She earned her pay and everyone liked her. So though they were pissed at each other, he knew it wouldn't kill him to be a man and make some kind of effort that time, level the playing field...even if it couldn't be level at the moment.

After we've gotten through our payment, he decided again, *when we're clear on the debt*, *then I'll drop in and have a talk*.

He began to consider their upcoming pay and the shares it would become versus the seventy-six bars she'd choked out for compatible initiators at Andal--way too much, but he could forgive that... He'd had some of that secondary pot diverted into her share at Minjau, but a large debt remained. He drew a long breath, running the numbers through his head again. Then he frowned. Their conversation might be put off a few stops longer still, unless... Tom glanced back at his science technician.

"Not again!" Maryl snapped. "I'm reading a malfunction in life support systems on deck four."

"Nadrev has sealed the section," Savan reported. "However, we are now experiencing a power failure throughout the forward section of the deck."

Tom groaned, then turned a glare towards his viewscreen. "Get off your ass Gil, or I'm driving us *through* your goddamned station."

"Savan," Tom said, speeding his pace to match hers as she swiftly made her way down Podala's main thoroughfare, "I need a favor."

"You may not have it," she coolly replied.

He blinked. "Why not?"

"You broke your word with me."

He rolled his eyes. "Guess my day's not been bad enough." It'd already been an interesting game of "let's not talk to each other over business" with Torres in Gil's office as they signed off on a series of dumps and collections. Gil, naturally, was both curious about their behavior and as solicitous as ever. Tom couldn't get away from them both fast enough. Now his science tech was as close as a Vulcan could be to annoyed. Not quite something he needed, particularly just then. "How did I manage to get on *your* wrong side?"

"You have once again avoided having your condition treated," she informed him. "You promised you would see a physician at Minjau, but failed to follow through."

"Oh come on, Savan!" Tom retorted. "Even if I'd had the time, I wouldn't have had the money to go through the base clinic."

"There is a Federation facility off base, of which you are well aware, which would have seen you without requirement of payment."

"I didn't have the time to go all the way out there. We were in and out in only two and a half days."

"You did not obey my request," she returned plainly, "and readily endanger your health more each day."

Tom coughed a laugh. "What are you, in love with me? Why are you taking this personally?"

Savan stopped in her tracks to stare long into his heavily shadowed eyes. "I assure you, Tom, my feelings for you at this moment are far from affection. When I am *not* disappointed with you, however, I consider you a friend as well as a patient. As both, it is disturbing to watch your behavior go unchecked and the results untreated. It puts the crew in an insecure position, not knowing if we will need to find a new captain and when. Moreover, to see you disrespect my every suggestion shows your lack of consideration for our friendship. Therefore, you deserve no favors until you show yourself worthy of them."

Crossing his arms, he nodded. "Okay, then, I have an *order* for you."

It was the Vulcan's turn to blink.

"I need you to divvy out my pay and reserve funds into B'Elanna's share plus whatever from the ship's pot to repay her in full for the initiators, in addition to her regular share."

"That would overpay her."

"I meant that part of my share plus *only enough* from the ship's share to pay her back, plus her normal pay. I don't want the pot to bottom out on funds because of this," he told her. "It's not much, but I need those extra bars there for B'Elanna and Maryl to get what we need and get us back on our feet without having to ask me for advances. Meanwhile, I'll be working with the little I've got left in my reserve funds."

Savan didn't have to ask how, but she did continue to eye the young captain. "You require medical treatment by a physician trained in Human medicine--preferably Federation."

He nodded. "I need you to divert my share to B'Elanna's payment so we don't bottom out the pot--and I need her not to know about it."

Her brow rose. "*That* is the favor--falsifying the record."

"I'll write and sign a correction for the file. She won't take it if she knows it's mine. As far as she's concerned, it's a back payment that went into the pot--or whatever, if she bothers to ask. I need this issue off my back, Savan. --And really, I didn't mean to forget about the docs. It just wasn't on my mind, and when it came back, I just couldn't get to it. If it means anything, I apologize. Really."

Savan held a long pause, and then finally assented. "I will follow your 'order;' however, I will expect if and when the route takes us to Deep Space-Nine or back to Minjau, you will follow through with mine--immediately."

"You have my word," Tom told her. "I'll even program a reminder."

"My trust is not one you want to lose, Tom," Savan warned him.

That one, he felt, in his gut and in his tight chest. "The one thing I have left to lose," he acknowledged.

"Nor do I care for disappointment."

He set them off on their pace again, and his hand rustled around in his coat pocket for latinum strips. "Yeah, I'll try not to do that again, too," he said, turning back to hit the bar and whoever happened to be waiting by the gaming tables. He'd be heading for treatment soon enough, he figured. A hearty mug of ale and a few rounds over a deck of cards wouldn't hurt in the mean time. For that matter, he was certain he'd earned the break.

Several hours later, B'Elanna accepted the case, somewhat larger than the others', and she nodded before speaking for the record. "Torres, B'Elanna, sixty-one bars, nineteen strips." Stepping away, her eyes caught the captain's. They were securely fixed on her.

"Good?" he asked quietly as she passed.

"Yeah," she responded tonelessly and reclaimed her seat.

Hearing her chair slide and her case find the floor, Tom pulled another long sip of his drink. "Yeah, that's much better," he muttered.

"Captain Paris, nine bars, eight strips."

Setting his glass down on the table with a clink, he stood, went forward and accepted it. "Captain Paris, Thomas, nine bars, eight strips."

"*Firing again!*"

"Shut it down, Ridge! Shut it *down*!"

Running into the control unit, the bulky technician knew he'd never get past the hissing sparks at the main control. He wrapped his large hands around the power coupling itself and yanked with all his

weight.

A flow of bolts and plates began to rain down.

"Whoops!" He jumped back as the bracing shaft followed the coupling and rattled against the sooty floor. Peering in, he saw nothing else making its way behind it. Shrugging, he jumped into the access corridor.

"It's down!" he yelled forward.

B'Elanna watched the secondary systems flicker to life as she hastily whacked in a new control node. The impulse engine whirred back to life. The captain put it to use immediately, throwing her off her footing briefly before the systems compensated again. The inertial dampers would have to be reinitialized--right alongside the rest of the ship.

"*They're firing again!*" came Maryl's report from two decks above.

The statement was so common B'Elanna all but ignored it. What she couldn't ignore was an engine room slowly coming to look like a smoking junk pile, pitifully few spare parts to work with and her overworked staff of two with no end in sight. Finally en route to Irtrin to drop off their regular shipment of building supplies, they were on their fourth Maquis attack; half functional with a working warp drive was looking good.

A five-minute sonic shower looks even better.

Crawling on the deck beneath the smoke layer to an access station, B'Elanna pulled herself up as the ship rocked and sparked with another hit. Shields were somehow holding; Tom was managing to keep the attacking ship on their port side that time. They were moving at a snail's pace toward Irtri space--which at impulse would take a few years.

The warp drive remained offline. They simply couldn't get warp and full shields to work together anymore. Once the Maquis ship had knocked out their bubble, there was no way to reinitialize until defensive shields could be taken down again.

So B'Elanna held onto the station and worked the deflector instead with quick but aching fingers, cursing as she heard each phaser strike take another chunk out of their defenses and blow another system in the bargain. Death, help, holding on: Any choice would have suited her at that moment as long as it came about. She had grown too tired and too annoyed to care.

Her eyes narrowed on another line of relays and she turned to call behind her again. "Ridge, open up that power shunt and reroute the secondary controls through there before primaries go down!"

"I like your confidence!" he returned.

She couldn't help but snort. Ridge really was a piece of work. Better still, within a few seconds, he'd diverted power as she'd directed--and just in time, too, as his wife's voice sounded yet again from above...

"*They're lining up...Prophets! A torpedo!*"

"*Trying to evade!*" Tom shouted. "*Hold on! --Damnit! Everyone hold *on*!*"

Suddenly, a boom echoed through the lower hull, throwing B'Elanna loose of her station, up into the

air and tossing her back onto the deck like a sack of parts as a new round of coolant sprayed through the air. Her head smacked the grate a split second after her body did. The computer gravely warned them of the hull instability even as it sealed it. The torpedo had knocked out their aft shields and damaged their lower cargo bay. Thankfully--so to speak--it was empty on that leg.

"B'Elanna!" It was Ridge. "You okay?"

Looking up, the swirling spots in B'Elanna's vision dissipated in time for her to see her station fizzle out.

"Damn," she hissed, pulling herself up to her hands. She felt the quick trickle of blood from her forehead, running down the side of her face just as the sting of it began. "I'm..." She coughed, tried for a stronger voice, but then gave it up. She knew she wouldn't get above the steam and klaxons. He'd run up soon enough.

Stumbling to her feet, she made her way back to another console. Wiping the condensation from the viewscreen, she tried to patch back in to the engine stats just as an Irtri border patrol zoomed in to their proximity. As Ridge jogged over to her, she pointed.

The Maquis was clearly unprepared for company, for they hadn't even broken off their attack when the Irtri cruiser opened up its torpedo bays and threw a volley directly into the Maquis ships' nacelles. A simple matter to them, it seemed, as they gracefully pulled back and waited for the result.

The Maquis ship burst from the inside out but a couple seconds later, filling the black field with dazzling blue fireworks.

No celebratory responses met the view. They all just stared at their nemesis sizzled away.

Finally, the captain spoke. "Shields down," he said, almost a whisper in a dry throat.

B'Elanna found herself descending to her knees. "Over again," she mumbled.

Ridge bent down beside her. "You okay, there, B'Elanna? You need me to call Savan?"

"No," she answered. "Just let me get my breath back, okay?"

"Okay." Straightening, he tapped into the engine specs again, checked their power diversions. "Tom, we can probably manage warp four-point-six, a little more when we get back on our primary PTC online again. --That okay, B'Elanna?"

"Yeah," she said.

"Yeah, four-point-six," Ridge reiterated.

Immediately, the warp drive reactivated in the bay behind them. A few seconds later, the thrumming core stabilized and sped. "'Okay, we're on,'" Tom announced. "'Going to warp four-point-six.'"

"I could use help on the drive, too, if you can get away," Ridge added.

A pause. "'Yeah. The Irtri are leading us in. Nadrev should be there in a second. Savan can take the conn.'"

"Umm, actually, I think I'll need her in the lab for a minute."

The engineer had passed out against his leg.

Tom rounded into the lab just as Ridge laid B'Elanna on the table. As Savan opened her tricorder, he briefly examined the knot on her head himself, then all that surrounded it. Her hair was matted up with blood, half-smashed against her dirty face. Pulling the dark curls away from the injury, he drew a deep breath through his nostrils. "Let me know if you need anything," he said quietly. "I'll ask the Irtri if they can spare it."

"I will give you an assessment momentarily," Savan told him.

"How long to Irtrin?" Ridge asked.

"More than ten days at this rate," Tom told him, nodding to himself as he took a step back from the engineer. He looked up at Ridge. "We need to get back up to six-point anything if we're to make our deadline."

"Got it," the other man acknowledged.

"She has a concussion," Savan reported, "and has lost some blood in addition to several contusions. I believe I can treat her without outside assistance." She looked at them. "I will contact you when her treatment is completed."

Tom took it for all she meant and led Ridge into the corridor. Heading straight back to the smoky hole at the midship, he looked up at his friend. "You think I'll ever manage *not* to have the female staff pissed off at me?"

"Probably not," Ridge gamely replied. "But I'm sure, if you try really hard, you can make me and Nadrev want to kick the crap out of you, too."

Tom laughed, barely feeling it but needing a little release.

The onset of the Maquis troubles had left far more than the Guerdon vulnerable. While they knew that some freighters were willingly shipping for the different sects, they also knew those ships weren't getting them everything they needed, so certain bands of the Maquis had begun to spread out their hunting parties, apparently figuring that if the tradeships weren't with them, they might as well be the enemy. Affiliated and unaffiliated alike had been targeted; who would be hit depended merely on what was being carried and if they had any protection.

The Guerdon's regular shipment of building materials and general housing supplies for the Irtrin colonies was a tasty morsel. Thankfully, the Irtri wanted their shipment more and were willing to blow a Maquis bug out of the sky for it with no more than a suggestion that the Guerdon follow them back to the station.

Had they a well armed and defensible ship, they'd have gladly reaped the benefits of dealing in such an insecure area: Almost immediately, rates along the border were rising. The downside was that most independent freighters were not well defended and fewer people were willing to chance their cargo on such a ship. Even the Cardassians had cancelled all alien licenses, suspicious of Maquis working within their borders. Only their old contacts remained willing to trust Tom and his crew. This left them with just enough to get by, but not nearly enough to commit to the massive repairs the Guerdon increasingly

needed.

Most of his winnings at Podala had vanished into suppliers' hands before they broke dock. He honestly didn't know where he was going to scrounge up enough to fix their deflector again, much less repair their power transfer assembly properly.

He'd considered once or twice investigating another trade zone. The rebellion was only beginning and Starfleet would eventually lose their stolid stance and Cardassia would drop their polite façade and pull out the guns. Any idiot could see where it was going. Unfortunately, closer into the Federation and their staid regulations was not something he was comfortable with, and Maryl, much as she so rarely visited them, resisted being too far from her family on Bajor. He couldn't afford to lose her and Ridge even if he was willing to. The other end of the Cardassian border past the Rolor Nebula was rather bleak in the way of trade. On the other side, the space past the Beloti sector offered nearly nothing. So, he resolved to bear it out, make what he could of it. Honestly, he would have cared far less if he didn't like his crew so much.

Hard times had come again to the border region.

Rubbing at his back as he grabbed a tool kit, Tom wondered what took it so long.

"What's first?" he asked, following Ridge into the steam.

It wasn't the first time she'd woken to that view, the greenish walls and cubbies of plants and parts. The sounds were different, though. In fact, none but an engine rumble greeted her that time. B'Elanna could tell immediately that it was the warp drive and it was running hard. Not a minute awake and knew where she'd be and what she'd be doing as soon as she was released. Without having to wonder why, she suddenly wanted to get to it.

She looked over. Savan stood at her worktable, setting away equipment and a box of medicine. The room was slightly darkened. Taking a breath, she felt her head lighten, some relief in her swollen eyes. Another, and then her eyes drifted shut. She remembered what happened--and how it happened. She sighed to herself.

Opening her eyes again, she turned her head the other way and saw the captain in the door. Leaning on the jamb, he stared steadily at her. B'Elanna blinked at his appearance. Head to toe, he was filthy and clearly exhausted. Still, he held her gaze for several long seconds, seeming to ask the questions and find the answers silently with a few sweeps over her. Were there questions outside the obvious, she couldn't tell, but he looked like he had more on his mind.

His attention moved to Savan. "We're at Irtrin Station in six hours," he said.

The Vulcan merely nodded.

B'Elanna didn't. "Six hours?" she asked, a loud whisper for her dry throat. She looked at Savan. "How long have I been in here?"

"Thirty-one hours."

B'Elanna growled at the information, not what she wanted to hear.

"We're back up to warp six-point-two," Tom said.

"Who managed that?"

"Ridge and I. Nadrev's been working on the deflector with Ridge's help. The drive's still twitchy, but it's holding together for now. Besides, it's the least of our problems with the major equipment." He pushed himself off the jamb. "Good news is that an Irtrin patrol is escorting us in, so we don't have to worry about any more company for now."

"*Tom?*" It was Maryl.

He looked up at the comm speaker. "Yeah, I'm on my way. --I've got to get up there. I'll be down later to finish helping Ridge with the starboard power relay switches. They were toasted."

With that, he set off into the corridor.

B'Elanna slumped back on the pillow. "God, I almost don't want to see that."

Savan peered at her over her tricorder. "Certainly they could not have left the engine room in any worse condition than you were forced to."

Frowning, B'Elanna grudgingly let her have that one. "When can I go see if you're right?"

A few hours later, B'Elanna strode into the engine room just as Nadrev was carting out the last of the rubble. She stopped and stared as she realized the extent of their efforts. They'd even taken the extra steps to clean off the deck and get everything organized again. Her toolkit was back in its hole; the parts stores had been refilled where they could be, and even her station on the main control board was functioning for the most part. The display still had a heat crack in it, but it ticked off all her usual information without so much as a blink.

"We had some time since getting the drive back up," Nadrev told her, not waiting for her to ask. "We can't do much else after Ridge and Tom finish the relays until we get the new ODN rods and power couplings."

"How many did we lose?"

"Fourteen couplings, half the rods."

B'Elanna cursed under her breath. That was not the repair she wanted to concentrate on, but it was sure to be once they docked. Shaking her head, she started tapping into her station to catch up on all she missed.

"Is there anything you need me to get to right now?" Nadrev asked.

"Not until I know what we're dealing with this time," she replied. Seeing him nod and turn in the corner of her eye, she looked over at him and said, "But thanks for..."

She stopped. He was already out of earshot.

Sighing, she returned to the report she'd requested, mentally prepared herself for what she'd find there. ODN problems tended to cause as much havoc as the mismatched connections, if not more. The ship's basic systems being lined up into the rods, and then the rods into the trunk, which fed into the main computer, if that network wasn't clicking right, then entire series of systems--and the ability to control

them remotely--would simply fail. Having only half the rods functioning meant the ship's computer was running almost entirely on backups. One wrong spark and they could be dead in space.

A few meters behind her, Tom leaned against the railing, waiting for her to finish that particular page of readouts. He knew what they were telling her, and he could probably expect what she thought about it. When she reached to tap the screen down, he said, "It'll get worse as you move in on the primary EPS distributor. It's burnt out. Secondary is working, but obviously, we'd rather have two of those, too."

She barely glanced back. "I'll rebuild it."

"I know."

That time, she looked, but he was already crossing for the supply shelf. "The relay switches are the last thing we can do down there, by the way," he explained. "We should have that done before we get to Irtrin."

Pursing her lips, B'Elanna tapped on her screen. "Will it be offline for long?"

"Only a few seconds as we turn over to primaries again. Savan's ready for it."

"Okay. Let me know when you're about to do it so I'm not surprised."

"Yeah, that'd be a good idea," he replied and moved to collect another bundle of toggles without another word.

Left again to the background pulse of the warp drive, B'Elanna growled out a breath. She didn't like feeling three steps behind, which she plainly was and a little useless to boot. The older, more accustomed crew had gotten the Guerdon back on its feet and well into its repairs without her. The EPS and warp drive were disasters waiting to happen, but they *were* moving and would make their deadline if nothing else impeded them. Seeing flags blinking beside the deflector, long-range sensors, navigation control and the EPS core Tom had mentioned, she could feel her shoulders tightening.

This is endless, she knew.

Then again, she'd felt a need to regroup since they lost Jerod. On top of losing someone she was quickly coming to call a friend, the team she'd so quickly built was cut and everything felt like it was limping a step. His skills and banter had been such a part of the ship she was just getting to know. She couldn't train Nadrev yet; she had far too many other priorities, more with every phaser shot. Though Ridge was careful to consult her, she didn't feel like she had a handle on where the new comm tech was. Then there was the ship, which seemed to be falling through her fingers even as she tried to string it together. There was just so much damage, an impossibly slim budget and only a few hands.

Not that it'd matter in a few months. Paris clearly hadn't changed his mind, had made every effort to clear the field between them. She'd taken care of any hopes he'd had in hiring her by coming down on him as she had. The Maquis attacks had made that technically impossible, too.

No, it didn't really matter if she got anything upgraded again. But she'd be damned if whoever replaced her would think her a fraction as incompetent as her predecessor had been.

Looking at the hole where the captain had disappeared, she just wished she wanted to leave that time.

The gleaming white and cream corridors of the Irtrin Trade Station were almost an insult to Tom's eyes. The Irtri's kindly efforts to make their visitors calm and comfortable in fact produced the opposite effect on him. Clean but disheveled, he could do everything but feel at ease before the well-placed kiosks and long-boned locals, neat and peaceful and relatively unbothered. He ignored the "natural" light coming down from the fake sunroofs and barely bothered to acknowledge the quick greetings of other captains as they crossed. He felt their curious stares in their address, though.

The Guerdon had come in under escort. Like at Podala, everyone knew they'd been kicked and were weak for having to be led. Pricing would be adjusted accordingly. Fellow traders who hadn't been targeted looked at him and knew they'd probably get a dose of the same. They seemed to walk around him, almost as if his bad fortune was contagious. That much was a good thing, Tom thought, stepping up his pace a little. He wasn't in the mood to chat. Rather, with four hours before the next expected sign-off, he knew he'd have time for at least a few rounds--both at the bar and at the tables.

Driving himself directly to the lounge, he signaled Ptliani, the bartender, before he got to the lounge. She immediately turned and poured his usual ale, a local spiced variety he'd enjoyed since his first taste of it two years ago. Tom fished in his pockets for the credits and dropped a few on the bar, dredging up a small grin as well before turning for the back room. Clean-lined and neutral as the rest of the place, it was well equipped with every form of diversion and regrettably empty, save a few veterans he knew were probably looking for the same sort of customer he was.

Not that I expected my luck to turn around today, Tom frowned to himself. He'd been hoping to supplement their supply of ODN rods. They'd only been able to buy what they needed from the Irtri supply master when they arrived. They needed another full flat for stock.

They glanced over after several seconds, a couple offering a slight nod of greeting, then returned to their self-made game, smoothly unsettled forms in coats either too wide or too long. Most of the tradeship captains Tom knew adopted a coat eventually. He'd had his when he came out to the DMZ region, but started wearing it regularly after getting the Guerdon. For no real reason, it felt right to wear it.

He made his way over to one of the captains, who idly poked around the dom-jot table, intermittently sipping at a greenish ale.

"Netor," Tom said quietly, coming around the table to take up a stick.

The man looked up and blinked at what he saw. "Paris," he said slowly, then shook off his impression.

"Slow in here lately?"

"Wrong shift," Netor told him. "Playing was good on the other side of day, I was told."

"Hmm. I might be back for that, then." Paris leaned on his cue and looked the table over. "Care for a friendly game? Winner takes the first dupe in the door?"

"Sounds good. The terik's yours."

Tom leaned down and struck the first corner, almost casually as he geared himself up for a little play. Really, he needed the money and would have much preferred to be playing a challenge, but there was no chance of betting with Captain Netor, who was historically broke and therefore a great dom-jot player.

Tom also knew he'd have to lose to Netor, just to look like he was in a slump--though that wasn't as all far from the truth. As it was, it'd be a nice warm up after a couple weeks largely under the grates.

"Three," Tom said, moving around to the inner corner, taking his shot. It missed by a fractional margin, just as he wanted it to.

"Two in," Netor said, moving in as Tom backed out.

It was by no means a diversion, however. Aside from his beat-to-hell ship waiting for a parts delivery fifty levels below, he couldn't get Savan's warnings out of his head. His body was starting to hear them, too. He'd been having trouble urinating lately and the pain in his back had become more than a nagging muscle to rub. He didn't have time for some Irtri doc to "research the necessary information" and get back to him. They'd have to break dock before the requests even filtered through a Human specialist's request list--if the Irtri actually wanted to go that route in the first place. He wasn't so sure he wanted them to take another route, when he thought about it.

Tom steadily drank his ale, waved back at Ptlani for another as he reached the bottom quarter. Finishing the first and setting the glass aside, he moved up for his turn.

"Ones out," he said quietly and struck the terik.

"You hear if Dejin's made her way here, yet?" Netor asked after the shot was completed.

"I did," Tom nodded. "She'll make dock in, oh, about sixteen hours."

He hoped he could make it back to Minjau. They weren't expected at Deep Space Nine, where a Human doctor was assigned, for another couple months. He suddenly wondered what might happen in the worst-case scenario.

"Out a bit much, there," he commented, forcing a little lightness into his tone as he swung away from the table.

"Nines center," Netor said, taking the move.

Just another massive disappointment heaped out on top of another, Tom thought, his eyes losing focus as he stared at the table. Were it not for his mother, he might have cared less. Were it not for her and his crew, he wondered if he'd have cared at all...on a bad day. It'd have to be a bad day. Despite his taste for moderate self-destruction, the thought of death wasn't appealing.

*Then what *am* I doing with all of this? Rolling on without end? --Not without end if things continue on this route, though. I might get this over with without even trying for it.*

"She's carrying duranium again?" Netor asked.

"Her favorite," Tom replied.

The other trader moved around the table, running his thick hand along his cue. "She' won't have fun coming in with that sort of fare."

"She requested an Irtri patrol well ahead of time."

"I hear they do good work," Netor commented, then promptly missed his shot. He backed off, reached for his drink.

"When it's in their interest to, yes, they do."

He really needed to write his mother again. He still hadn't gotten around to that. But as it was, he knew it would kill a part of her, especially in that situation and in his shame, rotting away on the DMZ. More guilt upon that shame, that time doled out on the one person who'd always kept him in line and loved him no matter what. He could see her bitterly crying at the dining room table, her slim, pretty hands knotted into fists against her forehead, her back shaking with sobs as she wailed out for her boy....

Feeling his chest tighten, blinking heavily, Tom moved swiftly around the table, struck the terik and rolled it into the nines without thinking. "Damn!" he hissed first, then lied on impulse, "I haven't done that in a while."

By his silence, Netor was hardly convinced, but Tom decided not to be bothered. They weren't wagering. And Tom probably wouldn't catch up at that station. So, he just shrugged and took the next turn.

His back began to hurt. He swished down half of his second ale and lined up his shot again.

He'd finished his fourth when a neat man of about thirty strode into the back room, carrying his assignment inventory in a hand, activated and in full view of anyone with decent vision. Tom peered over at Netor. "All yours."

The other man grinned generously. "But you're ahead, Paris. Not by much, but--"

"Don't worry about it," Tom cut in with a wave of his hand. "I'm a little off and too tired to wheedle anyone right now. I need some sleep. Have fun."

"Thank you," Netor accepted.

Tom took his glass up into his unsteady fingers and, nodding to the new captain passing in, took it to the bar. Netor was offering the young supplier a game before Tom's tip met Ptlani's side purse.

Digging his hands into his pockets, warming them there, he set off down the corridor to the lift. His eyes weighted as he tried to point them ahead, feeling the buzz from the ale more than he should have. But then, he hadn't lied. He really was tired--more tired than he wanted to admit at that point for all they'd had to do in PTC control on the way in. He got a few hours about fifteen hours ago, but a few hours sleep just wasn't doing what it had for him a year or so ago--even a few months ago.

He wondered if Maryl might manage to deal them into Deep Space Nine. Despite the danger, he knew the medical facility there was a very good one.

He'd made the turn into the center corridor and spotted the docks lift when he heard another person turn into the corridor behind him. Heavy steps--booted, and thus not Irtri. Long and slim-footed, even their military preferred a sort of tight slipper that was designed to not impede their natural agility. The pace behind Tom was steady, slowing slightly when he slowed, becoming quieter, too. He could barely hear the person breathing.

Shit, was his first thought, followed by a series of options. He wasn't up for any of them.

So, Tom decided to just stop and turn around to see who it was. Doing just that, a square-set, crop-haired man in a brown leather vest kept on his pace and passed him. Tom saw the tattoo on his forehead and a quick glance his way as the man crossed. Tom cursed under his breath, drew another, then slowly turned to follow the man to the lift.

He should have known they would find him eventually. They obviously knew the ship for all the holes they'd poked into it. They'd wanted something beside their cargo. They'd gone well out of their way to get the Guerdon's attention and had been willing to tempt the attentions of Starfleet to make that happen. *Time to finally find out what*, Tom scowled, catching up with the other man, who had stopped at their destination.

They silently waited for the lift doors to open. Long minutes passed, and the computer quietly apologized for the delay, promising the next pod would be there to take them soon. As far as Tom was concerned, it could take its damn sweet time. Unfortunately, it didn't.

The men stepped inside. Tom moved forward enough to allow the other man in, leaned a shoulder against the wall. When the door swished shut behind him, he turned and looked at the Maquis captain in full view as he commanded the computer, "Delta one fifty-two, no stop."

The lift whirred to life and committed to its command, lowering them into the pit of the station.

"What do you want?" Tom asked at last.

"A few minutes of your time," the Maquis answered, almost friendly in his frankness.

"You've had that."

"I want a little more."

Tom held the man's plain gaze for several seconds, then waved a hand at him. "You probably already know it takes a few minutes to get to the delta one fifty-two."

"I'd like to request your services for a few runs into the DMZ," said the Maquis, his tone unchanged. His stare did not waver but to blink. "I know you're an excellent pilot who knows what he's dealing with, which is what we need. From our past dealings, I know I can trust you to be honest and quiet, for the good of all involved."

"The way I remember it, we had *one* deal and I had no choice but to keep my mouth shut," Tom pointed out. "As for fair, I got what you were willing to give up. So let's try again, Captain: What do you want?"

"I need you to run three shipments of supplies, two to colonies in need of provisions; one to a community we're setting up."

A *base* Tom translated. Food and weapons. Sympathy and business. The man's technique was obvious but impressive. His voice was quiet, slightly yearning and yet upfront. His even stance remained non-threatening, his face was alert but unreadable. Being aware of all this did little to mollify Tom.

"I know deals have been thin for you and others in your classification," the Maquis continued. "It's going to get worse."

Tom coughed an ironic laugh that felt better than it should have. It's been so long since the impulse had grabbed him, he almost couldn't stop. But he did calm, eyeing the other man. "You really have balls to requisition me after what you and others in *your* 'classification' have done to us."

"Yes, I noticed you had a long supply list. I'm sorry for your trouble."

"I'm sure you are."

"We can help you with that."

"You haven't done enough for us already?"

"Obviously not. Moreover, we *can* help you--not only get the parts you need, but guarantee you're not put in your present position again."

"Oh, well, *that's* a comfort."

"You're not interested?"

Tom laughed again. "Sure, I'm interested in keeping my crew alive and my ship in one piece, Captain," he replied condescendingly. "Should I be anything otherwise, or am I just reading you wrong?"

The other captain stilled, his face momentarily hardening as he took in the younger man's tone. But a moment after that, he nodded, regarded him again. "It's been rough for everyone out here lately," he conceded, "and I hope you believe me when I tell you I wish it didn't have to be like this. But it is, and the truth of the matter is that I need someone with your skills and trustworthiness to get some badly needed supplies where I need them to go. You will be paid--not much, but the safety insurance afterwards will pay for itself and some for all the parts you won't need to replace."

Sighing a hard breath, Tom turned to shake his head to himself. "I should've known it'd catch up with me," he said, more to himself, then, releasing a breath, continued, "If you know my record, you know what got me out here. You're more willing to deal with me because you know I'll want to cover my ass all the more. You know Starfleet would love to crucify me again."

"Probably, yes."

"Because you were one of them."

The man paused, then decided to admit to it. "I gave up my commission for the cause, yes."

"Nobility that knows no bounds," Tom muttered. "I'm surprised you'd be seen in the same room with the likes of me."

A silence sat between them as the turbolift changed directions. The Maquis captain wisely did not justify nor try to deny the younger captain's remark. After several seconds, however, he said, "Computer: Correction. Beta ninety." The lift slowed, turned, then began again to its new destination.

"I don't have much of a choice, do I?" Tom understood, grinding his teeth. His bloody boots appeared before his tired eyes, accompanying the pains growing in his tight chest. It'd taken days to get the stains out of the bottom edges and toes, Jerod's blood, and their reclamators weren't functioning. He'd settled on just scrubbing them, over and over, until it looked like ordinary grime. Memories of their last couple of months filed through, all the malfunctions, the attacks, the thin deals: Jerod was gone, and now the Guerdon was dying. Unable to recover fully after the Hugora attack, the ship was starting to come apart at the seams. His engineer had been knocked around badly a few times now, and his contract liaison was about to kill something when she *wasn't* being set on fire; they were broke and tired and needed a break. The Maquis were anxious to provide it after a few months of doling out the need. Tom never hated anyone so much as he did just then. Were he any stronger...

"You have a choice," the Maquis told him. "Accepting my offer is simply the better one."

"And how long will these errands of mercy occupy my ship?"

"I can't see it being too--"

"Come off it!" Tom shot a glare back at the man. "You think I haven't put up with enough of your games already? We haven't done anything to you and wouldn't have touched your business if you hadn't come after us. The least you can do is answer me straight the first time. How long would we be tied to your chain?"

"I don't know," he answered. "I can tell you we never use anyone too long. But the protection is permanent, as long as our dealings stay between us."

"Naturally," replied Tom sourly.

"Your shipments would be double-loaded with your regular cargo. We'll be lending you a small craft for the second and third transfers. According to our scans, your lower bay can house a large shuttle."

Tom smirked. "The one place on my ship left in fine shape."

He ignored that. "The shuttle will be equipped with everything you need to navigate through our territory and evade people you don't want to meet. Your payment will be waiting for you upon delivery. After the third shipment is completed, we may or may not call you again."

The younger captain closed his eyes as he leaned against the bulkhead. Drawing a deep breath, he stuffed down the insult and the rage. He knew he was beat without having raised a finger. With his luck, he'd get caught his first time out and tossed under a brig as an example to all, and that plain-mannered Maquis captain wouldn't care a jot but for what little information Tom might have on him. Once again, he was at the mercy of fortune and could do nothing else but play the round.

The turbolift reached its destination and, with a soft ding, slowed to a stop. Tom opened his eyes. "This involves my crew, too," Tom quietly told him as the doors opened. "They'll have to agree to put themselves on the line before I make any decision."

The other captain shrugged, stepping out of the lift. "That's fine. It's your ship--for now. I'll meet you here tomorrow, same time."

Tom let the hard silence of the lounge press upon him as he drew on his whiskey. He could feel every eye boring into him, but he didn't meet a one. He swished the numbing liquid around in his mouth a little and swallowed. It was tasteless, but it did the job otherwise. It'd been cheap, but he was pleasantly surprised to discover it was good stuff--and effective. He'd needed that to deliver that most recent job offer to his crew.

"This time, I don't have my mind made up," he added quietly. "If we do this and get caught, we all could wind up in a Federation penal facility and possibly have the Guerdon recalled. You have to make up your own minds, and if you want out, you can have a vacation while this is being done. I won't blame you and I promise we'll pick you up when it's over. In any case, you choose."

With that, he finished his glass, set it down with a light clink, then reached over to pour himself another. He knew he wouldn't sleep that night otherwise, his liver be damned. He was more tired than sick just then.

"I guess I'm out, then," said B'Elanna. Her dark, sharp eyes found everyone there, accusing them all for their lack of protest. "That Maquis and his people killed Jerod, and they've been laying waste to the ship ever since. You're damned right I want nothing to do with this captain or any part of their 'cause."

"You won't get any argument from me," Tom told her, finally glancing up.

"But you're considering it," B'Elanna said.

"I have to," he replied. "I'd be a fool not to, the shape we're in. Besides, two of those runs are ones that won't make me sleep any less at night. That part I don't mind, even when I know he stuck it in to sweeten the bargain. The last run, yeah, I'd rather not do."

"You don't actually think they'll leave us at that, though," Maryl stated.

"No way," Tom said, shaking his head. "They'll use us as much as they can before it's a security risk for them. He's in this for more than he's saying, no question about it. They won't care about us as long as we wipe our records, either. We'll never see them come to our defense if we're caught."

"But then," Ridge reiterated, "we'll be insured against attacks later on."

"Which will be our primary means of attracting business in the foreseeable future," Savan noted.

B'Elanna reared her head in disgust. "I can't believe what I'm hearing here," she declared. "Those people killed Jerod! And we're going to *work* with them?"

"Jerod's death," Savan stated, "while most unfortunate, was not their aim. The Maquis wished to damage us and bring us to a state of desperation so we would desire a solution. We are at this point now, and must make a decision that will help us to continue with our only means of income and maintain those among us who were *not* killed."

"Got to give them credit for being obvious," Tom said quietly.

Nadrev hummed a little to himself at that. "Did he specify what the third run would contain?"

"No," Tom admitted. "But I won't be surprised if it's similar to the containers Mesler was carrying." Tom blinked slowly, remembering the Maquis anxiously digging into them on Mesler's ruined barge. "Power, weapons, maybe some building or ship supplies."

"Are they paying us at all?" Maryl asked.

"*Paying* us?" B'Elanna coughed.

"Actually, yeah," Tom told them both, "we'll get a little for our troubles. Enough for a jolt of deuterium, I'd guess."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "That'll come in use when Starfleet catches up with us."

Maryl sighed at her response. "Look, I know where you're going with this, what you're thinking." Glancing over at Nadrev, she could see his face reflecting her own. She returned her attention to the engineer. "But idealism's not going to save *anyone* out here."

"I never said it should," she returned.

"Then you'll know that sometimes you have to deal with these kinds of people," Maryl pressed. "It's not right or noble, I know. But look at my face. --B'Elanna, look at my eyes. I *know* it's not what we *should* do. But this deal will keep us going until the Federation makes a move, one way or another, and it will keep the Maquis off our backs until this all gets straightened out. Plus, it's helping people like Jerod's family, which I personally have no problem with. The Maquis are assholes who got Jerod killed and are ripping us apart. No one's forgetting that. But the colonists are the real victims, having to stick it out in a bad place because of some damned line drawn in the sky. We're just uncomfortable compared to them."

"But we'll be helping the Maquis, too."

"Yes. And helping ourselves while we're at it. It's a bad trade, but we can't choose that right now."

"We're dead in the water if we get hit again," Ridge said, uncharacteristically sedate. The big man sat slumped back in his seat next to his wife, rubbing his sore hands together. "We can't afford another attack."

"Which will happen as soon as we leave Irtri territory if we don't agree," Nadrev added.

"You still have the right to opt out, B'Elanna," Tom told her. "You don't have to be on board when this happens; I'll document that."

Her stare darted back to him. "Yes, I *do* have to be here," she snapped. "I'm the engineer. I don't have to like your decisions, but that doesn't mean I need to abandon ship every time that happens."

A pause. Tom didn't fill it but to hold her glare a few seconds before looking at his crew again. "Anyone else?"

No one spoke.

"I'm assuming you're all willing to go through with this, then?"

"We need to," Maryl said, none too pleased about it, but equally resigned.

Tom snorted softly. "I'd hoped I'd have more fight, actually," he said and finished his drink in several long swallows. With that, he pushed himself to stand. "I'm off for the night."

He left his glass and bottle on the table, not looking back.

They took that as their cue to break it off, too. Ridge dutifully took Tom's glassware to the reclamator; Nadrev and Savan left for the bridge. Maryl began to wait for Ridge, but saw B'Elanna striding out, turning right for the engine room. Wordlessly, the Bajoran slipped out to catch up. Glancing up at her, the engineer blew a short breath and looked forward again.

"What?" she asked.

"I think you need to give Tom a break," Maryl said.

"A break? For helping the people that killed Jerod?" She shook her head bitterly. "I can't believe he gave that captain his time."

"I really doubt it was Tom's choice."

"He *did* have a choice not to betray someone I thought was his friend."

"Yes, he was his friend," Maryl returned. "Ridge and I knew Jerod the longest, but he and Tom *were* good friends. Jerod being blown to pieces wasn't something Tom needed to have happen. Really, B'Elanna, it's the last thing he needed to see. Tom's also lost a good chunk of his dignity trying to protect us, making this deal. He's going to hate cooperating with those people more than you ever will, and he won't feel better about it even after it's over."

B'Elanna shrugged. "I'll admit he's getting us out of the rut we've been stuck in."

Maryl scowled at her. "What's wrong with you, B'Elanna? Did you and Jerod have something going on that I didn't know about? You wish Tom got it instead?"

"No!" she responded, then drove her stare away as she blew a breath. "It's not...We had a disagreement at Andal."

"I remember. You've been sore about it since."

"And he hasn't," she scoffed.

"No," Maryl countered, "he's been busy trying to keep us in one piece. He's got you paid back, too, right? Do the math and you'll *know* he had to have called in some debts to do it so soon. However he did it, he's honored his promise, so it's over with in his book."

"Yeah, I'll bet it is."

Turning into her office, Maryl was glad to see the engineer follow. So young, she reminded herself, not for the first time that day. B'Elanna's talents and confidence in her expertise made it easy to forget she wasn't halfway through her twenties yet. Reading people obviously was not the woman's forte. Turning in the middle of the room, Maryl squarely held her stare. "Look, I'm usually the *last* one to take pity on Paris, but I know he'll always blame himself for Jerod--for considering the deal in the first place. He doesn't need our help feeling like crap about it, especially when it wasn't his fault and we all agreed to it."

B'Elanna frowned at the truth of that. "Everyone but you."

"I said yes in the end," Maryl pointed out, "and gladly took my share of the earnings. Tom did the best he could to follow through, B'Elanna. Now he's doing all he can to keep it from happening again. I can't say I'd give up so much pride to protect this lousy rig, so I have to respect that he will. Give him a break and get past whatever your problem is, trust him to keep us alive out here."

With that, Maryl connected with the Irtrin contract delegate. The engineer left her to her work.

Rubbing uselessly at his aching back with a thumb, Tom looked the Maquis in the eyes as soon as the turbolift doors opened. The other man's brow rose. The rest of his face seemed set in stone.

"Yes," Tom said simply.

Relaxing slightly, the other man tried not to look too pleased. "My name is Chakotay. I'll transmit the

codes and directions you'll need. Have your engineer prepare your computer for some dumps."

"Yeah, I don't want any tracks either," Tom said.

"We'll contact you as soon as you're ready. Where is your route taking you?"

"We're headed back to Kytrel by way of Miga."

Chakotay nodded. "Good. You'll have a week to rendezvous with us after we confirm contact."

With that, the Maquis captain turned and disappeared into the first cross-corridor.

"I never thought I'd wish a man dead," Tom muttered as the lift doors closed again.

"I almost wish I had a god to damn," remarked Dejin as she strode into the wrecked midsection of the engine room and stopped at the edge of a steaming pit.

Halfway into the deck's plasma control assembly, B'Elanna wiped her wet brow with a filthy hand then turned to see the trader. "I heard you were coming through today."

"I just transported a flat of parts to your main bay," she told her. "Tom grabbed me two minutes after I got here."

"I hope he got what we need."

"He said it was Ridge's list, some of the items he couldn't get through the usual routes here." There, Dejin shrugged for what it was worth. "I'm sorry you've been picked apart so readily."

B'Elanna nodded her thanks, not wanting to discuss it further. "Maryl says she's only dealing with what the Maquis won't be looking for so we can have a break. I don't know that'll be possible for long."

"I'll be surprised if it is," Dejin admitted. "But if you can, head out to the outer Migan scrap yards. You might find something useful, collect some of the larger items you might need and refurbish them. You might buy yourself a better break later on."

"That's a good idea. Thanks." The engineer pulled herself up to sit on the edge of the deck. Reaching out to her kit, she ran a sonic wand over each hand and her face, removing most of the grime with a few concerted sweeps. A neat little device, she'd picked it up from a Lasaran vendor on Podala after signing off on their waste dump. She knew she needed to conserve her funds, but couldn't resist the promise of getting suitably clean in seconds and without having to go any further than her tool kit. After using it the first time, she wondered what she'd ever done without one and how she'd managed not to hear about it before.

"Are you off?" Dejin queried.

"No. We need these systems online before we break dock at twenty-two hundred. But I want to see what you've brought."

With a nod, the other woman backed up enough to give B'Elanna room to fall in by her side. Together, they started walking towards the port ladder. Glancing over, Dejin commented, "Tom's looking pretty rough."

B'Elanna shrugged. "Is he?"

"You're here every day; maybe you don't see it. He looks sick." Pausing, she tried again. "His mood wasn't much better. Being targeted isn't much fun, but I think he's trying to make up for something here now, too."

That managed to pique B'Elanna's curiosity. "What do you mean?"

"I mean it's interesting that you hoped he'd bought the right parts. He seemed especially concerned that you got what you needed."

"What's so wrong with that?"

"Nothing, but Tom usually doesn't care whom he's getting the parts for, just that they get to the right place--and don't tell him I told you that."

"Then why tell me at all?"

Dejin managed a grin at that. "You've really been riding him, haven't you?"

B'Elanna colored at the truth of it and hoped the wily trader couldn't see it in the dim lights as she tuned to get on the ladder. Climbing down, she waited for the other woman to come down before answering. "We've had some disagreements, but I wouldn't say it's been an all-out war. I hardly even talk to him right now."

"Hmm." Waving her ahead, Dejin let B'Elanna set the pace that time. "Look, I wouldn't bother if I wasn't concerned about him and about what could happen to all of you. The Federation not taking care of the Maquis and jumping on the Cardassian problem is only going to exacerbate the problem in the end. We're all at risk because of it."

"Things will get resolved eventually," B'Elanna told her, "there and here." She didn't bother telling how it would be resolved on her end, at least, in only a couple more months. As for the other matter, she wouldn't have to worry about it after the first was done with.

Dejin didn't ask for details on it, either, but said, "The Maquis are a pretty tough group. Tom had a bad feeling about the colonies when we talked here last year, so it only figures he'd be a magnet now. He's not alone."

They passed into the aft loading bay, where a neat flat of equipment and parts sat just off the loading dock, waiting to be inventoried. Coming around it, B'Elanna could tell someone had begun to--likely Ridge. He had a habit of leaving his tricorder on top of the next thing he needed to get to, like a bookmark. Respectful of his work, B'Elanna passed it to tap into the central console for the input list.

"So how do *you* see it playing out?" she asked as she worked, correctly assuming Dejin wanted to tell her.

"Money's tight, and it'll only get worse all around the region," the trader said, leaning back against an adjacent support pylon, "especially for us politically unaffiliated traders. Worse than that, without affiliation and as unremarkable as it is, you can bet the Guerdon will eventually be a target for

persuasion."

B'Elanna hid her response behind a concerted scrolling effort.

"One of these days," Dejin continued, "Tom will have to decide what's more important, his living or his pride. He captains your ship, but he has a pilot's sensibility. That's going to be a tough choice for him, not to mention the rest of you."

B'Elanna eyed her. "You sound like someone who's having to make that decision, herself."

Dejin returned the attention in a glance. "Almost. But not yet."

"Yet?"

Dejin shrugged. "Starving people will eat live rats to survive, B'Elanna. When you know that as a fact, the last thing you'll do is let yourself get to that point--if you've got any sense, that is. They've put the pressure on my resources, been tracking me and my affiliates from inside the DMZ; their eyes are all over these stations and they know every deal, every opportunity. When they see something they want, I have no doubt they'll try for it, one way or another. If it comes down to making a deal or losing my ship and my crew...I'll make the deal." Dejin's eyes closed. "I'm not proud to admit it, but I refuse to deny what's more important to me." She opened her eyes again to stare directly at the young engineer. "Pride isn't worth a pile of crap when you're cleaning blood off your bulkheads."

"I guess not," B'Elanna whispered.

"Tom knows that better than anyone right now."

She sawed her molars together as she looked up again. Dejin seemed glad to see her point sink in.

"My whole life is on this route, B'Elanna. Like the colonists, I made everything I have out here, and I love it. Even Tom has more back on Earth than I do anywhere outside this region and I can't see him going back to that life, either."

Ridge and Nadrev came into the bay, the former detailing where they needed the duranium set screws presently and how much should be stowed. They both gave B'Elanna a nod as they picked up another tray each. Distractedly, she nodded back.

"Honestly, I don't care what they think they're fighting for," Dejin continued as her stare darted around at the loading bay. The back walls were still smeared with gray soot; blackened rubble in haphazard piles, yet to be sold for scrap. "I really don't anymore. I used to feel some sympathy for their plight; but that they'd track the circuit and gun freighters down, kill us as if *we're* the problem, rob us as if *we'd* been attacking their damned planets..." Dejin pushed herself off the wall, shaking her head. "I need to stop talking about this. I'm just getting pissed off."

B'Elanna nodded. "You can help me finish up the plasma control valves, if you want to work some of it out. We have the right rods now, if you want grab a box."

Dejin grinned. "It'd be my pleasure, B'Elanna. --And thank you."

"I didn't do anything," she dismissed.

"Yeah, you did. --It's okay. It doesn't always have to be on purpose." Patting the engineer's shoulder, Dejin started with B'Elanna back to the main engine room.

Leaning back in his uncomfortable chair, his robe tied lazily around his waist, Tom looked out at the stars as he blindly reached for his glass. Nothing was going to numb it that night, but maybe he could knock himself out. Then again, how *could* he sleep when he'd just destroyed everything he'd worked so hard to build on that rickety brick of a ship he'd not wanted in the first place?

Before the Ligarán deal, they'd been doing pretty well. Even when Livich left them in a lurch, they'd gotten by. They picked up B'Elanna--literally--they had some good, regular deals, and the crew was finally clicking all together, even with him. Naturally, the temptation of some excitement and a huge paycheck lived up to the "too good to be true" standard and they were paying for it in tenfold--and would continue to, now. Now, he'd dealt with the devil.

One possible result of that deal could send him as low as he could possibly get. He breathed a silent laugh. *As if getting cashiered didn't make Dad mad enough. Getting thrown in jail for helping out terrorists would grab the gold.*

He drank again. He could hardly feel the liquid go down.

He'd just taken a shower. Coming out of the stall, he had been startled at his appearance when he passed by the mirror. Why he hadn't noticed before the changes in his body, he couldn't figure. Why only Savan had bothered to point it out troubled him. The crew either didn't care, didn't notice, or didn't want to say anything about it to him. He generally didn't give a damn, and though he liked that they didn't either, it did sting a little. But then, he'd been feeling a tad insecure of late.

There was something ever comforting about staring at the stars, though. Always there, always before him, beautiful, clean, uncomplicated: They always reminded him that there was something else, somewhere else, more than what he had.

He ran his finger over the lip of his cool, moist glass, breathing into the steady haze in his head, which grew, circled then radiated out. His shoulders relaxed a little.

A *chirp* rang out behind him, but he didn't turn towards it. "Open," he commanded and heard a swish and footsteps a moment later.

"Letting it all hang out again, Paris?" queried Dejin quietly as she slid a chair across the room, stopping on the other side of his table. Coming around, she set a bottle of wine on the table and pulled out her own glass as she sat. Reaching over, she threw his robe over his opposite leg. "I don't need to be looking at all that."

He coughed a little laugh. "What's up?"

"I don't feel like drinking alone," she shrugged, pouring her glass, "and I'm not much for the lounge atmosphere. The Irtri have the best trade station in eight sectors, but I feel like I'm imbibing in a sickbay here." Leaning back with her drink, she shared his view of the stars. "I just left your little engineer... --In the engine room, Tom, but thanks."

His responding grin came and went within the same breath. "How's it going back there?"

"She's all done. I gave her a hand." She smiled. "Helps to keep in touch with our subordinates sometimes. Keeps us humble, doesn't it?"

"I'm getting the feeling you're trying to cheer me up," he said cautiously.

She got the point. "Are you sick?"

He drew a fresh sip, rolled it over his tongue before swallowing. "Yeah. Savan's insisting I see a Human specialist. We'll get to one in a few more stops."

"You're getting it taken care of, then?"

"Yeah. I need to."

Dejin nodded, leaned back. "Okay. Thanks for telling me."

Tom drew a slow breath, the corners of his mouth turning up again. That time, it stayed. "Thanks for asking."

It'd be ten days to Miga at warp six-point five; after their pickups there, they'd be off for Kytrel. Away from the border for a little while, the crew saw it almost like a vacation. Maryl, continued to press for the Tagran deal via some old contacts at Ulinas and Ridge was working almost full-time with Nadrev while they weren't doing their usual jobs. Savan continued to spend the bulk of her shift running constant checks on the systems, averting what she could from the bridge and alerting the engine room of failures of malfunctions she couldn't fix remotely. The malfunctions remained common, but without new sores in the side of the ship, they had been better able to focus on them.

For B'Elanna, the run would give her time for work she was anxious to start. Along with suggesting the scrap yards, Dejin had scrounged up some parts in her back room and sold them to B'Elanna at a cut rate. "No one else is going to buy them," Dejin dismissed. It wouldn't fix the bulk of their major problems, but they could hold stave off some of their symptoms, which in B'Elanna's book was half the battle.

They could relax to know the Maquis wouldn't bother them that time, going out or coming in. B'Elanna cursed her relief, cursed the quiet but busy atmosphere she'd enjoyed before the Ligarán deal and now had again. No one else seemed to feel guilty about it. She wondered why she did. She wondered why, every time she thought about their upcoming deal with the Maquis, she could hear the last thing Jerod had said to her, over the scratchy comm and the phaser blasts. "*On my way!*" he'd called. She believed he'd tried.

Then she wondered why she was being so bothered by it. She hadn't known him long...

Shaking her head at her spinning thoughts, B'Elanna wandered starboard. She'd heard Ridge tell his wife Tom was in the aft parts bay.

She hadn't seen him since the meeting and hadn't thought about it at first. Maryl's little lecture and Dejin's follow-up started playing on her mind, though. She didn't *need* to be so damned determined to leave when he'd spoken in anger, in an argument. He might reconsider, now that they weren't being blown to hell between stations. It was her mistake to blame him for Jerod's death and for the initiator malfunction, for the ship's bad timing... Then again, the timing wasn't actually that bad after all. Remembering that the same captain that'd met Tom on Mesler's barge was the one who'd attacked them on the DMZ border and now was exacting another advantage made her pity her captain a little. Indeed,

Tom had been fighting as hard as anyone to keep them alive; there weren't many options if he wanted to keep doing that.

She was still angry with him, but she was coming to understand his feelings better.

Another half of a battle, she figured as she slowed, then peered inside the old parts room.

Much like the last time she'd found him there, he was kneeling on the bare deck, hunched over one side of a plasma injector, which sat alongside the impulse engine. The shell of the tiny shuttle had been moved to the back corner, and all the other systems remained in neat piles around the room. His coat was in a lump near the door. A flask lay at his ankle.

His breathing was barely audible; in the cool white light of the room, she noticed for the first time how ill he looked. From day one, he had a tendency to be a little rumpled and sometimes haggard after a hard night. This was different. His eyes were sunken and dark and his skin was sallow. He must have lost weight, as without his coat, she could see how his clothes hung upon him, the tendons in his hands. She wondered how long he'd been like that and she hadn't noticed. Certainly, she'd been busy and distracted, but he really did look like hell.

She could see the stress and his sadness in his automated movements, in his quiet, alone in the middle of the room. She stepped in quietly, but her boot heels gave her away. He stopped, but didn't look back. B'Elanna took a few more steps in.

"Mind some company?" she asked, poised to leave on his word. None came. "I happen to know something about shuttle engines. They can be twitchy."

Looking up, seeing an expression as quiet and plain as her tone, Tom blinked, shrugged then wordlessly slid the tools around so she could start on the other injector.

B'Elanna moved closer and knelt on the deck on the other side of the tray. Slowly, they began to work in tandem, pulling parts off the assembly, gradually revealing the smaller machinery within. B'Elanna reached over and wrapped her fingers around a microoptic driver.

"I'll bring my tools next time," she offered, her eyes on the upper valve as she set the end of the tool carefully into it, "if you want."

Stealing a glance her way, he reached down for another driver then continued his work. "Sure."

VII. Ship Leave

The ping opened his eyes.

The Guerdon had come and gone from Miga, where they had a small cargo drop, a little pay and five hours to poke around the nearby floating scrap yard to pick up as many parts as could be possibly refurbished. They didn't get much. It was seven and a half light years to Kytrel, where they'd be taking on more cargo, some of which was expected at Sicira. After that, they were expected back at Deep Space Nine for a large drop off and refueling. Backtracking like that was unusual for them, but nobody was complaining. It was big shipment and they would gladly waste their time if it meant getting a solid payment. Also, being at a Federation base meant they could pick up some cheap parts, plus all the newsfeeds and newly published technical reports. B'Elanna, who had taken over all of that downloading without asking not long after they left Andal, read both feeds voraciously.

All of that was a month away, though. For the moment, they had the puddle jump between Miga and Kytrel, during which the ship became so quiet, Tom's eyes closed and he all but fell asleep. It'd been a long time since they'd had such an uneventful run, and he'd been having periods where he really felt like he needed to catch up a few years of bad sleep. Thankfully, he'd been able to start on that. Whatever Torres was doing was working for the moment, because they'd not had a malfunction since getting to Miga. Despite knowing why they *weren't* being bothered by external forces, it was a welcome respite. Then he heard the ping.

"Tom, we're receiving an incoming message," Maryl said.

Tom looked at his console. They were still about two light years away from Kytrel. "The message is encrypted," Savan added. "I will require a minute to unscramble it."

His eyes closed again, not needing to guess, now, who it was. Drawing a breath, rolling his back a little to stave off the soreness, he waited for Savan to do her work. He forced the sounds of the humming engine to fill his ears, tried not to think about what he'd gotten them into this time, and tried not to think how he'd screwed Jerod's memory to save their butts.

Finally, the viewscreen activated, scrambled, pixilated, then re-knit the signal. The tan, tattooed Maquis captain filled the screen. He looked directly at Tom; his mouth remained straight. He looked just like he did every other time Tom had seen him.

"You're en route to Kytrel," Chakotay said, not asking.

"Yeah," Tom answered.

"There'll be an agent called Marcetti there, in section dikati-moro. Have your liaison meet with him and accept his deal. You'll find your directions there. You have a week upon leaving Kytrel to deliver your shipment."

"Thanks," Tom replied, holding the other man's stare until it re-scrambled and disappeared into the black. "You got that, Maryl?"

"Marcetti, dikati-moro." She pursed her lips. "Nothing to it."

"Yeah, just a quick violation of everything I didn't want to get into. No problem at all."

Maryl snorted. "Yes, but there's no sense in complaining about it now, is there?"

"Sooner we get it done, the better it'll be," Tom agreed and pushed himself to stand. He groaned tightly as he straightened, but rolled at the waist again before turning for the step. "I'm getting some coffee."

Savan followed him with her eyes, but said nothing.

"Thank God you're here! Finally!"

"I knew he'd keep his promise! Please, welcome! Welcome to Ovar!"

"Thanks." Trying not to look too shocked as he recovered from the blast of cold air, Tom nodded back through the deck four aft dock to Ridge, who with B'Elanna had loaded up the first flat of supplies onto their anti-grav. At his signal, Ridge pushed the flat out onto the cold, gray dirt of Ovar-Three, where a crowd of hungry faces in well-worn thermal gear awaited them. Obviously Federation, mostly Human, they descended on the rations and medical supplies like locusts, tearing into each shell as soon as it was unlocked and offloading it to the correct group of people. Beyond, at the edge of the landing site, a few small faces in thick hoods peeked out over the lower walls.

Tom's stomach sank.

"Thank you so much, Captain," said a woman, looking up as she pulled open a medical crate. Her face was clean and gaunt, her eyes a little wild above her thick collar. She looked pregnant. "We didn't know what we'd do without this shipment."

A quick nod was his only reply. Beyond the landing site was a typical Federation colony center, cleanly lined architecture in plate stucco and fabricated rock, some firs and a filtered yellow sun. The housing was burrowed in that constructed town, he could tell. There were laser blasts in the façades and the lights were flickering. Very little grew outside the community. It seemed too cold to grow anything of use and the gray dirt looked hard as stone. Any growing would probably happen inside heated greenhouses. Solar arrays on a world like that could go only so far. They'd always had to rely on outside support and obviously hadn't been getting it.

Three colonists were already running back to a central building with a crate of power packs. Tom guessed by the layout of the place that it was their medical facility.

Glancing over, Tom caught Ridge's attention. "Get the rest," he ordered quietly.

The technician snapped up. "Yeah. Going right now."

B'Elanna took another look at the thankful throng before hurrying back to join him, rubbing her hands to ward off the hard, dry cold. Her eyes quickly scanned over the labels. "This one first," she said briskly.

"Good idea," Ridge agreed, no more enamored by the weather.

Tom remained planted on the gangway, leaning against the lift strut as the other flats were brought out, one by one. Each was cleared within a couple minutes. Beside him, he heard a sigh escape Maryl. He couldn't blame her at all, there. She'd grown up with far worse, on a mining moon somewhere around Bajor; she probably never knew what relief meant until Ridge and a few young misfits from Felis snuck her and two others off that world beneath the Cardassians' noses. She spent her entire exile smuggling supplies back to her siblings and aunts via the Zarilari agent who'd captained the escape ship. She paid him to relocate them to Bajor, too, when the occupation finally ended, and had since been largely supporting them as they settled and were reeducated.

Unlike Maryl and her family, though, those colonists had every opportunity to get out of their situation. Sure, he'd be sore if someone told him he had to give up his house and living. If someone told him one day he had to give up the Guerdon and go back to Earth to find something else to do, he would never just comply. But that was his own life he was looking after. That the colonists would let their children endure that and the potential horror of starvation when they didn't have to disgusted him without excuse.

"Yeah, he's good," Tom nodded.

"Who?" Maryl asked, not looking at him.

"Captain Chakotay." He too continued to watch the people eagerly dig in to the crates as Ridge pushed them out of the hatch and B'Elanna unlocked them. "Remember what I said at Irtrin? He gave us a humanitarian run to make us pity these people, make it easier to do the other deals...make it seem worth it, maybe do some recruiting."

"Well, we knew we didn't mind helping these people when you pitched it to us," Maryl shrugged.

"Yeah, but you're not really feeling it over a channel. You know that as well as anyone. He bet that we'd feel it once we got here, make us more willing to ship his weapons, help the cause. He's played us as easily as he did at Hugora, just this time with our sympathies." Tom snorted humorlessly. "He's probably got a whole stockpile of explosives for us to smuggle. They know the Guerdon's hold specs by now; he knows we have great smuggling potential. He just needed to warm us up to it. He's a pro."

Stepping back as Ridge set a large case onto four thinly gloved hands, B'Elanna caught the comments. She blew a breath to ward off the resulting crush in her chest. It'd worked on her. Glancing back and seeing Tom's face, despite his cynicism, she could tell it'd worked on him, too.

"That bastard," she growled to herself as she continued to unhook the flat supports. She worked quickly as her hands grew clumsy with cold and distraction. She couldn't look at those colonists, now, who'd been used as handily as she and the others had been. *At least those vultures managed to get them some of what they needed in the bargain*, she reasoned to herself, frowning, *just like us*. Letting that thought process only served to anger her more.

"You need a hand?" Ridge asked, seeing her pause.

"No," she responded, moving quickly to free the rest of the crates. "I just want to get off this ball, get

back to what we *won't* get arrested for."

"We can do that now," Tom said as the last of the supplies were carried off the flat and towards the town. He motioned to Ridge to grab the anti-grav as he signaled a couple of older men on the platform. Though busy, they seemed a little surprised to see the ship packing up to go already. "Good luck," he told them, meaning it, though he didn't bother with much else as he turned away from the view.

He slapped the lift as soon as Maryl had come all the way in and breathed deeply as the warm air re-circulated. Reaching over to a comm panel, he tapped it and said, "Savan, we're done. Scan for activity and start us off. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Scanning now," she replied.

"B'Elanna, you know the plan."

She nodded, busying herself with securing the anti-grav truck. "Yes, memory wipe as soon as we're back on our trajectory. I know what to do."

"Dump it twice, just in case," he told her, heading across the bay towards Nadrev, who he knew would help her with that job. He wasn't halfway there, however, before his engineer's curse bounced back at him.

"Damnit! Now *this* piece of junk is blown, too!" She glared at the sizzling platform and might have kicked if she felt like having Savan chase her down yet again. "Don't these things ever work for more than a few months?!"

Ridge, standing with Maryl nearby, drew a big sigh. "Not really, but I do." He offered B'Elanna an encouraging grin. "We might be able to fix it, anyway."

"With what?" she demanded. "Everything that *might* produce an anti-grav field is locked up in the deflector assembly right now! And we barely have enough for that!" She threw up her hands and stalked back to the deck lift. "It'll be a good wipe," she said across to Tom.

Tom looked over at Nadrev. "You want to play with it?"

"I'll try," he answered, his eyes widening once the idea became a practical concern.

Tom shrugged off the Bajoran's uncertainty. "It can't get any worse." With that, he started off toward the ladders, calling behind him, "Let me know what parts you need and I'll see if we've got it in scrap in fifteen-forward."

"Okay, thanks," he acknowledged as he went the other way to follow B'Elanna.

Continuing starboard, Tom rounded a bulkhead for the aft access ladder. Reaching up to a rung, however, he suddenly had to stop then grab the rung with both hands as it hit. He pulled a long breath between his clenched teeth and set his forehead on the metal bar, swallowing hard against his rising bile. The pain spread throughout his midsection that time, radiating out into his arms and inner thighs. His heart began to beat hard, partly for the pain, partly for fear.

He honestly hadn't expected the fear, but it was there, and it was genuine.

It was another twenty-three days to Deep Space Nine if they *didn't* break down again. They had a drop off at Sicira, then a straight shot to the Federation station with a supply of krellide cells and sonodanite,

among other regular bio-transfers. They had a five-day cushion.

Like most outside the Federation, Sicira had relatively limited medical facilities, but he started thinking they could contact Deep Space Nine, have the doctor there walk them through whatever needed to be done. Procedures had been done before like that. The Sicirans weren't primitive. He knew the new doctor at Deep Space Nine was adept. All Tom knew was that there was no way he'd be able to take another few weeks of that. The throes were getting worse and Savan's analgesic cocktail was increasingly futile.

Dragging another lungful of air, his limbs grew hot, his chest quivered with stress, and he knew for a fact he was dying.

He suddenly realized exactly how he felt about that.

B'Elanna could have sworn within another day that the anti-grav truck had somehow been hooked up to the Guerdon's systems.

Almost as soon as she completed the memory wipe and they were back on their previous trajectory, the entire shield array collapsed, leaving secondary deflectors just strong enough for general debris repelling. Then power grids failed on deck four, leaving it on emergency power and its forward section deck three's self-contained hold section black, cold and nearly airless. Unfortunately, the main control assembly was in one of the affected areas of deck four. B'Elanna shook her head to think some idiot Bolian had *thought* to put it there. Finally, the IPS tanks froze up, forcing her to abandon the other repairs for the grease bucket she'd now rebuilt three times.

"No, *don't* tell me about the oysters!"

Ridge chuckled, holding the transfer bracket back as B'Elanna growled and sank into the deuterium line controls. "You really oughta' try them sometime, B'Elanna. They're good!"

"I'd beam the new replicator into a scrap yard sooner," she returned, willing away the turn in her stomach as she cut off, then pulled the fried line housings. "How in the hell did these just blow out?" she wondered aloud, then scanned the line itself. "We weren't even using the..."

Ridge looked curiously down at her face as she thought out the jigsaw, then turned her head up to stare at the coolant tubes on the other side of the impulse drive coils. "Yeah?"

"They wouldn't have..." she mumbled, stopping again as it came together in her mind. Blinking, she looked up at the tech. "Ridge, is there a way to secure that? You shouldn't be wasting your time there and I need to look something up."

"What's up?"

"Another bad configuration. I'm surprised I hadn't seen it until now, considering how many times I've been down here."

Ridge grinned. "I'm not." Letting her get out of the pit, Ridge gently lowered the bracket. "Yell when you need me back," he said. "I'll go see how Nadrev's coming along with the computer."

Wiping her hands on her jumpsuit, brushing the hair out of her eyes, B'Elanna nodded and moved forward to her console. She tapped into the revised power configuration tables. Since coming on board, she had been regularly updating them, mainly so *she* could remember what had been botched up since the ship had been built, if it wasn't badly planned to begin with. There was just so much of it; she knew why Tom's wish list had been so painfully detailed.

Angling into the impulse drive, she added the routing pattern she'd just suspected and ran a few tests to make sure her fix wouldn't burn out another power relay. There was no guarantee it wouldn't, but it was good to check.

"*How's it coming, B'Elanna?*" It was Tom--barely. He sounded like he was talking in his sleep.

Torres' stare didn't divert from her readings. "I'm running a solution. Do you need the impulse drive now?"

"*No,*" he answered. "*I'm getting some strange power fluctuations in the GNS and wondered if they were connected.*"

She scowled and stepped over to her other console to pull up the system. "Are you on manual flight control?"

"*Not yet, but...*" He coughed, then cleared his throat. "*But I can see us going there and down to impulse if the computer can't figure out where we're going.*"

"Hold on, it's coming back now." But the diagnostic spit back precisely what she didn't want to see. She growled under her breath. "When do we arrive at Sicira?"

"*Three more days at this pace.*"

"Then it's three days," she told him. "We're not going any faster. Keep your eyes on the input and let's hope it doesn't fail before we get there. I'll try to buffer it before we get there."

"*I can do it,*" Tom offered.

B'Elanna's brow furrowed to consider that. Of late, Tom seemed in no condition to be squashed up under navigation control again. She'd wanted to somehow find out what was going on with him, but knew Savan wouldn't say anything. She wasn't about to ask Tom herself. Either way, she didn't want to have to pull him out of there. "Ridge is headed down that way now. It won't take him long to get it in shape. Besides, if it has to go to manual, you should be at the controls."

"*You're right. Let me know how that--*"

Suddenly, B'Elanna's panel died. "What the--" A moment later, the warp drive groaned to a stop, followed by what looked like a shipwide power failure. As though a switch had been flipped, everything stopped. Only the hissing coolant pipes and groans of a quickly cooling warp core echoed through the grates.

For several seconds the whole ship went pitch black.

"What the hell *now*?!" she spat in the dark. "And where are the secondar--"

As if on cue, secondary power petered on. Her station remained black, but she felt a welcome gush of air and had enough light to see where she needed to go. Torres moved quickly to the main engine room

corridor. "Ridge!" she called astern.

"Right here, Cricket!" he called back from far into the back access walks. Without any engine noise, his voice echoed clearly forward. "Got Nadrev with me! What happened--besides the obvious?"

"I don't know yet. Do you have your tricorder?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Stay there, then, and see if you can get anything out of the computer," she ordered. "None of my consoles came back up. I need to get to the bridge and see if theirs did. Secondary power defaults to their command center."

"We'll be waiting!"

Growling to herself at that latest thing she'd have to repair--whatever it was that time--B'Elanna moved carefully back to her console, then across to the access stairway. The lights were only on at half power, so she reminded herself to be careful. The last thing she needed on top of everything else was yet another knee injury. Meanwhile, she furiously tried to picture what she'd been looking at when the power went out, the navigation control readings as they corresponded with the impulse fuel control lines. Neither--or even both--should have made the ship suffer a full power failure.

At least the secondaries are working...for now.

"Still a piece of junk," she said under her breath as she came to the upper deck. Striding across the overhang, she came to the half-lit center corridor and turned quickly to get into it.

"Oof!" she coughed. She bumped straight into someone's chest and felt two strong hands brace her arms. She looked up and squinted at the outline of a head. Then, the smell hit her. "Tom?"

"You're okay?" he asked in a breath, letting her go.

"Yes," she responded, cursorily brushing off her arms as she backed off from him. Tom was a lean man, but his grip had memory. "Is there any control on the bridge?"

"Savan's panel is operational," he told her. "Everything else is dead. She's trying to get the subspace comm online."

B'Elanna set the pace when he turned to walk back to the bridge. "I might be able to reroute the system through an emergency power relay. It's behind Maryl's station."

"We were counting on that," Tom said, sounding relieved and angry at the same time. "Any guess what happened this time?" "Not yet."

"Know where Ridge and Nadrev are?"

"They're back in the subprocessor grid. They know I'm here. Who's with you?"

"Savan," Tom answered, managing a grin, there. "Maryl's sleeping through all the fun this time."

She pursed her lips for want of a smile. Tom was probably quite glad the Bajoran was nestled in her blankets just then. Considering where she'd have to be working, B'Elanna had to agree with that sentiment. She considered Maryl a friend, but the woman could crawl up anyone's nerves when she was

inconvenienced.

Looking around at the barely activated lights and feeling the chill of the half-powered heating system, Tom said, "Guess I had to pay for thinking we were getting back on track."

"This is no one's fault," B'Elanna told him flatly.

Tom gazed down at her, slowing his pace a little. They arrived at the bridge before he spoke again, however. "We might not need to seal the decks off after all," he said to Savan as he moved to the other side of her station.

"I would not be able to perform it remotely regardless," replied the Vulcan.

"So I gathered. Go help her. I'll keep my eyes on your board."

As he neared, Savan immediately vacated her position. Tom leaned against the console and let his eyes fall across the half-dimmed panel with a long sigh. *Why do I bother?* he asked himself as B'Elanna pried off the partition behind Maryl's station. *I'm sure there's a scrap clause somewhere in that damned contract.*

Savan came out briefly to retrieve the tool set from behind Jerod's station... "Nadrev's station," Tom corrected himself quietly between his teeth. He listened to B'Elanna rattle off a list of technical fixes he wasn't going to bother understanding as long as one of them worked. It was bad enough they'd have to call for help, particularly from the Sicirans. For once, he'd be avoiding the bar. He'd catch nothing but hell there. For that matter, the game room was lousy.

Bending his head, Tom killed the distraction, much as he needed it. He'd worry about the station hacks when--if--he finally got there...much as they would be right about his ship. It was falling apart.

Everything was falling apart.

"I've almost got it," B'Elanna said from within the bulkhead. "Savan, reconnect the one-fifty-two in junction gamma."

"That is the primary power intake relay for the system you were attempting to repair."

"And it's not coming up any sooner than our subspace transceiver," B'Elanna replied coolly. "Reconnect it."

Several seconds passed, then suddenly the bridge's power grinded up to full emergency status. Tom felt blood return to his limbs. "That did it," he announced, quickly scanning what systems the computer was reading as it reinitialized. "Engines are down, shields--damn, the whole deflector is offline." He tapped in a request. "The comm's coming back up." He nodded tightly. "We're still in it deep, but we can make a call."

At least the main computer isn't toasted--yet, he silently added.

He moved away as Savan returned and B'Elanna came out to check the comm console. Leaning over his station, he tried to see where they were without success. He had been studying the navigational array before the blackout.

Then Tom heard the ping and immediately blew his breath. "Goddamnit, he *can't* be contacting us now!" he snapped.

"We are receiving an incoming message," Savan confirmed.

"Tell him to go to hell."

"That would not be wise," Savan replied. "However--"

"If you won't, I will," B'Elanna grumbled, still working the power distribution.

"It is not Captain Chakotay," Savan informed them. "It is a Starfleet signature."

Both Tom and B'Elanna's heads popped up. The former felt his chest shrink with dread; the latter hissed something otherwise inaudible. "Just as bad," Tom rejoined and shot a look back to his engineer. "You dumped us twice, right?"

"Yes," she responded tersely. "That's what you *asked* for, right?"

"Just making sure." Tom's mind flew back to their diversion to Ovar. They'd scanned the hell out of the surrounding sector in all directions. They'd covered their tracks, killed their warp and comm signals. He knew they were clean going in. Savan had made sure of it. It wasn't even Federation space, but Starfleet might have set out a mine...

"They are hailing us, Tom."

Bracing his breath, he moved around to his seat and looked at what the standard scan was managing to pick up. "Excelsior class," he noted glumly. "I needed that." Indeed, as an exterior visual came into focus on his screen, he felt like he was looking at his father's old command. Things left far behind him were pouncing on his grave.

"Would you prefer audio or visual?"

Tom blinked. "We have the viewscreen up, too? --Yeah, go ahead." He leaned back. "Not like making a good impression matters at this point."

The viewscreen powered on, revealing a crisp, clean bridge in gray and red, with a straight-backed crew situated around a wise-eyed captain of about forty-five. He wore a pleasantly concerned expression in contrast to a grave-faced XO. The ops and conn officers peeked curiously up, yet were otherwise wallpaper. The security officer frowned appropriately. The whole array looked like every Starfleet ship he'd known since he was a toddler. Some things would never change.

Though something's going to on this end.

Cursing again under his breath, Tom waited for the captain to introduce himself. Starfleet never failed in courtesy: He fully expected to be *politely* arrested, a light spanking to prepare him for another trial by ritual humiliation. Tom had the next two months of his life memorized before the other man opened his mouth.

"I'm Captain Lon Dokaru, of the Federation Starship Berlin. We caught the power fluctuation in your warp signature shortly before your ship lost power. May we be of any assistance?"

Tom exhaled sharply, feeling his blood vacate his head. "You could say that, Captain," he answered. "We were just putting enough wires together to call for help." Catching up with his nerves and thrumming heart, he added, "This is the UI Freighter Guerdon. I'm Captain Paris. This is my science technician Savan, my engineer, B'Elanna Torres."

The XO's eyes narrowed with recognition and the ops officer looked up again. Tom steadied his stare at the captain.

"I'm sorry for your trouble," Captain Dokaru said. He seemed sincere. "We're en route to Starbase 310, but have no fixed ETA. What is your destination, Captain?"

"The trade base orbiting Sicira-six," Tom informed him. "We're expected there in a few days. I'd like to try to keep that deadline."

Dokaru peered down in thought for a moment and muted to share a few words with his security officer. Then he returned his attention to the screen. "We can tractor your ship into our docking recess and take you there. It's not far out of our way. In the mean time, you can set about repairs."

Stifling his groan--he would be a fool in more ways than one to ask for parts instead--Tom dipped his head once. "Thank you, Captain Dokaru."

"We're glad to help."

I'm sure you are.

A minute later, as the Starfleet issue tractor beam shot out and locked on across the Guerdon's stern, Tom closed his eyes.

"I'm going to hate this," he said under his breath.

Six years ago, Cadet Tom Paris enjoyed the honor of traveling on the USS Dinar during his summer holiday, a reward for winning the Sakatuine Prize. He spent a month learning ship procedures, working with the technicians, even flying the ship. The latter, he realized immediately, was the least exciting, though he didn't have a problem with everyone else in his class knowing he had been allowed the privilege. Shamelessly, the charismatic twenty year-old prowled the female market and joined in with some holodeck programs, gladly staying behind with a pretty ensign not three years his senior. It was a great month that gave him bragging rights for a full year afterward. He caught a ride back to Earth on the USS Berlin.

Captain Dokaru was a new captain, having taken the command from Captain Nidlita four years ago. Tom remembered reading about it not long after he left home. Nidlita and her husband had both retired early to finally start a family outside the demands of Starfleet, who sent them off with all the honors they could unfurl. The XO, Commander Barnes, remained in her position--which could mean a great many things. By the look on her face when he introduced himself, Tom could tell she remembered him, or at least his name. She wasn't the only one who knew all about him.

Not that he'd been living in complete obscurity, even out there. In his early months on the border, people who decided to care about what he'd done--and hadn't done--liked to heckle him. He took it: They weren't lying after all, and he wasn't about to put up a phony defense just to get them off his back. Within a year, he saw those people eventually sink back into the woodwork, though he still met one from time to time who were stupid enough to ask if he was *that* Tom Paris. In their recent dealings with Starfleet, he'd noticed the stares of a few who apparently remembered, too, though they had the good sense to leave it at that. Then again, they were just passing by.

Direct contact for three days was not something Tom was looking forward to. The last full contact he'd had with Starfleet was the day they ousted him. Tom could still see with painful clarity their starch expressions as the JAG closed out her console and the councilors left the room. He remembered the long walk out of Starfleet headquarters, still wearing his reds but stripped of his insignia and even his comm badge. Those unaware of what happened had stared at him; those who knew had felt free to make a comment. As if they'd known what happened out there, as if he'd done it on purpose.

"Those poor families will rest better now, knowing there's been justice," one had said, a lieutenant.

Tom had paused in the hall to look at him, but no words, no snappy responses, came to mind. What could he have said to something like that? The man hadn't known him, but had looked at him, like many others now, with such hatred or distrust. Such reactions were opposite to what Tom had known throughout his life. He'd felt it for the first time there and continued to, even while he had avoided any contact with Starfleet. After Starfleet took over Deep Space Nine, the Guerdon could do business there and immediately did, but Tom had chosen to avoid the bar but for business, prowl through the promenade just for what he needed, sign off and leave immediately. When they returned to the station, he planned to repeat that procedure.

But that was another couple of weeks away at best, and he had Starfleet right then and there to deal with, and there'd be no avoiding them this time. Thankfully, Tom had plenty to do aboard his own ship. Within only a couple hours of being sucked up into the Berlin's hindquarters, he knew they all did.

"They've granted you full access to their engineering replicator," he told B'Elanna as he poked around at his soup with a spoon. He gave up the idea of eating it and reached for the other liquid on his table. Looking around the lounge at the others with their nicely filled plates before them, he briefly wished he had half their appetite. He knew he needed to eat. "You can contact their engineering department as soon as you're ready."

"It won't give us everything we need," she replied, then caught Maryl's glance. "Well, it won't. We *can* at least get our bundles and small parts and replace our burnt isolinear chips." B'Elanna then turned her frown down to her own uneaten meal. "Otherwise, we're going to need every minute of our lift to Sicira just trying to get what we already have working right."

Ridge regarded her. "It's a good thing they're able to take us."

"It is," B'Elanna allowed. "I'll just be glad when they unlock us and we can go our own ways again."

"Then what's on the top of the list?" Tom asked, not looking up from his glass.

"You and Savan can start on repairing the CDR bundles on deck three center," she answered. "Ridge and Nadrev are going back to the impulse drive once Nadrev's back on. --I've rerouted the secondary power coupling so it flows directly back into the PTC, so we shouldn't have the same problems again. I'm going to keep working with the main computer to try to figure out what happened in the first place."

"When do you plan to work on the deflector?" Savan asked.

"That's the last on the list. I want our power issue solved before trying to bring it up again. I'll let you know when that comes up."

Tom nodded. It wasn't his domain, and honestly, after seeing the whole list of things they needed to do to first time, he was glad she was keeping it simple. "A couple of engineers from the Berlin are bringing some diagnostic equipment over. I can ask them to replicate some bundles when they go back

from the second transfer."

"That'll save some time," B'Elanna nodded, then eyed him. "Your idea?"

"They have plenty to go around. Might as well use it."

She coughed a half-laugh then looked at her PADD again. "I will."

Tom looked over at Maryl. "You're still working on where we're going after DS-Nine?"

"Yes," Maryl answered. "Commander Banes offered to let me use one of the offices to send some communiqués."

"Yeah, I got a message about that. Don't get spoiled."

"No chance of that," she snorted.

Glancing around the room, Tom gave them another nod. "Guess that's it, then?" Polishing off his drink as everyone got to their meal, he pushed himself to his feet and crossed to dump his tray in the reclamator. Without looking back, he left the lounge and headed aft. He needed to meet the engineers, among the other borrowed tools.

Were it operational, he'd have taken the materials lift down to the bottom deck--not that it did too well in the first place. The lift groaned, creaked and often felt like it'd come apart every time it crossed a cross-pylon. No one ever took it unless they absolutely had to. Tom was tempted to check it again, but by the time the thought came to him, he was already in the main engine room and heading back for the midship port ladder, mentally sorting out his own duties outside the repair list.

He knew at some point soon he would have to follow one of those Starfleet people back to their ship, though the idea of strolling down the Berlin's crisp corridors wasn't very high on his long list of priorities. He needed to patch in to their contacts on Sicira and get their drop off and payment protocols, so if their systems weren't up yet, he'd need to borrow one of their comm stations.

Grabbing the opposite rung of the ladder, Tom stepped out and started down when suddenly a wave of fatigue hit him, that followed by an onset of pain he knew would get worse. He thought first to step back onto the deck, but then knew he'd never move up. *Down*, he told himself. *Go down, nice and slow...*

The pain began to radiate, starting in his gut and spreading...

...Which reminded him to contact the Siciran medical facility and have them research his disorder before the Guerdon's arrival. It'd save time. He'd already thought of availing himself of the Berlin's CMO, but he knew he wasn't *that* much of a masochist. He only needed to find--

His hands slipped off the rungs.

"Shit!"

Grabbing desperately, Tom slapped the rungs, but his grip had no purchase and he kept going down. Finally, his foot caught a rung only to flip him out from the ladder. Another shot of pain prevented him from thinking to put out his hands. He turned sideways instead in the last couple of meters and flew down full speed. His outer thigh and hip smacked the metal grate with a heavy thud.

"Aaagh! *Damnit!*" Heaving for breath, Tom rolled off it and onto his back, suddenly unable to gauge

which hurt more--and wondering why he cared at all. Pain was pain, and he was a big ball of just that. Breathing again, trying to get a grip on it, he felt a wave of numb begin in his head and chest, then a swelling nausea, welcoming unconsciousness lest he...

"Hell no," he grunted and forced himself to turn again so he could get up. "Walk it off...*walk it off*," he hissed. "It'll go away. It'll go away."

Unsteadily upright again, Tom stumbled forward a few meters to the deck four ladder, but he didn't mount it yet. He backed up to a nearby storage chest and let himself lean back on it as he breathed through the pain in his gut and rubbed his hip. Forcing his head to stay up, he played everything he needed to do before dinner over in his head, rehashed all the other things he should get to before arriving at Sicira. He swallowed, inhaled, swallowed again.

It'll only be a couple more days, he told himself. *Just a couple more days...*

Several minutes later, he slowly stood again, feeling the many sensations in his body ebb a little, enough for him to grab a rung and hold on good that time.

Just a few more days...

Easing himself down to deck four, clutching as if with vertigo to every rung, he could hear the Starfleet people had already begun to transport the equipment into the center bay. Their technicians would follow soon after. Tom puffed a little laugh to himself. He hadn't said anything about that to B'Elanna. Outside their occasional work on the junker, she remained outwardly brusque towards him, but he figured she'd have a harder time turning down the extra workers when they were already there.

He just hoped the Berlin's chief understood what Tom meant by, "My engineer suffers a lot of frustrated pride here, so don't send your best and brightest, okay? Just your very competent."

Finally reaching the deck, exhaling the effort and leftover pain through his teeth, Tom uselessly brushed down his coat and made his way out to the control pad. Accepting the final transport, he soon was looking at two engineers, one plain young ensign and an older lieutenant--fresh and settled, Tom interpreted in a glance--in front of the small pile of parts and portable diagnostic units.

They looked up at him, dumbly at first, wondering who he was. "Welcome to the Guerdon," Tom told them. "I'm Paris."

The lieutenant blinked with surprise. "You're the captain?"

"Yeah," Tom answered shortly.

"Oh, I'm sorry sir. I...I admit I was expecting someone different."

"That's okay," Tom smirked. "So was I." With that, the two officers both stared and avoided his attention, and Tom couldn't tell whether it was his name or his appearance that was causing it. Either way, he wanted to think about other things. "The main engine room is on deck two. The internal transporters somehow stayed online--though I don't recommend we use it for anything but the equipment. We'll take the ladders."

"Your turbolift is down?" the ensign queried. Her stare had become recognizably curious.

"We have a flat lift, but it's mainly for loads," Tom informed her, narrowing the coordinates on the pile, though her stupid question tempted him to broaden the beam to her, too.

"I could use the walk," the lieutenant said, not very cheery, but upbeat all the same.

Tom nodded. "Yeah, you'll do fine." He tapped a few commands into his panel and transported the pile to the upper bay. Stepping off the platform and back onto the deck, he forced himself not to limp, wince or curse as he motioned back towards the corridor. "It's just two decks up. This way."

"You've got to be kidding me."

Tom shrugged as he lowered himself to a knee before an issue crate.

Leaning against the newly repaired anti-grav in the hazy, half-illuminated center of deck two, B'Elanna's dark eyes grew solid; her glare did not waver. "You didn't say anything about Starfleet poking around my engine room."

"They offered to help and I said yes," Tom told her. His side slowly lighting on fire, he wasn't quite up to arguing about it. He popped the lid on a bundling crate, checked the ID tags and continued, "We'll never get the ship running in time without a couple extra hands and it's not like you have any trade secrets hidden in here, right? They're in your room. Tell them what you need."

"I just need the parts--*Captain*," she snapped. "Parts, Ridge and Nadrev. I don't need people who don't know this contraption in my way."

"I don't blame you," said the lieutenant, moving around Paris and the crate with a small, offhand smile. "Trust me, I don't want to bring the works down on us, either."

She rolled her eyes. "That's a relief."

"I think we're able to take directions," the lieutenant added. "I promise not to be creative."

"It's nothing personal," B'Elanna said flatly, belatedly realizing she'd lied through her teeth.

"I'm not taking it personally," he assured her. "Like your captain said, just think of me as an extra set of hands with a bucket of parts. Honestly, ma'am, that's our assignment here--just help."

Giving the man a long stare, she relaxed a little. "Okay. But really..." she squinted in the foggy room at his collar, "Lieutenant, the way this ship is wired, one failure *will* bring down the works and some--and we're already down. There's not enough time in the day to get rid of them all right now. Even so, you can probably imagine how I'll feel if that happens."

He chuckled. "I probably could. We're here at your disposal, ma'am. Just tell us where you need us."

She nodded. "Okay then, Lieutenant..." She left it open for him to fill.

"Carey," he supplied.

"B'Elanna." She moved closer to inspect the flats they'd transported up. "Okay, then, Carey. What do you have in that bucket?"

Seeing her attention turned fully off him, Tom backed away and reached into the storage for the tool

kit he'd need. Flinching as he straightened, he was ticked all over again that he had another sore spot to hide from Savan, who'd been watching him like a mother bird for a month by then. Stuffing a hyperspanner in his pocket, he caught the stare of the ensign who'd come with the lieutenant. Holding her attention firmly until she turned, a little abashed, Tom pivoted and turned to grab a bundle of relay wiring.

He gladly disappeared in the steam a minute later.

As the Starfleet techs began to unpack the parts flat, B'Elanna knelt down to make a quick inventory of the equipment she wanted to work with first. Waving at Nadrev, she pointed to their anti-grav. "Bring that with you. We'll start on the main computer and work our way out."

"Okay, B'Elanna," Nadrev said, grinning as he activated his pet project and started across the deck. Halfway across, however, a loud buzzing emanated from its engine and the tray flopped onto the grate with a clang. The unit promptly died.

Torres closed her eyes as her nails dug into her palms. "On second thought," she said tersely, feeling her heart start to hammer for lack of anything to hit, "get a hand truck from the side supply room and take that piece of garbage to the scrap room--where it *should* have been put before you wasted your time. Then, bring the truck back here so we can get the equipment aft. Do it *now*."

Chagrined, the tech nodded and hurried away.

"So..." started the ensign as they left the engine room together. B'Elanna was breaking for lunch; the ensign was going off duty, but needed to take some parts from Nadrev to replicate before transporting back to the Berlin. A full day in an unfamiliar engine doing grunt work hadn't dulled the young woman's curiosity, however, as they shared the deck one corridor. She'd been given a full rundown from the transporter chief while she waited for Carey that morning. "What's Captain Paris like?"

B'Elanna furrowed her brow. "Why do you care?"

"I don't, really. It's just that with a record like his, with what everyone's saying, I had to wonder..." She left it open, but getting nothing from the half-Klingon, she shrugged. "I'm sure he's fine."

"I'm sure he is, too," B'Elanna returned, casting a glare over at the other woman. "Let's get something straight, since I'm assuming you'll be back for more tomorrow: What my captain's like isn't anything that matters to me. What matters to me is getting this ship going again and getting back to my job as usual. And even if I did give a damn, it wouldn't make me any more willing to gossip with someone like you. Got it? --Good. The bridge is right up there. Don't touch anything you don't have to."

With that, B'Elanna turned into the lounge and went straight for the replicator. Growling off that hit of frustration, she ordered her coffee and sandwich and yanked her tray out of the hole.

"Now B'Elanna," chuckled Ridge, who sat at his usual table by the window, "that poor little thing did nothing to you."

"He and I have some standing issues," she snapped, "but I don't appreciate Starfleet brats trying to chum up on me to get into Tom's old dirt."

"I was talking about your tray," he returned, then motioned her over. "You'll get more of it before they break the tractor. Probably won't see much of Tom until then, too."

She fell into the seat across from him. "I wish I had his luck."

"What's *your* problem with Starfleet?"

"Their system and I didn't get along," she told him, cutting her sandwich into quarters. "Why do they still ask about him, anyway? It was four years ago. Hasn't anyone else made news since then?"

"Not any high ranking sons with shining records and good looks to boot." Ridge shrugged. "Tom was one of those 'had it all' sorts, you know? Upstanding Starfleet family, famous father, all that. If it could happen to someone like him, it could happen to anyone. And then, some are just nosy and annoying." Chuckling, he dug his fork in his pasta bowl. "Probably just more of the latter."

"So he crashed a shuttle and a few crewpeople died," B'Elanna ventured. Jerod never did tell her everything, and after Jerod was killed, she didn't get around to asking.

"One was a friend from the Academy," Ridge confirmed between bites. Chewing and swallowing, he chased it down with a big gulp of milk, then wiped his mouth. "Worst about it was that he had to sit there and wait for a rescue team in a powerless shuttle while she bled to death all over him. Poor guy."

B'Elanna stared at her tech as Tom's hard, solid expression filtered through her memory. She could see his face as he poured his glass, his mouth set with determined straightness. She could see his glare when he kicked her off the bridge at Andal. The she recalled his steady sadness as he pulled shuttle components apart.

"But he wasn't pinged for that," Ridge continued. "He didn't quite tell them why the shuttle went down, you see--scared to, probably. He said it was instrumentation or something like that, when he overcompensated in a course correction and knocked them into a spin--or so the feeds reported."

"A pilot error," B'Elanna deduced. "So they found out?"

"That's the funny part about it. He admitted it was his fault a month or so later. So, they court martialed him and said goodbye. The feed writers had a good time. I'm surprised we didn't hear about it until we met him and Hana looked him up. It happened a year before Jerod came aboard, though. We didn't get feeds often, then."

B'Elanna watched Ridge dig into his pasta again, frowning to relay the information, but his appetite otherwise unaffected. "Little wonder he keeps to himself," she said, picking up her sandwich.

"Yeah, and don't expect a warm welcome from the Berlin," Ridge added. "Once word gets around who and what Tom is to them--though it probably has by now--they might be a little snotty."

B'Elanna snorted quietly. "That wouldn't surprise me."

"If anything does by now," Maryl said as she strode into the lounge, "then you've got too many nerve endings." Going to the replicator, she ordered herself a tea and an Ulorsan crepe.

The Bajoran was unusually bouncy as she brought her selections to the table and took the seat by her husband. He glanced over at her. "You know you want to tell us."

"At least pretend to be curious," she scolded.

"Of course I am, dear." He stirred the last portions of his meal before taking another bite. "Can't wait to hear it."

"First off," Maryl said, holding up the blue PADD, "thank you for grabbing this, B'Elanna. I know you had a hundred other things to do."

The engineer shrugged. "I have a separate program to pick it up whenever a new feed is transmitted. We had the same program on Kessik. It wasn't any effort once the main computer came back online."

"Well, thank the computer when you get the chance. Thanks to the feed, I was able to contact some of my fellow Bajorans and hack out a deal to ship their medicinal plants to Ulinas. They're setting up a cross-racial bio-matter exchange. Starfleet's too busy hunting Maquis to drag around samples right now and we've got the right facilities, a science tech and not much better to do."

"That's great!" Ridge enthused.

Her satisfied smile in place as she finally cut into her crepe, Maryl added, "It's a loose deadline window, too, so we have time for a diversion, if you know what I mean. The plants are all in hibernation. As long as the enviro-hold holds and we're there within the twelve-day, we've got a nice twenty-six bars of latinum waiting for us for that shipment alone. With a good delivery, they said they might like to use us for the second run."

"And with any luck, we'll get there the first time," B'Elanna smirked.

"Shut up and eat," Maryl teased, impervious for the moment to the engineer's pessimism. "Get your strength back so you can make your miracles happen down there."

"It'll take a few of those, too," Ridge grinned. "Good hunting, you."

"Nothing to it."

They all resumed their lunch at that, B'Elanna pausing to swirl the last of her coffee in her mug before finishing it. Somehow, the image of a young Paris with a dead woman in his arms and that hard, watery stare had embedded itself in her mind. It was finally coming together for her, his feelings of responsibility, his random disappearing, his bitterness and the drinking, his reaction to Jerod's death.

She just wished having her curiosity appeased was any actual use to her.

Tom Paris hadn't stepped on a Federation Starship since he was dumped off on Earth shortly before his court martial four years ago. When his heel touched the Berlin's gray carpet just outside the transporter room, he steeled his breath and forced himself to move forward. His stomach lurched to breathe that perfect air, hear the slight thrum of the starship's engine below. For all his trying to put it behind him, his entire Starfleet life smacked him hard after only ten seconds aboard. For a moment, it felt as if he'd never left. A moment later, he remembered with painful clarity that he very decidedly had left that life behind.

He wished he'd have come up with an excuse not to visit Dokaru in his ready room. Standard operating procedure and usual good manners, sure, but Tom was feeling paranoid about their recent

colony shipment and insecure with his ship dangling from that interstellar tow truck. Even so, he didn't so much as brush his dirty hair aside for the trip. Making his way down the pristine corridor, he suddenly wondered if he should go back and at least wash his face. To his knowledge, he didn't smell bad. But on such a sterile ship, who knew what the crew would pick up?

Not that it mattered... But then, it *did* matter a little to him. Even about to drop dead, he wasn't totally bereft of pride.

He also knew that his visit there would make it back to his father eventually. *That* would be an interesting day at the office.

"Captain Paris?"

Tom caught the eyes of a young lieutenant, who seemed surprised at what looked back at him. The officer collected himself nicely a few seconds later, hiding his reaction in a brisk nod and a firming of his posture.

"Captain Dokaru asked me to escort you, since you've never been aboard the Berlin," he said.

Tom didn't correct him, though he was a little relieved. Obviously, that one didn't know about him yet.

"I apologize for not meeting you in the transporter room. I wasn't able to contact you and just found out you'd come aboard."

"I don't wear a comm badge," Tom told him, "and our comm is mostly down. It's not a problem."

Silently falling to the side of the younger man, Tom kept his stare blankly ahead, not glancing left as they passed crewpeople and moved around to the turbolift. He let the other man lead the way in, call for the bridge and step appropriately back when they began to move. Tom didn't divert his attention, though he could tell the officer was fumbling subtly at his charge's silence. Thankfully, the young man, well bred and trained, didn't try to initiate small talk, but stuck to his job. When they emerged on the lower deck of the well-appointed bridge, Tom's gaze fell only where the lieutenant went, which was directly around to a nearby door. In the few seconds it took for the lieutenant to press the bell and the door to open, Tom could count the number of eyes pinned on him in his peripheral vision.

Thankfully, he was not required to pay them any respects. He was there to take care of the niceties and get back to his ship as soon as he could. With any luck, Dokaru would not detain him long. In the mean time, Tom prepared his lines accordingly and with a skill that surprised him. He'd done it so many times when he knew he had to meet with his father or a superior officer he was in a tangle with. Then he wondered why he was feeling the need. He and Dokaru were essentially equal in rank...though Tom knew he'd never really felt right in the role, mainly for how he came upon it. Moreover, not since just prior to being confined to quarters on the Copernicus had he been to a captain's ready room. Better he hold up the front, he figured. He was better at that, and frankly, he didn't have the energy for an honest conversation.

Greeting him as he followed the lieutenant in was the same expression as earlier, this time behind a desk. Of vaguely Asian descent with a hint of something not Human, the captain was Tom's height and in excellent shape. Standing, Captain Dokaru nodded at the form in the door. "Thank you, Lieutenant. You're dismissed."

"Yes sir." He stepped back and the doors swished shut.

"Captain Paris, welcome aboard the Berlin," said Dokaru as he came forth to shake the other man's hand. His tone held great depth and warmth and his dark eyes held steady as his fingers gave Tom's a properly firm squeeze. He was the first member of the crew not to give him a second look. Professional and some. "Again, let me express how sorry I am about your inconvenience."

Tom couldn't help but cough a laugh, there. "Thank you, Captain Dokaru. --And please forgive me. All the attention is a little strange to us."

"How do you mean?"

"Independent freighters don't usually catch much notice from Starfleet," Tom explained, forcing some lightness into his demeanor. "We're used to Federation starships throwing some parts at us and moving on."

"I prefer a more personal approach," Dokaru replied, equally light but more convincingly so. With a sweep of his hand, he motioned to a small, round table surrounded by a few comfortable chairs. "Would you care for anything to drink, Captain?"

Tom shook his head, but did take a seat. "Thanks, but no. Honestly, I'd like to get back to my ship soon. We're still working off our emergency generator."

Dokaru sympathized, joining him at the table without any beverage. "Did your engineer discover the cause of your power failure?"

"She thinks it might be one of the optical clusters in the ODN core, an incompatibility or crossed connection somewhere between the core and the deflector. They're working on it right now."

"Those are pretty tricky diagnostics," Dokaru commented.

"She'll find it," Tom assured him. "She's somehow managed to stay ahead of the Guerdon for the most part, and I've only heard rumors about her sleeping."

The Starfleet captain smiled. "An ideal ship's engineer, then."

Tom's stare turned thoughtful at that. "Yeah, she is. Maybe too much so sometimes."

Dokaru allowed an appropriate pause to pass before changing the subject. "Where does your slate take you, Captain, after Sicira? I'm curious to know if you'll be able to find the remaining parts you need outside a Federation station."

For paranoia's sake alone, Tom did not deflect. Rather, he leaned back in the chair, rested his arm on the table and said, "We're back to DS-Nine and then out to Ulinas for a drop off--something my contract liaison just picked up, in fact. We might make some stops along the way if other deals come up. The usual."

Dokaru was surprised. "Don't read me wrong, Captain, but you cover a long territory for such a small freighter."

Tom played it off well enough. "We go where the deals send us, Captain. It's not work you take to get rich or stay still."

"Yes, of course," Dokaru nodded. "Forgive me."

"Nothing to forgive. I know we're small." He also knew that a great portion of Starfleet had no clue about his line of work, much less the currency scales or much else of really went on out there. "...and we'll probably be able to find what else we need as we had back towards Minjau. Thank you for asking." Pressing his hands on the table, he added, "But I do need to move--I mean, I have to meet my engineer soon, then get back to those bundles."

"Bundles?"

"ODN connectors--the old-fashioned kind," Tom explained, adding a derisive snort behind it. "Easy work in itself, really, though after another day of that, I'll probably need your doc to uncross my eyes."

Dokaru grinned as they both stood, then led Tom to the ready room door. "I won't delay you, then. Thank you for taking the time to see me, Captain Paris."

"You're welcome," Tom answered, once again shaking the captain's hand when it was offered and really wishing he'd grabbed that shower after all. Five minutes later, he changed his mind again. He wished he stank outright.

"Do you need any help, sir?"

"No, I know where I'm going."

It seemed in every section, he met with yet another crewmember who couldn't help but gawk at him as they offered, ever so politely, to guide the stray ex-officer to the largest room on the ship.

"Is the captain aware you're traveling through the ship alone?"

"Yes."

Years ago, Tom liked being the center of attention--relished in it, in fact. Now he knew why he'd come to prefer being on the Guerdon and on that far-flung route. For being unused to such treatment now, as well, the Starfleet officers' staged manners were triply intrusive.

"Do you require an escort?"

"No."

He reminded himself he was only about a couple hours from a nice Kressarian whiskey he'd picked up at Irtrin. At the pace he was going on the Berlin, Tom knew it wouldn't last long.

"Mister Paris? Do you need any help--"

"I know how to find a goddamn shuttlebay!" he cut in and strode ahead.

Annoying as it was to hazard the corridors there, coming into the Berlin's main shuttlebay and seeing the neatly lined crafts made Tom's chest hurt. *Just in case today was in any way cheerful*, he grumbled to himself and forced his eyes to point forward. He immediately spotted B'Elanna among a group of officers at the transporter station. A few long crates sat nearby. He propelled himself as swiftly as he could manage, keeping his attention futilely on his destination.

Indeed, he tried not to look, but couldn't not see it: His former career, his doomed life and every mistake, craft by craft in the corner of his eye, seeming to mock him as he crossed the long bay. He could practically feel the LCARS under his fingertips, see the starfield from the angled viewport and sense

the warm satisfaction of a day spent patrolling or running the engineers around on their various tests...

Yeah, did I know that feeling...

He could feel his youth, his health and everything before him.... Then he could see her panic, hear her choking, feel her death soaking through his uniform as her last puffs against his neck begged for life, and he could do nothing.

It all lived and died there, and so now lived for someone else. He was little more than a twitching corpse amongst that shining future.

Tom drew a deep breath and nodded to B'Elanna, who seemed surprised to see him there, though she knew he was going to take some parts over. Though it piqued his curiosity, he didn't ask about that. "We got the rods?"

She turned back to the panel and shrugged. "I'm not sure if they'll take, but I'll try to readjust the relay parameters."

"If everything else in there has a chance of working," he commented, looking over at the numbers on her board, "these should, too."

"The power conversion still concerns me."

"Savan can work with you on that," Tom thought aloud. "She'd helped Livich install the port isolinear junctions. I think they had the same issues to work through that hasn't blown out yet that I know of."

"I'll ask her, then."

Nodding, Tom found his gaze foolishly drifting to a set of eyes he felt upon him. Turning, he saw Commander Barnes, who stood nearby with a couple young officers making their lists and checking them twice. Tall and brunette, Tom noted in a glance that the years hadn't been any kinder to her, even in that happy environment. Her face seemed to have its own source of gravity. Approaching, she did not offer her hand.

"Captain Paris," she started smoothly. "Perhaps you don't remember me from your brief visit here some years ago."

"I remember you," he replied, bracing for impact.

His curt reply crossed her face and left a small grin in its wake. "I have to admit seeing you was a surprise. There were no reports of where your travels had taken you."

"Assuming anyone cared," Tom returned. "But yeah, I managed to land on my feet."

"Indeed. I think you've lived up to your potential, considering."

Tom's eye twitched, but he held on. "Glad I have your seal of approval. That means a lot, Commander."

The commander's chin turned up. "I wouldn't say it's an approval. But you have, I'm sure, rectified what you could."

"I don't know," he smirked. "I'm sure I could do more. Maybe you could help me there."

B'Elanna couldn't help but listen to the interchange. Much as she expected it, was warned it would happen, she found herself staring at them both with rapt astonishment. Deathly pale and rumpled, Tom stood before the crisp, standard issue officer and fed into her snide pleasantries, inviting more contempt and swimming in it. Earlier, B'Elanna had taken the woman as smooth and efficient, if lacking in a little personality. Now she was showing personality and some, and that in harder fashion than the pert little ensign of earlier could ever have managed. Worse, the other officers simply went about their business as though the two were talking shop. One of them actually cracked a laugh at one of the commander's jibes. B'Elanna couldn't finish the power transfer and cut the link with the Guerdon fast enough.

"I hardly think anything I'd advice would be of any use to you."

"True, considering, as you say, what I've done for myself. But even that's more than I deserve, I guess."

"There are some who would agree," she replied with mock subtlety.

"More than some," Tom assured her. "I think I've only met, oh, four or five who think I'm right where I should be."

"That many?"

"Sure. But then, they're under contract. They have to be nice to me."

"Captain," B'Elanna cut in, coming down from the platform and putting herself purposefully next to him, "I don't mean to interrupt, but I'd like to get back to the problem at hand."

Tom still held the commander's attention when he replied, "Yeah. Guess we should." Turning away from Barnes, he looked at the crates. "I can take this one over to Savan and Nadrev. They should have the relay ready soon."

B'Elanna nodded toward the ensign at the transporter controls. "Beam Captain Paris and all the crates to the Guerdon's aft deck three parts bay. We can carry the pieces forward as we get to them. I'll wait for the last bin. It needs to go to deck two."

Tom and the crates dematerialized a few seconds later, leaving the half-Klingon with the other reason she wanted Paris gone.

"You actually think," B'Elanna said, turning a glare toward Commander Barnes, "you have the right to treat him like trash. You think you're entitled because you're here and he's not, and you're arrogant enough to do it in front of your minions and me."

"You don't need to concern yourself with something understood between your 'captain' and me, Ms. Torres," said Barnes, retraining her small smile. "Judging by your passionate reaction, I can tell you respect him. For that, I apologize if our conversation angered you."

"The hell you do," B'Elanna snarled.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Ms. Torres." Barnes raised her chin. "I think your work here is almost completed?"

She regarded the commander again with that, taking in every centimeter of her cookie cutter form. Slowly, she shook her head, realizing aloud, "People like you remind me how grateful I am that I got out of Starfleet when I did. That you're second in command of a starship honestly frightens me, for the crew's

sake if anything."

"I hardly need to take pointers from a mechanic on an insignificant, border-bound tradeship, but I'll log your complaint duly."

"You have better things to do, Commander Barnes," B'Elanna coldly replied. Stepping down from the platform again, she brushed her hands on her jacket pockets. "The coordinates are set. You transport the crate. I'm stopping in engineering for the anodyne shunt, then gladly getting the hell out of here."

Striding across the bay and into the outer corridor, B'Elanna blew a breath, but then oddly felt a smile touch her lips. It felt better than it should have, to snap at a snotty officer. Worse than Tom taking her abuse with sardonic pleasure was that Barnes seemed proud to project everything Starfleet purported itself *not* to be about. But then, B'Elanna knew all too well what Starfleet looked like and was it really could be.

Back in her engine room, B'Elanna had seen Ensign Ciardro continue to stare at Tom on the sly and the other technicians passing through purposefully take the long way around him or make comments under their breath. Though Carey was the odd man out in not seeming concerned with any of that, he still said nothing to the others, though he did outrank them. The XO's behavior outdid them all, however.

Apologized for angering me, she snorted to herself as she stepped into the first turbolift. "She can shove it," she scoffed aloud.

"*Please restate command,*" chirped the computer.

B'Elanna opened her mouth, then paused. *How's this for a passionate reaction?* she reconsidered, her grin reappearing. Even if she could easily be shot down, it'd be worth the formality. "Computer: Bridge."

"...got what he deserved."

Walking through the section, he'd barely caught it, but turned his gaze to a junior lieutenant and a crewman setting parameters on the auxiliary power generator. They glanced at him, then coolly back to their work, not ashamed of whatever they'd been discussing. Tom could only shake his head at that point and continue forward.

Two and a half days to Sicira.

Tom rounded the corner from the main engine room and set into the corridor, his hands stuffed in his pockets and his heavy eyes on the floor as it moved before him. He'd just left Savan and Nadrev, who would continue to work on the microscopic ODN connectors within the main deflector power intake distributor, now that he'd organized the input valves. The blackout had fried the entire port relay. Thankfully, they were easily replicated materials and they had someone with the patience to rebuild it. The main computer and the electro plasma system were another story. B'Elanna had been working with half-compatible parts from the Berlin and would have to make do with them--risking another power failure--until they could find the right ones. Captain Dokaru's concern on that matter was not misplaced.

Dokaru, Tom mused, rubbing at his sore gut, was a good captain that he could see. Cynical as he was about the rest of the crew, Tom appreciated the man's inquisitiveness. *Knowing my luck, though, he's got*

a better poker face than I have, he frowned. It wouldn't surprise him. Only time would tell. They really didn't have a choice at that point but to find out.

In the mean time, his Kressarian whiskey and a few hours of sleep awaited him. He needed both, already regretting his trip over to the Berlin. Indeed, Dokaru was fine, but the byplay with Barnes had curdled in his mind. While he now was certain about the consensus among the ranks regarding his reputation, it still nagged at him. He knew he shouldn't care, wanted to say he wouldn't in the end, but again, being aboard made him remember what he'd been like and what popularity he'd enjoyed when he was one among them. Maybe Starfleet wasn't his first choice in life, maybe starship work wasn't where he felt he wanted to be, but he'd *liked* that popularity and liked knowing he was at the top of his game and feeling certain others agreed. He had thrived in that youthful arrogance.

Tom shook his head. He had to stop thinking about it. Two and a half more days, they'd be at Sicira, the Berlin would be back on its regular course and Tom could put that past behind him again...much as he knew he never, never would. It was just as possible as getting that old life back again.

It wouldn't let him go...

He turned the corner to head forward to his quarters.

She would never let him...

"Aaagh!" Tom huffed as a shot of pain ripped through his midsection and up his spine, then spread down his legs. "Ah God!" Suddenly, his knees buckled and he dropped to the blue carpet, then to his hands. A trail of drool escaped his mouth as he groaned again; his elbow began to loosen. Forcing them to lock, Tom lowered himself to a hip to ride out the attack. They were coming a few a day by then, so he was getting used to...

He cried out again, futilely trying to stifle it behind his gritted teeth. Tears sprang to his eyes as he gasped and felt, wave, after wave, the pain escalate. His elbows finally gave way and he dropped to his shoulder. His cheek pressed against the gritty flooring. He choked for air, hardly able to think for the pain...agony. Agony.

"Oh God...gaah..."

It wouldn't end, wouldn't relent. It rose higher, into his eyes. His nose ran.

He hoped to hell no one would come upon him just then. Then he wildly wondered why he thought that.

"Bear...it," he hissed to himself, trying to grasp at something--anything- to make some kind of sensation and perhaps distract himself. His fingers were numb; his vision flooded with white specks. His midsection rounded another bend of pain and spiraled down. Tom tried to pull his legs up, but couldn't. "Augh!" he grunted, closing his eyes only to see the same hazy static behind the lids. He felt his bladder give way in a warm gush and couldn't hold it back to save his life, only feel humiliated on top of everything else. Totally helpless...and nauseated to boot when the resulting smell made its way to his nostrils.

Once all bright and full of promise, like all those assholes so happy to help, because they can: Look at what became of one of them.

His heart fluttered and hammered.

He wasn't going to make it to Sicira.

He'd die lying in fetid piss on a junked out piece of crap freighter. The newsfeeds would enjoy that.

He wasn't going to make it to Sicira.

There was no way he'd get to...

A breath.

Then, the pain drained--a little. Then a little more.

Tom didn't move a muscle, but waited a few minutes, feeling the trembling shock of sensation fizzle from his limbs even as he expected it to return. His head cleared enough to see again. The crush in his chest dissipated.

He breathed, puffed several lungfuls of air to get the blood going again. His abdomen felt like he'd taken an asteroid to it, but he did manage to push himself to his hands and knees. Crawling, gasping, until he reached a bulkhead, he pressed his hands to the side, dragged a couple more breaths then got himself mostly upright. His head spun and lolled. His first steps were staggers. He landed against the opposite wall and pushed himself off; leaning forward, he propelled himself. Crookedly, he made his way around the next corner to his door and slapped in the code.

Stumbling into his quarters, his eyes locked on the table at the left of the living space. Glistening red in the table's pendant light, the bottle he'd been waiting all day to liberate sat like a monument next to a pile of PADDs he'd never get to before docking at the station--and he couldn't care less about that, really. Tom immediately made his way towards the whiskey and grabbed the neck to pop it open.

It wouldn't take all the pain away, but then, it never had.

He drank, smoothly gulping as he slid down into the nearest chair.

It never had, but he'd lose nothing by making another attempt.

He picked his head up with a start.

"Computer," he croaked, "what's the time?"

"Oh-six hundred hours, seventeen minutes, Federation Standard Time."

Tom's head dropped back down to the table. "Shit."

He was half sprawled on the table and off the plain metal chair he was sitting on. As a result, his neck and lower back were killing him. His mouth smacked of the acid he'd drank and finally collapsed upon, falling into unconsciousness. He stank of urine and the drippings of that whiskey. He couldn't tell right off which was worse. His gut throbbed. His head pounded. His hands were numb. His skin felt sticky.

"What the hell am I doing?" he whispered to himself, pulling his head up again. "What am I doing?" No response came to mind. Everything was so foggy, and with every inhale, he could hardly think about

anything but the smell, as though he were rotting alive.

He was three hours late, but no one had called for him. Then again, they all probably knew he'd be hung over. "He bought that Kressarian whiskey, you know," he could hear Maryl telling the others over coffee in the lounge. "He'll show up eventually."

Tom could be pretty certain Savan had checked for life signs inside his quarters. Were those sections of the sensor net not working, she'd have come down by then.

He stared at his thin hands. He could almost see the blood pumping through the veins, his skin was so transparent.

At last, he pushed himself up from the table.

It'd been a few years since he was on Earth, but he always thought of himself as looking like he did back then. When he closed his eyes and imagined himself doing something, he saw a tall, well-formed man, slightly tanned with light blue eyes, sandy blond hair and an expressive face. He wore neat shirts, well-cut trousers, good shoes. He was a handsome young man. It wasn't arrogance. He grew up knowing his looks pleased people, and he was generally satisfied with what he saw, too.

With that as his standard, he should not have been surprised by his tears.

Holding onto the door jamb as he peeled off yesterday's clothes and threw them into the non-functioning refresher, he still could think of nothing but getting himself into the shower, getting started with the day despite how he felt. Feeling clean always helped. Moreover, they were approaching Sicira. That alone made him want to get to work.

Naked, he turned to move into the bathroom and activate the shower. Unfortunately, there was no avoiding the mirror, which covered the wall to his right going in. What caught his eye, in fact, was the dark blob that wasn't supposed to be there. Looking over, Tom froze.

He'd been avoiding that mirror for a while, knowing he was sick and not looking too good. Now, he stared at it in horror, stared at something he hardly recognized. His cursorily cut hair was dark with grease and sweat above a haggard, unshaven face. His sallowness was dotted with dark splotches and was slightly flaccid for the weight he'd lost. Indeed, his bones stuck out a little, hard angles from his wiry muscles. He looked four times his age. The blob he'd first spotted was a massive bruise covering his hip and running all the way down to his knee--where he'd hit when he fell off the ladder yesterday. He thought he'd come down hard, but not hard enough to blacken his whole flank.

By all right, he should have been dead.

His sunken, bloodshot eyes filled with tears.

He would never imagine that young man again.

"How can I help you today, Captain Paris?"

Peering over at the oft-discussed captain from the seat of his usual console, the Berlin's physician

knew the answer was by no means simple, though it was plainly obvious the man did need assistance. Dokaru's suggestion that he might talk with the man, captain to captain, to try to discover what had happened to the young Human, had not been a bad idea after all.

"I'm having a problem," Tom rasped, then cleared his throat. "My science officer diagnosed me with a liver problem a few months ago, but I haven't been able to see a specialist, yet. I had an incident last night... I need to get it taken care of. You can download her file. She knows I'm here."

Dr. Masdi gestured to a nearby biobed as he pushed himself away from his lab readings. Standing, he showed a modest height and build beneath his neat gray hair. A ten-year veteran of the Cardassian border conflict, his dark blue eyes held an unabashed directness about them as he scanned the form before him. "Mind if I have a look for myself first?" he asked.

Tom shrugged, nodded. Taking off his coat and drawing a firm breath, he reached back and pulled himself up to sit on the side of the bed. He blinked away the resulting pain as the doctor came near with the tricorder and pressed his mouth firmly shut. His eyes still reflected a certain amount of anxiety, however.

Waving the tricorder slowly over his patient a couple of times, Masdi reset the parameters then scanned again. His tongue poked briefly out to lick his upper lip; then he rubbed his lips together. Without looking away from the readings, he asked, "Do you mind if I pull your file now?"

The younger man frowned, but then assented with a short nod.

"I'll try not to keep you waiting too long. Excuse me."

The doctor came around the corner into his office and with a few words, he connected with the Guerdon's science technician, who indeed had been waiting in her office for his call. The Vulcan said little, not wanting to interfere with the physician's work, but transmitted her captain's medical file with a quiet comment of gratitude.

Cutting the connection and calling up the file, Masdi's eyes soon danced over the neatly recorded history and increasingly worrisome test results. Notes taken by the tech also showed a steady decline of motor function, alertness and appetite. His own scan was a dire one to conclude the rest. Running the whole through the Federation database, a result shot back to Masdi's screen several seconds later. Seeing it, his head dipped in a nod to himself and his shoulders briefly sagged. But then he brought his head up again to spy through his window the young man on the table. Paris was trembling and the muscles in his jaw were tensed.

The doctor punched up the man's personal file, requesting the abbreviated version. He blinked as he read it, setting ship's gossip and facts in their correct places, glancing up a couple of times as he did when an image of the ousted officer scrolled into view. Masdi stilled for a moment, remarking to himself at the difference between the two images. Another file opened. Methodically, the doctor's fingers tapped on the LEDs, his stare unbroken from the display as that information was digested. Finally, he leaned back and exhaled slowly. He looked out to the main ward again.

The patient outside had closed his eyes. He was trying to sit straight--trying to hold on.

Finally, Masdi pressed his hands on his desk and got to his feet. Moving to another console, he tapped in a course of treatment, glanced over it then returned to give his diagnosis.

After several seconds, Paris opened his eyes. Returning the physician's attention, his visual

examination seemed equally thorough--and conclusive. He breathed a sigh through his nostrils and waited.

Masdi did not keep him waiting any longer.

"Min-Dirov's Cirrhosis is a *very* rare disease in humans, Captain, and entirely preventable."

The younger man rolled his eyes. "Here we go."

"Not we--you."

"Yeah, me. Going, right now." Tom slid off the table, muttering, "Another goddamned bad idea."

"Generally, it takes a few more years for the liver to present this form of dysfunction," Masdi stated as the man strained to get an arm in his coat. "Your beverage choices along the route have been exceptionally effective." Seeing Paris shrug at that, he added, "If you're going to kill yourself, there are far easier and less painful routes to it."

"I'm not in it for death."

"So, you're into suffering instead."

"Doc--"

"Do you think it's what you're *supposed* to do for the rest of your life because you crashed a shuttle and your crew died?"

"Two lousy days," Tom hissed to himself, "and I wouldn't have to listen to this."

"No, maybe not," the doctor deduced, willfully ignoring the younger man's digression. "If you were sorry you survived, you'd be dead already. Still, it's not easy to know your error had fatal consequences; it's a natural defense to try to not think about it, one way or another."

"It's not the only thing right now."

"It's not going to work, Captain." Masdi held the other man's glare when it turned back to him. "You're *always* going to think about it, no matter what you do to yourself."

Finally getting his arm in his coat, the young captain looked at his hand. One of them was gripping the hem of his pocket. It was shaking, the twitch in his leg became more pronounced. The man was obviously in great pain and taking as many pains to try to hide it.

"Let's put it like this:" the doctor continued as he leaned against an opposite bed, "This will kill you. I could treat you five times and it'll be what kills you as long as you keep imbibing the same gruel. And each time you're treated, the symptoms will come on more rapidly until you're in need of a full transplant. But you won't be anywhere near a facility that will be able to serve such a request in enough time, once you finally cross that threshold. You'll be in a great deal of pain and you'll probably be alone when your liver finally shuts down. Whatever you're trying *not* to think about? That'll be the *last* thing you think about before your heart stops, and you'll die having done nothing but let it rot you from the inside out. And for what? You think people are going to cry for a martyr? I promise you, they won't. You sure won't have honored those people who died. So I would highly recommend you find some other means of dealing with your guilt."

"Are you going to treat me or aren't you?" Tom demanded.

"I'm required to," Masdi assured him. "But I'm also responsible for advising my patients on the proper way to maintain their health and well-being."

"I've worked really hard to get away from the lectures, Doc. I'm not some junior officer angling for correction."

"And I've been through more with your sort than you're aware of. You think you're the only one who's done what you have? Lied about an accident? Captain Paris, I know at least three similar incidents that *haven't* been resolved, as you resolved your situation."

"Nice to know someone's keeping count. By the way, you're not answering my question."

"I'll treat you, make you feel like you did when you were a second-year cadet. But I'll lecture you as much as I like, Captain, especially when I know you have the capability to right your mistakes."

Tom coughed a laugh, leaning back against the bulkhead. "Yeah, I've done a great job at that."

"You're still moving, aren't you?"

"Barely. There's some more I could do to fix that."

"You've got a good crew who seems to care and it's obvious you work harder now than you ever had in Starfleet."

"Thanks for the recap," Tom drawled, then narrowed his eyes. "What's your point?"

"The point is, you've already been punished. Starfleet made sure to punish you in every way it fairly could and you'll always have the onus of having to remember it. So it's time to let those people go. You have to get on with your life, or you'd might as well end it and save everyone the trouble. --I'll bet you already knew all this, though. You just haven't gotten around to accepting it. It's why you're here."

"I'm here because I nearly died on the way to my quarters last night."

"Why you're *at this point*, Captain," Masdi clarified. "Though, now that you mention it, you recovered enough to get yourself in my room not ten minutes after I arrived. You could've rationalized waiting again if you'd wanted to; you could've grabbed some more painkillers. But you know you need to make a change and are probably waiting for someone to take you there. If that's the case, I have no problem telling you that you can't keep going like this. You have to let those crewpeople go and move on, and you have to at least switch to synthehol, or you *will* meet a premature death. You'll be a pill capsule in open space and no one will remember anything but what brought you down and how you let it happen."

That stopped Paris--stopped his tongue and froze his expression. In fact, he stared blankly at the doctor for almost a minute; thoughts, memories and emotions flitted behind his yellowed eyes as he put together the full picture. He drew shallow breaths, and then finally coughed a longer one. His hand gripped his pocket again as he tensed, then relaxed. His lips parted.

"Can you treat it now?" he asked roughly, pushing himself from the wall. He tried to stand without wobbling, but finally had to set a hand on the side of the bed.

The doctor returned a belabored stare. "Don't tell me: You're on a schedule."

"Sort of," Tom admitted. "My engineer's expecting me after lunch to check in and help with some RTC repairs."

"If anyone on board questions your rank, I'll vouch for you," Masdi deadpanned as he turned back for his office. "Take your coat off. I'll call my nurse."

The surgery was not as straightforward as the computer promised--but then, such treatments rarely went as planned. The level of degradation in the man's internal cavity was far worse when Masdi and his nurse got inside of it. Things he hadn't scanned for popped up, causing him to hold back on the liver and address those first.

"Guess his engineer will just have to wait," Masdi commented with a snort as he reset the tissue regenerator.

Worse of all of the ailments outside the disease itself were the festering ulcers in his stomach and on his lower esophagus. It was a wonder to Masdi how the man drank anything at all. They looked to have been there a while and the man hadn't twenty-seven years.

That completed, the doctor moved on to the side effects of the liver dysfunction. Series of veins required treatment; his blood required detoxification and several points of swelling were relieved. The liver itself required a few attempts by the regenerator to remove all the scarring, and it had to be done in sections as a series of antibiotics were injected. That at last completed, the doctor and nurse deactivated the organ spreaders, then sealed the large incision site. Finally, a few more runs by the bioscanner corrected the jaundice and bruising. Some closer work took care of the bruise on Paris' hip.

Backing off a step to re-read the re-evaluation, Masdi nodded to his nurse, who dutifully prepared the patient to be revived. On second thought, Masdi held up his hand. "Just one more thing," he said, stepping away to the medical replicator. Tapping into the menu, he quickly found what he was looking for; a few seconds later, the small implant appeared, sitting on a sample glass. Masdi picked it up and grabbed the requisite hypospray. Loading the implant, he injected it into Paris' abdomen.

"Not that I don't trust you, Captain," the doctor said, his mouth pursed into a smile. He nodded at his nurse again and pulled away his surgical gear. "We're done. Scan his vitals and bring him back up to normal temperature. Then I'll revive him myself."

The nurse wordlessly went to it, well accustomed to his superior's temperament and knowing on whom they'd been working. When his duty was completed and he'd handed the required stimulants to Masdi, he excused himself to the lab.

"Thank you, Alston," Masdi said, then took a seat by his patient once again. Shutting down the table, the machinery pulled away, revealing a man who at last looked as he was supposed to, save a shave and decent haircut. Pressing the hypospray to Paris' throat, the doctor set that away, too, then waited.

Several seconds passed before Tom Paris breathed normally; slowly, his eyes opened to the stark Starfleet lighting above him. Blinking, he breathed again, then looked over.

Masdi ghosted a smile of greeting. "Good afternoon, Captain Paris. How do you feel?"

Tom cleared his throat, rolled his shoulders. "Groggy, a little sore."

"That'll go away with more sleep," the doctor told him. "I thought you'd prefer to have that in your own quarters."

"I need to get down to my engine room."

"A little late for that, I'm afraid--and I apologize. I did try to whip you back into shape in record speed, but you'd abused yourself more efficiently than I'd at first detected. I contacted your tech Savan and let her know. She said she would assist your engineer today."

Tom nodded, still breathing as though he slept. Thinking a moment, his brow furrowed as he caught up. "What time is it?"

"About fifteen hundred," Masdi answered then stood to help Paris up. "Again, a solid rest should help the residual stiffness and fatigue a great deal. If you come in tomorrow, I'll likely send you off with a bill of perfect health."

"And it's not even Christmas," Tom smirked, sliding down the table to his feet.

"You got a lot, though," Masdi returned. "I'll transmit your revised medical file to you. You should know what the last few years did to your body."

"Birthday, too. Thanks."

"You're welcome." Staring hard at the younger man, he held his position until the attention was returned. The look on Paris' face was unreadable--well trained, the doctor understood. He sighed, shrugged. "Just do me a favor, for everything I've done for you today, would you? What we were talking about before your surgery? Think it over. Really, Captain, you have a chance to keep yourself from sinking again, a great chance to get past what got you here. You'll never do anyone any justice by destroying yourself--not your crew, your friends or your family--and it won't do you any good, either. And you *do* deserve to move on. Take it from someone who's been serving on this border since you were still in grade school and who's seen just about everything man can do: You have the right to recover."

With that, the doctor returned to the lab console he had been sitting at when his patient first entered the sickbay.

Captain Paris grabbed his coat and strode out of the doors.

Only when he got to the center junction did he realize that he was *striding*.

Even his quarters looked different.

Pulling on a fresh shirt, Tom peered out of his bedroom to the place he'd been calling home for two and a half years, and he suddenly wondered how he'd been doing it. --Not that he'd been very clear-headed through it all, nor did he spend much time there, but the chairs were impossibly short and hard. He didn't have a single decoration of his own on the drab walls; it was dark and stuffy. Yes, he knew these things, but how did he *deal* with that?

The only redeeming feature was the very comfortable bedding--though it was a heap on the floor, waiting for the refreshers to come back online. The comforter, pillowcases and sheets all reeked of

alcohol and vomit and his suddenly sensitive nose reeled well before he got on them. They were probably better off recycled. Nevertheless, with but a spare blanket, he did get over six hours of solid, undisturbed sleep. He almost felt guilty for it when he woke, though Torres had told him she wouldn't need him until twenty-three hundred, when she went back on shift and the last supplies had been replicated.

The rest had done just what the doctor said: He felt excellent. He'd forgotten what it felt like without the heaviness in his head or the flaccidity in his limbs. He felt like he needed to walk, even run.

We don't have a space set up for exercise here, do we? he pondered idly. He knew he had a great deal of natural energy--or at least he always had before. If that stuck around, he'd need to do something to burn that off.

He remembered once again that his sleep had been without disturbance, no memories, no panic attacks. He wondered if that was going to last as long as he lay off the drink. It could have simply been the aftereffects of the surgery.

Lay off the drink.

Tom paused, leaned against the window and pulled a breath into his unclogged lungs. All the sudden, it was so simple? Just stop? His form of relief had been such a part of his life for the past four years that Tom was having a real disconnect considering its absence. Then he wondered why in the hell he'd want it back, considering how great he felt, how clear-minded and free of pain he was.

"Day hasn't started yet," he told himself with a smirk.

Then again, being drunk never did help him get away from what he knew, nor could he punish himself enough with it. Masdi had pretty well nailed that one, too. Tom knew he liked the numb, though. He'd become comfortable within the haze. He was afraid of the clarity of feeling and the emotional responsibility that came with it. But again, he'd always felt, always remembered--remembered painfully well. Rather, remaining intoxicated let him shirk off the emotional responsibility he had to *them*...

What I owed them, he thought again. The thought sat a moment longer. *What do I owe them...for what happened out there?*

Then he felt as though he could run fifty laps around that squat little ship.

"I need new chairs, maybe a chaise," he added, pushing himself away from the window to grab a pair of trousers--the last clean ones he had. He hoped they didn't smell, too.

I've been walking around wafting that odor, he thought as he slid his legs into the holes. He sighed. *Goddamned wreck. No kidding people stayed away from me.*

He needed to put on a few kilos at least.

"Damnit, I need to *do* something!" His mind was everywhere--making up for lost time. It'd been so long, and he hadn't slowed down enough yet to get annoyed at it. But again, he hadn't been out the door yet. He'd probably want a couple bottles of slowdown by the end of it. He had a fresh half-crate with his name on it in the back of the lounge.

Tom stopped again, trying to get back to that other train of thought...and then couldn't recall what--

"*Torres to Paris.*"

Tom walked over to the wall comm and tapped it on. "Yeah, B'Elanna. I'm here. Need something?"

A pause, then, "Yes, well, it's twenty-two hundred, but I'm already on. Lieutenant Carey and I have been working on the port controls, and he had some good ideas on how to realign them. The new protocols are working well; I'm ready to start on rebooting secondary systems as soon as navigation is taken care of."

"Sounds great. Thanks."

"Um, yeah. Anyway, if you're up for starting on the new GNS connections, I'll be in navigation control with Carey in about ten minutes."

"I just need to shave and I'll be right there."

Another pause. "Okay. Torres out."

Tom nodded and popped his closet open to grab his boots and some socks. He tossed them on the bed for the moment, hurrying himself. A little distracted herself, B'Elanna still sounded upbeat about the progress and was ready to move forward at last.

Moving back into the bathroom, he almost didn't look. Pulling out his shaving kit, though, knowing he'd have to, he finally glanced up, then looked again.

The kid wasn't there, but what he saw was a hell of a lot closer to it than the ghoul he'd viewed not a day before--an image that hadn't left his near memory yet--and probably never would. No, he wasn't young anymore and he did need to gain some weight, but his color was good, his eyes were clear and steady; he looked and felt healthy...and was back to square one, give or take four pretty lousy years.

What about you? he asked himself, staring himself in the eyes. *You ready?*

Tom made good time to the engine room once he found a pair of socks that didn't somehow also stink. He still couldn't believe what he'd been doing and living with. Turning into the center corridor, which led straight into the deck two engine room, he saw his contract liaison coming his way, likely finally ending her long day on the bridge. Maryl had been covering for Savan while the latter was down working on repairs with the rest of them. Now her hands were in her pockets and her pace was relaxed; she even yawned.

"Hi Maryl," Tom said, offering a brief grin when she looked up at him.

"Oof!" she coughed as she smacked into a bulkhead.

Tom kicked up his pace. Maybe the new look was a good one after all.

Behind and beneath the rear warp and impulse assemblies laid Tom's domain: Navigation. Though not an engineer, the guidance and navigation system was one piece of machinery he'd made certain to know about from the bolts up, no matter what ship he was flying. In the Guerdon's case, he'd worked on that GNS so many times, he could probably rebuild it blind. Even Torres allowed him every opportunity to tune and replace parts in it for knowing it so well.

He couldn't wait to get rid of it.

"Carey, right?" Tom said, moving directly into the center of the half-layer of control relays, which they'd pulled out and set on its support hinges. Letting the man have his moment to stare at him, too, Tom motioned

to the small crate of shunts. "Have you guys started, yet?"

"We just got here, Captain."

"Great," Tom nodded then looked around. "B'Elanna?"

"Good, you're here," she called, glancing briefly from the other side of the power control box. "You can start the installation now. Ridge finished cleaning out the unit a couple hours ago."

"Is he taking a break?"

"Yes. He'll be back on in six."

Tom nodded at that, too. Maryl would fill him in and they'd both get some deserved rest. It'd be nice if they could somehow get back on a regular schedule again. They hadn't enjoyed one in months. "Where's Nadrev?"

"Recycling that useless anti-grav."

"Got to give him credit for trying, though."

"It was a waste of time," she clipped, "but yes, he did try."

Looking at Carey, Tom grabbed a tool tray. "Thanks, by the way, for all your help these past couple of days. It's really made a difference," he added, pointing Torres' way with his chin, "in more ways than one."

"I'm glad to help," Carey returned with a small grin. Blinking his returning stare away, he motioned toward the assembly. "B'Elanna says you might have some compatibility issues with these kinds of shunts."

"We'll reroute and compensate as usual," Tom replied, settling himself into the first section and dragging the crate nearer to him. "But yeah, it's why we keep having problems." *Not to mention a dozen or so Maquis attacks, but that's beside the point.* Cursing to himself as he set those memories aside for another day, Tom cranked the replacement part into its socket, then waved the hyperspanner over it. He grinned. His hands were so *steady*. "Hopefully, the new relays will help, though I'm not going to hope too hard. It'll get us where we need to go for now, though, which is enough for us."

"That's what she's hoping too," Carey said, collecting a kit and a section of his own to work on as Tom came out to tap into a nearby panel.

Coming out of the control grid, B'Elanna did a double take to see her captain. *What one trip to a doctor can do*, she remarked to herself. He looked...*handsome*. His fair golden face nicely shaved, he had dressed in refreshed clothes, his posture was straight and his hands had an odd grace about them that she knew couldn't have been there before. Even his walk, an easy stride that knew its footing, looked right on him.

It was good to see him well, particularly while still in contact with the Berlin's crew. After defending him against the officers there, B'Elanna had realized in full how she'd been kicking a man already down, too. Though she saw no need to apologize to him, she didn't like seeing him beaten anymore, either--and certainly not brought down by a bunch of Starfleet assholes. Whether or not he wanted her to stay on the Guerdon wasn't so much an issue to her, anymore. What happened in the Berlin's shuttlebay wouldn't happen again while she was there, if she could help it.

Stepping over to the console, she reached up to an adjacent screen and locked in some numbers. "These shunts respond better to a lower frequency," she told Tom. "Don't set them too high."

"Yeah, I was just seeing that." Looking down, he held her stare when she glanced up to him. "Thanks."

B'Elanna paused before exhaling, then turned her attention back down to the readings. "You're welcome."

With that, Tom moved back to the grids and continued his conversation with Carey.

Entering a new line of power conversions, B'Elanna let the remnants of his cologne fade slowly away.



They were eight hours from Sicira--a miracle, really, considering what the ship had been through. In fact, they were coming in *ahead* of schedule, an irony Maryl gladly reported as Tom slid the last few wires into place beneath his flight control console. Standing, wiping his hands on his coat pockets, he slid off his coat and stepped into the middle of the bridge when the call from the Berlin came through. A transporter beam whisked him away a few seconds later.

For the second time since hooking up with the Berlin, Tom moved down the corridors en route to Dokaru's ready room. Two days later, however, his visit with the Starfleet captain would be greatly improved, for both the ship and how he presented himself--a detail he realized only as he caught the stares of various crewmen he passed, and again on the bridge, when Barnes looked up from her position and frowned.

He couldn't help his smirk, there, and he gladly aimed it at her. He knew he looked good as much as he knew she hated him for it. *It's what you get for relishing in my downfall, you ass.* "Just here to see your captain, Commander," he glibly told her and turned for the ready room door. Drawing an unnoticeable breath, he reached out for the door call.

"Come," was the immediate reply. Captain Dokaru was out of his seat before Paris got in the door. "Captain, thank you for coming."

"Not a problem," Tom told him, shaking the other man's hand when it was offered. To his credit, the older man hardly blinked at his appearance, though Tom could tell he noticed it. "Actually, we're pretty well set. We have enough to get into the Siciran system on our own and complete our repairs, thanks to you and your crew."

"That's good to hear."

"I owe you a lot of thanks, Captain Dokaru," Tom told him sincerely, "and Carey, too. He was just what we needed in our engine room."

"We're more than happy to have been able to assist." There, Dokaru offered a more inward grin. "And amend our ways, too."

"How so?"

"Your engineer Torres came to visit me not long after you left the other day. Were you aware of...? Well, she had some choice words in defense of you."

"She did?" Tom didn't try to hide his surprise. B'Elanna had showed no indication of letting go of her grudge. He'd have never guessed she'd been off sticking up for him.

"Yes, and I've had a few words with my second in command. I apologize for her behavior, Captain. I honestly did not expect such disrespect to be displayed by any among my crew."

"It's not unjustified. I'm used to catching hell."

"It's unjustified when it's a member of my senior staff speaking with a guest aboard my ship and setting

an example." Letting the little burst of indignation that came with that admission fade, Dokaru motioned towards the table, where a couple chairs had already been pulled out and some selections of food had been set. "I know we'll be breaking off soon, Captain, but I assure you, it won't happen again."

"Thank you," was all Tom could think to say. He was still in rewind about B'Elanna taking his byplay with Barnes to the top.

"This might surprise you," he started as Tom moved towards it, "but I am not interested in the past or politics. I prefer to look at what's in front of me. And what I've seen is a leader making the best of a bad situation. You obviously work very hard; you have a good crew and a decent living--not an easy thing to keep in this region these days. There are a lot of temptations along this route, which I know you're well aware of."

Sitting as Dokaru had said the words, Tom instantly felt a pang in his chest. Suddenly, he was reminded of where he was--and where his ship still was. *Oh shit*, he thought next. Stupidly comfortable for a moment, he now could see precisely what was coming. He wondered how the well-corrected Barnes would look when he was led to the brig by the security officer, this time for treason.

His chest fluttered with anger, then, but he knew better than to move. Running to the door would have signaled a full alert. Tom's eyes nailed the door, however.

Dokaru, walking over to the replicator, finished, "I hope you'll continue to be successful in keeping ahead of it, Captain."

With that, he tapped on the replicator panel. The welcome whirr of an efficient food slot filled the room, shortly drowning out the sound of Tom's thrumming pulse.

"Me too," Tom finally coughed and looked down at the food tray to deflect the flush in his face, buried his hands under the table to hide the shakes from that surge of adrenaline, trying not to curse aloud. His chest panged again and he calmed it with a few slow breaths. With all his native skill, he got a grip.

"Yes, please help yourself," Dokaru said, glancing back. "Would you care for a drink?"

Stuffing his first response, Tom stared suspiciously at the slim, silver tumbler that Dokaru had removed to the table. "What are you having?"

"Iced coffee."

Tom smiled, exhaling a breath of relief. "Iced coffee it is, then. It's been a long while since I've had it."

The captain complied then took his seat by Tom. Sipping at his drink, choosing a finger roll from the tray, he leaned back. "Catching up on events, I learned you are also a pilot."

Tom nodded as he swallowed. Dokaru's choice wasn't half bad. The coffee was quite cold and strong, heavy with vanilla but not too sweet. "Yeah, I put in some time at the wheel."

"As did I. As did I." Dokaru smiled wistfully. "I sometimes think I shouldn't have let them promote me." Seeing the other man's stare askance, he grinned. "That surprises you?"

"A little," Tom admitted. "You seem very comfortable in your position."

"Thank you--and you have a point. Most officers aren't in it to stay where they are."

"I was," Tom said. Laughing quietly to himself, he nodded at the memory--the first time he'd ever done so, he realized, even as he continued, "I didn't want to be anywhere but behind the conn, or at the shuttle controls."

"It was your real love, then," Dokaru observed.

"It was," Tom, mused aloud. "I'd have been happy anywhere as long as I was flying."

The older man grinned. "I used to think that way, but I think I was more the officer in the end. Opportunities opened up and I began to climb..." He stopped there, smiling a little, then sipping his coffee. He looked at Tom again. "Maybe it'd just be nice if my commander would let me fly a shuttle."

"Maybe you should take a vacation at the test fields at Migata-three," Tom suggested.

Dokaru chuckled. "That I hadn't thought of--but I will remember it! I was there in my fourth year at the Academy when they introduced the Ottar-Ring relay..."

Leaning back in the very comfortable chair as Dokaru told the story, Tom realized that the man was still paying him courtesies, but not because of the Guerdon's situation or just because they were there. Tom was now certain that he wasn't being played for information, either, much less under arrest. Rather, it occurred to him that Dokaru was showing a *fellow captain* the courtesy earned by his rank, in the regular updates over the past few days to the candor of their present conversation. This was highly strange to Tom, though he finally decided to try some food and accept the opportunity to relax. He'd spent most of his time on the Guerdon *avoiding* the idea of his rank, mainly for knowing he hadn't earned it. Suddenly picking up a kind of camaraderie he'd not experienced in a long while, Tom felt he might actually be enjoying his position for the first time.

Being off the alcohol really was messing with his brain. He plucked up a cracker.

"Perhaps I'll convince the designers to refit the bridge with the configuration you enjoy," Dokaru continued.

Tom pursed his lips. "You can't be coveting the Guerdon."

"It might be a freighter, Captain, but again, I do miss being at the conn. Being able to fly your ship as a captain is, yes, something that would give me the best of both worlds."

"Well," Tom considered, "you do have a holodeck." He smiled, scooping up another cracker and a piece of cheese that time. "I'd probably be the loser, but I might be willing to trade ships."

Dokaru laughed.

That must have been some talk, Tom noted to himself as he moved into the engine room. B'Elanna had just set up a small group of Starfleet people with the last of the ODN assignments, their final favor to the Guerdon. They all saw him come in, but all would sooner look at their boots than look him in the eye; they got out of his way as he walked, offering a quick, quiet, "Sir." Whatever Barnes received trickled down with the force of a flash flood. No question, that was satisfying.

"I have some time," he told B'Elanna as he neared. "Can I do anything?"

B'Elanna glanced quickly back at him. "Actually, you can. I finished the rebuilds on those injector rods, if you'd like to help install them."

Tom watched her stare follow the flow of numbers before her. "No problem. Thanks."

She seemed to think about it again for a moment; then she frowned. "I'll have to open the control panels for you." Sighing to herself, the engineer gave up her console and led Tom over to four plasma rods, which lay

unceremoniously on the deck. Each two meters long, B'Elanna knelt at the center and nodded over to a tray of tools. "Bring me the magnetic-diffuser."

Tom did as asked and regarded the shiny instrument with a flick of his eyebrows. "This yours?"

Her lips twisted up. "It is now."

"Glad to hear it," he grinned back and placed the diffuser in her palm with a light whack. Her fingers wrapped around it and she got to work immediately.

Coming back into the main engine room, wiping his hands on his pockets, Ridge caught the last of their dialogue and nodded. "About time we moved on," he said with a wistful grin, looking up a moment. "You'd have liked that we did."

"What?" B'Elanna asked as she and Tom unhinged the rod assembly, then moved to the next one.

"Just talking to myself," Ridge answered and bent to heft the first burden onto his brawny shoulder. "You know I'm a little off in that department."

"Just a very little," B'Elanna replied, her head bent to her work

Carey, nearby, stared at Ridge with a certain amount of awe, then got B'Elanna's attention as she disconnected the second injector. "You know, an anti-grav unit would probably make things a lot easier."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "You'd think that."

Tom snorted. "I think we've got it, Lieutenant. Thanks."

"They just beamed it over?"

"Just a few minutes ago, in fact, just before we before we reversed course."

"No message?"

"None. He only asked permission and said it was for you."

"I see. Well, then, let see what's under..."

"What do you have there, Doctor?"

Masdi sat back on his heels on the floor of the transporter pad, a slow, rare grin forming on his thin mouth as he looked down at the crate he'd just opened. According to the label, it was a stock of whiskey.

The note beside it read, "Happy Holidays. --TEP."

VIII. You Can Sometimes Go Home.

Out of his seat two seconds after cutting the comm, Tom nodded to Savan on the way out.

As the ship powered down, system-by-system, he made his way aft, into the engine room, down to deck two and in and out of the tool closet within three minutes. When he turned, they came out of warp. Jogging easily back to the central power relay, he found Ridge securing the pulleys and B'Elanna plucking out parts. Just another EPS switch, he knew and set down his tools. Slipping in beside Ridge, he reached in to help balance and shift the assembly when the time was right.

Her eyes on her tricorder and her panel in turns, B'Elanna rerouted main power into a temporary generator to keep their essential systems online; then she gave a Ridge a nod. "Do it."

Ridge huffed a few breaths, gave a Tom a look, then the two men heaved the unit from its dock and swung it precariously around. Loosening the pulleys, they tipped it forward and rolled it onto a waiting cart, on which it would be repaired. Shaking out their arms, catching their breath, they then moved to get the other unit strapped in.

They'd been trading out EPS distributor units for two weeks by then, almost every other day, that in-between the numerous consequences of a twitchy electro plasma system forced to work on *almost* compatible parts and a warp drive doing much the same. The ODN was in better shape at that point, and it still needed a full rebuild, as well. But Tom was trying not to think about that.

"Remind me why I didn't look harder for an anti-grav at DS-Nine?" Tom quipped as he squatted to get a better grip on the cross-pylon.

"Aside from the fact we're broke?" Ridge returned, pulling with all his strength on the straps.

Tom turned the unit around. "Yeah. Forget that part."

"Well...still good for the soul," Ridge grunted as he pulled the unit over the locking plate, then finally began to lower it.

"If that were true, you'd be gods by now," B'Elanna replied, watching and waiting with her laser wrench nestled between her tightly crossed arms as Ridge's brute determination as well as strength got the piece gently into its dock with Tom's guidance.

They had done it twelve times by then, and the job still left them panting and sweating and B'Elanna feeling a little useless as she waited for her turn. She could help a great deal with that lifting, especially

with the pulley system she and Nadrev had set up. But Ridge asked--then begged--her to stick to what they needed her to do. He was frightened for her fingers and was paranoid after her many visits to Savan's lab. Moreover, because of the distributor's position and the angle it had to come out at, the pulley system was dangerous; one slip could take out the whole assembly. After several futile arguments with the frustratingly cheerful man, B'Elanna decided to simply wait until he was somewhere else to do her share.

"Can I be the god of levitation?" Tom said with mock enthusiasm. He reached down and snapped the docking plate back up while still helping steady the coupling with his other hand.

"The god of the parts depot would be more useful," she returned and knelt down next to him to access the controls.

With a snort at her return, Tom held on with Ridge until B'Elanna had fully secured the unit and confirmed it was working again to her satisfaction. A flicker of a grin crossed her lips. With a few taps, main power was taken off the generator and the distributor came back online.

Letting go, Tom briskly rubbed his hands together and nodded. "All clear?" Her glance was all the answer he needed. He strode over to the comm and tapped in to the bridge. "Savan, take us back to warp seven-point-five. I'll be up in a while. Let me know if you need me." Bouncing on his heels a couple times, checking the room with his eyes, he nodded again. "Okay. I'll go check on Nadrev. See you later."

With that, he disappeared.

B'Elanna glanced up again, shaking her head. "I sometimes don't know which one's worse."

Ridge chuckled. "He's fine, just a little frisky."

"He's making me nervous."

"You just can't handle change, B'Elanna."

B'Elanna frowned, digging into the control pad to check one last output. "That too, I guess."

"Nothing weird about it," Ridge shrugged and sat back on his heels to watch her finish, rubbing his big biceps with his opposite hands. "What's up next?"

"We have our landing clearance."

"Docking coordinates pending."

"Yeah." Tom bounced his leg on his knee as he tapped through the usual numbers. Looking over at the other panel, he saw that B'Elanna had already locked down the warp core--gladly, probably, as she'd been largely under it since a week after they left Sicira. When she wasn't, she was buried in main power, switching out coupling units. Though it'd be a working holiday, even she would probably appreciate the break during their ten-day layover at Ulinas. "Maryl, patch in to the Fidor Group and tell them we're here."

"I'll be more than happy to announce the obvious," she replied, rolling her eyes, "if I get to accept the

credit."

"No problem. B'Elanna needs someone to scrub the coils after this run. I'll let her know you're angling for the job."

"Asshole."

"Who loves to waste your time for you," he smirked. "Just send them a message, Maryl, in case we need to reconfirm our dock. I don't want some idiot telling us we don't belong there."

That put the Bajoran to work.

Putting both feet on the floor, he tried to stop bouncing his leg--then he wondered why he bothered trying. He could feel the hypospray Savan had given him bouncing in his coat pocket. He was still taking them regularly. They did nothing to stop the nervousness, though. Giving up for the mean time, he dug into some environmental stats. They'd be docking at the main station that time, courtesy of their contractors. Though not the very best one could have at Ulinas, the central docks were still first-class accommodations Tom did not take for granted. The Guerdon would look like an old buzzard in a field of swans, but it wasn't difficult to not give a damn.

They'd gotten lucky all around, it seemed. The run to Deep Space Nine passed without delay or distraction. They all expected a call from Captain Chakotay, but did not receive one. (Tom and Maryl confirmed the man had not been arrested.) The hold inspection and subsequent materials pickup went smoothly, and their one-point-seven sector jump remained both fast and, again, uninterrupted. Everyone but Maryl raced around the various parts of the engine room to help stave off computer and engine failures en route. With stops only a few minutes long at a time to change out the EPS distributors, they managed to get to Ulinas from Deep Space Nine in just under twenty days--but at a price, as their engineer predictably noted that morning over breakfast.

"Unfortunately, this unofficial speed run's already burnt out half the replacement parts the people from the Berlin helped us to," B'Elanna stated sourly as she tapped on her PADD. "We're trading out the units every other day, and now the warp drive is showing stress again. The subspace generator is also going to need refitting. The switches aren't doing the other systems any favors, either. The ODN will start to malfunction again with that much fluctuation."

"We all knew the Berlin's parts would be the first to burn out," Tom said.

"I'd just hoped they could last until we got back to Minjau," B'Elanna admitted.

"Between the Fidor deal and our Maquis obligation," Maryl told her, "we won't be going that way for another few months--and that just to run the Hidirin supply line."

The engineer frowned, pausing to think. "What are supplies like on Ulinas? Anything we can use?"

Tom nodded in mid-sip of his coffee. Swallowing, he said, "I know some vendors who have a building or two of old parts they sell at a colony rate. They can usually supply for our systems; we've dealt with them a couple times before. They all have stock in different floating scrap yards, leftovers from the border wars, among others. Pretty good deals as long as you don't mind rebuilding everything you get."

B'Elanna gave him a look.

Tom grinned at it. "If it's not a perfect fit, it'll at least be better than what we have."

"Give me the contact information when you can."

"I'll take you over," Tom offered. "It's been a while since I've been out in the northern province, and they prefer you show up in person to deal with them."

"Mainly 'cause they've got nothing else to do," Ridge snorted, then looked at B'Elanna. "Tom's right about going there, though. Jetad's full of Humans, most of them Traditionalists who still like Federation convenience. Nice country, too. Good food."

Maryl smirked. "Great shellfish."

"Nah, just decent. Not enough brine for me. Best corn chowder I've tasted, though."

"Sure that was corn?" Tom queried.

"You think I don't know corn when I see it?" Ridge scoffed.

Maryl rolled her eyes. "Like you grew up in Andiarna."

"Indiana," Tom corrected.

"Isn't that what I said? --That *is* the corn province, right?"

Ridge chuckled.

B'Elanna was not distracted from her PADD, though the corner of her mouth twisted downwards at the captain's suggestion. She never had warmed up to running parts with him; his perpetually restless state of late made the idea even less appealing. Then again, he did know how to get in with dealers when he wanted to, so it might be worth it. "We'll need to reengage the secondary power coupling before we land."

Nadrev sighed. "We just rebuilt the primary unit yesterday."

"And we'll have to keep doing that until we get or build replacements that are worth keeping in there. I don't want to have a blackout during landing procedure."

"Your gods stand at the ready," Tom grinned then ticked off the last few items on his schedule.

Several hours later, they'd finished setting the secondary unit into the trunk again, which had worn to the point that it slid rather than snapped into place. Nadrev had been disassembling the primary unit since they got it out--again. No one had been bothered for very long about the repetition, though. Ulinas was the hands-down favorite stop among all the crew but B'Elanna, who had not been there before, and they had a luxurious ten days in a well-equipped drydock to get their repairs done. With any luck, they'd get enough of what they needed to give B'Elanna a break...so she could crawl back under one of the many other systems screaming for attention.

Leaning back in his seat as he continued to wait for his coordinates, he remembered that B'Elanna would be crawling under those systems for only a short time. Her contract was up in two weeks.

He paused. Had it been six months already? Then again, it felt some days as if she'd always been there. He'd not thought about Livich since Podala, and even then, when he thought about his engine room, he only pictured that busy, determined half-Klingon, heard only her voice, steady and clear, over the comm. Tom had to think hard to remember Livich's tinny tone and steel blue stare. *I was pretty*

drunk then, too, though, he reminded himself with a smirk. Tom better remembered the Zomirian whiskey he'd enjoyed during her last few weeks on board. How much he could feel and taste that old favorite blend on his tongue, feel the delicious numbness as it washed into his belly. Ulinas also made a particularly good...

Quickly tapping a note to himself on his arm console, Tom thought about maybe drafting a preliminary contract update, then see about the rest. Torres was obviously committed to the primary repairs, though she'd been giving him no indication of anything else. Or maybe she just didn't want to bring it up yet. Either way, it was something to do between checking in and their parts run.

Tom considered the options for a few seconds before deciding he could get a better idea of where she stood before they left Ulinas. Problem was, much as he wanted and needed those repairs and her brand of dedication, a small part of him still knew she'd be better off elsewhere.

"Coordinates received," Tom announced and opened up the comm. "Ulinas Station-Two, this is the Guerdon, ready on approach."

"Guerdon, we have you in position lock. You are clear to proceed."

Tom's fingers tapped deftly over his panel as he poked his twitchy ship into the upper atmosphere and wondered if the dealers might have an old GNS assembly lying around...

B'Elanna shivered a moment after they materialized on the transport pad at Rikad Province. She knew they were going north, but she was instantly annoyed that no one had bothered to advise a coat. Stepping down into the main terminal of the typically industrial structure, she looked out the nearest viewport and saw what looked like a warm sun. "Where is this warehouse?"

"There are a few, and they're out on the industrial wing, near the end," Tom answered, setting their pace toward the open side of the hold as he pulled his bag strap up onto his shoulder. "It opens up on some really beautiful country. Lakes and mountains, woodlands."

"That's nice."

He grinned over at her. She looked like she'd break in half if she crossed her arms any more tightly. "It's a lot warmer outside."

B'Elanna sighed with some relief and matched his quick stride along the outer corridor. It was a long, spartan building, dimly lit and populated only with workers. It was probably too early for day tourists. True to Tom's words, though, the sun outside was deliciously warm and slightly wet--a bath of relief that helped her speed her pace without effort. Looking around at the town's rows and mountains beyond, however, she couldn't help the pull in her gut. In her travels, world towns had begun to look all the same, just in different colors or sizes. Then she remembered what Ridge had said about the area's population. Everything she was looking at probably had a copy elsewhere in the Federation, including where she grew up.

"Are these suppliers natives?" she asked.

"No. Almost all the people here are either Human, Trill or Onaran--resettlers from other colonies--and Humans not from the border colonies, ironically, but the old, inner planets. They came in fifteen years

ago and rebuilt most of this town, about ten years after Ulinas got Federation membership." Tom pointed around at the new, yet somewhat old-fashioned structures. "All of these fronts are built on the old frames. It was pretty run down after the Ulinians shifted out to their four colonies and other Federation bases. The central city has always been a great place to visit, but over the last ten years, Tikad's really come around; it feels like a little vacation resort out of the way. The scientists love this place because of the neaporan crystal cluster just outside the system."

"A little more than I needed to know," B'Elanna commented.

Tom snorted. "You know, you could *try* to get some insight on the vendors, B'Elanna."

"That's what *you're* here for, I thought."

"That's part of it," Tom admitted, trying for lightness that time. In truth, keeping himself occupied and away from an open bar charging merely credits was a good deal of his inspiration there. He knew without anything better to do, he'd be craving something to calm him down and could easily get stupid. He came close to contacting Paiham a few times at Deep Space Nine for boredom alone between sign-offs. (*What would a little touch hurt?* his brain droned to him over and over, until he was forced to run a few laps around deck four, reciting bearing equations and convincing everyone he'd lost it.)

As for the rest, B'Elanna reminded him of his initial reason for being her guide that day.

"My job's to keep the ship running, not be a tourist."

"Yeah," he said, peering down at her. "Question is, do you want to keep doing that? --Fixing the ship, I mean. Fixing the Guerdon."

B'Elanna met his stare, slowed her pace as he likewise relaxed. "You want me to stay?" Tom shrugged. "I know you've been pretty pissed off with how things have been...how they turned out. All that wish list stuff pretty much went out the airlock with the Ligarán deal. I wouldn't blame you for looking for something outside the mess brewing in this region, not to mention I still think you're working beneath yourself. That said, I'll renew your contract on the same terms if you're up for another go."

She continued to hold his attention, so suddenly intent with the change in topic. The man was everywhere but down lately, but she believed his sincerity, there--not to mention she was glad he brought it up, and did so plainly. No games, no lectures. He meant business. She knew she wanted to stay and had slowly started to put behind her that incident at Andal, but only then did she realize how much it meant to her, for him to ask to renew.

She drew a deep breath and hoped he couldn't see any result of her relief. "I'm up for another go."

His lips turned up, then he nodded. "Okay," he said simply. Looking forward again, he pointed to a side street, which ran down to a series of oblong building. "We'll start with Nissan, then move over to Oscar. Takkid is on the far end of the row, so we'll try him last, then grab some dinner to take back for everyone." He grinned. "Ridge wasn't kidding about that chowder. Even Savan will eat it."

"What's the difference in their supplies?"

"Different junk drifts," Tom replied, springing easily back from his digression. "I haven't dealt here in Rikadin a year, so all I can say is we'll find out who's been where."

B'Elanna didn't reply, but continued to walk at Tom's side until they came to the first building. Entering beneath a handsome façade, she peered around with some surprise once inside. It was more a

covered junkyard than a warehouse. Piles of parts were strewn about in no discernable order, none of them were clean, certainly nothing could have been labeled in that condition, either.

"It's going to take me a week to get through all this," she hissed under her breath to Tom.

"Yeah, it's a mess," Tom agreed. "He must have just come back from a pickup."

"Just yesterday, in fact," said a man from behind him. When Tom turned, a middle-aged vendor in an old blue bodysuit smiled and stuck out his hand. "Paris, right?"

Tom blinked. "Yeah. You remember me?"

"Never forget a face or a name--and you left your base ID here when last you passed through. I've still got it on the workbench over there."

"Don't let me forget it this time," Tom chuckled, then motioned to the woman by him, who had not lost her frown. "B'Elanna Torres, my engineer. She'll be dealing today."

"Lot prettier than that lemon wedge who picked up last time," Nissan noted. "And that, I *do* recall."

"Is there any way to sort through this?" B'Elanna asked flatly.

Seeing the young captain shrug, Nissan answered, "Why don't you give me your list with your specs and condition ratings and I'll see what I can find. The piles are organized by age: Metallurgic analysis is best way to start with a bunch of scrap, right? If I have something for you, I'll find it in a day or so."

"I'll need to know what you have by tomorrow," B'Elanna told him.

The vendor laughed, shaking his head. "Quite the firecracker, aren't you? Good deal." Then, he nodded. "Okay, Ms. Torres, I'll see what I can find by tomorrow afternoon. Come by around then and you can even poke through yourself."

She nodded down to her PADD. "I will. Thanks."

Nissan took the datachip Tom held out to him. "You off to see Oscar next?"

"Tell me he hasn't been out recently, too?"

"No, you'll find him in good order--though he'll have less on hand. He's been boating with the missus. He might be able to get you something specific if he knows it's out there, though. He has claim to a floater around the ninth moon of Yibbal and a little shuttlepod now."

Tom and B'Elanna arrived at his building five minutes later. Walking in, they were welcomed by a long, half-circle counter, suitable for putting large parts on top of, several meters from the door. The entry space was plain but clean; skylights above made the area bright and welcoming. Immediately, B'Elanna liked what she saw.

Probably twice as expensive, though, she smirked to herself.

Leaning against the counter, Tom glanced back and nodded toward a monitor on the side. "You can see what he's got on file, there."

B'Elanna nodded and moved to the old display. "I still don't know why we couldn't have done all this on

the Guerdon."

"And miss the chance for some fresh air?" Tom grinned, but shook his head of it. "When you want parts cheap, you dance on their floor." Bouncing on his heels a few times, he leaned over the counter again, then moved around it to peek into the warehouse door. "Oscar?" he called. "Anyone home?"

"Coming!"

A few seconds later, a dark, stocky man in a long shirt rolled up at the sleeves exited the warehouse to immediately shake Tom's hand. "How are you?"

"Fine, thanks. We're looking for parts for an Alos Two-five Sool tradeship."

"Hmm. Bolian?"

"Yeah, with parts from all around."

"Two-five sool's an oldie, too." Oscar eyed the taller man. "Do I know you?"

Tom nodded. "Tom Paris of the Guerdon. We've dealt a couple times, the last time just over a year ago."

"Good. I'll have you on record, then, Captain. Just give me a moment, here." Moving behind the counter to his workstation, singing the ship model to himself a few times over, he glanced at the woman concertedly tapping at the warehouse inventory before reactivating his console. Then he looked again--then stared. "B'Elanna?" he asked, though it was hardly a question when she looked up at him and paled, her lips dropping open as she focused on him. "It *is* you!" Oscar laughed and got himself back around the counter to approach her. "What in the world are you doing here?!"

B'Elanna gazed, almost in horror, as Oscar Madares approached her with his arms outstretched. She coughed when he caught her in a big hug and kissed her cheeks. In the corner of her eye, she saw Tom staring at the scene with equal surprise and a good dose of amusement. "I'm working," was all she could manage, then got at least an arm's reach away from him.

Oscar laughed, a little unsettled, a little confused, but happy nonetheless. "*Working*, are you? Mavis is going to faint when I tell her that. What are you doing with this man?"

"I'm his engineer," she told him, recovered enough to be annoyed at the distraction. Looking at Tom, she explained, "Oscar and his wife were neighbors on Kessik, where I grew up. It's been ten years since they moved."

"Just about that, yes," Oscar said. "Miral? How is she doing?"

"Fine," B'Elanna replied. "She went back to the Klingon homeworld after I graduated and left home."

Oscar looked like he wanted to say something about that, but he restrained it to a rise of a brow and a momentary frown before continuing, "And so now you're keeping a ship in one piece. Sounds like a fit. You're still keeping busy."

"It's not as hard to do, now." Seeing his mouth open to add something else, she added, "When you left Kessik, the last place I thought you would end up would be on another border planet."

"Oh, yes, well, we did stay at Vega for a few years. But then, the big astro-geological studies shifted

out of that region, too. We went where the work was--is. The crystal cluster outside the system was just starting to be explored. They can't get enough of it. Just about every geologist with nothing better to do has been poking around in there."

"Yes, Tom mentioned that," B'Elanna said, trying not to be too dismissive. One planet's crystal trend was nothing she was interested in, unless that trend was dilithium. Though she noted to herself that Oscar obviously wasn't working that cluster *now*, she said nothing about that. She still was there for a reason. "Look, it's great to see you, but I do have a list I need fulfilled to get our ship running."

"Yes. Yes, I should let you get to that--though you know Mavis is going to want you over for lunch."

"I probably won't have the time, but you'll know where I am, and I can stop a little while when we have a pickup. Speaking of which..."

"Yes. You've got your list." Oscar looked at Tom, who had patiently watched the scene as he leaned back against the counter. "How long will you be on Ulinas, Captain?"

"We're here ten days, twelve total if we have to," Tom told him.

"If I have it, I'll make sure you get it within a few days," Oscar promised. "I'll even work in a deal for B'Elanna's sake."

"That's not necessary," she protested.

"Shut up and take the deal," Tom said with a laugh, then waved off the resulting insult on her face. "You know as well as I do what's in the pot."

"What's *not* in it," she muttered, getting the point. She still didn't like taking a discount just because she'd been the vendor's little neighbor long ago.

Oscar got back behind his console and took the datachip from Tom. "Good. Good." Looking up again at B'Elanna a couple times while his computer made the necessary matches, his smile flickered away, then rose again. "You'll come tomorrow, B'Elanna? I'll see that Mavis is here--and tell her not to try to lure you to the house. All this work, you are indeed very busy."

"I'll need to be here," B'Elanna told him, watching him fumble with his console, peek at her again. It pricked her nerves a little, in the way it always had when people looked at her in any other manner than directly, a long standing insecurity with her heritage that she was aware of but never could get past, much as she wanted to. She chose not to call Oscar on it, however--not just then, anyway, not with Tom standing right there and naturally curious.

His nervousness aside, the years hadn't changed Oscar much. He still was warm and familiar, and he talked a lot. She almost forgot how *much* he talked. Still, she couldn't begrudge seeing him. The Madares had been very kind to her and her mother after her father was gone, had never treated them like "other people," had always left their doors open to her, even if she rarely dropped by without their directly asking. Always something of a tinker--his conversion to parts dealer really wasn't that much of a surprise when she thought about that--Oscar was B'Elanna's first practical exposure to mechanics.

Fifteen years later, she stared at Oscar Madares and felt like she was on Kessik again, hanging around Oscar's sidelot, waiting for her mother.

Unfortunately, all the other memories she'd tried to leave at Kessik decided to crawl up upon her, too.

"But I still can't stay long," she quickly added.

LOOKING FOR EPS PARTS AT U-3. BACK AT YOUR 1100. --OM.

Tom and B'Elanna stared at the note literally taped to the door for several seconds before taking a step away. "What time is it again?" Tom asked.

"About nine hundred fifty," B'Elanna grumbled. She had hoped they could sign off on something right away so she could start some actual repairs. There wasn't time to mess around and wait for parts she hadn't even accepted.

"Well, at least it's not too long a wait," Tom said. Looking around the building row then down the hill, he added, "It's probably worth it just to hang around, considering. With ours out, the local transports doesn't customize site-to-site. Even if it did, as soon as we start anything on the Guerdon, we'll have to turn around."

"Hang around? And do what?"

"Maybe walk the docks?" Tom suggested. "It's a nice boardwalk around the town border and just down there. Last time I was here, they had something close to coffee at a kiosk near the marina. It'll be good to get a walk in."

"Maybe." Still frowning but knowing the captain was right about going back and forth, B'Elanna headed down the hill with him. Nissan, they already knew, had taken himself back to the floating yards to look for a few optical subprocessors he knew were up there, needing only to be detached from the junker itself. Takkid wasn't able to help them with their ship's configuration that time. Now Oscar was at the auxiliary unit he shared with a partner on the third moon, leaving her with Paris for the time being.

At least he's being quiet today, she shrugged to herself.

"And you thought you wouldn't know anyone at the party," Tom quipped, looking askance and down at her. "You knew Oscar and Mavis when you were a kid, then?"

B'Elanna briefly closed her eyes as she drew a breath. *Or not*. On the way back yesterday, they were busy sorting the inventory. She should have known he'd remember to ask eventually. "They lived on the next property," she answered. "My parents worked with them on a few field assignments before they all moved to Kessik."

"Geologists?" Tom asked and saw her nod. "What was the big project there?"

"There was an asteroid field a couple light years away with charged trimagnesite, among some other things that are really not my specialty." She glanced up. "And also things I'm not into talking about." She turned her gaze forward again.

A pause. "Why not?"

"I wasn't very happy there."

"You and your mom?"

"We argued."

"What about your dad?"

"He left us. Story over."

Tom slowed a little, staring down at her solid gaze, pointed at their destination and unblinking. "I'm sorry," he said sincerely, examining her all over again. Those few admissions snapped into her personality like jigsaw pieces. "Guess it isn't easy seeing Oscar, then."

"Actually," she admitted, "I'm glad to know they ended up well. When their part of the study ended, they left not knowing where they'd go."

"Well, you've got that much, then," Tom said and tactfully let the topic die in his following pause.

At the end of the industrial row, the street opened up onto an impressive lake, which stretched around the base of the mountainside as far as could be seen. It was almost violet in the depth of its blue and flanked on one side by a wide, black boardwalk. On the other side, a sheer film of mist dallied in the last cool of morning below a shadowed, coally rise. B'Elanna drew a long breath, smelling a kind of pungent wet that only a lake could boast. Down the walk, kiosk vendors had just begun their day, readying their wares just in time for the first few lazily strolling tourists.

It almost made B'Elanna feel bad for wanting to get back to the ship...or maybe just unnatural. By all right, she should have relished the idea of getting some fresh air and a walk. She'd been craving both since leaving Irtrin, but now all she wanted was to get her parts and get back to work.

Tom seemed to have no such problem, she noticed when she looked his way, then purposefully turned forward again. She'd tried not to stare at him since Sicira, though the change in his entire presence made that difficult. There on Ulinas, she found herself glancing even more. The yellow sun did every favor for his improved complexion and neatly trimmed but tousled hair, and even for his fair blue eyes, which had lit upon the view, scanning every leaf in the distance, it seemed. Indeed, he had an intensity about him, which decidedly had survived the change--a curious watchfulness that must have come from years behind the conn, being forced to stay planted for hours while concentrating on any number of readings. Or at least that was how she had interpreted it. She had never cared quite enough to ask a pilot about any of that.

In any case, it was there, along with a growing grin as they came near a flock of bright green water birds bobbing for seaweed. "I should bring some bread," he said, more to himself as he leaned over the railing to watch the show.

B'Elanna realized just then that she'd never seen Tom outside an artificial environment. They'd always been on a base or station or on the ship. The time they were at Minjau, she remained aboard while he and Maryl scoured for parts. On the Berlin, which arguably boasted the best lighting, he had been ill.

She still didn't know what that doctor had done to him, though they all had noticed he wasn't drinking alcohol anymore and he was eating real meals. He had even reprogrammed the replicator again, adding soups, pizza and salsa, among other items B'Elanna would never have imagined the man enjoying as much as he now did, as she never knew him to eat much of anything at all. Tom had also taken to pacing the ship in big circles, deck by deck for a couple hours at a time when he could. He still visited Savan's lab regularly, though, and in place of his moody lethargy was an agitated alertness with a side of

wisecracking that was still surprising and sometimes annoying to her.

Ridge had it right: She hated change. Not that she hadn't instituted changes for herself--but she'd been in control of those moves. In that case, it was all the worse because she had *just* started feeling as if she knew him when his entire personality flipped over. Then again, she thought, at least he wasn't as bad as he was at Deep Space Nine, when he was literally running circles around everyone for things to do and in everyone's business as a result. Maybe it was wearing down, the aftereffects of whatever had been done.

She hoped so.

Beside her, Tom straightened, setting them off again. Drawing drew a deep breath of appreciation, he smiled and said, "It's perfect."

B'Elanna shrugged. "It's fine."

"Everything one could wish for."

"It's not *that* special."

"I meant for water skiing. It's like glass. Perfect."

"Water skiing?" B'Elanna echoed, surprised by the switch in topic and the information. More than the food, she never pictured the man *near* water.

"I used to love to water ski--or just get out on the boat. Feel the water, the air." He smiled. "It was great--though I'd probably break both my legs if I tried it again, after so many years in the chair."

B'Elanna turned her eyes out to the water. "I preferred sailing."

"Really? I took you for a speedboat sort."

"Sail boating can be fast," B'Elanna countered.

"With a danger element, too," Tom affirmed. His eyes took in the view again; he filled his lungs with the sweet morning air. Then he looked at B'Elanna again. "Let's go."

"Where?"

"Boating. Let's rent a boat and go sailing, burn the hour."

"Now?"

"Come on, B'Elanna," he urged. "We won't have this kind of time for months and I won't go alone."

B'Elanna turned to head back up to the town, cracking a laugh. "I can't handle this."

"Handle what? --Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I just can't get used to you being like this."

"Like what?" Tom couldn't help but laugh, too, she was so determined to continue away. "Like what, B'Elanna?"

"You've been set at full power since Sicira," she finally told him, stopping to look up at him. "You're about to drop dead one day, then they patch you up and you're running in circles around the ship as though you're on fire. It's taken everyone off guard, and if they don't know what to do with you, you *know* I won't."

"I'm sure something will kill it soon enough," he returned, his grin faltering. It revived again, though, to return to the topic. "Come on, B'Elanna. How hard can it be to say yes?"

Her lips twisted. "About as hard as it can be to say no."

"I know you want to. I saw that look in your eye when I first mentioned it."

She set off again. "Tom, we have a ton of other--"

"Oscar and those parts--*if* he gets them--aren't here yet." Taking her arm, he gently pulled her to a stop. "Please B'Elanna? I don't want to go alone and you can't see Ridge getting in a dinghy with me, can you?"

B'Elanna snorted.

"And Savan's like a cat. I think she's allergic to water." His eyes shone brightly into hers; he felt a smile he'd not felt in what seemed like eons well upon his face to ask her one more time. "Show me how to drive?"

B'Elanna felt her breath slow a little to stare up to him that time, to the light in his eyes, the brightness of his expression. He was asking her to share the one real joy she'd known in her childhood, with that look, so foreign and yet so right on him somehow...and sincere.

"Okay."

"Great!" Tom Paris laughed; for a moment, she thought he might kiss her for merely accepting. But he managed to restrain himself enough to give her arm a grateful squeeze, then turn to look out at the lake again. The breeze picked up just then, stirring a few curls of hair as he squinted out onto the horizon.

B'Elanna almost lost her breath to see it. Free of the ship for the while, out in the sun and the air, he almost seemed...*happy*. Even with a month of preparation, his turn of...of *everything*, really, was all so incredibly weird...but good. Yes, in the end, it couldn't be bad, at least for his sake.

"Now," he said, turning a random squint toward the marina, "where do you think we can rent a boat?"

Snickering, she tugged him southward. "Come on, sport. The rentals are back there. I saw it yesterday."

"So you *did* want to go," Tom teased and paced himself to walk beside her.

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "Do you want to do this or don't you?"

"Sure, I do."

"Then let me handle it."

Tom continued by her side, smiling down at her. "Yes, ma'am."

B'Elanna didn't dare look up, even when fate saved her from getting caught up in something that probably was a stupid idea after all....

"*Tom, are you there?*" It was Maryl.

He reached in his pocket and tapped his comm receiver. "We're here."

"*Oscar Madares was just looking for you. He says he's back and has some parts ready for pickup.*"

"Thanks. We're on our way over." Tom sighed as the comm was cut. "So much for playing hooky."

"Another time," B'Elanna said victoriously.

Pleasantly surprised that B'Elanna had said anything at all, Tom grinned. "I'm holding you to that," he warned.

She could claim victory twice that day.

Within a few hours, B'Elanna had an EPS base and its coordinating primary feeds spread out like a massive jellyfish with a hardhat on a worktable she'd recently set up on deck three. Oscar would work on grabbing more pieces of similar compatibility. The ship he was mining from was Minjan, ironically enough, but seemed to fit the specs remarkably well. B'Elanna would remember that.

For the mean time, she already had the pieces laid out and ready for a cleaning. Space was sterile, but the conditions that got it to the scrap yard plainly were not. As a result, the whole assembly was coated with grime and corrosion. The latter, thankfully, was not severe. It simply needed to be scraped away and any pits re-soldered. She then could begin to refit the assembly, rework its connections and finally set in a new primary EPS distributor, granted Oscar could confirm he had the model she needed. He would continue to search for a trunk replacement while they were out on the leg.

As she ran her tricorder over a few of the lateral power taps, it came up with a request for more information, which meant it didn't know what it was looking at. Pulling up the chemical codes, B'Elanna furrowed her brow. It looked like the usual. *I should have known it wouldn't go in so easily.*

Walking out into the corridor and forward to the cross section, B'Elanna hit the comm there--then hit it again. Not even a hiss met her, though the lights were active: Another network problem. "One more for the list," she grumbled to herself and set off for deck one. She didn't bother to call back to Ridge and Nadrev. Outside working on hull fractures and testing the nacelle plating, they probably wouldn't miss her. They'd be out there all day and the next at least.

Savan had the dayshift on the bridge while Maryl hunted for contracts at the station and coordinated with the Fidlor Group, but B'Elanna didn't find her there. Calling out a couple times, she felt a pinch in her gut to get no answer. Though she didn't visit there often and they were powered down at stable drydock, it unnerved her to see the bridge both empty and silent. Quickly doubling back, she headed for the first cross-corridor and down to Savan's office.

"You'd think they'd leave me alone," came Tom's voice, muffled by the thin door a few meters ahead. On impulse, B'Elanna stopped.

"Your projection of them," said Savan. "The nidoxin will help."

"And it's getting worse again. I feel like I'm coming out of my skin. Keeping busy helps, but I can't move enough sometimes, and now I'm having trouble sleeping."

"The symptoms will fade with time and your continued efforts. Find me again when you are going to retire and I will administer a mild barbiturate."

"They're still coming up."

"I believe, Tom, 'they' always will to some degree. *How* you deal with this is what should change."

"Are you secretly studying to be a shrink?"

"Hardly. Do continue to report these episodes to me, Tom, even when minor. I would like to see if there is another pattern."

"No problem. Hell, if it hasn't been so far..."

"Their cause is psychological."

"Couldn't be as easy as a chemical imbalance, could it?"

B'Elanna slowly came closer until she couldn't not straighten and propel herself through the doors at regular speed without knowing she was purposefully eavesdropping. Both Tom and Savan looked at her as soon as she entered and stopped just short of the worktable. He was leaning against the table, still rubbing at his bicep, a little paler than that morning but just as alert. Savan looked more displeased than usual.

"I have a question for you about a chemical analysis," B'Elanna said and glanced at Tom, "but it can wait."

"We are finished," Savan told her.

Tom gratefully slid between the women, then gave B'Elanna a look behind him. "We set for tomorrow morning?"

"Last I heard, yes," B'Elanna blurted, then plowed ahead to cover it, "The comm's down again. I'll switch to secondaries as soon as I hand this question over."

"Oh-eight hundred all right?"

"I'll meet you at the ramp," B'Elanna confirmed.

"Okay," Tom said and moved easily out of the room.

When the doors slid shut, B'Elanna reactivated her tricorder to present her problem and opened her mouth to speak.

The Vulcan beat her to it. "Whatever part of my conversation with Tom you were able to hear I would greatly appreciate you do not repeat."

B'Elanna blew a breath to fight the blood that rushed into her face. "Why do you assume I'd want to

gossip? It's none of my business what goes on with Tom."

Savan held the young woman in her eyes for several seconds. "Thank you."

B'Elanna stepped a little closer to finally show Savan what she'd picked up on the taps, though in the back of her mind, she was unwillingly more curious than ever.

"Good morning, sunshine!" Oscar called as he came around the counter wearing a fresh set of coveralls and a big smile. Giving B'Elanna a light hug, he turned and shook Tom's hand. "I have good news for you, B'Elanna."

"I couldn't tell," she smirked, stepping back from her friendly ex-neighbor.

"That power transfer conduit distributor is going to work out. The tests on the Minjan derelict turned up a near ninety-five percent compatibility."

B'Elanna reconsidered that hug. "Are you sure?"

"Very," Oscar confirmed, then held up his hands. "Now, it's a mess like the rest, but it's in good enough shape to rebuild. And knowing how much you already have to do, I'd be happy to reconfigure the main connection. There's a new design layout that's supposed to be very efficient in these old models. --Tom, I mean it, and at no charge, either."

B'Elanna dismissed the offer with a shake of her head. "I appreciate the offer, Oscar, but I'd prefer to handle the rebuild myself."

"Oooh, little miss engineer, all grown up," Oscar teased.

"B'Elanna's actually taking a break from Daystrom to go slumming," Tom deadpanned. "We'll be getting our crappy mechanic back soon enough." He didn't have to look back at her responsive expression. "Sorry, couldn't help myself, B'Elanna."

She rolled her eyes, but didn't withhold her smile. "Two of you, now. Great."

Oscar chuckled, relenting. "I'll have it for you tomorrow morning."

"That'll work," she nodded. "How much?"

"One bar, sixteen strips."

Tom eyed him. "A little slim for a PTC distributor," he commented.

"You're still on discount," Oscar told him. "And don't look at me like that after telling her not to argue. I'll rob the next trader."

"I wasn't really arguing," Tom grinned and counted out the latinum. His smile faded, however, as he mentally calculated how much that day would put them out. Not that he could do anything about it at that point. Without the parts, they wouldn't be able to add anything else to the pot. Thankfully, Maryl had secured a one-way shipment of korbonite cells to DS9 for use on one of the Bajoran moons, which

would help a little. With any luck, she'd fill a few more holds. All they had to do then was be able to take off.

While Tom fished in his bag for his datacard, Oscar took B'Elanna aside. "Now, Mavis and I want you over for a lunch or dinner--just a little while before you go. You can take a meal with us, can't you?"

B'Elanna sighed. She knew she'd be cornered eventually. The morning before, Mavis seemed quietly intent on getting to talk to her "off duty." Now Oscar was staring at her, almost begging with his eyes. "I'll try. You can see what we have going on."

"But you *do* eat, yes?" Oscar said, trying for his smile that time. Glancing past her towards the door, he added, "We do need to talk to you about the projects happening in his region and some other business."

Turning her stare askance, she didn't ask just then. Obviously, Oscar wanted to be discreet about something. "I'll try to carve out a spare hour or two, if it's all that important."

"It'll mean a lot, trust me." The man kissed her cheek. "You're a good girl. Thank you. --Now, Tom, have a look in here at the other assemblies I've mined for you."

"We can't afford much more," Tom told him.

"Sure you can," the older man smiled and motioned to the big double doors.

B'Elanna followed Oscar and Tom into warehouse, where neat piles of pylons and struts waited for inspection. She knew she'd have taken the lot if she thought she could--Oscar wasn't *giving* it away, after all. She assured Nissan of the same shortfall the afternoon before and in the end chose the field generator coils. It would refresh the ones they had at least, as would some of the field coils and the plasma distributor, which laid between several items she resisted more easily.

"We'll take those and the connectors and links," she said crisply, activating her PADD.

Tom nodded. "You heard the lady," he said, glancing at the other man. "Can we get a gift wrap?"

Oscar laughed. "I'll see what I can do. Want me to transport them again?"

"Yeah, but this time to...deck four forward bay, B'Elanna?"

"Yeah," she said, still tapping out numbers. "Ridge and Nadrev can sort it out with the rest."

"We have a pointer on," Tom told Oscar and returned to the main room.

B'Elanna finished her inputting and paused to grin at the parts piles. Between installing those parts and repairing their EPS system, they could probably manage another two-way from Deep Space Nine without nearly as much hassle. She hadn't been sure about it at first, but it was coming together now--a needed reassurance. She just needed to get those parts in her engine room, do the rebuilds, and they'd be set again. Then she'd definitely give Mavis that meal at their house. It was the least she could do after they once again had been very kind to her.

Moving back out into the lobby, she saw Tom and Oscar still jibing at each other. Choosing wisely not to get involved in that, she tapped some notes into her PADD while she waited for the moneys to finally be exchanged and Tom to get his datacard back. As they concluded and thanked each other; B'Elanna finished, too, she saw Oscar look up and suddenly fall silent.

"Something wrong?" Tom asked.

The man's eyes were on the door again, that time reflecting recognition.

"No," the man said softly. "Not wrong, I don't think."

B'Elanna glanced back....

"That was the business we needed to discuss," said Oscar softly.

His voice was a sector away. Her heart stopped; her skin chilled so quickly she had to suppress a shiver. Eyes like her own stared back at her, equally stunned--equally scared.

Seconds passed and B'Elanna couldn't think, couldn't interpret what was before her, if only for sheer disbelief. Numb followed the cold, even as she gripped her PADD. As if seeing the Madares hadn't aggravated old wounds, her long gone past tore open behind her eyes, and she saw with perfect clarity, after years of pressing it away, the last time she'd seen that face, that expression. She felt her anger, terror...guilt.

At last, her instincts took over: She turned on her heel and left the building as fast as she could without running.

"B'Elanna!" the man called behind her.

Looking at the men in turns, Tom jogged out after B'Elanna to catch up with her. She stomped up the row clutching her PADD, her dark eyes nailed straight ahead and her lips parted for her pants of breath. Her skin was white; the muscles in her jaw were tensed. Hearing footsteps behind them, Tom asked, "Who's that?"

"Don't worry about it," B'Elanna responded.

"He seems to know--"

"I said, don't worry about it!" she snapped. "It's none of your business!"

"B'Elanna!" called the man again, dropping his bags to catch up with her at last. "At least let me talk to you!"

She whipped around and glared at him. "You're a little late for that," she told him then resumed her course straight to the terminal.

The two men were left standing in the intersection, looking after her, then looking at each other.

"You know her?" the man asked.

"She's my engineer," Tom told him.

He blinked at that information. "Is your ship in a restricted area?"

"No, but I wouldn't suggest visiting if she doesn't want to see you." Tom eyed the man, his dark brown hair and near-black eyes, slight, leanly muscled build... He knew he didn't need to ask, but he did, anyway, just in case. "Who are you?"

"I'm John Torres--her father." The man jerked a slight shrug. "I haven't seen her since she was a child."

"Yeah."

"I want to talk to her, if she'll let me."

Tom sighed, slumping to consider that complication--not one they needed just then, one he also knew would not be putting his engineer in a good mood, judging by her initial reaction. "Yeah. Okay, look, you can try contacting her tomorrow, if you're all that serious about getting in touch. We're knee deep in engine repairs, so I can't guarantee she'll break for you even on a good day. But you can try. Oscar's sending us some parts. Get our information from him."

To Tom's great relief, the man nodded and turned to go back to the Madares' warehouse.

"Ridge!"

Tom came cautiously around the warp core, following the sound of his engineer's demands. He'd been curious to see how they were coming along, having noticed when he came on the bridge that morning that the power transfer conduit had been tuned up and the EPS's replacements were already being prepared.

Apparently, B'Elanna had been working around the clock, which Tom wouldn't think twice about if he hadn't seen anyone scurrying out of the engine room for other things to do. Nadrev, who preferred staying within the ship, readily expressed his relief in having to work the incoming crates in Ridge's stead, and even Savan had chosen to sit under the twitchy internal comm and diagnose that latest issue. Maryl promised she wasn't going down there until whatever was up with B'Elanna had blown over, though the liaison needed to talk in detail with her about the revised parts list and some upcoming deals. Tom didn't know if he should feel sorry for Ridge at that point. The man handled B'Elanna so well, it seemed he was more comfortable with yelling than peace.

"Where the hell are they?!"

"Working on the last set!" Ridge called back faithfully.

"That should have been done two hours ago!" she huffed, then turned her glare to Tom as she ripped open the field generator casing and threw it on the grate. "What do *you* want?"

"Just passing through."

"Keep passing through, then," she told him, crouching down before the assembly. "This isn't a spectator sport."

Tom pursed his lips, leaning on a bulkhead to watch her dig in with her bare hands. "Oscar sent the crates," he informed her. "Want me and Nadrev to arrange them in the loading bay?"

"Deck four?"

"Yeah."

She grabbed the center control panel and unhinged it with a snap of her wrist. "Fine. Is that it?"

"Yeah, that's it," he muttered and moved away. Glancing back, he added, "Just remember we're going to need that engine again soon."

"I know what I'm doing!" she retorted and hauled the generator arm out with a tight groan. "Damnit, Ridge! Where are my constrictor pins?!"

"On the way! They're almost ready!"

"Get them up here *now*!" she bellowed.

As gladly as Nadrev had, Tom passed out of her earshot and made his way back into the next section, where Ridge stood at a grader, resurfacing the pins in question. The man's mouth was twisted with concentration, his big hands holding the slender rods securely as he matched the grooves with the laser and turned the rods as needed. He glanced up at Tom and offered a brief grin.

"Surfed through Hurricane B'Elanna unscathed?"

"For the most part," Tom nodded, then added, "It's not going to be a good day."

"You get that impression, eh?" Ridge joked, then shrugged. "I don't mind the steam as long as it eventually floats away. She'll get some sleep, feel better."

Tom didn't bother disputing that notion. The tech obviously had other things to think about. "Take it easy," Tom said and left the section.

Nadrev didn't always get a lot of credit for his judgment. Reserved and small in frame, the young man did his work with a pleasant quietness that would have made everyone quite happy had he not replaced a far more gregarious man. Thankfully, Nadrev wasn't insecure, either. Not only did he get points for not trying to live up to what Jerod left behind, but he proved capable of another brand of wisdom when he had their supplies dropped off outside the deck four loading dock rather than in the engine room.

Standing on the gangway amidst the crates and flats, Tom felt the warm sun and breeze and the quiet buzz of that "nice side of town." Indeed, the central docks were clean, efficient, quiet, free of wandering dealers and well worth enjoying while they were there--well worth their usual price, had they so much latinum to throw around. Tom tapped a note on his PADD to thank the Fidor Group personally for their accommodations.

Nadrev took his time unpacking the myriad parts B'Elanna had purchased, organizing the smaller pieces on the correct trays, then stacking the trays neatly on the cart, which would be taken to where it needed to go. Though he was really coming along in his training, working diligently everywhere he was assigned, the Bajoran was just as happy as the rest of them to take a break with the mindless stuff from time to time.

Tom moved down into the middle of the piles, whistling at the largest of the arrivals. "That's going to take some doing," he said.

"The EPS distributor?"

"Yeah. B'Elanna needs to refurbish it as is, but it'll need a scrubbing before she starts that."

"Maybe I can offer to do that part," Nadrev said, though it seemed he wasn't so thrilled about that work.

"Offer, but she'll want to do it herself," Tom said, then knelt to start checking off the equipment. "You're inventorying that as you go?"

"I have the PADD here if you want it now."

"That's okay. We'll collate later. I just wanted to know."

Another breeze drifted over the gangway and Tom breathed it. If asked, he would easily admit that getting out in the air those past few days had reminded him how much he loved being outdoors. Even years ago, despite his love of flying, it was equally nice to get back and do something planetside. *Maybe I should have dealt for some holographic equipment on the Berlin while I had the chance*, he mused. *Bay four-three starboard would be perfect for a little holosuite....*

Then he wondered what the hell he was thinking about. They had power issues enough without installing a giant energy siphon in the belly of the ship. *It'd be nice if we could, though*, he sighed to himself, then got back to his PADD. He gave Nadrev a quick glance as he passed with the cart, then bent down to get the registry number off the upper plate. He wasn't about to wipe it with his coat to make it clearer. "Nadrev," he called behind him, "can you bring some solvent and a wipe when you come back?"

"I will," the Bajoran answered.

Checking off the line of items before him, he saw two cleanly shod feet in his line of vision and looked up. Then he frowned. "Speaking of power issues," he muttered. Unable to look down again without looking stupid, Tom instead got to his feet and acknowledged the man, first with a quick nod, then, "Mr. Torres."

"Captain Paris, yes?" the man answered, stepping closer.

"Yeah," Tom said, not happy for the visit for more reasons than one. "If you're looking for B'Elanna, it's a slim to none chance she'll come out right now."

"I thought so. She hasn't returned my communiqué."

"I don't think she's checked, to be honest. She's been at it overtime."

The elder Torres considered that for a moment. "No, I think she's checked to see if I've tried. I knew I'd need some help getting her to answer."

Tom resisted a groan when a more pointed look painted itself on Torres' face. "Why do I need to do anything about this?" Tom asked. "There's got to be a reason why she's pissed at you, like your apparently not being there for her."

"She has every right to be angry about that."

Tom waited for further explanation, but getting none, he nodded curtly. "Glad we've got that settled. What do you want with me?"

"I want you to help me."

"Why do you think *I'll* be able to?"

"You're her captain."

"So they say. Doesn't mean I've any influence over my crew."

The other man didn't seem convinced, but decided to drop it. Instead, he offered his hands. "Please help me," he said. "I can see you're busy. I'll give you a hand with this equipment if you'll hear me out. This might be my only chance to right what happened between B'Elanna and me."

Tom stared at Torres for several seconds, taking in the man's seriousness and quiet desperation. Not firm by any means, he seemed to have spine enough to come there and beg. Tom could see B'Elanna's occasional apprehension in him; that unspoken need in her eyes had to have come from him as well. Looking over at Nadrev, who was doing all he could not to pay attention to their conversation even while his work was only a meter away from where Mr. Torres was standing, Tom said, "Nadrev, go see if Savan needs another set of hands, will you?"

"I'll do that," the Bajoran said. Handing Tom the requested solvent and a stack of wipes, then quickly finishing the last few pieces into the inventory, he set the PADD on top of the pile, gave the other man a nod, then gladly disappeared into the cross corridor.

Tom reached out and grabbed Nadrev's PADD. Setting up a new page, he tossed the device to Torres and pointed to the stack next to him. "You know how to inventory, right?"

Torres snorted. "Yes, I think I can handle it."

"You'd better," Tom grinned. "My engineer will skin you alive if the numbers are off by a bolt--and that's on a good day. That pool of lava over there's been dripping out of the engine room since she saw you." Tom sprayed some solvent on the next strut casing. "So, you and B'Elanna's mom divorced and she's been pissed at you about it?"

"That's a part of it," the other man replied, cross-checking the parts to the labels he pulled up.

"You weren't around?"

"Yes, I wasn't there...and I know it was wrong." Torres' eyes drifted away from the PADD. "It was a difficult time for us all. When she was angry and pushing me off, she probably needed me more than ever, but I didn't see that until it was too late, and I just couldn't go back."

At that admission, Tom paused, his mouth slightly agape as he realized aloud, "You left." Suddenly, those pieces *really* started to fit; he exhaled to know it. "It wasn't just divorce. You didn't go back."

Torres paused then nodded. "Yes."

Staring at him another few seconds, again waiting for the man to offer more, Tom asked, "And you didn't bother trying to explain why?"

"My wife divorced me. That much should have been obvious."

"I meant your not explaining why you left *her*."

"I thought at the time she wanted me to go."

Tom coughed an ironic laugh. "Are you a *complete* idiot?"

"Miral used to ask me the same thing."

"She asked good questions," Tom returned, then started rubbing at the grime on the label. "Anyway, you're the one who wanted to air your side of it. Now I know what you did to her, it's your turn."

Torres sighed and began to set the pieces into the tray. "I didn't know she was here," he said quietly.

"It didn't look like you were looking for her."

"I've been working with the Bitdraet Project for four years, living on base out at Sattrra. Most weekends, Oscar and I explore the caves in the Rikad ranges and I'd gone there to see if he was free. I knew something was going on, but he didn't say what. He just asked if I'd stop in with Mavis to see how she was doing with the planting. She wasn't there, so I came right back...and there she was. B'Elanna." Pausing, he entered another index of pieces. His eyes hardly stuck to the work. "After you two left, he told me he'd wanted to prepare B'Elanna first, so she wouldn't react the way she has."

Tom rolled his eyes. "Yeah, that was a good plan," he said under his breath, then looked over at Torres. The man had heard his comment, but Tom didn't care. The more the man spoke, the less Tom wanted to do for him. "Help me get this on the truck," he said.

The other man came over and got a hold of the end of the strut. Tom took the other side and together they heaved the part over to the waiting cart. Lowering his end onto the flat so the other end could be stood upright, Tom made sure it was secure then went back to his PADD to mark it off.

Torres, too, went back to the flat to finish the tray. "I tried to contact B'Elanna when I found out she was at Starfleet Academy, but she didn't return my messages there, either."

Tom furrowed his brow. "How'd you know she was there?"

"I still have friends in Starfleet."

"And it took them to tell you where your daughter was?" Tom coughed a derisive laugh. In its own way, it was almost as bad as his own father's maneuverings. "Now you've had another accidental encounter and you expect the outcome to be different?"

"She's the one who didn't return my communiqués," Torres pointed out.

"How many did you send?" Tom asked.

The other man loaded the tray onto the cart then pulled up an empty one. "A couple," he quietly answered.

Tom stared at him again. "You didn't try again?"

He sighed. "No."

"Your ex-wife shouldn't have needed to ask the question," Tom snapped. "You *are* an idiot!" Catching Torres' responsive glance, he shook his head. "What makes you think she's just going to come out at your convenience? It's almost like you're asking for failure."

When Torres said nothing, Tom paused. The older man wasn't the only person he knew with that disposition, he knew with a certain stab of shame. Regardless, he continued, "Look, B'Elanna's the best engineer I couldn't have hoped for--pure, natural talent, an amazing ability to figure this piece of junk out. She's a friend to everyone on the crew, loyal to the core and I thought at first that she wasn't afraid to speak her mind about anything. So, maybe you can understand my confusion when I see her practically curling up into a ball at the mere mention of you. She looked like she'd crack when I did as little as ask about her childhood."

Torres was a little stung, but managed not to respond too much. "It was...stormy. In the end, we argued; she took me the wrong way and, well, I knew she felt bad about it--she was a good kid, just...intense. I felt bad about everything, and I didn't know how to deal with it, how to talk to her."

"So you said nothing at all," Tom concluded, even as he wondered why he was getting into it, caring so much. He wasn't getting anything done at that rate, which was going to screw up more than his own schedule. Maybe it was the ridiculousness of it all, how utterly clueless her father seemed to be about her--and Oscar, too. "Treating her like a little Klingon," he added to himself aloud, then looked at Torres again. "You and Oscar both, handling her like a bucket of trilitium. Granted, she's no fun when she's ticked, but who is? If you respected her at all, you'd have made an *effort* to be straight with her."

"I'm here now," Torres protested.

Tom shrugged. "Maybe. You going to be here again tomorrow? And the day after? You know our ship now. If she doesn't respond after we leave, will you still keep trying?"

"I'm willing to keep trying this time, if you think that'll help turn things around."

"You're willing to turn things around?" Tom rolled another part over and kneeled down to clean off its plate. "It's funny, at first I thought she was just hardwired to meltdown when she couldn't keep a handle on things, but seeing how you are and knowing it was rough with her mom, too, it makes perfect sense." Looking at the other man and waiting for his attention to be returned, he continued, "Mr. Torres, she has no one. She doesn't talk to her own mother, who *did* stick around; B'Elanna had no connections when we hired her. She never signed the death instruction form, either. If she was blown out an airlock, we could do nothing but send a death notice to the Federation central registrar. You wouldn't find out she was dead unless you wanted to know."

Again, the elder Torres sighed, slumping over the tray he'd stopped working on.

The resignation only frustrated Tom more. "I'm supposed to be hearing *you* out, remember?"

"I'm sorry," he said, shaking his head. "All of a sudden, I don't know what to say. I always thought I knew how I'd explain this."

"Seems you have a habit of being at a loss for words," Tom observed.

"It should have been simple," Torres said softly, ignoring the young captain's sarcasm. "Miral divorced me and told me to leave. It had been coming for months by then, so that much wasn't a surprise. But B'Elanna... We'd been so close when she was little, but she and I had been having a hard time, too. One night, she overheard me talking about her and her mother and...well, it was all blown out of proportion. She overreacted, and I didn't know what to say without backpedaling into lies. When Miral told me to leave, I thought it would be a good idea to give us all some space, let everything calm down. So I left. I thought I'd wait a week, then stop in, or meet her after school, have a talk. But it...I just didn't. I tried to write her something, but... I wasn't able to understand her and she was so angry with me. I thought

that maybe time would help. But the longer I was away, the more I knew she would hate me for going, and so the harder it became. So I stopped trying."

Tom's eyes had narrowed throughout the explanation. "Do you *understand* how seriously you screwed up?"

"At the time," Torres admitted, "I thought she would be better off without me confusing things again. I could hardly talk to her anymore without it being misunderstood."

"Yeah, that helped her understand a lot," Tom replied sourly. "Suddenly, her dad's gone and he doesn't write, he doesn't come back, and when he does make an effort, it's a one-shot. Do you honestly think a kid's not going to wonder what was so wrong with her that he'd never want to see her again?"

"I do now," Torres pressed, holding Tom's gaze at last. "And like I said before, I want to do something about it this time, while I can. I'm assigned to the Baskidri Survey in the Bitdraet mid-rims and have to leave in four days, but I'll do everything I can while I'm here."

"Which she deserves," Tom told him. "You *should* have to work for it."

"But will you help me, if only to just...just tell her I want this? Hearing it from you might make her believe I'm serious."

"Hearing it from me might make her resist the idea even more."

"Maybe. It's worth the risk." Torres offered his hands again. "Now that I've seen her, now that I see how much she's grown..." He breathed a little laugh to himself. "I've missed so much. She's her own person, now, and maybe I don't deserve her forgiveness, but I'm sure she deserves to finally get an explanation from me, face to face, the way I should have, from the start."

Considering him once again, Tom held Torres' stare for several seconds before motioning to the other side of the assembly. "Help me with this," he said. When the man came around and got his hands under the frame, Tom lifted with a grunt. Together they drug it to another flatbed. "I'll talk to her when we have a minute," he promised, huffing a little from the exertion. "But I'm not about to play the go-between without her permission. It's your job to settle the issues between you two. The only reason I'm doing this much is for B'Elanna's sake."

John Torres rubbed his hands and nodded. "I understand. I'm glad B'Elanna has a friend in you."

"You're lucky she does," Tom returned. "That wasn't the case six months ago." Moving to the gangway inner arm, Tom tapped the comm there. To his relief, it activated. "Nadrev."

"Yes, Tom?"

"I need you back down here, if you're not too wrapped up."

"Savan didn't need me yet, so I'm free," he answered.

Torres knew what it meant and gave the captain a nod as he stepped away. "Thank you, Captain."

Tom's frown had not dissolved as he got back into the middle stack of crates; the warming breeze and busywork wasn't washing it off that time, either.

He had wondered how long the thrill would last.

She'd padded across the warm, wooden floor in bare feet. Mother had designed her home well, insisting on hearths, indoor ponds and floorboard heating, which in turn kept the house very warm and moist during the cool, dry winters there.

He probably hates heat, too, she sighed, still feeling her anger at what he'd said, but feeling more guilt for her own part in it, especially as her sourness continued. Dad was so sad, all the time, now, and he didn't make an effort to hide it anymore. She hated that she was a part of that. Worst part about it was that they'd been inseparable. What happened? she used to ask herself. She could feel him moving away from her even while standing still. Then she heard him complaining about her and her mother to Uncle Carl, about living with Klingons.

Much as she wanted to, she was scared to apologize for how she had yelled at him for what he said...scared of what might happen--of what she might do again. She wished she could make it all go away, make everything the way it had been before...before she'd been so angry. Maybe if she didn't say anything, it'd blow over. Maybe if she bit her tongue, tried harder than ever to be how she'd been, he'd want to be with her again. If only she could remember how she'd been.

Not that it mattered. Dad was sick of handling her mother, was getting tired of handling her, now that she was so "sensitive" all the time. He couldn't take them and so she invited him to get out. But how she wished it were different, that he wasn't so repelled by them now, that she could have been what he wanted her to be.

Mother wasn't helping matters, as usual. She was disgusted all the time and *never* made an attempt to suppress what she felt. B'Elanna shuddered to think they'd be visiting the Klingon Homeworld again if things didn't improve soon. The smell alone of that place made her sick to her stomach.

Things had to improve, she decided. She'd make them improve, somehow. Things had been great once. They could be again.

Bearing her shaking breath, she came around the corner in her bare feet, pulling her pajama top neatly down. Her father was sitting at the kitchen table, his elbows on the board, slightly slumped. He looked tired. When he turned his head and found her in his eyes, he sighed before he smiled, then stood. B'Elanna put on a smile for him as well and went to him. "Off to bed, then?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You finished all your homework?"

She gave him a look. "Of course."

"Good," he said with a nod.

"Goodnight, Dad," she whispered and gave him a hug. *Was that normal enough?* she wondered, feeling him squeeze her hard, breathing into her curly hair. Finally able to pull back enough to look at him, he still looked sad, though his smile seemed more real.

"Goodnight, B'Elanna," he returned. He held her hands for several more seconds before finally letting them go...

B'Elanna's eyes shot open to find the Guerdon's cold blue ceiling above her.

Water from her eyes had left trails on her temples.

She shivered.

So much for everything coming together, she grumbled to herself as she made her way into the lounge, still half asleep after fifteen hours rebuilding the distributor and five hours of barely sleeping at all. Another communiqué from her father was waiting for her when she got up, wiping her face and disgusted. She dumped the message despite her curiosity. She couldn't open it. She didn't want his pity, his excuses. She just wanted to get her parts, snap the EPS unit together and get the hell off of Ulinas, get back to Deep Space Nine.

The only bad thing about it was that they were scheduled to come back after the next pickup. Oscar probably gave him the whole damned itinerary. She'd planned to get some more parts from him when they returned. She would have to send Ridge instead. She couldn't go down there again. Bad enough knowing her father was hanging around, but she was equally angry with Oscar for trying to hold her off.

Her father had a little gray in his hair now, and his face was a little paler. He was thinner.

Hurt and angry, she'd told him to leave if he couldn't love them anymore. He seemed so ready to do it and she lived in fear since spitting the words at him.

After saying goodnight, she glanced back at him one more time before heading to the stairs. He'd returned to the table.

She never saw him again. Question answered. Case closed.

If only it was so simple.

If only she could bury it for good.

B'Elanna breathed through the crush in her chest. She hadn't signed her contract renewal yet.

"Morning," Tom said from behind her.

She glanced back. Tom sat at his usual table, kicked back in his chair. He had a stack of signoff PADDs in front of him and a mug of coffee hanging from his long, steady fingers. An empty bowl had been pushed away to the center of the table. He looked bored, as usual when he was knee-deep in what he called paperwork. B'Elanna growled a little to herself at first before remembering that he was usually in that place at that hour. Maybe for what he'd been doing the day before, she'd simply wanted a change in his routine.

"Hi."

"How'd that distributor work out?"

"It was a mess to get into," B'Elanna answered, "but it wasn't a waste on the inside. I got it done before I broke last night."

"Are we doing the EPS assembly this morning, then?" he asked.

"Yes. Is that all right?"

"Just making sure," he told her. "I've blocked off nine to sixteen hundred, just in case."

B'Elanna turned back to the replicator to tap in a breakfast she felt like eating. "We should be done before fifteen hundred."

He shrugged. "It'll give me time to help out on the other stuff."

She blinked to realize she'd have another full day with Paris and his many good moods of late. Granted, he had become easier to be around in the past few days, but she was equally glad to know she could keep him very busy there and that he would indeed work very hard. But then, he always had. Even when he was very ill, he put a surprising amount of hours in the engine room, doing whatever it took to keep the ship alive. She'd never known a captain like that before.

B'Elanna's eyes remained fixed within the hole in the wall for several seconds, deciding what to do about the rest of her problem with him at the moment. Of course, she really didn't want to bring *anything* up, but then, in her half year there, she learned that handling issues right off tended to get them off Tom's mind faster. So, she said, even but without much else, "I heard my father came here yesterday."

"He did," Tom replied, glad she broached the topic. He owed Nadrev a big favor for dropping the hint on that one.

She watched her meal slowly materialize. *All that work, all those Starfleet people in my room, and the damned ODN is going to fail again any day now*, she cursed to herself, then drew a deep breath as she realized she couldn't distract herself enough. *God, if I could be talking about anything else today...* But she knew she had to ask. "What did he say to you?"

"He talked about how he and your mom divorced," Tom quietly told her, "how he felt guilty for leaving you--more for not coming back or staying in touch like he should have. He asked if I'd help get you to respond to him." He shrugged. "I can tell you everything that passed between us if and whenever you want, B'Elanna. He seemed like he wanted to make good, but he didn't know how to get you to hear him out. He said he'll be planetside a few more days before a survey he's on starts. He seemed anxious to talk to you."

B'Elanna took the table next to Tom and started setting out her coffee, fruit and toast. "Are you telling me I should contact him?"

"I'm not telling you to do anything, B'Elanna," Tom replied over the lip of his mug as he scrolled through some regulations. "I know how *I'd* feel if anyone approached me about making amends with my father on his terms. I'm just telling you what I know. The rest is just what you said: none of my business unless you ask for it to be."

"Did he ask you to get involved?"

"He wanted me to help you see he was sincere, maybe get you to respond to him. I told him I'd tell you what he said, nothing more." Tom looked up at that. "I respect you too much to mess around,

B'Elanna. I know how tough this has to be for you, so I'm only as involved as *you* want me to be."

Blinking at that last bit--much as the remark suited him, she hadn't expected him to voice it--she picked up her fork. "Okay. Thanks."

"You're welcome," Tom said and bent down to his reports again. Silently, he let out a breath of relief that it was over with. At the same time, he wished it really were.

Silent again as she started into her meal, B'Elanna looked over to see Tom's feet bobbing nervously under the table.

An hour later, Tom came onto the bridge still holding his mug and a few PADDs in both his hands. Glancing up at a purplish blue sky in the little dome above his station, he then gave Savan a nod. The Vulcan returned the gesture with a slight bow to boot. Tom slowed and blinked. She rarely gave him a glance when he came on, much less a silent salutation. "What's up?"

"The communications relay has been successfully repaired by Nadrev and myself. It was completed at seven hundred hours. It should not trouble us again in the immediate future."

Tom's brows rose. "You and Nadrev really burned the midnight oil on that one, didn't you?"

Savan looked at him askance. "Your archaic expressions are surfacing again, Tom."

"You two worked overtime," he clarified.

The corners of her mouth turned inward. "You might have used the simpler phrase initially."

"But then we wouldn't be enjoying ourselves nearly so much right now," Tom returned, setting his coffee on the side of his console before taking a seat.

"Again you assume I enjoy these conversations."

"Deep in your heart, you know you'd be bored without me."

"I will see about refilling your medication when next it is convenient."

Maryl came in. "Are you two griping already?"

"Sorry to have not gotten some?" Tom quipped.

"You know I have plenty of my own material to nail you with," she returned as she checked into her panel. "I'm right on time," she remarked. "Tom you've got an encrypted message coming in over subspace from Capella."

He furrowed his brow. "Where?"

"You heard me. Capella."

Tom shrugged and leaned back in his seat. "Okay. Let's see who's knocking."

Maryl tapped on her monitor a few more times as Savan decrypted the signal. That done, she sent it to the main viewscreen without pause. Looking up, though, she coughed to see what she least expected. "What is *he* doing there?!" she blurted before she could think not to.

Captain Chakotay had appeared on their main viewscreen, dark, dirty, giant-sized and decidedly unhappy.

Tom managed to yoke his own surprise and stuff it into his frown. "Captain, what brings you to *Capella*?"

"Our signal origin is disguised, as you'll figure out once your person is able to analyze it," Chakotay told him, his small eyes narrowing as they pinned to the other captain. "What I'd like to know is if anyone else is going to find out."

"Is that my problem?" Tom asked.

"It will be," the other man promised. "We find it very interesting that the Guerdon was assisted by Starfleet so conveniently after your Ovar run."

"Yeah, you would," Tom sighed. He had expected the Berlin's assistance would get back to Chakotay somehow. "We had a shipwide power failure, Captain. The USS Berlin happened to be nearby and offered their assistance."

"And you accepted it."

"What do you think I should have done?" Tom returned. "Tell them to go away because I'm contracted to the Maquis? They gave us parts and dragged us to Sicira--they did their job and I stuck to mine. I wasn't about to risk my ship and crew to turn in someone they wouldn't find in the first place."

The Maquis captain's lips tensed in thought then turned down again. "I was part of the system. I'm sure a fair deal could have been worked out to spare you and your ship."

"Yeah, they'd have been happy to spare me."

"I'd like to believe you, but again, I know how Starfleet works."

"Believe what you want," Tom coldly replied, "but frankly, I want to be on Starfleet's chain as much as I want to be on yours--in other words, I *don't*. You can use me, you can not use me. That's entirely up to you. Were it up to me, I'd ask the whole lot of you to get off my back."

The Maquis captain let a long pause pass before finally asking, "When are you scheduled to leave Ulinas?"

"Six days if our repairs go as planned."

"We'll be monitoring you."

"I expected nothing less than the best," Tom smirked, waiting for the other man to finally cut the comm. When he did, he peered back at a thoroughly abashed Maryl. "Guess I get some material, too," he said, though he wanted to be lighter than he was.

Maryl recovered more quickly. "Don't forget, you need to do the verbal okay with the Fidlor group, too. That's this afternoon."

Tom rolled his eyes and uploaded the signed contracts to the Guerdon's computer. "Great. I can't wait."

The data finally filtered onto his screen so he could double check them and then send them to Maryl. Tom meanwhile tried to breathe through the bad mood he'd been delivered, the first real one he'd experienced since he left the Berlin's sickbay. Being the worst possible choice for family mediator had started the turn. Finding out precisely why B'Elanna could tolerate neither change nor incompetence was strangely unsettling, much as it helped him to understand her.

Then that morning, before B'Elanna found him in the lounge, he'd been approving the ship's budget. By Maryl's calculations, they'd been running thin until they were finally able to get back to their Hidirin run. The various parts bought from Rikad had easily wiped out their payment for that run, and they would need a stock of deuterium at Deep Space Nine. He and Maryl had already squabbled at the end of shift yesterday about needing another deal, agreeing only on perhaps taking a one-day stop at Irtrin to scrounge up something.

Now that would likely not be possible, with the Maquis knocking on his door again.

Not that he had forgotten about that deal, or that they were largely broke during their comfortable stay at Ulinas, but plotting out a future was no easier now than when he was able to numb the frustration a while. How he wished he could distract himself somehow, get away and relax, just for a while.... *You have to get back to those issues eventually, anyway*, he reminded himself. *God, what lousy habits I've picked up.*

"What now?" Maryl suddenly said to herself, then, "Tom, you've got another--"

"If this is what fixing the comm's going to give me," Tom cut in, "then feel free to break it again."

She snorted. "It's okay. It's planetside--a communiqué from Base Three-Sattra."

"Text only and put it on my monitor," Tom replied.

"Why?" Maryl queried, but gave up as soon as Tom pointed another look back at her. "Yes, yes," she grumbled. "Material."

When it came in, he nodded to see the sender he expected:

*I still haven't had any response from B'Elanna.
It occurred to me that maybe I could meet her
alone at some point, and then she would be
more willing to speak with me. I'd need to
know when she might be off the ship again,
though. Is this something you can help me with?*

Give an inch... Tom frowned to himself and tapped back a negative. Much as he wanted the man to leave him alone, he knew B'Elanna had every right to her feelings...whatever they were. He didn't blame her for not being too forthcoming. For that matter, B'Elanna was the one working on his ship. Being a captain meant looking out for one's crew...not to mention the budget and Captain Chakotay...

"Little wonder I never wanted this job," he muttered.

"Well, some idiot has to fly this rig," Maryl countered, still reviewing the contracts he'd sent back to her.

"I could teach you," he replied, half serious.

"But I'm not an idiot."

"Got me there."

"*Torres to bridge.*"

"You're ready?" Tom asked, gladly pulling himself back to his feet.

"No, I just wanted to chat," B'Elanna responded. "We're ready to go and waiting for you."

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I'm on my way."

"Hi ho, Hi ho!" Ridge sang out as he wrapped the pulley straps around his hands.

Tom snorted. "I'll never in a million years be any good to you if you keep singing that one," he said and stood up from the side of the distributor he'd just unbolted.

"Just thought we could use something festive," Ridge shrugged with a chuckle.

"We're unhooked!" Tom called aft. A "Yeah!" was the only reply. Slowly, as the ship powered down, they looked over to B'Elanna, who came around the assembly tapping on her tricorder, her face set in stone as she glared at her readings. When the auxiliary generator came on, lighting and half-powering their systems for the time being, she nodded to herself, tapped some more. Prowling back to the replacement base, she made one last check, then moved her prepared tool tray as close to the assembly as she could get it.

Finally, she knelt down next to the old base, picked up her laser wrench and looked at her tech. "Okay, Ridge. Do it."

"Here goes again," Tom puffed, grabbing a good breath before helping his friend heft the distributor into the air then swing it around towards a waiting Savan and Nadrev.

They pushed a waiting cart forward to catch the equipment. "You may lower it now," Savan told them as Nadrev knelt to steady the cart. The distributor clanked against the metal and settled in, much as usual.

Ridge and Tom immediately grabbed duron-ratchets and helped B'Elanna unbolt the EPS trunk. The hiss of the tools and dropping bolts on half-deck beneath the assembly was all that could be heard nonstop for several minutes. The trunk soon was freed, and with Savan, Ridge, Tom and a winch all guiding and pulling together, the tubular housing was set onto its side. B'Elanna stepped in and disconnected the circle of connections there, cleaning them as she went along to save time when they reinstalled it. Seeing the over-worn upper end of the trunk did cause her to frown, but she moved on. She couldn't do anything about it about it on that leg. The trunk was secured in a magnetic clamp B'Elanna had brought up from one of the cargo bays.

They repeated the procedure with the base, which was shaped like a doughnut and attached directly to the deck. Three meters in diameter and mired in junctions and cross-supports on the top, feeds and

taps on the underside that ran into a half-deck below it, and from there into conduits, that part of the job was a little more complicated. B'Elanna and Tom both had to scrape away a good deal of corrosion to loosen the plates; Ridge ended up cutting away several of the pins to free the supports. Ten minutes later, Savan was back to help them peel the old apparatus away from deck three with crowbars, then hoisted it into a locking position. After the straps were secured, B'Elanna and Nadrev got underneath and disconnected each of the power feeds and then the taps.

Tom moved back while they worked, sharing a grin with Ridge. "God, this'll take care of so much, it's hard to imagine."

"Which will naturally allow a whole new system to break down," Ridge joked, holding his head high. "But that's what we engine gods are here for."

"You're here to scrub coils when we're done if you keep going down that road," B'Elanna warned from the edge of the base. "Nadrev, lay that one over there. Yes. Theta-five feed."

"We could get transporters online almost immediately," Tom told Ridge, "transport the old base and the rest of this stuff for scrap, get a few strips back at least."

Ridge, who had silenced with a sheepish grin, said quietly back to Tom, "I'll just be glad to have my shower back on full power."

"So will Maryl," Tom grinned.

"Aww, she loves me just the way I am."

"She'd *have* to at this point." Leaning back with his duron-ratchet still hanging in his fingers, Tom felt a smile creep back onto his lips, belying his mood of earlier. Of course, he'd still have to deal with it when his time down there was done, but he did not neglect to be grateful for their good fortune in at least that department. Watching as B'Elanna came around the old base, her eyes set solidly on her task, he didn't miss the brief grin that touched her lips as she unhooked the last power tap and laid it in the proper position. Tom laughed a little to himself. She too found cheer in progress, despite all that awaited her outside.

It's a satisfying escape, all right. Not to mention it gets something done in the mean time. And he shook his head for the hundredth time that they'd been able to hire B'Elanna. Starfleet screwed themselves good by letting her ditch them--but now that made sense, too. He hoped when she chose to deal with her issues, it'd go more easily than his own business had. He was glad to see her father seeming to make an extra effort. Tom never thought he'd be so grateful to have had all his family around him growing up than when he heard Mr. Torres explaining himself...even his own father, despite how that turned out.

Tom shrugged it off for the mean time, stuffing his tool into his trouser pocket. Like his business, it could wait until their preferred occupation was done.

"Ready," B'Elanna said, nodding at Tom and Ridge. The men came forward and attached the EPS base to the main pulley. B'Elanna backed off, crossing her arms to watch the old piece lift slowly from the deck. Her face radiated satisfaction at the view--until, of course, it was time for her and Savan to turn the hulking disk around and help them get it into the third clamp.

They all paused for a breath at that, then simultaneously looked at the new part to be installed. B'Elanna had refurbished the scrapped assembly, but it might as well have been brand new. It glistened in

the emergency power light; its connections were polished and ready for installation and activation. It almost looked too good to put that old trunk on, but they went to it without much more thought about worthiness.

"You know," Ridge puffed as they lowered the trunk into its slot, "in olden times, they just got a bunch of guys to sit in the bottom and row."

"Oh, for the good old days," Tom chuckled. "Who gets the whip?"

They both looked at B'Elanna and snorted.

B'Elanna shook her head at their fun. She was in no mood for any of it, much as it helped them get through the heavy physical labor. Seeing the trunk swaying precariously in the air, held only by a few suspension belts, did prick her nerves, though--and they were pricked enough already. Her father seemed not to be taking silence for an answer this time. Was Oscar egging him on? Was Tom being straight with her about his lack of involvement? And then she wondered why she couldn't just go and get him over with, tell him to go to hell and stay out of her life.

Because she didn't want to do that, she knew, gritting her teeth--then snapping herself out of her thoughts. She literally had tons of other things to do at that moment.

The trunk met the base and B'Elanna immediately moved to snap in the lead bolts. Getting it down all the way, the men came forward again and ratcheted in the remaining connectors. They then loaded up the new distributor and set it into place. The old trunk accepted its burden: It slid rather than snapped in like the other two always had, but otherwise looked as stable as before. B'Elanna climbed onto the brackets to get above it and connected the main power tap conduit.

Running her tricorder over it a couple times, B'Elanna nodded her approval. "Savan, you can take us off the generator and switch us back to full power." Smiling at her success, she moved away. Then, there was a creak. She turned around. "What was that?"

Tom shook his head, kneeling by the opposite support pylon to make sure the connection there was secure. "I don't--"

"Look out, Tom!" Ridge suddenly called out.

The trunk bent forward as the bearings began to give way at last to age and stress. The creak became a metallic groan and the junctions in the base sank. Before Tom could imagine some way to get the straps back around the distributor, the support beams right in front of him followed suit and folded under the increased pressure. As his eyes widened at the sight, a shard of sparks flew at him, scalding his hands.

"Shit!" he hissed and jumped back.

Then they came down: The distributor and the trunk both lurched forward and collapsed into the new EPS base, tearing the main power tap halfway from the conduit above, then out of its housing. All the base's junctions and cross-supports at the head were crushed.

The sheer force of the sudden fall was not welcomed by the old, corroded deck, either. The base only partly supported by it and a diamond-shaped support frame, it easily folded in when the units hit it dead center, cracking the plates and sending the assembly through to the half deck below. Another spray of blue and red sparks from the plasma discharge below flew up from the hell just created, like water from a fountain flipped on.

Moving back, Savan reached up and switched them back to the emergency generator, then cut all power to the EPS.

Silence--for a moment.

Slowly, the trunk pulled the base up and partly over in the half-deck, revealing the ropes of feeds torn from the junctions, its remaining current popping in time with the falls, the weakened metals scraping and tearing, grinding...then finally falling silent again.

They all stared at the unfolding destruction with rapt horror, disbelief, shock. As it all halted, Tom clasped his singed hand against his chest, flexing his fingers and trying to comprehend what they'd just lost.

Next to him, B'Elanna coughed, then stepped closer, her glassy glare jumping from piece to piece, shard to shard. Dragging a couple hard breaths, she released a hissing growl, then whirled around and kicked the unit sidewall. "Damnit!" she yelled and punched another dent in the upper section, stopping just short of hurling her tricorder at it as well.

"Watch those fingers!" Ridge pleaded.

"Forget my fingers!" she yelled. "What the hell am I going to do with *this*?!"

"Lots, if we could afford it," Ridge slumped. Forced to face their view again, he didn't seem to know where to look, there was so much to see.

"This is useless!" she spat. "The whole thing's a worthless pile of garbage!"

Tom's breath began to pick up as his heart began to beat again, then thrum. The whole ship's pot, plus most of what little he'd managed to collect in the last few stops, all of it gone for a bad EPS trunk. They weren't going anywhere. They wouldn't be going anywhere. Tom's face paled, and his mouth firmed against his teeth and his breathing grew more rapid. His stare was fixed on the EPS, unable to tear away.

Savan instantly recognized his breathing. "Tom, perhaps we should--"

"Shut up," he cut in, then dragged another breath. B'Elanna was right. They might as well have never bothered. They'd never get ahead. Rather, they were falling further and further behind...and not even falling anymore. They were all dead in the water. He then wondered what the self-destruct protocol was on that rig--if there was one. It'd be too good for the Guerdon at that point.

Stepping back from the chaos, still flexing his swollen digits, Tom's eyes finally found B'Elanna's. Visibly livid, she knew precisely how damned they were.

"*What happened down there?*" Maryl asked from the bridge. "*My console came on for a second, then flicked and died.*"

"We just lost the EPS to another, um, malfunction," Ridge croaked.

"Which wouldn't have happened if you two hadn't been screwing around!" B'Elanna barked, swinging her attention back to her tech. "It was set down into the wrong pins! There's no way that could've happened otherwise!"

"I checked those pins," Ridge insisted, "and they were in toe to toe, just as we planned."

"You weren't *looking* at it right!" she snapped.

He gave her a rare long stare and frown. "I know I got it right, B'Elanna."

"Well, *something's* got to be at fault!"

"That trunk was readying to go, B'Elanna," Ridge reminded her. "Even you knew it had to be replaced soon."

"Not yet!" she retorted. "I spent all night shoring it up! It wasn't going until I got rid of it, damnit!" With a scream, she threw another few kicks into the base plating. "It shouldn't have gone wrong! It *should've* held on! That son of a bitch!"

The deck silenced as she heaved a few more lungfuls of air, growling on each exhale, readying to burst again, but somehow holding it back for whatever she wasn't saying at that point. Staring hard at the wreckage before her, she seemed to realize far more than what she'd be doing for the next week at best. It reflected on her features no more fondly than the rest.

For his part, Tom had slowly begun to step away from the pile. His ratchet had fallen dumbly to the ground during his engineer's tirade, leaving a fist behind. "Maryl, you still there?"

"With bated breath," she quietly answered. Two decks up, she probably was never so glad to be technically inept.

"Contact the Fidlor Group and ask them if they'd be willing to give us an advance. We'll need...God, I can't begin to think...what we need." He shook his head. *Every time I think we're getting it done*, he cursed to himself. *No matter what I do, I'm screwed--and they are, too. We'll never get ahead. Never...* Tom finally backed off to the access corridor. "I can't handle this right now," he told them. "I've got to get some air."

Residual coolant steam buffeted his hard-set face as he cruised around to the access ladder.

B'Elanna watched the place where he disappeared, into the cool fog, striding silently away. Her tricorder began to bleep again, snapping her back to the EPS. Staring at the wrecked distributor, however, she suddenly thought that the captain's expression had turned back to something she knew quite well and thought she'd missed until it speared again. It was pale, hard and blank...lost. It was the first look she remembered him giving her.

It was the look he gave her before he helped her to everything she *did* have now.

Closing her eyes, she shut her tricorder.

"Double up and lay down your credits, friends.... The dice are up!"

"Taggir! --Another on!"

"Double up, double up!"

The echoes emanating felt more like home than most other places did since he started on the route. The warm rush of air and inviting smell of table snacks, the clinks and buzzing conversation, echoes of laughter and thumps of chairs, all drew him closer. Every notion of comfort, he associated with those sensations now.

"Nasro! --Another on!"

Sloshing his hands around in his pockets, he felt a few strips of latinum and lint. It wasn't enough for the tables by a long shot--not for Ulinian table dice--but it was enough for a touch.

Tom's eyes drew up. He saw clearly into the window of the south base bar. He knew every crack in every chair, every stain on the floor...

What would a touch hurt? he asked himself. It's not like I have enough on me to do any real damage.... What does it matter in the end if I get some relief? No one's going to give a damn either way I end up as long as the ship flies eventually. Savan'll even deal with it.

He slumped, letting loose all his breath. "Piece of shit coward," he muttered.

"Towing five! --Another on!"

He knew all the wait staff and dice dealers there. A good sample of the clientele was also familiar to him, captains, dealers, crew, all enjoying a little time off, taking it easy and getting off the routine. He'd been missing the diversion of stopping in, making connections, relaxing. His missed blowing off the heartbreak of watching every step forward being followed up by a smack back--back where he belonged, apparently.

Screw it. I deserve a break. I deserve...something. Anything--anything but that damned series of failures that's my livelihood. So I drop dead or puke my guts out. It'll happen, anyway...and I'll have had a few minutes...just a touch...

A hand touched his shoulder and he jerked around. He blinked to see his engineer looking up at him. "What are you doing here?"

B'Elanna could only stare up at him at first, startled by the naked pain that greeted her. She drew back to feel it practically radiating out of him. But then she stopped, straightened, held her ground. She drew back to nearly feel it radiating out of him. But then she stopped, straightened, held her ground.

"Sailing," she said abruptly. "Let's go."

Tom blinked, jerked his head. What?"

"You heard me. Let's go sailing."

Tom shook his head. "Look, you don't have to come after me."

"I know that," she replied. "God knows I have other things to do."

He stared at her pointedly.

"It's what a friend does," B'Elanna said simply, "and you said you'd hold me to it. I won't have time later. So come on."

His feet remained unmoved. "What about the engine?"

"What about it? It's not getting fixed today. Oscar and his people are back on the hunt for a trunk, tap and frames; he'll check in after dinner." She held his heavy stare, pulling up her chin. "I contacted the marina and rented the boat. It's white with a big green sail, and it's windy as hell out there, they say." The corners of her mouth turned up. "We'll probably be thrown over."

Tom breathed a laugh he barely felt, but wished he could. "The element of danger, right?"

"Something like that," B'Elanna promised.

He paused, forcing himself not to look back at the window. He first chose the gravel walkway, and then glanced up to find her dark eyes still on him. She wasn't backing off. "What *are* we going to about the EPS?"

She sighed, shrugged. "I was angry. I shouldn't have blown up like that in front of everyone."

"You had every reason to."

"Maybe, but I do know better...and I'd like to think I'm better about it than I used to be." Again, she shrugged. "Anyway, once we get the parts we need, it'll be fine."

"If."

"I didn't buy everything from Oscar," she reminded him, "and he has some other pieces I can use that we didn't need before. Everyone's chipping in until we get that advance and he's really giving me a good deal after what happened the other day. It'll work out." She paused, pressing her certainty with her expression. "We'll make it work."

"We just lost the entire power manifold, B'Elanna," he stated. "I've never seen that much damage make itself happen in a day, and we still have the ODN and navigational deflector to think about."

She rolled her eyes. "It's a *ship*, Tom. I'll *fix* it."

"Yeah," he conceded, a fonder gaze finding him to know it.

"Yeah. Well, that said, I'm not ready to work with that thing right now, either. I've ordered my parts and the cleanup can wait a while, so I can afford a break." Tilting her head, she continued archly, "You don't have to do much: I'll keep working the engines and you still get to drive." She felt some satisfaction to see the color gradually return to his face, his expression loosen up a little. The pain remained in his eyes, but it was familiar enough to her that she wasn't concerned about that part. At that, she said, "I owe you, Tom, for handling my father and respecting my feelings about it."

"All I did was hear him out," Tom dismissed, "and tell him I'd run what he said by you when I could."

"I know. You didn't have to do that much."

"You don't have to take me sailing, either."

"Yes, I do," she told him. Her lips turned up. "Besides, you *were* right. I did want to go all along."

Finally, his grin warmed and, considering one last time, he fell to her side. "Then I guess I have no choice."

"You have a choice," B'Elanna returned. "Just mine's a better one." Setting a gradual pace to the nearest transport, she crossed her arms and set her eyes ahead of her. In the corner of her eye, she saw the captain put his hands in his pockets, release a sigh, swallow. She peered up at him. "What did that doctor treat you for, anyway?"

"A form of liver failure," Tom answered. "I was wondering if someone would ask."

"I didn't want to intrude."

He nodded. "Okay."

"But it's better now?"

"Yeah, all better now. No more alcohol, though, especially alien varieties...which means I've got to deal with things head-on for a change."

"Not easy, is it?" she said, not ignoring the irony.

"No. It's not."

They came around to the transport; with a few commands, they stepped on together and activated the unit. A couple seconds later, they were looking at the Rikad terminal for the third time that trip.

Wordlessly, B'Elanna set their pace again, a little faster when she saw the sun continuing to lure her outdoors. She hummed her approval when they came out of the building, even when the breeze cut into her jacket and insulted her hair--and then she wondered why she even thought about it. It'd be much worse soon, and it wasn't for herself she was there, anyway, though she hadn't been lying when she told Tom she needed to step away for a while, too--a first for her, in fact. She didn't know what to make of that, only that being a friend for a change just then would be more useful than sitting waiting for yet more parts and seething about what she already knew she'd be doing nonstop until it was done.

Thinking about it that way, it suddenly wasn't a decision anymore.

It occurred to her just then that Tom could have been dead as soon as Sicira. Everyone had chosen to not say anything, let him work things out for himself as usual. Meanwhile, he was wasting away, alone in it save whatever Savan was able to do. She must have worked very hard to keep him moving, considering her watchfulness during that time. Considering all this, B'Elanna held her silence a minute longer as they crossed through the little town, pursing her lips with her thought before deciding to voice it.

"You have a second chance, Tom. A lot of people aren't that lucky."

He frowned. "Yeah, I know."

"Some of those unlucky people are still around," B'Elanna pointed out.

He looked down at her, briefly catching her even gaze, realizing to whom she was referring. "You didn't do anything wrong, B'Elanna," he told her, and continued even when she turned her head in the negative, "He was the grownup. He should have known better, should have done it better. But he didn't; he walked away because he wasn't strong enough to handle it head-on, either. That had nothing to do with you."

She closed her eyes at his words--words spoken with more conviction than she'd ever known in him. "Whether or not that's true, I'll still regret my part in it."

Tom nodded. "I would, too, if I'd been in your shoes."

"Then why are you saying anything about it?" she demanded, stung anew. "I thought you agreed it wasn't your business."

He sighed. "Look, you're doing something really nice for me today. I appreciate it, B'Elanna." Stopping them, he held her fully in his gaze. "I really do. But you know what? *You* have a second chance, too, who's waiting for you at Base Three-Sattra. He is around *right now*, which is more than I'll ever be able to say for those dead crewpeople and my friend. It's not going to be flowers and sunshine, and it shouldn't be; but I have a feeling you'll regret a lot more if you don't give yourself a chance to forgive him--and yourself."

She drew a long breath, sucking up her impulse to throw his suggestions right back at him and walk swiftly away...to keep doing what she'd been doing since that man in question had run away, years ago. All those years, she'd been unwittingly following her father's example.

B'Elanna's heels dug down hard as she held Tom's unwavering stare. At last, she jerked her head toward the lake. "Let's go."

His brow furrowing, he didn't budge. "Didn't you hear anything I said, B'Elanna?"

"Of course I did," she responded, but reigned herself in when she saw the choppy water ahead. Her heart began to beat in expectation, feeling the dips and turns and the rush of a struggling sail in her hands, the whip of the wind and the speed. "God knows we'll be here long enough to get to the rest of what I need to do," she told him. "I deserve this break."

Tom released his breath, gave her a slow nod. "Fair enough."

"And about time," she said as again she set their pace down the avenue. "Come on."

She was back on that street the next morning, and for an odd moment, she didn't regret it. The sun coming through the fog lit the little town nearly lavender, warmed it just enough to make the wet inviting. The fog helped quiet that early street as well: Maybe a little unsettling, but it was also very peaceful. She was so accustomed to noise that she never failed to notice silence. She almost wanted to get that little boat out again, lie down in it and float for hours, bathe in that peace and plush glow.

But she wasn't there for that. She had other business to handle--business she should have handled from the start.

She hadn't put anything special on, just her usual wrap shirt and khaki trousers. Even her hair was cursorily brushed. It *had* crossed her mind to clean up some more as she got her PADDs arranged in her quarters, but she nixed the idea as soon as she activated her schedule. She would be back under the EPS base in only a couple hours, continuing to repair all the severed feeds as Ridge disassembled all the plates. They'd soon be re-welding them, one by one, then reinstalling them. That was the *first* order of the day...

First after this, she corrected herself.

It almost didn't seem real as she neared him. Her boot heels clapped on the stony brown cement,

hollow and echoing against the nearby building façades. Standing right where she asked to meet him, by the droop of his shirt collar, the disorder of his hair, he seemed to have been there a while, still wearing that mix of anxiousness and regret she'd seen the night he left.

A full stride away from him, she stopped. Crossing her arms upon her ribs, she blinked and said, "Good morning."

John's mouth twitched for want to smile. His eyes took in her every feature then found her unmoved gaze again. "B'Elanna..." Seeing her brow rise, he drew a slow breath, then released it. "I heard there was trouble on your ship. Are you all right? Do you need--"

"We're taking care of it," she told him.

Her return to silence forced his eyes down momentarily. "I know. This isn't what you want to talk about."

"Yes."

He nodded, looked at her again. "I'll never be able to reverse what happened, what I did and didn't do," he said, offering his hands, then letting them fall again to his sides when her fingers clasped her arms. "But I am sorry for how it hurt you, B'Elanna. I'll always regret causing you so much pain."

She blinked again, pulled a quick breath. "Did you leave because of what I said that night, in front of Uncle Carl?"

He paused, choosing for a moment how to answer that.

"Tell me the truth, Dad."

"Not entirely, but it did affect me." At last, John straightened to look at her again. "B'Elanna, why I left isn't the problem. Why I didn't come back is what went wrong, and it wasn't about anything you did or who you were. I couldn't get my feet under me enough again to do make it right...to be a good father to you. It's not a good reason, but it is what happened." She looked directly at him, then, seeming to ask with her stare. He sighed as he gazed long into her eyes. His hands twitched to reach for her again, but he kept them still that time. "I never stopped loving you, B'Elanna. I never stopped wondering how you were, what you were doing."

B'Elanna rolled her stiff shoulders and looked down the avenue, tried to see through the mist to the corner. The sun was starting to melt the fog; she could see a blinking storefront light. The man across from her had fallen silent again, though his attention had not diverted. She drew a slow breath through her nostrils. She could smell the lake in that air. "Is there someplace to eat around here? I could use some coffee."

Straightening, nodding, he motioned down the way. "There's a place just around the next street."

She did not come near enough for him to touch her, nor did she look his way, but she did fall beside him as he started down the avenue.

"So..." he started, venturing as gently as he could, "you're an engineer."

Her lips turned briefly up. "Yes."

"Haven't you had enough fun out there?" Tom quietly quipped when he heard her come into the aft parts bay.

"I'm a masochist," B'Elanna returned, lowering herself next to him to see what system he'd gotten into.

Tom obligingly scooted over so she could get a better look. "What do you think?"

She shrugged. "Not bad for a beginner," she replied and set her toolbox down.

Tom chuckled lightly and let her open the next section. Indeed, after eight full days patching their EPS manifold back together, patching up the deflector and going for broke with their main computer, then charging off of Ulinas as fast as they could make themselves go, they had to be insane to use their precious time off on a useless project like that shuttle. Half-hour by half hour, however, it was really starting to look space-worthy. Nothing fancy, of course, it was just a tossed aside shuttlepod nearly the age of the Guerdon, but it was coming together. Any accomplishment, useful or no, was some sort of gain, especially of late.

"You seem to be feeling a little better," he observed.

B'Elanna nodded. "It's good to be off the ground...and settled, at least a little." She looked over at him. "Thanks again, Tom, for helping."

He smiled a little, warmed by her softly put words. He wasn't used to that tone of voice on her, but he had no problem deciding he liked it. "I'm glad I could, even just a little."

He had been of greater assistance than he probably believed, she knew, with but a few words and for just being sensitive to her feelings. It was still cool with her father. In perfect truth, she didn't trust the man, and she probably never would entirely. But they did manage to offer each other some reassurance and come to some important understandings between talk of their work and a little of where they'd been, catching up in summary. She told him about the crew on the Guerdon. He related how Tom had defended her and how he had come to fully understand his fault because of it.

B'Elanna wasn't up for much else past that repeated apology, and surprisingly, her father followed her tacit guideline. As they spoke quietly about Ulinas and her schedule, she finished a scone and two cups of coffee, then stood to return to her ship. Something in her wanted to hug him goodbye, but she didn't. They parted where they met on the street, each looking back once, then moving forward. The next morning, before leaving for the survey, he sent her a note of thanks, hoping they could meet again, to let him know when they were back at Ulinas and telling her how to reach him if she needed anything.

B'Elanna still felt a little odd about it all, though she was glad in the end that she met him. She was glad she blocked off a couple hours to finally have lunch with Mavis, too. The rosy-cheeked matron hadn't changed at all and stuffed her full of every temptation she could pull off her old-fashioned stove and every bit of warm regard and pleasant chatter she had always been happy to deliver. B'Elanna enjoyed the visit far more than she wanted to admit. Indeed, much against her expectation, B'Elanna left Ulinas without any regrets.

"Are you doing better?" she asked in her turn.

"A little shaky still," he admitted, "but better, yeah. Some days are better than others are. Keeping busy helps. Thanks for asking."

Indeed, it was a fair price for friendship, truly gained now, he believed, and proof again how a little can go a long way in securing someone's feelings. They both were guilty of that and thankful for that. Tom was also a little surprised by that as well. Of all the crew, B'Elanna was not the one he'd have expected, after what happened to the EPS, to come and look out for him. It made his semi-involvement in her family business a lot easier to think about, he had to admit.

Before leaving the planet, when they were still stuck and still seething about where in the hell they'd scrape up enough for the new EPS trunk they'd managed to find in another dealer's south continent warehouse, Tom had found that same assembly sitting in the middle of their last shipment from Oscar Madares. The main comm was down again, so Tom had sent his complaint the old-fashioned way:

/RE, the EPS trunk: Thanks, but I'd rather not get anything for free.\

//It's been paid for honestly,\ came the text reply not thirty seconds later.

/By whom?\

Tom scowled at the screen as he waited, then blinked to see:

//Fathers get to do these kinds of things for their daughters. He hasn't been able to for a long while. He has plenty of credits lying around. Let him, Captain.\

With one final second thought and against his better judgment, Tom did.

Five days later, Tom leaned into the old shuttle's main coolant junction and began to unravel the iso-nodes there. "I know I'm probably pushing it now, but..."

B'Elanna looked over when he cut himself off. His face, as usual, did not give him away. "What?"

"You should write him--your father," he suggested. "Make the first move and send him a note. Not that anything was your fault, but you'll have nothing to blame yourself for later if he doesn't respond this time. It's still the point: make him respond to you."

She shrugged. "It's the least I can do," she quietly agreed, "for the effort he made this time."

"Do it for yourself, B'Elanna," Tom told her. "It won't be worth your bothering, otherwise. Speaking of which, drop by my quarters after dinner if you can. I've got something waiting for you there--if you still want it, that is."

Still staring up at him, B'Elanna colored a bit at his offer. Then she realized and laughed to herself. She'd completely forgotten about that. "Well, considering I'll be doing the work of three for the rest of the run, I might have to hold out for a fourth share."

Tom laughed and popped open the initiator cap. "Come on, B'Elanna, you'll be busier than that," he drawled.

"What?"

Catching the little gleam in his eyes when he glanced her way again, B'Elanna's stare shot back to the draw arm she'd just started on. Her gut pulled and her breath caught as the images, the sounds, all came rushing forward, as though they'd never left her. The green lawn on that cool, sunny day, the uniform, red and black, and him running backwards several steps, teasing his friend... And now that she thought about it...

"Never mind," he said.

She glanced over at him again and caught the remainder of his grin. Her breath halted. It just couldn't be...

But it was. It was him.

"You saw that?"

"Yes."

Tom leaned back in his chair, taking that memory off the shelf for the first time in a *very* long time, letting his chest flutter with the presence of that ghost. He and Cass jostling on the Academy grounds, like the kids they were...the kid he had been. She wouldn't have been fooling around if he'd not stolen her PADD and forced her to play. He always took particular delight in joshing her; she responded so well. She got him back on those damnably boring assignments, though, right down to the end. Right down to the end.

He really missed her sometimes.

With a sigh for the memory of his friend, Tom then looked at B'Elanna. She'd already pushed her renewed and signed contract back to him and was sharing a cup of tea before getting back to work. She probably didn't know about the smudge of sheering dust on her forehead, but her hands were clean and she'd checked her work vest at the door. After he got his paperwork done with, he'd be down there with her, starting on the ODN yet again. Another day on a run and a lot of business, still to come.

Her face was full of wonder just then, though, seemingly seeing him all over again. Though he knew he shouldn't mind being appraised so kindly, something in him didn't like that it was now connected to that past. That in mind, he told her, "It was a long time ago."

"It certainly was," she nodded, still piecing the memory and his present *faÁade* together, wondering why she'd never been able to. Also knowing the face of the friend who'd been killed, knowing her voice, made B'Elanna somehow sympathize with Tom's experience more. "It's always been such a vivid memory, but the whole time I've been here, I never realized that was you."

"It's not me," Tom gently replied, wrapping his fingers around his mug. He stared at it briefly before catching her gaze once again, his lips turning slightly up. "Not what made you remember, anyway. --That's okay. We all grow up eventually."

B'Elanna's smile reflected his for her own reasons. "I guess we do."

They were fifteen light years into the leg when the encrypted message pinged them.

Tom looked back from his seat. Maryl's frown pursed and she blinked her nod to him. "Yeah."

"Yeah," he echoed and waited patiently for Savan to decrypt the transmission.

That time, a dark-haired Bajoran with a colder glare than Tom ever knew on a woman filled the viewscreen. She scowled directly at Tom and started, "Chakotay might have given you a pass, but don't think for an instant that I have. Were it up to me, you'd have all been floating scrap months ago."

"You obviously haven't seen my ship lately," Tom replied.

"I'm still thoroughly convinced you've sold us out to Starfleet."

"Fine," Tom nodded. "Let us off your hook and we'll be on our way. You won't have any problems."

"You don't get things that easily anymore," the Maquis sneered.

"And space isn't as big as you seem to think."

"And so they happened by you en route to Starbase 310? I don't believe in coincidence."

Tom held her steady glower with as annoying a smirk as he could muster. "Neither do I."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. Were he in the room, Tom was sure she'd have made a stab for him. He then remembered that she was the same Maquis he'd run across on Mesler's ship all those months ago. He snorted to himself. Little wonder she was pissed on top of paranoid.

"Look," Tom said, "I'm always happy to chat with you people, but I've got a date with a GNS module. What do you want?"

She released a slow, seething breath, almost forcing herself to get past her teeth what she likely was ordered to say. "You'll stop briefly at Sicira for deuterium. The vendor, Jissiki, will sell you what you need and contract a shipment to Volon with your liaison. You'll find out when you pick up your crates where you're going. I'll be watching you, Paris." With that, she cut the signal.

"So much for our vacation," he muttered, then punched in their new trajectory.

IX: Departures

The lawn was so green it almost hurt her eyes. The air was wet and cool, the sun, warm. With tightly crossed arms, she strode across the grass, her eyes fixed on her destination. She was busy. She had business. Her feet crunched against the blades; she sped herself, made good time across.

"Give me that!"

"Come on, you're better than that!"

"We're too busy!"

"You want it, you'll have to catch me!"

Looking over, she stilled. Tom stood not a meter away from her, gazing down at her. Not Starfleet. He had his usual brown coat on, flung open and hanging long over his slim hips.

"You'll have to catch me," he said again, a little smile turning his mouth.

Taking the PADDs from her hands and slipping them into his coat pocket, he wrapped his fingers around hers and drew her out onto the grass with him. She followed, reluctantly at first, then gaining speed until she felt herself smiling, even laughing. The cool air brushed her warm cheeks as he led her around the yards.

Then she stopped. His hand still holding hers, he drew her close and slid his hands around her hips. Her breath caught as suddenly as he'd changed their course. She felt his warmth on her bare throat, felt his soft breath on her cheek. His long, warm fingers easily found the waist seam in her jumpsuit.

"Catch me," he whispered to her ear....

B'Elanna jolted awake, hot and half numb from the leap into consciousness. Her sheets felt stuck to her body, though she was dry. She could almost feel where she'd pressed against him, where his hands had gone, and her response... For a moment, she didn't know whether or not she should be annoyed, but then, it was *Tom* she'd just been dreaming about.

You always pick the convenient ones, she frowned, meanwhile beginning the process of telling herself it was just her subconscious playing around with her day, and it didn't mean anything. Indeed, she knew she didn't have feelings for the man--not romantic ones, anyway. He'd proved himself a friend and had welcomed her friendship, too, back on Ulinas. That was a month ago, though, and now, heading towards

a Maquis base in the heart of the DMZ, they'd all been quiet and busy without excuse. It wasn't like anything was--

"*B'Elanna?*"

She jolted again. It was Tom.

"Yes!" she responded, then blew a breath. *You can be so incredibly stupid*, she cursed herself. "Yes, I'm here."

The comm crackled lightly. Ridge had taken to calling it "Mesler's Revenge." B'Elanna made a mental note to remind Nadrev to poke at the EM junctions yet again.

"You mind coming on a little early? We're twelve hours to Sygra-Two and the subspace transceiver just started twitching again. We might need that when we get there."

B'Elanna snorted. The man did enjoy understatement. "We might. Ten minutes okay?"

"That'll be fine."

Putting her feet on the floor, B'Elanna leaned over and blew a long sigh through her lips.

"Out of the freezer and into the fryer."

Tom's eyes narrowed on the environmental readouts as he muttered the words to himself. Forty Celsius, high humidity, no clouds, no wind. This was reported to be normal weather at this colony site. Better still, instead of dropping off at a convenient landing pad, Maryl was told at Sicira that setup assistance was required with that shipment. They were to deliver and install five internal power generators to replace the old units and install one industrial replicator. The colony's technicians were off with the Maquis, Tom figured, or Captain Chakotay had designed an up close and personal look at what the Maquis was fighting for.

Either way, Tom found himself grumbling even while he knew he didn't have a choice. Unfortunately, the person who'd want even less to do with the drop-off was probably the best choice to help with the installs.

Leaning back in his seat, Tom thought about that. B'Elanna had been through a lot in that last month, between the surprise meeting with her estranged father and the EPS manifold disaster, on top of continuing to work overtime and some to keep them held together on the run to Deep Space Nine. The ODN and main computer were her primary concerns again, power failures her chief fear again, along with a warp drive needing a full retuning with their long, fast runs of late. It was always something, but ever since the Ligarán deal had been literally blasted apart, it was always something major; being unable to fix the problem for good was starting to really tick her off on the bad days.

Tom scrolled through the readouts again and sighed. Might as well ask, he decided. Getting it done and being paid at Deep Space Nine for their legitimate work sooner rather than later would have to win the day. With any luck, B'Elanna wouldn't mind a distraction from the presently unfixable things. Since Ulinas, Tom had gratefully learned that she was capable of enjoying some distraction. Pissed off and

tired as hell, they still had a pretty good time sailing on that choppy water, Tom remembered with a little grin. They even managed to keep the boat upright, though barely at times. She seemed equally in her element there as in the engine room, on fire about her latest project or repair. Indeed, he learned a lot about B'Elanna Torres that week.

"Tom, we have another ship coming up on us--fast," Maryl reported, scowling at her panel.

Savan was already on it. "It is Captain Chakotay's ship," she informed him.

"Guess we need a babysitter now, too," he muttered and glanced back at Maryl. "Are they just following, or do they want to chat again?"

"It looks like they're following for now."

"Just how I remember them best--on our tail." He looked at his monitor. Their ETA to Sygra-Two was nine hours, and the status column looked manageable. B'Elanna was probably not too busy...not much busier than usual, as it were. Pushing himself to his feet, he looked at Maryl again. "I'll be on deck two. Let me know when they feel like talking."

Savan stared at him. "Are you certain it is wise to leave the bridge now?"

"We're carrying their contraband," he reminded her. "They're probably *making sure* we go where we're supposed to go. --And it's not like we could do much if the case were otherwise. Anyway, I won't be long."

Setting himself into a steady pace down the center corridor, Tom rolled his head around, loosening his tense shoulders. Bad enough they were there in the first place.... Then again, the Federation was starting to gear up against the Maquis factions, get better intelligence and make some key arrests. The Guerdon's run-in with the Berlin made Chakotay and his people nervous for good reason. But the Guerdon's deradiative holds were too good to resist and its captain was too easy a prey--a reminder that made Tom roll his eyes. The Maquis captain knew exactly what he was doing, choosing him to make those runs. Now that they had the crates and had flown past the sensor nets, Chakotay could swoop in and see about the rest of the job.

"Rope and hook...son of a bitch," Tom muttered, stuffing his hands in his pockets. He needed to refresh that coat...easily done while he worked on Sygra-Two. He sure wouldn't need it there.

"I need the thirty-two line," came B'Elanna's commanding voice from below. It was a staple sound around the engine room's main control panels, so much so that the place didn't seem right when she wasn't there. Ridge and Nadrev had to admit from time to time that it certainly was more *relaxed* when their "boss" was off, but even they said it felt empty. Tom shook his head for the umpteenth time to think more on it. She didn't even have a proper engineering degree, but going through the motions of getting a degree would probably bore her to tears at that point. He wondered if she'd ever considered trying to place in an advanced program anywhere, but knew with a sigh she probably hadn't. The Guerdon kept her too busy for any of that. Then again, he could be working far more to his expertise, too.

He shrugged away the old nag, though. He wasn't going anywhere, either.

Coming onto the deck overlook, Tom caught but a glimpse of her as she passed behind the main panels towards the ODN. *So she's back on that again*, Tom noted. Her small tweaks had been working, though. The main computer had stabilized and some of the compensation issues had been solved. They still

needed an overhaul that wouldn't happen for some time yet.

"Want me to bring them?" asked Ridge from the supply room.

"No," she called back. "I'm coming back."

Tom took that opportunity. Descending to deck two, he strode across to meet the engineer just as she made her way back around. "B'Elanna," he said.

She glanced at him. "What do you need?"

Seeing and feeling the chill in her greeting, he shrugged. "You're busy. It can wait."

"I'll be busy later, too," she told him, stopping in the middle of the deck. "Tell me now."

He relented with a nod. "Aside from the materials drop off, this next delivery requires installation work inside the colony itself. I have to go, but I was wondering if you could help set up the units."

She stared at him. "Set up the units," she said tonelessly.

"You have every right to say no and I'll respect it. But I thought I should ask."

She exhaled a breath slowly through her nostrils, considering all over again the chunks of machinery they had strapped to the bulkheads in deck three's beta-seven forward hold, then considering the look in the captain's eyes. He wouldn't have come to her unless he felt he had to. "I'd be lying if I said I wanted to do it...but I will."

"Really, B'Elanna, you can send Ridge with me," Tom assured her, "if you're really against it. I know how you feel about these people. Just that he'll need to know how to do it."

"No, it's probably better I set them up," she conceded, shaking her head. "I have a lot more experience with them. It'll be done more quickly, which is what I really want."

"Quicker is good," Tom said, glad she'd come to the same conclusion on her own. Offering her a small but genuine smile, he added, "Thanks, B'Elanna."

The engineer gave him a nod and continued to the supply room without looking back, her fingers wrapped firmly around her PADD.

"Standard orbit," Tom announced, more to himself than anyone else on the bridge. Savan appreciated hearing it, at least, and somehow, the old habit had become easier on him, as well. He still wondered why he bothered.

"The Maquis ship has set itself into a synchronous orbit," Savan reported.

"And he's opening a secure channel," Maryl added dourly.

"At last, he speaks." Tom leaned back fully in his seat and crossed a leg at the knee.

A few moments later, Captain Chakotay appeared on his screen again, not so angry as the last time but just as looming. His dark eyes knew exactly where to point. "Captain Paris."

"Captain Chakotay. What a surprise."

"Are you ready for transport?" he asked.

"We were assembling our bathing gear before taking the plunge," Tom replied.

The sarcasm played a frown across his face before he realized what the younger captain was saying. "With a shuttle?"

"No," Tom said slowly. "Is it different this time?"

"There isn't a landing site for a ship your size."

Tom's brow drew down. "Why weren't we told about this? Our transporters aren't bio-safe, and we don't have a shuttle. How the hell can we help with an install when we can't land?"

Chakotay paused, looked to his side a moment, but then returned his attention to the younger man. "I apologize. That must have been lost in the details. The colony has no convenient landing site for your ship. However..." Pausing again, he weighed a few options in his eyes as he looked down to tap on his panel. Finally, a little grin touched his lips, then melted. "I have a small shuttle that can take one generator at a time. You're welcome to it for this job."

Tom tilted his head. "Why not just take the generators," he suggested, "and bring them yourselves? You seem to be here for a purpose."

"We need to be here," Chakotay admitted, "but I have no one to spare. Our technicians are busy with repairs."

Like mine aren't, Tom frowned, but let it slide. He knew he would never come close to winning that discussion. "Do you need me to pick up the shuttle, too?"

"We can transport you to our shuttle bay," said the other captain, enjoying that easy victory for what it was worth.

Tom glanced at his status monitor, then looked once again at the other captain. "Let me arrange it with my person on this end, and I'll get back to you. Give me a few minutes."

"You have thirty," Chakotay told him, nodding to his side, then cutting the comm.

"What do you know? The Maquis don't have an anti-grav, either."

B'Elanna pursed her lips for want of a smile. "Guess you can't even steal one out here."

Tom hopped up and grabbed the control arm of the magnetic flat. Thankfully, it came instantly to life and rolled easily down from the gangway hatch and toward the main aft bay access corridor, where Ridge waited with the first generator.

Their transport over to the Maquis ship had been oddly quiet. No one was there to welcome them but the captain's voice over the comm telling them what to do. Tom suddenly understood that Chakotay was in fact low on techs and likely had come to Sygra to recruit some personnel. B'Elanna showed no sympathy for the man's plight--not that Tom had expected any or felt much different, even as a fellow captain. Slipping into the side hatch, Tom immediately walked forward and checked out the controls. B'Elanna ran a couple of quick diagnostics on the engine, just in case the Maquis had something else in mind for the Guerdon's captain. They both had suspected it in vain. The systems all checked out. Tom popped on the thrusters and sailed them out of the Liberty--as they finally learned the Maquis ship was called--to the Guerdon's deck three landing bay in but a couple minutes.

"You sure I shouldn't go instead, B'Elanna?" Ridge asked plaintively as he prepared to push the big machine aboard the cart. "I could learn the install."

"I'd like this to be over with as soon as possible," she told him. "And you won't learn the procedure in ten minutes."

"Don't let that Maquis captain get on your nerves, Tom," Ridge warned.

Tom snorted. "I think I've read the memo, Ridge."

"I'm just saying it," Ridge insisted miserably. "And those roughnecks, too. I don't trust hot colony people."

"You don't like letting your boss out of the kitchen," Tom grinned back at him.

"I thought about that, too." Coming around the flat, Ridge knelt down and punched the extenders. They slid out of their bearings and crawled under the generator with only a few squeaks. When Tom pushed the rest of the unit under, Ridge hit the lift and the big metal box rumbled up onto the base.

B'Elanna immediately examined the unit, checking to make sure the move went well on the inside, too. Generators could take phasers hits to their shells, but the machinery inside was annoyingly sensitive. Units were not designed for mobility. Satisfied, she gave Tom a nod and grabbed her tool pouch. "See you later," she said to her tech and walked up the gangway.

"I'll be waiting for you when you get back," Ridge told them both.

"Yes, Mother," Tom grinned as he locked the generator into place. Giving his friend another look, though, he added, "We'll see you soon."

With that, Tom slapped the hatch control and moved up into the shuttle. Taking his seat in the pilot's couch, he checked the controls again. He'd flown over without a problem, but there was a difference between a ship jump and a planetary landing. More, the shuttle was Bajoran in origin, very old--pre-occupation, in fact--though it would get them where they needed to go and back. The panels had been refitted to Federation standard, so that most ordinary Maquis could read it. For Tom, it'd just been a while since he'd seen a Bajoran configuration. To him, it was a little counterintuitive. It didn't take but a minute to get his bearings, though, and plot in a landing solution.

He looked over at B'Elanna. "Ready?"

"Let's get this over with," she answered.

"Gladly," he replied and tapped the engines into action. Seconds later, they lifted from the Guerdon's aft cargo bay and turned. With a tap, they slid through the forcefield and entered the space just above

Sygra-Two. He checked the environmental readouts as it scrolled up and nodded. "Weather's good--for this colony, anyway. Should be smooth going in."

"Just as long as we get there in one piece," she replied. Realizing what she'd said even as she finished the sentence, though, she drew a deep breath and tried to bury it with, "It'll be a long day no matter what the weather is."

Though it stung, Tom knew better than to take it personally. He didn't quite need the reminder just then, though. "We'll land in about eight minutes," he said and angled the shuttle down.

Feeling their descent into the atmosphere begin, B'Elanna leaned back and closed her eyes.

Three generators later, Tom was wiping sweat away from his brow. It'd been a long time since he'd been on such a fireball of a planet, not to mention work on one. He'd probably gulped ten liters of water between trips to hydrate himself, and he'd had to request a sunscreen from Savan to keep his skin from burning. Even B'Elanna was a little uncomfortable by the end of the second run.

"No, I like heat," she told him when he asked. "It's the humidity I can do without."

"Isn't the Klingon Homeworld kind of wet?" Tom asked.

"I couldn't get off that planet fast enough, either," she returned.

Considering how he felt just then, Tom didn't question it.

"So what'd Chakotay contract you to?" queried a tan, strong-armed woman as she helped him and B'Elanna maneuver the big box around to the next installation site.

"We're not on his payroll."

She crooked her head around the edge of the generator to give him a look. "You're not Maquis?"

"That's right," Tom replied coolly. "Just unlucky."

The woman snorted. "Guess so if you're not here for the goodness of your heart."

B'Elanna blew a breath. "The goodness of anyone's heart really doesn't have anything to do with what we're doing right now," she snapped.

"No need to get testy about it," the woman sniffed. "I was just trying to make some conversation."

"Help us get this thing in place and stop asking questions," Tom told her. "You probably don't want to know too much about us as it is."

That silenced the woman more effectively than Tom had expected. Snorting to himself, he wished he'd come up with the line that morning. Cut off from the Federation and not being supplied by anyone not in a rush, the colonists were itching for news and information. For their sake alone, Tom had copied what news feeds they had archived. That didn't take care of their nosiness on the spot, though, and he was having an increasingly difficult time responding with charming repartee when he felt like his skin had

been set on a slow boil.

Kicking into the cement to keep some control of the flat cart as they moved down a slight slope, Tom swung the control bar around so they would turn the contraption before getting to the unit housing. The open pit sat just inside the main control building's outer wall, flanked by an array of signal and seismic equipment that kept them from transporting the generator closer. Thankfully, the others were in more convenient positions. "B'Elanna? You got it?" he puffed as he grabbed a corner pylon for balance.

"I've got it. Try to slow it down."

Tom coughed. "Yeah, okay."

Suddenly, another set of hands appeared on the corner. "Let me help you, there," came Captain Chakotay's voice soon after.

Tom brushed off the assistance. "We've got it," he told him and brought the unit around to the housing with a grunt. The thing seemed to get heavier every time he breathed against it. Glancing over, he saw the dark, tattooed man a couple meters away, having indeed let go and watching them finish. He looked a little put off, but Tom didn't care. He was more concerned about securing his grip again and making sure he didn't slip and make an ass of himself in the bargain. "How are we?"

"Just another couple meters, Tom," B'Elanna said. She also could see the Maquis captain waiting there and stifled a growl. "We don't need an audience," she announced. "Isalda, one more push and you're done, too."

"Good!" she huffed and did just that--gave the unit one more push as Tom did, finally easing the unit up almost against the port.

"That's it. Let's get it connected." B'Elanna grabbed her laser wrench as Tom shook out his arms. Kneeling, she popped open the input shield, just like before.

Loosening his shoulders, too, Tom made himself ready to hand her what she needed. Glancing back at the Maquis Captain, he asked, "Come to make sure we didn't install popcorn poppers?"

"Yes," the man answered honestly.

Tom shook his head. "Sixty-two other independent freighters working the border right now. If we're so untrustworthy, why not pick them up instead?"

"Many of them we have," Chakotay replied.

"And the others?" Tom queried. "Are they still operational?"

"I don't keep track of those numbers."

"I'm sure you don't," B'Elanna snipped. "Tom, give me the hyperinverter."

Chakotay looked down at her, then back to Tom. "I don't think we've met."

"That's right," Tom told him as he set the tool in his engineer's waiting hand, "and you won't for a while yet. She's working."

"That beside the fact I'd rather not meet any of you," B'Elanna muttered. Looking back to catch the

other captain's eyes straight on, she added, "We're doing your bloodwork. Leave us alone so we can finish this deal and move on, would you?"

Chakotay looked at Tom again. "That's what I came to discuss."

Tom swore between his teeth. Catching B'Elanna's eyes as her head whipped around, he gave her a look. Her stare melted into a glare, but she said nothing that time. Tom knelt by her and pushed her tool kit closer. "I know. Let me handle it."

"You're the captain," she said dourly, turning back to her work.

Tom stood again and moved a couple meters away, leading the Maquis captain as he ran his sweaty arm across his dripping face. "It's not like we didn't think the third run would be the charm," Tom said.

"You didn't trust us, either," Chakotay observed.

Tom laughed. "Well, what you're fighting for aside, you're terrorists and turncoats, and at least a few people on my ship consider you murderers, too. Trust is not exactly on my list of feelings for the Maquis right now."

Captain Chakotay nodded shortly. "I understand."

"Yeah. So what do you need?"

"I need you to run some quick supplies to a series of smaller bases. Most are temporary ports, but they need supplies to get moving and regroup."

"What supplies?" Tom asked.

"Do you need to know?"

"It'll be in my holds. I have a crew to think about. What supplies, Captain?"

"Weapons, power sources, standard provisions."

"How do they get to where they need to go?"

"I'm working those details out. You'll know before you get out of the DMZ." Then, Chakotay lowered his voice. "I believe you now, by the way, about the Starship Berlin. We checked their course records and some of the open communiqués, and so we know the Guerdon was a random find after your power failure. I hope you can understand why we're paranoid."

"It's not that hard to figure out," Tom replied.

"You've done good work for us," the Maquis continued, frank and friendly that time. "And the way you fly that old shuttle proves you're still as good a pilot as your record boasts. You can't blame me for wanting to keep you on a while longer."

Tom's blood cooled the moment the comment and his ego and made contact with his better senses. To his shame, his ego put up one hell of a fight in those few seconds. "No, we all knew you'd wring us for all we're worth when you snagged me the first time."

"You did."

His eyes narrowing, Tom crossed his arms. "My question stands, Captain: How long do we have to hang on your rope?"

The coldness worked. Captain Chakotay's facade resumed its former firmness, with a touch of insult that time. "As long as I need you to."

Tom said nothing, but did not divert his attention. It was what he'd expected to hear. Four years and over the border and he still couldn't change his bad luck with other people's politics.

"You'll get your orders when you resume course," the other captain continued. "We're still watching--you *and* your ship."

When the Maquis turned away, Tom backed off to return to B'Elanna's side. Falling to a knee, he poked through her tools to see what she hadn't picked up yet. She hadn't gotten far. Feeling her eyes turn to him, he paused, sighing. "I'm screwed."

"Is that going to take care of everything I need?"

"It'll have to. I'm not rebuilding anything else for this space until it's on the top of my list."

B'Elanna found herself in much better spirits after they finally plowed through the last install and got the Sygran systems linked up again. Both she and Tom stayed only long enough to accept the thanks of a couple colonists and arrange for a small pick up. She did not ask what it was. They were in the shuttle and back to the Maquis ship within ten minutes. A minute after that, they were looking at Ridge's unabashed relief. She couldn't help but smile to see it, and then to thank him as she and Tom moved off the transport pad.

Not so happy in months to get clean, B'Elanna forgot about her power restrictions and indulged in a long, warm sonic shower and a night off in comfortable pajamas with a real book. It'd been ages since she'd enjoyed a novel. The one she downloaded wasn't very good, but it was a mindless diversion that did what she needed it to do. She was fast asleep within an hour.

She was up the next morning ready to get back to *her* job, right down to installing an independent subspace comm panel next to Maryl's station. The former unit, a geological scanner, was not only useless to the contract liaison, but also long broken. The "new" comm station, collected at the Migan scrap yards, would allow Maryl to make contacts outside the ship's general communications grid--"Her own phone line," Tom had called it when he requested the side job. While they wasted their time on Sygra, Nadrev finished setting up the spare subspace transceiver and running the lines through the access ports to Maryl's station within the day.

Popping the old unit loose with a photonic wedge, B'Elanna yanked it out, disconnected its cables and set it on the floor. Then, digging into the hole, she quickly found the new connection rods. Pulling them up and setting them aside, she went to work on closing out all the old cables.

She almost ignored the beep that sounded at the station, but then Maryl acknowledged it. "Captain Chakotay's on the comm," she reported glumly.

B'Elanna looked up from her work to see Tom, who had just sat down, draw a breath and lean

forward. He'd gotten some sun on Sygra, tinting his skin enough to make him look healthy--robust, even. B'Elanna noticed his improved diet and increased activity had helped him everywhere else, as well...though she tried not to think too much about that. For that matter, his discouragement and growing disgust easily marred his features there. Clearly, he knew what was coming.

"Let's have it," he finally said.

A few seconds later, the captains had greeted each other. The Maquis looked upbeat, probably for the sustained state of getting what he wanted from them. In his turn, Tom did not bother to hide his contempt for the man.

"Where is your next shipment taking you?" Chakotay asked.

"Gimol station," Tom answered.

"Then?"

"DS-Nine."

"That's what I was hoping to hear," Chakotay told him, another brush of pleasure crossing his face. "Go through with your Gimol drop-off and pick up. You'll get our signal before you get there. En route to DS-Nine, you'll find a runabout. It'll be bigger than the pod you flew here. Pull it into your bay and transport the cargo into its hold. You'll find an itinerary in the main control panel with all your coordinates preset. There are four drop offs. At the second to last location, you'll have another pickup. You'll drop that load of cargo at the last colony base, then beam a stack of flats into the holds, drop the runabout where you found it. Transport the flats into your holds and deliver the shipment to our contact at DS-Nine."

"Can't wait," Tom muttered and waited for the other man to show some hint of mercy. He did: The comm was cut a few seconds later. Tom closed his eyes. "I'm going to get nailed for this and that son of a bitch'll be flying free."

Still standing with the comm station board in her hands, B'Elanna watched Tom lean back in his seat, his eyes still shut, breathing through his frustration. He tried to pass it off a lot, she knew, but he did not lack pride. The Maquis captain ordering him around like a subordinate, despite where Tom had been and what he'd done, couldn't be anything less than humiliating. As he leaned back again and willfully relaxed into whatever appeared on his private viewscreen, she felt sincerely glad there was no chance of her ever becoming a captain.

"More tinker toys," he said to himself as he stepped into the dark and stripped down runabout that might have echoed his heartbeat if he'd stand still, it was so hollowed out. Not that decoration was anyone's priority there. The stats showed it could go fast, get between the close colonies around Solosos in little time. It was even faster than the Guerdon--though Tom was certain the rig wasn't safe at its top speed. He'd need to use it to get the runs done in time, though.

He knew the wise-eyed Maquis captain would get him behind a conn of his choosing eventually. Now he'd done it twice.

"Damnit," he hissed to himself, but blew the rest out through his teeth. There wasn't anything else he

could do but get it done, and he'd start doing that sooner than he wanted, too.

Sinking into the pilot's seat, Tom felt his face fall further when he tapped on the itinerary. The Guerdon would indeed be coming in close this time, only a light year from Fidalis-Two, then running along the anterior territory line to two light years away from Solosos, where Tom would meet them again. It was a far safer trajectory than what he'd have to fly, he noted, seeing the updated sensor net data. The Maquis' galvanizing enemies were obviously on the hunt inside the colony route. He would need to pull some tricks to get around them.

Yet another reason he needed a Starfleet expatriate, Tom grumbled, rethinking his dislike of dealing with stupid people. Worse was the plain fact that he was being played, along with his crew. In the end, they meant nothing to the Maquis. *And I'll bet I haven't even begun to hang.*

Tom shook his head briskly and got up. Getting pissed off even more over things he mulled over a hundred times already wasn't going to make his week any easier. Going aft, he ducked down into the little bay and found B'Elanna and Nadrev still at work on the shields.

She only glanced at him. "We'll be able to boost your signal disbursement with a few more tweaks, but you'll have to manually rotate your emission pattern. After a couple hits, they'll figure you out. The same applies to your shields when you use them."

"Better than nothing," Tom nodded. "Thanks."

Nadrev sat back as B'Elanna dug into another node column. Looking up at his captain, he rubbed his neck and asked, "How long are we out here again?"

"Eight days," Tom frowned, unhappier still to be reminded. Getting pulled off the route was also bad for business. For all their supplying the colonies, they needed parts and supplies as well; they wouldn't be able to afford half of them even with a few moderate deals. Nadrev seemed to understand, though he could offer no reply but a resigned nod. Tom didn't have anything more to add, either.

Turning, he left the runabout through the hatch and strode out of the bay. He had six hours until the Guerdon was in position and he would need to take off. He needed some coffee, some dinner, a shower and maybe a quick shot of sleep--all and anything to prepare for a lousy week ahead of him and perhaps temporarily distract him from the very certain feeling of two hands firmly grasped around his neck...and twisting.

"Code two-two-theta-nine-epsilon!"

A crackle came back first. "Didn't get that! Say again!"

Tom continued to wrestle the controls as he sat in a tremulous hover above the stormy colony site. "Two-two-theta-nine-epsilon--damnit!"

"The beacon's set!"

Tom found it immediately and pulled the runabout's thrust pattern forward to fight the winds. Tipping and buffeting around, he rattled the small ship down through the atmosphere and shakily onto the landing pad.

He slapped off the controls, blowing his breath and checking his nerves. Bad enough that so-called runabout drove like a truck without shock absorbers--or a wheel alignment--but the flight to Solosos from Bakkach was spent mostly veering away from Starfleet and Cardassian sensor nets, which had easily spotted the craft and tuned in to track it. To say he'd taken the long way around barely touched his procedure that week.

At least he didn't have to deal with the Maquis themselves that time. He just needed to wait for the people on the ground to get the supplies, then take off again. No questions, no stares, no having to repeat security codes or help with cargo. All of those extra duties had been expected of him at all but one of the stops, and all of them proceeded with a phaser pointed at his side. This time was just the drop off, then a quick pickup before leaving.

He'd be back to the Guerdon in forty hours, given the engines didn't putter out with that last burst of speed. Finally on the ground, he was watching the clock again.

"Open your hatch!" came an order over the comm.

Tom hit the controls. A minute later, the thudding boots and cargo flats scraping echoed up into the cubicle bridge. He waited, tapping a foot, piecing out the sounds as they pulled their wares out the hole in the back. There was enough firepower to blow up a moon, Tom knew; enough provisions to hold out a year, sensor equipment and medical supplies. Everything he didn't want to support or get involved with even before he got the Guerdon.

Guess I thought too soon that I'd stay clear of this mess, he smirked to himself. *Dad was right: I can't walk out of the house without attracting trouble.* At the same time and on another note, he had to admit he was impressed with himself. That landing was not an easy one, and he'd managed to set that alien bucket down on the buffers without any warnings. He still had that much going for him, just in case he would ever give up his glamorous job, shark a slobbering drunk at the next base bar and plunge full throttle into a life of crime.

Those lighter thoughts sank, however, when a set of boots sounded in the upper corridor, then pounded up to the bridge and stopped behind him. *There goes that.* Tom didn't move. "Yeah?"

"You're Captain Paris?"

Tom did not stand for the person who'd come in behind him, but finally glanced around to see a typically angry-looking Maquis, with brown skin and a canvas vest buckled tightly against his muscular body. *Shouldn't have hoped I wouldn't get company, either.* "Yeah, that's me."

The presence did not move.

Blowing a breath, Tom stood and turned to face the Maquis who'd entered. He was about his height and even broader up close. The man's brow seemed permanently knitted into his nose bridge. "Do you need something?" Tom asked him.

"So you're Paris," the man said, looking him up and down. "I wanted to see if it really was who I thought."

Tom's eyes narrowed. "Seen enough yet?"

"Not yet." Pulling out a tricorder, he gestured toward the bulkhead. "Turn around. Hands on the wall, *Captain.*"

"What the hell is this about?"

"Do it or you're not getting back to your piece of crap freighter in less than three pieces," the man growled.

Staring at the Maquis' tricorder--a medical scanner, he identified--Tom warily did as told. The scan took over a minute for the Maquis' thoroughness, and it hit Tom that the man was probably looking for implants. Done, the man grabbed Tom by the shoulder. Tom slapped his hand away as he was whirled back around to face him. "Done?" he snapped.

In a beat, the Maquis' fist flew around and caught Tom in the cheek, instantly sending the young captain flying back around and onto the pilot's couch with an "Umph!"

"Chakotay wants you alive," the man spat, "but you'd be a pool of blood hosed into our gutters if I had my way about it, coward."

"Rodrigo, we're done," said a woman as she came forward. She snorted at the sight she found. "Guess our welcoming committee's had their turn," she grinned.

"Just taking care of some old business," the man told her, backing off from his prey.

Oh hell, was he at Caldik, too? Tom thought muzzily, feeling his eye and jaw and everything in between swelling and pounding in time with his increased pulse. The taste of blood swirled over his stinging tongue. Slowly pulling himself back to his feet, he watched the other man and disturbingly amused woman back off to the access corridor.

"Let's not have any more run-ins with friendly starships, either," the Maquis warned, looking back from the door. "We know where to blow a hole that can't get fixed by that cute little mechanic of yours. And we will."

"Slap me around all you like," Tom snapped, with an effort now that half his face felt like a hot water balloon, "but leave her and the rest of my crew the hell out of it!"

"You might get away with slippery loyalty with Starfleet, but the Maquis handle those kinds of problems head-on. We'll have your ship and whatever crew we like. Do your job right this time, Paris, and you won't have either of us to worry about."

Tom did everything he could to keep his mouth shut and his eyes on the other man's glare until the Maquis had no choice but to break it first for better things to do.

"Jeez, Tom, what'd you say this time?" Ridge queried only moments after his friend materialized on the deck four transport pad.

Tom immediately began a steady stride across the bay to the ladders. "Another fan of my last gig," he slurred, frowning below his bruised jaw and eye, the latter he couldn't open since the day before, when the swelling really set in. "I need to see Savan before my damned head explodes. All the medical equipment I had on board they took off at Solosos."

"I'll comm her," Ridge offered and doubled back for the unit in the transport base.

Coming to the access ladders, Tom took the opportunity to make a call, too. "Maryl, I'm on. Transport the material flats to hold four-nine-beta per the plan and get us the hell out of here--preset coordinates and speed."

"Got it."

He punched the comm off and began to climb, stopping only to let B'Elanna and Nadrev get by with their iso-junction sheet on deck two. Following them forward to the main deck, they moved aside to a table, allowing him to pass and giving them a good view.

"Don't ask," he muttered. Shoving his hands into his coat pockets, he stomped across to the stairs.

Deep Space Nine was the station the crew generally loved to hate.

Inaccessible when the Cardassians had control of it due to Maryl's "fugitive" status, it now boasted a complement of not only Bajoran ranks, but also Starfleet officers and Cardassian expatriates, among many others. Excellent parts, repairs and provisions could be gotten there at an enviable price--and there were ways to get other items under the table when needed; however, its supply was notoriously inconsistent and simple deals could turn dangerous. Tom blamed it on the Starfleet presence. "Anything coming out of San Francisco is bound to precede some kind of insanity," he told them after losing a deal for deuterium to a group who insisted at the other end of their disruptors that they'd paid first. The Starfleet people could do nothing about the matter but see that Tom was reimbursed and send him along his way. He, Maryl and B'Elanna grumbled about it for three more legs before they managed to get what they needed and at a far higher price.

Worse than the rest, Maquis, Cardassian and Bajoran terrorists now crawled all over the ringed station, making it impossible to trust any dealers there lately.

Now, another black mark could be added to the list.

"Nothing. Just nothing."

Maryl leaned forward, her cheek on a fist as she scrolled grumpily through the contents of the latest blue PADD, which she'd picked up from B'Elanna before joining her husband and their recently returned captain at the murky little bar off the station's promenade. She'd asked for the newsfeed so she might sniff out some deals around the area. She needn't have bothered. It was only another reminder of the reality setting in for ships like theirs. When she got a refill on her drink, she sucked down nearly half of it to see the next news topic.

"Oh great, and now the Tagrans have locked up all new licenses due to the instability in the region." She snorted derisively and set the PADD on the table. "I just wasted three months in arrangements with that idiot Liodris."

Pushing his cold coffee around on the glossy little table, Tom exhaled. The happy thought of the Tagran license always did seem too good to be true, much as their reasoning for closing shop made perfect sense. He'd still wanted it, almost as much as Maryl had. It easily would have set them up for the next year, allowing them to make the repairs they needed on the ODN and warp drive. "Did you hear

back from the Fidor Group?"

"They're pausing operations for the same reasons. They have enough to maintain the study for a couple months, then they'll get back to us."

Tom frowned. "Did you tell them we'd be back on the Hidirin route then?"

"I did, though it doesn't really matter right now. No Ulinas run right now means we've got nothing to do."

"We have *nothing*?" Tom asked.

"Just a couple parts relays to Miga," Maryl told him. "Nothing worth the dilithium, but it'll keep us out there. --And it's not for lack of trying, Tom. I've been at it all week. No one's touching independent freighters right now. Too much liability and suspicion."

"I know," Tom said, following it with a hard sigh. The call of dabo echoed behind him and he wondered if he had it in him to run the back tables that night, but knew he was too angry and distracted--*Hell, probably too sober*--to do any good there. Rather, the opposite would probably be more like it. Unnerving as it had been, he wished he still had that post-treatment glow. His energy level was the same and better managed now that he had some physical routines back in his daily schedule, but once it'd been killed on Ulinas, the upbeat mood that came with a sudden return to health could not be resuscitated. Reality had a way of doing that. "Maybe we need to move our concentration back to the Mingauan region," he mused aloud. "I can't see this area getting better in the next few years at least. Once our obligations are up here, maybe start looking in that direction?"

Maryl shrugged. "I'm not sure which side of the border's going to be worse at this point. I'm reading news from every end of the DMZ, and as you know, we're usually picking up on that end of the region and bringing it here. There's just not enough there to trade for exclusively now that Tagra's off our list."

Ridge gave Tom a look. "Maybe thinking about licensing with the Federation would...?" He left it open. It wasn't his arena, though he'd heard Maryl mention it offhand.

"Even if I didn't think that was a last resort," Tom answered, "with our current obligations and all the pots Trusket dipped into, I'd be an idiot to invite a full investigation of the Guerdon's trade practices for the last five years. This beside the fact that Starfleet's generally not fond of *me*... Hell, it seems I have all kinds of people waiting to beat the crap out of me. Starfleet just likes to do it officially. I'd hate to give them another excuse."

"Yeah, probably wouldn't be a good idea, then," Ridge nodded.

"It was worth asking," Tom said, half felt but still honest. "I'd thought about it, too."

Looking up, Tom saw Savan approaching the table, her smooth gait swishing the hem of her ruddy tunic against her thighs with machinelike accuracy. The Vulcan moved to the fourth seat and gestured to the bartender. He instantly turned for her usual. "I have left Nadrev with the Guerdon," she reported, looking at Maryl. "You are expected there in fifteen minutes."

"It's as good a place as any to scrape the bottom of the ocean," Maryl said, then lifted her drink to finish it.

Savan looked at Tom. "Our 'contractor' has left another set of coordinates for a pickup. I will need to review the materials list with you before we leave, Tom."

"Yeah, whenever that'll happen," he grumbled.

"It will need to happen soon. He requested our pickup be scheduled in five days."

"Not that he'd let us enjoy the suspense."

With that, Tom pushed himself to stand and turned to leave. He wasn't enjoying being in a bar without a tumbler in his hand, anyway, and there was only so much more gloom he could take without wanting to crawl into one. Making his way from the back tables to exit via the bar, he stopped to pay the tab. The bartender instantly slid up to collect it.

"Leaving already? But it looks like you could use a break, Captain."

Tom peered at the Ferengi bartender askance, then shook his head as he slid the latinum across the slate. "Not tonight, thanks."

"Well, if you're not up for sleep, the game tables are always open. --Ah, but you're a discerning customer. Pity dabo's not your taste."

Tom rolled his eyes. "Not for a long while, Quark. Let me know when someone's wandering around the back room, though. I might be able to make that worth your while."

"Always a pleasure, Captain," replied Quark, showing his teeth. "But why not take some leave right now? You've never been one to part without trying my newest imports."

"Unfortunately, they've had to leave me."

The Ferengi was not deterred. "Come on. You look not nearly like yourself. Why not try this new Devanian ale? Try one on the house, just a taste to see if you like it. Let me know if it's worth my investment."

Furrowing his brow, Tom looked over the bar to the cask on display. The symbols looked all too familiar, but the container did not. "I didn't know Devanians made ale."

"It's a new process," said the bartender, well pleased and swinging around to a separate tap. "They take the sap from sargor tree and ferment that into the finest nectar..."

The words faded. They didn't really matter. Rather, Tom watched the ale fill the tall glass, falling into a sudden daze as the familiar whispers echoed within him. *What would a touch hurt?* Suddenly, he couldn't move, and honestly didn't want to. It was attractive ale, in what ways it could be. The deep red liquid boasted hardly a spray of foam, just a few bubbles from the force of the tap. He could probably guess what it tasted like. Devanian liqueur was strong and heady. And good. Quark knew how much he liked it.

And it's not like it'll matter when Starfleet buries me under the most convenient penal resort. If they don't, the Maquis'll take care of it. God knows they want to.

"Tom?"

And it wouldn't change the fact that I'm trapped--again and sixty light years away. Why would it matter in the end, getting some relief from these damned walls, always closing in--

"Tom!"

He blinked and turned to see B'Elanna standing right next to him, staring up into his eyes with some urgency. "What?" he blurted.

She started a bit, suddenly seeming to forget what she needed to say. Recovering quickly, she said, "You need to come with me."

"Something wrong with the ship?"

She rolled her eyes. "There's *always* something wrong with the ship."

He coughed a laugh. Watching her lips turn up, too, he barely heard the clink of the glass as it was set on the bar behind him. "Yeah. But you've got that, right?"

"I'm getting there," she returned, straightening.

The bartender sniffed, trying to regain Tom's attention. "Here you go, Captain."

Tom glanced back.

"I need you out here," B'Elanna pressed again, purposefully ignoring the troll behind them.

"Why?" he asked, but her stare did not waver, her boots remained planted in their spot. Then, she tilted her head, pressing her meaning with a breath, the tiniest gesture toward the promenade. Finally, his lips fell open, and he realized where he'd almost gone--again. For the second time in as many visits to that station, he'd been tempted to relapse. *Just a bundle of bad luck, this place*, he grumbled to himself, making a mental note to stay on the Guerdon next time they had to dock there.

For the mean time, though, he dumbly followed B'Elanna out of the bar and into the corridor despite the protests of the bartender about a wasted drink.

"Damnit, how do I do that?" he reproached himself. "How do I keep letting that happen?"

"Force of habit?" she offered.

"Maybe," he admitted. Sighing, he peered over at her. "Are you training to be my guardian angel now?"

B'Elanna colored slightly at the question, playing it off successfully by fussing open her jacket. "Is that what you call being a friend?"

"I appreciate it, B'Elanna," he told her quietly, wishing he didn't have to say it, to thank *anyone* for something like that. "It's been a long time since anyone's looked out for me like that, and now you've done it twice."

"Savan and Dejin look out for you."

"Savan doesn't follow me and Dejin's not here," he pointed out, then tried again. "*Thank you* for helping. Really, I don't know why my brain keeps doing that, like it's on autopilot to get me screwed up again every time I hit a bump or get bored."

"Everyone has something they're trying not to do." She shrugged. "And, you're welcome."

Looking down into her eyes that time, he grinned, nodded and continued to stare at her until she

turned her gaze elsewhere. Drawing a deep breath, then blowing it out as if to start the entire day anew, Tom cast his stare down the promenade. "Let's get something to eat. Food helps sometimes, too. You hungry?"

"That's what I came here for in the first place," was her ready reply.

He needed no more to set them off towards the food kiosks. "Great. What are you up for?"

"Anything," B'Elanna said, then remembered the venue she saw when she first stepped off the lift and corrected herself: "But *not* Klingon food."

He snorted. "Yeah, I didn't think you were much for it."

"Why do you assume *that*?" she demanded.

Her sudden defensiveness made him frown at first, but then he relaxed, remembering what demons *she* had been forced to deal with. "If I haven't judged you yet, B'Elanna, I won't now," he told her. "I've never seen bloodworms programmed in the replicator. The rest was guesswork."

She rolled her eyes at herself. "Sorry."

"It's okay," he said easily, steering them around a collection of tables to the next section, picking up his pace and scanning the venues. "What's to eat, then? You're just up, aren't you? How about breakfast? Waffles and coffee?"

"I haven't had waffles in years," B'Elanna smiled.

An hour later, they were three quarters through their servings, his with butter and a pool of syrup, hers with raspberry jam; each was on their third cup of coffee, which was surprisingly good. They credited it to the station actually being a Starfleet base. Alien attempts at replicated coffee were usually awful. They both had finished their eggs--or at least what had doubled for them. They agreed their waffles were far better.

"Replicated eggs just aren't the same after you've had the real thing," she commented upon completing her serving.

"They aren't," Tom agreed. "Then again, not many things are."

"What's the food with the biggest difference to you?"

He thought about that for a moment. "Probably minestrone--tomato anything, really, just doesn't taste right from a replicator. Good bread and brie, too. I won't replicate them."

"Brie cheese?" B'Elanna grinned. "That's a little surprising for someone with a love of pizza and popcorn."

"I got a taste for it when I lived in France," Tom told her. *Not to mention wine*, he added to himself with an inward smile. "What about you?"

"Fruit--almost any kind of fruit. My grandmother used to bring us oranges from Earth when I was little. I could eat a crate of them in a sitting."

Tom sighed. "You had to remind me of oranges."

"Grapefruit, bananas, pears--you name it, she brought it. I refused to eat replicated fruit, except applesauce. Mother would get so frustrated..." She stopped at that, leaving the rest of her thought to a wedge of waffle, which she smeared in the compote and popped into her mouth.

Tom let her have it by forking off another wedge of his own. It easily weakened his determination not to come stationside again. Maybe he should just remember to go right instead of left. He made a mental note of that place, which had been geared to the human contingent now living there with the intention of making them miss home less... And it occurred to him that he missed Earth fare. But then, he had also forgotten what it was like to have a brunch for no reason but to eat, with a smart, good-looking woman he genuinely liked and trusted, and with whom he enjoyed working. It made the food even better.

"It's good when they get the edges crispy like that."

"Mm, yes. That is good."

Tom spun another piece in the syrup. "So, do I need to make some runs on the station for you?"

"I think I've got it this time," B'Elanna said, not looking up. "I'll let you know."

"But bring Maryl if you see Treg. Aside from security, he owes her a couple favors. With the lack of business, we're going to be shaving it really thin until we're back to Hidirin."

"We need a few of my list items if we're making it back to Ulinas within a *year*, Tom."

He laughed quietly, nodding. "I'll have to warm up my dom-jot stick, after all, then. Can I bet the tricorders?"

She snickered at the memory, then flatly said, "No."

An hour ago, he was very close to ditching everything he'd achieved, had maintained and finally had come to really want. Indeed, he *wanted* to be healthy. He wanted to move forward in what ways he could. He'd even pulled out his wish list after months of being unable to stomach looking at it, started looking ahead again, hoping for something again. He did not want to go back to the haze and stench he'd been living in for nearly four years--all the more reason he just could not understand why he still could lose himself at the sight of a drink. Bad mood and vulnerability couldn't be all of it. Maybe it *was* a force of habit--the temptation to shirk off his unwanted burdens and worries. He hadn't been doing badly, though, dealing with his issues. He'd been getting better....

And now he was sitting across from B'Elanna Torres, talking at random and eating waffles, like any other person having a meal out with a friend and he felt fine...aside from his musing about it. He almost wished the temptation still nagged at him, bothered him more. He was so used to abnormal that normal felt foreign now. Or maybe he really did just need to keep busy...or at least diverted. B'Elanna had always been capable of being that, in one way or another....

"Still, a couple more trips and we'll be on the other side of the border for a while, between Hidirin and Irtrin," he noted, picking up the carafe and swirling around its remains. There were a few cups left. He poured himself another. "I have to admit, it'll be good to get away from the uniforms again."

B'Elanna nodded her agreement, then said, "I think there are more Starfleet here than at the Academy."

Tom snorted. "You're probably right."

And I thought I should avoid him, B'Elanna thought as he offered to refill her cup. She gave him a nod. *It's not impossible to be a friend, especially when he really seems to need one stationside.*

She knew it was just her romantic tendency getting to her again, her dreams and imaginings. All the crew worked very hard, around the clock--and worked even when they weren't working, like she and Tom did on that old shuttle, still half in pieces but just something to be done. So, she really couldn't blame herself for a bit of subconscious fluff rising from time to time. It didn't mean anything. She'd come to enjoy spending time with him, now that he was neither a drunk nor a basket case. Rather, since their experiences on Ulinas, he'd really settled down, even while he could be silly with Ridge and still enjoyed poking at Maryl. Her imagination didn't have to mean anything more than that.

She still felt like what she saw wasn't all of him, though. For all she'd gotten to know, she couldn't help but wonder what he was holding back. There was always something there, something he kept tucked away, put aside, but didn't forget. It wasn't the accident and expulsion. That threw different shadows upon his face. It was something...deeper.

And she stopped herself there. Yet again, that romantic tendency was getting the better of her.

She remained curious, however.

"Ridge said your father was a high ranking Starfleet officer."

Tom gave her a look. She glanced briefly up from her work on the last bits of her waffle, checking his reaction. "He's an admiral," he confirmed, thinking she probably already knew that, but wanted to ease into a topic. B'Elanna could be forthright on reflex--but wasn't always.

"That must have been interesting."

"I think it's more interesting to him," Tom replied coolly, then blew his bitterness out in a sigh. Leaning back in his seat, he continued, "No, I'm not being fair. You see, I was supposed to follow along in his footsteps, be the next Paris in a long line, all that." He shrugged. "My cousin should take the honor in another decade, the way he's moving along. He's fit for the part. I never wanted it, and I couldn't have lived up to any of that."

"Couldn't have been easy," B'Elanna ventured.

"It wasn't," Tom admitted, adding in a second thought, "I mean, I can't complain about what I had. I had a lot, growing up, maybe too much. I didn't know what it was like to struggle for anything until I had to start over."

"Out here."

"Yeah," Tom said softly, gazing back at her inquisitive stare. "All the way out here, stuck with nothing and consigned to be nobody, and I finally got the point. The irony's great, isn't it?" Chuckling, he set down his coffee, rolled his shoulders to let out the remaining tension. "Anyway, if he knows what I'm doing, my dad's probably not too happy about it."

She peered at him askance for that one. "You don't talk to yours, either?"

"I write sometimes," he said, reaching out to stir some sugar into his coffee. "I write Mom, tell her about the sights, tell her I'm okay. Not much else. She's great and I miss her, but...it's easier to write, keep it simple."

"It is," B'Elanna agreed and leaned back, too. She laughed a little at his responsive look. "Yes, I have. He even wrote back."

He was glad to hear it. "Any progress?"

"A little. It's communication."

"Yeah," Tom said softly, smiling to himself. As always, he owed his mother another letter. Maybe he'd get around to opening up to her that time, tell her exactly what he was doing instead of sliding around the topic, tell her how much better he was doing--though not about his illness. If she knew he'd been very ill, she would be all over him. Slipping his hand into his pocket, he pulled out his PADD and quickly tapped in a reminder to write when he got back to the bridge--and told himself to follow through on it this time.

For a time after, the two finished their meal in silence, finally clearing their plates, taking the last of the coffee, watching the people pass by. Tom gave a nod to a few he knew. B'Elanna watched him do it, glanced at the person to see if she knew them yet. She'd dealt with a couple, had seen a few more in passing elsewhere. Most of them remained complete strangers to her.

From time to time, Tom felt B'Elanna's eyes drift back his way, trying to see what he might be looking at. Since she'd diverted him at Ulinas...but it had started before then. On the Berlin, she'd looked out for him, too, going as far out of her way as Dokaru's ready room. It was such a departure from how she'd apparently thought about him, he hardly knew what to make of it at first. Only a few months ago, when she seemed determined to rip him apart at every convenience, he'd have gladly dumped her stationside if he had anything resembling a replacement. Now he could honestly count her among his very good friends--and not just for the save. When her resentment faded, and when he sobered, he started to know her better. The more time they spent together, to more they worked well together, could talk and joke and even relax...

Not for the first time, he was glad for the change.

Especially today, Tom mused, glancing her way once again and catching her stare that time. For several seconds, he held onto it, allowing himself the luxury of a full appreciation of her features, her wide, brown eyes and full mouth. She really was a beautiful woman; he rarely was able to notice it as much as he thought he should. To his surprise, however, when a small grin touched his lips, she reddened, frowned and pushed her empty plate away.

"I need to get back," she said abruptly. She got to her feet and threw a couple credits on the table. "I left the sensor manifold diagnostic running without a solution index, and Nadrev doesn't know how to code that yet on the main deflector. I'll contact you later about how much of the parts list we'll still need fulfilled."

"Uh, yeah, see you later," Tom said, quickly trying to catch up with the fact that she was going away, much less why and what her excuse was. Within seconds, she left with a brisk nod back to him. Her determined stride was just the same, though, and her tone wasn't anything but businesslike. If he'd been too intrusive by looking at her as he had, she'd have called him on it, or at least asked him why he was doing it. So, he simply shrugged and leaned back to let his meal digest.

"How many cartons?"

"Twenty six hundred forty-two," came the answer.

Maryl added it quickly and matched it up on another panel, which B'Elanna had upgraded while preparing the new subspace console. "Prophets, this was worth the wait," she whispered, promising herself to do their engineer a favor sometime. Looking at a blinking rectangle in her results, she saw that the units fit perfectly in their deck four center environmentally controlled hold. "We have the perfect space for it, Rua Oggalor. It's center ship and has its inspection seal, updated at DS-Nine only a few months ago."

"And you travel back to the converted station directly?"

Maryl looked over at Tom, who spun a finger in the air as he continued to adjust their heading. "We have one stop before returning to DS-Nine, Rua Oggalor, but it's not a long overlay. It will easily clear the window."

A pause, then, "I will expect your contact at Miga tomorrow morning, Maryl Hana."

"Thank you, Rua Oggalor." At his click and the closing of the channel, Maryl blew a breath. "Just a bunch of lousy eggs, but six bars of latinum is six bars of latinum."

"It'll buy deuterium," Tom nodded.

"You assume we won't need anything else," Maryl scoffed.

"I *know* we need 'anything else,'" he responded, "but we already ordered the deuterium for pickup on our return, and we can't flip on the lights without *that*."

"Tom, I was joking."

He put his head in a hand, rubbed his temples. "Yeah, I know." Standing, he stretched his arms forward. "I didn't sleep last night. I'll be getting some coffee if--"

"You have an incoming message," Maryl interrupted, shrugging when she looked back at him. "Sorry."

Pivoting back around on a heel, he resumed his seat. "Don't worry about it. --Savan?"

"I will require another minute," she answered. "Their protocols are difficult and change often."

Tom used that time to wish all over again he could make the Guerdon less trustworthy without being tossed in prison, and to wish yet again that he'd at least managed a few hours of sleep. The night tremors and memories were becoming less common, but now they were occasional enough to make him less used to them, thus more unnerving.

Hearing footsteps behind him, he glanced back to see Nadrev coming onto the bridge with his tool kit. His first real kit, Tom mused fondly. B'Elanna had helped him choose it when they were at Sicira a couple months ago. "Put that away for now," he told the younger man. "I don't want them to see anything we've got."

"They probably know already," Nadrev said, hardly a protest, but a little hesitant. Having just come from the engine room, he knew his schedule for the day.

"I don't want to confirm anything," Tom told him. "Stow it. It'll only be a minute. These never take long."

Slumping a little, Nadrev did as told, pushing the kit behind the console support beam with his foot as he slid into his station.

Tom leaned back and waited, wondering what they had for him this time. Unconsciously, he rubbed his jaw. Savan had fixed him up pretty easily, but he still was having headaches from the punch Captain Rodrigo had delivered him those couple of weeks ago.

Slowly, the signal drizzled onto the screen, scrambled, then cleared again. Captain Chakotay seemed to be working on the connection on his end, too, glancing into the monitor every few seconds. At last, his image popped into focus and he looked at Tom directly.

"Are you reading us now?" he asked.

"We have you," Tom answered. "What do you need this time?"

The Maquis paused, staring at Tom a moment, but let it pass. "Another setup run. I need you to plot a course from a particular entry point, land on a new base site, then setup equipment."

"Where?"

"It's not in the DMZ," Chakotay informed him, seemingly pleased to relay it. "It's an area of space called the Badlands.... I take it from the look on your face you've heard of it."

"Yeah." Tom was nowhere near as happy as the other man was. While stationed at Caldik, he and the other pilots used to look at probe data from the phenomenon and wonder what it would be like to fly through that naturally occurring minefield. They all were glad they didn't have to, too. "What region?"

"Not on the Cardassian side," the Maquis answered.

Tom grinded his teeth together. "I'm not taking my ship into that."

"I'm not asking you to. You and one of your techs will come aboard my ship; we'll take you as far as Nivoch, where you'll take another shuttle. It'll be a better model than the runabout; it'll get you where you need to go with your cargo, get you around the plasma flares and to the surface. You'll take the equipment and systems you need, plus all you'll need in the way of rations, to the site. It's been cleared and the shelters are erected. There's a small power generator there for basic equipment. We need systems installed quickly and a good course recorded so I can bring my ship in. You're the only one of my contacts I think could do this in the time I need it to be done."

Tom drew a slow breath. He felt his chest flutter and shrink at the same time, his blood chill as his skin warmed. Like on Sygra, he was prey to that subtle compliment, while that other addiction slid into notice yet again. Much as he didn't want to be on any deal with the Maquis, much as his thirst for a little excitement made him nervous thanks to Caldik and Hugora, he'd still have to be dead to deny he enjoyed considering that challenge before him. Problem was, Captain Chakotay probably figured that out with one glance at his personnel file.

I need another damned hobby out here, he frowned to himself; then he asked, "We go in, set up and rendezvous where?"

"Actually, we'll come in after you within three days, on the Liberty, following your flags--unless you're

not as good as I've heard. In that case, we won't have to worry about that part."

"Nice to have someone to walk into the fire for you, isn't it?" Tom smirked.

"I'm transmitting the meeting coordinates and equipment list. Make sure you and your person are prepared. Send the rest of your crew ahead on your planned route. The round trip will take about ten days on schedule."

"Too bad Risa's too far off." Glancing back at Savan, seeing her slow, cautious nod, Tom gave the Maquis a nod of his own. "We'll head towards Gimol after we're done at Miga."

"We'll be watching for you," Chakotay replied, then faded to black.

Tom just shook his head, then said, "Maryl, send a message down to Ridge for us all to meet in the lounge at twelve hundred."

"Done," she answered, already tapping the message.

That completed, Tom got back to his feet and wordlessly left the bridge.

Finishing reading the list, B'Elanna glanced up from the PADD she'd been given. Tom had not moved except to take a long swig of his coffee, patiently waiting for them to finish catching up. Ridge as usual took his time, not because he needed to as much as he liked to make sure he got it all. There was a lot to get.

She read the equipment list again. The Maquis' new "base" made the Guerdon look like a Vulcan science cruiser for precision of parts. They had Megran generators and Barolian flow regulators, Ferengi iso-junctions and Starfleet mobile core units--obviously stolen for the newness of those models, to force all the systems to merge. The rest was crows picking at seconds and what they could swipe. It was little wonder the scrap yards had been so bare of late. The Maquis were way ahead of them, there, and far less discerning.

"What do you think?" Tom finally asked, setting his coffee down.

"You'll need manually regulating tools for all these systems if you don't feel like carrying half a storage locker on your shoulder," B'Elanna replied as she traded the PADD for her lukewarm coffee. Looking over at her tech, she knew there was no way Ridge could get all of that hooked up without another year of preparation.

Did the Maquis guess that, too? she wondered. She didn't discount the idea. Maryl liked to remind her when they were stationside to send Ridge on the basic parts runs. No one would bother him, but someone like B'Elanna, with both what her looks implied and her obvious knowledge, was a tempting recruitment prospect. Savan, too, had begun to accompany both her and Maryl on errands, admittedly concerned about the growing unpredictability at the bases and elsewhere. Tom's experience on Solosos had put an entire sermon into the Vulcan's agenda before they got two light years away from his pickup. B'Elanna shrugged at the caution, but was privately glad she'd been too busy of late to spend much time on the stations. Now it looked like she'd have to make some time to get out of her department and jump straight into the thick of it.

She sighed a breath, resolving herself to just what she didn't want to do for more than one reason. There was only one person she could see setting that mess up with any success, though, and she didn't like the idea of Tom making do with a manual. She could easily seem him trying to; he'd never make the deadline...and then he wouldn't make it back. "When do you need to leave?"

"A few days, maybe four. We'll head towards Gimol and wait for their signal. Savan's agreed to take the Guerdon though on our planned route to DS-Nine. You'll go through with business, then head back toward the rendezvous point. If we're late, they've arranged for an 'emergency docking' at Gimol-Eight's outer station."

"Which, knowing this ship," Maryl grinned, "might actually be necessary."

"I've stabilized the ODN for now," B'Elanna corrected her. "The patched isolinear nodes should hold up another month or so, barring any phaser shots. And we're holding at warp six-point-eight without issue."

"Ridge and I will meanwhile take the shuttle in," Tom continued, "plot the course then do the setup planetside and wait for the Liberty to pick us up again."

"It sounds like a decent plan," Ridge grinned. "No way it'll work as well as he pitched it, though."

"Don't I know it. But it'll take care of both ends of business."

"For the present," Savan added.

"Yeah, I might need to talk to him about that," Tom said. "Not that I expect him to respect it, but I'd like to say I tried."

"But sometimes we just have to speak so we know we spoke," Ridge finished, then looked at B'Elanna. "So, can we get together before shift and go over the details?"

"You can't," B'Elanna told him outright. She set her coffee down. "I'll have to go."

Tom's gaze jumped over to her with that, and he held her stare for a few seconds, as if to be certain she meant what she said. "B'Elanna, this isn't a stop off at a colony. You'll have to come on board their ship with me and get through the Badlands in a shuttle I haven't even seen yet. Aside from the obvious problems with all that, it's something I know you're against, helping the Maquis."

"I know what it is," she replied. "It's also a setup operation that makes Sygra look like a first year orientation. --Ridge, you're a great technician, but you've just never worked on these kinds of systems before, and you've never seen one of these mobile converters. I have." Ignoring the man's facial protest, she looked at Tom again, focusing on his intent gaze. "You'll be there forever if you have to work from nothing. Like last time, it'll get done faster if I'm there--and I want this deal done and these people out our business as soon as possible."

"There is no guarantee this will be the last of their assignments," Savan reminded her. "This is the fifth of three missions initially requested."

"And this job might even get stretched out, if you know what I mean," Ridge warned them. "They seem to need a lot of help there."

"I understand the risks." Undeterred, B'Elanna watched Tom's eyes search her again. He was genuinely concerned. She had to wonder why he was having such a problem with the idea when he recruited her for the other job. "It's not like I haven't been on a ship with bad conditions, Tom."

Tom leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms. The image of the engineer, filthy, broken and half-conscious, staring up from the floor of Mesler's ship, passed behind his eyes. For reasons he didn't have to wonder about, he never wanted to see her like that again. "I don't like bringing *any* of you in there," he said, not saying the rest. "Captain Chakotay obviously wanted me to bring a tech, though, and I'll bet he's hoping I bring you. In spite of what you told him on Sygra-Two, he's definitely interested in getting another engineer on board--if he has one to begin with."

"I don't think you have anything to worry about on that score," she told him.

"Glad to hear it," Tom said, quiet but meaning it.

"I don't forget what they are," B'Elanna returned, "or what they did. I'll be there to help get you through this setup and get us back on time. That's all." She looked squarely at Ridge. "We'll be home before you know it."

Tom's expression remained unchanged, even as Ridge reached out and squeezed the engineer's shoulder affectionately.

The engineer pushed herself to stand. "I'll put together what we'll need. I doubt we can count on Captain Chakotay's people to supply anything that'll be useful to us."

"Just don't pack your good tools," Tom told her. "Don't take anything you'd rather bring back."

Nodding on that potentially heavy thought, she motioned to Ridge to follow along and left the room.

When they were gone down the hall, Tom's gaze turned to Maryl. "If for whatever reason we don't make it back," he told her quietly, "I've left the contract for you, Maryl."

The Bajoran breathed a little laugh. "You're just determined to punish me, aren't you?"

"You'd expect nothing less," he grinned, then finished his coffee. "In any case, it's time to get this over with."

"How do you mean?"

Tom snorted. "Shut up."

B'Elanna pressed the seam of her tunic together and slid on a jacket she didn't wear often anymore. Not that they all didn't look much the same, but the light gray one just didn't come out as often as the olive and blue. She brushed the hem over her hips, smoothing down the pockets on her loose brown jumpsuit. It wasn't the best looking outfit, but it was comfortable and warm. The generous pockets in both layers would probably be useful, too.

She opened the one thing she would be bringing: A tool case. The case was something she found in the upper storage when she first was hired, and the tools she picked out were probably as old. The choices were somewhat limited in comparison to her good case, but it would probably be more than she needed in the end, and she really didn't mind knowing she had backups. She had one change of clothes--a duplicate of what she was wearing--rolled up tightly and stuffed into the end of the kit. A toiletry bag was stuffed in right behind it. Sealing the latch on the case, she slung the strap over her shoulder and

looked around for anything she might have forgotten.

Passing by a mirror, she caught herself frowning. She didn't try to correct it.

One more walk around, and she made certain everything was neat and put away. She hated coming back to her quarters when she was tired only to see things she needed to do. She hated waking up to that kind of thing, as well, so putting it off until the morning was also a bad option.

But she had made the bed, set away her clothes and PADDs, finished her notes for Ridge, Nadrev and Savan, locked away her good tools and personal belongings. She had only one thing left to do: leave.

She clenched her fists, feeling her back tighten.

You hopped right into this when you knew he'd need you. Yes, the setup will go a lot better, but you just had to be useful, didn't you? She shook her head bitterly, catching her reflection again. Her clothes, though clean, were wrinkled and her short brown hair was only cursorily brushed. She'd taken more pains with her lipstick, which she'd packed in her toiletry bag. *You really can be stupid.*

She spun from the mirror and set herself forward. Striding out of her quarters, finally focusing on what she needed to do instead of what she regretted doing, she turned the corner and almost smacked straight into Ridge.

"Hey, Kid!" Ridge sang out, smoothing down her shoulders as he let them go.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, a little surprised. She'd expected to see him in the deck four aft loading dock.

"Savan asked I hang onto the engines when we come alongside the Liberty, so I thought I'd at least walk you to the stairs."

B'Elanna couldn't help but smile. "Thanks, Ridge." With that, they began walking toward the engine room.

"You watch yourself out there--and look out for Tom, too. That Captain Chakotay wants to use him, but everyone else on that ship's probably got other ideas, considering what Tom's from."

"We'll be careful." B'Elanna moved ahead then slowed after turning a corner, letting Ridge duck under a coolant pipe she had yet to redirect. "And keep your eye on that ODN output level we were talking about. The five-three-delta junction was giving me a little trouble last night again. I left notes on my main console."

Ridge chuckled. "I'll probably finish reading them after you're back." They got to the access stairs and he looked down at her, asking her one more time with his eyes, but settling on a smile a moment later. "You make sure that happens, okay?"

B'Elanna nodded. Reaching out to pat his arm, she gave him a nod of reassurance. "I will," she said and reached out for the rung. Her smile fell as quickly as her altitude.

Tom pulled on his old blue coat then grabbed the roll of tools B'Elanna prepared for him and an old

comm bar. Yanking the strap onto his shoulder, he checked his coat pockets for his rolled up changes, nodded when he felt them all there and left his quarters without looking back.

All morning, he made himself look at it as the end: One more run out. One more go, and maybe then it'd be over at last. One more go, a dot of deuterium and they'd get back to Hidirin, run that route, get back to normal, as it were--business as usual.

Pausing, he scowled. His facility for self-deception had been seriously compromised by sobriety--and it hadn't been too good to begin with.

He did not take the forward access ladder often anymore, but knowing he was running a little behind, he did that time, cutting straight down the forward corridor from the door of his quarters and lowering himself to the chin of his ship within seconds. Jumping from the ladder into the deck three, section two corridor, Tom only glanced when he passed the cross junction where Jerod was killed, though his steps remained slow for several seconds longer as the memory distracted him. Jerod's arm wasn't the only thing that'd been torn off in the explosion, though his body otherwise remained in tact. Tom knew human physiology well enough to deduce that had he not been knocked unconscious right away, he would have suffered his last minutes away, as rapid blood loss would have been the cause of death.

Not particularly what Tom needed to know, but he couldn't help remembering it, either, especially on the bad days, and on that day, passing through deck three forward to the next access ladder. It was spotless now, all the holds repaired. The casual observer would never be able to point out the bulkheads that had been blown into open space, the new sections were set in so cleanly. Tom hardly saw them. He saw the coolant steam and the light beam shining through it, the sweat on the walls, and he heard the klaxons echoing far in the background before B'Elanna could shut them off again. He heard Maryl coming up behind him as he stared at Jerod's white, reaching hand.

Tom felt his heart pound a couple times, but he plunged ahead, forcing himself once again to not look back.

He moved into the next section and took the last ladder down with as cool a façade as he could muster, breathing deeply in the deck's cool air and speeding himself purposefully. Besides wanting to get away from deck three forward, their departure time was coming up fast. Swinging around the corridors, glancing at the hold doors, knowing how empty they were, he knew all over again exactly what he was doing by resting his neck on the block yet again: Surviving.

They all were out there. They all were.

This was just a little bit more of the same.

Tom sighed. "Nothing different there," he muttered. There was simply more now spinning in that hell.

Coming into the aft loading dock, he saw B'Elanna already at the transporter flat, punching buttons and tapping her heel against the pad. Reflexively, he straightened and wiped the effects of his thoughts from his face before he got across the bay.

"You're late," she told him shortly as she finished transferring the data.

"That anxious to go?" he lightly asked.

B'Elanna turned and looked at him, then damned him for looking as good as he did, in dark blue and brown, shaved and well tended...and lot better than she did. "Anxious to get this over with," she

responded and stepped up onto the control center.

Tom shrugged and stepped up to where he'd need to be in another minute. He had expected the icy blast, or at least expected she'd reconsider her determination to join him on that job after having a few days to realize what doing so actually meant. He wished he hadn't slipped her into the plan at Sygra-Two, or that she'd said no, particularly so that Captain Chakotay had never seen her face. He almost wished she didn't have such a strict sense of responsibility. He wished he could tell her stay put and mean it.

"Savan, I'm sending the Maquis our coordinates now," B'Elanna said.

"*I will monitor it,*" answered the science tech over the comm.

"Good luck at DS-Nine," Tom told her sincerely, for all their sakes.

"*Luck will have little to do with our arrangements,*" Savan replied, "*while patience and a keen eye will. However, I should report that Ridge has produced an effigy for Maryl to incinerate to buoy their confidence in the same.*"

Tom laughed. Ridge had apparently replicated a s'mores grill for his pessimistic wife, who had easily become addicted to the decadent treat. Tom was still surprised Ridge knew anything about in the first place. Even Tom only had a passing knowledge of the ancient dessert until he saw Maryl succumbing to the ecstasy of a prepared morsel several months after he came aboard. Their resident Vulcan, not surprisingly, had abhorred the smell of toasted marshmallows from the first whiff, likened it to burning corpses and made a point to avoid the section until she could fully recycle the air.

"I'll look for your formal complaint when we get back," he grinned.

"*I will be gratified to compose it,*" Savan assured him.

"The Liberty is responding," B'Elanna quietly told them and rejoined Tom on the flat. She could feel him looking at her, but didn't look back. "They're ready."

"*Tom, B'Elanna, we will await the signal to rendezvous with the Liberty with great anticipation.*"

Tom's lips turned up again. In more than two and a half years knowing her, the Vulcan had many ways of showing her mind about things, but rarely so much sentiment in one sitting. It meant so much more when she did. "Thanks, Savan."

"*A safe journey to you both,*" Savan concluded and cut the comm.

They were gone a moment later.

X. Paybacks are Hell

Though they had all the stats on the Liberty and had transported there for the Sygra mission, it still seemed larger onscreen. Considering how they'd known the Liberty, Tom wasn't surprised.

"This way," said the man who'd met them. Dressed to work hard, a little dirty, too, he was otherwise relaxed when he gestured to the corridor with a throw of his hand.

The spare, rust-colored cruiser was in fact barely larger than the Guerdon, only angled for maneuverability and sectioned out for wholly different purposes. Deck three boasted thin, dark corridors heading directly from the cubicle transporter room to main engineering, then navigation. The shuttle bay, situated forward, would fit only about two vehicles, three with a squeeze, and doubled as an open stock room. From there, they were taken directly to deck one. Bunk-style quarters aft housed its crew of forty or so; a meeting room and crew mess sat in the middle.

Their guide gestured forward as they passed the mess. "The bridge is that way," he said, not slowing. "Don't go there."

All along their trip through the ship en route to the "guest" quarters, B'Elanna curiously peered into every open section. Her eyes grew wide to wonder how in the world that old cruiser was still running, much less taking out innocent trade ships.

The Guerdon was not much younger, really, but the Liberty plainly was missing someone who knew what they were doing, not to mention several upgrades. The gurgling sounds from the open conduits above spoke of a pulse-generated power matrix linked into the main ODN--an incredibly inefficient configuration that hardly lasted five years in production before they ditched the design. It was solidly built, she could easily see, but the sections, so totally blocked off from one another, could not have been easy to coordinate, either. The comm system worked, though, buzzing with a steady stream of commands and suggestions and updates every few seconds for the whole trip from the transport room.

The comm systems always work in places like these, she smirked.

It all made B'Elanna appreciate the Guerdon in ways she never had before--and uneasy in ways she never wanted to repeat. *Yeah, jumping into this mess was just what you needed to do,* she told herself again as she caught the hard but curious eyes of the crewpeople they passed. Only a couple *didn't* divert their attention to her forehead. She could guess what they thought and suppressed the wave of indignation and nervousness that always met the feeling of being on display.

"You'll share this bunkroom," said their escort, who had to punch the panel a few times before the door

shimmied open. "Chakotay wants to see you in the science lab when he's done inspecting some repairs. He'll call you down."

"Thanks," Tom said, stepping inside the small, cube-shaped room. "So this is what prison's like," he remarked, setting his duffel bag on the small bench by the door as soon as the door slid shut. To the right, a bunk bed nearly filled the entire side of the room. Not expecting much more, he confirmed with a glance into another door that showers on the ship were shared, too. There was only a wall latrine in there.

For her part, B'Elanna used what little space was open to pace from one corner to the other, dropping her bag on the bottom bunk on the way back. "So we're supposed to just stay here until they're ready to shoot us off in that shuttle?" she asked, pivoting for another trip across the space.

"Oh, I'm sure they'll try to use us in the mean time."

"I'm not doing anything but what we were contracted to do," she told him.

"That's fine, but don't be shocked if I have to. We're in their territory now, and I really need this to go off on a relatively even keel."

She snorted. "If you're able to--"

"No, I *have* to," he cut in. "And you should try too, because there's no going back now until it's done to their satisfaction. We should just try to relax and --"

"Look, you might want to make this into a positive experience," she snapped, "but all I want is to get off of this rig and back to my engine room."

"You're the one who volunteered to help," he pointed out.

"That doesn't mean I'm going to enjoy our little stay."

"Who the hell said anything about enjoying ourselves?" Tom demanded, meeting her glare as the words rose in him. "You think I *enjoy* being jerked around? I'm here to save our asses. That's it--and that's the only thing that makes any of this bearable, making sure what happened to Jerod doesn't happen again." Hearing the man's name made B'Elanna blink and rear back. Tom sighed and nodded to acknowledge her reaction. Saying their friend's name did nothing to comfort him, either. "Look, when we first met, I might not have been much of a captain--even less so for all my trying not to be one."

She shrugged. "I never saw you as anything less."

"I didn't feel it, B'Elanna--I didn't *want* to feel it, along with much of anything else. But I do now, and I want to be good at what I can in this. Part of that means that I am *not* losing another member of my crew like that. Not if I can prevent it. I can't handle it happening like that again. So I come here, drag you along, do what they tell me and see that we *survive*. It's a small price to pay, but don't ever think I don't hate every goddamned minute of it."

"Fine," B'Elanna conceded, "and I see your point, about getting along and all. But don't ask me to relax, okay?"

Tom breathed a little laugh, needing it more than he felt it. "Fair enough," he said, gazing thoughtfully at her. "Guess that *was* wrong of me."

Several seconds after he stopped talking, his eyes remained on her. Feeling the annoying urge to shirk him off for having had enough attention already that day, she raised her chin and asked, "What?"

His shook his head, turning to grab his bag. "Nothing. Sorry, I was just thinking."

"About what?"

"How you'd like to beat me into a blob with a pulse ratchet for being glad you volunteered to help. In spite of what we've gotten you into, I'm glad you came."

"You're right," she replied. "I *would* like to pummel you right now."

He snorted and snatched up his bag. "Get in line."

"The central relay needs to be on this side, so it can be hooked directly in to the geothermal generator," said the Liberty's second in command proudly. Arrow straight with a stare sharp enough to short circuit a Vulcan, the thirty-something Bajoran had barely managed to hold her tongue when the Guerdon's captain was formally introduced, but was more than happy to give the Guerdon's engineer a tour of the planned installation. "Everything will be working off the core--there--with backups in these sections."

"Make sense," B'Elanna replied, continuing to read the needed output levels. In itself, the generator, though working, might not be the easiest to handle in the way of stable output frequencies. She had fought with more than a few of those at Cabol-Five.

"It's our best attempt yet to centralize our sects operations," Seska continued, once again eyeing the half-Klingon beside her, then glancing down to the other end of the lab, where Chakotay and Paris stood in their own conversation. "It's a shame you won't see how it'll really work in the end."

B'Elanna said nothing, but moved a little so the other woman wasn't so close to her shoulder.

Meanwhile, Chakotay watched Tom study the planetary readouts. The younger man had been as serious as ever, though it was interesting to see his new resolve in person. Gone was the purposeful casualness that he had first seen in Paris; he didn't try to lighten the load with talk, but got straight to business and kept an eye on Torres--for good reason, Chakotay knew. But he also didn't try to fool himself. He knew neither the trader nor his mechanic wanted to be there, despite their diligence.

They both were worth the effort, however. Just having them there to do that install on the secret base was a great help. Chakotay could push up their settlement date by a few weeks along with their weapons shipment. They were sorely in need of both rest and defenses. The Cardassians had been stepping up their attacks, and Starfleet was beginning to make some decisive moves. Chakotay knew from experience that they were only testing the waters and setting out plants for information. The Maquis would need to step it up to counter their next move effectively.

"Maybe you're wondering why we're going through all this trouble when we could shift our base at any time," Chakotay said, breaking the long silence.

"Honestly, I don't care," Tom returned, then added, "It's not my business how you manage your

whereabouts--and frankly, I'm better off not knowing."

Seska, passing nearby to pick up a PADD for B'Elanna to take with her, rolled her eyes when he heard the comment. "What a sensible and correct answer, Paris."

"I only aim to please," Tom replied sourly and looked at Chakotay again. "When can I have a look at the shuttle?"

"As soon as we pick it up," Chakotay answered and set himself off toward another section. "I'll try to get an ETA for that rendezvous."

Tom nodded, pulling up another row of numbers--recorded plasma activity patterns in that area of the Badlands. Not that there was any *real* pattern, but there were indicators that could warn a ship that they were about to be speared with lightning. Tom made a point to memorize the data. He was not anxious to put himself and B'Elanna in the way of those things--and that was only part of his concern.

"How common is it for the Cardassians to cross the Badlands right now?" he asked, but Chakotay was already out of the room.

"They don't cross it," Seska told him condescendingly. "They'd much rather waste time than a ship. If they sense any warp activity, they'll cross around the distal arm, then go in where they think they'll find a Maquis ship." She grinned. "But we're taking care of that problem, too."

"You're a regular brigade of efficiency," Tom smirked.

"We're getting there," Seska replied. Her eyes narrowed. "And you'd better be when you're on that planet. If I have to follow up on any shoddy work, you better believe I'll find you."

"Yeah, I know you people are capable of that much."

"What is your problem?" Seska demanded. "It's not our fault we have to defend our colonies from those monsters--and now from the Federation, too, for siding with them. If you could see --"

"I've seen plenty," Tom interjected.

"I think you refuse to look hard enough," the Bajoran responded. "The reason we had to bring you on board for this is because the people who set up what we have were killed, just for trying to get back to Bajor. They didn't even have a phaser on the ship. If you had any heart, you'd be with us all the way, instead of putting along the border in that supply scow.... Or maybe you really aren't worth any more than that, and I'm wasting my breath."

"Actually, you are," Tom drawled. "You can stop breathing any time now."

Her response was silence, though her stare boasted far more, even as she turned it away from him.

"Sixteen hours," Chakotay said, coming back into the room. Nodding to Seska, smiling briefly when she touched his arm in passing, he returned to his place beside Tom. "It's a Ligar scout shuttle, converted to Federation standard. Its warp drive needs a little work, but I'm told it's probably a dilithium problem. I have some here--though you won't need to be at warp long."

Tom nodded. "We'll have a look at it, if you need."

"I was hoping you would. We're still stretched pretty thin here."

Tom shrugged. "It's me and Torres I'm looking after, too."

"You mind looking at the specs?" Chakotay asked. "I have them out here."

"Give me a second," Tom said and finished closing out his diagnostics. The computer was damnably slow. He forgot how frustrating that could be. It probably explained half of why the Maquis were in bad moods.

As he thumped his boot against the console base, B'Elanna managed to finish uploading her own data to the PADD Seska brought. She only frowned as she checked the indices, though. She couldn't scoot any further away from the woman without going through the bulkhead.

"Do you want something?" B'Elanna finally asked, looking at her.

"I was thinking," Seska offered, "before the shuttle comes, if you get bored, you might be able to lend me a hand."

"You think?"

"Well, when I'm not up here with Chakotay, I run the engine room."

B'Elanna thought better of expressing her condolences. "And?"

"Maybe you and I can talk sometime. I've been having trouble with the intermix ratio on this old cruiser. I'm willing to bet another set of eyes on the problem is all I need."

Tom snorted. "God," he breathed and stepped out to the outer terminals.

Seska's narrowed stare followed him. "Is he always like that?"

"Only when he doesn't like someone," B'Elanna replied, then faced the other woman. "Look, I have my own job to do. If you need a new reaction protocol, you have to tinker with it in your own time. If you're an engineer, you'll already know that it has nothing to do with the specs and it takes a lot more time than I plan on having with you people."

"It's too bad you feel like that," Seska said, trying again. "We really need people like you, Torres. It's been a hard fight, harder still without people who know what they're doing with an engine."

B'Elanna stared at her. "That's also not my problem," she stated. "We're here because your captain asked us to do a job for you, our payment being protection. All we want to do is finish the work we were contracted to do and get back to our ship."

Seska's mouth pursed. "You don't do exactly as my captain tells you," she warned, "you'll be lucky if you have a ship to go back to."

"Just what the day needed," Tom said, moving in again, "another round of threats and intimidation from someone who's not actually in charge." Peering over to the man who had followed him, he smirked. "That's quite a first officer you've got there, Captain. You could shoot *her* out of your torpedo tube and chip off half of Cardassia."

"It'll be more than you've bothered to do," she sneered.

"Do you need another explanation of how it's not my fight?" Tom queried.

"Or mine?" B'Elanna joined in. "If you've got so many problems in your engine room, why aren't you down there working on them?"

"I was asked to be here," she shot back.

"Are you done yet?" Tom asked. "Because aside from explaining the obvious, you've already tried to seduce my engineer and gone another round with me. Is there someone else here you need to piss around with before you go back to hell?"

Seska's hand flew up and caught Tom across the head. Her mouth curled up when he rebounded to face her again. "If I had my way about it," she seethed, "you wouldn't have made it two light years away from the Berlin."

"Seska," Chakotay interjected, grabbing her upper arm. To his relief, she stopped and let him take her away a few steps, say a few words privately. He knew she always responded better when she wasn't called out in front of others. She protested before saying a single word against it, but he remained patient, allowing her that natural urge to distrust. He understood it well, but hers had been trained from birth. His had only recently been imprinted.

"I don't *trust* him," she urged, glancing angrily at him. "Torres is fine, but Paris is working against us, Chakotay. He should have never been allowed to come aboard."

"We need this run completed. He and his person have the skills we need."

"His person's the one we should be working on," Seska observed.

"We can't take people against their will," Chakotay told her, "and hers is pretty nicely set on getting back to her ship."

"She could bend. She's the type who goes for problems she thinks she can solve."

The Maquis captain shook his head. "We don't have the time. A few months ago, I could recruit from the outside, but not now."

Seska moved closer to him. "Mind if I give it a shot?" she asked, a little smile pulling at her lips.

"You don't have the time, either," he told her, purposefully gentle so her smile wouldn't turn completely south. He knew it'd been hard for her lately, after they lost Liddou. She wasn't an engineer by trade--though she was necessarily turning into one--and working with people with little or no training had taken a toll on her short patience. "Let's talk to Rodrigo about getting you assistance that we don't have to work on, let Paris and Torres get back to what they're dedicated to."

She considered that, shrugged slightly. "It would be easier to take on an expatriate," she admitted, then turned her eyes back to Paris.

Tom tried his best not to return the attention. The woman's glare made him feel like steak in a lion's den.

"Nice way to keep things on an even keel, Tom," B'Elanna said aside as the other two talked.

"She has it in for me," Tom whispered, rubbing his head. He could be certain the woman's handprint would be firmly embedded in his skin for the rest of the day. "Forget the Badlands. Call it pilot's instinct, but she'll have me dead if Chakotay blinks in the right direction."

B'Elanna's stare turned down, remembering the accuracy of his instincts, indeed. "He promised our protection, I thought."

"I've a feeling Seska has a way of taking initiative," Tom muttered, feeling her attention sear him yet again.

"We'll talk about this more later," Chakotay told Seska at last, softly enough that she understood his meaning. Pointing with his chin to the exit, he held her attention until she passed through it and disappeared in the foggy corridor. Chakotay turned quietly to the two. "I apologize for her behavior, Captain Paris. Seska is not usually so harsh to my guests."

Tom blew a breath. "Look, Captain Chakotay--"

"Just Chakotay is fine," he said politely.

"Yeah. *Chakotay*, I frankly couldn't give a damn what your second in command is or isn't. Just let us do the job and get back to the living we can barely make, thanks to you and your bands of merry men. Keep her off our case."

Chakotay stared at the other man for several seconds, examining the anger, determination and his unmoved posture. Seska had undoubtedly managed to raise his resentment to another level. He sighed to himself. She had a talent at that--and had actually sensed Chakotay's initial desire all too well. Those two were ones he wanted to be shifted the *his* way. Now both were good only for specific hires, if that. Seska's feelings for Paris would make any further dealings complicated. Then again, some of it might be salvaged, if he worked the problem a little...

"It's been rough for your people," Chakotay noted.

"You know it has been," Tom told him.

"It's going to get worse."

"Any idiot knows that."

"But you want to keep dealing on the border, anyway."

"There's nowhere left for me." Tom shrugged. "But you knew that, too."

A pause, then Chakotay nodded. "Yes."

"Looking for another gravity check?"

"Are you offering one?" Tom returned with a smirk as he neared the small shuttle bay.

As the woman turned sharply away, Tom felt his shoulder yanked back. A second later, his back hit the bulkhead and he was faced with a glowering, dark-haired man. "Are *you*?" he demanded and smacked the trader against the grated metal again.

Tom swung his arms into the grip, shrugging off the pin and stepping off the bulkhead, even if it meant

getting up into the man's face. Somehow, he kept his mouth shut. The slam still stuck on his spine.

"Ayala, back off." Chakotay's firm, calm voice managed a blink in the man. Then, the captain neared. "Back off now. Get back to work."

Ayala stared hard into Tom's eyes a few seconds longer before obeying.

Tom blinked his thanks to Chakotay, who barely acknowledged it as he turned back to where he needed to go. Tom wasn't surprised. That morning, when he and B'Elanna left the tiny quarters they'd hardly slept in for all the noise, they learned that the Liberty and a few other Maquis ships were off to raid a Cardassian supply cruiser they'd been tracking since taking on their passengers. "All the food and equipment we doled out at Ovar," B'Elanna frowned, "might as well be taken away. That's what it'll be for the Cardassians waiting for it."

"Except that their government is still supporting them," Tom pointed out.

No one else was talking politics, though, as the morning progressed. Rather, their diversion, when they could get it, seemed to be taking shots at Tom, who simply shrugged it away where he could. They'd be off the Liberty soon enough. Playing it smart and letting it roll off his back was his only option...even if that back really hurt from the blow against that wall.

Shaking it off and turning for the shuttle bay, Tom came face-to-face with another dark-haired man about his age--and twice as pissed off. Before Tom could think to move around him, the man's expression melted into a snarl as he drove a fist directly into Tom's jaw, snapping him around like a spring.

"Damn!" Tom hissed, grabbing the bulkhead he'd just pushed away from. *Yeah, that one's going to leave a mark*, he thought with a swallow or two of blood.

"Just finishing the job, Paris," said the man.

He'd barely finished his sentence when the unmistakable thud of a heavy punch bounced down the corridor. Tom looked just in time to see the man spin down to the grated floor and land like a block of wood. Stepping forward, Chakotay stood above him. "You attack another guest on my ship without my direct order," he said, firm but simple, "and I'll beam you into open space." Grabbing the man by the collar, he yanked him up and threw him down the corridor.

"Nice ship you've got, *Chakotay*," Tom choked, falling behind the other captain, who walked him the rest of the way to the bay.

His face still pounding, his eye beginning to swell, Tom breathed through the pain as he regarded again the shuttlecraft they'd been assigned. Surprisingly, it was a decent model, long and graceful in comparison to most Starfleet shuttles, not too old, with adequate storage and facilities aft. It was Ligarans, so it wouldn't be seen as too unusual in that region. The Ligarans had some ongoing projects in the Rolor Nebula, which sat ten light years past the distal arm of the Badlands. A shuttle would seem away from its ship, but not immediately suspicious. Their entry point would have them heading towards Rolor, so they would be less suspicious still.

Even so, the more he learned about what the Maquis had their fingers in, the more Tom wanted to be on the other end of the quadrant. Considering how his day was going so far and seeing the Liberty's small crew begin to move faster, Tom thought the other side of the galaxy seemed kind of nice, too.

He did like the look of that shuttle, though. He was curious to know how it would handle in the Badlands. He figured he'd need to pull a few turns en route to get the feel down before going in. He had

never flown a Ligarán craft before. By the specs, it looked like they'd borrowed a lot from the Trill, whose ships Tom knew quite well. In the end, it really didn't matter, though. He'd get the feel for it well before the sensors would shoot out its first plasma activity warning.

As he crossed his arms and closed his eyes for a moment, B'Elanna came out of the back hatch. "I have those numbers," she told him, holding out a PADD. Her eyes widened at the sight of his pulpy cheek and reddened eye, but she said nothing. It'd have been a stupid question.

Tom reached out and took the PADD. "How does it look?"

"Everything checks out," she said quietly. "Even the extra things you asked me to look for. No problems that I can see."

"Good to know," he said and looked down at the diagnostics. B'Elanna had run every kind imaginable and they were all spotless. Tom drew a deep breath and moved around to enter through the side.

"Guess we can all pack for our JAG date," sneered a Maquis as he passed on the other side, "now that Captain Paris is on the job."

"Shove it," B'Elanna snapped before she could think to stop herself. Glaring at the man who'd spoken, though, she knew she wasn't sorry for it. She was already sick of their looks, and the self-righteousness was incredibly annoying. "You've got problems with Paris being in charge of this job, bring it up with *your* captain. We don't need to listen to your crap when you have plenty of other people you're signed on to kill."

Against his will, Tom snorted and had to turn away to hide it.

"Just remember you'll have to fly back with us whether or not you screw it up," the man replied.

"In which case it won't be your problem to handle then, either."

"Don't be so sure, Torres." Holding her hot stare for a few moments longer, the Maquis offered an assured grin as he grabbed another man's arm in greeting. They both disappeared into the next section.

Tom finally looked back at B'Elanna. "I know I've been a bad influence on you now."

She rolled her eyes and smacked a datachip into the starboard access socket. "It's not like I came out of a cloister, Tom."

He laughed quietly, nodding. "Yeah, that's good to know, too. Thanks." As she pulled the chip out again, he cocked his head toward the hatch. "I'll start the pre-flight."

"Fine. I'm going back to analyze these data. Comm me when you're ready for me."

"Will do."

Seconds later, he was sliding into the bridge's command seat. He looked around, memorizing the layout. Not just to fly it, but in just a few seconds he knew he wanted to remember that configuration for the junker shuttle he and B'Elanna were still poking at. *Hell, if I could redesign the Guerdon's bridge...* flew into his mind, but drifted away unfinished, as it should have. He definitely could not afford the luxury of daydreams just then.

"How does it look?" came Chakotay's voice from behind him.

Tom glanced back, wincing when his eye muscles screamed back at him. "It's good--very good. And the warp problem's fixed. Just took some dilithium realigning, some tweaking of the output levels. Though, if you're keeping this shuttle, you'll need to replace the crystal soon."

Chakotay nodded. "Thanks."

"Just doing the job," Tom replied, turning back to the console.

The Maquis captain paused, regarding the younger man for several seconds. "You really are," he observed, "just doing the job."

He really is determined to pick my brain about this, Tom sighed to himself as he looked at Captain Chakotay's curious expression. "Should I be doing anything else?"

"I was hoping to make you more willing to work for me full time."

Tom snorted. "Yeah, I know. I wouldn't call you opaque this past month or so."

Chakotay admitted to it with a small grin. It didn't last long, as his next question formed. "Was there ever any chance you might have?"

"Eight months ago, I swore I wouldn't get mixed up with this mess, but I think the Hugora Nebula took care of any miniscule chance I'd have been wheedled over to the good fight."

Chakotay's eyes narrowed. "Where you lost your man."

"Him, a great job and my ship's mechanical stability, among other things, yes."

"To a Maquis ship," Chakotay continued.

Looking back again, Tom stared at him for several seconds, trying to understand what angle the man was trying for that time. *Does he think we didn't get their warp signature? Hell, we could almost see the whites of their eyes.*

"In any case, Captain," Chakotay finished before Tom could complete his thought, "I don't *have* to have you. I have other independents on my roster, now."

"Yeah, you've mentioned that," Tom returned, his swollen eyes narrowing. "Did they get the same gentle touch, or are they there out of the goodness of their empty docket?"

Chakotay frowned. Bitter as Cardassian aggression and Federation policy had made him, cynicism always managed to annoy him. "They're there in the interest of our mutual benefit."

"Keeping their asses in one piece while helping the equally unlucky. Just like us, I guess."

"For now," Seska said, light in tone as she leaned into the little space left on that bridge and smirked at Paris' swollen face. Ignoring him from there on, she turned a bright smile to her lover. "We're on. The Cardassian freighter is within two light years; its stocks are full."

"Defenses?"

"Two small cruisers. The sect is collecting. We'll get it this time."

"We will," Chakotay returned, a brutal little grin finding his lips.

She squeezed his arm affectionately. "I'm going forward."

"I'm right behind you," he nodded, glad to see her mood improved. He'd put her with Rodrigo about getting some new people. They must have found someone already. He hadn't seen her so happy in weeks.

Tom looked over only as she moved away, only to see her smile mutate into a snarl as she took her own last look at him. Tom returned his attention to the panels at his fingertips. "Guess we'll be off soon, then."

"Within the hour," Chakotay promised.

Tom coughed and slapped his comm bar. "B'Elanna, we're out of here in an hour. Finish the analysis and help me beam the supplies onboard, okay?"

Her response was entirely predictable.

Forty-five minutes later, they were done packing the shuttle and rechecking the stores. Just about everything needed to build a base's power control, sensors and communications center, plus enough food, water and living supplies for a week, somehow fit into every cubic centimeter behind the flight control seats.

"Good thing there's no gravity in space," Tom quipped, hardly feeling it but needing to say something despite the now-familiar throb in his skull.

"There is in the atmosphere, though," B'Elanna told him. She was reading the base planet's information. "The gravity is one-point-two."

"Like we'd get a break," Tom muttered, then sighed. "Damnit, this is really starting to hurt."

"Maybe I can find the med-kit back there," she offered.

"No. It can wait until we're off. Besides, you'd never find it in all that--"

A sudden jolt stopped him. Straightening, he looked around at the sensor map.

B'Elanna looked, too, her eyes narrowing on the local grid. "What in the hell?" she breathed.

"*Cardassian warship is attacking off our port!*" Chakotay yelled over the open comm. "**Everyone to stations! --Paris! Get ready to jump on my order!*"

"Isn't that what I've been doing all along?" Tom said under his breath. Settling himself back in the pilot's couch, he reached around and tapped the shuttle to life. A sharp whine and a rush of air, followed by another whine as the thrusters activated, made Tom straighten and blink. "God, it sounds like an airplane."

"What?"

He shook his head, then peered over at her. "You ready, B'Elanna?"

"As I'll ever be," she replied, leaning back in the generous seat as systems powered to full.

The ship rocked again as the two watched the proximity screen grow ominously crowded. Not that they hadn't felt such blasts or shimmies in their recent past. But they at least had the "comfort" of knowing their fight was one-on-one. "I wonder what Captain Chakotay's been up to that they'd send half a fleet," Tom commented, rechecking the controls he'd been using first. He had a feeling he wouldn't get two chances to learn them.

"I really don't want to know," B'Elanna said tersely, checking their defensive shields one last time before Tom threw on the navigational deflector. "But we've probably been helping him do it." She'd already had her experience with Cardassians. She certainly did not want to repeat the experience. Looking over at Tom's display, she made a few adjustments to her operations board. "When can we get out of here?"

Tom shook his head. "Not sure. Looks like they're trying to get up near that--" A crash sounded around them and the shuttle literally jumped. Tom's hands whipped out to the panel for support, but B'Elanna was forced to jump to her feet to keep from being tossed. "They're heading toward the Gytad Asteroid Belt."

"I hope so!" B'Elanna shot back and pulled herself back into her seat.

"*Paris! You're up!*" Chakotay yelled. A spray of sparks sounded over the comm, too, as well as a few choice curses.

"We see where you're heading."

"*I'll get us in as long as I can. Jump when you're ready.*"

"Sounds like a plan," Tom replied.

"*See you in four days. Good luck!*"

Tom coughed a little laugh. "Yeah, you too, Chakotay," he returned, cut off the comm, then finished for B'Elanna, "for our sakes as well as theirs." The engineer did not reply, so Tom tapped on the main controls and lifted the shuttle into the air within the bay, and then waited. The Gytad Belt steadily neared, would be there in fifteen seconds...then eight...

The bay door ground open in the midst of a firefight. Shards of phaser fire flew all around the little Liberty as it banked and parried and struck when it could. A massive Cardassian cruiser wasn't the only one on the other team, too. Four large scout fighters zoomed around it like bees defending a nest. Tom and B'Elanna watched with an ironic dispassion, almost like watching a file or a holodeck program. B'Elanna blinked first, though, looked up and pointed at her viewscreen. "Five other Maquis ships are heading in," she told him.

"The Cardassians were planning on that."

"They'd have to know they'd be prey to a raid."

"Cardassians are arrogant as hell about their ability to ship a full freighter across hot zones to their outer bases," Tom said. "Maryl's been tracking them for months now so we'd stay clear of any possible deployments. Some of them go without any escort, but this one has it and some, so I'm guessing it's an arms shipment or they got some intelligence."

"And if the Maquis can't steal what's in there, they'll at least try to destroy it," B'Elanna continued.

"So it's not fired at them. No doubt, the Cardassians thought about that. --I think we're... Yeah, we're off. Hold on."

Suddenly, the Liberty swung around a large, oblong rock, then banked into a rocky slope. Tom glanced up and saw the larger ships were indeed waiting on the other side. Without further warning, he punched the thrusters, spit them out of the bay, then hurled the shuttle down in a sharp pass along the Liberty's underbelly

"Goddamn, that's some gravity!" he coughed, fighting to keep them from plunging further from their inertia. Between the Liberty's shields and the asteroid's magnetic pull, he had to wrestle the controls to keep them from diving right back into the ship's hull.

B'Elanna looked over as her stomach pulled at the sudden g-forces. He didn't look like he was complaining--rather, she'd never seem Tom so focused. His stare was bright and his movements were fluid as he swung them out of the Liberty's shield bubble and full speed at the asteroid, grazing the side of its highest outcropping then hugging its corners more tightly than she'd have personally liked. But he seemed to be making no effort at that point, so she forced herself to sit back and let him do his job.

"Tom used to be a crack pilot, you see..." Maryl had said that about him when she first came on the Guerdon. B'Elanna had almost forgotten about that until just then. They'd been in a couple shuttles together and she knew all about his short career now, but only as they pulled around another ridge and ducked into a gully to avoid a sensor sweep from a ship above did B'Elanna understand...

"Computer, graph," Tom ordered. A topographical navigator's map replaced their view. "God, that's beautiful," he breathed as he steered them back down and into a gorge per the map's moving guidance. "It's almost like Atari."

"Like what?"

"Ancient game device. I'll show you sometime."

"I don't know whether to be curious or frightened."

"That's right, I forgot," Tom grinned. "You don't like games."

She rolled her eyes. "Let's not go there again." Leaning up, B'Elanna looked at her own console. "You're planning to wait them out?"

"We'll never make it to the Badlands if we don't," he nodded. "It'll be over soon and Chakotay will lead them away."

"There's a crater at point two-four-zero that's out of the scan range."

"I see it." Letting his fingers play over the controls, he managed to turn them down and around until the crater was before them. Checking the position of the firefight around them, Tom lowered them into a nook, settled them into the dust, switched the viewscreen back to normal then cut the engines. Silence quickly fell over the shuttle, save the random beeps and buzzes of the computer, one moment in the thick of escape, then next, at rest. A sheen of dust settled over them.

B'Elanna almost shivered at the shift, and she suddenly understood why people on the bridge liked having their viewscreen on all the time. With theirs blocked and so much happening above, the sensor map suddenly didn't seem like enough.

Not seeming to notice, Tom leaned back in the seat with a long sigh. "It's scary sometimes," he said quietly, "when I remember that I miss being a pilot."

She looked at him again. Now his face was dreamy, gazing out at the view through puffy, purplish eyes. His mouth was straight. His breath had not quickened in their short escapade. "I guess you would, if that's what you really wanted to do."

The corners of his mouth twitched upwards. "It was the one thing I never had to question."

"Well, you got us here without a bump in an alien shuttle you never flew before," B'Elanna said lightly, "so I'm inclined to believe you're still passable."

Tom chuckled. "And I wanted to do a few turns to get to know this shuttle. Guess I got that over with efficiently."

She grinned, too. "What do you think?"

"I think I'm in love," he answered. No joy was in his voice, however, and his smile faded away as soon as he said it.

Standing up, B'Elanna paused, then touched his shoulder supportively. "I'll try to find that med kit," she told him.

He glanced up as she moved away. "Thanks."

"Viewshield?"

"And the inputs."

"And we have the RCS. The fusion reactors, too?"

"Definitely. And the seats."

"God, yes. I almost forgot about those." "You're probably just tired."

B'Elanna laughed, leaning back into her very comfortable seat as she tapped the last of their "shuttle-inspired wish list" into her PADD. Indeed, over the long day trip to the border of the Badlands, those seats had helped keep her from cramping up and even reclined for sleeping, which is exactly what she and Tom had done for lack of anywhere else to go. Quiet and deep while the other remained respectful during their "bridge shift," it was the best sleep either had enjoyed since leaving the Guerdon. "I probably am, if I'm finding you that amusing right now."

"Hell, you're exhausted if I'm that," Tom replied jauntily, pulling up another plasma flare analysis. "Now, roguish and irresistible..." He cut off, pushing a few more queries into the results.

"I'd take that," B'Elanna said without thinking and felt her face flush treacherously. *I am tired* she grumbled at herself. She grabbed the carafe at her side and her mug. "Want more coffee?" she asked.

"Sure," Tom said, glancing her way. He hadn't missed the slip, but couldn't guess what it was about, except that she'd embarrassed herself...and was staring determinedly into his eyes, not daring to turn her eyes down. Handing her his mug, he had to repress a smile. He wondered if her slip implied what he thought.

Then the sensors beeped and he was back to work. "Coming up on the Badlands," he told her.

"According to the records in here, it's at high activity."

"Only the best for us," Tom grinned.

"We are gifted," B'Elanna agreed, pursing her lips. "I think I can start plotting out the map."

"Mind if I double check it?" Tom asked. "Not that I doubt you, B'Elanna, but we don't have many alternatives here."

"Mind if I argue with you over them?" she returned, eyeing him askance. "I won't give you anything I'm not certain about, Tom."

"I know. I just want to see it if I'm going to fly it. For that matter, nothing's going to be stable in there."

"I guess that's only fair," she shrugged, knowing she'd be the same if not worse were she behind the controls. "I'm picking up no ship activity in the vicinity. We're clear to enter."

"Here we go, then." Tom kicked the shuttle down to full impulse at the edge of the phenomenon and waited for B'Elanna's figures.

"Oh-five-three, mark eleven," she said.

Tom checked the readouts as they came onto his board, quickly translated it against his mental map, then nodded. "Oh five-three, mark eleven," he confirmed and soon swung them around an active flare. "One down, fifteen thousand to go," Tom said glibly.

B'Elanna rolled her eyes and tapped into the guidance system. "Oh-two-nine, mark thirty-two."

Again, he confirmed it, then doubled back when a flare began to activate. "Woah!" he exclaimed as the stream of plasma shot up before the shuttle's viewscreen.

"That was fast," B'Elanna remarked. Pressing back into her seat a little, she looked over to make sure the mapping system was transmitting their coordinates properly. Everything she recorded was being collected by a transmitter at Nivoch. Captain Chakotay would use that information to pick them up later. They'd definitely get a zigzag of a map at first glance, B'Elanna knew as she watched Tom continue to whirl them around the sprays of fire, then resume their pace once they hit another pocket. "One-two-six, mark eight." Her final job in the shuttle, in fact, was to clean up the map and transmit that as well before they landed at the base.

She gritted her teeth, still not enjoying the idea of assisting those people. Throughout their stay on the Liberty, she felt like Seska would gnaw her arm off for wanting her in the engine room so badly. Everyone else on board watched her curiously, probably wondering if Seska was recruiting her after all. They wanted nothing to do with Tom. He was shouldered and shoved every time they left the bunkroom. B'Elanna breathed a bitter little laugh to herself. Captain Chakotay probably chose him for that mission just so they might get to her...like they tried to on Mesler's ship.

She shivered, but dug her heels into the deck to get back on task. "Oh-eight-five, mark twenty-one."

"Oh-eight-five, mark twenty-one." Tom glanced over at B'Elanna. Her arms were tense at her side and her face was pressed into a steady frown; he'd heard her shudder a breath just then. "Is it too cold in here?"

"No. Just thinking."

He cut the thrusters to half-impulse and turned them around in the wake of an eddy. "About what?"

She shook her head. "You're trying to concentrate."

"It actually helps to talk a little," he told her. "It keeps me from daydreaming. Something besides the obvious wrong?"

"I was just thinking about what Maryl said, when she first interviewed me, that the Maquis would have taken me from Mesler's ship and gotten me into their fight if they could."

Tom grinned. "Now that was good timing. I remember Captain Chakotay was pretty interested."

"And you covered for me," B'Elanna recalled. "Three-oh-two, mark eight-five." She looked at him as he checked his board and followed through with a smoothness that a less knowledgeable eye might have thought was casual. "I wonder if he knows that."

"I'll bet he's done the math by now." Tom chuckled quietly. "Well, he still can't have you."

"I'm glad that's all decided," B'Elanna returned, pursing her lips as some new data flowed in. "I'm reading some instability ahead."

"I've got it," Tom nodded and punched them back up to full impulse. A burst of blue-white plasma shot up starboard, sizzling and spiraling like a sword through a violet sky. Tom watched it shimmy as he passed around it. "I dunno, B'Elanna," he said quietly. "I think about how Jerod felt about the Maquis. He knew they were doing all they could to help, helping his family, mainly; but he didn't like the way they'd started branching into sects and making moves that invited retaliation. He didn't like their recruitment tactics, either. I knew the day I read about it on the blue PADD that this would turn into something we couldn't get around."

"Two-eight-seven, mark nine." She looked at him. "So what do you think we can do?"

He shrugged. "Keep following our noses. --Easier said than done, but we've gotten by. All we need is to scrounge up some actual deals outside Hidirin."

"Maryl will get something," B'Elanna said. "One-oh-two, mark forty-four."

Tom chuckled. "If anyone can squeeze blood from a stone... --Slowing to quarter impulse." Pulling the shuttle up, he all but skidded to turn around a gurgling flare that almost formed, but shrank back into its own creation. "I hope she manages to dredge up something, soon. We've had tough cycles, but this isn't looking good."

"Oh-oh-nine, mark one sixty-four."

B'Elanna consciously straightened her back. She already knew what those tough times were about; she wasn't looking forward to seeing how much worse it could get. Scraping the scrap yards for parts to

rebuild was about as close to bottom feeding as she thought she would get as an engineer. Still, the Guerdon was her ship and its many problems were like affronts she was obliged to rectify. Though, sometimes she did wonder why she bothered; she sometimes wanted to beam the entire ODN into a minefield. She did feel responsible, however, and she counted its crew as her friends...just as Tom had come to.

She shook her head as she heard him curse quietly to himself; then she watched him maneuver around a trio of flares. He didn't bother with position announcements. Instead, his long, fair fingers slid over the Ligarán controls as though he'd been specially trained on them, while his face showed intentness she remembered from past conversations with him. Sometimes, he would give her a look that made her almost believe he was trying to see straight through her. He was seeing straight through those flares now, not looking down anymore at the controls, watching out the viewscreen as they glided around another pattern of plasma flares without much more than a little rumble.

Only when the flares were past did she notice that he'd been a little on the edge with that maneuver. His breath released, he leaned back again and his movements slowed. It wasn't much of a reaction, but B'Elanna filed it into her memory. *When they make it look easy...* she mused.

More softly, still half in her own thoughts, she called out another trajectory.

Several hours later, B'Elanna yawned before voicing another.

"Need some more coffee?" Tom asked.

"Probably," she answered, "but we're almost there."

He punched his board. "Yeah. Ten more minutes at full impulse until we're supposed to hit the system."

Continuing forward, Tom easily knew why Chakotay didn't want to be bothered with the same journey. It'd been a stop and go ride, warp five at best in the holes where there was no plasma activity, and maneuvering around at full impulse elsewhere. In all, it wasn't far inside the Badlands. Certainly, it would be neither convenient nor safe for any Maquis base to be located much deeper within that unstable area.

B'Elanna stood up for a moment to stretch, roll her shoulders. Leaning over her panel, she tapped in another round of calculations and prepared to turn them again. Luckily, their path had taken them along a long, calm zone, allowing her a few breaks like that. *There's good and bad in that, though*, she told herself in afterthought, looking at a new reading on the sensors.

"Tom, I see something out there."

He looked down at the board she spied. "Run a scan?"

Lowering herself into her seat, she did just that. "I'm reading a polyduranium shell and a warp signature."

"A starship in here?" Tom wondered aloud.

She nodded. The readings were getting stronger, confirming a vehicle of some kind. "The question is: whose?"

Tom spun them around as another flare threatened, frowning when he looked again at the sensor

board. The bleep had changed course and was now heading in their direction. "Looks like we're going to find out," he replied. "Whoever they are, I'll bet they've been waiting for someone to show up. They're heading through pretty confidently."

B'Elanna drew a slow breath, her eyes nailing another console. "Should I activate the weapons system?"

"Hell, yes." He snorted. "For what it's worth, anyway. You know how our luck's been."

"*What* luck?" she acknowledged and powered on the shuttle's phaser banks. "So now what?"

He looked at her. "We wait."

"I meant, what do I do with the phasers? I've rebuilt a couple arrays, but I've never used them before."

Tom blinked in a moment's surprise, but then he thought about that. "Yeah, I guess you wouldn't have," he said, then activated the board for her. "You use the command processor to help line up the shot on the main board--right there. It'll vector in for you within a second, so keep your finger on the initiator. I'll say something, but you'll probably know better where to fire if we're up close on someone."

B'Elanna started tapping into the controls. True to his words, the systems lined up quickly on her command and she was able to adjust the vector with a simple stroke. Aiming at a moving target anywhere within their bubble would probably not be as easy.

"Or maybe it's not worth thinking about after all," Tom added.

B'Elanna looked over and coughed with disgust. The ship on fast approach was a small cruiser--and Cardassian. They knew exactly what they were looking for. "They got the people who set up the base and decided to hang around to see who'd come back," she deduced.

"That's a hell of a wait. They must have left a net to signal when someone came this way again."

"That's a hell of a net," B'Elanna returned. "The sweeps I ran should have picked them up."

"Should have, yeah." Beside her, she heard Tom draw a long, calming breath. A moment later, the beeps and hums of the systems took over the small space. She looked at him again. His eyes were set on the horizon.

"Hold on, B'Elanna," he quietly told her. "We're going to take a little ride."

She set herself back into her seat and reset her console for the trip.

With a sweep of his fingers along the board, Tom dug the little shuttle in on the line of a plasma flare and followed it around to another, just as the Cardassian cruiser made its final approach and tried to open a channel with them. "You'll have to catch me," he muttered and swung the little shuttle around again. The cruiser followed, easily making the turns and evading the flares. Tom confirmed,

In essence, he was up against another pilot who knew the territory.

"Okay then, let's see what you've got." Tom punched them up to full impulse again, turning around and under a flare, all the while keeping his eyes on their proximity to the base. He wondered if it was still there, considering the Cardassians had been hanging around, or of they'd even bothered. Cardassians often liked having things come to them, because they so often did. --Not that he needed to worry about that just then. But he didn't want to get too far off course, either. That in mind, he straightened their

path and began a new series of maneuvers through the field.

B'Elanna watched both the view and her boards in amazement as Tom drove them around forming streams and around their bases, easily leading the Cardassian cruiser around. By his inputs, she could tell he was both flying their shuttle around the flares and testing their response times and methods of pursuit. His flight patterns became more complex with every turn. Unfortunately, the cruiser was already proving to be less patient than he was.

"Tom, they're powering up their torpedoes." "They're trying to poke at us," he said. "They have good transporters. They'll take us for questioning before killing us off...probably."

She snorted. "Great!"

"Let's see what else they'll do." He glanced her way. "You don't mind having nothing to lose, do you?"

"As long as I'm not throwing it away, no," she answered. Indeed there weren't many options just then and no way to play it safe. "Do what you need to do, Tom."

He did just that. Slinging the shuttle around and reversing their trajectory, Tom shot them back straight at the cruiser at full impulse. "Knock on their door, B'Elanna," he told her. "Pop a little phaser shot on their bridge dome."

She stared at him for a moment, but then complied, waiting for him to angle them above the ship. He did so smoothly, practically lining up the shot for her. She vectored in and punched the button. A narrow beam of phaser fire tore out of little emitters and bounced into the cruiser's shield bubble. "That probably only rattled them a little."

"Doesn't matter," Tom replied. He drove straight past and into the path of a forming plasma flare. Sailing into it, he grinned to see the cruiser following fast behind them. "They'll be annoyed either way." He set into the flare pattern, skirting the energy waves as closely as he could without burning through their shields, then banked off to swirl around another.

"They're following."

"Good."

B'Elanna braced her boots to the floor as she diverted a little more power to the inertial dampers. Tom was putting those to the test, too, as he rounded an errant rock in the middle of a sustained plasma eddy. Looking out as he turned the shuttle around in mid-maneuver, sailed back and ducked around the Cardassian cruiser again, forcing them to slow and turn and set after them again, B'Elanna felt her heart beating harder. For his part, Tom had settled into a new level of intensity, flying them straight to every flare he could ride, then teasing the cruiser just enough to make them follow with greater speed each time.

A swirling blue-white sword shot up in front of the shuttle. He coughed a little laugh and banked straight up it then around even as it turned and shimmied and grew.

B'Elanna caught her breath as he broke them off that one, too, commenting to himself about the cruiser's persistence as he wrapped them around another surge and took a backwards trip down. She was finally confirmed: What had been holding Tom in that shell was captaining a ship that was painfully unworthy of his skills, and also him knowing--or believing--he couldn't have anything more to his expertise. He knew what he could do; he knew how good he was and how he wasn't doing it.

No wonder he kept that wish list. No wonder he still pestered her about the Guerdon being beneath her. No wonder he threw them into every plasma stream like there was no tomorrow--

"Still hanging on!"

--Because he knew there would be a tomorrow if he could just keep the other guy from shooting him down. The accident in his past hadn't crushed his confidence in his skill, only in his judgment and the system that'd exiled him. As they sailed toward another bed of activity, she stared at him again, understanding Tom Paris all over again in but those few seconds.

Catch me, she could hear him say, soft but absolutely assured, in her dream....

B'Elanna braced her breath and swung her attention back to her boards.

He raced around another flare, zipping and swerving back and forth between them, seemingly without care that any of them could bounce and strike their shield bubble. Very few deflectors could withstand that much energy--but he knew that. Letting the cruiser catch up a little, his mouth turned up to see them indeed move in. The Cardassians wanted to capture them. They hadn't found the base yet. They'd been wandering around looking and still wanted information.

Glancing over to see B'Elanna still hard on her consoles, Tom tapped in a few more maneuvers and let loose on another set of forming streams. "We'll be cutting this close," he announced. "Time too see if I can shake them off."

She stared at him. "Please don't tell me you were playing around just now."

Tom snorted. "I wish I were."

"They've sped to full impulse. How close do you want them?"

"Too close," he responded and flipped on the graph view. The grids instantly lit up before them on the viewscreen, scrolling and shifting with dizzying precision. His eyes narrowed as a tiny smile pressed the corners of his mouth. "There's the eddy forming. Keep your eyes on those phasers. We might need a couple more shots. --And come to think of it, can you add a mix of tachyon particles to the banks?"

"It'll take some--no, I have it here. Yes." With a few commands and a rerouting of the power inputs, she reactivated the phasers and nodded briskly. "They're ready."

"You ready, too?"

B'Elanna's mouth pursed into a grin. "Let's go."

Slowing them to half impulse, Tom dove into the murky blue of the plasma bed, skimming the rippling waves of energy, each potentially ready to burst into a stream. The Cardassian cruiser stayed close behind, projecting shots, lining up to take out the little shuttle's rear deflector. "They can't shoot until we're in a clear zone," Tom explained.

"That's right," B'Elanna said, impressed yet again that he'd thought of it. "The shockwave will cripple them, too."

"They'll be patient and try to run us out," Tom concluded, his smile reaching his eyes. "They already know they can keep on our tail, which is just what I want."

B'Elanna decided to stop looking at him when he was like that.

Tom continued along the plasma bed, scanning the graph, checking every heat emission, every bubble of growth. Further starboard, a flare erupted, but he ignored it. He wanted something--

"Zero-oh-one, mark zero!" he announced and kicked them back up to full impulse. The cruiser sped to match a moment later. Cranking their elevation straight up, Tom spiraled the shuttle straight up the plasma flare as it formed, almost atop its fiery head. The cruiser, moving as quickly but not quite as maneuverable, skidded back down to half impulse and then followed them along the flare. Tom nodded and banked, then flew a corkscrew pattern back down the flare, passing the cruiser on the other side, then beneath.

"B'Elanna, fire--anywhere on them!"

She punched the controls and threw a random shot, which bounced off the cruiser's shields before they passed to the other side again.

The cruiser shifted and turned to follow yet again.

"Throw another shot into the flare in the cruiser's direction, then rotate our shields!"

Again, she fired, igniting the plasma flare with a dose of their own plus the tachyon particles, which streaked the entire flare with crimson, shooting out the other side at the Cardassian cruiser in mid-turn. The flare expanded and wrapped around the cruiser's shield bubble. Like a bug in a web, the ship tried to propel itself out of the discharge, but it was smoothly sucked back in.

Tom banked hard away, smacking off their phaser banks and spinning them back towards their original coordinates. Turning the viewscreen back to standard view, he gave them both a look back at the cruiser as it crackled and crumbled into the tube of plasma, still glowing red and violet.

Slowing catching his breath, he stared in wonder of it with a moment's sadness. "Sorry, guys," he whispered.

"Not that they would have shown us any mercy," B'Elanna said.

"No," he quietly agreed and turned their view forward as they moved through a clear zone. With one final deep breath, he said, "So, where were we?"

He was suddenly quite calm, but B'Elanna's heart still pounded and her nerves remained alert. She even stared over at him, a little insulted by his repose. How pilots could go through something like that and not want to get up and run, jump up, do *something* to burn off the adrenaline, suddenly bothered her, too. But then she understood a little more why pilots were considered wild on base, with all that stored up energy and thrill. Bouncing her heel against the deck and forcing her breath to slow to normal, B'Elanna did not take for granted her ability to prowl the deck as an engineer. "We're not far off course."

"Yeah, I tried to stay close. There it is."

Ramping them up to warp three, he drove them directly back to the base's system. As B'Elanna cleaned up and retransmitted the map the Liberty would need to come in, Tom dropped to impulse and activated their landing procedure. It was the first and last thing he'd reviewed when he checked out the shuttle, so there were no questions when the programmed responses began to play out. He still double-checked to make certain the reverse thrusters were pointed at the correct angle, though. It'd make their descent smoother when he popped those on, too.

"You have the landing site?" he asked B'Elanna.

"It's in." She made a few calculations. "We can move around thirty-four degrees if you want to go in on a straight path."

"Sounds good."

He followed her direction and angled the ship up for their entry, preparing for the tug of gravity on the presently back-heavy shuttle. The predictable atmospheric warning beeped beside him and he flipped it off. Settling back in his seat, he watched his board and took them down.

"It's a hot entry," B'Elanna commented.

"Yeah," Tom nodded, his eyes still on the board. The upper ionosphere was affected by the plasma activity around the system. Electrical energy on the planet was abundant. They were wearing grounding pads in their boots and inside their coats for having expected that. "Coming into planetary gravity," Tom said and flipped on the reverse thrusters.

Suddenly, a loud *crack* sounded below them, and the engines began to whine.

Tom looked over at B'Elanna, who had all but jumped on her console to see what caused it. "Can I ask the dumb question now?"

"No dumb questions here," she responded, her fingers flying over the diagnostics as the shuttle began to fall. "The reverse thrusters are shot."

"Shot? How?"

"I don't know how! They checked out!"

The shuttle passed into the stratosphere and Tom felt the unmistakable pull of a spin. "Goddamnit!" Seeing B'Elanna grab her console bar, he started into the engines again. "I'm *not* doing *this* again!"

Warning: At current speed, atmospheric g-forces will exceed recommended-

Tom slapped off the warnings. "I know!" he snapped and turned on the forward thrusters. Struggling to regain control, he turned into the spin and rode it a few more turns before pulling them out of it. Blowing a breath with that achievement, Tom then furiously tried to figure out how the hell they'd **land** that shuttle. If the transporters were bio-safe and they had a mobile unit, he'd just stick them into orbit and send everything and themselves down.

But now it was too late for that, too. They were in full descent and heading straight for the field the Maquis had cleared. It would be over in a minute or so--no time was left to second guess. Playing about a hundred scenarios through his mind in but a few seconds, Tom finally grabbed one. "Shields up! --They'll bounce off the atmosphere and slow us down a little--and cushion us until they fail.

"I'll try to keep them on as long as possible."

"Yeah, good... I'm aiming us at the site. ...I have to cut the engines, everything but the planetary RCS. I need you to tell me when to do that, soon as we're through the lower ionosphere."

"It's going to be soon!" B'Elanna told him and punched in the numbers. "Eight seconds!"

"Figures!" Tom's hand flew to engine control.

"Five...four...three...two... --Shut down engines!"

Tom flipped off the thrusters and immediately ignored the loud groan of complaint from the reactor. He flew them in, pulling the nose of the shuttle up as the tail dragged--then dragged more the closer they came. It was windy there, he then discovered, and compensated for that, too.

"Prepare for impact!" he yelled, cursing under his breath directly afterwards.

He'd never, never wanted to say those words again in his life.

The Ligarán shuttle plowed through the atmosphere and straight toward the southern continent, over hills and a long forest. Aimed at a long clearing between lakes, it shimmied and whined and came in far faster than any vehicle had a right to. Birds scattered as the trees and ground rattled and a scream of sheared air invaded the alien world.

"Hold on! We're going to skid around!" he told B'Elanna, then threw the shuttle down and into a spin just as they hit the dirt. Round--round--round, they both were flung from their seats as the weakened shields plucked the unforgiving surface, bouncing the shuttle gently into the air before sizzling away. The unprotected shuttle then slammed against the surface and skimmed like a stone: Round--round--round--then they flipped.

"Shit!" he cursed, grabbing his seat from the side. Another flip and he was hurled across the small bridge like a stick in a tornado. His side smacked the ceiling controls before he was thrown back-first down to the deck.

Round-round...and a bump before it finally began to slow, skidding--a hard bump--

"Oof!" Tom grunted and grabbed desperately at the open grate.

--then a loud *smack* as something in front of them finally stopped them.

With another groan from the engine, a whish of coolant steam, the bridge became eerily peaceful. Sunshine poured into the nearby viewscreen, showing leafy, fir-like trees on a breezy day. The klaxons and advisories turned off; only quiet beeps echoed in the little space, dinging in time with the thrums of the on-hold reactor. The engines were still offline.

That silence was quickly broken. Still on his back, Tom held the grate for dear life, sucking for every short breath he could manage as soon as he remembered that he indeed *should* breathe. He felt like he'd been kicked in the gut a hundred times. He was sure he'd broken a rib. He knew exactly what that felt like. Then he blinked.

"B'Elanna?" No answer. He coughed, grabbed another breath so he could silence the space again. Hearing her jerky breaths across the cabin, he craned his head to try to see her, his gut dropping to think the worst first. The worst, that it *would* happen again to him, that he'd have to go through such a loss again... "B'Elanna!"

A bleep...and a gasp of air...

"I'm here!" she choked. "I'm...I'm stuck under the...damned tactical console. Are you all right?"

"I will be," he said, "when I...ah, God. When I figure out what's cracked, I'll... I can move, though.

You?"

"Yeah." Unpinning herself at last, she got her free hand out to the seat support bar and heaved. She finally pulled herself out of the little space their final crash had smacked her into and hissed to feel her shoulder scream with pain. It had come out of joint again; the rest of her arm was not much better off. "I think my arm's broken," she muttered tersely. It was the last thing she needed, considering what they needed to do there. Then she knew she was damned lucky that was all of what was wrong after a landing like that.

"Is the tissue knitter in the med kit still active?" Tom asked her. His voice was rough with effort, and his short breaths resumed as soon as he was done speaking.

"It can be recharged," she confirmed.

"It'll help, but you'll need a better job later."

Getting to her feet, she stumbled back to the rear of the bridge and lowered herself to the floor by him.

She was disheveled and scraped up, and her face was dark with seriousness and bruises yet to color, but she was the best thing he'd seen in years. "I just don't have good luck with shuttlecraft," he grimaced apologetically.

"We're still here, aren't we?" B'Elanna returned, holding her arm steady as she scooted on her knees close to his side. "We're still here, Tom."

"Yeah," he whispered. He choked a painful laugh then, holding onto her dark, assured gaze. "Here we are."

"You're all right there?"

"I have been so far. Can you get those last pieces from that replicator?"

"We'll see."

With one more look Tom's way, B'Elanna trudged out of the main base shelter, into the hot, muggy air and across the long tarmac to the shuttle for the next round of components they needed to replicate. She pressed her scraped hand firmly around her ribs, her eyes set solidly on her destination. She tried to clear her mind...then she tried diverting herself. "Phase lock plates, emitter pins, grid circuit lines..."

She was done with the basic installations, having decided to integrate the systems into the mobile converter as she went along, so in case something didn't work, she'd know where it wasn't working.

They neither, after all, needed anything else to go wrong.

A day and a half ago, they finally extricated themselves from the shuttle after two hours of patching each other up. Tom needed more time than even he had expected to merely get off the floor. Each time he tried, he lost his breath again. He cursed every time he got it back. "Why always the ribs?" he grunted

as he fell into the pilot's seat. With his help, B'Elanna was able to reset the tissue regenerator to take down the swelling in his torso, mend the bruises.

"They'll come back, though," he grimaced as she pulled him one-armed to his feet. "I'll need more treatments. This little unit's not nearly strong enough to do the whole job." Taking the little tricorder and regenerator, he was able to relieve the pain in B'Elanna's arm, knit her up enough that she could use her fingers. Then he took care of her other bruises and lacerations. Then he told her to replicate a sling, as her arm would be very weak until a proper bone knitter could be used on it.

When she brought the requested item, he helped it on her--"No, really, B'Elanna, let me get this on straight so you don't have to readjust it later"--and secured it snugly against her slim but sturdy frame. Checking the give in the back with a couple gentle tugs, seeing her not flinch, he nodded. "Now if we can keep *me* moving, we'll be all right."

She looked at him askance, but asked something else: "So what now?"

He looked back at the main space of the packed shuttle. "I guess we figure out what we can do." He sighed. "I won't be able to do much, but if we can get the transporters online, I can set up the smaller items when everything's there. Are you up to seeing how far off we are in case we can't?"

"Maybe we should try to get the transporters back online before deciding anything," B'Elanna suggested. "But I'll take a look." At his gesture, she moved to get to the hatch, thanking herself silently for making certain all the equipment has been secured properly. Very little had come loose, even after the shuttle's flips and spins.

The landing had taken them to the other side of the base-in-progress, they immediately saw when they opened the hatch and greeted but a warm, sunny morning. They had essentially come in going the wrong way. That turned out to be a good thing, however, as the only stopper on the other end was the main building, and B'Elanna was certain she wasn't up to rebuilding *that*.

Tom looked back at the banged up shuttle with a sigh. *Too bad about that*, he thought. *It's a damn good little craft*. The thought was pure pilot's sensitivity. It wasn't his ship, after all, and even without the accident, he wouldn't have flown it again. He still couldn't help his appreciation of a fine vehicle, though. Hiking his tool bag up on his shoulder, Tom pointed with his chin toward the stubby main building.

"You want to get on those transporters and I'll go see if it squares with the specs we were given?"

She eyed him, wondering if she should let him go alone, but finally shrugged. Tom wasn't the stiff upper lip sort. If he couldn't do something, he usually admitted to it. "Do you still have your comm bar?"

He checked his pocket. "Yeah. I won't be long."

The walk was longer than he thought it'd be, though. The sun wasn't very forgiving, either, only adding to his fatigue. Before their unfortunate landing, he'd been flying the shuttle for nearly nine straight hours, nor had he eaten lunch.

Coming into the long, spartan structure, he had to get down to his hands and knees. His side around the broken rib was swelling again, making it hard to breathe and the pain miserable. There, he snorted to himself. "How easily I forget," he muttered, remembering his liver problems of only a few months ago. *That* was pain--that was pure *agony*. All he had now was a couple cracked ribs...and a base to set up, and no idea if they'd actually be let back to their ship once that job was completed. He hadn't talked too

much to B'Elanna about it, but he knew he didn't trust them to their word. Chakotay put up a solid front, but even he had been as slippery to deal with as Tom had expected.

Which made him wonder again why the reverse thrusters checked out when they inspected the shuttle, but decided to fail as soon as he activated them. In any other situation, he'd think he was just being paranoid.

He caught his breath and pulled himself to his feet. Moving across, he opened his tricorder and checked the layout and all the connections. They matched up well...maybe *too* easily. For the time being, however, he wasn't complaining.

B'Elanna didn't, either. *"*Good,*"* she told him over the comm. *"*I actually worked correcting their layout into our schedule.*"*

Tom coughed a laugh. "Good idea," he said, pulling another breath as he leaned against the wall. "You might need to, yet. I'm just eyeballing this."

*"*Okay.*"* A pause. *"*Are you all right? You don't sound good.*"*

"Yeah, the pain's pretty annoying."

*"*I'll have the transporters online in about ten more minutes. Why don't you stay there and I'll start beaming everything over?*"*

"Send the med kit first."

Four hours later, the low-res transporter had beamed the last of the equipment from the bay of the shuttle. Soon after, Tom was kneeling next to a supply case as B'Elanna finally walked in and looked around for herself.

"Hungry?" he asked when she came back into the main room, generally unimpressed.

She smiled. She knew she was filthy and a little bruised, but to his credit, his gaze said nothing of it. Rather, his friendly grin was a welcome sight. His voice over the comm had been concerning to her. "Actually, yes. What's on?"

"Looks like chicken stew with toasts and baked apple something," he said, examining the label. "What it really is, I don't want to know."

"Protein meal," she nodded. "I really am hungry, though. I probably don't care."

He nodded then broke the seals on their packs. Handing B'Elanna her portion, he scooted against the wall to get into his.

B'Elanna watched him as she waited for her meal to fully expand. Working under a relatively miniature transporter array to reroute the external beam conduits one-handed was not something she wanted to do ever again, but he really looked drained by his comparatively simple job of receive and inventory. His paleness and dark-circled eyes recalled his recent illness, too, which did nothing to ease B'Elanna's mind. "How's the pain?" she asked.

"It's okay," he shrugged. "I've been using the knitter on it about every hour to take down the swelling. It's recharging now. Your arm?"

"I've had worse."

"Yeah, you have," he replied with a wistful smile. Taking the spoon from the side of the ration pack, Tom peeled off the cover and stirred up the stew. The throbbing had essentially erased any hunger he should have felt by then, but he knew he needed to eat something, keep up his strength. Thankfully, the reconstituted food wasn't half bad.

"Latch rod connectors?"

Tom's hand swam through the crate and pulled out a half-tray. Crawling into the access port and through to where B'Elanna was working, he slid the requested items under the extended casing. They disappeared completely a moment later.

"Thanks," she said from beneath the assembly.

"What's next?" he asked in a breath, leaning his head against the opposite wall. Closing his eyes, he knew he'd need another treatment soon. Eating had made the pain worse...or at least the pain had increased after their meal. He wasn't sure which. At that point, he didn't care.

"I'll need the tie-arms next," she said, then added pointedly, "but not for about five or ten minutes."

Tom didn't catch the hint. "I'll set them up, then, and give myself another swipe."

She tried the direct approach that time. "Maybe you need a break."

"Don't worry about it," he dismissed and crawled back through the tube.

An hour later, he slid a transceiver section towards her waiting hand. "Can you lift that into place all right?"

"I have a magnetoscope here," she answered. "I'll let you know in a few second if it doesn't... No, it's fine. Thanks."

"Are the power conduits meshing?"

"Better than I thought they would," B'Elanna said. "They knew what they were doing when they stole this core unit. It's really flexible. I'd like to build one for the Guerdon."

"You could recreate it yourself?" Tom asked, genuinely interested.

"If I got the right parts, I could, especially now that I've copied the design specs. Half of what makes it so good is that its design is simple. There's nothing unnecessary in its overall structure."

Tom sighed a laugh, then. "I say this a lot, I know, but you really belong somewhere better."

"Probably. But I'm here now and I'd still like to build one if we can afford to sometime."

"Well, you'll never hear me say no to it."

With that, Tom crawled back to the main room. When he got out of the tube, he got down on the floor and got his breath. It was becoming a routine now, though more and more difficult to do. He was physically exhausted; he felt cold, though it was very summer-like inside. The pain was changing, as well. The throbbing was starting to alternate with sharp twinges deep within his gut, a slight tearing sensation.

It slowly dawned on him that it was more than the ribs, now. Something else was going wrong.

B'Elanna took the news as soberly as ever, though her eyes darkened with concern. She knew as well as Tom did that Chakotay likely would not arrive on time--and even if they did, it'd be another full day and some before that happened. Worse, they didn't have a full sickbay, either. Meanwhile, Tom's movements had weakened and his voice had become softer. His stare was set with some certain determination, though, especially when he implied how it would affect her.

"What can I do?" she asked.

"Keep setting up the converter," he told her. "Hand me small parts to work on, but I need to stay still. I'll work on this knitter, too, see if I can ramp up its beam."

"Maybe I should work on it."

"I've worked on them before," he assured her, his lips turning up with amusement. She never seemed to believe he had any technical ability on first pass. She was an engineer through and through.

"When?" she asked, furrowing her brow.

"At the academy. I took a physiology course and a little medic training. We fooled around with the regenerators in our spare time."

"Along with replicators, I guess." Torres shook her head. "What else don't I know about you?"

"My birthday?"

"It's in November," she replied and returned to the last crate they had opened. "Ridge told me." Standing over the neatly arranged parts, she let her eyes close for a moment as she allowed herself a sigh. Stuck on a wastrel planet into the middle of a plasma-charged anomaly, setting up a base that might never actually be occupied for people she wished she'd never known, and Tom's injuries were getting worse.

Tom was getting worse, and he couldn't say how or what. Something in the impact had damaged something internally and he'd need a real doctor to fix it--preferably sooner rather than later. He was handing it calmly, so she thought she should relax. She knew herself well enough to know that wasn't going to happen.

Growling at herself, forcing her residual worries aside, she opened her eyes and breathed again. Reaching into the crate, she pulled out a node and junction box and its corresponding isolinear connections. Setting them all on a mobile cart, she pushed the parts over to Tom's side and proceeded to

tell him what to do with them.

When the sun began to sink into the woodsy horizon, they finally decided to try for some rest. After nearly a day and a half awake, stressed and injured, they both were beyond tired. She had stopped thinking straight with the isolinear chips and finally set them down for easier work; his eyes were closing of their own volition as he pieced together tray after tray to pass on to her. He finally told her he had to get some sleep and she might like to as well. Silently, they gave up all the parts and pieces and opened the bunks in the adjoining room.

B'Elanna took herself back to the makeshift lavatory to wash. Deciding to give her some privacy, Tom chose to relieve himself one last time before hitting the bunk. Slipping out the back door, he at least found some sardonic satisfaction in being able to piss on that world. He wished he could have on that whole situation.

How he resented Chakotay for pushing his buttons so effectively, making him know that any of his crew were vulnerable, his ship was at risk, his own reputation, bad enough already, could get a nice, fat "traitor" mark stuck beside it, too, for capitulating to protect his crew and his ship. He hated being a captain all over again for once again being forced to experience that old, all-too-familiar feeling of entrapment...and giving in to higher powers at work. Though, this time it wasn't for him. Had it only been him involved, he'd likely have ticked Chakotay off just for fun and let the dice fly. Now, he had a crew to consider and, more immediately, B'Elanna, whom he'd stupidly not worked harder to prevent from coming. Now her arm was broken and she wasn't complaining as much as she had the right to, and they still had another week with a thirsty resistance who all but drooled to look at her. For someone he liked a lot, he sure was putting her under a lot of guns.

"Agh," he grunted when he finally was able to relax enough to make his bladder release. He leaned his shoulder against the edge of the building. He had to go more than he knew. It occurred to him that he'd not gone since well before lunch, but he probably would have avoided it for the trouble he was having at it now. His side suddenly felt like it was on fire.

Looking down, he understood why. In the building's exterior light, he squinted, then stared. His urine was a decided shade of reddish orange.

"Yeah, it could get worse," he muttered bitterly as he finished, breathing hard to try to muster enough strength to move back inside. His bladder empty, there seemed to be all the more room for swelling.

Best part about it, he knew, was he or B'Elanna could do little but wait and repeat the superficial treatments with that weak equipment. He chose for the mean time not to tell B'Elanna about the blood. She already looked anxious about him, in that way of hers. She needed sleep and had enough on her plate even then.

Staggering into the bunkroom, Tom noticed B'Elanna already in the wall bed across from his, lying on her side and looking most determined in her effort to slumber. Tom eased himself down into his, pulling his blanket over his body with a weak sweep of his hand. "Goodnight," he whispered.

When he released a long, shaky breath, she looked over. Lying on his back, his eyes were already closed, his hands resting at his sides. "Computer, dim lights eighty percent."

Tom groaned as he barely awakened, rolling out of the bunk and hitting the floor with a cough. B'Elanna, nearby and tucked up against the side on her bunk, looked to have fallen asleep watching him, but didn't stir at his noise. He reached up to pull himself back up, but his arm dropped back down. Feeling a wave of dizziness pass over him, a shudder close behind, Tom gave up and fell asleep on the floor.

"Tom! ...Tom!" Patting his flaccid arm, B'Elanna didn't know if she should roll him over. A quick check told her he was alive, but past that... "Tom! Wake up!"

Getting to her feet with a wince at the sharp pain in her shoulder, she stumbled out into the main room and to the table where the tricorder and now recharged regenerator lay. Now if she could remember how to use them... Looking down at the display, she suddenly remembered that Tom had fiddled with the controls to strengthen the beam. He didn't share the new settings with her...because she'd still been busy when he was giving himself those last few treatments. Either way, she wasn't sure what the setting should be that time.

The tricorder she could figure out, though, so she took both pieces into the other room just as Tom had begun to cough and groan, turning over as his knees and chest shrank toward each other.

"Ah, God," he breathed, aborting the move half-completed. "What the hell's going on?"

She stood there dumbly at first, wondering if he'd forgotten yesterday. Then his bloodshot stare crept across the floor to her bare feet, up her body, finally catching her eyes. B'Elanna instantly moved to kneel by him. Setting the machinery on the floor by her knees, she brushed his tangled hair from his eyes with her hand. His skin was hot.

Her gesture and the sight of her sling seemed to bring him up to speed. "You have the regenerator?" he croaked.

"Yes," she answered.

He pulled a couple breaths, then nodded. "Let me see it. I'll reset it."

She waited as his shaky fingers bounced off the LEDs. Belatedly, he glanced up at her and relayed the figures. "It's an easy pattern on the main control panel. Four-seven-three-three-eight."

"Four-seven-three-three-eight," B'Elanna repeated, then took the equipment when he handed it to her. Looking down at the grid on the controls, he did have the beam regulators set to that numerical pattern. As she passed extended bar over his belly, it lit up with alert areas. B'Elanna furrowed her brow. "Tom, there are five separate lesions--damaged areas."

"Just work one at a time," he managed. "Run the bar slowly...over it. It'll tell you how...how it's coming along." He drew a fuller breath that time as she started the procedure. "You won't be able to finish the job. It automatically stops at eighty percent and recommends surgery."

"Thanks for the warning," she said, still wondering about the severity of the damage. He was handling the whole thing as though he already knew about it and it wasn't a big deal. Unfortunately, that little tissue knitter was telling her something else. Eyeing him, she looked away to reset the frequency then waved the bar again.

"Guess this is my payback," Tom whispered, laughing weakly behind it as he stared into B'Elanna's eyes. "It's been a long time coming, but I finally got it."

"Be quiet," she told him, kindly though she meant it. "Accidents are just that."

"Don't you believe in fate, B'Elanna?"

She moved her concentration to his side, watching the response bar alert her to what it was targeting. "Pilots. All luck and instinct."

"And everything's got to have an answer engineer," Tom returned. "I don't think we're that bad, though, much as we are what we are."

"No, we're not," she relented. "Now be quiet for a second."

"Second's up."

She smiled without wanting to. "Be *quiet*, Tom." She worked the little wand over and over his midsection until the levels came close to normal again, then deactivated the beam before it completely wore down. "Besides," she said offhand, "if it really was a payback, you wouldn't be here right now."

"I can't shake the feeling," he breathed, his eyelids growing heavy. "I can't stop thinking that maybe I needed this to happen." He watched her face, dirty around her dark, striking eyes, watched her glance up from the readouts, cool and as professional as she could be just then. Indeed, it was a pleasant diversion for that moment, wondering what she was thinking past that well-kept façade. "I didn't used to be superstitious, believe it or not. Not really. Not until I got the Guerdon..." Sharply inhaling, he shut his eyes and breathed through it. "I wanted you to get some sleep, B'Elanna... We both needed it, but I knew you've ended up having to take care of this mess."

Her eyes jumped to his again and stayed there as the regenerator bleeped a new warning. "Don't do that again," she told him.

"Okay. Sor--agh. Sorry! Maybe *this* is the revenge."

"I thought I told you to be quiet."

He coughed a laugh as he caught her wry smirk. "Yes, ma'am." He hardly groaned the words as the pain radiated again, almost as though it battled the healing rays the engineer was so determinedly administering.

B'Elanna meanwhile went back to feeling all but useless as she watched the man bear it, knowing that what she was doing would have to be repeated numerous times before Captain Chakotay and his crew could get there and wondering how much Tom was bearing. Being half-Klingon, she could feel pain like humans, but usually responded to it differently. While comforting at the time, it often was detrimental to her overall health, as her largely human frame needed to acknowledge pain to alert her to do something about it. But even in childhood, B'Elanna was caught with infected cuts or broken toes, convinced they were simple annoyances when they required care.

It carried itself elsewhere, that mindset, she knew.

Savan must have quickly deduced her tolerance levels, B'Elanna realized, as the Vulcan came to her with the regenerator more than she did to anyone else. In fact, to her knowledge, she *never* came after the other crew, even when Tom was sick.

She stared at the man before her once again. *Was sick, got better, really started taking of himself and moving ahead with things. Now this.*

"No one needs this to happen," B'Elanna finally replied, feeling that much as keenly for herself as for him. *We get here well enough without requirement*, she silently added as he slowly lost consciousness again.

Tom's eyes opened, he couldn't tell when. It was quite warm and the sun shone brightly through frosted windows. He hurt like hell, but he was able to move. He didn't want to do much of that just yet, though. He suddenly recognized that he was in the cot, propped to sit reclined at a forty-five degree angle, and he was in the main room. There was a ration pack and water on the table beside him.

B'Elanna left him food.

By the clinking and whizzing nearby, he knew she was back in the geothermal power assembly, probably connecting the last of the sensor nets to it. Remote stations planted over the last couple months could relay activity between Nivoch Bajor, Dorvan and Amleth. Though B'Elanna appreciated the good planning, she had wondered what use it would be in the middle of a giant plasma storm. Tom suggested they could pass information on to other Maquis ships.

"Not that I actually care," B'Elanna had stated, "but can't they do that from where they are?"

"Not without getting tagged," Tom had pointed out.

She'd merely shrugged and started the installation.

By the look of the crate carrying those parts, Tom guessed B'Elanna was probably almost done with it, leaving her with the shield array and general subsystems. Reaching down, he grabbed a shunt processor unit and popped the casing open. The move nearly wore him out, so instead of digging into the relatively simple work of connecting the rod sockets and cross checking them against the frequencies B'Elanna was setting the units at, he set the piece down onto his knees. Sighing, he looked at the tray, took the water and drank it. It rolled into his stomach unimpeded, circling around before settling. He did not try for the rations.

He should have hurt worse than he did. She must have treated him again recently.

He closed his eyes, leaned back onto the cushion she'd set behind him. Even one-armed, she was able to drag him and the cot out there and get his dead weight repositioned. That said a lot to him, more than he felt like thinking about just then, but probably would again sometime, if he survived. *If* he survived.

Damn, I hate this, he thought, more than once as he realized all over again what crap condition he was in. He missed his ship, wished he were back on that clunky, old waste of time and money. What he

would give just then to lean back in the captain's couch and poke through a nice, long leg, bored to death and living on coffee, dealing around like they used to, not scraping and compromising themselves to stay alive. Running the table on base for parts. Putting off paperwork until Maryl was screaming at him. Sharing the table with Jerod... *Hell, I'd take a dinner meeting with Gil over any of this.*

Tom breathed a little laugh as he picked up the node again. How things had changed since the last time he'd deftly escaped Gil's office. How much had changed since Jerod was killed. Not for the first time, Tom hoped he hadn't given away his soul to those people, to the Maquis. He'd told B'Elanna that he was trying to keep them alive; without question, that was his intention. He hoped to hell that the price for the Guerdon's survival wouldn't be too high in the end.

Maybe it would be after all.

But then he blew a breath at that thinking. He was awake and alert. The pain was heinous, but survivable. If he could work overtime with his liver about to explode, he could certainly sit on his ass and suffer kidney damage.

He still wished he could get up.

She wiped at her moist, dirty arms as she came back into the center section, ready for another uncharacteristic "break" to check in on Tom. To her surprise and relief, she found him halfway into the sensor node she'd left for him, poking out the STA to get to the receiver circuit. He was pale and looked drawn, but he was well enough to work. That was more than she could have asked for. He wasn't nearly so hopeful looking when she finally dragged him and the cot out of the chamber.

His lips turned up when she came in at last. "Hey," he said quietly, finishing the extraction before setting the part down.

"You're up," she acknowledged, walking over to the water bottle she'd left out for herself.

"Been in the sensor net unit?"

"All morning," she nodded. Taking a few large swallows of water, she leaned against the table and added, "It's almost ready to go. I have only those few nodes to install and I can finally move on to the enviro-shield."

"How's it been?"

"I had some trouble with this one, actually," she admitted with a snort, "but it's originally a Ferengi system, so I should have been expecting that."

He shared the small laugh for what it was worth. His stare turned regretful a moment later. "I'm sorry I can't do more."

B'Elanna shook her head. "It's nothing you can help. Besides, I've been getting used to working with one hand. It's...interesting."

He breathed a laugh. "I'll bet it is."

"I honestly didn't think I would be able to do as much as I have." She watched him take that in for a few seconds. "How are you feeling?"

"Pretty rough, but these odd jobs help." He watched her nod, then move around the table to the

toolbox she'd assembled the day before. Her loose, two-piece jumpsuit was smeared with grime from crawling around in unsealed access tubes. She'd cleaned her face since yesterday, but obviously gave up on her hair after brushing it with her fingers. He pursed his lips at the stab of odd jealousy at her mobility despite her broken arm, still strapped firmly against her torso. The work did help, but he knew it was nothing to moving around and literally getting into the work. He was probably better off unconscious for the combination of boredom and pain that faced him. In truth, he didn't know which was worse. "Where are you going next?"

"I'll be on the other side of the geothermal assembly. Comm me when it gets to the point that you need another treatment."

"How many have you done today?"

"Four."

Tom blew a breath. "Guess you're managing to keep busy, too.... Thanks."

She watched him lean his head back, probably trying to hide his chagrin--or dread? He'd tried to make a joke of it, more for himself than for her, it seemed. But then he pulled himself back up and picked up the node, as though he'd not taken that break. B'Elanna finished the water and pushed herself to her feet. "Is there anything I should watch out for?" she asked. "With the regenerator?"

"You should first poke me with a phase inducer to make sure I'm still alive," he deadpanned.

She gave him a look.

He shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know. A lot of bleeding, I guess. It's already doing that. We're just corking it a while, so a rupture would probably be bad news."

"You think so?" she said, playing along with his understatement.

"Definitely make me lose my appetite for reprocessed apple brown betty," he returned. "But it'll certainly save you a lot of work later on."

She snorted. "Just what I need." Heading out, she gestured at the box of parts on his other side. "So can you manage to put a few more boxes together before deserting me on this mudball, Captain?" she said, trying for a little playful sarcasm. Its effect was what she'd wanted: He chuckled and shook his head. Satisfied, she disappeared down the corridor.

Tom looked after her, his fingers still resting on each side of the node, his mind playing back her smile, her clever eyes pinned to his, her full mouth curled up into a grin, her light tone playing over and over, sinking nicely into his heart and warming him there. He'd have to be dead not to feel any response to that.

If anything, he knew he was decidedly not dead--far from it in at least one department.

He suddenly heard her laughing, when they were out on that sailboat. He never imagined she'd laugh aloud like that, but she had a few times, when the buffeting wind nearly tore her over and she dove for the mast to hang on while she somehow kept the sail from knocking him cleanly off the back. Her eyes were alive and her laugh was clear and real. How didn't he fall for her right there and then? He could see her sneaking looks at him over their breakfast on Deep Space Nine. He didn't connect the dots there, either.

He'd tried to dismiss it before, but now there was no denying it. Everything was connecting and he knew it. Naturally, the timing was lousy.

More than for the obvious, he wished their situation were different. He wished he could woo her with the abandon he enjoyed so well in his past, and he wondered why he didn't just go for it and let the pieces lie as they may. But then, he knew why: She was his friend and he just wasn't interested in disposable feelings anymore. She wasn't the sort who'd fall right in with a flirt and enjoy herself just because. Moreover, they were constantly busy, angry, injured and tired--and save injury, their daily lives were *always* like that.

But sure as hell, he wasn't dead.

"Better luck next time," he whispered. Drawing a deep breath, he set his eyes on the node once again.

Soon enough, she'd run out of work.

Whoever planned those systems and stole those parts had planned too well in the end--too well for her, at least. Despite her thinking it would be otherwise, the units had mostly installed without issue, thanks to the Starfleet technology bringing it all together. Even the sensor array was coming on line, bit by bit, now that the final network nodes had been corrected and installed. The environmental shield was the only thing giving her trouble and would at least require a trip out to the shuttle's replicator for parts she couldn't find in the crates; connecting the general subsystems to the geothermal generator and ODN would happen within a couple hours. If she and Tom hadn't been injured, they would have finished already.

Then again, she'd been working since they got there, largely one-handed but doubly determined to keep busy. She almost wished she had more problems to deal with.

Of course, she *did* have problems to deal with, just that she didn't know *how*.

Pulling herself out of the access hatch and moving around to the sensor console, B'Elanna punched in a new scan and waited a few minutes for the system to initialize. Were everything connected properly, it would soon shoot back Cardassian ship positions in the Bajor sector.

It did just that. Examining the readings, the little console tracked a number of Cardassian ships around and over their border. With another few taps, B'Elanna could see Starfleet's deployments, too. A few adjustments and both factions' sensor nets popped into view.

Her chest sank. That system was working perfectly. The Maquis could easily see where their enemies were and let their friends know about it. Thanks to her and Tom, the Maquis would have an upper hand for a while, until Starfleet and Cardassia could update their protocols. Whoever designed the relay knew what he or she was doing. Moreover, when they pitched this mission to Tom, they made it seem much more complex than it actually was. She and Tom had both realized that yesterday, but it was stupidly obvious now. B'Elanna frowned. Though it might have taken him longer to figure out the few problems she had encountered, Ridge could have made the trip after all. But they wouldn't have been interested in Ridge. They needed engineers more than techs.

If she wasn't so busy and so sure of herself, there, she might have been afraid.

"B'Elanna? You've got it in?" came Tom's ragged voice down the main corridor.

Finished with the nodes and lacking anything else to do, he periodically "checked in" with her when she moved into earshot. In any other situation, it'd have annoyed the hell out of her.... *Well, maybe it still is annoying*, she admitted to herself. But in his position, she'd have probably gone insane by then--or driven *him* nuts. She sure as hell wouldn't have cracked a joke.

"I'm on my way back in a minute," she said, closing out the station for the time being.

"How's it working?"

"Probably better than we'd like it to, actually," she answered. Wiping her hand on her pocket, she shoved her tools into her waist sack and headed back to him. "They can pick up everything, Tom--Cardassian, Starfleet, Breen, whoever they want. The person who planned this system was really good."

"They probably got their hands on a security expert," Tom said. "Or maybe an ex-officer. No one else could pin down all the codes, otherwise, especially Starfleet's right now."

"And we're putting it in their hands."

"We knew we would," he said resignedly. "But if it hadn't been us, someone else would have had the honor."

Coming into the center section, she found Tom in the same place, but markedly inactive. With nothing else to assemble and not being up for eating, his hands rested limply at his sides, slightly swollen. His skin was a shade of sallow she remembered all too well and his face didn't try to pull up in greeting. He was probably too drained for any of that. They knew without his saying so that he was getting worse. She also knew by his expression that he was sorry for it. She blinked a nod of acknowledgement and went to check the regenerator.

"It's still charging," she told him, not looking back.

"I'll survive for now."

She nodded, checking the components in the regenerator before giving it up for the time being. They'd been using it far longer and for far more than it'd been designed to handle. If it burnt out at any time, she wouldn't be shocked--though she certainly didn't want that to happen. In spite of it, as she turned it in her hand, it slipped and fell to the table.

"Damn!" she hissed and grabbed it up again. Giving it another good look, she made sure she hadn't broken it. She sighed to see its diagnostic still running uninterrupted. "It's okay," she said, more for herself but aimed at Tom.

He watched her fumble a little longer with it and finally set it down again. "Go ahead and get those parts, B'Elanna. You could probably use a walk."

Looking back, she found him gazing understandingly at her. She felt her chest quiver at it. It seemed like ages ago when he first gave her a look like that. Her mindset at the time and the coolness he also projected in his constant state of intoxication made her instantly distrust any outreach on his part. As the months went by, as he came to know her better, too, she had come to like getting that look. It suited him, even when he was displeased. Even when she was angry with him and thinking about leaving when her contract was up, there was something about the captain catching her with "that look," that always

gave her a little pause. To see that expression above so much pain now, however, prevented any of the pleasure she'd have gotten from it, though it made her admire him even more. He was fighting hard, in his own way, as usual.

"You're all right there?" she asked him.

"I have been so far," he replied. "Can you get those last pieces from that replicator?"

"We'll see."

With one more look Tom's way, B'Elanna trudged out of the main base shelter. The hot muggy air hit her in all the wrong ways, working like glue for the soot and sweat she couldn't wait to blast off. Sonic shower power inputs were among the subsystems she needed to install--and she had no problem moving that to the top of the list. She knew she'd happily *bunk* in one of the shower stalls if she didn't have to remain with Tom.

Tucking her good arm against her chest, she watched the sleek, Ligarán shuttle come closer and closer. If she had been able to procure the parts for *it*, she'd have repaired the engine, hull and reverse thrusters and planned for a speedy departure once the systems were in, and to hell with the Maquis, the Liberty, Captain Chakotay and his crew of vultures. She'd have gotten them out of there and gotten Tom the help he needed instead of waiting there for him to slowly bleed to death.

Bleed to death. Paybacks. B'Elanna's stomach churned to realize exactly what Tom had been talking about that morning.

"Phase lock plates, emitter pins, grid circuit lines," she muttered, trying to keep off the track of things she couldn't do anything about.

Slamming open the shuttle hatch, B'Elanna stomped through the now empty bay to the little replicator at mid-ship. With a glance, she could tell it was offline again. Growling, she fell to her knees and popped off the bulkhead cover. A little rigging after they first landed had rerouted enough power to it. Getting into the power network again and seeing the impulse reactor surprisingly still in good shape, she rerouted again and soon heard the system whirring to life. Sighing, she pulled herself back to her feet and began replicating her list.

It was a numb process, and she thought between items that she was more tired than she wanted to admit. Standing still was making her realize it. Realizing it did her no favors, either. She knew she was more stressed than she'd ever tell Tom at that point, though he probably didn't need to be told. The idiot vendor at Velir station probably wouldn't need to be told at that point.

She growled again and punched at the panel.

"Thirty-two lines for grid section alpha-gamma-nine," she commanded.

"*Specify junction.*"

"Four-six-one upper."

The items materialized. She continued to repeat the process until the tray was nearly full, her voice becoming almost as mechanical as the system that confirmed each order. Examining the tray once again, she replayed her list in her head. It came up with surprising ease, scrolling mentally through junctions as her eyes drifted across the inventory. Her shoulders were relaxed, her mind perfectly focused. She blinked when she saw a hole in her process.

"Computer, three core shunts, same unit and section."

The brackets appeared and she took them, one by one, and laid them on the tray.

"Isolinear units four-one-beta through."

"Straight pin or--"

"*Transverse,*" she ordered and waited as the machine lit up yet again.

"*B'Elanna?*"

"Isolinear units four-two-beta outer. Transverse pin."

"*B'Elanna?*"

Pulling the pieces off the replicator pad, she almost didn't recognize it, but then felt an alert buzzer in her pocket. Tapping the piece through the sticky cloth, she said, "I'm here."

"*You need to come back,*" Tom whispered.

"Is it bad?" she asked, still visually inventorying.

"*I couldn't get...to the regenerator myself. I...need you back here.*"

"Okay, I'm almost done here," B'Elanna told him, looking at the replicator panel again. "I have--"

"*Are you--*" The sound of something overturning and a loud grunt followed his last word before the comm died.

The crash snapped up her attention and she suddenly realized what was happening on the other end.

Without looking at her work again, she turned around and ran out of the shuttle.

His eyes opened very slowly, unwillingly as the light stung. Everything stung and throbbed and ached.

Not that I could expect the break of my choosing, he smirked to himself, even as he hated himself for indulging in another round of self-pity. It came so naturally to him sometimes, he wondered if he'd ever break *that* habit. *Today's not that day, I guess*, he concluded for himself and ground his teeth together to ride out the waves of nausea that accompanied the rest. He might have verbalized his many complaints if he could, but only a pitiful moan escaped him.

Looking over, he immediately caught the dark, bloodshot eyes of B'Elanna Torres. She was sitting on the floor, resting her chin on her arm, knees pulled up to her chest, staring steadily at him. She looked like he felt: hurt, dirty and well past exhausted. He couldn't tell by the look on her face what she might be thinking, but she sure as hell wasn't happy, even as she blinked to see him awaken. Rising, she drew a long breath, then let it out. Her eyes didn't waver from his.

"You've been out the rest of yesterday and all night," she informed him softly. "It's about midday

now." She paused, then added, "I've been controlling the bleeding, but it's not going to last much longer."

Tom nodded and opened his mouth to speak, but he still couldn't form words yet--a unique condition for him, without a doubt. Releasing his breath, he glanced at the water flask on the table.

B'Elanna immediately went to get another one. "I replicated a mineral drink," she said, retrieving a spouted bottle. "You probably need nutrition, right?"

Tom didn't argue. A few vitamins wouldn't be what killed him in the end. Letting her gently tip the nozzle to his lips, he tentatively sipped the water. The last thing he wanted to do, he knew, was choke on the water and hack. That *would* be the end of him, he was sure. The taste was slightly acidic, but it cleared his palette, wet his throat and soon gave him a little energy--enough, at least, to manage a breath of, "Thanks."

She nodded briskly, a cool nurse, standing at the ready to give him another dose when he could take more but not offering much else.

He understood it. She'd been going around the clock with him, twice now. "What...what's Maquis...ETA?" he asked.

She frowned. "They should have arrived this morning. --I know. We expected them to be late."

Had he the strength, he'd have shrugged. Instead, he looked at the water bottle and opened his lips for another sip. "Setup?" he asked.

"It's mostly done," she answered, her face unchanged. "The environmental shield still isn't cooperating with the converter and I really don't care. One of their people said they moved bases a lot, so they probably won't be here long enough for it to matter."

Tom took that with a blink. He was in no position to say otherwise. "So...now what?"

"We wait, I suppose." She set the water bottle on her lap. "Too bad we don't have your... What was it? Atari?"

He breathed a little laugh. "I wish. But...have an idea."

"Now," he whispered slowly, gesturing to the stack, "you draw one, slip it into your hand...now decide, whether or not it matches up with anything you've got--or anything you think I've got, or might want. If not, discard it."

"And you decide whether or not you want it or draw from the stack," B'Elanna concluded with a nod. "Easy enough."

Tom grinned. "Pretty much."

She looked at her hand, clumsily clutched in her bad hand, halfway against her chest. According to the rules he defined, she could lay down two sets already. "And you actually wager on this game?"

"Poker more often...but every now and again, I meet a rummy player. I always miss rummy. Played it

a lot, when I was a kid.... Now, here's the twist to the game. You see...see how we're spreading out the discard pile?"

B'Elanna smiled as Tom proceeded to explain another strategy of the game to her. Resigned to whispering, almost too weak to set the cards down correctly, probably dying as they wasted their time there, he was somehow keeping his spirits up with as little as a card game. It amazed her in a way, how such a simple thing could inspire him so well.

Her smile melted, however, when he set his hand aside and groaned. "Where?"

Tom tried for breath for nearly a minute. It came on and spread like flame on a pool of oil. Scuttling the cards, he pressed against the back of his chair, trying to get the words, trying, if anything, to look at B'Elanna again. When he did, he felt for her. She really didn't know what the hell to do but what he told her--which couldn't be fun. "Right side, under my ribs, deep," he finally managed between his teeth.

B'Elanna activated the tricorder and checked the regenerator. "We'll need to recharge them both again. The signal's not strong in this tricorder."

"Yeah. I'll show you...the regenerator beam will be the same. Put those...put them down a second." Tom opened his tunic and took her hand. Pressing her fingers to his torso, he clenched his teeth and let out his breath so she could feel where the swelling was. She took over a moment later, slipping her sensitive fingertips down around the muscle there. He coughed a soft laugh. "You know, this'd be exciting if it didn't hurt so damned much."

"Maybe next time," she dryly replied and activated the tissue regenerator.

"The one time I *can* excuse a relapse and there's not a drop around." B'Elanna glanced up at him from the rations she knew she had to eat rather than wanted to. Night had fallen, quiet save the warm, rustling breeze. The cards were set aside for good. They'd lasted a good few hours, but Tom couldn't hold a hand, and his head was hurting too much to focus. He was fully reclined, trying to keep his breathing steady and failing more often than not. His voice was ragged, but keeping it low helped. B'Elanna had been trying for a while to keep him going. Thankfully, he seemed to need to talk.

"You still want it," she said, only half a question.

"Hmm. No. Not really." He blinked, remembering... "It's not the taste anymore, but escaping, yeah...I can't help that sometimes. The numb...was good."

"I remember you saying so." B'Elanna thought about that for a moment.

"Don't even know...why I went along with the doc's advice. Not at first. I walked out of his sickbay not thinking I cared. But it was done...and when I saw where I'd been, I couldn't go back again."

"Maybe you have less to run from now, too," she suggested.

Tom's lips turned up. "Yeah, maybe. Or I'm just done...with running."

"It does get old," she softly rejoined.

He eyed her, there, but didn't say anything. "I have all the same impulses...but it's different. It's just hard to know...where to put them."

Finished with eating, B'Elanna set aside her tray and leaned back in her seat. "Have any hobbies?" she asked.

"Too many," he smiled, his bloodshot eyes closing for a long moment. They opened slowly, all but lost when he focused again. "If I hadn't loved being a pilot so much...I think I could have been a historian."

B'Elanna smiled, too. "I would *never* have guessed that."

"I love antiques," he confirmed, "and anything else...around the twentieth century. Great century, so much fun, so much to know."

"It was war torn then, wasn't it?"

"Violent, screwed up, politically insane...materialistic and totally oblivious; but there was a lot of change that...came on quickly, a lot of development, progress despite it all.... Anyway, a lot of it's been a hobby for me, especially combustion engines. Had a car at home I used to work on. God, I loved that thing...and my old movie collection. You can't build a life around that stuff...though you couldn't have told me that five, six years ago."

B'Elanna laughed a little at that. "I guess not."

"But lately, what I'm thinking about...want to look at more, is holo-technology--structured programs, all that. I like to write programs, when I can. I always wanted to look at...writing holonovels."

B'Elanna nodded. "They are the latest thing, and you have good programming skills. You should download some information when we're at DS-Nine next time--or I can for you. I'm in their databanks every time we're close enough to ask permission."

Tom nodded his thanks with a blink. "If we get out of this."

"Your optimism is really catchy."

"Well...I'm not up for dying just yet," he softly assured her. "I joke around, but...I'm not quite ready yet. And...aside from not wanting to give Seska whatshername the satisfaction, I don't want you to...have to deal with those people, alone."

Leaning down close to him, she told him, "You're not going anywhere if I can help it."

He held her eyes in his for several long seconds as his grin replayed itself upon his lips. To his pleasant surprise, he was almost certain he saw her blush. "That's good to know," he whispered. Watching her nod and pull safely away, he let them both off the hook and continued, "In any case, if I'd been sober and sane enough, at the time...I would have gone right back in and retrained after the court martial, started writing full time."

"You couldn't have been able to handle that then, though, considering."

"I couldn't handle *anything*," he breathed, almost in wonder to remember it--not that those days had ever left, even with sobriety and a certain amount of letting go. Or so he thought. It felt so far away from his present life, though still undoubtedly a part of him. He'd never thought about it so much until just then. "I lost...everything, B'Elanna. Everything that mattered...everything that didn't but I used,

anyway. I lost my home...or at least my sense of it...and I left soon enough that...I couldn't go back... My career, my best friend, my...innocence. --It sounds corny, putting it like that, but there's no other word...I can think of. I was no saint, but I was, well...blissfully unaware of what could happen. I had it all. I couldn't have imagined...what I ended up with. Not in a million years."

"You still made a lot of it," B'Elanna offered.

"No way it compared to what I had...or thought I had. But I did do okay, yeah." He paused, tilting his head in a shrug. "The programming...that's a creative outlet I can...I can live with. I could be good at it if I got the time...to learn the tech. So, I have options. Just haven't dug in yet." He watched her nod. "You're doing what you want."

She grinned a little. "I always had my mind set on engineering, from the first day I took apart an old replicator at Oscar's lot."

"How old were you?"

"About nine."

Tom smiled again. "You must have been cute as hell."

"I was shy," B'Elanna told him, not catching the compliment for the unearthed memories. Thankfully, the sting of it was not nearly what it had been before their Ulinas stop. Much against her expectation, seeing and then writing her father, having his reassurance and perhaps even friendship, really made a difference, in quiet ways. Sometimes, she believed she might actually be able to try again with her mother, too. Her father had recently brought up the idea, stopping short of actually recommending it. "I had a better time in high school, when I felt like I could do more," she continued. "I was always into things, seeing how they worked, and keeping moving. I was always busy with sports or projects. I couldn't stand being bored."

"That hasn't changed," Tom noted, still amused.

"Neither did my concentration," she said.

"That's a good thing. You could really run the table...anywhere you went."

"Yes, I *know*," she snapped. "I already promised *twice* I'd tell you if I found something better and I will, if only to get you off my back about it."

Tom sighed. "I'm sorry, B'Elanna. I just can't help it...seeing your gift. I like to think...we're friends. As a friend, I want you to have...all you deserve, all you can get."

She gazed at him. His words came between breaths, now, all of them apologetic, but honest and warm with regard for her, even as weak as he was becoming. He wasn't trying to push her off. He simply had an intimate understanding of what it was like to go untested, and he happened to give a damn about her being in the same situation. *Why do I keep doing that?* she wondered. *More forces of habit at work*, she answered herself. Shaking her head, she shrugged. "Forget about it."

"I am sorry."

"I know."

"You...You there...B'Elanna?"

"I'm right here," she assured him, forcing something close to normal into her tone. His eyes were closed, after all. She didn't have to try to look it, too. "Don't worry. I'll take the watch. I'm right here."

He dragged a fitful breath; his hand twitched. "I'm sick," he muttered.

"They'll be here soon. I'll get you taken care of. We've been up all night. Get some sleep. They'll probably be here before you wake up."

"Yeah." He pulled a shorter breath. "Okay...thanks."

Finally, he gave it up. He'd fought all day through the pain and weakness, but finally had to let go.

B'Elanna was stuck between relief and concern to watch his body finally relax. Despite all she said, she had to wonder if those could be his last words. She wondered if *he* thought they could be.

Slowly sighing out her breath, she touched his hair, stared at his face. Handsome, expressive, but drawn and pale, there seemed to be no peace in that sleep, either. Idly, she wondered if he was the only one getting their just reward. Maybe there was something to be said about that odd superstition of his.

But then she shook her head of such thinking and moved to get something to drink. Perhaps she could find *something* to do while she waited for that damned regenerator to charge again, besides reconsider how the shuttle really malfunctioned. She'd run three full diagnostics on the shuttle's reverse thrusters knowing they would need them to land. There was no way they had a hidden defect. The thought hadn't struck her in a couple days for being busy and tending after Tom, but now she had plenty of time for conspiracy theories. She wished she could reexamine those thrusters.

Perhaps her hatred would keep her occupied, instead. It certainly was keeping her warm.

"Ten, eight, two, one, queen..."

B'Elanna looked up from the stack when she saw some movement, but it was the same move as he'd been making all day--a spasm, followed by a jerky breath. No matter what she did, he was still in pain. His vital signs remained steady thanks to her work on him every ninety minutes or so, but he could rupture at any minute. They were into the fourth day. She wouldn't need to keep mending him much longer.

Again, she looked down and resumed her sorting. "Ten, king, three, jack..."

She'd been sorting for over an hour.

She hadn't slept. She couldn't--wouldn't.

There was nothing more she could do with the base units--and nothing more she wanted to do besides completely disassemble them and transport them piece by piece into a swirl of plasma. So, she dealt out the cards, one by one, looking at the face cards, the stony impassion, two-dimensional below name

value. When she was done, she'd collect them all and start again.

Tom hadn't gotten around to teaching her solitaire. She had learned it when she was very young, but had forgotten the rules. She could go to the shuttle and look it up, but it wasn't nearly tempting enough to get her away from Tom's side. With her luck, the Maquis would come, beam her to their ship and leave Tom there to die. --Or not, but the image had passed through her mind, effectively keeping her where she was. For that matter, she was determined to have him teach her sometime. Though, if they got back to the Guerdon, she knew they'd soon get back to their schedule of deals (such as they were lately) and constant repairs and maintenance. She'd never get around to asking him how to play a card game. She probably would never ask the computer.

In her weak moments, she hoped until her chest hurt that she would be able to forget about asking him.

Against her will, she remembered how he looked on Ulinas, so bright and alive that day he teased her about going sailing. His hair tossed in the breeze, his eyes shone above that quirky smile...how it fell into her, made her indeed want to run along and skid dangerously along the water, though she of course would never have thrown off work that day. She was so glad she'd thought to waste their time with it later, when they needed it...and still wanted it. It was the best afternoon she'd had in years, not an hour after it was one of the worst.

He twitched again.

"Seven, queen, nine, nine..."

The breeze picked up outside, a herald to the oncoming dusk. "Computer, seal room." Forcefields rose over the windows and doors.

She could see his fingers flying across the control panels of the Ligarán shuttle, his eyes set intently on their path. He pulled out several incredibly complex maneuvers as if they were nothing, and that in a craft he'd only flown that once. At the Hugora Nebula, during both attacks, she hadn't been on the bridge, but she knew that he'd flown the hell out of his bulky freighter and kept them alive, and did the same during the other attacks, too. B'Elanna flipped another card. So much talent, intelligence, instinct, all gone because the forces around him wouldn't leave him the hell alone and get on with his life. She remembered the look on his face when she asked about his father. He was wise to her roundabout method, but let it go--and even opened up about his family...let her in, let her know him.

She knew he didn't talk so candidly about himself anywhere else. Even Ridge didn't know many details about Tom's family, aside from his having a couple of sisters and that his parents lived in San Francisco. Maryl told B'Elanna that Tom had never brought the topic up with any of the crew because his father was so high profile and he didn't want the attention. None of them talked much about their families, really.

Tom had opened up to her, though...and now it was over.

This isn't worth the pain, she growled to herself. Why do I let myself get like this?

She looked down again.

The deck was finished.

She gathered all the cards together, packed them into a stack once again and split that stack into two. Then she shuffled, several times. She was getting better at it with each round, and she felt a sort of soothing effect with the melding of those cards between her hands. Pausing with the split stack in her

ready fingers, she stared at him again, not for any reason anymore. Without looking down, she shuffled some more, then again...and again.

Her heart began to thrum as her mind replayed the look on his face when the thrusters failed. He'd handled it well--better than she probably would have. He saved their lives with his skill and resolve, and now he was dying thinking it was a balance.

Dying because of...

She almost didn't believe her eyes when she saw that very reason stroll around the corner, looking curiously around at the installation as though he were on vacation. A dark, barrel-chested man with a little height, same leather vest, same tattoo, healthy and wide awake. Even a smile had found his small mouth. He was impressed. He was pleased.

Her heart thrummed in a wash of rage.

Captain Chakotay finally found what he was looking for, one of whom already found her feet, dropping what looked like playing cards on the dirt-smeared floor. "Torres," he acknowledged with a polite nod.

"You son of a bitch!" she snarled and lunged out at him.

Surprised at her attack, Chakotay still didn't need to do much to stop her, holding her good arm with both of his hands. "It couldn't be avoided," he assured her firmly, holding her wide-open glare in his steady one.

Twisting out of his grip, B'Elanna stepped back again so that her calves were pressed against the edge of Tom's cot. "Where the hell have you been?!" she demanded.

"Trying to get here. Again, the delay couldn't be avoided."

"Oh, I'm *sure* you took every pain to live up to *your* plans!"

Choosing not to respond at that time then looking around to the captain lying unconscious behind the livid engineer, Chakotay calmly tapped his comm badge. "This is Chakotay. I have them. Have you found the shuttle?"

"*The shuttle is in the bay now,*" answered an easy-voiced man.

"Good. Transport three--one with the bunk he's on."

Within seconds, they were facing an empty cargo bay. B'Elanna looked around to see only a few people there to greet them.

Chakotay tapped his badge again. "Get us back on the map route--get us out of here," he immediately ordered, trying to see Paris' face. What little he did see didn't look good.

B'Elanna's brow furrowed as she lowered herself next to Tom. "Not even going to inspect my work?" she asked derisively.

"There's been a change of plans," he replied and motioned to someone across the bay. "It's too hot here. This base's location was leaked to the Cardassians, or they hunted it out. Either way, we can't stay."

"So?"

"So we're vacating."

B'Elanna glared at him. "You mean Tom and I went through all of this for *nothing*?!"

"We'll come back later," he told her simply. "For now, though, we have a couple agents who'll pack everything up for safe keeping."

Breathing through her fury at that spectacular waste of time and energy--and quite possibly a life, too--B'Elanna kept a firm grip on Tom's jacket shoulder as a dark-skinned Vulcan approached and knelt next to him. His straight, impassive stare was only slightly less pleasant than Savan's, but his motions were markedly rigid. "He stays with me," B'Elanna warned him.

"I do not intend to separate you," said the man. "I will rather require assistance to take him to the quarters you were assigned."

"We need a doctor," B'Elanna told him, then looked up at Chakotay. "And for now, whatever medical equipment you have. He has internal injuries from when we crashed in that shuttle you assigned us."

"I'll try to contact one in our network," the captain told her, "and I'll like to know eventually what happened."

"What *happened*?! " B'Elanna spat, but reined it back for the more immediate. The Vulcan had already signaled another Maquis to help him pick up the other side of the bunk and seconds later was ready to go. "You find some time. I'll tell you what happened." Going out with the others, she added under her breath, "You treacherous bastard," and ignored the fact that the two Maquis there could hear her perfectly well.

As they turned the corner and entered an open lift, she heard Chakotay announce his return to the bridge. Drawing a deep breath through her nostrils, she planted her feet and waited.

The lift gate shut with a slam.

XI. What Comes Around

B'Elanna watched as the two Maquis gently transferred Tom onto the bunk he'd used on the way out--or at least the Vulcan did, slow to shift his burden and watchful over how Tom's discolored and lifeless arms were placed, he then draped Tom's coat over him again. The human-looking Maquis released the trader as quickly as possible, brushing off his hands when he moved back and away and noisily dragged the cot out of the quarters. The Vulcan remained behind to assess the man before him in what ways he could.

As Tom's lifeless form sank into the plain, thin mattress, B'Elanna leaned over to readjust his legs and tried not to make any sounds as she did so. She had a great deal of natural strength, but his limbs were like pure duranium. Or maybe she was more drained than she wanted to admit. Either way, his legs were straightened, and with a sweep of the tricorder she still had in her pocket, she could see that the transportation hadn't caused any more damage. Not that there was much more *to do* to him.

Brushing Tom's hair from his forehead with a cursory air, B'Elanna glanced back at the figure silhouetted in the stark ceiling light.

"You are also injured," the Vulcan noted.

"It's fine, a clean break."

"Nevertheless, you will be of better use to your captain and less burden on this crew, if the injury is treated. We have the necessary equipment."

She snorted. "I'm sure it gets a lot of use around here."

"Indeed." Eyeing her, he then asked, "I take it you are not a Maquis."

Her stare narrowed. "About as far from it as we can be without having been roped into helping you people."

He took that in with a blink. "Understood."

B'Elanna nodded rigidly, looking back to Tom. "I'll take that bone knitter, by the way. My captain's ribs need a better job, too."

"I will bring you the equipment presently," the Vulcan replied. "Also, I believe we may be able to find the Norshaka, which has a medic able to treat Captain Paris' injuries."

She looked at him. "Thank you," she said, meaning it that time.

He bowed his head slightly and left without reply.

The door lock wasn't difficult to reprogram. That old model ship and the lack of personal security there made it a simple matter to reinforce the entrance. B'Elanna backed swiftly away when it was done to hurry to the supply closet for the rations and recharged power cells the man had said she could use. She knew that anyone who wanted to get into those quarters could with the transporter, or could simply transport Tom out. Double sealing the door was what she *could* do, however.

The trip across the top deck, through the lateral corridor and empty crew mess to the storage on the other side, was not very long but decidedly unpleasant. The hard-faced, canvas and leather clad people she passed stared long at her, assessing her, perhaps even accusing her. In between them was the corridor itself, all gray, etched with orange LEDs and grounded with brown grate floors; all areas were lit at fifty percent at best, and a heavy chemical odor hung in the air. The rumblings of the systems behind the bulkheads echoed and ebbed, then pinged out again. It felt like a cave...or the recesses of a smelter.

B'Elanna's back remained arrow straight through the journey around the deck.

Checking the panel to make certain she had found the right place, she entered the code the Vulcan had given her and waited. The doors opened about eight centimeters. Looking around, B'Elanna stuck her fingers in and pulled them open the rest of the way. They squeaked and grinded in protest, but finally sank into the bulkheads. Inside the wide room was a haphazard collection of various ration packs, nutrition bars, scanning devices and cells for every kind of equipment possible--all an excellent diversion from her tension.

"Who *stocks* this place?" she breathed, beside herself that power supplies and food were kept in the same place. Thankfully, the rations were well sealed.

As she quickly scanned the cells for the models she needed, she heard the footsteps, then voices come into the mess.

"When will you be leaving?"

"As soon as this is done and the shuttle is repaired. --And I need you to take over that."

Seska and Chakotay, B'Elanna instantly knew and rolled her eyes. She was hoping to get in and out without meeting anyone. One of the two activated the rickety replicator on the other end of the room. It sounded more like a food slot.

"I'll see it's done right this time."

B'Elanna nearly squeezed her nails through the hard-sealed package in her fingers.

"Do you have any prospects?" the Bajoran then asked.

"A few. I shouldn't be gone long. Take the Liberty to Solosos anyway, train our new man in the new security routes."

"You think he's a fit?" she asked suspiciously.

"I've been getting to know him better. He's a standard expatriate, only that being Vulcan makes him more difficult to know. He'll fit in well."

"If you say so."

"I do say so. Also, try to get those fittings from Rodrigo."

"He won't have them," Seska insisted. "And you know I can do a lot more than sit around there."

"No," Chakotay said flatly. "You'll stay there and get the work done on base. The last time I let you run a raid alone, we almost died in the water for deuterium depletion."

"That was Jonas and you know it!" Seska snapped. "How long are you going to blame me for his mistake?"

"As long as you refuse to see that when you're in command, you're responsible for *all* the crew and *my* ship. You should have rotated the crew and picked up the stores as we'd planned."

"Even you said that was a great lead."

"That was before I knew you missed the pickup."

"Chakotay--"

"We're fighting to the death out here," he retorted. "We were almost made the loser for that 'great lead.' I'll blame you as much as I feel it's necessary to prevent it from happening again. The hatch is on deck four forward when you stop wanting to accept it."

She breathed audibly, but calmed in the time it took her to exhale it back out again. "You know I don't want to find that hatch."

A pause. "I don't want you to, either."

"Good." Her footsteps followed the word.

Within the storage, B'Elanna's mouth had turned down, but she didn't bother thinking too much into it, aside from the fact that it was the best proof she had to date that Chakotay was indeed the captain. Seska gave the impression of control, while the captain seemed to know how to work with her, but he obviously knew where to cut her off, too. Not that it mattered as far as B'Elanna and Tom were concerned. Chakotay was still running that rig and had already made plenty of decisions that'd made their lives hell. Nothing told B'Elanna that he wouldn't again when it was convenient for him to do so. Finally finding the last of what she needed, B'Elanna came out of the little room with three packs of rations under an arm and three cells stuffed into her jacket pocket. The doors slammed shut behind her and she slumped. *So much for getting through here quietly.* Straightening again, propelling herself forward, she turned the corner and saw Chakotay sitting at a table with a PADD and a glass of something reddish. She did not slow down, but offered a blink of acknowledgement as she went by.

"How is Paris?" he asked her.

Coming to a stop, she glanced back his way. "The same," she muttered, feeling her chest tighten.

"When we're clear of Nivoch, we'll be able to contact others in our sect, find someone who can do more for him."

She adjusted the rations as they started to slip in her arm. It was still a little weak from the treatment she'd had to apply herself. She hoped she'd done it right. "How long will that be?"

"We'll be out of the Badlands in ten hours, given your flight plan is as useful backwards." Watching her nod again and prepare to leave, he added, "I'll have Tuvok look in on you soon. He's new, so if you need anything and he doesn't know, you can contact me. But you can trust him."

B'Elanna frowned. Contacting the Maquis captain was possibly the last thing she wanted to do. Likewise, trusting anyone on that ship was not something she'd considered. Nodding, she continued on her way.

She quickly got the door open and went into the quarters not a minute later. Looking quickly at Tom, she released her breath to see him still in his place and breathing, still shallow but steady. B'Elanna half expected to come in and see him gone, having heard Seska go off before her.

He'd need another go with the regenerator within the hour.

She decided to eat first. She wouldn't want to later.

She jerked her head up from the mattress edge when she heard the door beep. "Yes!" she said abruptly. She hadn't meant to fall asleep. Shooting a look at the beeping tricorder beside her, she'd done so less than ten minutes ago. She sighed and forced herself to straighten.

She didn't ask when she saw Chakotay at the door, though she was mildly surprised that to see him running errands. He carried in two rectangular cases by the handles in one hand and a slightly apologetic look on his face. Her responsive expression wordlessly told him to say what he needed to say. Seemingly unbothered, he came in and dropped the boxes by the chair, then stopped at the end of the bunk.

"I thought you'd like to have your toolkit back," he said.

She glanced at it. "Those aren't my tools," she said. "But thank you, anyway."

He smiled a little at her admission, but kept his interpretation to himself. Instead, he moved around to the other side of Tom and knelt down. Looking the younger man over then glancing at the dark-eyed engineer's protective stare, he stood again. "No change?"

"The treatments hold him where he is for the most part," she told him. "There are five small ruptures. Two are worse than the others; I need to watch them."

"Hopefully, we'll be able to find our friends as soon as we're clear." Chakotay continued to consider the other captain. "I have one of my technicians looking into the malfunction on the shuttle."

"The landing thrusters failed when my captain activated them," B'Elanna informed him purposefully. "I ran every diagnostic possible when I first got to look at that shuttle. There shouldn't have been a malfunction."

"You think there was sabotage?"

"I know there was," she stated.

Chakotay took it with a shrug, though he wasn't pleased to hear it. "Considering how many people on board weren't fond of Paris, I'm not surprised. That said, I will see that if someone is responsible for tampering with the shuttle, they will suffer consequences."

"Someone already has," she returned. "Do whatever you like, Captain Chakotay, but it won't change what happened."

He nodded. "If it means anything, I admire your captain. From what I've seen, he's made good after having to walk through more than a few minefields."

"Fields made no less crowded by you," B'Elanna pointed out.

Chakotay's frown returned. "I'm trying to apologize for what happened, Torres," he quietly told her. "I don't need to, but I do take responsibility for the people I have working for me."

She exhaled with a shake of her head. "Look, if you came in here thinking I'd be receptive to anything besides, 'I have a doctor' or 'We're transporting you to the Guerdon right now,' that was your *most recent* mistake. I don't need your apology. I need someone to treat my captain's injuries, my ship flying alongside yours and a transport for my captain and me. That's *it*."

"I'm sorry you see it that way," Chakotay said, moving back around toward the door. Stopping before it, he looked at the diminutive woman once again. She was still seated on a stool beside the bunk, her emptied ration pack at the toe of a boot, glaring at him as though she were looking down at him, instead. Still wearing the sooty jumpsuit she'd had on the day before, she looked like she'd just crawled out from a warp coil scrub job, and was twice as tired. He thought better than to offer her a change of clothes. But her refusal to listen bothered him somehow, too, so he continued, "It's been a hard fight out here for us. We've lost everything but that--our worlds, our people, everything we had and believed in. Our fight's only begun, so consider yourself lucky to get any kindness at all. When I come here--"

"I'm sure your fight is important to you," B'Elanna interrupted, more annoyed with every word, "and I've never said it wasn't, so stop trying to sell me to it. Nice try, but there's no chance in hell I'm going along with it."

He frowned. "I'm not selling anything to you."

"Then stop assuming I'm interested in hearing your side of the story. We've had more than enough of *your* side of things."

"You and Paris have both made it clear that you're--."

"It can't be made clear enough," she snapped, "what you've done. We've been cleaning up after your 'good fight' for months and I'm sick of hearing how justified you are." Chakotay pressed his lips together as he let her words cycle in. True to his words, he wasn't so far gone, so embittered and angry, that he would come down too hard on a contractor's assistant who apparently had every reason to thoroughly hate him and everyone associated with him. The obvious strain of Klingon ancestry seemed to put even more ferocity into her assertions. He also knew he sometimes needed to hear dissention. Even so, it was good thing she was his guest. Had Torres been some random passer-by, he'd have gladly put her into a bulkhead for cursing the fight for which he'd sacrificed everything.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a stack of palm-sized, cardboard paper. "You play much?" he asked.

She glanced at the neat stack of cards in his hand. She had thrown them to the floor when she saw him at the base. "No."

He blinked his attention down to it. "No, I guess not." Drawing a long, even breath, he set the deck on the table as he left the room.

"I'll be back," B'Elanna said quietly to the unmoving form in the bunk, knowing he couldn't hear her. She didn't bother looking back, but slipped the dead power cells into her pocket, stepped out of the doors and activated the lock code. Turning into the semi-dark corridor, she headed out to the storage room once again.

She wasn't particularly hungry yet, and she still had a couple hours before needing to administer another treatment on Tom. Now that they were both aboard the Maquis ship again and not going anywhere else for a few more days at least, there was only so long she could sit around and watch him breathe and twitch and feel little but uselessness, anger and resentment without the ability to vent.

Tom's color had gone from reddish to a kind of purplish sallow that made his past illness look not so bad. The tricorder's medical warnings were bothersome. Her spinning thoughts had become even more so. The Maquis ship was moving too damned slowly. She was incredibly bored and too tired to know how exactly tired she was anymore. She felt like she could sleep for a month, but knew she couldn't risk more than an hour. So, every few hours or so, she had to stretch her legs, get a grip and force herself to clear the fog from her head.

A short trip out wasn't a big deal in any case. Ten minutes. No problem. She propelled herself forward into the outer ring of the web-shaped deck, forcing herself to breathe deeply, clench and loosen her fists, roll her shoulders.

"Torres, just who I was looking for."

B'Elanna glanced up from her crossed arms to see the one person she was *not* looking for. "Seska," she said, mustering some measure of neutrality. After her conversation with Chakotay that afternoon, she remembered what Tom had said when they first came aboard, about having to work with those people to keep things going smoothly. No matter what she said, Chakotay would do what he wanted, and her bad attitude would only make things worse, not better. As usual, though, she didn't consider this until *after* an explosion. --Not that she was sorry for it. Captain Chakotay needed to know where she stood. She simply decided that she didn't need to repeat it. So, she decided to make *some* effort to reign herself in. Even so, she would have preferred not having to talk to anyone there again.

"How is your captain?" Seska asked, effectively stopping the half-Klingon in the corridor by standing directly in the middle of it. The woman meant to speak with her.

"The same."

The Bajoran let an appropriate pause pass. "Look, Chakotay talked to me about your feelings about us."

"He did?" B'Elanna said, hardly a question.

"Yes, and... Well, I apologize for pushing you so hard before, when you first came aboard. You and

your crew have obviously seen everything negative about us, and you've suffered for it."

B'Elanna straightened. "We have," she confirmed.

"Desperation can be our worst enemy sometimes," Seska admitted, staring directly into her eyes. Holding her there a moment longer, she drew a new breath. "We have a few regrets on our logs, things we won't repeat for the consequences we understood only after the fact. I think you know what I'm referring to. But in the last few months, we've gotten ourselves organized, well-stocked and connected, and we only raid Cardassian supply ships now."

A shrug was B'Elanna's only reply.

"I know my feelings for Paris aren't positive," the Bajoran continued, "and I know I've done a great job of showing it, but even I have to admit he's done good work for us. You have, too. --This is the long way of *thanking* you before you leave for what you've done and apologizing for it being not worth everything you've been through in the end, with the base shift and all. I can imagine how infuriating that would be, on top of everything else that's happened. I'd have been livid, were it me."

B'Elanna continued to stare at the other woman, at first not knowing what to believe. Tired as she was, she could see that Seska showed every evidence of sincerity. Her tone and even her body language was completely non-confrontational. Maybe the woman did deserve some benefit of the doubt. "Thanks," she quietly said.

"Really, Torres. I'm not trying to 'sell' you, or however you put it to Chakotay. I hate that we can't convince you to get on our roster, and I wish I could show you what we do *right* around here, but that doesn't mean I'm ungrateful for what you've done."

"And I really meant thanks," B'Elanna replied, feeling her instincts crawl alongside her confusion that time. The last time she had spoken to Seska, her friendliness froze into threats in a turn. Thinking on that, she said, purposefully brusque, "I need fresh power cells. Do you mind getting out of my way?"

Seska did not deliver the response she expected. She instead moved immediately aside. "That's right. I didn't mean to keep you. You know where everything is, so just get what you need. See you later." The woman then walked away, not looking back.

B'Elanna was left in the dark, amber-lit corridor, furrowing her brow and wondering if that was worth trying to figure out.

"Later," she said to herself and started moving again down to the storage room, half expecting all the while to turn a corner and find someone else waiting in the way. No such person appeared, however, and she shook her head at her paranoia. Proper as it might have been there and then, it didn't make her think any more clearly. Tapping in the code for the door, she knew that time to stick her foot in and wedge the plates along their tracks. They opened with only a plaintive squeal that time.

Moving to the end of the shelves, she stacked up an arm with two meals she didn't bother trying to choose, a couple extra in the hope that Tom would be awake to eat one or two soon. Not that he'd likely be up for eating any of them, even if he miraculously developed an appetite in addition to regaining consciousness. From what she'd tasted of that batch of stolen nutrition, it was nothing to wake up to.

Hearing the squawk, B'Elanna pivoted with the rations clutched against her chest. She immediately found herself eye-to-eye with a handsome, brown-haired Maquis holding a tricorder and looking straight into her eyes. He did not smile or inspect what she carried, but he seemed to memorize her in a

sweeping glance before speaking.

"Hi," he said.

"Hello," she replied and looked around him to an empty shelf where the power cells she needed had once been.

"I'm Bendera. Are you Torres?"

"Yes."

Confirmed, he gave a single nod. "Okay. Chakotay told me you'd be mousing around. Good to meet you." Had her hands not been occupied, he might have reached out to shake one. He settled on a short bow and a brief smile of welcome. "Don't mind me. I'm just getting the numbers on these last units."

"The cells I need aren't there. Do you know where they are?"

He breathed a laugh of confirmation. "Yeah, between you and Larson, the five-three-thetas've been taking a beating this week--and they're not too good to begin with."

Shifting the packs to one side, B'Elanna pulled the dead cells out of her pocket for him. "I noticed they wear down quickly."

"Problem with contraband," he said and tossed the cells into his bag. "No telling how much they'd been used before we got them."

"Have you tried replacing the sub-central diode?"

"That'd probably help," he remarked. "If we get our hands on anything we could use as replacement material, I might give that a shot. Thanks."

Reaching around him, B'Elanna checked the label on another cell unit, noted it was labeled incorrectly, then stuck it back where it'd been with a sigh. "I miss my stockroom," she grumbled, "even if it's probably as populated as this one is."

"I'll bet you're homesick," Bendera grinned wistfully. "I'd like to be able to get back, too."

She eyed him. "Don't tell me, you lost everything."

"No, just where we'd been living--but we hadn't been there long, to be honest. We've always been a little gypsy-like. But anyway, my family vacated to Betazed, which is safe and entertaining enough. At this point, though, I'd be dumped into the nearest prison if Starfleet spotted me, so Betazed's a no-go." He shrugged sheepishly. "They know my face." Choosing not to go into it further, he motioned to his bag. "You know, I can get you fresh ones now. The recharge unit's on deck three."

B'Elanna paused, considering the man's plain, friendly face. Unlike Seska, her skin didn't crawl at the sight of him...much the opposite, in fact. But she knew what waited for her in the next section. She had time before having to administer another treatment, but she didn't want to have to leave Tom right before one. "I need the five-three-t's and a set of dicosilium packs."

Bendera looked down the row. "Yeah, the packs are also on deck three. I can bring them up."

She smiled--a little, almost not wanting to. "Thanks. But I don't want to take you away from what

you're doing."

"It's my job--for today, anyway," he grinned. "Come on, then, I'll show you, get you what you need. --Don't worry. Chakotay's been keeping the people you should be worried about busy."

B'Elanna stared at him, not certain whether to be grateful for the reassurance or put off by the fact that her and Tom's position there was such common knowledge.

Bendera laughed. "What? You think we haven't had to deal with reprisal problems before?"

With a shrug, she crossed her arms and followed him out and through the near-dark central corridor to the main lift. The squat bucket lift jerked a little when Bendera activated it, but otherwise lowered them without a jolt between the decks. It only served to remind B'Elanna of that nagging repair on the Guerdon she'd had at the end of her basic list, fixing that vertical deathtrap the Bolian builders hadn't installed right in the first place. It would make getting things up and down a lot easier, but B'Elanna and Ridge both had been fixed on other issues.

She sighed tightly, her fingernails digging into her palms. More things she never thought she'd miss: that never ending repair list, Ridge jogging her shoulder as he passed her in the lounge, Maryl snipping as she devoured the blue PADD, seeing Tom stroll down to the deck. His hair was always brushed cursorily with his fingers; his hands were stuffed in his pockets as his gaze found hers to say a good-natured, "Morning, B'Elanna," before getting on with what he needed...

B'Elanna hunched over a little, killing the thought as soon as her blood rose with it. "How far is this room?" she asked curtly, looking down the noisy, busy corridor when they got to it. She recognized it as the way to the shuttle bay.

Bendera pointed. "Just around this turn. You'll get back without a problem."

"Yes, we took this corridor when we were brought back here."

"You probably used the tube lift the other time, then."

"We did." It was small talk, but it helped. Mentally noting the location that time, she followed a full pace behind the red-vested man, willfully ignoring the attention she attracted just by walking down there. Hushed whispers between crewmembers raced behind her; some brushed shoulders with her, shooting her challenging or just curious looks. With another turn, they entered the recharge room and Bendera immediately crossed it to pull down a plate of packs from the wall unit. The cells were still in the charge pins.

B'Elanna looked around as she moved into the room. Like everything else there, it was in an inefficient space, as the main engineering block was a deck below and aft. She shrugged it off as before, though, taking the needed power cells.

Bendera handed her another set. "Take them," he insisted. "Larson won't be back on until first shift. You'll go through the first set before I'm able to stock on deck one."

B'Elanna nodded and stuffed them into the handled tray he also gave her. She set the other cells in. "Thanks, Bendera," she said and moved to leave.

"No problem," he replied.

She glanced back in at him. He was already back to work, as though she hadn't even been there.

Shrugging to herself, she turned to go back to the lift. There was at least one person on the ship she knew to go to for the cells. That was something. Moving through deck three again, the industrial sounds of the ship in full shift, the rough voices and hollow clangs, surrounded her again without distraction. More crewpeople shouldered by, each of them looking at her, probably knowing more about what would happen to her and the patient two decks up than she did at that point. They said nothing, however. She was able to cross the middle section and get to the lift without being stopped.

Stepping off a minute later, she caught a waft of old air from the environmental unit and shivered. The goosebumps on her arms hardly formed for all the grime on them, though. She slumped and plowed ahead, trying not to remember how long it'd been since she'd showered.

Her run-in with Seska crossed her mind again, and she furrowed her brow. Between her and Bendera's unadorned assistance, B'Elanna didn't know what to believe about them. She appreciated it when people leveled with her, even when it was something she didn't want to hear, so the Bajoran's approach certainly was a plus, and she had been straightforward about her feelings. But Seska's hatred of Tom and her quick to manifest acidity continued to tick in B'Elanna's head. Something in her eyes bothered her, as well. She couldn't put her finger on it...

She shook the thought aside, though. It wasn't anything she needed to deal with right away and nothing those people did or could do would ever change had had happened.

Stretching out her shoulders as best she could with the load inside of her arms, B'Elanna made her way around the corner in little time, drawing a full breath and mentally organizing what she needed to do and in what order.

Then she saw the light in the corridor--coming from what she was sure was her assigned quarters. At first, she froze, but then she moved forward, again, speeding to a run when her brain caught up with her instinct. Coming up to the door and cutting into the room, she only needed a glimpse at the tall man with the phaser to know what was going on.

"Get out!" she bellowed and charged at him. Just as he turned and his face reflected surprise, she jumped forward and whacked the weapon out of his hand, sending it clattering across the floor.

His other fist shot up and caught B'Elanna across the cheek, snapping her head to the side.

She immediately railed back with her elbow in his gut, then her fist into his chin. He came back on the rebound, though, catching her cheek again with a resounding smack. B'Elanna spun off to the door panel. Feeling her head pound and her eye instantly swell, tasting blood in her mouth, she shook her head and forced herself to focus. She did first on a small rectangle. Thinking quickly, she punched the comm code she'd been given, but hearing the man's footsteps, she turned again to face him again.

"This isn't over," he assured her.

"And you're not getting rid of us that easily," she returned.

"Not 'us,' but you'd better get used to the idea that Paris isn't going to make it."

"According to *whom*?"

"According to *you* if you want to survive, Torres."

A low growl rumbled in her throat as her hands balled up again. "You're not getting anything from me, you son of a bitch."

Before she could make a move, he grabbed her shoulder and spun her around to slam her against the entry wall. Her head smacked it with a thud. Pressing up against her, he leaned down to whisper into her ear.

"It's all up to you," he told her. "It might not be me and you might even get back to your precious junker, but Paris is no better than dust as soon as it can come about. Count on it. The Maquis will never let a man like that run free. You've just spared him a painless exit, is all."

B'Elanna sucked a breath and jabbed her elbow back into his ribs, throwing her fist down into his groin. He jumped back quickly enough that she instead whipped her other fist around and towards his face as hard as she could. She caught him in the teeth and jaw, spraying blood from his lips when they parted with a cry and shocking even herself for what she had done.

Immediately, he rallied, redoubling his previous strike with another hit to her cheek and pinning it and the rest of her to the wall once again.

Dropping to her knees, she was able to grab his leg and hurl him off his footing. He landed soundly on his back--but then shot a kick with his other leg directly into B'Elanna's arm. The still weak bone cracked upon impact. She cried out as she was thrown onto her other arm.

"Damnit!" she screamed, her heart pounding and adrenaline pushing up to her knees and a hand before she could think about it.

In a sudden burst of fury and determination, she lunged at the man again, damned if he'd win--damned if *any* of them would. Scrambling across with a kick, she knew throwing her other leg around could take out his knees again--

Two strong hands grabbed her shoulders and pulled her back.

"Let me go!" she hollered, kicking and struggling as best she could before the shock wore off.

But an instant later, Bendera jumped into the room, jerked the other man up by the collar and hurled him outside. A couple other men contained him and dragged him away.

"Take him to the brig!" Chakotay boomed from behind her.

Shrugging off his grip, she whirled around to indeed see Chakotay standing above her. "Until the *next* asshole who decides they'd like to have a stab at him!" she shot, backing up to the bunk behind her.

Calming as quickly as he'd exploded, Chakotay motioned to the Vulcan waiting outside. "Tuvok, you stand guard here. You can switch off with Bendera when you need a break. Arrange it however you like, but I want one of you on this door at all times."

Tuvok was decidedly displeased. "I do not think this duty would utilize my time efficiently, Captain."

"You don't earn my trust by complaining about my orders," Chakotay responded. "I need you here now and that is all."

The Vulcan's brow twitched. "Very well, Captain."

Bendera snorted as he moved around the new man. "Those snotty Starfleet really *are* the toughest to break, aren't they, Chakotay?"

He cracked a sardonic grin for that one. It melted a moment later as they moved to leave. "I need you to trade off with Washek. --Torres, let Tuvok help you with that, and let him know if you need anything. I mean it. This was the last thing I wanted to happen here."

She merely nodded, purposefully focused on picking up the cells she'd thrown to the ground as she felt her face swelling up and her stomach churn for having swallowed so much blood.

Chakotay waited until she met his eyes again and acknowledged his offer before going with Bendera.

B'Elanna turned back to the floor, scooting along it on her knees. *So much for a relaxing evening*, she thought, rolling her eyes to realize she was bloody on top of sweaty and filthy, and if she'd been below deck a minute longer, Tom would be dead. Her arm twitched uselessly at her side, a slicing pain that started to throb. Both times, the Maquis man knew right where to hit her. She instantly earned a great deal of sympathy for Tom on that score. He'd been a target of the same attention and had to hold onto his injuries, while she at least had a regenerator at her side. For the moment, though, getting the power cells back onto the table and reorganized seemed like a good idea if she was going to get the regenerator working at all for anyone.

"I can assist you in treating your injury," Tuvok said calmly, finally resigned to his assignment now that the other men had gone.

She shook her head. To her disgust, she knew she'd need to treat herself--again--before getting back to Tom. "It's fine," she thickly told him. "I can do it."

"It will be done more efficiently if you allow me--"

"And I'm saying I can *do* it."

The man looked at her for several seconds, letting silence fill the space around them and calm the room, before speaking again. "Ms. Torres, I will not harm you or your captain," he quietly promised. "I give you my word."

Blowing a breath, B'Elanna took her own long look at Tuvok. Then, she relaxed a little. Had she never known Savan, she might have thrown it back at him again. Thankfully, she did know the science technician and knew that Vulcans in any state of affairs made oaths as lightly as Klingons did. Moreover, she didn't want to have to mend her arm one-handed again. Finally, B'Elanna blinked, nodded, then found the right cell for that piece of equipment. Slapping the cell against her thigh to lock it into place, she handed him the regenerator.

"Thank you, Tuvok."

He directed her to sit on the nearby chair. "You are welcome."

What he still couldn't understand was why Fitzgerald did it.

Leaning back in the conn seat on his tiny, half-moon bridge, Chakotay stared at the stars flying by and puzzled over yesterday's events. Dalby, Larson and Jonas were easy suspects and on his watch list. Lishio and Jarvin hadn't done anything, but because of their history with various trade stations, Chakotay had

assigned them to work deep within the ship as well.

But Fitzgerald? The engineering assistant shouldn't have had any interest in Paris, no real reason to go after him, anyway. Like most aboard the *Liberty*, he was a colony exile, had worked on a large exotic tree farm right out of technical school. He had no knowledge of Starfleet save that it existed and so shouldn't have had any score to settle--that Chakotay knew about, anyway. Paris did have a sardonic tendency that grated on the nerves. But to Chakotay's knowledge, Fitzgerald and Paris hadn't even had contact on the trip out, either--which was more troubling than the rest.

Naturally, he could never know everyone's agenda, but the attempted murder of an incapacitated guest was an agenda he should have been able to spot, or at least hear about. Seska usually saw to it that he knew about everyone's ins and outs. She hadn't been *that* busy. He would have to talk about that with her, see if maybe they'd missed something important.

It just wasn't like Fitzgerald--or he hadn't thought so.

Either way, the Maquis captain had easily chosen not to deal with the issue until that failed journey was finally completed. Fitzgerald could rot for another month for all he cared. Chakotay disliked most not knowing where people on his ship stood. Whether or not he liked what they thought, he wanted to know what was going on. Ignoring his direct orders, too, was not something he tolerated. Even if he was of a more lenient temper than other commanders he'd known, allowing that much freedom to that particular crew was parallel to suicide.

And then he remembered that he still had to figure out how so much had failed in the first place, from the Cardassian cruiser sniffing out their base's location within the Badlands to the shuttle malfunction, nothing but Torres' systems installation had seemed to go right.

There, he sighed. Seska was getting better, but he wished he had someone with half the ability as Torres. Seska certainly did, too. She would have done anything, he knew, to not be locked up in that engine room as she was. If given a week, he was certain the part-Klingon could easily rebuild half his ship, get it running more like it should. But after Fitzgerald's stunt, it was less likely than ever to happen. At that point, she'd probably disassemble half his engine if let near it.

Hearing the bleep, he looked over at Kinidar. The young Andorian gave him a nod.

"Maybe this will help," Chakotay said to himself and changed their heading.

"Yes?"

B'Elanna tried not to frown when the doors to the quarters opened and Seska walked in. She tried not to move in front of Tom, too, when the Bajoran curiously peered over at the bed. Instead, she folded the cards into a fresh stack and stood up.

Having seen what she needed to see, Seska gave the predictably sullen engineer her full attention. "I heard about what happened." She peered at Torres' face. "Tuvok fixed you up?"

"Yes," B'Elanna said with a nod. "He did a good job."

"Well, he's good for a few things, at least," Seska grinned. "Look, I don't have much time, so I won't

waste yours, either."

B'Elanna suppressed a smirk. *Not like my schedule's been tight lately.*

"Before we get back to business, I thought I'd buy you a break."

"Excuse me?"

"Have you had a shower since you came on board?"

B'Elanna frowned. "No."

"That can't feel good. You should grab one now, while you can." Seska waved at the door, outside of which the Vulcan stood guard. "Your guard's here and I'll stand outside the shower." She nodded at Torres' unvoiced wariness. "I know, I know. About the last thing you want to do right now is trust anybody. But speaking as Chakotay's second and," she added more quietly, "as his lover, I'd be a fool and then some to fly directly against his orders and let anything happen to you or Paris."

Lessons learned from not following through at Solosos? B'Elanna wondered to herself.

"You need a break--and don't try to deny it. Get a shower, collect some fresh cells and rations, whatever--have a walk. Then you can get back to your captain a little freshened up. It's been a long week for you, and it'll be another three or four days before you're done with us."

B'Elanna measured Seska's straight expression. Indeed, something in the woman's eyes piqued her cautiousness. But for the second time, she was being straight, and indeed, being that close to a captain who had insured their safety there, Seska would have to be a complete idiot to cross him again. And B'Elanna really did feel like she was coated with glue, plus the leftover blood all over her jacket and jumpsuit, which wasn't something she enjoyed looking at...

"I won't have time to offer this again," Seska finished, a more plaintive look crossing her face that time...

"I appreciate it, Seska," B'Elanna finally declined. "But after what happened, I don't feel right leaving Tom here alone, even with a guard."

"I wouldn't worry--*really*, Torres. Chakotay has this whole section on surveillance, and it's *Tuvok* we're talking about. He'll cross-examine a dung beetle if it tries to crawl under the door."

B'Elanna grinned a little at the backwards compliment. "Don't you like him?"

"It doesn't matter if I like him or not," Seska replied. "But he's pedantic and slow, which annoys me. Not that people have to try hard to get me that way." She gestured toward the door. "Come on. I might not like him, but I'd trust him with the whole ship. We won't be long."

"You don't have to do this."

"I know that," replied the Bajoran, a little annoyed, then. "This is called a favor, not an order. You don't want it, say so and I'll do something else. But I thought I'd give you a break while I had a chance and because I feel bad about what happened here and that you have to trudge around filthy. No one needs to live like that, especially when you have better things to worry about."

Finally, B'Elanna released her breath and gave a nod. Even if Seska still made her uneasy, she knew

she could rely on Tuvok. His care of them had been steady and polite, and he had been watchful. When she needed something, his arrangements were quick and effective--and he was still new. Turning to lean over Tom, wave the tricorder over his lifeless body to make sure nothing was progressing more quickly than before, she straightened and followed Seska out.

"I'm taking her to wash up," Seska told the Vulcan at the door. "We won't be more than... What do you think, Torres? A half hour?"

"Sounds right," B'Elanna shrugged. She almost asked Tuvok to look in on Tom, but hoped her stare would convey her caution well enough. Part of her did want it, another part of her wanted *no one* in there with him. Sighing, she set off after Seska on the short trip down the dark, orange-lit corridor to the shower room.

Seska stepped inside and checked the stalls. "No one home," she gladly confirmed, then took a seat out on the entry bench. "You go ahead. I'll wait here."

With one more look Seska's way, B'Elanna finally took a stall and pulled off her jacket as she toed off her dirty boots, dropping them on the seat outside the entrance. Pulling the rest of her clothing off and setting them atop the rest, she set the shower for a full job, closed the gate and activated the sequence.

She breathed deeply as the pulses found her skin without interference. *That* was a real shower, unlike the low-powered quick jobs she didn't get much out of at the base. At the same time, she felt somewhat guilty that she enjoyed it so much--and then couldn't enjoy it so much, wondering if she'd been fooled into leaving Tom behind, giving them a window to cut him off...

She shook her head. Chakotay would have Seska's head if she really was up to something... But what if she'd changed his mind? No, he did know when to put his foot down, and B'Elanna believed he was sincere about making sure Tom was protected. Seska really was trying to make good, though it seemed a little against her will. Maybe Chakotay put her up to being friendlier. Either way, she was making every effort.

B'Elanna leaned her hands against the wall and stretched her back. It felt better than it should have. She drank it in regardless. It'd probably be a long while before she could get another. She could have fallen asleep leaning against that wall. The end cycle beeps snapped her attention to the control unit, however.

When the shower at last deactivated and she stretched herself out again, she opened the stall gate and found her clothes on the chair. They had been refreshed and neatly folded. Even her jacket was spotless and pressed. Grinning a little at the surprise, she got herself dressed again, ran her fingers through her curls. She hadn't had the time to set the sonic shower that far--not that it mattered. Then she noticed there was only one boot below. Looking under the chair, she guessed Seska might have dropped it.

Then her heart beat again. Maybe it was a trap. Maybe they needed her to be off balance, unable to run on the hard grate floor...

But when she stepped carefully out of the stall area, she found Seska sitting on the bench with a pocket blade and her other boot, winching her broken boot hooks. They'd caught on the chair frame when the shuttle crashed, and she hadn't gotten around to fixing that yet. But with a puff of breath and a deft wrist, the Bajoran turned the metal back into the loops just right and nodded with pleasure when it was done. Then she looked up.

"Done already?" she said and held up her project. "So is this."

B'Elanna sat down by her and took the boot. "Thanks," she said, putting it on and hooking the latches with a few flips. They held perfectly. She looked at Seska's little blade before she tucked back into its holding and slipped it into her pocket. "I can't believe you got them back in place with that little knife."

"Growing up in a work camp, you learn how to fix just about anything with almost nothing," Seska explained, a proud, quirky smile stuck to the corner of her mouth.

B'Elanna nodded, realizing for the first time that Seska likely had much the same upbringing as Maryl did, which said a lot about her low tolerance. When she thought about it, she realized that Maryl put up with very little, too, and was quick to temper and to act. Only having a relatively safe place to live and an affable husband had given the Guerdon's contract liaison room to relax. Seska, living on the border with Cardassians pressing in, didn't have that luxury.

She seemed pleasant enough there, though, as she stood and motioned to the door. "How about grabbing those supplies, then? They'll be breaking for dinner soon if they haven't already. You'll want to get back."

B'Elanna nodded her agreement and followed Seska out.

Taking a different route per Seska's suggestion, she could just make out Tuvok in the same position at the door before they turned off to cut through the deck one midsection. Relaxing, she sped to match Seska's pace, and together they made good time to the crew mess. The lighting had been dimmed a little to cast an amber glow around; more relaxing, perhaps, for the few people there. A few more stood at the little replicator, ordering drinks to go with their ration packs. All of them were typically rough for the wear, though obviously not born to be. Fine featured and looking a little shell-shocked, the human crew in particular struck B'Elanna. She could see any of them teaching, doing research or simply raising a family on colonies that probably didn't exist anymore.

"You coming, B'Elanna?"

She snapped her attention back to Seska. "Yes," she said and strode across to the storage room.

Seska opened the doors for her and walked through for the rations. "I'd ask you what you'd prefer if any of them were any good," she smirked.

B'Elanna grinned. "I think they all taste alike after a while."

Seska laughed and stuffed a few packs into a sack. "Are the right cells there?"

"A couple. I'll need more later."

"I'll have Bendera bring them by when he comes back to the bridge."

"Thanks." Tucking the power cells into her jacket pocket, B'Elanna led the way back out and accepted the sack from Seska when it was handed to her. The mess had about twenty people in it now, most only drinking from mugs just then, leaning back in the sparsely built chairs, listening to others as they talked, a low hum, almost sad, maybe tired, maybe wanting. Maybe it was all of those things. But they all seemed to have the same condition, whatever it was.

The hum filtered, built and ebbed, then ebbed some more as a particular sound made its way through their voices: a song, hummed softly, aimlessly, off in the corner. A tall, dark-haired man with dark,

distant eyes sat across from another man and his mug, just humming. He continued as though he didn't notice the others were listening--and perhaps he didn't. He was in a world of his own, though the rest of his world had stopped to take him in.

Again, B'Elanna needed to snap her attention back to an intently watching Seska. Frowning, she passed the woman on the way out. Cutting through the middle of the ship again, she was deposited at her door a minute later.

"I'm glad we could get that done," Seska smiled, offering a nod to Tuvok as she stepped back a pace, then two. "I'll be buried in the engine room, but if you run into a wall, Torres, contact me and I'll see if I can do anything."

"Thank you," B'Elanna said with a nod. As soon as the Bajoran was gone, she glanced at a curious Tuvok, then passed him to get back into the quarters and set the sack on the table.

"I briefly examined Captain Paris," Tuvok informed her, peering into the door, "during your absence. His condition has not changed."

B'Elanna picked up the tricorder anyway and slapped in the fresh cell she'd collected. The old one wasn't dead, but she knew it would be soon. "I was half-hoping you'd check on him."

"Your respite was useful?"

"I'm a lot cleaner, that's for sure," she grinned.

He blinked, turning his stare askance, reexamining the guest as she watched the piece of equipment reload. "Indeed."

The doors closed, and B'Elanna knelt on the floor by the bunk to give Tom a full sweep with the tricorder. True to the Vulcan's words, there was no change in his condition--or at least he would need another regenerator treatment no sooner nor later than the last time. That would be in another hour, by the tricorder's estimate. She would check him again in twenty minutes just to be sure. It was becoming routine at that point.

Routine.

B'Elanna sighed. There was no way what they were going through was routine. Tom's condition wasn't a routine, her being stuck there with him wasn't a routine. She growled at herself for once again clutching to the dependable, even the predictable. She often thought she was addicted to order. The first thing she noticed in a room full of people was the broken LED.

Setting the tricorder aside, she reached out and touched Tom's head, then drew back. She touched his arm, furrowing her brow.

She hadn't noticed when she was filthy how dirty he was.

Now she was clean. *"A lot cleaner, that's for sure."*

Slumping, she closed her eyes as the guilt did its work on her. It had a lot to do. Breathing through it, she blinked, straightened and looked over at the shelf. She got to her feet and retrieved the small medkit there. Finding a pack of fiber compresses and a cleansing solution, she then grabbed a water tube from her ration supply and returned to the bed.

"Better late than never," she said softly and wetted a compress.

He found the young woman sitting on the floor with her head pressed against Paris' leg, her short, dark mop of hair flung in all directions. It was fluffy and clean, and her clothes had been refreshed, too. He nodded with satisfaction that Seska indeed had gone through with his suggestion. A deactivated regenerator was still in her small, strong hand. Her re-mended arm hung laid along the edge of the mattress. A half-empty water tube sat at her knee. Her face looked oddly at peace there. Chakotay couldn't help his grin.

"That's loyalty," he said with a nod.

"That's bloody exhausted," Bendera grinned and moved to kneel next to the engineer, setting a portable power unit on the floor by her. "Torres."

"What?" she whispered, not yet awake.

"You're having some company," he told her. Backing off an arm's length just in case, he gave her shoulder a little shake.

B'Elanna was startled into consciousness and jumped back to see Bendera, then Chakotay behind him. Neither blinked. "What is it?" she demanded, then shot a look to Tom. He was very still. Coughing out her breath, she pressed her hand against his neck. His skin was cold...

She felt a beat, then another.

She released her breath.

"The medic from the Norshaka's collecting his gear and transporting over," Bendera told her, nodding when she looked back at him.

"They'll fly in tandem as long as we need," Chakotay added.

B'Elanna had already gotten up on the side of the bunk again with the tricorder. "When will this medic be here?" she asked.

"Within the hour," Chakotay told her.

"And he can treat his injuries?"

"He was an local area clinic nurse and emergency medic for fifteen years before his colony was given away to the Cardassians."

"I didn't ask for his resume," B'Elanna snapped. "I asked if he could take care of my captain."

Chakotay coolly replied, "Yes. He can."

"Thank you."

Bendera gave the engineer a friendly nod and joined Chakotay in the corridor. "Too bad she's got a job, Chakotay," he said as they moved away. "She'd fit in just fine around here."

"Too bad for you," B'Elanna said under her breath, though a small smile found her. Looking at Tom's drawn, pale face, she felt her heart quicken to imagine hearing his voice again and his intent blue eyes fixing on hers. No matter what it meant, no matter how uncomfortable her feelings were making her lately, she just wanted him back. The rest--getting back to the Guerdon, getting back to work and deals and station stops--would come as it would. She'd deal with her own issues some other time. Getting him back was what she wanted and it suddenly looked like that might happen after all.

She hardly stirred for the forty-eight minutes she waited, half expecting some tragedy to befall him at the last minute. Even when she told herself she was being an idiot, she couldn't make herself move.

It was just a little more time...

Without warning, they entered. First came a scruffy man with wiry red hair and a straight stare that set upon his patient as soon as he entered. The moment he set down his medkit, Tuvok followed, rolling a stack of equipment ahead of him and a frown that made B'Elanna appreciate Savan all over again. Tuvok looked as incensed as a Vulcan could manage.

"Right over here, Tuvok," the man told him. "Yes, that's fine. Stick around. I'll need you." Ignoring the embers that floated behind Tuvok's eyes at that, the medic finally acknowledged B'Elanna's presence. "You're Torres?"

"Yes," she said.

"May I see your tricorder? Has it been recording?"

"This one has. I don't have the first one I was using anymore."

"That's fine." Taking it, he read quickly through the log, nodding to himself. "Yes, pretty typical impact bleeding. Five ruptures...Hmm, small tear...more damage along the anterior... Yeah, he's probably not feeling too good." He slapped the tricorder shut. "Let's see what I can do." Looking back at Tuvok, he added, "We just broke off with the Casiat en route."

B'Elanna jerked her head up. *The Casiat!*

"Contact its captain and tell her I'll need those medical units after all. Tell her to put them on her tab."

"I assume she will understand your meaning?"

"She'll know. We just talked a few hours ago. Tell her it's an emergency with a civilian. That might speed her up a little. For now, I can start on the upper bleeders, the big ones."

B'Elanna continued to stare at the medic as he got what equipment he did have organized. *Dejin's in, too?* she thought, not shocked once she gave it a little thought, though her chest shrank a little to put together those pieces. A few months ago, Dejin had been prepared for the possibility, much as she disliked it. "*Pride isn't worth a pile of crap when you're cleaning blood off your bulkheads,*" she'd said. B'Elanna wondered what all they'd been through to make her finally acquiesce, wondered if Dejin had needed to clean up much blood first, as they had on the Guerdon. B'Elanna was most curious to know if Dejin figured out what Tom had been forced to do.

All of those thoughts swirled as the medic opened up his own tricorder and started running some preliminary surgical scans. B'Elanna planted herself at the end of the bunk, out of his way but ready if he needed something. Or at least she couldn't make herself step away, even when he set up the laser scalpel and gave her a glance.

"You can sit down for now, Torres. Even after Captain Hirro delivers the units, it's going to be a long one."

"I've been sitting long enough," she replied.

He shrugged. "Suit yourself."

She couldn't tell how many hours had passed, only that it had to have been a few. One minute melded into the next, into another and another as the patient was opened and prodded and scanned, then prodded some more. The passage of time became increasingly numb, hardly memorable, save the commentary from the medic, who dictated a scoreboard of damage that should have been easy to fix if only...

She quickly tired of that line of doctoring. "Sorry if I hadn't gotten the holographic hospital online in time," she'd snapped at one point.

"It's just for my records, Torres," he informed her.

"What could've helped days ago without you there isn't anything that matters right now," she returned. "Score your ego points on some other field."

His mouth pursing into a sour frown, he continued his work more quietly, glancing to her glare when he needed to record another note.

A couple hours and a meal break after that exchange, B'Elanna finally gave up her position at the end of the bed, feeling a cramp in her leg twinge dangerously. Shaking it out, walking it off, she stopped at the window to stare out at the Norshaka. It was larger than the Liberty, long and dark, like a capsule with nacelles. B'Elanna didn't recognize the origin. She'd have said it was Barolian had it not been for the color and the length. Not that it mattered, but her mind naturally went there, an easy diversion.

Then, a far finer ship appeared from the black. In typical hotshot style, the unmistakable half-moon tradeship Casiat popped out of warp at a reckless proximity and, at full thrust, turned swiftly to stick itself between the two Maquis ships.

B'Elanna breathed a little laugh at that. *Definitely Dejin.*

Its warp drive was abruptly shut down. With a burst of thruster power to set itself more neatly into place, the Casiat then came to a rest. Then, nothing. Not even a light blinked. In fact, with further examination, B'Elanna could see the trail lights were on half-power. The ship didn't look damaged in any way, so she was probably just trying to conserve energy. B'Elanna pursed her lips. They probably were running low on materials, too.

A minute passed, then a circle of energy spun within the middle of the room and left behind a portable surgical carton and a corresponding regenerator unit. The medic motioned Tuvok to drag it over as soon

as the transporter beam dissipated.

"Open the surgical flat and set it on this table," he ordered. Tuvok did as asked. "Torres, sanitize your hands. I'll need you to hold the viewplate for me."

She looked back from the window to a sight she knew she'd rather not commit to memory. The medic had reopened Tom's incisions and had spread his midsection precariously open. "What?"

"So I can see inside of him." The medic looked tiredly at her from the open belly of his patient. "If you want him alive, just do it. Buck it up and don't ask."

Her eyes narrowed at the cold simplicity of the medic's logic, but she returned to the other side the bed with her lips pressed together. Grabbing the sanitizer and running it over her hands and upper body, she set it down again to grab the plate that was handed to her. To her relief, the medic punched a couple keys on the side, which released tripod legs. She could see why he needed her to keep it steady, though. The legs weren't sturdy on that uneven surface. She didn't bother to try to figure out why the designer hadn't considered mattresses when he put that model through. She merely concentrated on looking at the medic and hoping the man was all Chakotay said.

"He's in bad shape," the medic told her as he organized his protocols and equipment. Giving her a slightly more sympathetic look, he then offered, "Your regular treatments kept him going when most would've expired a couple days ago at best. What you've done saved his life, Torres."

She nodded, settling herself on what she needed to do. "I appreciate that. Thank you."

She still didn't look down when the medic activated his laser scalpel and set into Tom's open flesh.

Her head pressed against the viewport, B'Elanna opened her eyes to see Dejin's ship again. Over an hour ago, she'd been released to stand once again, but could do nothing but return to her place by the window, closing her eyes in a half-sleep until she heard the medic's words.

"Tell the Casiat it's free to go now," said the medic to the comm after patching through to the bridge.

Her eyes opened, but she didn't look back.

"*Understood,*" came Chakotay's voice over the tinny speaker. "*So he's all right?*"

"He'll need to remain medicated and in bed for a couple more days while this old tissue knitter finishes my work and he'll need some follow-up treatment, but, yes, he'll recover under those conditions." When the comm patched out, the medic loaded a hypospray and pressed it to Tom's neck. "Starting now."

The hiss of the hypospray felt loud in the room, then it silenced completely.

The medic waited patiently, then grinned when his patient finally responded.

Finding a path through the pain and confusion, Tom first felt the unbearable weight of...something. His whole gut felt like it had an anvil on it...and the rest of him felt like it was floating. Recognizing the feel of a hard mattress...then the look of a second tier bunk above him, he suddenly knew he wasn't. He blinked heavily, tried to pull a deeper breath, but the heaviness still prevented that. Finally, he realized

he was in the Liberty's guest quarters. He blinked to focus on a red-haired man above him, who was busy looking pleased with himself and waving a medical tricorder wand up and down. Tom blinked again, slowly, forcing his eyes back open.

Letting his stare fall toward a figure in the corner of his eye, he found B'Elanna leaning against the window, her face set with a sad sort of wonder he didn't really recognize. He felt his blood stir to see her nonetheless, messy hair, lumpy jumpsuit, rigidly crossed arms and all. When last he saw her, he wasn't sure he would again. Actually, he was all *but* sure he wouldn't.

Another rare time in my life I'm damned grateful to be wrong.

When last he saw her, he'd faded unwillingly, yet was unwilling to tell her his fears. She didn't need that. He didn't want her to carry that along with everything else. But that wasn't the case now, and so he stared at her, knowing he'd beat the odds--again.

One of these days...but not today... And so here we are again.

For her part, B'Elanna had finally allowed herself a long sigh of relief. It wasn't often she could admit to being drained, but she was pretty close to it at that point. The brief nap Bendera had woken her from had done her no favors. She was beyond physical restlessness, too, which by all right she should have been feeling, considering her lack of actual activity over the last several days. So, she'd slept a little against the window, waking to the view of the Casiat.

Dejin's ship had remained neatly by the Norshaka for the duration of the surgery, but upon that completion and receiving its release, B'Elanna watched the Casiat smoothly turn, move away, then pop into warp, glad to be on its way for all its preamble. The irony left B'Elanna shaking her head. She couldn't help but wonder what Dejin was thinking just then, and if she knew or would ever know how she'd come to the aid of her old friend once again. She wondered if she should inform her sometime. A moment later, she hoped they'd be all right, walking the same line the Guerdon had.

She heard a very familiar breath, stronger, poised on a word but not quite there yet. Turning her head, she saw Tom's eyes on her, blue and steady and everything she remembered and hoped to see again. The tiniest smile touched his lips. Feeling her heart rate double, she returned the same.

"It's about time you showed up, Captain."

He pulled a long, slow breath, offered the tiniest shrug. "Got sidetracked," he whispered before the medic moved into his view.

Closing her eyes as she drew a slow, full breath, B'Elanna turned back to the window.

"I owe you my thanks, Captain Chakotay," Tom whispered.

Still flat in the bunk, the few hours of conscious rest had done a lot of good in clearing his mind and gathering some strength--enough to talk, at least. Naturally, by the time he was ready to sleep again, Chakotay was there for his own visit. Tom had to give the captain that. His timing was on the ball...though he did do right by him. Any simple terrorist could have easily left Tom to rot; after B'Elanna told him about the base, he knew even more that Chakotay had taken a full extra week out of his way for

them and then changed course to get him a medic.

Tom knew how *he* would feel, being in charge of a ship and having to reroute to help someone he had no real need of. In fact, he'd been doing that a lot lately, he realized with a tiny smirk. Though his feelings for the Maquis hadn't suffered any improvement, Tom would never take the captain's efforts for granted.

Chakotay nodded, allowing himself a satisfied grin despite the business he had forming on his bridge. "I'm glad we were able to get the right person for the job quickly."

"Me too."

Chakotay watched Paris' eyes drift off and close, so he backed up and returned his attention to Torres, who kept herself busy preparing the hyposprays the medic had left with her. "Tuvok should be back in a couple hours and I might need him and Benders later. You have everything you need?"

"We're fine for now," she told him. On a second thought, B'Elanna looked up and met his eyes that time. "Thank you, for everything, Captain Chakotay."

"You're welcome," he returned, glad he could say those words. "I can try to arrange another person for you, someone I trust, if you need another break. Being locked up in here can't be easy--"

"You don't have to go through any trouble for me," she interrupted, assuring him. "If I can spend as much time in the cockpit of a shuttle, I'll survive this."

Chakotay grinned. "Yes, you're right." He leaned against the doorjamb, then. "We've been looking over the shuttle flight data. What you two did to shake that Cardassian cruiser was nothing short of incredible. I almost wish I'd been there."

"That was Tom," B'Elanna told him.

"Charging up a plasma stream on an inverse spin," Chakotay recalled aloud, "getting them close enough and using the plasma and phaser fire to create a magnetic thrust. I had to read it twice to believe it."

She also smiled, remembering that much of their journey with some satisfaction. "Well, someone once told me he was a crack pilot."

"Guess you never read his record, then," Chakotay said. "Paris didn't miss a single accolade at the Academy. He was ranked over and above One-A Flight Controller. That's not a throwaway title, nor was his degree in astrophysics. He had an impressive education."

"Yes," B'Elanna said, a bit chagrined that she'd not looked as far into Tom's record as that Maquis captain had.

"I'm not surprised he could run those maneuvers then," Chakotay continued, "but after five years of drink and putting along the trade route, that he still could handle an alien shuttle like a two-man scout ship was very impressive."

The rest of the trip came back to her at that. She looked at the captain again. "Did your people ever find out what happened to the reverse thrusters?"

"There was a problem with the gravimetric plates," he answered, "but we don't have all the details

yet. We're monitoring some potential action, which means we have to put the shuttle investigation aside for a while. But we will find out how the accident happened. I need to know if you're right and there is a saboteur on this ship."

B'Elanna paused as that filtered in. It made complete sense that it was in his interest to know what had happened to the shuttle he'd likely had to buy, or call in favors to get, but he did look sincere in his own right. Either he held up a good façade or he really had been duped by someone on the crew. She didn't know which instance to hope for more.

"Well, thanks again," she said, laying out the hyposprays. "I need to finish preparing these injections."

With a slight bow of his head, Chakotay backed off a couple steps and exited the quarters, ordering the computer to seal the doors on his way out.

B'Elanna watched them close behind his sturdy frame, a little surprised he went as quietly as he did, though to her memory he'd never really been loud. His presence was strong, but he seemed to prefer a soft approach. It was an effective combination.

She still couldn't say she trusted any of them, but she couldn't make herself hate them anymore. She wanted to. She thought about Jerod and all the pieces he ended up in because of them. She thought about the holes in the Guerdon's hull she had to patch and all the other harried repairs as they blew them apart, bit by bit. To her surprise, she found it difficult to will up the knot of indignation she'd felt before. Recalling Chakotay's frank expression and knowing he'd gone well out of his way to get Tom what he needed--not to mention pick them up, then remembering everything his circle had done for them, too, done for her...

She almost liked them.

Maybe there was an ulterior motive. They'd long been set up for bigger and more complex jobs. On the other hand, Savan was probably right in that they weren't really out to kill Jerod, or even take the Guerdon out completely. They took them to the brink, but she honestly couldn't say what would have happened in the end. --That didn't make what they did right and she was no happier about their effect on the Guerdon, but it made the whole matter a lot grayer.

She shook her head again. Hating them was easier.

"B'Elanna?"

She looked over. Tom had awoken and was gazing at her. "I thought you were asleep," she said. A breath, the slightest shrug, was his only reply. His color was vastly improved, she could see, almost normal. Having had plenty of it, he probably didn't *need* to sleep as much as stay still. But he did look drawn, probably for not having eaten. On that thought, she asked, "Are you hungry yet?"

"Maybe soon," he answered, roughly for an unused voice and all the drugs swimming in his bloodstream--one thing antique he could definitely do without. What he'd have done for a one-shot deal via Starfleet just then. A real sickbay never looked more inviting. Not that he was sorry for what he had. The pain was being managed and he was on the mend, and so he did feel like an ass for grouching, if only to himself. "Still catching up with the living world."

"How about some water for now?"

He blinked a nod and got a sip of cool water a few seconds later. Running his tongue through his wetted mouth, closing his eyes as that simple sip charged half his body, he tried for another deep breath,

a slight stretch. He felt like he indeed had been on his back for almost six days. He really looked forward to being able to be turned onto his side. The regenerator pads would prevent that for another day at least, according to the medic who'd patched him up. "I've been meaning to ask how it's been here. Chakotay seems...solicitous."

"It's been all right." She shrugged. "There was an incident, but he took care of it." She pulled the chair over to sit by him. "They've actually been very good to us. It's not what I expected."

"Hmm," he breathed, thinking about that. Catching her unsure expression, he could immediately tell they'd indeed been very nice to *her*. "Much as I hate him for getting us here, I think Chakotay's honest," he ventured. "He's dedicated, but he means what he says. Though, he knows when and how to throw compliments around, work to a point."

She breathed a little laugh to have that confirmation, then added, "Even Seska's been making the peace."

Pausing, he looked at her askance. "Do you believe her?"

"I don't know," B'Elanna shrugged. "She seems real, and she's assured me they don't have any hidden plans for us, but something about her doesn't feel right, picks at me the wrong way."

"It should," Tom replied, but let it go. B'Elanna was smart enough to figure those people out for herself and probably could more readily, having been up and around for both of them. He trusted her judgment. "How long to the rendezvous?"

"Two or three more days. They've been busy with some possible 'action,' as Captain Chakotay calls it. I'm sure we're going to be delayed again."

"It'll give these pads time to do their work," he said, then frowned through a sigh. "God, how useless I've ended up being out here."

"I told you before," B'Elanna replied, "it's not something you could help."

"Doesn't mean I like it, B'Elanna," Tom returned, but then closed his eyes, shook his head. "Sorry. It's frustrating. I've never been down this long. Sick, but not down, and especially since you're here, too." Weakly lifting an arm as he opened his eyes again, he set his hand on his abdomen. One of the units sat in the middle of his belly, bleeping and emitting pulses every half-second. It was only one of four annoying tapping feelings inside his body, combined with all the rest. "I remember these things from the medical history files I used to poke through in high school. They work, but it'll be good to get them off."

Reminded, B'Elanna leaned forward on her elbows. "Dejin delivered them, Tom," she told him.

He blinked his attention back to her. By her serious expression, he knew he'd heard it right. "She was here?"

"Not on the ship, but the Norshaka had been dealing with her, so they knew she had the supplies you needed. She transported them over and probably didn't know we were here. The Casiat left when you were revived."

Tom took that in, nodding with resignation. "I can't say I didn't expect she'd be tagged," he whispered thoughtfully, "but I'd hoped she could have steered clear on this one." He sighed and turned his eyes to the bottom of the upper bunk. "I wondered why she hadn't returned my communiqué last month. She's probably been stuck out here--and pissed as hell about it. I probably don't *want* to hear back from her

right now."

B'Elanna snickered, remembering how she'd flown her ship in on a skid--in retrospect, she was probably *aiming* for the Norshaka. "I'll bet you're right."

He leaned back at that, breathing against his tingling muscles and feeling for a few seconds like a giant, unscratched itch. Peering over at the side table, he noticed the hypospray set. "Is it almost time for those?" he asked.

She picked up the tray. "It'll take a few minutes to get them ready. Are you feeling it?"

"Not right now, just the pads. But the injections help."

Nodding, she set the power cells she needed in the correct order. For all her usage time over the past few days, she was pretty well able to predict by then how long she would use them before having to switch them over. She frowned at the number. "I'll have to get with Bendera again," she said, more to herself, though she added for Tom, "He's been helping me with the recharged power cells."

"Another helpful crewmember?" Tom queried, half an attempt at lightness...the other half, he realized, a test to see if she'd enjoy a little teasing.

"Like I said, they're dropping everything they've got to lend me a hand," B'Elanna archly replied. "I should get half the good service on my own ship." Hearing him chuckle, she smiled, too. "No, the people Chakotay assigned to us have been good to have around, considering half the ship's a bunch of insulted colonists and the other half a flock of outcast Starfleet."

"Including Seska," Tom noted.

B'Elanna furrowed her brow. "She was in Starfleet?"

"The Academy," he softly confirmed. "Read it before we came here. She dropped out after a year, about ten years ago. Been floating around the border since."

"God, did *anyone* out here graduate Starfleet Academy besides you?"

Tom's grin grew. "Captain Chakotay did."

Rolling her eyes, B'Elanna leaned up to continue preparing his medication. "*That* makes me feel better."

She'd given up her chair for the floor as the talk returned to what they needed to get to when they got back on the Guerdon. She hoped aloud that Savan and Maryl had been able to scrounge up some deuterium after all--or at least a deal that'd help them to some. They also were in great need of drive plasma, warp coil casings, vent sockets and a number of other "small" parts that suffered the greatest wear on the long, high-warp hauls. Ridge was supposed to pick up a gross of parts when they crossed Gimol Station again en route for Deep Space Nine.

Tom was anxious to get to Hidirin, not just for getting back on the track. He was also very curious to see how conditions were on the other side of the border. For that reason and some, he regretted they'd

miss their usual stop at Minjau that time around the route. Because of their schedule, they'd be flying a direct trajectory from Hidirin to Podala, even crossing through the Kimoa Range on the way. A little grin crossed his mouth. Maybe they should blast through Sila's range and contact her a couple days after the fact to ask authorization. For all the waits she'd put him through...but then, he did have to deal with Sila on occasion. Pissing her off wasn't very useful...though thinking about it was fun.

"She's the one who bought Mesler's barge, right?" B'Elanna asked.

"What was left of it," Tom answered.

A smirk curled B'Elanna's mouth as she leaned her head on her hand. "I wonder if anyone's been desperate enough to buy it yet."

Tom chuckled. "I'll put a bid in on it if you want. It's Barolian. We could use some of its pieces. Fifteen strips sound about right?"

"Way too much," she replied. "For that matter, I *never* want to work on that ship again."

After a scheduled stop at Irtrin, they'd wind up the leg at Velir. Tom looked forward to having a reason to land there that time to take on return cargo. Velir boasted a nice trade base that Maryl could always mine for deals. The Hidirin contract initially was arranged there, in fact.

B'Elanna liked that base, too, having struck up an acquaintance with the engineering manager there while searching for odd parts for the Guerdon. She drowsily told Tom she needed to contact the manager again to see if they had found the reactor ports she'd been looking for. She would do so when they made the course change at Argolis. If they got back soon and had the power and speed they needed, that would happen in just over a month.

They both hoped aloud, again, that it would happen.

Finally, in mid-sentence, she fell silent. Relief and relative relaxation finally giving way to tiredness, her eyes had already closed even as Tom watched her, even as she still spoke. Her body, already leaned against the length of the bunk, slid down to her arm, leaving her half-supported by the mattress. Then, her head tipped forward and slowly settled next to his shoulder, her hands on either side of her face. Several seconds passed in that stillness; then her head turned to the side and she exhaled deeply.

Watching her give it up at last, he had to wonder how long it had been since she'd slept. She had quickly become known for her all-nighters on the Guerdon. Only Savan beat her for claiming the fewest hours of sleep. But they'd been there for a few days by then, and he doubted she'd slept much at the base, with him as he'd been. She had to be completely wiped out.

Propping himself up a little on an elbow, Tom reached down and eased her up onto the bed with him, careful for the connections and wires coming from the pads. Grabbing the cloth of her jumpsuit in spots, he managed to pull her hips, then her legs up. Slim but solid, he honestly expected her to weigh more than she did. But she came up with relative ease. It wasn't the best position for sleeping, but he figured she'd adjust if she needed. She'd need to be up in about four hours as it was to change out the cells again. He wished he could do it himself, turn off the alarm and let her sleep.

"Have a break for now, B'Elanna," he whispered, stroking her soft curls with a hand, watching her relax by his side despite all the bleeping, buzzing machinery there. He drew a deep breath and relaxed, too. "I'll take this watch."

"God, I hate this stuff," Tom grumbled as B'Elanna pressed the medication into his neck.

"It won't be much longer," she quietly told him.

"After years of wanting to be numb or unconscious, it's funny how much I hate it now."

"It's an improvement."

Tom breathed and said nothing more when the second and third injections were applied. She was probably sick of his complaints and he was too tired to make a joke of it.

B'Elanna set the spent hyposprays inside their case for cleaning, then set the case aside. Then she looked for something else to do. There wasn't much, which was even more bothersome to her than before. They'd talked for so long the night before, she literally fell asleep on him. When he gently woke her, she found herself in the last place she should have been: Snuggled warmly up at his side and completely comfortable there. She'd been rigidly keeping her distance since, cursing herself for being such an idiot about it. He certainly wasn't troubled and likely didn't think anything about it. But she was starting to feel distracted and nervous around him, and they still had a couple days at least cooped up together.

Once they returned to the Guerdon, she could easily work her way out of it, but she really didn't want to say or do the wrong thing there, especially with him in a position that allowed even less business than she endured. The way he processed information, he'd have no trouble figuring out what was going on in her mind. Her blood ran cold to imagine how embarrassing that would be on top of all the other humiliations she'd suffered on that ship.

Then she wondered why she was acting like a fifteen year-old. *Because this is someone you work for*, she answered herself.

In another half hour, the final medication she needed to administer would make him very drowsy. She was a little ashamed to know it, but she'd be glad to have that time to regroup.

While she circled the small space, Tom watched her. He knew better than to ask her what was wrong. After such a hard week, and days of keeping up her game face, he'd already surmised, she was probably embarrassed by having fallen asleep as she had, appearing so vulnerable. In any situation, B'Elanna didn't like that. He sighed to himself. He should have just left her where she was. But then, she *had* felt pretty nice there next to him, warm and softly breathing, so it wasn't a total waste. She'd get over it soon enough.

Nope, he grinned, *Still not dead*.

But she did look like she needed a save. "Did you manage to hang onto those cards we replicated?"

B'Elanna looked back at him. "I still have them," she answered, burying her relief under her crisp reply. "Are you suggesting I play you in your condition?"

"Yeah, it probably wouldn't be fair, but you need to earn some confidence, so I'll still let you win."

She laughed and went to her bag for the deck. "We'll see about that," she responded before she could check herself. Stiffening, she pulled a breath and got herself together, but otherwise didn't pause.

The moment she turned again, a blast knocked her directly across the room and off her feet. The cards sprayed across the floor. "That deck just wasn't made to stay together," she remarked before another blast sent her tumbling back.

"Oof!!" Tom grunted and hit the floor, knocking over the regenerator unit and tearing off one of the pads.

"Oh no!" B'Elanna scrambled across the floor even as a third explosion rocked the ship.

Looking out the window and seeing the streams of reddish white bouncing off the shields, they didn't have to guess what was happening. Whatever the crew had been readying for had finally caught up with them.

B'Elanna knew she couldn't do anything about that much, though, so she got her hands under Tom's side and heaved him up with a little of his help.

"The pad," Tom gasped, nodding to where it landed on the floor. "It'll need to be...um, recalibrated."

"I know," she said and got out the tool as quickly as she could. The dampers a little off due to the blasts, she could now feel the sharp turns the little ship was pulling. Glancing at the viewport, she drew back a little to see a huge white form pass in the distance, readying for another turn. Jerking her attention back to the business under her hands, she moved so Tom could see. "Is that a starship?"

Tom squinted at the parrying view and forgot about the regenerator, even as B'Elanna slapped the pad back into place and braced herself against him. Even doped up and looking through the little, bobbing window, he knew his ships, especially the Excelsior Class. "More than that," he whispered and looked at B'Elanna. "It's the Berlin."

B'Elanna cursed under her breath and weighed Tom down as the phaser fire sliced over the shield bubble. "Seems the Maquis knows all our friends," she muttered.

"Space is small out here," he agreed, holding onto the sides of the bunk as another blast and course shift rocked them again. In a little cruiser like that, dampers at one hundred percent wouldn't keep them from being tossed around in a firefight.

A firefight that turned quickly offensive, too, as the Liberty, for all its deficiencies and age, made a course change and faced the sleek starship with an answer of its own. Dodging and diving the streams of phaser fire, it made fast time to the anterior port nacelle section of the bigger ship--Tom guessed, anyway, from what he could see. Chakotay was Starfleet. He knew he couldn't be shot at there.

A creak, then rumbling sound rattled underneath the ship, and then they disengaged from the safe haven to take a dive around the starship, phasers first. A moment later, a torpedo shot out from beneath and flew directly into the Berlin's underbelly.

They only got a passing view as the weapon tore through the powerful starship's shields and blew out what looked like half a deck.

Sitting up again, B'Elanna stared in horror even after the view shifted to nothing but sparks in space. "That was one hell of a torpedo," she breathed, almost in disbelief.

"They don't have material control in the Maquis," Tom reminded her. "I don't want to guess what was loaded into that canister."

"Probably not much different than what they shot at us," she said, harping to herself, *How could I have sympathized at all with these people?*

Another shot struck the Liberty, vigorously buzzing through the shields. She threw her arms over Tom's midsection and her leg over the regenerator unit before the shockwave hit. The dampers weakened, she could feel her fingers pulling at the joints for a couple seconds as she held tightly on before the ship swerved again and she felt herself being shoved the other way. Below, she knew several phaser banks had been at work, though they could neither see nor hear what they were producing.

"I thought about it before, but I really know why you pilots insist on viewscreens," she said. "I wish I could see what was going on."

Tom coughed a laugh. "It always takes an emergency--" He cut off, grabbing the frame of the bunk again as the ship banked and ducked.

The next blast threw B'Elanna's head down onto the other side of the mattress. The lights flicked and main power seemed to fail momentarily. But it all came back and the Liberty rallied, tossing another couple of torpedoes out of its bays.

B'Elanna kept her head down that time, waiting...

A crash sounded, then, and at least a few power conduits were fried as the comm panel at the door sizzled and shorted out. Tom craned his head to see the Berlin coming around. "Part of me wants them to win, the other part doesn't feel like getting caught here or dead."

A loud, hollow boom reverberated around them, and then the whole ship was knocked off its line. B'Elanna groaned for the pull in her gut, closing her eyes when the unmistakable creak of tearing hull plates whined above them as they struggled to get the interior gravity corrected. Something was coming through the shields...

Another groan and rumble from below and a fourth torpedo shot out of the Liberty, whirling around via a directional device and whizzing past the viewport when Tom managed to see over B'Elanna's back. He immediately knew where on the Berlin it was aiming for. It was a little relieving to know that a starship could be attacked as efficiently as the Guerdon was. Then again, the Maquis seemed to have the chemicals to make any destruction quite possible. More, they had no qualms about using them, even on Starfleet. That was a little scary, Tom knew.

Suddenly, another couple of larger cruisers came alongside the Liberty, one of which took up position just outside the viewport, firing at will and straight ahead, then shooting yet another torpedo out at its enemy before paring off for another assault angle.

They caught a glimpse of the Berlin once again. Predictably, it'd taken some hard damage to its deflector rim and lower decks thanks to that last torpedo, and it was sporting a few more battle scars along its stern as the other Maquis ships kept the pressure on. There was little resistance from the shields at that point.

"They probably knocked the main deflector offline," B'Elanna noted.

Tom rolled his eyes. "Yeah, they like frying deflectors first."

"They're working on secondaries," she added, wanting to move to the window to perhaps have another look at the Berlin, but she was smart enough to stay where she had purchase. Someone in engineering was still trying to get the internal gravity balanced, but kept overcompensating. With a snort, she

realized they might get her down there after all, if that kept up. "They won't last."

"Yeah."

With that, they could do nothing but wait. They waited longer than they expected. Nearly a minute of silence followed that torpedo.

A couple more hits rattled the Liberty again, but it was not nearly as powerful as before. The Maquis ships all seemed to easily turn away, and they saw one of them bank hard starboard and pop into warp. Glancing out the window again, Tom saw the sparks give way to streaming stars.

"They're getting some distance," he quietly deduced. "My bet is the Berlin's disabled."

"They're running?" B'Elanna was surprised.

"Chakotay knows that destroying a starship is more trouble than it's worth. It'll attract every piece of junk in the fleet to the sector. Just disabling them will make Dokaru want to fight him again himself."

"You're right."

"And I'm glad for it," Tom said, grunting a little as, with B'Elanna's weight off of him, he could check to make sure the regenerator pads were still in place. It was hard to tell without the tricorder and with the first round of medications starting to do their job. He was feeling the pain from landing on the floor, however, and he hoped no more than the pad had been knocked loose. "I liked Dokaru, and even Doc Masdi was a good guy. I like knowing they'll live another day."

"Carey was a great help," she remembered aloud. "He and the rest of his department aren't having a good day, either. They'll be on that deflector for a week."

"Yeah." Done with the topic, he looked over at the table. "Where'd the tricorder go?" he asked.

B'Elanna got on her hands and knees to reach under the bed for it. *Careful when you wish for something to do*, she told herself, hoping one thing to do wouldn't be fixing the medical equipment. Thankfully, the little unit whirled to life. The LED had some damage, but it was working.

With a little determination, Tom managed to get the regenerator pad reset and B'Elanna, satisfied that he hadn't suffered any more than a bruise for getting tossed onto the deck, got it back in place. Checking the chronometer, B'Elanna loaded up the final hypospray.

"Now that you've had your excitement for the day," she jested, "you can have your nap."

"Shut up and get it over with," he grinned back, closing his eyes to take the dose. He breathed deeply when he heard the whiz of air, then felt the radiating numb crawl over his body, starting with his stomach. Groaning softly, he readied himself for the aftereffect.

A wish followed that, then a clamor of footsteps. "Explain how the USS Berlin was able to track us down, Paris!" railed Seska.

Tom turned his head to see it indeed was the Bajoran, fiery-eyed and snarling...pretty much everything he knew about her looks *Not that I should have expected to have that one behind me as long as the Berlin was still in operation*, he sighed to himself. Standing beside her, Chakotay did *not* look his usual self. He was hot from the fight, full of whatever his second in command had told him; he was looking for answers, too, and wanted them now.

"A full sector away from Starbase 311 and they could pin us down?" she continued. "How does *that* happen?"

"Interstellar bread trail?" he whispered, forcing his eyes to stay open. "You're the ones who scanned us...when we came aboard, you scanned us. You know we didn't have a beacon."

"But you had all the equipment to build one at the base--and that equipment is missing."

"I installed all the long range communication devices," B'Elanna insisted. "We couldn't have carried them out."

"They were obviously used, though."

"I tested them and that was it."

"We'd have never...been able to get...signal." He pulled a breath as his eyes closed. "Just...hypo. B'Elanna."

She gladly stepped in as his head rolled the other way. "There's no way we could have known they were onto you," she asserted, stepping between Tom's unconscious body and the two Maquis. "And we couldn't have been able to contact the Berlin from the base without knowing where they were."

Seska shook her head at the engineer. "I'm not blaming *you*, Torres. You probably didn't have anything to do with it that you know of. But Paris knows these people and I think we deserve an explanation after being attacked by a Starfleet ship your captain has had dealings with."

"I'm sure there's a great explanation why they'd patrol this area looking for Maquis ships carrying stolen materials and illegal substances," B'Elanna returned. "Tom was in no position to do arrange *anything*, much less get into the systems I was only just installing."

"Were you in the center with him at all times?" Chakotay asked.

"No, I couldn't have been," B'Elanna answered, then shot a stare to Seska. "I left him unconscious on the bunk. I'm not exaggerating. He couldn't move."

"As far as you knew," said Seska. "Look, Starfleet is all for making deals. It happens all the time. I have no doubt that daddy's little screwup had no problem brokering a deal to save his ass, either there or here somehow when he was working in the control lab before you left. But it did happen, and I *will* prove it. There's no other way the Berlin could have followed us out here so far."

"If he was close to being the type to do that, he would never have come here himself."

"I think you're wrong about Paris," Seska told her squarely. "I think you don't know him as well as you think you do. I do appreciate your guts in standing up for what you think is right, though, despite everything I tried to do to help you here," Seska told her. "I still say you could be doing a lot more of that, instead of the lost cause you're having to deal with now."

B'Elanna's eyes narrowed at the pitch. "I don't throw my loyalty around, Seska."

"I'm only saying your could make a real difference by helping us."

"I wouldn't help you to a glass of water if our lives weren't on the line."

The corner of Seska's mouth turned up. "What makes you think they aren't?"

Chakotay raised his hand towards the Bajoran, but B'Elanna spoke before he could address her.

"I think that if you'd kill or trap us here for whatever end you're looking for, then you'd be no better than the Cardassians and Starfleet put together." She glanced over at the other Maquis there. "In short, Captain Chakotay, I'm counting on your sense of common decency to get us out of here, and that's all."

"You'll get home as soon as we meet your ship," he told her.

Seska coughed a laugh. "Chakotay--"

"That'll be all," he cut in, letting his stare do the rest. Turning, he gestured for the Bajoran to leave. "We'll discuss it later. Let me handle this."

"That son of a bitch betrayed us and you're going to let it go?!"

"I never said that," he calmly replied. "But I need to take it from here. I'm going to handle it from here on."

The woman's eyes were a reflection of pure loathing--for Torres, for the situation, it was hard to tell--though she did pull slowly back and finally obey. The captain silently released his breath, even as Seska's hiss echoed back to them when she strode down the corridor.

"Thank you," B'Elanna said, as sourly as before but meaning it enough. Her instincts at full again, she felt her heart beating to wonder how Seska would have continued if allowed to stay. Chakotay seemed to be holding her down by the heel, the Bajoran was so frustrated and determined. But then, living as they did, maybe they had no choice but to think the worst of her and Tom--mainly Tom. They had to watch around every corner, protect themselves. She couldn't curse them too much for behaving very much as she had, when times were rough....

It was so much easier to hate them. She honestly didn't know what to think anymore, only feel angry with Seska for assuming she'd betray the man she'd been protecting day-in and day-out for a week.

"You're welcome," Chakotay nodded, knowing whatever gains they had made with the engineer in the past five days had been sorely tested. He'd told Seska again not to try to recruit Torres, just to help make her comfortable and be friendly, and that was it. Obviously, she went too far again, preventing any chance of an ally to call on down the road if needed. Seska simply could not think in the long-term. But that was another conversation.

"I didn't want to create any hard feelings here," he said. "The Berlin's ability to find and track us had to be checked out, though. They'd been watching us since we came out of the Badlands and that doesn't happen by accident."

"Tell me, Captain," B'Elanna asked, looking directly up at him, "are you in the habit of apologizing for Seska, or is it just for us?"

Deliberately, Chakotay took that with a grin. "Actually, just you."

B'Elanna's eyes fell back to Tom. His breathing had slowed and quieted, the meds full in effect. He was still alive, and the Maquis captain at least seemed to be honest about his objectives. She sighed. "Look, she did a nice thing for me and I appreciate it. But considering how she feels about my captain, I'd like it if she stayed away from here, if that's possible."

"It shouldn't be too hard to keep her busy for the next few days," Chakotay assured her and waited for her gaze to draw up again so he could offer another nod. Only when she blinked her acknowledgment did he step back through the door, straighten his vest and stride away to the hundred other things he had to take care of.

"Thanks, Bendera," Tom said quietly as he waved off B'Elanna, who was in the middle of her meal when the man entered. "I think this'll be the last time you have to ferry a shipment of cells. I get to take these things off tomorrow."

"You've got to be looking forward to that," the Maquis agreed, stuffing the spent units into his satchel as Tom handed them to him.

"Do you know how far off we are now?" Tom asked.

"About two days," Bendera told him. "We weren't driven too far off course. We've let your people know, too, what's happened. Your science person's preparing for you."

Tom snorted. "Great."

Bendera, who had spoken with the Vulcan woman, didn't need an explanation. "Anyway, if these die out on you prematurely, let me know. Everyone is hot on specific repairs right now, but I'm all over the ship and can get them to you."

Tom nodded. "I appreciate it."

"Standing orders, Captain Paris," Bendera shrugged, "and to be honest, we'll all be glad to have this over with, get back to the line, back to what we signed up for."

"The base is a wash, then?" B'Elanna queried.

"Probably."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes, but said nothing. The anger at all that wasted effort was still there, but she knew there wasn't a choice but to move the base. She and Tom should have known that the moment they saw the Cardassian ship waiting for them.

"Using the Badlands is a good idea," Bendera continued. "If we do it again, it'll just be somewhere else."

"Good," Tom said, slapping in the last power cell and handing the old one to Bendera. "I'd rather leave here knowing I have absolutely no idea where it is."

"We're glad you think like that," returned Bendera. With a nod, he backed off and stepped out of the quarters, locking the entrance behind him.

Satisfied, Tom looked over at B'Elanna, who had involved herself completely in her meal again, now that the Maquis had gone and they were alone. She'd remained quiet even after he woke up, save relaying what happened between her, Seska and Chakotay earlier that day. He wondered at first if

something else was going on with her, but again, it really had been a hell of a trip for her, in every kind of way. He guessed she was also mixed up from all the signals being shot at her there, too. Much as he'd like to help, she probably needed to get a handle on things in her own way.

"So, what's for dinner?" he quietly asked.

"*He's busy with something else.*"

"He's supposed to be *here*!"

"*We're trying to put our ship back together, lady. But I'll let him know you were looking for your babysitter.*"

B'Elanna blew a breath of disgust between her teeth and slapped off the comm. She looked back at Tom. He'd be awake soon and requiring new regenerator cells, thanks to a unit that burned them out thrice as quickly. The stock Tuvok had brought her was already spent, now he was nowhere to be found, and the idiot not in charge of tactical thought she was a joke.

"Assistants," she grumbled to herself. Station-side or Maquis, they always thought they ran the whole unit when their boss wasn't breathing on them--all the more reason she was grateful to have Ridge.

If she had the equipment, she'd simply hardwire the whole unit and let the ship power it instead, like most people would in that past century or two. But she didn't have that kind of equipment--or the authorization.

Had she the equipment, she might have done it, anyway.

Unfortunately, she knew Benders and Chakotay were deep into tactical, too, and weren't to be disturbed. She didn't want to leave the room with Tom unguarded, even with the ship as busy as it seemed to be right now and having gotten to know some of the people better. Experience had already proven it quite possible to get past any tricks with the door. Her gut shrank a little still when she remembered the moment she walked in--right in time, just as that guy--she never did get his name--was about to shoot...

B'Elanna turned around and noted her position. She'd been in that spot when she first confronted the man, knocking the weapon from his hand with a swat. Getting down on her hands and knees, she looked under the bunk, then around to under the corner unit. She smiled a moment later and crawled forward.

Tom blinked his surprise when she handed the phaser to him. "I have to say, B'Elanna, you blend in quick."

Her lips turned up. "So they tell me," she returned. "You know how to shoot one of those?"

"I think I can figure it out."

"I'm asking you, Tom."

He checked the controls. The characters were Gamarian, but the rest was standard Federation. "I can use it," he answered. "Where'd you get this thing, anyway?"

"Ask me again later," B'Elanna replied, stuffing the last of the spent cells into her bag. "You'll be able to stay awake for about twenty minutes?"

"Yeah, I'm awake. See you in a bit."

She reprogrammed the door lock on the way out, anyway. With nothing else to do now while he slept, she'd been working to make it a little more secure, so if someone did try something, the alert would at least give Tom a warning.

Striding through the corridor for the lift, B'Elanna pointed her eyes ahead and kept her pace quick, though she needn't have bothered. The crew was definitely less interested in her by then, with a quick pace of their own to match their intent expressions. She came to the aft junction without so much as a bump on the shoulder. Coming off the lift was Kinidar, whom she'd met when Tuvok needed to check in with Chakotay on the bridge during Tom's operation. B'Elanna gave him a nod of greeting before trading places with him.

"How is your captain faring, Torres?" the Andorian asked curiously as he turned around to look at her again.

B'Elanna hiked the shoulder strap up onto her shoulder and held the lift button. "Better. That medic did a great job."

"As did you," Kinidar noted. "You showed a good deal more patience with the man than I would have. But then, were it Chakotay, I believe I'd have mustered some."

B'Elanna grinned. "It does make a difference," she agreed.

"Well, good that Paris is recovering. And tell him we're all still marveling at the conn log from the shuttle. --He was a pilot. That should go a long way." He smiled and bowed his head curtly before breaking off to get on with his business.

B'Elanna laughed a little to herself as she activated the lift. "Yes, he'll like that," she said to herself, but then settled herself back into the reason she was there. Drawing a full breath as the lift halted at deck three, she propelled herself forward and around the starboard corridor for the recharge room.

"I left for *them*, damnit!"

B'Elanna slowed before reaching the room where she heard the cries.

"I put aside my career, my relationship, my *everything* to protect them--and for what?!"

"What happened, Mariah?" asked another woman.

"They're back to Earth, is what! They're safe--and don't get me wrong, I'm glad they're all right--but now I can't go back and I can't follow them. I gave it up for them and they *left me* here!"

A healthy outburst of sobbing followed the confession, a lament that made even B'Elanna's gut tighten for it. She could only imagine what it would be like to put one's whole life aside just to be abandoned,

even rejected, and then trapped... Pointing her eyes ahead and starting forward again, shooting a quick glance into the parts bay door. A brown-haired woman still released her cries into the arms of another Maquis, who didn't move or try to break away.

"We're as much family as anyone out here, Mariah," the other woman pressed after B'Elanna passed by. "We stick together. You have nothing to worry about as long as we're around, and every person on this ship will stand by you. You can count on it."

"I'd better...because I might as well be dead otherwise."

Walking slowly on, the power of the Maquis' association left B'Elanna nodding to herself. People without anywhere to go or anyone to turn to for support would naturally hold tight to each other, even when they didn't want to be there. The cause only put a higher meaning above it all. She remembered the man in the mess hall, humming while everyone so intently listened. Did they know why he sang it? They probably knew why he was there, and that was why they stopped and gave him his time.

In any case, B'Elanna was slightly comforted to know that the woman would indeed be taken care of.

The dusky corridor grew maddeningly narrow after the shuttle bay--there was no reason for the difference, and it allowed less traffic in a stock area--but B'Elanna left it with a shake of her head as she crossed through the familiar port and finally turned into the recharge room.

Gratefully, she found all the cells she needed, all lined up in the charge units and ready to go, as if they were waiting for her. She wouldn't put it past Bendera to have made sure of it, anyway. She grabbed all the ones she needed and stacked them in her bag--then rechecked to make sure she had enough for a change. Much as she was getting used to the trip, she still didn't want to have to take it often.

The corridor opened up again, and B'Elanna sped her pace. Even with the stop, she'd make it back before she expected, change out the cells and get Tom's medication done without having to rush. She passed the shuttle bay entrance without looking in that time.

"This time, do it right."

B'Elanna slowed when she heard Seska's clipped voice echo behind her. They weren't speaking loudly, but she heard them well and knew the last one who spoke was Seska.

"Didn't I do that the last time?" the man asked.

"Yes," Seska returned. "Now I'm asking you to do it again. Do you need a chart? Put the spec thruster control plates back in then lock the shuttle down in case the dampers go offline. I'll run the diagnostic after we're done with the deflector array realignment."

"Easy out, easy in," a man acknowledged and went to his duty.

B'Elanna stopped and swung around to the wall beside the entrance, leaning against it as though she were waiting. She hardly breathed in the mean time, even as her blood rose directly into her cheeks and her heart dropped into her gut.

"It'd better get back in according to the plan, or I'll jettison you personally and wave at your remains."

"Never hurts to be friendly about it," the man snickered. "Yeah, I'm going! I'm going!"

"This isn't the *farm*, Jarvin," Seska snapped. "Get on those thrusters *now*! I want to be able to inspect this shuttle by second shift tomorrow. Any later for any reason and I'll blame you."

Her mind turned the information over a few times and her pulse began to pound. Pushing herself off the wall, B'Elanna resumed her course, hardly mindful of anything but what was right before her that time. The voices faded into the bay long before she remembered to breathe again.

She stumbled onto the lift and tapped deck one. She stared numbly ahead as the view began to move.

Seska planned what she did to the shuttle ahead of time. She was working on me knowing what she'd done to the shuttle. --Maybe she was betting I'd survive?

She felt her skin warm to know Seska could have won that bet. The helpfulness of the crew, the sincerity of the captain and effort to give Tom good care, Seska's reevaluation and resulting friendliness and favors and even Seska's accusing Tom of contacting the Berlin and Captain Chakotay's following reasonableness: All of it made B'Elanna rethink her feelings about those people, who would do anything to meet their goals. They hadn't changed toward her. They'd seen to it that she'd changed towards them. But they would be violent as readily as they would be conniving if it helped them to what they wanted.

B'Elanna felt her stomach churn and forced herself to swallow against it.

As the lift ground to a halt, she had to straighten herself from the slump she'd fallen into. Walking through the deck one corridor, staring at the nods of people who were already becoming more familiar to her, she felt like a bug on glass and a traitor to the people she wanted to return to. One of the people opened her mouth to say something to her, but B'Elanna dug her heels into the deck and sped her pace.

Seska might have won that bet.

Was Chakotay in on it? Worse, would he continue to protect her even if he wasn't?

They stared at her like hungry people, all of them wanting a piece of something.

She just wanted to get back into the quarters and get past the next couple days, get back to the Guerdon and crawl into her bunk and imagine the Maquis and the Badlands and the DMZ never existed, if only for a while.

She sped her steps again, making good time to the lift, and maybe she wouldn't have to look at any more...

"Torres."

A hand landed on her shoulder and she whipped around with a snarl--only to find Tuvok at the other end of her curtailed attack. He had caught her arm in his large, firm hand, and he looked down to her as he always had before slowly releasing his grip. She felt the warmth of it many seconds after it left her skin.

She blew out her breath, dragging her emotions into check. "What do you want?"

"I should ask if *you* continue to require my presence. I received your request."

"No," she blurted, then shook her head. "I don't need you anymore, thanks. I've got everything."

"Who is with Captain Paris?" the Vulcan then queried, a speck of concern crossing him.

"A fully charged phaser," B'Elanna answered, nodding towards the cross corridor when his brow rose in response. She needed to get out of that hall. She needed to get away from those people. "Even so, I should get back."

"Very well." Stepping out of her way, he bowed his head slightly to let her pass.

As she resumed her pace, she wondered if Tuvok's assignment included softening her up, too.

Growling to herself, B'Elanna strode back into the cubicle quarters and tried not to look at Tom. Suddenly, it was hard to look at him again, knowing where she could have gone if they'd just had the time, and if she hadn't seen and heard...

Seska may well have won the bet.

Could it have happened? she asked herself, shamefully knowing that anything was possible and indeed, that they'd been trying to make it happen.

"Got them?" Tom asked, watching her drop her sack on the table and yank off her jacket.

"Yes."

"Everything went all right?"

Nodding tersely, B'Elanna started changing out the cells.

"Out with it," Tom sighed, then snorted at himself. "God, when did I start sounding like my father?"

He continued to watch B'Elanna, who was buried in a meal he personally knew tasted like freeze-dried dirt. Since she had returned from getting the recharged cells, she'd assumed much the same posture, glancing up from time to time, as she did just then. It looked like an effort to meet his gaze for as long as she did.

She looked very much like she did when she first came on the Guerdon. He coughed a little laugh to himself to recall it. How long ago it seemed.

"Something happened out there, didn't it?" he asked, poking a mysterious ball of what might have been cheese.

She frowned, shrugged. "Nothing...nothing directly. I heard something, and it made me start thinking about..." She shook her head. "No, you need to know. Here I am questioning my morals and I suddenly can't be straight with you."

Tom furrowed his brow. "About what?"

B'Elanna finally met his eyes. "Seska had the thruster control plates changed out in the shuttle. The wrong plates were purposefully put in so they'd check out on the diagnostic, but wouldn't operate with that shuttle when actually used. No one could have spotted that until activating a landing sequence."

Tom took that in with a slow blink. "You heard her talking about it?"

"I heard her telling her person to put the spec parts back in, yes. Even Chakotay said there was a problem with the gravimetric plates--which makes me wonder how much he really knew."

"I don't think having us dead and a shuttle totaled is in his best interest," Tom said.

"But it seems to have been in Seska's," B'Elanna finished quietly.

"Hmm," he quietly replied, then paused. "I wonder how many lives I've got left," he asked himself aloud, then looked at her again. She looked like she'd break in half if she tried to stand. Meanwhile, he wished again that he could at least sit up. "What did that make you think about, B'Elanna?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. *Where to start?* she suddenly wondered. Her brain had been spinning since she stepped away from the shuttle bay. But she trusted Tom...and did feel a strange need to tell him the rest. For all she'd been through with him that past week, and knowing what close calls she'd averted, she felt he should know where she'd been. Drawing a slow breath, she quietly admitted, "They'd been working on me, Tom."

Again, a slow blink was his first response. "Yeah. But we knew that'd happen."

"Which makes it worse," she sighed. "We all knew I was a target, from my first day on the Guerdon. I should have seen through it. I mean, I was still suspicious, but I didn't want to be as much.... It was right there and I let my suspicions relax even knowing I didn't trust or like them. --None of this makes sense."

"Being in the moment and tired as hell on top of it isn't something anyone can be prepared for, B'Elanna. You see it the least when it's right on top of you."

She breathed a humorless laugh. "No kidding. They'd been doing a good job, too--not trying too hard or pushing me into anything but that damned shower. Chakotay was doing everything he could, protecting us, making sure his people were helpful, and they seemed like they were accepting I was there..." She swallowed the bile rising in her with that confession. She knew all too well her weakness for acceptance, despite all her assertions of self-reliance.

"Maybe it wouldn't have happened," she continued. "I want to think it probably wouldn't have--but a part of me knows that if they kept me here long enough, maybe got me fighting for something, if just myself...I could have turned my back on everything I said I'd never do. I've despised these people, Tom. I'm the one who didn't want you to accept Captain Chakotay's deal despite the protection. Maybe...I don't know, but...I was starting to like some of these people--or at least I'd stopped hating them; Seska really seemed sincere and got me feeling good by helping me to a shower and clean clothes. How easy was that? How couldn't I have seen it?"

"She'd all but served you chocolate bonbons in the command room when we first came on," Tom recalled. "Naturally, she'd adapt for the circumstance."

B'Elanna growled, shaking her head tightly. "After everything they'd done to us, to even think I could have been turned on their side is incredibly humiliating." She breathed a derisive laugh. "And admitting all this isn't making me feel any better, either."

"I'm glad you trust me to it," Tom told her. "I know from personal experience it's not easy to open up with something like that."

She only shrugged to agree, then continued, "Anyway, you had a right to know about the shuttle and

about Seska." Her eyes turned down again.

"It's not such a bad thing," Tom softly told her, smiling understandingly when their eyes met once more. "God knows I've fallen for worse. But it just shows what a good person you are, B'Elanna, and that you're not so jaded inside as maybe you'd like to think. We try not to let too much get under our skin out here, but we still itch to look for what's good. We want good things. Really, that's no crime, and there was no harm done. It'll be all right."

B'Elanna breathed against her beating heart and sudden warmth as his words found her. "I never thought they didn't have their own plan for us, though," she diverted. "There was more going on than that base."

"Well, that's just good reasoning."

"I hope they let us go, though."

"Yeah." Tom sighed. "Guess we'll just have to wait and see on that one."

Her eyes turned down again. "Yeah."

With some effort, he pulled on his coat, checked his pockets, moved his toes around in his boots.

Of it all, the boots felt the weirdest. He feet felt two sizes too big.

Waking nicely from another drug-induced sleep, Tom knew with a thorough wave of the tricorder that he could finally take off those regeneration pads. He'd been anticipating being able to do so that day, but half expected a setback because of the fall yesterday or some other form of delay. But his luck was still working with him. He was ready to start living in the twenty-fourth century again. He was never so glad to get back to it.

Deactivating the generator, peeling the pads away and setting the unit aside, he slowly but gladly pulled himself to sit. B'Elanna's puffs of sleep did not stir as he recovered from that position; then, readying himself, he used the upper bunk frame to pull himself to stand. His knees felt like jelly and his gut required a minute to deal with gravity once again, but he breathed and moved a little and got his bearings.

"Where do you think you're going?" B'Elanna whispered. Her eyes had opened to stare directly at him.

"Across the room if I'm lucky," he returned gamely. In fact, he was feeling better by the minute, certainly able to do as he said.

Her lips turning up, B'Elanna rolled onto her back. "It's about time."

Two hours and a quiet breakfast passed before he was ready for more, which request inspired a belabored look from the engineer. Not that he expected much different. She knew all too well what was beyond those doors. "Just a walk around the deck," he promised. "Why not just contact one of the people you know," he suggested, "and just let them know that public enemy number one is having a stroll? I need to get my blood moving, just a lap."

Knowing how he could be when he *didn't* get to work off that energy, B'Elanna finally shrugged and stacked up their empty ration trays. "I could use a coffee," she told him and grabbed her jacket before moving across to open the comm. Chakotay was probably on the bridge by then. She didn't have to look to know Tom was smiling with satisfaction.

It only felt half real, putting one foot in front of the other, moving ahead, glancing at the orange-lit doors in the deep gray corridor. Tom's head was light, still adjusting to the blood flowing more freely out of it and into his still swollen feet and he was stiff as hell from a week on his back and only the regenerator treatments to keep his muscles in tone. Still, he felt no pain. B'Elanna had seen to that before they left, insisting that being a little out of it was worth the trouble if it meant he could actually get himself back.

"I've done with dragging you around," she added, only half joking.

They entered the mess soon after and without pause. Kinidar had assured them that the lunch shift was ended and they probably wouldn't be bothered by a passer-by. Either he or Chakotay would stop in to make sure of that. True to his word, it was vacant. Tom's eyes went to the rickety, flickering replicator before B'Elanna took her first step towards it. "Mind getting me a coffee, too?"

"Strong, cream no sugar?"

"Yeah. Good memory."

"I've heard you order that about a thousand times," she shrugged. "It's not that hard to remember."

He grinned and settled himself against the bar, leaning against the stool instead of sitting on it, taking full advantage of being a biped again. Before he could enjoy himself too much, however, a familiar form appeared on the other side of the entry--and spotted him immediately.

Tom made the most of it, anyway. "Good afternoon, Seska," he drawled.

"Still watching where you're going, Paris?" she replied with a smirk as she continued through toward the bridge. Her eyes pinned to his as she slowed to a stalk. "Well, maybe, to use a Human expression, the *fourth* time will be the charm."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes as she brought out the coffees, but Seska had sped again and moved out of the room before she could add a reply. "God, Tom, what exactly did you say to make her hate you so much?"

"Not sure," he muttered, failing at lightness and increasingly distracted as Seska's words bounced around in his mind. "I was pretty drunk back then."

She set his mug before him, but he didn't reach out for it, yet. Taking hers, B'Elanna watched him puzzle something out behind his eyes. Now that she knew the expression, it was easy to tell when he was doing it. Finally, as the clank of the plasma emission tube housing below the deck began to make her itch to go shut it up, he picked up his mug, glancing his thanks her way.

His eyes turned back to the wall, alert but elsewhere. It reminded her of how he looked when they were flying in the Badlands and he was getting his idea on how to evade the Cardassian cruiser. But then his lips parted; with a jerk of his head, he caught her eyes, suddenly enough that she blinked with surprise.

"What?" she asked. Before he answered, she heard more footsteps echo behind them. She turned to see Chakotay coming into the mess, surveying them both with narrow eyes and a firm, straight mouth.

B'Elanna had a feeling what he was looking for. "You just missed her."

"She told me you were here," Chakotay replied. "She had to pick up some equipment from the bridge. She'll be returning in a minute, and then I'll get back to work soon."

"You shouldn't have to babysit us," B'Elanna told him.

"The break is good," he admitted, then looked at Tom. "And it's good to see you're healing as expected." Tom didn't answer. Giving him a moment, Chakotay stepped closer and tried again. "Paris?"

His instincts piqued and heart starting to race before he was nearly ready for that much stimulation, Tom had hardly noticed the other captain's entrance and ignored Chakotay's address. His spine crawled with sensation as it all came to him. "*You'd better watch yourself*," she'd snarled when they first met and he served her a bitter little quip. Indeed, he remembered, as did she. B'Elanna had told him about Seska's conversation with Chakotay, how she'd been left in charge of the Liberty and how she... *She's been doing all the watching, all along.*

Seeing Tom's expression hadn't changed, B'Elanna remembered that she hadn't gotten an answer. "What is it?" she repeated.

"She planted the bomb," he breathed, shifting his attention to where the Bajoran had disappeared. He then looked at Chakotay, who couldn't have caught on but was looking rather curious. "Do you get your hands on triceron often, Captain?"

Chakotay furrowed his brow at the question, but didn't answer.

B'Elanna instantly knew where Tom had gone. "That bitch," she hissed. "Not just this run, but she *started* the whole mess!" She looked at the other captain. "She waited until she had command of the ship and came after us at Hugora. That time your deuterium stores were wasted when she was supposed to pick up more? She or whoever Jonas was didn't screw it up."

"Did you hear that here?" Chakotay asked, darkening at the young woman's accusation. "On this ship?"

"I overheard you and her arguing about it when I went for cells the first time," B'Elanna quickly replied before pressing the rest. "Captain, the deuterium was gone because she spent it all cruising out to the Hugora Nebula and playing cat and mouse with us, nearly destroying us before she had to run, rotated your base crew and probably got the rest to think it was what they were *supposed* to do. I'm willing to bet there's a record or person somewhere that will say she got that deuterium."

"There might not, considering how we get it." "Did you fly the Liberty out to the Hugora Nebula and attack the Guerdon?" Tom finally asked him.

Chakotay scowled. "No."

"Who else on your ship could have done it, then?"

The Maquis did not answer that time, but he knew his face was answering that question.

"God damn," Tom muttered. His attention returned to the other man for the last confirmation he needed. "Did you leave the Liberty in Seska's charge around seven months ago, Captain Chakotay?"

Chakotay stilled as he put everything into place--the triceron charges he told Seska to stop using because they were too traceable, his off-ship station runs, recruiting and looking for Captain Paris and the

Guerdon. Seska had indeed been left in charge of the Liberty just over a half-year ago and could have picked up the deuterium and spent it going after Paris and his ship, for what was left of it.

He wondered how deeply she'd erased the course logs. He wondered who would lie for her...were it all true. Seska was convinced that Paris was out for her and the Maquis because Rodrigo got a little rough with him. Much as Chakotay didn't want to believe the trader's accusations, though, it made perfect sense. Worse, for all she believed and had said about Paris, he wouldn't put it past her to take a stab at revenge.

And he'd been sleeping with her the whole time, as recently as the night before, with no indication that anything had changed. But then, he knew how much he valued Seska's incredible resourcefulness--and spitefulness. He'd used it, just as she'd used him. That'd all have been fine if she hadn't gone behind his back and wasted their precious stores...twice, now.

He had planned to wait until he returned again to do so, but he needed to talk to Fitzgerald...if the man would talk at all...

No, he'll talk, Chakotay reassured himself grimly, then briefly closed his eyes when a familiar click of heels came up behind him. He felt himself stilling inside, his heart thrumming, readying to turn and find her upturned lips, her bright eyes, so direct, so sure, so intent upon him and him alone. He'd loved her, even if he knew he'd gone to her in need, with passion and desire ricocheting off his pain and needing a place to burrow and thrive. She'd given that and all of herself, too--or so he thought. So he thought.

He hoped he could think it again in another minute.

Turning, he faced her directly. "Seska, I have to ask you about the botched deuterium trip."

Taken aback at first by the suddenness of his question, Seska glanced at the two at the high table, then at Chakotay again. "What about it?" she asked cautiously.

"When you were out on your raid, did you happen to divert course to the Hugora Nebula?"

She laughed. "The Hugora Nebula! Are you kidding me?"

"Paris and Torres are pretty certain you were there--with my ship," he stated evenly, quietly, watching her reaction closely. "I'm wondering who's telling the truth. I'd like to hear your side."

"What are you talking about, Chakotay?" Seska scoffed. "How could I have taken the ship to the Hugora Nebula? I'd have to have taken it through Cardassian space to get there and back from Solosos in only three weeks!"

"You based at Berad-Five after raiding the supply cruiser coming out of Panora?" he asked her.

"Of course I did!" she insisted. "We got a couple scrapes in the process, too. We took on repairs, and after Jonas started us off in the wrong direction, we missed the supply pickup. There's no question about what happened."

"And if I start asking him and the regular crew about exactly what happened and what everyone was doing, I'll hear what you just told me? If I contact Gifadet and his people and ask about the deuterium pickup myself, he'll back up everything you say?"

She stared hard at him. "I can't believe you'd question my loyalty, Chakotay. After everything we've built here, you'd let this trader make you paranoid. No, but you go right ahead--go right ahead and waste

your time digging in to what's obviously a sorry attempt at revenge."

"I don't think you want to discuss loyalty with me right now, Seska," Chakotay coldly responded.

"I don't think you want to come near me any time soon, either," she shot back.

"Seska," Tom interjected, "we have records on our ship that can prove the Liberty was in the Hugora Nebula, that it attacked us and when it did. The USS Draden was there, too, and probably has your specs and warp signature on file. They chased your ship away from us. Think if I regurgitate some friendly relations with Starfleet that their records are going to prove us wrong?"

"Think you'll be reporting your so-called proof from a cell?" Seska said icily, "You'll never put yourself in that position, now that you've been helping us."

"But a little bird told me Starfleet's all about making deals," Tom deadpanned.

"You won't be making a deal about the Liberty and survive it."

"I've survived you this far," he replied, "and it sure as hell wasn't easy. I'll have to admit, I'm impressed. You're good at what you do. You were able to find us a full sector away, tease us, poke and prod at our defenses and pick them off one by one before lighting your candle and killing my comm tech--who got a job on my ship to support his family on *Ronara*."

"You're delusional!"

"You went through all that trouble," he continued, unfazed, "and even changed out the gravimetric plates in the shuttle to try to knock me off again."

Chakotay's attention snapped back to the other captain. "What?"

B'Elanna stepped in. "Seska had her person put the shuttle's original gravimetric plates back in yesterday," she told him.

Seska rolled her eyes. "I was completing the repair on the shuttle you and Paris crashed."

"I heard you in the shuttle bay yesterday ordering a man named Jarvin to put the spec plates back in," B'Elanna said and looked at Chakotay. "That's why it didn't come up on our diagnostics, Captain. The plates didn't fail until the thrusters were actually activated."

"First off," Seska coldly told her, "you've confused everything I said down there."

"The hell I did!" Again, B'Elanna addressed the narrow-eyed captain. "Ask Jarvin and look at the data. There's no other way a set of gravimetric plates would check out as sound and still fail unless they were not built to handle planetary gravity and a full load."

"There's absolutely no proof you can uncover that says the shuttle was tampered with."

B'Elanna breathed a bitter laugh to realize the meaning in that. "I guess there isn't."

"And then you came after me about the Berlin," Tom finally continued, "when there's no way in hell I could have patched through to them even if I was *able* to walk to a console. You've taken every opportunity to get to me, Seska, one way or another."

"This is useless," Seska snapped, looking back at Chakotay. "Why are we letting this man talk?"

"Because he's saying something," Chakotay told her, his eyes remaining fixed on the tradeship captain as he furiously tried to decide how he was going to handle her in that latest issue and remembering Torres' point. He *did* do a lot of explaining for Seska. And she may well have betrayed him. It was looking like she had. He felt a fury begin to creep into his nerves and radiate outwards and the pieces continued to fit together in his mind.

Tom still ignored the diversions, and he hardly even blinked as Seska's glare likewise went undisturbed. "You've done a hell of a lot of damage, Seska--to me, my ship and my crew. And for what? A couple comments I made in passing. No question, you're psychotic."

"And you're dead, Paris," she snarled and grabbed the phaser from her side holster.

Tom blinked when he saw the gleam of the weapon. Jerking to his left, he shoved B'Elanna against the wall as a whiz from the phaser shot a ray of plasma straight to his chest. He ducked back and felt the shot slice through his arm. "Damnit!" he hissed and dropped to the floor.

Chakotay lunged for the Bajoran, but she jumped back immediately and aimed the weapon at him. "Don't make me regret this," she told her captain. "This is about Paris, not about us."

"He's my responsibility, Seska!" Chakotay shouted.

"What's that supposed to mean? Letting this trader sell you out at every turn? Letting him ruin my reputation to save his ass?!"

"It means this is over," he stated firmly, taking a step closer to her.

"He's turned every word against me to weaken you, Chakotay!" she pressed. "Can't you see that?!"

"I see very well," he replied, tinged with sadness but terse with anger. He paused, staring long into her hard and desperate eyes. He had never seen her look desperate before. He had never been faced with mutiny before, though, either, he realized, feeling his blood chill as she took another step back. Her phaser was ready and he knew when she decided what to shoot, she would not hesitate again. He wondered if she knew what she was about to do. "It's my command to see to, Seska."

Gratefully smelling his coat more than his flesh, Tom forced a breath into his trembling frame as he fished around in his pocket with his good hand. The phaser he'd been holding onto was already set.

"Not this time," Seska told her captain, her eyes narrowing again.

Tom pulled his hand up, straightened his arm and shot Seska's hand. Her phaser flew across the room.

"Bastard!" she cried out, shaking as her hand smoldered.

He didn't blink when the stench of burnt flesh wafted his way. "You'd better get a tissue regenerator for that."

Chakotay strode the few steps to Seska's side and grabbed her other arm. "No!" he snapped when she backed off a step. "If you know what's good for you, you'll let me."

"What's good for me?" she said, turning a plaintive stare up to him. "You wouldn't know it."

"I can at least try." Looking down at what was left of her hand, he jerked his head around to yell at the exit, "Bendera! Get down here with the medkit!"

"Who's down *this* time?" called the man from the bridge.

The Maquis captain wasn't up for lightening the mood. He dragged Seska off to the door as B'Elanna knelt down next to Tom, who fell onto an elbow to catch his breath again.

"When are you going to stop surprising me?" she asked him.

"Maybe this time'll be it," he answered.

B'Elanna sighed and peered at the wound. It was superficial, but the last thing Tom needed on his first day out. Clearly, he knew that, too. He let himself lean over, didn't try to get up again. She also understood that though the phaser hadn't been aimed at her, he made sure she was out of the way. She placed her hand gently on his back.

"This makes us even, I guess," she told him.

He snorted softly and looked up at her again. "Not by a long shot, but I'll whittle away at it eventually, knowing your luck."

Bendera came and, glancing over at Tom, took an increasingly agitated Seska by the shoulders. She tried to shrug him off, but he held on. "We'll get that taken care of, Seska. --Come on, let me get to it now, before the shock wears off."

"Feel free to use my old regenerator pads," Tom said, though they probably couldn't hear him by then. His voice was cracking, too.

Chakotay watched the two disappear before moving to help Torres with Paris. Getting the other captain under his arms, he slowly helped the man back to his feet and steadied him when his knees looked like they would give way. When Paris nodded back at him, Chakotay moved to look at the two. "I promise I'll deal with her," he assured them, "and I will make certain she doesn't interfere again."

"Just get us the hell off this ship," B'Elanna returned, not looking at him. "I'm done with all of you."

"Though," Tom said quietly, offering the Maquis captain a more understanding glance, "I could use that handheld regenerator, just one more time."

"I thought I'd stop in and say goodbye. I'll be on the bridge most of today."

B'Elanna looked up from the chair she'd placed at the window, her last, pathetic bid to find something to occupy her mind in those last hours while Tom still slept. It had been an insanely long morning. And now Chakotay stood, as he had every other time, in the frame of the door, the darkened corridor behind him, his arm pressed up against the jamb. She knew when she remembered the man, she'd remember him like that.

"Tom's not up yet," she told him.

"I can tell."

"He'll be up in an hour, probably."

Chakotay nodded. "Let him know I stopped in."

"I will."

A long pause followed, but the square-built man did not move. Rather, his face reflected several topics of thought, perhaps even decisions of what he would say and a couple shades of that B'Elanna could only guess was regret. She correctly guessed the Maquis would much rather not show that bit, however.

"Seska is still sedated," he quietly informed her. "Your captain knows how to shoot effectively. She'll need a good deal of corrective surgery to fix the damage.... But maybe she needs to concentrate on something else for a while. She's been fighting a long time. All her life."

"Maybe," B'Elanna shrugged. Seska was officially off her list of people she cared about, if she'd ever been on it in the first place.

"I know Seska was trying to influence you," he added, "and I admit I let her do it, but keeping you here indefinitely was not my plan, Torres."

Her mouth pursed. "Good to know."

"Believe it. I wouldn't keep someone here against their will. It's counterproductive." Glancing at the door, he added, "I don't think you or Paris had anything to do with the Berlin, either. But I have to assume my people are right before discounting a conflict as mere paranoia."

"Guilty before innocent," B'Elanna concluded, crossing her arms as she shrugged. "I guess it can't work any other way around here."

"No, it can't," he confirmed, eyeing her again. "To be honest, I wish I had a few more people as principled as you. I'd have a lot less guesswork to do."

She frowned. "That would make your job easier."

"I still have an opening in engineering if you change your mind," he added with a little grin.

"How many times do I have to tell you people?" she shot back, her lingering anger easily ignited. "I already *have* a job--with a crew I trust, fair pay and the fortune of waking up not wondering if I'll be dead by night. You came after us when we did *nothing* to you. Then you and your people try to suck me into this hellhole? That you think, after everything that's happened, I'd work on this piece of crap with a bunch of backwater cutthroats and a fight that's not mine is beyond arrogance. You got us off that mudball and found someone to save my captain's life. For that, I'm grateful. But that's where it ends."

"I didn't expect you'd accept the job," Chakotay told her, a little bruised, much as he understood her now. "I was only being polite."

"You want to be polite? Follow through on your word, then don't ever contact us again. *That*, I would appreciate more than you know."

He considered the half-Klingon before him another moment before turning to leave. Indeed, there was nothing left to say to her, and a good deal of work--work on the fight that *was* his, by choice and

great conscience, soon to return full force. "I'll have Bendera contact you when it's time to leave."

Her stare remained pinned to the doors long after they closed.

"The worst part about it for me, I guess," he told B'Elanna as he stiffly got his boot strapped on, "is knowing that in a way it *was* my fault, what happened at Hugora."

She shrugged, not looking back at him. "You couldn't have known what she'd do."

"No. But I should have just kept my mouth shut. If I had..." He cut off there, shaking his head of the rest of it. "You're right, but I guess it's my job to feel it. That much is working with me right now." Pushing himself to his feet, he made his way to the door, trying hard to keep his back straight.

"You're sure you have to go up there?" she asked.

"It'll be better if I do. I won't be long."

She nodded, pressing her jacket firmly into the back of her bag, which she'd been packing with purposeful care.

Tom left her to it, knowing they both would need some time to get over that ride. Wordlessly, he slipped out and into the corridor.

A few minutes later, he knocked on the frame of the tiny, open door bridge. Finally seeing it with his own eyes, he reminded himself never to complain about Bolian ship design again. Maryl's office was twice the size of that space *without* the machinery.

Chakotay glanced back. "How's your arm?"

"Fine, thanks," Tom answered. "I'm still woozy, but I was before that happened." Moving another step in, he waited for Chakotay to look at him again. "Thanks for getting us back to our ship in good time, considering all the diversions."

"I'm sorry it took as long as it did."

"I guess that part couldn't be helped." Seeing the sting cross the Maquis' face at the reminder, Tom diverted the topic to his actual point in going there. "On that note, Chakotay, it does have to end here. I went along with you to keep my crew and my ship safe, against everything I'd have rather done; against any respect I might have shown Jerod. I like knowing his death wasn't your fault, but I'm still done. If an opportunity comes along to lend the colonists a hand without endangering the Guerdon, I'll consider it--but *only* in that case and not through your people. If that's a problem for you, Captain, then I guess we'll deal with that however you like. I've had very few choices in the matter since the day we met."

"You've made your feelings known often enough that I couldn't fool myself into thinking otherwise," Chakotay quietly told him, "but you did follow through, Captain Paris, despite everything you associated with my ship."

Tom nodded. "I tried."

"You succeeded."

With another nod, Tom thanked him.

A series of beeps sounded behind the men, and the young man at the ops controls, obviously trying not to look like he'd heard a word of their conversation, said, "We'll be rendezvousing with the Guerdon in fifty-eight minutes."

"Bendera's already below," Chakotay told Tom. "You'll meet him there for the transport. He'll contact Torres in your quarters when he's ready." That said, he nodded toward the door, then turned back to his controls.

Paris did not hesitate to follow the cue, using the doorframe as a crutch to propel him back into the corridor.

Not two minutes after the Liberty stopped alongside the Guerdon, Tom got himself up onto the transporter buffers, his tool roll hanging lazily over his forearm. A few meters away, Bendera got up close to B'Elanna as she approached and slid a few bars of latinum into her jacket pocket. Her stare shot up to his, a little confused and on the verge of insulted.

"Take it," he quietly ordered her, pressing his hand on her shoulder supportively. "It's not much, but your people should have something for your trouble. Besides, it's what Chakotay and Paris had agreed on. Or at least that's what Chakotay told me to tell you."

B'Elanna looked long into the man's eyes, seeing the same frank courtesy and honesty in them she'd known before. Glad as she was to be rid of that ship at last, she hoped he would be well. Indeed, she'd be glad to never see them again, but at least some of them deserved what they were fighting for. She didn't say so much, however, but blinked her acknowledgement and followed Tom onto the transporter pad, her tool kit in one hand, her other hand resting on the latinum. "We're ready," she confirmed.

To some relief, she watched the Maquis move to the control board to send them off himself. He said no goodbyes and he didn't even look as he tapped in the commands. Only once did he glance up, and that with only the most businesslike air as he tapped the board once more.

Suddenly, Bendera was gone, and the Guerdon's grungy deck four bay faced her and Tom once again. The smells of grease and old coolant housings assailed her nostrils; she gladly breathed for more. A smile pressed her cheeks when she turned and saw Ridge, huge and dark and happier than she'd seen him in a long while, deserting the control unit the instant he was sure they were all there.

"Welcome home!" Bounding over to them, he grabbed both the captain and the engineer into his big arms. Pulling back, he laughed at Tom's haggard appearance. "The pirate's life's sure no good for you, Tom!" he proclaimed.

"I must be getting old," Tom rejoined.

"Nah, just conventional."

"You know I'd rather be old."

"Too bad, that, eh?" Laughing, Ridge put his arm around B'Elanna and led them both to the access ladder. "You can climb, can't you, Tom? --Yeah, figures they'd put you in the pit, right back where you started. But Savan's already got you marked up and ready to dissect and I'm right behind you. --I heard your arm got busted, B'Elanna! You both have some explaining to do! Hana's dying for details."

Tom was not surprised--and glad to hear it. "Let's make her suffer until breakfast, okay?"

"That's in five hours."

"Dinner, then."

Grabbing the rung in the access ladder, Tom stopped for a moment. Drawing a deep breath, he looked back at B'Elanna, who with her courage and incredible will still could look so ridiculously tiny in front of Ridge. He felt a smile creep back onto his lips as he drew a deep breath, took in her gaze, then looked up the ladder. They still didn't have that damned lift fixed, and he knew climbing that length was going to easily put him out for the rest of the day. There was no reason they shouldn't have been able to fix that relatively simple piece of equipment, save that no one seemed to think it was important enough. They all were used to the ladders.

Business as usual. It'd be dealt with eventually, like everything else.

"Yeah, it's good to be home," he grinned and climbed on.

"It'd better be!" Ridge laughed, following B'Elanna up the ladder. "After all the trouble we took making this rendezvous!"

"Sorry I put Captain Maryl out," Tom joked behind him.

"God, don't *ever* call her that. Unlike you, she'll take to it."

Tom snorted and continued slowly up.

Several minutes later, Savan helped him onto her examination table and pulled out her tricorder.

"How much more will you need to do?" he asked.

"I cannot ascertain the course of treatment until I have completed my own analysis."

"And you thought I wouldn't bring you anything back from the Badlands," Tom grinned.

The Vulcan's brow flicked. "I did not suspect you would escape your obligation without guaranteeing more problems for me to contend with."

"It's good to see you, too, Savan."

Watching Tom receive Savan's initial examination, B'Elanna remained silent. Indeed, it was comforting to be back among the people she knew, on a ship she needed no caution to traverse. She looked forward to sleep, a decent outfit after a week in that old jumpsuit, then getting back into the engines. She almost looked forward to seeing how much Ridge and Nadrev were able to do--or weren't able to do, as it were.

At the same time, her unsorted emotions were drawing on her nerves. Shutting off her feelings for the captain was becoming more difficult. As she watched Savan slowly move the tricorder over Tom's patiently still frame, she felt a sense of protectiveness come over her, as though she should be the one continuing her work with him, bantering with him, seeing to it he got to sleep...and woke up again. She almost didn't trust the science tech to get it right, knew the other woman wasn't as familiar with his condition as she was. Closing her eyes, she shuddered and backed up to the wall.

"If everything's all right," she said, looking that time to the chronometer in the panel, "I'd like to get changed, get a shower."

"I would like to examine your arm," Savan told her. "However, it can wait. May I come to your quarters when I am completed here?"

B'Elanna nodded. "That'd be fine. Thanks."

Turning his head to thank B'Elanna before she left, he sighed. The engineer was already gone.

Without knowing why, he'd expected that.

He'd probably never taken a longer sonic shower than he had the afternoon Savan finally released him to his quarters. Hardly moving from his place, leaning against the back wall bar, he reset the unit three times before believing that he'd knocked off the physical evidence of his visit with the Maquis. He wished all the while that the pulses could have zapped the rest of the evidence as well.

He sighed. Apparently, a good deal of independent traders were taking their showers and likely wishing the same, with as much use.

He still wondered if he should try contacting Dejin again. He hoped she'd be all right.

The third cycle done, he stepped out of the unit and into a pair of shorts, slid into his bed and breathed deeply to feel his plush comforter and soft sheets, recently replicated at Deep Space Nine, surround and warm his skin. He thought for a moment that he should truly relish the feel of being back in his bed, but sleep caught up with him first.

He relished it upon waking for about five minutes before Ridge called, asking him about his console and if he'd mind B'Elanna reconfiguring it.

"Do I actually have a choice?" Tom queried, his head still pressed in his pillow.

"Not really, but etiquette is of the utmost importance to us around here."

"Almost forgot, being hung up with the rebels so long." He yawned. "Tell her to have at it."

When the comm clicked off, he remarked to himself how quickly B'Elanna had gotten back into the swing.

"I'd better too, then," he muttered to himself and rolled out of his bunk.

He took another shower before dressing.

When Tom finally appeared on the bridge and looked around, he didn't expect anything to be different, and indeed, nothing was. Even the sight of his engineer, back in her usual dingy trousers and wrap shirt, yanking a part of his panel out, was the only thing that didn't happen every day there.

When Tom served on the Copernicus, a thousand years ago, his captain had gone on an away mission

at Surro-Three and suffered typical bad luck. The negotiations went awry thanks to a third party and the resulting ruckus left the captain with both a broken leg and a phaser wound that landed him in Sickbay for almost a day. His return to the bridge was greeted with applause, his waving it off and a handshake from the XO.

Tom's return, mug in hand, was a silent one, with hardly any notice until he was looking over Savan's shoulder. But then, he knew it was better that way. Canned clapping and a pat on the shoulder could not express nearly so much as a contract liaison's immediate demand for a meeting over some new Hidirin shipping lists, nor the science tech's beckoning him to her panel so he could peruse their improved inventory. Only the engineer didn't look back, but she was head first in a pile of panel and not disposed to dropping everything to say hello.

Tom smiled, taking in for a moment that crappy little Starfleet knockoff bridge, with the dingy blue carpet that still had burn marks in some places from the Hugora incident. Then he looked down at the slowly scrolling list beneath his science tech's fingers and saw what his people were able to do while he and B'Elanna were away.

"Savan, I could kiss you."

She peered at him askance. "I would not recommend you do."

"Where in the hell did you dig up a store of deuterium at DS-Nine? The last time we were there, its running rate was at eight bars per gross."

The Vulcan blinked. "You are not the only individual who might 'call in a favor,' to use your expression, on occasion."

Tom chuckled. "What I'd do to have been a fly on the wall."

Savan did not ask.

"The boys below," Maryl informed him, "were hard at work on the twitches the whole time you were gone."

"They did do a great job," B'Elanna agreed, otherwise undeterred from her work on the connections. "I can stick largely to the warp drive if we don't have any other problems. With that deuterium and the new gas flow separator, I should be able to keep us at warp seven-point-five around the hairpin."

For reasons he knew should have been too simple, Tom was actually felt excited. "That'd be great, B'Elanna. We might just make our initial schedule if that holds up."

"Given no one else gets in our way," she added.

"No chance of that," Tom returned, grinning at the irony and at the returning thought: It was good to be home.

Just coming off that grin, he immediately stiffened when he heard the beep. Blowing a breath, he wondered if he'd always be hardwired to do that when a message came in. Maybe not, he decided, but he knew he'd think about it. Looking over and seeing the Vulcan already hard at work on the security panel, he sighed to know his paranoia had rung true. She was decrypting. "I wonder if we have another cup of sugar," he muttered sardonically.

"It is a coded communiqué from Captain Chakotay," Savan confirmed.

"Imagine that." Tom leaned against the stair rail. "Let's have it."

Savan tapped it on. It was audio only, a quiet, deliberately spoken note, tinged with something unpleasant.

"Captain Paris: I wanted to express my regret for your misfortunes as they related to my ship, the damage to the Guerdon, the loss of your man and the injuries you sustained on your last mission with us. I can't compensate you fairly for any of it. I can take full responsibility for these events, however, and do. I apologize for being unable prevent them. I wish you luck on your regular run."

The engineer had straightened at the voice, then looked back at her captain. His eyes were set somewhere on the viewscreen; his mouth was straight. At the end of the message, his gaze drew down and met hers. There, they shared a long look, knowing, and then again, unsure, too, in more ways than one. Maybe there was nothing to interpret. Maybe there was more than they wanted to.

Either way, it was there. And now it was over.

Or is it? Tom mused, watching her mouth part slightly when she blinked.

"Think we can go over those new lists, Tom?" Maryl asked, obviously not wanting to think about the message and glad it was over.

"Might as well let B'Elanna work in peace," he said, turning away at last.

Jerking her attention back to her work, B'Elanna drew a deep breath as she heard them leave, knowing peace for her, as usual, would take more work than they would ever understand.

XII. Landing Hard

"Is the relay ready?"

"Right here."

"Thanks.... That was a good find."

Tom chuckled. "Yeah, it's why I enjoy being condescended to by Sila." His smile turned bittersweet at that. "I'm going to need to borrow a laser scribe when we put the hull plating back on."

B'Elanna glanced at him. "What for?"

"Hilda," Tom answered. "Jerod wanted to name it Hilda."

She scowled. "*Hilda*? What kind of name is that?"

"Jerod's kind, without a doubt," he answered, running his hand appreciatively along the shuttle's re-welded frame, which housed its fully rebuilt and replaced systems and was almost ready to take on its hull, once the nacelle coil assembly was at last completed. It wouldn't be long. "He'd have loved this."

"Yes," B'Elanna softly agreed, a little surprised, there. It was the first time since their friend died that her memory of him wasn't accompanied by bitterness or anger. Looking at Tom's wistful gaze, his small smile, she guessed that it was a new thing for him, too. Blinking her attention back to the business in her hand, however, she set the relay on the floor before her and began to install the connections.

Respectful of her preference to handle that kind of tight work alone, Tom leaned back and let her do it, entertaining himself by watching her small, deft fingers move over the sensitive lines, so able, so certain. It somehow never bored him.

The break within the break was good, too. Not that he really needed to get off his feet, nor sit back and wait, but he had recently realized how much he enjoyed that particular diversion. For that matter, it had been a hard, fast run to Hidirin from just three light years past Regulon. Tom was still surprised they'd managed to get all around the border and across to Hidirin as quickly and safely as they had.

Three weeks ago, the Hidiri dock manager laughed when he walked into the hold. "I didn't think you would get back on schedule, Captain Paris. But look at you! Just a day into the cushion!"

Tom's casual grin belied the exhaustion he felt from his eyeballs to his heels. Standing on the loading

ramp, he knew he'd likewise walked through a small field of crumpled technicians and at least one very nervewracked engineer to meet the man. He personally was running solely on nutrition bars and coffee at that point. "We do our best, Mrichi."

Sharing the laugh for what it was worth, the manager peeked around and asked, "Had trouble with the Maquis?"

Tom's grin held steady. "You could say that," he replied.

Mrichi needed ask no more. "Can you get our power supplies across? Quantum has many uses, but we cannot run our operations without it."

"I know," Tom told him. "You think anyone else can get it across more effectively at this point?"

"No--and don't take me wrong, Paris. We've been losing regular shipments. It's cost us a great deal in the last season, replacing pre-contracted cargo. We are still working on providing the resources to adapt our people's machinery to accept another source, and our Federation membership is not being helpful at this time. We have had to change all our trade contracts as a result."

"Yeah, Maryl went over it with me. It's a pain in the ass, but I can see why you're insisting on the insurance."

"Challenging times make us wiser, if not simply less friendly."

"Don't I know it," Tom smirked and moved to see after the crates.

Two days later, they set off on the border route, already knowing it would be a rough go, well aware there wouldn't be a break in their stops at Irtrin, Kimoa and Podala. Though, the crew agreed it would be best to get around the "hairpin" in good time and enjoy their break at Velir. Within a couple days, they discovered how much more they would enjoy finishing that route.

"Aw, B'Elanna, not again!" Ridge moaned in concert with the hard sighs around him.

B'Elanna shrugged and leaned back in her seat with her coffee. After a half day of running the numbers ten meters away from a sputtering warp core, she was well beyond caring about their protests. "Power usage restrictions always save us in these situations," she insisted, then looked at Tom. "The engines aren't going to make it on their own at the rate we're running. I thought they might make it, but some of the old damages are starting to open up."

Tom frowned. "Where?"

"The port PTC--the distal arm is starting to split from the head junction again. The plasma injectors are going to need a full rebuild if we can't replace them at Velir. The interhull deflector grid is showing fissures. I have a list. I'm going to have to start diverting power to make up for those weaknesses."

"You've got your contact at Velir to arrange for parts, right?" Tom asked her.

"As soon as I can get a secure subspace link, I'll contact her. Though, I'd like to try to get those parts sooner if we can."

"Understood. Will you need a drydock?"

"If we can get it, yes. I don't like taking chances with a PTC repair." B'Elanna said and looked around

the room. "In the mean time, we have to start turning things back off."

"Just when I was starting to like this route again," Maryl grouched and dunked her spoon into her soup.

The Bajoran liked it even less when she was forced to take over all bridge operations every time B'Elanna needed all available hands in her engine room. As they skimmed Ibaten territory, she enjoyed a eleven hour shift with little entertainment but comm contact from below when the field deflector suddenly shut down, forcing them to stop until they fixed it. Maryl nearly fell asleep at Tom's station to the rhythm of an increasingly rackety deck below.

Giving Tom a hard stare when he finally dragged himself back onto the half-powered bridge, she pulled herself to her feet and faced him as he came down. "When's my contract up?" she asked him. "Because I've decided to quit."

"Can't do that for another few months yet, Maryl. Sorry." Falling into his seat, he waved a hand her way. "Go get some rest. The corpse blocking the corridor's probably your husband."

When Savan finally came to relieve him, Tom didn't get past the lounge before he heard the comm crackle from above.

"Tom," said B'Elanna, her voice rough with a shift even longer than his had been, "I need you for one more hour, with Nadrev. The power links on deck three are--"

"Yeah," he cut in, swinging back to the lounge for the replicator. "Figured that."

"I didn't even tell you anything!" she snapped.

"Pretty much any part around here is game today, right?" He hardly noticed when the comm cut off.

By the time they got past Dirud, they were literally holding parts of the engine together with string.

But they got through the leg, pushing hard through Kimoa and to Podala to get back on their original schedule and avoid a late delivery penalty. They were able to unload that portion of their goods and reload the few extra bays of cargo Maryl was able to contract, as well--and in but half a day, which bought them some more time.

"Ah, you're not even on an overnight dock?" Gil had asked with surprise as Tom double-checked the figures.

"Sorry to chintz you some strips, but we'd like to make up some more time getting to Ulinas," Tom told him without looking up. He tried, meanwhile, to withhold his grin. Like the other unaffiliated trade stations lately, Podala was a hotbed waiting to set on fire. But Gil hadn't changed a bit, still sliding around the traders in every way he thought he could.

The station manager moved around the younger man and leaned back on a panel to appraise him. "You're looking quite well, Captain Paris--far better, I have to say, since last you came through."

"Yeah, thanks."

"Have you been on vacation?"

Tom snorted. "Yeah, I had some R and R last month." He pointed to the third transaction column. "We didn't have a waste dump here, Gil."

"Oh?" Gil breathed, then sighed. "I apologize. I'll speak with Kruiko."

"Sorry I won't be there for it," Tom returned and reached into his pocket. Spreading out nine strips of latinum, the difference that Savan had already calculated and thus all he'd brought, he set the money on Gil's desk. "That should handle the balance, right?"

Gil bowed, a little stiffly, but deeply enough that it was meant. "Thank you, Captain," he said, then turned his head askance. "Though you still confuse me with your quick departure. An hour here or there might make all the difference for your hard-working crew. We have new holosuites, and I can personally reserve a block for you."

"Thanks, but no thanks." Moving close to the oily manager, Tom gave him a sidelong look. "We've got eight vats of fish juice in our deradiative hold to deliver on time or else. You can guess why that's pretty important right now."

Tom had learned from Tibin that Gil had a contract with the Cardassians.

They broke dock less than an hour after Tom left an unusually quieted Gil in his office. Ridge had literally run laps around the station to pick up the supplies they could get with what payment they'd received there, and B'Elanna had yanked and plugged and exchanged at a breakneck pace to ensure their speedy restart. Though the Guerdon and its crew were coded "safe" because of their assisting the Liberty and thus left unbothered, they all were averse to dealing with *anyone* there anymore. Spies from every faction crawled in every crevice of every station, and unlike Gil, it was hard to know who sided with whom.

Space was safer, and speed was safer still...though no less annoying at times.

"Have you your ship's docket available for viewing?"

Tom leaned back in his seat and furrowed his brow at the heavy-headed Starfleet commander. "Yes."

The officer waited several seconds before speaking again. "May I see it?"

"No," Tom answered.

"Why not?"

"I haven't seen *your* orders, Commander Rejinski. You show me yours, I'll show you mine."

"I am required to inspect all business along this route, Captain Paris."

"By whose order?"

"By order of Admiral Nechayev."

Tom chuckled, shaking his head. "Yeah, sounds like her. Well, Commander, you show me a copy of her order and I'll show you a docket. You're going to find a pre-contracted materials shipment and three bays of organic stores, aside from a few of the usual rubber ducks of the route. Your scans already picked all this up, so you're essentially just wasting all our time holding me here to violate our privacy and look at a page on a PADD so it looks like Starfleet's actually *doing* something for us traders out here. But you go right ahead and tell your captain you need to dig up that order. I'll get a coffee."

They crossed through two more such checkpoints before passing Salva. Thankfully, they weren't

detained, so the annoyances were not real inconveniences...yet.

Heading back around the Argolis Cluster, they would make it to Ulinas in only five more days if they could keep up their pace. Of course, they didn't expect this to happen. B'Elanna was complaining before they reached Podala that they were going to hit a few bumps with the warp drive. Once they passed the hairpin and Tom was able to poke around the subspace lines, they also received some troubling reports of Maquis, Starfleet and Cardassian activity in the Kalandra sector inside of Irtin.

Eighteen days if the time passed half-decently, Tom mused, and they'd be at Velir to drop their main Hidirin load. They'd receive their payment, head back to Irtin, buy a few days' layover at the station, tune up the works, have a look at the weather, so to speak, and schedule their run to Minjau, where the regional tension was only apparent, not active...yet.

In the mean time, he would enjoy sharing that break with his engineer for a change.

Due to their round shift schedule on that run, Tom had in fact seen very little of B'Elanna since they finally got off the Liberty, outside of stopping in the engine room en route to somewhere else. They'd continually missed each other in the lounge, as well. Only arranged share meetings seemed to match up right. In their spare time, they both still worked on the shuttle, but without company.

Here and there, replacing planned parts, they left small notes to each other saying what they'd done and where they left off. B'Elanna's were typed out on an old PADD and left at the base of the shuttle door; Tom's were etched on a scrap of paper, with arrows and bull's eyes cheerfully drawn on the parts in question. She had been amused at first, but lately just sighed and wiped the carbon from the parts with her sleeve. She wished she could be more annoyed by the playfulness, but in fact, she liked that he could be that way, in more ways than one.

Though a part of the problem, it wasn't close to what she was really dealing with, on top of everything else.

The worst of it began a couple weeks ago, not a minute after he walked into the main engine room to check up on engine status and "be nosy"--his words.

"How's it coming?" he asked.

B'Elanna glanced up from the scroll of diagnostics she'd had to run for the tenth time. Rested, freshly dressed, recently trimmed and leaning on the nearest support arm to regard her in turn, her captain looked and smelled a hell of a lot better than she knew she did. "Slowly. Have you gotten in touch with Dejin, yet?"

"Not yet," Tom answered. "I've tracked her to Sicira, so she should be contactable soon. She must be at least a month behind schedule, probably because of her obligations."

B'Elanna sighed for their friend's sake. If she'd really been locked up on that side of the border all that time, Dejin would probably have lost half her contracts by then and was probably scrambling for deals. "I wish I knew where to get the right sensor pallets anywhere else, so we wouldn't have to bother her."

Tom shrugged. "I'd rather give our money to her--which she probably needs as much as we do--and the transfers won't take any time. Besides, you know why I want to talk to her."

"You won't want to over subspace," she warned him.

"I won't need more than a minute to arrange a rendezvous--and then I'll only need ten," he assured

her, bending closer in to see which test B'Elanna was running that time. "Is it picking everything up?"

"No," she answered, moving to the next console to tap in some separate figures. "It's why I'm repeating them."

Tom nodded. "You'd added those sensor spreads to your damage list for a reason." She said nothing to that. "Can I do anything in the mean time?"

"Keep trying to get Dejin."

In truth, the ship was certainly no worse off than the last time they'd crawled up that leg, after their disastrous Ligarán haul. Then, the Maquis were having a field day on their weakened hull and the ship seemed bent on making it to a self-destruct cycle. Looking back, B'Elanna was amazed they'd made it through. They had moderate supplies and a decently functioning ship at present. The run was dragging down the systems, though, and they would indeed be dead and require outside assistance if the power transfer conduits malfunctioned, or any part of the warp drive or deflector decided to blow out badly. They'd both been given a hard test, and to B'Elanna's pride, they'd both held on so far. However, with internal sensors having to be rerouted every which way already, no breakdown would surprise her.

She threw herself into those systems, though, not lying about having to keep on top of any possible problems, but also because she really needed to get her mind back to a mechanical process, and thus get a grip on that next level of warring and inconvenient emotions. She'd never been attracted to any of her bosses before, after all. The opposite was always the case. They were only a couple years apart in age, so it wasn't as though she'd fallen for a professor, she knew, and it wasn't like they were in Starfleet and having to worry about fraternization rules. But she knew absolutely that the natural course of action in her situation was not an option, even were she the sort to make the first move.

So she would have to deal with it and get over herself. Problem was, her magnifying the need to work on the systems backfired in a way. Because of the ship's increasing needs, Tom was all over her department, wanting to help, wanting information, asking what else he might need to barter for when they got to the next station or found Dejin.

"Need another hand?" Ridge asked her as she groaned softly to herself.

"Only if you can replace mine," B'Elanna replied tightly. "But thanks. Just keep an eye on these input levels. We can't go over fifty-nine without spiking the system."

"That wouldn't be good," Ridge cheerfully agreed and leaned up against the panel to watch the numbers.

Her fingers ached and her eyes were losing focus, but B'Elanna finally got the bearing onto the rod. "One down, fifteen to go," she said to herself. Picking up another bearing, she silently cursed the idiot who designed the node pocket that way. *Arrogant bastard never thought his piece of junk would have to be serviced.* That said, the mechanical process was good for her in every other way. She hadn't felt so relaxed in a week, and she knew she liked the challenge of getting better at the procedure. Her fingers would need a break after a few of those, though.

"Hey there, Tom!" Ridge called out. "Over here!"

B'Elanna's fingers tightened on the rods and the bearing slipped between her fingers and onto the grate. "You mind not being the social secretary?" she snapped at her assistant. "Or, better yet, take it somewhere else."

"That's my fault, B'Elanna," Tom said as he approached. "I needed to find Ridge when we were ready to set the grid back in line."

"Then *take* him," she replied coldly. "Let me work."

"I thought you needed me to keep an eye on the levels," Ridge complained.

She closed her eyes, drew a steadying breath. Of course he was right; that had flown out of her mind. She wondered what was going to fly out of her mind next. A matter-antimatter output level? A plasma regulator pressure ratio? *Why can't I keep anything simple?* she sighed to herself.

She couldn't keep going like that.

"Bring the tricorder over here," she ordered him, still not looking up at either man. "I'll watch it. Do whatever you need to do, then come back."

The men moved quickly away, only starting to discuss where Tom and Savan were on the sensor platform when they were into the next section. Meanwhile, her stare still locked on the node pocket, B'Elanna had to blink several times before remembering where she'd left off. She growled and blew a breath before hunching over to retrieve the bearing.

She didn't have a choice, though, to keep going like that, especially while events seemed to be *working* to put her in uncomfortable situations that did nothing but distract her from work, rather than from him. Though, the situations probably hadn't changed. She was just too sensitive to them now--a realization that doubled her self-consciousness.

She had been doing pretty well the week before, when they hit what Tom later called "a nasty speed bump."

B'Elanna stood at Nadrev's station on the bridge, her eyes on his board, checking the latest sensor data for discrepancies. Below in his seat, Tom was rolling his shoulders, letting his eyes close after a full shift in his seat when the lurch sounded from below.

Starting upright, his eyes flew open to see his readouts. "Warp drive is offline!" Tom shouted, his hands flying to his controls before he could add, "Autopilot is going down, too! Switching to manu-- God damnit!"

Suddenly, a huge crimson ball popped onto the viewscreen and enveloped the view.

Tom punched up the impulse engines--then punched them on again. "Where the hell is impulse?" he demanded.

B'Elanna slapped on the lower control panel. "They're online!" she told him.

"Where?!" Finally, the impulse drive activated and Tom instantly set their course up and away. Already being pulled down, the Guerdon fishtailed and swung wildly around. Tom cranked it up to full impulse. "Let's hit a moon instead, okay?" he scoffed. But blowing a breath, then taking another, he dug his heels into the deck and carefully wrestled the ship out of the planet's strong gravimetric field. Twice, the planet reappeared in the viewscreen before he finally sank the ship a little into an eddy and sailed them through it. Forcing himself to calm down, he jumped off the energy wave and put them back on a safe but slow trajectory.

Looking around, he caught his engineer's eyes. "You have any idea what just happened?"

Chagrined, her eyes fell back down to Nadrev's panel. Seconds later, she grumbled to herself, then said, "The primary plasma injectors shut down, causing the warp drive to deactivate. It's a safety mechanism."

"Please tell me we can fix it."

"I'll have to look at it," she said.

"But I said please, B'Elanna," Tom returned.

"I'd be happy to lie to you of that's your thing," she replied, responding unconsciously to his unspoken request for lightness. "But it won't get us to Ulinas."

Tom snorted. "I guess not," he quietly admitted. "Just do me a favor and shoot me the next time I start thinking I'm bored, okay?"

Her lips pursed. "I think you've had enough of that particular diversion, Captain."

"Oh? I'm still breathing, aren't I?"

"For now."

Despite defusing the stress on the bridge at least, their captain had been pacing the decks and bothering everyone in the four hours it had taken to fix that newest problem. B'Elanna finally assigned him to the ODN, the best way she knew how to get rid of him--and give him something to focus on--while she went after the plasma injectors. She planned to double-check his work before they got going, though.

She couldn't help but wonder if there was any real alcohol on the ship, and if he was trying to avoid it. It had been enough time with solid determination on his part. She liked to think he'd gotten rid of it. His nerves could still be twitchy in between his easiness and business, though. Not that B'Elanna could blame him that time around. Nearly broadsiding a giant gas planet would have set her off in far worse ways. The resulting "what ifs" would linger for weeks.

"Where are they now?" B'Elanna asked as she backed through the small access tube from the lower plasma injector control unit. When her knees hit the junction rods, she turned a little into the cross tube and started forward, careful not to bump her head on the pylons that dipped down at every section junction. She'd cracked herself badly a couple times before learning that slouching in a crawl was worth the discomfort.

"*It looks good,*" Nadrev answered over the comm. "*The input levels are fluctuating slightly, but within safe levels.*"

"Good. Bring the primary injectors back online," she told him. "As soon as Tom's done on the ODN, we'll reset the timing sequence and get back into warp."

"*That would make our captain happy,*" Nadrev replied, flaunting the understatement.

Crawling into the main cross section after resetting the injector valves, B'Elanna turned herself to go backwards down the last five meters. Because that tube was no larger than the others, the ladder in the access room could only be gotten to backwards. She shook her head. *I hope I never get to meet the designer of this freighter.* Getting to the end--she could tell by the light--B'Elanna reached out with her boot for the first rung, then caught the next one with the other. Pressing herself back, she felt herself catch against the tube ring and arched to see what the matter was.

"Damn," she hissed to herself and reached down to unhook her tool belt from the ring. Doing so, though, her boot slid over the ladder rung and fell through. Grabbing at the smooth tunnel wall uselessly, she felt herself sliding backwards and down fast.

As she came out of the tube and fell backwards from the ladder, two strong arms hooked under her arms and yanked her away from the stairs. On her feet a second later, B'Elanna swung around and found herself in the circle of Tom's arms and pressed up close against him.

Her breath caught.

In a nanosecond, she had memorized where every part of his body fell against hers and told herself to stop doing that. *But God, he's warm...*

His eyes assessed her. Obviously, he was as surprised as she was.

"You okay?" he finally asked, not moving a muscle.

"Why are you here?" she blurted.

"My comm bar broke," he answered, his voice tinged with the frustration that'd brought him there in the first place, on top of the rest of his day. Nevertheless, he continued to hold his position--and her--and almost seemed amused.

"I've replaced the valves and Nadrev is bringing the injectors back online," she reported, but unable to scoot herself out of that ridiculous proximity without looking worse than she already did. "Are the ODN adjustments done?"

He blinked. "Yeah, that's what I came to tell you."

"We should be back at warp within thirty minutes if nothing else goes wrong," she nodded. "I just need to reset the timing sequence. I have Nadrev and Ridge waiting to help me with that."

Tom didn't know quite where to look that time, but seeming to catch her message at last, he released her, pressing his back into the opposite corner to let her through. He then gestured to the entrance. "Have at it," he intoned.

"Thanks." Breathing away what she knew were flushed cheeks, and hurling her mind back to the tasks that lay ahead, B'Elanna plowed out of the access room and prepared herself to yell at her techs.

There was no way she'd get anything done effectively when he unnerved her like that.

It wasn't his fault, she knew. He wasn't trying to make her crazy, was being a genuine and involved captain and doing everything he could to make things work. Their Maquis adventure behind them, he was more than happy to keep on moving. That she couldn't move on as well wasn't his fault at all. Eventually, though, she was going to have to find a solution for that complication she felt herself steadily being sucked into.

In the end, though, she didn't have to do anything at all. The solution found her that time.

"Tom," B'Elanna said, breaking the silence as she slid the shuttle's new plasma relay into its housing, "I have to talk to you about something...since we're here, while things are quiet."

His brow rose. This was something B'Elanna didn't often do while working. "What's that?"

B'Elanna turned the secondary node into the slot, only briefly allowing a glance at him. "Yesterday, when I contacted Velir, the engineering manager and I got to talking. She's really impressive. She and I were on Maryl's subspace link for an hour."

"Jilibrar?" Tom asked.

"Yes."

He grinned, nodding. "Yeah, she's a good manager. So what's up?"

"She and I had spoken before, when we were at Velir the last time, and she looked me up..." B'Elanna shrugged. "Something opened up over there and she thought about me."

"Oh?"

"I got an offer to work as head engineer at the central station."

Tom felt his blood drain treacherously from his face as her information cycled through, and he coughed a laugh. "I didn't think it'd hit me like that," he remarked, half to himself, "much as I'd told you to grab a better job if you could."

"I wasn't grabbing," she corrected him. "It was just an offer."

"Yeah," he said quietly, waiting for her to look at him again. She didn't, so he continued, "You wouldn't have told me about it if you weren't considering it."

"I'm still thinking about it," she replied, carefully locking the distal control brackets, one by one. Guilt and relief were never so well mixed when she sent Jilibrar a firm maybe. But telling him was going very well, better than she expected. She felt better already. "I just didn't want to surprise you. --And it's not that I was angling to leave. Jilibrar also remembered that my contract was still up in the air. I have to admit, though, it's a nice station."

"It's a great opportunity."

"Everything I'd been looking for after the Cabol station shut down," she added with a nod.

"You could work on your degree...get your sheet of paper, advance yourself."

"That'd be nice." Then, she shrugged. "But again, I haven't accepted anything yet."

"The offer to void your contract is still open to you if you need, B'Elanna," Tom told her, withholding his sigh for her sake. Seeing her almost done with the relay installation, he picked up the calibration unit and added, "We'd hate to lose you, but...well, you know how I feel about the issue."

"I do." She finally looked back at him, offering him a small smile to counter the intensity of his gaze. Reaching out, she took the part from his hand. "Thank you."

His returning grin matched hers. "Anytime, B'Elanna."

She jerked her stare back to her work and smacked the unit into place with the ball of her hand. "I need the laser wrench."

Tom's enjoyment of coffee the next morning was reduced to a few sips and a steady tracing of the mug's lip with his fingers. Sitting in the lounge over his half-eaten toast and eggs, he found his stare locked on the viewport, the stars zipping gratefully by.

And I was anxious to get to Velir.

Not that he cursed it now, either. Indeed, he had been honest about his offer to release her, just that lately, he hadn't been thinking about running the Guerdon without B'Elanna on it. In just nine months, she was that much at home on their ship, a part of their lives...his life. He at least believed they'd become good friends, looking out for each other, confiding in each other. Having realized he had begun to feel more than that, he had considered taking it a step further, had their life there eventually managed some resemblance of normality.

Naturally, his timing was still lousy. By the time he realized that he would *like* to and could manage taking it a step further, he was in no position to test the waters with her without looking like an idiot--or worse, desperate. They'd been too busy and too off schedule for him to make any honest attempts after they got back from their journey on the Liberty. Their station visits had been cut short, too, so even just getting a meal together wasn't an option.

Not that she seemed inclined to a friendly date lately. More than before, she was brusque and purposefully busy, and lately had a problem with looking him in the eyes until she absolutely needed to. Probably still getting past her problems on the Liberty on top of playing catch up with the ship and the never ending need for parts, he surmised, and so he didn't press her into anything. Instead, he had planned to try to lure her into something social during the two-day layover at Ulinas, see if they might repeat the few downtime excursions they'd shared. There was a great park-side café in Ulinas' capital city he remembered from a couple years ago. He had a feeling she'd have liked it.

Guess I'll have to find something more productive to do while we're there, he resolved with a sigh.

Not that it mattered anymore. A base job on Velir was about the best thing that could happen in every way, especially of late. She should use her talents, that amazing ability to build and deduce and solve. And it didn't mean they'd never meet again. The Guerdon stopped there almost every run.

He had a feeling they wouldn't meet, though. Business sucked people up like that. It was just nice to think about visiting. It made everyone feel better in the mean time.

Blowing a curse under his breath as he shook himself away from the view, Tom got up and dumped his plate and mug into the reclamator. Coming into the corridor and hearing the echoes of the engine room to his right, he turned to look into the sound. *I haven't been shot or punched this month,* he resolved sardonically, *I needed something to keep me honest...not that B'Elanna's not helping out, there.*

She insisted she hadn't accepted the position, but she was too smart to turn something like that down. She'd accept it, once she got over feeling bad for leaving, maybe burned a couple bridges along the way. Unlike everyone else, she'd get somewhere in life...

"Or she'd better," he mumbled.

"Morning, Tom!" Ridge piped as he passed with an armful of isolinear connections.

Tom stared at the pile. "Please don't tell me--"

"No," Ridge laughed. "Just off to storage with these. Need something?"

"Just having a walk before I sit down for the day," Tom told him. "B'Elanna around?"

"Yeah, she's back on the accelerator grid."

"Thanks." Digging his hands into his pockets, he passed behind the main console wall and down the row of vertical pylons to the middle of the engine room, where the stout little warp drive-that-could pumped and thrummed. Behind that was accelerator control, an open space around which the plasma injectors and flow regulators, coolant assembly and driver coils were housed. Since her first days on the ship, B'Elanna had been busied with those systems, he remembered with a flicker of a grin. He wondered if anyone had serviced that ship as well as she had since its maiden flight.

She happened to glance up from her work before he could say anything, and she stared up at him until he was a couple meters away. Her expression was unreadable, but her eyes seemed to search him for a moment before she blinked and asked, "Is there a problem?"

"Just coming to see what's up," he answered. "I was about to hit the bridge."

She shrugged. "If nothing blows out today, I shouldn't need you. I'm just working on this injector problem."

"Have you figured out where the problem's coming from?"

"I'm getting there," she said, nodding at the accelerator. "I think the lines might need replacing. Temperature control is fluctuating and the ODN isn't picking it up every time it should, so the plasma flow isn't stable."

"Not something we'd like to happen on a large scale."

"No, that kind of breach wouldn't make a good day at work," she replied.

"So the PIS isn't regulating the flow from the warp generator into the accelerator."

"And the safety protocols clamp down every time the temperature spikes--"

"Which causes a backup in the PIS--"

"And makes the warp drive hiccup--"

"And drops us out of warp."

She grinned, resetting the frequency on her hyperspanner even as she glanced his way. "You're getting better at this."

He eyed her. "Yeah, maybe I can be the one to replace you."

"You're not that good," B'Elanna rejoined.

"Too bad you won't be around to teach me."

"I can recommend a tutelage file or two, if you're up to the kinds with no pictures."

"Not even an arrow and bull's eye?" Tom asked with mock complaint. "How will I get past 'turn off ship before beginning repair?"

"That, Captain, would be your problem." Her smile disappearing, she fished through her toolkit and peered under an access rod. "But I should get *this* problem solved if I ever plan to jump ship. It's not something you want to deal with between here and Minjau. I'll let you know how it goes or if I need more help."

He took it for all it meant. "I look forward to it," he told her, more smoothly than he meant to at first. But seeing her back on task and moving around to the coolant valves, he said no more as he turned to head forward again. *Yeah, that was enough punishment to hold me off until Ulinas*, he smirked to himself as he swerved around a bulkhead to get over to the starboard ladder.

He stopped, however, when he heard the whine, like a balloon squealing air. Stepping backwards a pace to peek back into accelerator control, he saw B'Elanna tapping on her tricorder and preparing to bend into the main coolant control housing.

Suddenly, it burst: White steam surged from the central line and hit the engineer dead on. Thrown across the deck, B'Elanna hit an opposite pylon with a familiar crack before landing on the floor, wincing in pain and holding her arm.

Tom leapt to her in four long strides without blinking and was on a knee beside her before she could roll onto her unhurt side. Cupping her head in his hand, he quickly looked her over. Immediately, he could tell she was masterfully trying to get her breath back into her. Klingons were just amazing that way, he was reminded. A throw like that would have taken at least a couple of his ribs and likely knocked him out, but in only seconds, she looked to be recovering. Ice crystals on her hip and side were quickly melting, as well.

Her eyes darted to the assembly. "Lock it down, Tom," she rasped, "the manual control."

Tom nodded and jumped over to the unit to finish what she was about to do. Careful to stand aside of the fried housing, he glanced over the many exposed pieces for a moment, then found the knob arm and turned it. Letting his breath go as he saw the lights go from flashing yellow to a safe blue, he turned to address B'Elanna again when another whine of pressure began to build. "Damn," he hissed and slid around to the main console there. Tapping into the correct system, he switched into the secondaries and locked down the remaining primary coolant injectors.

"With any luck," he said as he watched the system regulate, "the secondaries won't blow until we get out of the room." He returned to B'Elanna's side. Touching her hair again, he offered an appreciative smile. "How are we doing on that law of averages, anyway?"

She coughed a little laugh. "Maybe you're better at this than I thought," she conceded.

"I had to do a lot more of that kind of thing before you came around," he reminded her. "You're the one who changed the room rules when I left you to it."

Her smile faltering, she said nothing to that, only grunted when he gently got his arms behind her and helped her to her feet. Careful to let her check her stability first, Tom led her out.

An hour later, Tom came back into Savan's lab to check how things were going. He knew, of course, that she'd be fine, but he was feeling very weak about his impulses with her since she'd unloaded her news. Stepping into that back room, he got about what he'd expected, too: Savan was patiently preparing an instrument, while a similar expression to the Vulcan's was plastered on the engineer's face, a steady frown and a glassy stare, which turned to him as Savan approached her.

"Should I leave again?" he queried.

"She's almost done," B'Elanna said shortly.

"The damage will soon be repaired for the time being," the Vulcan confirmed.

Tom asked B'Elanna with another look.

"Savan says I'll need a professional treatment on Ulinas," she supplied.

He was surprised to hear it. "Was it that bad?"

"No, it *wasn't*."

"It is the repeated damage which concerns me," Savan informed him as she moved the regenerator over the break for the third time. "B'Elanna's physiology has been a great benefit with this repeated break. Only to a point, however. She requires specialized treatment to fully restore the bone and tendon's strength."

Tom nodded. "Go ahead and do it, B'Elanna," he told her. "Savan'll make you relieved to jump ship if you don't follow her treatment advice." He snorted. "Hell, you might not wait until we're in orbit."

"I'm already thinking about that," she snapped. Not only had she been there forever and forced to endure the woman's lecture, but she wasn't quite ready to explain her plans, and Tom had effectively started the news without her permission. Maybe it was just a slip, but he seemed already sold on the idea when she hadn't even contacted Jilibrar yet. When Savan closed her regenerator kit, B'Elanna slid from the table to her feet, flexed her hand and nodded at her. "Thanks. I'll be fixing the coolant systems. How far from Ulinas are we?"

"A few more days," Tom told her. "I'll shoot you an estimate when I get back on the--"

"Forty-two hours," Savan told them from her console.

"What she said," Tom grinned.

"That should be enough time," B'Elanna nodded briskly. "I'll grab Nadrev and start now. We have the parts." With that, she moved quickly out of the lab and turned sharply for the center corridor.

Tom blinked, regarding the hole in the air she'd left behind. "Was it something I said?"

Savan did not look back at him. "Very likely."

When the viewscreen flickered on and he saw his old friend, Tom couldn't make himself not stare. It

was all too familiar.

Rather than the crisp, yellow interior and brightly blinking panels of the Casiat, he easily recognized the smoke stains on the bulkheads and holes in the wall where panels had been removed. In the middle of all that was Dejin, looking very much her usual self in dress and posture, but notably tired and decidedly cross. She obviously knew they were seeing her damaged state for the first time, which had to add embarrassment to the mess of negativity she was enduring. Rather than looking cool and in control, Dejin's life was plainly not that, and there was no way to hide it.

Seeing she was not going to make the first move, Tom leaned back in his seat and cast his gaze askance. "So how was *your* day, dear?"

Against her will, the Betazoid laughed. She gestured at her bridge. "Just redecorating. I'd long been thinking about a lovely shade of black, but it's not quite there, yet."

"It'd go with your lovely eyes," he replied with mock adoration, then sighed through his smile. "Yeah, I know, Dejin. We've been there."

"And I can't hold this channel long before it's tagged," she told him.

He nodded. "We'll be paid at Ulinas and need some parts I know you regularly stock."

"Nothing's been regular lately," she frowned. "What's on the list?"

"Internal sensor pallets, a part-spread and installation gear; a PTC distal arm bracket and injector coils, among some other small parts."

Dejin tapped it all down and read quickly. "I've got nothing in the injector department," she told him. "But the sensor pallets and the brackets I do have. Are these the same ones B'Elanna had before?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, then we have that."

"We'll work out the price when we meet. How's that sound?"

"Good. I don't feel like dealing today." She tapped quickly again on her panel and threw a trajectory onto the viewscreen. "How about there? Two light years off the Hanolan System?"

"Smack dab between Ulinas and Irtrin," Tom nodded, plotting the course in. "Tucked in the rocks. Perfect. We have a day layover at Ulinas, which means we can rendezvous with you in five days."

"My warp drive is puttering. I might be late for that."

Tom resisted expressing his sympathies. Dejin was already pissed off; reminding her she was applicable for sympathy wouldn't do her any good. "A one-plus layover at Ulinas, then. I'll contact you again when we're ready to leave and find you wherever you are."

"Thank you," Dejin said meaningfully.

"Take care of yourself, Dejin," Tom told her before the channel was cut. When the screen blackened and he heard the beep to confirm the channel was off, he blew a breath. "I'll remember *that* the next time I'm up for feeling sorry for myself."

Maryl sighed her agreement. "I never thought I'd see her dragged down like that."

"Everything's prey to change lately," Tom quietly replied as he dumped their transmission record, then set his ship back onto its original heading.

Ridge smacked the hatch button as soon as they arrived at the loading bay. As the gangway squealed and lowered to the Ulinas dock's tarmac, he put his arm around his wife and breathed the air, looked around at the busy base center before them. "Land at last," he sighed happily and looked down at her. "It's almost like old times, how well this run's gone."

Maryl snorted. "Relatively."

He conceded with a chuckle. "Yeah. Guess so."

"And you know the run's not over yet," she reminded him. "There's plenty of time for things to go wrong."

He laughed and started them down the gangway. "I think sometimes, Hana, that you curse the world to make sure you won't be disappointed."

"It works for me," she grinned and leaned into his arm as they turned for the main building.

Coming out after them, Tom watched as they disappeared among the rivulets of base denizens, visitors and traders. Maryl was off to collect their pay, Ridge going to arrange the offloading of the bio-material they'd brought from Ibaten, the two moved swiftly, anxious to have their work done before taking their pre-arranged leave to the mountains. Aside from it being their fifteenth anniversary, Tom knew they didn't have much else to do until their small purchases came in, plus he thought they had both earned a nice break. He personally arranged for their lodgings and to pick up Ridge's shift with Nadrev's help.

Leaning against the strut, Tom leaned his head back a little and drank in the sun. If there was one thing Tom honestly missed about being stuck on a ship, it was for the lack of sun and fresh air.

What I wouldn't do for a holodeck, he mused, possibly for the hundredth time. He sighed, knowing the likelihood of ever attaining that particular and power-draining luxury was farther away than ever now. But then he shrugged and told himself to stop doing that--also possibly for the hundredth time.

Ulinas' Aj-Asaro Landing Docks were the most commonly used docks among the traders. The Guerdon always landed on that side of the base, except the last time they were there, thanks to the Fidlor Group. Tom knew every knob on that side of the base by then. Like everywhere else, though, changes had been made in response to the latest security issues. A couple nearby attacks and a few captured Maquis had sent a panic through that quiet, diverse world. As a result, security throughout the capital had been ramped up, with native forces deployed to every section of the trade station and no trader or deal going unexamined. Having seen similar responses on all his stops that month, Tom wasn't surprised when he was contacted by base security and was told he would have to sign for his visitor, though the man was a resident of Ulinas and had arranged his trip a week with the local authorities a week ago.

"We can't be too careful these days, Captain," the security officer assured him. "As you know, having

seen personally what the Maquis can do."

"You really are thorough," Tom acknowledged.

"We have had to be, to protect our people and our business."

"And as always, we appreciate you many efforts, Officer Gafirsu," Tom replied dryly and pushed himself to stand. He'd be passing B'Elanna on the way down. He'd tell her, then get going on his own plans for that afternoon.

Ten minutes later, Tom reached out and pressed his thumb to the PADD accept his engineer's father aboard his ship. "Thanks," he told the officer, waiting until he had moved away to add, "for looking in all the wrong places." Then he looked at John Torres, who stood with about the same look on his face as was there the last time Tom had seen him. "But I guess if it makes *them* feel better..." Shrugging, he shook John's hand in greeting and jerked his thumb towards the innards of his ship. When John was all the way in, he pushed the button to close the hatch. "I'll take you up."

John almost tripped for staring around at the bay they entered. "Thank you, Captain Paris," he said quietly, then darted his stare back down to the man before him. "I overheard your conversation with Gafirsu. I take it you've been attacked by the Maquis, too?"

"There isn't a ship on the border who hasn't," Tom replied. "We managed to survive it."

John followed Tom to the ladders before speaking again. "B'Elanna's said nothing about any trouble."

"She's had enough of fixing the damage. I don't blame her for not wanting to relive it, even in a letter. With any luck, though, she won't have to anymore."

"What do you mean by that?"

Tom sawed his teeth together, slumping slightly. That was the second time he had done that, and he suddenly realized he was trying to make the idea commonplace so it wouldn't hurt so damned much. He was coming to know himself too well--well enough to know, too, that the tactic would ultimately fail. "Ask B'Elanna," he finally said and started them up the ladders, knowing she'd be pissed at him for good by day's end.

She didn't force down the smile that found her as she exited the medical facility, flexing her hand and rolling her shoulder. She hated to admit it sometimes, but Savan was rarely wrong. Her arm felt like it had never endured a bump, but rather was strong, warm and ready to pick up something to eat. Walking over to her father, who had patiently waited the hour it took for the doctors to work on her, her smile held without effort, to her surprise. It *was* good to see him.

"How about dinner, then?" she asked. "It's early, I know..."

"I know a great place for just such a meal," John told her, falling beside his daughter to lead her out of the clinic. "They have interesting salads and savory bread wraps that could pass for a whole meal. Very good food."

"Sounds great." B'Elanna slid her hands into her pockets and matched his pace, relishing in the warmth

that greeted them as they exited the building and set off down the city's main avenue.

Indeed, the day had improved greatly. She'd rather been full of dread when Tom breezed through in the middle of her diagnostics and told her that her father was on his way.

Though put off, she hadn't expected the flush of nervousness she felt when Tom led the man into her engine room. She felt her shoulders all but meet her ears and her mouth press down. It was still weird to see him at all. Seeing him in her workplace almost felt like an invasion...and it was a little embarrassing, too, considering the condition of the space. Her nerves unchecked, she pointedly told him that she'd hoped to meet him after her appointment. He admitted that he was anxious to see her again, and he apologized, too, for disturbing her.

"I can go away a while," he offered, "until you're ready to go."

B'Elanna grudgingly shrugged, despite the chill his kindness inspired. His going away was not something she thought of pleasantly. Realizing this managed to calm her, though, re-focus her attention. "I have to leave in fifteen minutes to the Biaadral Medical Facility to get my arm re-mended," she told him, wiping her hands on her vest before removing it. Staring into her father's eyes, seeing the same, steady longing in them, she sighed to herself and thought quickly. "If you don't mind waiting, you could show me how to get there."

John smiled. "I know exactly where it is," he said. Thinking a moment longer on her destination, he asked, "What happened to your arm that you would need a corrective procedure?"

"It's a long story, not worth repeating," she dismissed and led the way out with a gesture to Nadrev, who moved to finish running her numbers.

She did not look back at Tom, who had begun a diagnostic nearby and was all but burning a hole in the back of her head. She knew he had to be.

Worse than looking back was not knowing what was going on behind it. Then again, he'd been outwardly supportive of her mending her relationship with her estranged father. Maybe he was thinking about that, how far they seemed to have come. And indeed, they had, she knew with a good deal of satisfaction. Uncomfortable as it had been at first--and probably always would be when they approached certain topics--she really thought they were making progress.

So maybe that was what Tom was thinking. She was content to believe that, particularly while sitting on a table with doctors circling and nothing else to do but stare at the lights. Her imagination didn't need to go any further.

She'd had enough Paris-related imagination the night before.

"Penny for your thoughts."

Blinking, B'Elanna glanced over at her father, who gazed at her askance, truly curious but ready, it seemed, to back off upon her word. He stood not six centimeters taller than she was, boots included, and she remembered that he and her mother were nearly the same height.

"Or maybe I should say credit?" he smiled.

"I'll take latinum, thanks," she returned, only half joking.

He chuckled. "A few slips, then, for whatever might be on your mind."

She shrugged. "I was thinking about how strange it felt to be here with you. I'm not used to it, yet."

"I'm still adjusting to reality, too," John nodded. "Strange...but good, though, I hope?"

"Yes," she quietly affirmed. "It's good, too."

With that, she turned with him into a side street and looked at where he gestured, an open-air café along a flowery park and violet blue river. Just a nook in the middle of that city, with quiet conversation among the diners and the occasional chatter of birds, it was possibly the most inviting thing she'd seen outside her work in as long as she could remember. Smiling and giving her father a nod, she let him escort her the rest of the way.

True to her father's words, the food was very good--or maybe she was just very hungry. Probably both, as she breezed through a very large fruit and green salad and a full serving of cheese wraps, enjoying a glass of faux berry wine on the side. She hadn't thought about tearing into the replicator again any time soon, but she was tempted to ask for the molecular breakdown of both dishes. Off to the side, the wide river bubbled and rippled, sending the occasional cooling breeze their way--not cold, but enough to ease the warm afternoon sun. She always forgot after long stretches in space what planetary life was like.

As though he'd read her mind, John said softly, "It's a little like Kessik here, isn't it?"

She blinked. "I'd thought the same about the Jetad Province when we were there, probably even more." Her lips turned slightly up. "When we were there, I realized that I actually missed home a little, though I didn't want to."

"It is a beautiful place--Jetad. Good people." Eyeing her thoughtful stare, seeing it drift far away once again, John leaned back in his seat and folded his napkin. "May I ask you something?" he finally queried. Seeing his daughter's silent assent, he continued, "Captain Paris told me you might not have to worry about fixing the ship soon, and he told me to ask you what he meant by that. Are you leaving?"

B'Elanna sighed. "Damn him. He just can't keep his mouth shut."

"He seemed a little uneasy about it," John clarified. "I don't think he meant to say anything."

"It doesn't keep him quiet, though," she responded. "I think he's more excited for me than I am." With that, she explained the offer to work at Velir Prime to her father, and that she still had not decided. She made certain to emphasize that--though with her ire piqued, she felt once again that she might decide there and then--*after* pitching Tom out an airlock. "It's a big move," she finished. "I'd like to make sure it's the right one before asking to have my contract voided."

"What would be wrong about it?" John asked enthusiastically. "Your captain is obviously thinking about your welfare; he's right to be excited for you." He nodded to confirm his statement when her gaze darted to his again. "It's a great opportunity, B'Elanna, a stable position in a clean and safe environment. I know the Velir base. They have extra programs and training facilities that as an employee, you'd have full access to at no charge. Their advance rate is very good. Velir itself isn't very exciting. Most staff there travel offworld a great deal because of it. But going there would be a wonderful direction for you, I'm sure."

"I don't know if I'm ready for that, though," she admitted.

"Why should you feel the need to be held back, B'Elanna? "

She shook her head, biting down her first answer to that. "Part of me doesn't like leaving them in a

lurch. They *got* me in a lurch and I remember what the systems looked like. I don't like delivering that right back to them."

"Maybe you could help them recruit? Or train one of your techs to take over for you?"

"We don't have the time for that."

"Yes, you're right." He paused. "Well, I know they're your friends and you care about what happens to them, but honestly, they survived before you, and though they've benefited greatly by having you there, they'll survive if you leave. If your captain is supportive and you believe it's a good fit, nothing should stop you from taking what's best for you."

B'Elanna held his assured stare for several seconds, then finally nodded and leaned back in her seat. "I'll make my decision when the Guerdon docks at Irtrin. That's when I told Jilibrar to expect my answer."

"You'll have thought it out a lot by then," John nodded and dropped it. Looking around the table, he reached for the decanter of wine. "Would you like some more, B'Elanna?"

Her lips turned up. Not only was she glad he was ready to move on to another topic, she realized how that simple gesture wore well on her--how much all of it was. Another glass of wine and a nice dinner on base, like anyone anywhere, a father and a daughter sharing some time. She still felt strange, a little out of body, about being there with him, but she knew she could get used to that sort of...normalcy. Maybe a little stability *would* be worth the pain of cutting her ties with the Guerdon. And maybe she was more ready for a steadier lifestyle than she thought before. Maybe it was indeed time to move on.

"Yes, thank you."

"Double up and lay down your credits, good men.... Dice up!"

"Masha! Double up, double up!"

It never changed, he knew, the same sight, the same smells, a base, a dock, a bar somewhere wiping the drudge of a long run away, if only for a while.

"The dice are up again!"

"Taggir! Another on!"

Then again, it *had* changed, because he stood before it yet again and dreaded going in there for all his weakness and knowing he was feeling down, knowing he had things to deal with that he didn't quite want to.

He was going to lose her, when he was just latching onto the reality of having fallen for her. Too much too late and a usual slap of bad luck--but if he cared at all for her, he would never, never let her know he hated the idea of her destination. Rather, he at least would do what he could for her and the ship all before she left--a little something to help her leave with her conscience in tact. He suspected she wouldn't like leaving unfinished work behind her. It was worth revisiting that old haunt.

You'll go in and you'll order water--no, seltzer water. It's no big deal. You don't want to drink. You want credits. Easy as that.

Oddly enough, it was easy as that. Unlike the last time he'd stared in that window, he wasn't looking for an out or an escape.

Still, this time, he knew that B'Elanna couldn't show up and save his ass if he screwed up.

"Another on, friends! --Die down! Yes, yes! Another on!"

Drawing a deep breath, Tom propelled himself into the bar, swerving around the hostess with an easy grin and a gesture forward. Immediately, he found the bartender, who smiled at him and pulled up a glass. Even after a year and hundreds of other customers, the man still knew what kind of tumbler to pull. That alone earned a good tip.

"Just a carbonated water, Kivrom," Tom told him and smiled with frighteningly automatic affect when the man's reaction questioned the young captain's very identity. "Yes, you heard right. Carbonated water." Leaning up on the bar as the puzzled bartender got what he wanted, he asked, "Anyone on the table today?"

"We've got a new self-proclaimed hobbyist," smiled Kivrom as he slid the clear, bubbling glass across. "He'll be off shift soon."

"Thanks. I'll just be having this today, then, all right? Doctor's orders."

The man laughed. "Oh, so that's what it is! Payback for all the crates you helped me unload."

"Well, in truth, it's a little more than that." Tom popped a small stack of credits back.

Two hours later, Tom slipped a fifth stack of chips back into his palm and sank them into his pocket. "Another round, Eddaf-Itto?" The young officer laughed. "Let's have a break, shall we?"

Tom smiled and nodded. He could afford a healthy break by then. Setting his stick down, he motioned to the waiter and handed him his glass. Breathing with satisfaction, he glanced over at his friendly opponent. Seemingly unafraid to shell out his entire ration of credits--obviously, the kid worked for Starfleet and didn't need money--he'd still not been too very easy to beat. The Ulinian had some certain talent, making Tom's wins more fun than he could remember. Being able to take his pick at the supply depot, thus achieving his goal for the day, he'd been able to relax and even chat a little, too.

He leaned back and smiled again when his refilled glass came back to him. "So, what department are you in Eddaf-Itto? --Oh, sorry. This day and age, I shouldn't ask that."

"I'm not in any security position," the younger man shrugged. "I'm only in requisitions."

Better and better, "Must be nice," he commented, sipping his water. "Steady job, good hours."

"It kept me from leaving Ulinas," Eddaf-Itto admitted pleasantly. "I was thinking of Starfleet in my last year of school, but then I was accepted into the training program here."

"Worked out great then, didn't it?" Tom returned then drew another sip. Blinking, he sipped once more, then set the glass down, breathed as all-too familiar warmth flowed through his abdomen and into his limbs. That wasn't seltzer, and his gut was already rejecting it. "Shit," he hissed, closing his eyes.

Eddaf-Itto came around the table to Tom's side. "Are you unwell, Paris?"

Tom shook his head at first, then turned his stare toward the bar. Geddra was pouring the drinks, and like Kivrom, she had obviously remembered his usual. Kivrom was probably on a break. "I think I need to..." Then the drink *really* hit his gut. "Oh God. Get me outside--out the back if you know--know where that is."

"I do," the young man quickly assured him and helped Tom out by the arm. Getting down the rear hall in less than a half-minute, they passed Kivrom coming back in. The bartender instantly turned back around and got Tom's other arm as his knees started to fail him.

Tom dragged for breath and tried with all his might to hold it down until they got him through the rear of the building. His hands and legs shook and his vision blurred--his whole body both heated and recoiled in a way he had never experienced. Tom stumbled on--five more meters, then three, then one. When the back doors were open, he fell across the alley and onto his knees, retching until he was doubled over, hacking out every milliliter of the drink, the water and likely everything he'd eaten in the last week. The more he vomited, the more his stomach seemed to produce. Coughing, gagging, it started again, and he meanwhile fought to keep his elbows locked. They jiggled and he rocked, but he managed to stay above it as it began a third time.

Behind him, he heard Eddaf-Itto say there was a doctor back in the lounge. Kivrom hurried in to get him.

Finally calming, falling back on his heels, emptied, sore, exhausted and still a little dizzy, Tom coughed a laugh despite it all. Any other place--any other dom-jot player--would have left him there to rot after a good fleecing--if they'd have taken him out at all. "My luck can't be that bad, then," he rasped, checking his humiliation, if anything. Spitting a couple times, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he turned a bleary stare back to a visibly shocked Eddaf-Itto. "Thanks."

"Do you think you're very ill?" the young man asked. "Should I take you to the facility nearby?"

And meet BElanna there reeking of puke. Great. "No," he muttered, his eyes narrowing to think more of it, put a few more pieces together and realize... *Damn you, Madsj. I know that had to be you, you bastard.* Letting Eddaf-Itto help him back to his feet, he did not hesitate to take the bench by the back door. He still hardly felt like he was in his body, except behind his eyes, which were swollen and throbbing.

A minute later, the doctor came out, markedly unhappy to have been pulled from his time off to see after a drunk, or so it seemed until Tom explained what had been done to him some months ago and what he suspected was the reason for his sudden illness. Waving a tricorder over the captain's midsection, the doctor nodded.

"Yes, Captain, you have an implant which prohibits the absorption of alcohol. In short, you're allergic to it."

"Yeah, and I think someone mixed me something besides water." Leaning back, Tom snorted. "The first time I'm able to get it right and I get a sip of a screwup. I can't win."

"You've not regressed since the procedure?" the doctor queried, still tapping at the tricorder as it picked up more data.

"Almost, but no," Tom answered. "I didn't even know for sure if the doc had injected anything--though

I thought he might."

The doctor's lips turned up. "Then that's a benefit, Captain Paris. Seems to me you passed his test." His smile grew when Tom looked up to him once again, questioning. "*You* didn't regress. Think about it, Captain. In the mean time, I have my medkit inside. Stay here, and I'll regulate your blood pressure and treat the remaining effects of this reaction. Then perhaps you two can finish your game."

Tom shook his head. "No, doc, I think I'm done for the day," he said, more thoughtfully then. "Thanks."

Eddaf-Itto sat by him. "May I help you spend your credits, then?" he asked. "I happen to recall your ship has a parts request on file."

Tom closed his eyes, chuckling to himself. "Better and better," he breathed, at first in disbelief, and then knowing the doctor had a point. His mouth tasted of acid and his head was pounding, but he *had* swerved temptation--and despite his gloomy start that day, he hadn't even thought about drowning his feelings. Indeed, it was slowly dawning on him that this time, it really was different.

Maybe he was *ready* for that change. Maybe that wasn't the only one.

It was worth considering, at least.

"Merry Christmas!"

B'Elanna turned her stare up from her readouts and found Tom striding past the warp core and around to her. "It's not here again yet...or did it come yet?"

He laughed. "Just an expression." He held out an inventory slip.

She did not take it. "What's this?"

"Courtesy of Eddaf-Itto," he grinned, gratefully feeling his smile as he pressed the slip into her small hand. It had been a long while since he'd cleaned a table. *Maybe feeling low and obsessive really can lead me in the right direction*, he thought wryly. "I had everything transported to the control room," he continued, leaning against the brace beside B'Elanna's panel. "It's not a full set, but he couldn't find any more. He's having a buddy track down Dejin for me with their big scanners to make up the difference."

B'Elanna stared down at the slip and read the contents: Primary plasma injector coils, including all the installation lines and duranium support brackets. Peering up at him, she did not try to hide her surprise at the parts and his liveliness, the like she'd not seen since the last time they were on Ulinas. "Who did you shark this time?" she slowly queried.

"Does it matter?"

She shrugged. "Probably not."

"Wish you'd been there?" he teased, leaning towards her.

"Definitely not," she replied. "I don't like games, remember?"

"I got you hooked on rummy." He took another step closer. "I'll get you to the dom jot table one of these days. It's only a matter of time."

She pursed her lips into a crooked smile as she glanced over the progress. "According to your daily reminders, you don't have much of that."

"You assume you'll be done with me after you're gone and living amongst the washed and well off," he returned in a beat.

"You assume we'll ever have time for any of that."

"I'm willing to make it if you are."

"I might be busy."

"I'll wait."

B'Elanna's breath caught.

She suddenly realized that he was standing at the corner of the control panel and looking directly down at her. Their noses would touch with a half step closer. She could feel his breath, his heat, his energy. His light blue eyes were sure and intent in hers as he returned her every move--challenging her, making her respond to him. *Why am I letting this happen again?!* her mind screamed as she felt herself leaning on her toes.

But then, she breathed, remembering he always got a little excited and playfully intense when he was in "win mode."

And you want him there, she told herself before she could shut the thought down.

"The control room?" she said briskly, shutting down her station. "I'll have a look at them."

Jerked out of their repartee, Tom blinked. "Okay."

Moving around him, she quickly left him standing at the station, following her with his eyes as she disappeared. Only when she was gone, standing in the hole she'd yet again left in her wake, did his brow furrow and his mind turn it over properly that time.

Tom stood there for nearly a minute, in fact, locked in on her point of exit, knowing for certain that Savan nailed it--that it *was* what he'd said, and what he did, and had been doing. He was *him*. He might have been along the wayside for the better part of his twenties, but he'd been around the block enough times to sense a positive hit. Even so, he suddenly had to wonder how long she'd been attracted to him. In a moment, he had already ticked off a handful of events that showed her hand. In another moment, he knew why B'Elanna was leaving, leaving him in that room, leaving the Guerdon and shutting the door hard behind her.

His chest panged, and he forced a deep breath into it to slow his heart.

"Damn," he whispered bitterly.

The space outside the Hanolin system was what navigators liked to call "crowded." Outside of the large, rambling system, the Gitta Nebula, a small, greenish gas cloud sat right on the Federation border. A rippling stream of asteroids surrounded it, trickling out a series of random tachyon eddies that regularly sucked in unsuspecting prey. Not quite the best place to hold a meeting, Tom had smirked to himself when he plotted it out, but given most ships avoided the area when possible, Tom and Dejin agreed upon further conversation they'd feel safer there. Both starting their careers as pilots, the conditions certainly didn't bother them as much as they knew they should.

"Switching to manual." He tapped off the automated guidance control and maneuvered his ship over and around the rocks. It was almost too bad he didn't have the little cruiser he'd first visited that area in, back during his assignment to the Copernicus, when he'd been loaned out to run a surveillance mission. He'd had a lot of fun there...

"Will you need me to alert you to tachyon eddies, Tom?" Savan asked.

He frowned. *Or maybe it's better I don't have that kind of maneuverability now.* "Yeah."

His eyes held to his board as he steered his chunky, old ship through another series of rocks. His mouth remained turned down, and he didn't think to straighten it. He hadn't slept well since they left Ulinas. Without her deserving it, he blamed B'Elanna for making him like that and running away. But at least they'd have the last parts they needed and enough time to get them in before hitting Velir. All the general maintenance stuff could wait until they got a new engineer.

"God damnit," he mumbled, thinking about having to interview for a new person. *How the hell am I going to find anyone I'll be satisfied with?* he asked himself, but knew he would. B'Elanna would disembark and he would take the best person he could find, and if that one didn't work out, then they wouldn't get a new contract in six months. It was business, it was a ship, and he needed to get past that--and her.

His father would be insanely proud to hear him admit that one at last....

"Tom!"

Tom jerked the ship up and out of the way as an eddy came up fast on them. Diving again between a couple of small asteroids, he shot a look back. "I thought you were warning me!" he snapped at Savan.

She blinked slowly. "I did."

"I didn't hear it."

"You are obviously distracted," she replied, withholding what he knew she would suggest next were she any more apt to tell him what to do.

He shook his head. "Didn't sleep last night. I'm wide awake *now*, though."

"Do I need to see you?" Savan asked.

"No," he frowned. "I'm fine."

With that, Tom pulled the Guerdon around and into the preplanned coordinates, ducking back a little to make room for the Casiat.

Waiting, he kicked the case of latinum softly with his foot. It was half of the pot with a portion of his reserve, in case Dejin was in a very bad mood. He was willing to give her whatever she needed for the parts, though. They had to have their sensors in good order, and certainly none of it would matter at all if the starboard power transfer conduit came crashing down on their toes, a sort of feat he'd seen enough of already.

And he wanted to tell his old friend that she'd saved his skin again. Maybe that would make her suffering a little less acute. Not much less, he was certain. He knew where she was...

He also wondered why, if she was working with the Maquis, she hadn't scored the same deal with protection. Maybe the Maquis had sucked her in another way, but it didn't make sense that her was still that beat up when she was running their supplies. --Or at least he assumed that was what she'd been doing, as he and others in their class had.

He'd get his information soon enough, he knew, as the battle-streaked Casiat slid into their meeting place and settled itself nicely next to the Guerdon.

"Is she knocking yet?" Tom asked.

"Opening visual," Savan reported.

Dejin's face appeared before them a moment later, though she wasn't looking at the screen. "Keep an eye on them, then," she ordered someone behind her, then turned forward. Looking at Tom, she nodded quickly. "Good. You're up."

"Good to see you again," Tom said, eyeing every evidence fight on her bridge. There were many--and even some new ones. "Can we meet, or do we--"

"Sorry, Tom," Dejin cut in, glancing back at her ops man, "but we don't have time for that. We think a Maquis ship tracked us coming in here, so we don't have much time. Gillens didn't catch it until we pulled up. He's watching."

"Okay." He tapped the latinum case into a place where she could see it. "I still want to have a word with you if we can."

"Can we deal first?"

"Sure. It'll be good to get that out of the way."

"I have the brackets and the sensor half pallet," she told him, "plus all the installation gear and the iso nodes you asked for on the side. I think four bars, fifteen strips for the lot will do it."

Tom shrugged. "Sold."

"What?!" Maryl piped in from behind him.

"You know where I'm getting the difference," Tom shot back. "Stay the hell out of it!"

His retort took even Dejin aback. "I'm willing to deal down a little," she assured him.

"We don't have time to barter, I'm covering the difference and I want you to have it," was Tom's reply. Leaning down to the box, he took out the appropriate amount and pushed the box further out for her. "Transport the parts to the deck two workroom?"

"Doing it now," Dejin responded. As the box disappeared and Savan confirmed the transport below deck, Dejin turned her gaze at her old friend askance. "I've meant to tell you, Tom, that your looks have suffered some great improvement, but your mood's not tagging along. What's up with you?"

"Lots," he told her sourly, then added, "But there's one thing in particular, you should know about."

She leaned back in her seat. "Which is?"

Seeing her relax a little made him do the same. Leaning back, too, he drew a deep breath and started in the middle of everything he knew she'd find out eventually. He wished he could talk to her about everything that was going on. He needed her particular wisdom just then. "A couple months ago, I was contracted to run a setup for--"

"Maquis ship on approach!" came Gillens' voice from behind Dejin. "They're one parsec off the port!"

Dejin ran to his post to see it. "Get the hell out of here!" she barked at Tom as she ran to her navigation control. "Deal's done! They'll tag us both if we're caught."

"I was about to tell you how we'd been granted some protection," Tom said, starting the impulse drive and glancing back. "Savan, tell B'Elanna." "I suspected they'd gotten to you, too," Dejin said as she kicked on her systems, "but there's no such thing as protection anymore. We had it, too, until a few weeks ago. New rules for everyone--everyone but *them*. The sects are severed and really don't care about blasting another sect's pigeon straight into hell as long as our cargoes go undamaged."

Tom needed no more warning than that. "Then you'd better beat me out of here, then way you look. --Savan, raise shields!" Whipping them up and out of their hole, he swore to himself that he wasn't surprised and damn the Maquis anyway for being as true to their word as any other power playing dice on the border. "We're off. Good luck, Dejin!"

"And you!" she called and cut the comm.

With that, she spun and banked out into the rocks as well, throwing back a series of long phaser shots directly into the face of the Maquis ship.

Tom glared at that--the blatantly illegal weaponry at work, obviously recent upgrades, because he knew Savan would've known about them before. Biting back his greed for just half that much firepower, Tom popped the Guerdon into full impulse and tapped his fingers on the board. The warp drive was still powering up. They still needed that PTC repair before warp could activate more immediately.

"Come on," he breathed, zigzagging them through a series of asteroid trails, hoping to throw them off a little. It didn't seem to be working. The Maquis had already broken off from the Casiat and was lining up a shot. "Come on, I can't afford a firefight right now."

Suddenly, a line a phaser fire came their way, knocking out their aft deflector and the kicking the crew forward in the bargain.

"Guess I'll just have to budget that in, then," Tom grumbled, then turned them back and through the asteroids again.

"You're *not* going to play tag in here, are you?" Maryl demanded.

"No, I'll be taking us out into open space, instead," Tom replied, "where they'll have a nice clean shot. Saves time, right?"

"They are firing," Savan reported.

Tom braced his feet below his station and tried to move them out of the way. The blast knocked them all to the left.

"*We have hull damage on deck three!*" B'Elanna reported shortly, obviously in a full run across the deck. "*We're sealing it! --And secondary sensors are offline!*"

"Hang on!" Tom told her. "I'm working on losing them. Where's warp drive?"

A pause, then, "*Forty more seconds!*"

"Forty?! Damnit!" Dropping to half-impulse, Tom drove the Guerdon out of the way of a long row of asteroids in full spin, then looked ahead a little. The Gitta Nebula was right there, and one of its many arms dipped into the steam of rocks. Running a quick scan, Tom sped to full impulse again and took off towards it. "B'Elanna! Can you light up a tachyon dump?"

"*I'm a little busy for... Yes! Yes, we can! But you'd better be ready to jump out of the way!*"

"I'll be ready in twenty-eight more seconds. Get it ready!"

"The Maquis are likely aware of this tactic," Savan warned him.

"And they're not aware of beating the snot out of a tradeship, anyway?" he returned, then grabbed his console to keep from smacking it when a blast punched the whole ship forward. "B'Elanna, add some waste to the mix!"

"*Done! --They're going for the deflector! I'm compensating, more power to the shields--and the dump's ready! But you'd better jump before--*"

"Ten seconds!" Tom yelled, driving them directly into the arm. Another hit and Tom heard a blast and sizzle behind him. He didn't look. Warp drive was coming online and B'Elanna was ready to go. The streams of gas surrounded them and Tom circled underneath it then came back over, sliding up the gaseous arm for another couple of seconds. The sleek little Maquis ship was just touching the end of it...

"B'Elanna, light it up!"

A second later, a flood of tachyons mixed with tricarbonate gas spit out of the belly of the Guerdon, propelling a bright green firestorm down the arm of the nebula.

"*Warp drive is online!*"

Tom punched in their previous trajectory and slapped the control. The Guerdon lurched around and, with a slight jerk, pounced off into warp.

Savan eyed her board, ignoring the curiosity around her. Finally, she blinked at her station's response. "The Maquis ship does not appear to be following--presently."

Tom blew a breath and fell back into his seat. "Now let's hope they don't find Dejin," he said, looking over at his armrest monitor. "So, let's see how much they did this--"

The ship fell out of warp.

--Time." Tom sighed. "Okay then, let's hope they don't look this way." Looking at a thoroughly disgusted Maryl, he added, "And maybe the base on Hanolin might throw a repair vessel at us?"

She instantly went to work on the crackling panel before her. "How about hoping this message gets through a fried sensor board?"

"That too."

"*We're going to need some more hands down here when you're able,*" B'Elanna told them, then exhaled. "--Ridge, get the other end of that. --That deathtrap of a coolant assembly collapsed onto the deck and I'll need everyone here to help me get it resecured. Warp went back offline as a safety measure.*"

Tom nodded. "I was about to ask."

"*It was waiting to happen!*" she responded. "--There's *no* way I could have stayed ahead of that! Now that'll probably need a full rebuild, too.*"

"Just make me a shopping list, okay?" Tom told her, struggling to get the long-range sensors to send him back something besides spaghetti.

"*That'll take all day at this rate,*" she snapped.

"I've a got a few problems of my *own* up here, B'Elanna, in addition to the many of yours. We all knew things were getting worse, but I'd hoped we'd be able to manage at least one run without getting a few holes blasted in our side by our old buddies."

"*Yeah, some protection we gained by selling out to those bastards.*"

"We were protected from *Chakotay's* people blowing our asses to kingdom come," Tom shot back. "But he's not the only clown in the circus out here, and you're a fool to think otherwise, particularly after being where we've been. And by the way, while I think venting is good and you've earned it to a degree, I promise you, B'Elanna, I don't have the time right now to go over the long list of who's to blame for *any* of this, so *get off my back*. Get to what you can and we'll be down as soon as we're able. Let's fix what we *can* before someone else decides they want a chunk of us."

He heard her take a breath to respond. With a wave of his hand, he slapped off the comm.

How many times she'd come into the lounge and seen him like that, she couldn't count by then. Hunched over in that worn brown coat, hair but an afterthought with a brush of his fingers, his long, steady hands surrounding a mug of coffee, his eyes on the viewport, lost somewhere in another galaxy, it seemed--and yet, he was totally there every time he turned and looked back at her.

That time, his presence reflected some measure of regret.

Hers did too, though she blinked it away to go to the replicator.

"Ridge and Savan are finishing up," she quietly informed him as she tapped in her choice, a sandwich and a coffee. It would get her through the night. "It's going well."

Tom nodded, picked up his mug. "Need me again tonight?"

"If you could check in with Nadrev in the deflector control room and run the backup diagnostic, that'd save me some time."

"I'll go when I'm done here. How the rest of it looking?"

"Warp drive is stable and the PTC output is back into the ninetieth percentile, which is fine." She pulled out her tray, then programmed a side of coleslaw. To her surprise, she'd never tasted that old fashioned salad until Tom and Ridge helped program the new replicator, dreaming aloud to each other about barbecue picnics. Though she shook her head at their distractions, the new dish was an instant favorite with her...though she tried not to let on until Ridge noticed its frequency on her plate. "But I'm going to be on repair duty at least another three days, and *then* I'll install the sensor pallet. We'll fix the hull at Irtrin if we can get the parts."

"I'll see that we have them," he told her.

Closing her eyes to the cheery LEDs for a moment, B'Elanna released a sigh and went to take the seat across from the captain. Catching his full attention, she drew another breath and said, "Look, I apologize. For what happened earlier? I was wrong to go off on you like that, especially over an open comm."

His lips ghosted upwards. "Don't worry about it," he quietly replied. "I know it's hard to stay cool when the room's falling down around you."

"I should know better, though. I just...it just comes out, and I don't like it--and it's still wrong of me. I know you're not to blame for anything going on here. You've done all you could to keep us going."

He accepted that with a small but grateful nod. "Thanks. I'm sorry for blasting back. I know you know what's going on."

"So," she continued, trying to get away from her apology, now that she'd made it, "it's getting worse, now."

"Yeah, and it'll get worse still when Starfleet or Cardassia finally makes a move, or if someone else sticks their foot in the puddle." He made a wave with a gesture of his hand. "Everything overflows."

"Who else could do that?"

"The usual: Whoever might be interested in the resources at play in the region--or the power. There's so much that can happen. I remember stories coming back about the Border Wars, when I was a kid. It happened in this same region; my dad saw the hard side of that fight here, too. When he got back, I remember eavesdropping on the crew when they talked about the bloodshed and the firefights, the tortures...my father included." He nodded at her, then went on, "Then the Talarions got involved and everything they'd been working on blew up in their hands."

"Leave it to the Talarions to kick a bomb," B'Elanna frowned. She'd had her own run-ins with a few members of that race at Ibaten. She was forced to bring Ridge in as an oversized fly swatter.

"Their double-teaming was part of the reason it was so hard for the Federation to manage a truce." Tom snorted. "Naturally, the Cardassians went right out and broke the agreements, but now the Maquis are in it, instead." He shrugged, not trying to lighten what he knew was true. "It'll be better that you got out now. --Really, B'Elanna, I don't know what's going to happen here, but it's going to be bad. It'll be a

smart move for more than your qualifications."

For all the returned camaraderie she'd felt just then--a really good feeling, to talk to him as they had come to--she stared at him now, insulted that he just had to go back to pressing her. He just couldn't drop it and let her think for herself. "You want me to go that badly, Tom, just go ahead and dissolve the contract, get it over with. I'll save you the trouble of even going to Velir. I'll hop a trip over with an Irtrin transport."

"Our final Hidirin drop off is scheduled at Velir, B'Elanna," he quietly reminded her, then sighed. "I'm sorry, but this is getting to me in so many ways, I don't know what to think sometimes. One thing's sticking out, though."

"What's that?"

"When I first signed you up, it was with the idea that we could help each other and fix up this ship somehow, as the latinum could be collected." He laughed derisively. "Boy, was I delusional. We have everything opposite to that now, and really, B'Elanna, you shouldn't be hung up in ship's business, either. Everyone else can deal with being stuck in neutral. Hell, they pretty much design to be, so I've never had to think about them being there."

B'Elanna was surprised. "I don't think Maryl or Ridge or the others have futures any less worth seeing to."

Tom snorted and leaned back in his seat. "Are you kidding? Look at them, B'Elanna."

"I do every day. So?"

"Ridge is a fine technician," he returned, "but he learned everything on the road and never got around to using that brain of his for more than basic engineering. Maryl paid to get her entire family to move to Bajor and makes sure they live comfortably, but she never visits, never contacts them, even though she had no problem with them and we're regularly at DS-Nine. She's so stuck in this life that she's afraid to look outside of it. Or, maybe I just don't have their brand of faith. They have no dreams, no plans, and they're going nowhere. Nadrev's just trying to get by, too. He'll be a grade-two tech for life. Maybe he can live with it, but even he knows he's smart enough for better. Savan--hell, she went through all the rigors of a Vulcan education, along with a great run at Starfleet Academy, but never graduated into anything. She reports to me then goes to pick apart flowers every day, five years now on *this* ship. She was on her former ship ten years, doing about the same thing.

"You're all great friends that I couldn't do without, and I'm not saying we all *have* to have ambitions, but no one here's living up to themselves--that goddamned potential--remember us talking about that? I sometimes think it's simply because they never had the confidence or drive to take it a step further. I thought I did, but I burned myself badly enough to have to take what I can get and watch the people around me stand still when they *do* have a choice."

Staring deeply into his engineer's dark eyes, so full of herself, so alive with emotion and wit, curiosity and regard, he concluded more softly, "Yeah, I think you're wasting your time here being stuck on 'repair duty.' I don't want to see you walk away--I don't want to lose you--but you're worth a hell of a lot more than what I can offer you here. Really, you deserve so much more, B'Elanna. I wouldn't care about you at all if I tried to dissuade you from getting everything you could."

B'Elanna continued to stare into his unbroken gaze for several seconds after he finished. She hardly knew what to do but let his words sink in. There was so much there, indeed, she needed that minute.

At last, Tom stood, making the break for them. "I'll go see how Nadrev's doing." With that, he got his mug, walked across the room and set it in the reclamator.

B'Elanna slumped a little when he was gone, the weight of his presence and his words removed with him. But the content remained.

She would never look at the crew quite the same way again.

He cared about her. She knew it before, but she wondered how much. She was starting to wonder...

She needed to go. It was time to go.

She did not move, however. All but forgetting her untouched sandwich, she slid her hands around her still warm mug and let her gaze fall out onto the stars, racing by.

Tom's eyes drifted up and around winding the inner coil that was the Guerdon's deflector housing. Scars from the past, months old and brand new, patches and parts from over four sectors worth of depots, marked the assembly like a series of bandages from different hospitals. Old, knotty, a pesky patient that had to be serviced and serviced well, only to be beat up again...and again. Eventually, the old bastard would hiss a final curse and die, just no one could say when.

The tricorder Nadrev had helpfully given him hung limply in his long fingers. His lips were pressed together.

No real weapons to speak of, a twenty-something year old barge with a crew of but six, roaming the most dangerous region of space in the Alpha Quadrant. That they had lasted that long was a miracle. And yet, it was his life, trudging on in that territorial hell, turning in new and bitter directions.

He wished any of it surprised him.

That Maquis ship wasn't after Dejin. They gave her up too quickly. The Guerdon had a full bay of power supplies, among other desirables.

"Are you all right, Tom?" asked Nadrev when he saw the captain shiver.

Tom shook his head, flipped open the tricorder. "It's nothing," he muttered and started to move around the deflector. "Just a pilot's instinct."

"*Shields are almost gone!*"

"Evading! --Where's the patrol?!"

"I don't know! --They're coming around! They're making--"

"*We can't keep--!*"

A blast threw Tom out of his seat, tumbling across the deck until the dampers kicked back in and he could stop himself. Scrambling to his hands and knees, he leapt back to his seat, where he punched the last impulse power B'Elanna had been able to scrape up.

Four light years from Irtrin, and the Maquis were bold enough now to plow into them with all they had. Tom was still trying to believe they were that desperate to come eight light years away from the DMZ to knock off an insignificant tradeship, then follow them down the main trade route phasers first.

"Savan! Find the Irtrin patrol!"

"I am attempting to."

"Tom, they're lining up again!" Maryl cried. "Coming hard on the port!"

"I see it!" he barked. "B'Elanna!"

"*We can't take another hit!*" she yelled. "*There's nothing left to divert!*"

"Got it!" Tom looked at his board. Warp drive had been the first to go, there were numerous hull fractures to add to the patches B'Elanna had recently put in outside Hanolin. Main power was in jeopardy and their sensors were fried well before they'd been tagged. The deflector had been their only defense and it was toast soon.

He was really getting *really* sick of that.

"Coming around!" Tom announced and pulled the Guerdon at full impulse around and into the wake of the Maquis cruiser, forcing it to turn. Slicing through its plasma wake, Tom tapped in a hydrogen exhaust cycle, razing the plasma molecules and causing a chain reaction to run up toward the Maquis ship. But the ship cut its engines for a moment, interrupting the plasma chain. "Damn it!" They knew that one.

His fingers flew over his board again, desperately plotting them off the Maquis ship's line of fire yet again...

Just one more. Just one more...

There was no more.

A massive *crash* thrust them all against their consoles and blew out a whole line of circuits along the port side of the bridge. Tom clutched his board to ride out the backlash, almost sliding off his seat again and the whole ship groaned for mercy. He knew without looking that they'd been kicked to a dead stop--kicked dead and left to steam and spew. He didn't even want to hear Savan open her mouth to serve him all he already had on his plate. Mercifully, the Vulcan remained silent.

Instead, he got what he dreaded more. A familiar whirr filled the air...

"*Shields are offline!*" B'Elanna called out.

"Yeah," Tom huffed. Pushing himself off his board, he found himself face to face with four dirty, hot and heavily armed Maquis. "We have company."

"Oof!" B'Elanna coughed as she hit the bulkhead below Nadrev's station. Glaring back, she saw Ridge hurry to his wife, who was pressed against the bulkhead on the other side of the bridge. Glancing left, she saw Tom against the wall by the viewscreen.

"If you'll suffer just a little humiliation," said the leader of the four as he moved around the forward section of the bridge, "this will be entirely painless. The Maquis work quickly as a rule, and my crew will have what we want in just a few more minutes."

Tom smirked. "I'm guessing you have the experience to prove it."

Moving towards him, the other man motioned the Maquis guarding Tom to step aside. "I assume you're the captain?"

"I am," Tom replied. "And we're supposed to be enjoying the protection of the Maquis, have been for months."

"Show me your contract," the other captain smirked, then nodded at B'Elanna. "Better still, get your little Klingon over there to open up the central parts storage. We can't beam through the inner casing and she's being stubborn."

"It's not worth your time," Tom assured him. "We're not rich, Captain. Those parts are specific to this model ship. They're locked up in there because it's a convenient spot."

"I'll make that judgment. Open the storage."

"I'll open *you*!" B'Elanna snapped and took a step forward. "Who the hell do you think you are, knocking off a little tradeship who's been *working for your people*?!"

The man next to the Maquis captain turned his phaser rifle toward B'Elanna at that.

"Another sect," the captain told her.

With a snarl, B'Elanna jerked to move again when the rifle was powered up and raised to point at her eyes.

In four strides, Tom was across the room, knocking the weapon out of her direction. "You don't touch *any* of my crew without going through me first!"

"If you insist," said the Maquis, then swung the rifle head around to whack Tom across the cheek.

He took the hit, hissing at the shot of pain in his septum and eye, but immediately straightened and grabbed his engineer's arms when she moved to defend him. Moving them back against the bulkhead and pinning her there, he put his swelling face near her ear. "There's nothing we can do."

She threw off his hands. "Obviously!"

"Then don't make it worse."

"You're saying we just give in?!"

He grinned at that, straight through his pain as he pulled back just enough to meet her glare. "I didn't

say that, B'Elanna."

She exhaled, still feeling him against her and the racing quiver that shot up her midsection--totally inappropriate, and at the same time, she furiously tried to figure out what he was talking about. *Damn him, I can't handle this!*

"You'd better say something soon," said the Maquis behind them, low and ready. The whirr of the plasma rifle ratcheted up.

Tom was still staring into B'Elanna's eyes, trying to figure out what to go for first, or if he should simply stall them again. But if Savan couldn't pick up the Irtin patrol, they were probably not near enough to zoom in within another hour at least. One thing Tom did know was that he was *not* going to open--

"I'll open it," came Ridge's voice, quiet and miserable on the other side of the bridge.

Tom looked back at him. "Ridge, this isn't--"

"Like you said, they won't be able to use most of it," Ridge shrugged. Giving Maryl's arm a warm squeeze, he looked at the Maquis captain. "Just don't hurt anyone, okay?"

The captain chuckled. "Yeah, we'll try."

B'Elanna glared at her technician over Tom's shoulder as he hurried out, two of the Maquis close on his heels. Then she looked at Tom's resigned and rapidly swelling expression.

"I wasn't thinking about that," he muttered.

Within minutes, the Maquis captain began to answer his comm badge. "You know what we're here for. Get to it and let's get out of here before the Irti get a clue." Tom's eyes narrowed as he glanced down at B'Elanna again. "They threw the Irti off," he whispered when the comm busied again.

B'Elanna's eyes closed. "Damn them."

"I'm angrier about the cargo, frankly. They're probably stripping us clean. We'll have nothing to unload."

B'Elanna's gut shrank to understand all that his statement guaranteed. Tom obviously had digested the grim fate already.

They were dead in the water.

"That should do it," the Maquis captain nodded and waved at his remaining man when he brought Ridge back in. "We'll leave you now. The Irti patrol should catch up with you within a day or two. I hope you don't mind if we make certain you don't track us."

Tom scowled and turned to face the man. "You son of a bitch, if you're thinking about--"

The Maquis transported away.

"Damnit!" He swung around. "Savan, can you see them?"

"Quite clearly," she answered, quiet as she watched her board. Glancing at her captain, then looking forward, she transmitted it to the main viewscreen. Suddenly, they all saw the sleek cruiser, Andorian by

design, pull a graceful turn in the space before them.

"They're carrying our payment," Tom said as he strode to the side of his station, "everything we've been killing ourselves over and they still want to take us out." He blew a bitter laugh. "There's not a goddamned thing that *hasn't* gone wrong with this run, now."

B'Elanna glanced at him, but he didn't look back. He continued to stare the Maquis ship down, almost daring it at that point to take the shot, just so he could take it with some remaining pride. The Maquis complied, almost cheerful in its duty as it sank down into the correct coordinates and powered up its weapons. A few seconds later, it zeroed in on the Guerdon's remaining sensor grid.

Suddenly, two quick bursts of energy flew out of nowhere and struck the Maquis ship in its forward phaser banks, halting the shot and knocking the ship off its position. The ship that fired followed a moment afterwards.

It wasn't the Irtri.

Tom shook his head sharply, almost trying to jar the vision he couldn't believe he was seeing: A small cruiser, bronze-toned and sleekly angled, with a complement of supplemental weapons banks along its keel. "The Liberty?!"

"What the hell are *they* doing here?" B'Elanna demanded, paling to see that familiar shape move into the line of fire.

"Who cares?" Maryl told them both. "*Someone's* bothering to help out!"

Tom's brow rose on that thought. "Yeah, but at what price this time?"

The two ships tangled in the near space before them, circling and lighting up their weapons banks like two school bullies in the yard, seeing if the other would flinch. Neither did. A few more turns between them, a push and a pull, and the Liberty finally settled itself between the other ship and the Guerdon, a little low to block their opponent's torpedo bays. Then, there was a deadly stillness and an unnerving proximity. The two ships might have touched bows would one just tap their docking thrusters. The crew on the Guerdon's bridge could only stand and stare, waiting for someone to do something.

"Tom," Savan reported, "our cargo is being transported back into our holds--not the correct holds, however the crate signage and mass are identical. Also: the Liberty is initiating the transports."

Tom swung around to see her still watching it happen on her console. "All of it?" he asked.

"It seems so," she confirmed.

Finally, the comm opened up and the first Maquis captain appeared on the right side of the screen. "You work for Captain Chakotay?" the Maquis demanded as Chakotay's frame slowly opened as well.

Tom blinked and stepped forward. "That's right."

"You're hauling for him?"

Tom looked at Chakotay, who tersely nodded. "It's fine Paris," he said. "Tell him."

He frowned, not all for show. He thought fast and decided faster. "Yeah, we're delivering a few holds of supplies for him. But we also have a few cases of mareuvian tea, if you're interested in that much."

"Cut the crap, Paris. --Chakotay, since the quartum's your deal, I'm willing to offer an even split."

Tom sawed his teeth together.

"No deal," said Chakotay. "I need that supply for our sect base."

"You won't be leaving with the whole dock, and you won't get to your base if I have to fly away empty handed. I'll make certain of that."

A pause, then Chakotay considered him again. "One quarter."

"And the rod lines."

"Half the lines."

Eight bars, right there, and ninety percent of our Irtrin dropoff, Tom silently groaned, meanwhile thankful Maryl was keeping her mouth shut. Ridge had to be sitting on her head. In the corner of his eye, he could see B'Elanna was visibly too furious to make noise. "You're very cooperative," the first Maquis observed.

"I have a deadline," Chakotay shot back. "And you're not giving me any slack. Prepare for transport, then get out of our way."

"Anything for a fellow freedom fighter," the other man smiled.

It was over in a stupidly short amount of time. Tom could almost feel pounds of flesh being taken with each of the four transports, even more so than before for knowing precisely what was going that time. One repair gone there, another thing they'd have to put off because of the other--all that aside from his still reliving them getting on his ship. And yet, thanks to Captain Chakotay, it had become far less heinous a raid. Disastrous, but not crippling.

If I have to sell my arms, I'm getting our shields fixed, Tom growled to himself. At the same time, he couldn't imagine where he'd scrape it up that time. He'd have to spend a month straight at the tables--*and* stay lucky--to make up for their loss. His own funds were seriously depleted after the deal with Dejin, though he didn't regret being able to secure those parts.

The final transport left Chakotay as stony-faced as before and the other Maquis captain smugly pleased. It was only a small comfort to know Chakotay was probably as keen to beat the hell out of the other Maquis as Tom was.

"See you on the line, Captain Chakotay," came the captain's farewell, one more poke before disappearing a moment later to turn his ship around.

Bruised, tired, beyond disgusted, Tom watched the other Maquis ship bank and fly away, a little heavier, but not nearly as much as they could have been. When they jumped into warp, he looked again at the other man.

Chakotay looked solidly back, still sweaty and darkened with the fight. "Okay?" he asked shortly.

Tom gave him a curt nod. "Yeah. Thanks."

"It's all I can do, considering."

Tom didn't comment on that. "Does that captain specialize in piracy," he queried, "or is running raids this far into Irtrin territory just the latest fashion?"

"A little bit of both," answered Chakotay, not hiding his disapproval. Before Tom could ask his next question, the Maquis jerked his thumb back towards a tall form behind him. "That's Ayala, by the way, my new second in command."

Tom's brow rose. "What happened to the other one?"

Chakotay's lips twitched downwards. "She went to recover at her brother's home on Nivoch."

I'm sure glad I wasn't there for that conversation, Tom remarked to himself. "I hope you're not too put out."

"Less than I should have been," Chakotay replied. "This side of the DMZ isn't getting any better, Paris. I recommend you think about moving your operations, for your sake as well as your crew's."

"We've only got another couple runs here before that happens."

"Get them done quickly. Good luck to you, Captain."

"And you," Tom said sincerely, though a little surprised. "That's it?"

"That's it," the Maquis captain confirmed. "You're too hot to deal with now. We don't plan to call on you again."

The man looked away. The channel was closed a second later.

"God damn," Tom breathed as the Liberty disappeared into the pitch black sky before them.

"I don't see them, Kid," called Ridge.

"Stick your head *in* the locker!" she retorted, punching on her panel to somehow get that program started without tearing the whole ODN out of the wall. "I am *not* going to come over there to find something I laid right at the door! *Look* for it!"

The technician wisely did not reply that time. He knew her too well.

So did Tom, who leaned against the rail of the stairwell until her tirade was over and he might be able to ask her a question without losing an organ. In the last week, B'Elanna had become all but unmanageable. Unfortunately, Tom wasn't up for her many moods just then. The Maquis ship had not only taken most of their Irtrin cargo, but a lot of basic parts and wiring bundles B'Elanna needed to do the *usual* post-attack repairs, plus a lot of small power nodes and diodes. They'd worked quickly, but they did a damned good job making the small parts room look like a tornado had swept through it, debris and all, which infuriated B'Elanna even more.

Not that Tom blamed her for any of it. He was still pissed about that, too, and wasn't close to getting over it, if he ever would. They had shot the hell out of his ship, beamed aboard, pushed B'Elanna around

and manipulated Ridge into giving in. If Chakotay hadn't been nearby, they'd have been kicked again and left bleeding and completely fleeced.

They had come aboard his ship.

Tom came to B'Elanna's side and waited for her to stop putting holes in the panel long enough to address him.

"Yes. What?" was her greeting.

"I need to know the first repair you want to make," Tom told her, likewise not up for faking a grin.

"I sent you my list."

"Tell me what we need *first*," Tom said. "I'm going to requisitions in an hour and I need to give them a priority list."

She furrowed her brow. "With what money?"

"Tell me what you need," he repeated tersely. Doing what he had to was bad enough without a discussion. For that matter, he knew she'd hate it, too.

Rolling her eyes, B'Elanna complied. "I need the starboard polarity source generator and the mesh panels first to get the deflector up. The rest of the hardware to make it run well--you have that list already. We also need deuterium and the plasma flow regulator if we ever want to get out of Irtri territory inside another decade," she told him. "Not that any of that's going to get me ahead of the curve." She snorted. "Maybe it'll be easier this way, getting someone who doesn't have the baggage to drag into every operation. Every time I start, I just get angrier."

"Yeah, it'll be probably be a relief, won't it?" he returned. "It's a hell of a lot easier to drop everything and start over than deal with what you've got."

"I've *been* dealing with it, Tom!" she charged back, hot upon contact with his accusation. "Dealing with this piece of garbage falling apart since day one! And where are we? Back *past* step one and beggars on top of it!"

"If you want out," Tom returned, "then there's the door! I've opened it for you, for *your* sake, and I told you why, and have been understanding so you could take that opportunity and not feel like crap. But I'm not up for burning alive in your wake, so give it a rest, Torres!"

"Oh, I will, soon enough," she responded coldly.

"Fine. Do your job until then and leave me alone. I'll be aft."

She scowled at him. "You're not repairing anything, are you?"

"No. Parts deal. I'll give you an inventory later."

"Fine," she replied and got back on the power grid reassignment at her station. Only after Tom was gone and she had begun to tap into the panel again did she notice Ridge. The big man stood, still and quiet as a leaf, his arms full of the bundle support beams she had ordered him to fetch. Holding his stare a moment, she just shook her head and turned back to her work.

Ridge didn't do her the same favor. "What was that about, B'Elanna? You're not leaving, are you?"

B'Elanna looked up again as he neared, still reflecting the dread of that truth. She suddenly understood what parents felt when they had to deliver bad news to their child. Though he was more than ten years her elder, she never quite felt it, for more reasons than for her position there. "I got an offer to work at the Velir base," she told him, almost offhand in a weak attempt to assuage the sting. "I'm pretty sure I'm going to take it."

"Why?" Ridge asked, his gaze searching hers, hoping to find something to grasp at there. Getting nothing that way, he asked, "It's not about what happened before, when they stole our goods, is it?"

"It has nothing to do with that, Ridge. Really. I've been considering the position for a few weeks now."

Ridge sighed, accepting defeat with a shrug and downcast gaze. "Velir, eh? It's a nice place." He started out. "Boring, though."

"Is that a shuttle?"

"Maybe. Could be a great greenhouse for Savan, too."

"Where did you get it?"

"Off a junk dealer. I got to thinking when I saw it I'd never put one together before."

"You should be running Daystrom, Jerod."

"Maybe when I finish my contract."

Tom could see his old friend's face so clearly, in the other storage room, buried in parts that'd been unceremoniously beamed in along with the dilapidated shell and half-removed systems hanging from their moorings. Jerod was in heaven.

A couple months later, Tom stumbled into the storage room, angry and exhausted, his ship half blasted apart by the Liberty, his friend's corpse floating around somewhere in that cold, black space. Coming up to the neatly disassembled parts, Tom slid against the hull until he was on his knees. Bending his head down, he coughed and wiped at his flaccid mouth. He did not cry, but he did mourn. He knew he felt something right for mourning, at least, despite the great effort he put into not feeling at all.

He was in the same place, pulling apart a sensor node, when B'Elanna came into the bay and quietly offered her help. He never thought he'd like to have company as much again in his life as when he silently accepted hers that night. Their friendship was formed there.

He had finally put the last touches on that shuttle just after they left Ulinas, inscribing the name on the side with a small flourish: Hilda.

The buyer liked the name and promised to keep it, though Tom had not requested it. Tom did tell him, however, a little about Jerod.

"A great guy," he'd said, more warmly than he expected he might. "Right by your side no matter what you needed and out of the way every other time. He loved to tinker with machines--it's why he got the shuttle in the first place, just to play with."

"But you continued it?" the buyer queried.

"It seemed...like the right thing to do." Tom grinned. "He'd have wanted it."

Not a half-day later, Tom stared heavily at that beautiful rig, shining in the stark light of the dingy old storage bay. It was in better shape than Jerod would ever have expected. B'Elanna had fine-tuned every bolt that went back into it and upgraded some of its too-outdated parts. Tom had gone as far as to grind down the hull plates and repolish them, much as he had the panels of his old Camaro. The duranium was murder to shine, but it eventually complied and took its shell coating without a pinch.

The result was a slick aluminum tone and sheen on a lean, two-seater shuttle. It had warp four capability, enviable maneuvering thrusters and defensive shields to complement the navigational array. They'd even found comfortable seats to slide into the old slots and lock down.

It occurred to Tom just then that he and B'Elanna had not once discussed what they'd ever do with that shuttle. All that work and they'd not considered its use to them.

Guess I know now, he frowned to himself.

"Captain Kiggari's funds are secure, Captain Paris," reported the holder.

Tom sighed. "Thanks. Tell him he's free to transport."

The buyer did want to make sure the shuttle was actually space-worthy, particularly considering its history. So, the payment was put into a trusted Irtri holder fund. If the ship held up and did everything the buyer wanted, the funds would be transferred to Tom. If not, then the holder guaranteed the safe return of the product, else pay the sum themselves.

Tom waited patiently for over ten minutes, leaning against the wall, resting his eyes, willing his shoulders down, trying not to think...

They needed that money, but he wished it'd malfunction.

Suddenly, a loud whirr filled the space to his left. Looking over, he saw the cases of latinum appear where the shuttle had been.

"The purchase is complete, Captain Paris. Thank you for your business."

Then, a click.

It was gone.

He dragged a couple of breaths, trying, but feeling it, feeling it well up within him, in his chest and throat. His hands balled up.

Suddenly, Tom railed his fist into the wall, crying out in frustration and anger. The boom echoed around the room as he struck it a few more times. "Damnit!" he yelled and slumped, coughing out the rest as he pressed his fists against the bulkhead. Then he turned against it and pressed his head back.

"Damnit, Jerod," he whispered, his eyes on the latinum, "you never knew how much you'd do this far out..." Wiping his eye with the back of his hand, shoving his heart down with unfortunate skill, he sighed once more and moved to load the latinum cases onto the small dolly. He sure as hell didn't want to cry that much over a piece of equipment they didn't need and by all right should have sold. There was no use in sitting on potential payment when the ship was going nowhere.

He felt like a piece of him went out with that shuttle, though, and it had nothing to do with Jerod.

Kneeling to scoot the first case onto the platform, he sighed again and looked toward the forward wall that time. "Even sorrier," he whispered, but stuffed that away, too, and grabbed the second case.

Standing in the corridor across from the open bay door behind him, B'Elanna had watched the latinum appear where their shuttle had been. Her back pressed against the bulkhead, her arms tightly crossed, she'd also heard his cry and his words. Seeing him appear and get the dolly into place, seeing his bent posture and his fallen features, she did not have to wonder what it was for him to sell that shuttle. It was easy enough to imagine as her heart thudded with remorse. She wasn't even angry at all their work beaming away, only...

Or maybe there was nothing left worth feeling.

She remembered how she felt six months ago. Hurt, angry--angry at each other and their whole situation--and desperate for distraction, she and Tom had mourned Jerod through working on that old shuttle together. Wordlessly, they mended their hard feelings and came to know each other, with easy bantering as they learned to work in tandem and each other's skills--and weaknesses. Nervous as his presence had increasingly been making her, she also knew as they finished it how much she would miss working on it with him.

Now the shuttle was gone. It almost felt like they had lost Jerod all over again, and she and Tom were back to square one.

But it was probably better that way. It wouldn't be much longer, and they wouldn't have to think of it again.

Turning her head down, she crossed her arms and continued to deflector control.

She had a feeling she'd have some work to do there, soon.

As the darkness of the corridor enveloped her, as the patterns in the grate blurred before her eyes, she blinked.

Six months, she recalled, counting the time to herself again.

She sped her pace.

Thirteen hours. Even B'Elanna was surprised when she passed the chronometer. Only hunger had told time for her that day...now night...so to speak.

Even so, she knew she was just grabbing coffee and a sandwich and going right back to it, so she might even break one more shift record. Their needed parts quickly delivered--without a word or preamble

from a downright sullen Tom, she'd noticed--she, Ridge and Nadrev set right into the replacements, starting with the deflector array and ending with the flow regulator and a fuel input. Then she set on the *other* repairs, which supply deal caused the trouble they were in.

She blew a breath. Truly endless, all of it. And how any times had she said that? Even *that* was endless.

Passing Savan with a quick nod, B'Elanna soon turned into the lounge. Maryl and an overcooked Ridge sat slumped over his dinner. Though far more inclined to sleep and breaks, he had been at it almost as long as she had. Looking up at his boss, he offered her a small grin before resuming his meal. B'Elanna frowned and turned to the replicator. He'd been visibly mourning her all day.

His wife, newly informed and not bothering to hide it, watched B'Elanna through narrow eyes for almost a minute, then said, "Ridge tells me you're leaving us."

"Probably," replied B'Elanna quietly.

"Tom's giving you a special dispensation with your contract?"

B'Elanna drew a cooling breath. She hadn't been anxious to have that conversation. As sad as Ridge could be, Maryl would be doubly put off, just because. "What's in my contract has nothing to do with you, or anyone else."

"So we're done bidding your time?"

B'Elanna glared back at her. "Look, the job came up. I didn't look for it, but it came to me and I want it a hell of a lot more than I want to hear your whining! This has *nothing* to do with you, Maryl!"

"I never said it did," she returned. "I'm just a little confused that you of all people would turn so sharply for the greener pastures without letting any of us know until just now--and that by accident. Were you going to simply dematerialize at Velir?"

B'Elanna coughed a laugh. "I thought you'd at least *try* to be a friend and be glad for me."

Maryl sighed. "I *am* glad you got a good base job, B'Elanna. It's just what you've been wanting. But this *is* surprising, and you have to know how it's going to affect us. Engineers aren't the easiest people to--"

"You couldn't give a damn about anything but how it's going to inconvenience you!"

"What are you talking--"

"And you know what? I *deserve* this chance. I deserve a position that's not going to blow me across the room or work me for over a half-day straight with no hope that the malfunctions won't be back in a week. I deserve to be able to *fix* problems! I can't *wait* to start doing that for a change."

By then, Ridge had set down his spoon and moved to push his exhausted frame to stand. "Come on, B'Elanna, I'd just told her. It's kinda fresh, still. Let's not go out on a bad--"

"Don't even try to talk to me," B'Elanna snarled. Grabbing her food from the replicator, she stormed out. "To hell with all of you!"

Tom barely made it out of her way as she swung around the corner and drove herself back towards the

engine room. He watched her go for a moment then looked inside to see who'd been the latest recipients. Shrugging, he went to get himself a coffee.

Maryl gestured toward the door, still surprised. "What's wrong with her?"

"She doesn't know any other way to cut the cord," Tom told her. "Don't take it personally. Let her go."

Nodding grudgingly, seeming to understand, the two returned to their meals. Grabbing his coffee and a serving of peanut butter crackers, Tom found a table near the window and lowered himself into a seat. Leaning back, sipping from his mug, he stared out at the stars, wondering what else he was going to have to let get away in his life. Without a doubt, he knew, he was on a roll.

"I don't feel like looking for another engineer," Maryl griped.

Ridge slumped and picked at his potatoes again. "I'm gonna miss the little cricket." He glanced at his wife. "You will too."

"There's no use in it," she countered, then softened a little to add, "Though you're right."

Tom closed his eyes. Her angry voice still echoed in his ears, but he could only sigh at it. A long time ago, he'd refused to put up with an engineer who couldn't keep her temper in check. He didn't feel like flying a run in a fight, putting up with constant challenges and fiercely swinging moods.

What I wouldn't do to hold onto that now.

"You're giving me your word?"

"Yes. I'll let you know if I'm dissatisfied."

B'Elanna sat on her bed, her hands pressed under her thighs, eyes closed.

"Looks like you've got yourself an engineer, Tom."

"I was almost afraid you'd call me captain."

"I learn quickly."

Her eyes opened again. The pleasant voice filling her cabin continued uninterrupted. She had already been warned that this was simply how it had to be done and it would be over soon. Nothing that met her ears was in any way a surprise. She'd read it all already. Now, she barely heard it.

"I respect you too much to mess around, B'Elanna. I know how tough this has to be for you, so I'm only as involved as you want me to be."

Her tool kit sat by the door. She'd dropped it without care when she came in after another long day of installing deflector parts. To her shame, and as much as she tried to scratch the thought, she did not think of Jerod with every piece of equipment she stuck into the system, but of Tom. She saw his long, strong hands as they inserted a node or turned a laser wrench with a precision she never failed to notice.

She heard his voice, quiet with respect to her working preference, but increasingly light in tone, more the voice of a friend than someone sharing a wake that wasn't.

"I already promised twice I'd tell you if I found something better, and I will, if only to get you off my back about it."

"I'm sorry, B'Elanna. I just can't help it...seeing your gift. I like to think...we're friends. As a friend, I want you to have...all you deserve, all you can get."

Her father said that her captain had made a great exception for her sake and that she shouldn't take that kind of friendship for granted. Maybe he had gained it along the way, but as much as she had missed her father in her life and been thankful in retrospect he hadn't given up on her on Ulinas, she had never considered him wise.

"I already have a job--with a crew I trust, fair pay and the fortune of waking up not wondering if I'll be dead by night."

How slippery is loyalty when a good job's in your face, B'Elanna frowned to herself. But that wasn't even it and she knew it. Her emotions were screwing her up again--and in a most insidious way that time, in falling for the captain. The Velir offer had merely saved her time and frustration. She wouldn't have renewed her contract, anyway, had she not been able to stuff her feelings effectively. So she'd distanced herself from him and unconsciously had been doing a great job setting her bridges ablaze.

"It's a hell of a lot easier to drop everything and start over than deal with what you've got."

At the rate she was going, they would probably give her a personal escort off the ship by the time they got to Velir.

When will this ever end? she asked silently.

As if complying further to her desire, the voice paused.

"Does this sound equitable to you, Torres?" Jilibrar queried, a warm smile in her tone, like a fresh cup of coffee in the morning.

B'Elanna felt her lips turning up at it. She couldn't imagine how it would be to be surrounded by so much positive energy on a daily basis. *Six days and I'll know*, she answered herself, then told Jilibrar, "It sounds just right."

"I look forward to welcoming you to our team," the other woman replied.

"Thank you for taking the time," B'Elanna replied, letting her eyes fall over her quarters as though it were for the last time.

Indeed, it was time to go.

"Base Velir Prime, this is the Guerdon, requesting landing clearance at Dock Odn Eight-Four."

"Please hold for pattern assignment, Tradeship Guerdon."

Tom peered back at Maryl, who was already hard at work connecting with their Hidirin liaison there, who would arrange for the pickup of the remaining quartum and the other portion of their cargo. Thankfully, the Maquis hadn't been interested in that section of their bays, so their Velir drop off would give them just enough to pay for their needed equipment and parts and secure a new engineer. According to the personnel manager there, recruits often asked for a small wage deposit upfront and an exit clause on most contracts. Tom and Savan had been tweaking the old template for a couple days in expectation of having to make those concessions.

He would be paying for the three-day drydock, too, though partly with his share from that last drop off. Though Velir had an impressive space station, they were drydocking at the main base that time. Tom had made the excuse that he wanted a recruit from the ground base. They usually checked out better if they had taken the time to register planetside, and so he called in a favor and got the dock for the same price as at the orbital station--a complete lie on both counts. In truth, he wanted B'Elanna to walk off the ship herself.

After another week of frost and avoidance, he'd finally decided that if she wanted to walk away that badly, she'd have to do it on her own two feet.

"You know, I don't *care* if it's the last one we have," she'd snapped at Nadrev soon after the Guerdon left Irtrin. "It needs to go in. Put in a requisition at Velir and they'll *deliver* new ones." When the young man hurried back to the locker for the requested part, her eyes found Tom. "Did you have to do this much babysitting before I came here?"

"No, we pretty much winged it," Tom answered, half mocking as he helped Ridge balance a support arm. "Then we discovered *fire*."

"Shut up," she grumbled and ducked underneath the assembly.

His eyes followed her. "Yes ma'am."

His first memory of her, lying unconscious on the deck of Mesler's barge, flashed in his mind. Only a couple days later, he almost crushed Ridge when her healed presence made itself known in the engine room for the first time. Tom coughed a laugh at it. It felt like years ago that they were there, when it'd not been eleven months.

"The primary circuit junctions are rerouted there," B'Elanna stated a couple days ago, pulling up the schematic on her console and pointing. "Whoever's going to be working those lines has to be careful because they run close to impulse control now. It's easy to get them mixed up if you don't know the layout."

"Got it," Tom said over her shoulder, taking his mental notes. He knew she'd changed a great deal down there, but in fact, she'd rerouted a lot more than even he thought. Leaning a hand on the board, he pointed with his chin to a bar in the middle of it of the routes. "What's that blue thing?"

"The injector port relay," she answered tightly. She could feel his warmth, he was so near to her. If she merely turned left ninety degrees...

"God, I shouldn't have forgotten *that*," he chuckled, "the first thing you tore apart when you came here." He looked down at her. Her eyes were pinned hard on the board and her lips were pressed together, but he knew precisely what he was doing. *Why* he was working so hard to bother them both was still a mystery to him, though. He knew she'd accepted the Velir position formally and wasn't turning back. Then again, he always was a glutton for punishment...and the occasional mindless diversion, which

wasn't really a problem. He had nothing to lose, and he'd had far worse habits. "I came down here to have you sign your first contract, and you looked like you'd been swimming in coal, and ten times angrier because you thought I'd be dropping you off at Podala."

"I was just angry, period." She breathed a half laugh. "It's hard to think about how I'd been then, so much happened since then."

"It's been a hell of a ride," Tom said softly.

She looked up, and their noses nearly touched.

"And I don't regret a minute," he finished.

Pulling a quick breath as her gut quivered and her face grew hot, B'Elanna stepped back and grabbed her tricorder. "We're not done yet," she told him. "The starboard relays are configured differently--over there."

Smiling though his sigh and finally satisfied with his frustration quotient, Tom followed her over to the other access panel. "Yeah, I'll have Ridge look at those environmental controls sometime, too...."

Still waiting for the landing codes above the green-gray Velirian orb, Tom lightly drummed his fingers over his recently reconfigured board and wondered how his life might skid to a stop after she was gone. Even without her trying at it, since she'd come aboard, things started *happening*, good and bad...though mostly good, all said.

She had trouble thinking about how she'd been. Tom had to *fight* to think of how he was a year ago, aside from stuck in a numb haze of guilt and avoidance. He couldn't understand how he'd flown the ship, made friends with Ridge and Jerod, made deals and ran tables. He could remember *doing* those things, but considering his state of mind, poor health and steady inebriation, was amazing to him now that he'd gotten by at all.

"So, it's all done," Tom quietly assured her the day before as he leaned back in his chair. Nudging aside his soda, he pushed the PADD over to her with a finger. "Savan checked it through with our Bolian counsel and it's approved." He gazed unabashedly at her when her attention left the table and returned to him. "You only have to read and thumbprint approve."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that," Tom nodded. "I'd made sure to have your contract written so this, if it ever happened, wouldn't be too big a bother."

Jerking her eyes down to the PADD, B'Elanna let her eyes fall over the preamble, the legal jargon--obviously Savan's work--and finally, the gist: Full release from all responsibilities as previously contracted upon the Guerdon, effective Stardate 47676.

She let her heart predictably thump at the reality, then pulled her hand forward to press her thumb to the authentication square. It beeped, recorded, then transmitted. She looked at Tom again. "Thanks," she said, softer than she'd wanted to, but sincerely, too, "for everything."

He tried for a smile, wondering if he succeeded even as he told her, "I hope you're able to find what you've wanted, B'Elanna."

"I do, too." She pushed herself to her feet, gladly breaking contact with his intense gaze. Even were

she willing to, it'd be useless to fall prey to it now. "But that's not going to happen for another day. Mind if I get back to work?"

His small grin remained, though the light fell away from his eyes. "Be my guest...."

The next afternoon, Tom angled the Guerdon in per the granted coordinates, raised shields and slowly dropped the Guerdon into the Velirian atmosphere. The process went rather automatically, very smoothly, all per the program transmitted to him. All Tom wanted to do was bank that clumsy old rig and slice right back through and out into open space, and to hell with the shipment and the pay and the contract. To hell with it all. He was sick of contracts.

Minutes later, the Guerdon landed softly on its assigned dock. The landing gear tucked smoothly against the belly of the ship, then sank within, letting the ship rest very close to the ground. The deck four starboard gangway, when extended, was almost four meters wide and a mere five-degree pitch, making it very easy to load...and unload.

Tom drummed his fingers on his panel again. He glanced twice at the "launch" option before a beep behind him broke the temptation.

"Tom, it's Jilibrar," Maryl told him.

Tom rolled his eyes. "Yeah, that sounds about right. Let's have her."

A soft-featured lady in her mid-fifties appeared on the screen a moment later, her ruddy hair pinned high upon her crown and her smile immediately apologetic. "Captain Paris."

"Administrator Jilibrar," he acknowledged.

"I wanted to contact you when you arrived."

"You did a good job of it," Tom replied.

"I do apologize. I know how awkward this must be." Jilibrar raised her palms. "I was under the impression that Torres was searching for a new position. I was unaware of your contract schedule."

Tom waved a hand at her. "Don't worry about it, Jilibrar. You're too good a person to wrangle other people's personnel. I know that. Besides, it's what she wants, it's her time to go, deal done. What can I do for you?"

Jilibrar tapped quickly on her board. "Because I know I have inconvenienced you and your crew and because you have very limited time at our base, I have compiled a small list of candidates, who might be able to replace Torres. They are cleared and checked and able to start very quickly, according to their files."

"That might be useful," Tom nodded, secretly amused to know that B'Elanna would be working with such tender-footed manners from then on. Velirians prided themselves their excellent composure and gestures the way Vulcans prided themselves on logic. On that thought, Tom thought perhaps it wouldn't be half bad to have a Velirian engineer. That way, he wouldn't have to try to like them.

"May I transmit my list to you?"

"Thanks," Tom said. "Very thoughtful of you. That wouldn't have happened anywhere else on the route."

"It's the least I could do," Jilibrar replied magnanimously, then bowed. "I won't disturb you any longer, Captain. I'm certain you have a great many other matters to attend to."

"Thanks again," Tom returned, then popped off the transmission. Glancing down at his board, popping his lips to see the neat little file, he tapped a couple commands and threw it over to Maryl's station. "Have at it," he told her, then got up to meet the engineer he still did have for a couple more minutes.

"And don't wait for the coils to get grimy before scrubbing them," B'Elanna said, still tapping notes into the main panel, "even if you have to hire a temp to do it for you. This ship's crabby enough *with* a good maintenance schedule."

"I know," Ridge insisted.

At last she stepped away from her panel and faced her former assistant. Poised on a goodbye, she instead added, "Oh, and I left the extra tool flat in aft storage four. Everything you need when you get another port PTC bracket is on the lower shelf, and--"

"You'll never report at this rate!" Ridge laughed and grabbed the diminutive woman into his big arms, hugging her until she coughed. Then he kissed the top of her head. "Just makes it harder to let you go. Don't make me cry, because you know you can make me, right?" Pulling her away to an arm's distance, he said, "I will write you, let you know how it's all going. --Really, I'm not just saying that."

She grinned up at him. "I believe you."

"You won't write back--but that's okay." He grinned fondly, squeezing her arms once more. "You won't have much to say. Velir's boring. You just take care of your thing and I'll keep up, as usual."

"Sounds good."

"So get going, you. We'll miss you."

With that, Ridge turned and headed off towards the port access corridor, speeding to a lumbering stride, trying to make it seem like he'd just ended a conversation, no goodbye, no more complaints or questions, just back to business, back to the needed.

B'Elanna watched him go, glad he'd ended it like that. But then, Ridge always did seem to know how to handle people, how to give them what they wanted and get a little of his own needs filled, too. She didn't, and she had made the mess she was extricating herself from that day. She reminded herself yet again how she had allowed herself to become too personally involved, let them become like a family, let her feelings for the ship's captain become more than they should have been and had allowed her distraction to affect her work. She had not been treating her place there like part of a business anymore. That would only have been a detriment to them all in the end.

Having politely kept his distance during Ridge's non-goodbye, Tom eased to her side as she backed off, then matched her pace across the deck toward the ladders. "Are your things collected?" he asked her.

She looked up at him. His expression was casual, though his eyes were cast away. "Yes," she told him, "they'll beam them to my new quarters when they're assigned. That won't be for another few hours, though."

"I'm not deciding on anyone for a couple days," he said as he reached out for the ladder rung. "It's no problem."

B'Elanna watched him descend before grabbing the ladder, too. "Good."

Ridge had beamed down her tool kit to the deck four hatch entrance so she wouldn't have to haul it down the ladders. The oblong case with the heavy canvas strap, steel handles and corner guards was almost as well-known as she'd become on that ship, her pride built of so many payments for hard, dirty jobs in a highly fixed system, but also of dreams and needs. Always with her, standing by, asking nothing and supplying what it could, it seemed to be a real part of her when she could claim little else.

They approached it together; their eyes remained upon it, even when they stopped.

On instinct, Tom bent to pick it up for her, but she brushed his hand away. "I have it," she said curtly as she cut ahead of him, then added in afterthought as her fingers slipped around the strap, "but thanks."

Blinking slowly, Tom reached out and pressed the knob for the gangway. It ground slowly open, revealing her new home. The morning sun was cool and the air was dry, and a faint buzz from the other denizens of the dockyard trickled into the bay. It looked like the start of a beautiful day. Tom gestured toward it. "Here you are."

Lifting her tool kit, pulling the strap over her shoulder, she looked up at her now former captain, into his gentle, meaningful gaze, so familiar, so warm and real to her, it was little surprise to her now that she'd fallen for him. In a flash, the guilt returned, thoughts and demands to herself of why she was doing this to them when they'd been so good to her, that it wasn't right and she should have dealt with it, or just let it be and see what might happen. She wished...

But then she reminded herself once again that it was too late for that. It was over.

"Maybe we'll get together when you're back up from Minjau," she offered as he walked with her down the gangway.

Stopping at the middle, Tom looked deeply into her dark, round eyes for the last time, memorizing her there. "Goodbye, B'Elanna."

Staring back for several seconds, hardly aware that she was doing so, she blinked, then finally nodded and turned to go the rest of the way on her own.

Tom didn't wait for her to disappear.

"B'Elanna go off okay?" Maryl asked as Tom stepped into the lounge.

"Yeah, she's off."

The Bajoran nodded briefly and held out a PADD for him. "Back to work, then."

"It's what we're here for," Tom agreed, walking over to her. "You set up an interview already?"

"Yes. I have to hand it to Jilibar, she did her homework, made my job pretty simple for a change.

There are three on base alone."

She should have hired one of them, instead,, Tom groused to himself before he could stuff the thought back. The station manager's appearance had been more difficult on him than he wanted to admit. Taking the PADD, he almost dropped it at his side, but quickly corrected his move and stuffed it into his back pocket. He'd left his coat on the bridge, anticipating a long day of waiting for pickups and parts, diagnostics and contracts, and otherwise being left to his own distractions. Though it felt too soon to replace B'Elanna, he was glad for Maryl's unflinching practicality.

"You'll need to meet Aglori in the base Tifhro Lounge in forty minutes. --They say it's only a ten minute walk after the transport. I put a map on the menu so you wouldn't get lost."

Tom cast a tired look her way as he went back to replicate a coffee. Maryl never seemed to remember that he knew his way to about every lounge on every base on the border and beyond. "I have to go all the way to Tifhro?"

"That's what we agreed on, yes."

"Aglori doesn't sound Velirian," he noted.

"He's Ligarán."

Tom rolled his eyes. "Great."

"I doubt he's dragging any of *our* past deals along," she replied. "He checks out and has some half-decent credentials. He's worth the interview."

"Whatever he is," Tom dismissed, "I don't like having to go across the city for a maybe. He should interview on our turf."

Maryl furrowed her brow. "You're kidding, right?"

"I'm not kidding," he assured her. "If he wants a job, he can come here."

"That's not how things are done and you know it."

"I'm not writing a contract for someone who can't get off his ass and over to a place he expects to work!"

"Then I guess we're not going anywhere," Maryl returned, "because you know damn well we can't break orbit without an engineer."

"We've done it before," Tom pointed out.

"We're not getting lucky like that again." Maryl stared hard into his eyes to make that point stick. "Tom, we're *not* getting that lucky again."

The captain froze for a long moment as he held his contract liaison's eyes. Of course, she was right, and maybe it had been a huge, stupid mistake to have fallen in love with B'Elanna Torres after all, for all it'd done for him and would continue to. He knew better than to get distracted from the real business at hand. He'd paid the price for that kind of mistake, suffered and finally buried those bones. Just months after that funeral, he'd let himself crash land again...

No, it was for *not* getting the girl in the end that his brain was going to mush. What-ifs were starting to crawl in and fester uselessly, making him want to avoid other issues that needed attention. Still, Maryl was right, and he really needed to reset and move on.

Finally, he blinked and looked away. "Who the hell says we were ever lucky at all?" he muttered.

Replicating a coffee, he ran his hand over the LEDs, then dropped it to grab the mug. Drinking it down in a few swallows, he set the mug aside and grudgingly left.

"All the way to Tifhro," Tom muttered to himself as he released the rungs and landed on his feet. Turning aft and coming around the bulkhead, he could see once again how the sunny Velirian day poured into the deck from the hatch, lighting up crevices of the bay long left in shadows. Hidden bolts and smears of dust resided there. Tom walked by it all.

"Computer, release security grid," he ordered. It immediately complied, no comment, no question. B'Elanna had done a great job on that annoying Bolian mainframe.

Is she always going to be everywhere? he wondered, running his hand along yet another panel she'd reconfigured or replaced. Knowing how his mind worked, Tom was confident that he'd never forget a thing she'd touched. After a while, the sting of her absence would go away, and not for his trying. He just knew, as B'Elanna did, that work was a great distracter and he had a lot of it. Or if he didn't, he was sure he would find something to plunge into, like in the old days, lifting impossibly heavy equipment with Ridge because they *still* couldn't keep a working anti-grav on board the Guerdon to save their lives.

He simply didn't *want* to get over it--over her. It'd been a long time since he'd been genuinely attracted to a woman and far longer still since he'd known he was in love, if he ever really had been. Letting B'Elanna walk out that hatch not an hour ago was among the hardest and certainly one of the stupidest things he'd done to date.

Caffras had already delivered the first of two field coil packs, Tom noticed as he came onto the gangway and locked the flat down with the thumbprint ID pad. Pursing his lips, he tried to recall if he'd signed for it last time. So much had been taken out of his hands in the last ten months. Deciding to give it a shot, Tom walked down and pressed his thumb to the circular spot in the middle of the lock. The protective caging disengaged and disappeared. Nodding to himself, Tom pushed the crates up the gangway and into the main bay. Ridge would find them soon enough. He'd be unloading the duranium sheeting and framing bars from the other Hidirin contractor within the half-hour.

He came out onto the gangway again and stopped when his eyes caught the chronometer in the lift frame. Leaning up against the strut, he knew he'd be damned if he would be early for that interview.

So instead, he glanced around and almost immediately he could see her standing there; he still heard her voice, soft but sure, in his mind, offering to try something else when the Guerdon came back to Velir. Did she really mean that, or was she just trying to cushion the farewell? She usually meant what she said...but not always of late. Blinking the sound away, he then could feel her small body pressed up against his that time they got wedged together in the access room. She went increasingly rigid as she realized their proximity, but unconsciously held steady. He wished he'd touched her, just once the way he wanted to. He could see her face as it was when he woke up on the Liberty, so sad and remote...until she looked at him...

It hurt like hell to think about her. He needed to get going. He shouldn't stand there making himself crazy anymore. For that matter, Maryl would beat him to a pulp if he missed that interview.

...Indeed, she was everywhere on and around his ship, even out among the Velirian foot traffic, staring at him as she did when he said goodbye, poised on everything she wanted to say and saying everything but that. Her arms were crossed upon her neat white wrap shirt, her mouth slightly parted, her short boots set solidly on the edge of the tarmac. But then, straightening, grabbing the strap of her tool case, she moved away from the opposite dock section and onto the walkway, her gaze pinned upon him as she neared.

Tom did not register that it was her until she was nearly at the landing of the gangway. His face melted from distraction to wonder and finally to relief as B'Elanna slowed, then stopped.

He blinked. He wasn't imagining.

She was there.

Setting down her toolkit, B'Elanna took a step onto the ramp, her stare unbroken. Her lips flicked slightly up.

Pulling a long breath to will down his hammering heartbeat, Tom stepped down the gangway and slowly passed her by. Reaching down to retrieve the strap of her toolkit, he saw her turn, felt the air move with her, felt her find him once again...hold on to him in what ways she could. For a moment, his eyes closed. Suddenly, he knew that he wasn't about to be a fool about her again and to hell with what *should* be.

Releasing the tool case, Tom rose, reached out, sank his hand into B'Elanna's hair, then smoothly pulled her to him.

Their lips immediately met and she gasped with relief at the contact. He then steered his other hand around her waist to pull her against him. She pressed willingly to his long, lean body, responding to their kiss in kind as she slid her hands over his shoulders.

God, this is actually happening.

Breathlessly, his kisses explored her full mouth, then beside it, her cheek, and finally her soft neck. There, he finally broke away to gaze into her eyes once again. Glistening with her little smile as she likewise caught her breath, she seemed a little nervous, but also accepting. She'd chosen to be there, Tom realized. She really was staying.

"You're certifiable," he breathed and grabbed her in a warm embrace.

"I'm in good company, then," she returned, holding on.

She leaned her head against his shoulder, taking in the scent of him, mixed subtly with his cologne, half of her content at last to have what she had so wanted, the other half still trying to believe she'd gone back for it. In but a second, she had recovered from the fact that he'd initiated that kiss; that he obviously had wanted her too, possibly for some time, was settling in as well. He had wanted her, too...

He wanted her, but he let her go, let her fulfill what they both thought she'd wanted and felt she deserved.

B'Elanna's eyes closed. The clanging and rushes of the dock's engines and voices quickly died away as

the sound of his thrumming heart filled her ear. Her whole body relaxed against his.

His fingers threaded into her hair once more, then brushed along her neck. With a gentle nudge of his finger, Tom turned her chin back up. Her pulse jumped at the gaze that met her--that same intentness, a thousand unvoiced thoughts and feelings, focused entirely on her before his eyes closed and she let herself fall into him again. This time, he kissed her fully, walking them up the ramp a couple steps so he could pin her against the lift arm for purchase. B'Elanna moaned her approval when her back met the strut and held tightly onto him as he deftly tasted her parted lips....

"Oof! Flaming *Prophets!*" came a curse from far aft.

Breaking off again, they looked back to see Maryl scrambling from her knees to her hands and feet to propel herself back up and into the deck three loading bay. She barely disappeared before screeching her husband's name. Tom and B'Elanna laughed.

"Think she'll want you to do another interview?" he grinned.

"I'll quit again first," she returned.

Stepping back a couple paces, Tom reached down, recovered the tool case's strap and pulled it over his shoulder. Raising his brow to ask, seeing B'Elanna nod, he slipped his arm around her waist and walked them up into the belly of the ship. There, a loud thud echoed from within the deck, and he laughed again to hear what he expected would follow.

"Where's that cricket?!" boomed Ridge, the echoes of his heavy steps preceding him.

Swinging B'Elanna around for one last quick kiss as he punched the ramp control, Tom let her step away and brace herself for a hearty welcome home.

He'd all but forgotten that morning already.

Having sprung for a big lunch and toasted their next round on the circuit together, the others on the crew now hardly acknowledged any kind of leaving had happened in the first place. They came back aboard, got back to work and with a stern reminder below a curious stare from Maryl, Tom left for the station office to sign off on a few bays worth of cargo, arrange their revised departure time and expected return docking and pay for their chemical dump. If he scheduled them to dock again next week and overpaid by ten bars, however, he might not have noticed. He couldn't get back aboard his ship fast enough...much as he hardly knew what to do once there.

He was almost sorry not to see Jilibar on his way in or out, but he wasn't sorry at all to come into the engine room and see Ridge and Nadrev scampering at a word from the lead engineer. Planted at her main console, her fingers traced over the scrolling lines of diagnostics as her gaze danced over the readouts and results. Then, her lips parted. Reaching over, she quickly tapped in a few adjustments, a couple of corrections, and then resumed the process.

The sight was so familiar to him now, he'd begun to ignore it. Not anymore, though, he knew as he approached her. Just then, every minutiae of his engineer filed neatly in and planted itself. *Damn, I've got it bad*, he chuckled to himself.

Looking over to him, her working façade melted slightly as she blinked to update herself again on their changed status. They hadn't been able to talk about that all day, though, had been charged with the usual station business and some. Naturally, nervousness had crept into her during that time, and now his expectant but otherwise unreadable gaze raised the bar. He wanted to talk. She would have to. Best they get it all on the table right away.

"Can I walk you home?" he quietly asked, leaning against the console crossbeam. Much as he wanted to be with her, he knew how she was when she was running numbers. To his pleasant surprise, however, she nodded and closed out her station.

Her lips twisted up as she motioned to the console. "Funny, I'm gone only a few hours and they'd already mangled the relays. I think I have them straightened out."

Tom chuckled. "I don't doubt that," he said and gestured toward the port corridor.

B'Elanna's brow flicked up. He wanted to take the very long way back. She looked back over her shoulder. "Ridge, I'm off!"

"See you tomorrow, B'Elanna!" he called back from somewhere within the engine core.

Her arms crossed upon her ribs as she moved in his direction, a slow but easy gait that going aft would take them to the upper deflector control section. Having finished those repairs before she left, she knew as well as he probably did that it would be empty.

"We got the plasma stores," he started, breaking the silence, "and the dilithium you ordered. They're down in the bay."

"I'll get to them tomorrow," she acknowledged. "When do we break dock?"

"Tomorrow, around noon our time. No sense in paying for drydock when we're not using it."

"I thought you'd scheduled a few more days."

"I have everything I need," he returned. "We don't need to stay any longer."

Meeting his eyes when he cast them down her way, she nodded slowly, then looked ahead, reassured. Feeling her heart respond to that realization, she felt a smile touch her lips. "Okay."

They came into deflector control a moment later. The ship on minimal power just then, the section was eerily dim, glowing slightly red in the secondary lighting. Not that they hadn't seen that place so dark and hushed before. Too many times, they had, in fact. Tom eased their direction forward again, bringing them across the deck and into the oft-mended starboard corridor. Plates of replacement bulkhead still dotted the corridor there. Sheets of mesh grate opened up the floor in places, revealing the tubes and wires beneath. The techs all liked that new feature, in fact. It was easier to get to the lines, so B'Elanna never ordered new plating for there.

Tom glanced over again. "Is it, B'Elanna?" he asked her. Her arms still crossed, he had settled on holding his hands behind his back. "Is it okay?"

"It's going to have to be," she replied. "As soon as I reneged my acceptance, Jilibrar deleted the contract and contacted the next candidate."

"I mean us, B'Elanna."

"I know," she sighed, chiding herself for the tired tactic. "I'm sorry, this is still...I mean, I'm not unsure of how I feel. It's just..."

"It's new for me, too," he admitted, finishing with a little laugh at his own fumbling. "It's been a long time. I'm not used to this feeling anymore."

"I'm not used to it *at all*," B'Elanna said, not meaning to, but with a quick breath, committed to it. "I usually got over crushes after a while. It didn't go away with you. It only got..." Again, she stopped.

"Worse?" he grinned.

She laughed, thankful he'd said it. "Much worse."

Tom ran his tongue over his top lip, considering his next question carefully. "So you took Jilibrar's offer when it came?"

Several seconds passed before she answered, "Yes."

"I thought so," he nodded. "Or at least I had a feeling. --I believed you when you said you hadn't planned it. But I thought you were uncomfortable around me for a reason."

B'Elanna only nodded again, not liking where the conversation was going. Still, she had to ask, "You knew? But you didn't say anything."

"I have a talent for self-flagellation," he confessed, a bit sheepish as he turned them onto the outer corridor. He didn't want to go back to the main engine room. He didn't want their conversation to be interrupted--or overheard--just then. "And I figured you'd be safer there, with the border region about to ignite. And, yeah, I was pissed off at my bad timing, and I was upset that your luck wasn't much better and that you were so willing to get away from me. I wished my ship was the best Starfleet had to offer so I wouldn't have to feel like a shit for asking you to stay here." He stopped at that, as quickly as it'd all come out. "It's been a long month."

"It has," she agreed, reassured even more to know he'd been as twisted up as she had been, and warmed to know how much he apparently had been thinking about her on top of the rest. *We are really talking about this*, she suddenly remarked to herself. It barely felt real, and yet it was very real--and honest.

As they continued forward, past the last storage room and into the forward sections of the deck, she wondered how she'd managed to earn so much trust from a man who spent years hardly trusting himself, much less anything else. It said a lot about his nature, too, that'd been lurking in there, under the drink and the pain, waiting to be able to come out again. Or at least she guessed it. It could not have formed in mere months from nothing. And then there was that young guy on the lawn, running free, without shame or hesitation...

He had once trusted and was crushed. When he began to regain his sense of it, he trusted *her*, with his thoughts, his memories...his feelings....

"Something you said really stuck with me," she said as they turned at the bow corner.

"What was that?" Tom asked.

B'Elanna slowed her pace, forcing her stare up from the carpet. "That it'd be a relief, leaving the Guerdon, starting over without the issues that'd built up."

"B'Elanna," he said with a sigh, "I was pissed off, and I didn't mean to--"

"No, you were right." She looked up at him. "It *would* have been easier to go to Velir, start over again. I've been leaving a lot of places since I got away from Kessik--just like my father did. I probably would have left Cabol eventually, if its base hadn't shut down. I'd already made enemies there and was considering a transfer." Shaking her head at the memory, she went on, "Even after I saw him again, I didn't realize how I'd been doing exactly what Dad did. I finally understood what was in his head. And instead of digging in and dealing with my feelings, I was about to do it again." She breathed an ironic laugh. "I am some incredible coward."

"You're sure not that to admit what you just did," Tom pointed out.

She shrugged. "Either way, I realized when I got to Jilibrar's office what I was doing and what I was leaving behind...and I knew that even if you're right and Velir's a better place for me professionally, I'll regret leaving what I've built here, what I'd finally managed to achieve." Stopping them as they rounded the forward cross-corridor, she turned to face him fully.

Tom reached out and touched her hand, his eyes totally on hers now as he waited for her to finish.

Slowly, her fingers slid over his forearm, warming there. His hand turned to hold her arm, his thumb idly stroking the soft skin inside her elbows. He hardly blinked. "I'd regret leaving someone I care about, too." To her relief, his lips turned up into an understanding smile. "I never thought I'd say this but...life's more than work, Tom."

Tom brought his other hand up, reaching up to brush her cheek with his fingertips. His heart began to thrum again, and he remembered to breathe a few seconds later. What just touching her could do to him...

"But still..." She cut off, hesitating again.

"What?" he whispered.

"Are you sure you don't mind this--us? You're the captain, and I work for you. Part of what bothered me is knowing how easily it could get complicated."

"Screw complication, B'Elanna," he returned, his relief giving a little way to a flush of enthusiasm. "I'm not going to stand here and pretend I'm not crazy about you. I'm ready to start taking some chances again--chances I *can* take and want to." His hands slid around her waist to nudge her nearer, and his blood rushed in all directions when she molded herself against him again. He hadn't felt anything so good in years. "Besides," he lightly noted, "if we screw it all up, you can always reapply. God knows you'd be better off."

A smile rose in her, finding her eyes. Only Tom Paris could turn a moment like that around on its toes--and she could finally admit that she loved that. "It's a much better opportunity to use my skills," she rejoined.

"Probably better pay, considering."

"*Much* better living conditions."

Grinning at their play, he felt himself sink into her steady gaze, the way her smile turned wry at the corner of her full, red lips, the way her strong but tentative fingers found his muscles through his shirt, tracing them there. He gently kneaded her lower back and could swear he felt her temperature go up a

few degrees as she responded to that easy pressure. His blood decidedly changed course in response. *This morning I thought I'd never see her again, never talk to her again, or ever touch and feel her up against me like this. What the hell was I thinking?*

Drawing a slow breath, his fingers tightened, then spread over her back. "So what are you waiting for?"

"For us to screw it all up," she replied.

"Well, that shouldn't take long."

Her hands slid around him. Slowly, he leaned down and brushed his lips against hers, prying open her lips enough to taste. Pressed against the bulkhead, feeling his hips rock slightly forward, she gasped in their kiss and instinctively returned the tacit invitation. The kiss opened and his touches moved. One hand ran firmly down her side, pressing every curve and dip; the other hand snaked up into her nape hair, holding her head as he gratefully moved his mouth against hers, then tipping it back so he could taste her soft neck again. He shuddered to feel her fingers begin to explore this frame, finally finding the loose collar of his shirt, and then his shoulder underneath, holding on.

Humming with contentment, Tom glanced down the corridor. He'd hardly paid attention to where they were when they stopped, just knew they were in the crew section. But with that glance, he knew they were around the corner from his quarters, not five meters away. Pulling his attentions back up her neck and to her welcoming lips, he nudged his nose against hers, backed off just enough to meet her liquid stare.

"Come here," he breathed, letting his hand fall to hers then taking a step back.

Locked in his gaze, she stepped forward.

He wrapped his fingers around hers and walked with her to the door of his quarters. Punching the lock with a finger, he stepped close to her again before the doors could decide to open. That time though, she moved first, pressing him back and leaning up to recapture his mouth. Decidedly pleased with that move, Tom turned them into the main room and toward the seating area. Before he could think about waiting maybe another minute or so, he let his fingers fall into the folds of her neat white wrap shirt. The fabric was more delicate than it looked, and her skin was deliciously warm and soft, with more awaiting.

B'Elanna had only realized that her shirt had floated off her arms and onto the floor when Tom's long fingers traced skillfully over her belly and around her bared waist. Seconds later, he had reached up and opened the seam of her brassiere. But instead of pulling it away, he slowed. His kiss grew languid, then moved off to the corner of her lips as his free hand quickly unhooked the clasps of his shirt for her. Her hands dove in and pushed it away, then pulled off his undershirt when he backed up just enough.

She slipped her hands over his chest, around his slim frame and down the lean muscles of his back. Descending to his waist, she pulled him against her, relishing in his arousal, his soft groan as he savored her shoulder. His thumbs crept up and slipped under the remaining fabric to caress her breasts. His fingers followed, his nails softly teasing her flesh, then slipping back down her sides. She rubbed her cheek against his, almost dizzy with his scent and her quickened heart. Then she felt his mouth urging hers to him again. She gladly gave it.

All's fair now, she grinned to herself when he took another trip around her stimulated skin, stroking slowly, softly, making her press impossibly close to him and still want more. She had gone so long thinking about it, thinking it could never happen, that she wanted everything now. Dropping a hand to

the waist of his trousers, she tucked her fingers just within and slipped it around to the front seam clasp. Turning it, she breathed with satisfaction when the waist loosened and she could run her hand freely over his hip.

Tom coughed a surprised laugh, equally glad that she had initiated another turnabout. Enjoying the feeling of her fingers prying his trousers down from his hips, he continued to caress her, waiting...much as he didn't want to wait a moment longer. Seconds later, her short nails had reached his thighs, stroking lightly around to the insides and up until she could grasp him firmly. Tom groaned aloud and plundered her mouth with his own, rocking into her grip until he was forced to break away, panting for air. When his trousers finally fell to his ankles, he dropped to his knees, more than ready to up her repayment.

B'Elanna was surprised at first to see him suddenly disappear, and was more so to feel within seconds her trousers and underwear vacate her legs. Then he pressed to her, parting her with his tongue and driving a breath-muffled scream from her throat. Her hands flew to his head for nowhere else to go, perhaps even balance as his arms wrapped firmly around her thighs and turned her back to the sofa chaise. His hand flew up to the small of her back as she reeled and arched; then he guided her down.

Gladly, she let her knees buckle as he leaned her down onto the cushions, the curve of her back hanging precariously off the edge. Circling, tasting, nibbling her flesh until she trembled beneath his soft touches, he took his time, now that she was where he needed her. With a few sweeps of a hand, her clothes were yanked from her feet and tossed aside. Between her breaths, she heard his remaining clothing follow. His concentration immediately returned to her, and a pining moan escaped her as her hips rocked forward to direct him further. His fingers stroked her inner thighs until she could spread her legs no more; he hummed his approval against her.

Her belly twitched and her muscles tightened as he expertly caressed her to the point where she was almost whimpering for release. At last, she buckled as the flush of pleasure washed through and from her. She shuddered for what seemed like minutes as he eked it on, running his nails softly over her skin until he finally kissed her swollen flesh and let her relax.

Wiping his lips with the side of his index finger, Tom rose away from her. Watching her, sprawled out on the chaise end of his sofa, her legs flaccid, the muscles in her torso still contracting slightly from her orgasm, her stare half closed as she regained her breath, he needed to pull a few full breaths of his own, bring *himself* down a notch. Without question, he knew he had to be the luckiest man in the quadrant that night, and he'd be better off still when he could make contact with her again. Running his hands around her thighs and to her hips, he pulled her off the sofa until her back arched. One hand rose further still, up her ribs, teasing a breast, around and up to her face, where he tenderly cupped her cheek.

Glancing down, she met his gaze and felt her heart flutter once again. *What that one look can do!* she remarked to herself. Certainly, no one had ever been able to elicit so much in her from a single look.

Her hand softly ran up his arm to hold his shoulder. Slowly, she blinked.

He pulled her down another couple of centimeters and pressed himself into her. Gritting his teeth, checking his breath, he rocked forward, then forward again. His fingers tightened on her back to steady them as he entered her completely. There, he groaned with relief and even thankfulness as her sigh echoed back to him. Pulling out, he repeated the slow thrust, and then again, loosening some of the friction, preparing for the rest. Leaning over, his hand perching on the cushion beneath her shoulder, his breath matched hers, and he found his lips turning up as hers did, too. Her legs pulled up slightly and wrapped around him. *Damn luckiest man in this galaxy*, he grinned to himself.

With a squeeze of her legs, he started again, a long rhythm that grew as he got a feel for her.

Straightening, he pressed his hand to her abdomen, kneading it gently. Her sounds grew louder, her grip around him flexing and twitching until she began to meet his pace. Then her hand reached out to his chest, falling as he continued to drive into her, down the line of hair on his torso. She traced it to his pelvis, and then dragged her nails around to his hip to hold on when he adjusted her angle again.

Tom cried out at that, suddenly feeling it all fall apart before he could think to slow or stop it. With another involuntary thrust, he came hard within her, shuddering with the forceful release even while filling with dread and embarrassment.

It took B'Elanna several seconds to realize what had happened, why he stopped and nearly collapsed on top of her. She felt her chest sink.

"I'm sorry, B'Elanna," he gasped, hardly able to look at her. "It's been so long...and a long time since..."

"It's okay," she whispered with obvious disappointment, even as she meant what she said.

"No, it's... Ah, God, just..." He swallowed, bent his head down beside hers. *Not that anything this month's gone right...the first time.* At that, he blinked, licked his upper lip. *The first time.* Indeed, it'd been a long time--long enough that maybe.... And knowing whom he was on top of, and remembering all of what they'd been through, he wasn't about to give up that quickly. So, puffing a few short breaths against her shoulder, he rose to catch her attention and touch her cheek again. "Just stay still."

"Still?"

"Don't move," he panted, forcing himself to remain where he was, too. "Give me a minute and...let me look at you, B'Elanna...touch you."

"Tom, it's--"

"Shhh."

Catching his breath at last, then finding her slightly confused stare in his, he let his fingers fall upon her beautiful mouth, tracing it from the corner and around and softly under her jaw. Sighing at the touch, finally consigning herself to his request, she leaned her head back. He met her move to run his tongue along the long groove; he then closed his teeth upon the muscle below her ear. Meanwhile, his hand, gripping her hip, turned in just enough that his thumb could stroke her. A slow cry escaped her throat as her muscles involuntarily twitched. He winced, but the move was worth it.

"I can't stay still when you do *that!*" she rasped.

"Take another breath," he whispered to her ear, then returned his kisses to just beneath her jaw. "We're not done yet... Touch me, B'Elanna. Let me feel your hands...."

With painful slowness, he kissed her mouth again and felt her fingers and nails trace his back, down his sides and around his waist, softly marking every curve and making him purr, low in his throat and rumbling his chest slightly. She could reach no further and so her hands settled on the curve of his back, but he needed no more effort. Her scent and small shudders, her softly panting breath and little moans, in addition to the rest, were well enough to stir him again. Indeed, he was going to have all he could of her, now that she was there with him. He wasn't giving anything away this time.

Rising from her damp body, his hand firmed upon her belly, pressing her womb, then slipping down again, making her gasp, her eyes open wide, then grow heavy with sensation. At that angle, she could

barely touch him, so she let her arms fall to her sides, one tucked up beside her ear. Letting her eyes roam up his slim, fair frame, she caught his eyes once more and felt her breath catch. His liquid gaze reflected pure want, so completely hers. She could remain there, like that, forever...until he moved again.

His eyes closed when he finally committed to it, hard enough that he could stoke it without completely falling apart or losing his legs. Her muscles firmly squeezed him, but there was very little friction there thanks to them both, and so he knew he'd need to play it close...which wouldn't be a problem that night. At last feeling he was all the way back in the game, he thrust hard into her.

"Oh God!" B'Elanna gasped as her hand shot up and grabbed his shoulder.

Second time's the charm, all right, he confirmed and quickly picked up his pace. Stroking long a few times, he dug in, pushing hard and fast, deep within her. Looking down, he saw B'Elanna fall completely back against the cushions, her lips parted, one hand clutching him, the other practically tearing into the arm of the sofa, shuddering and undulating, lost in her pleasure. Reaching down, he threaded his forearm under her knee and raised it to his free shoulder. Pulling her down just enough, feeling her other leg hitch around him, he resumed their rhythm and speed.

"Ah, yeah...right there--"

"Yes...there..."

She met his thrusts in time, but could hardly keep up with the onslaught of sensation his motions were raising in her, a radiating quiver, ebbing, then growing, ebbing a little less, growing some more. *He does know how to get it right when he wants to*, she recalled, and then completely forgot again, forgot thought and time and what she'd been doing before anything that night... His heat drove through her over and over, slowing briefly, then coursing hard and fast for as long as he could handle it. Soon, her ragged gasps and his soft grunts were all she could hear, and all she could feel was him and that growing tremor inside of her, maddeningly near to breaking free...

Then he slowed again, pushing his length into her with insane patience; she cried out with frustration and dug her nails into the meat of his shoulder. Good as it felt, she had never been so close before, and now that she was, she wanted so badly to go there...

"Tom, please..."

His lips turned up once more, and he caressed her body with his free hand, watched her eyes squeeze shut, felt her tighten around him as he got that small rest. Drawing a deep breath, he scooted her down a little more again, grabbed her hand and with it got some purchase against the corner of the sofa. "Okay," he finally said and rocked his hips forward and up, burying himself in her, then again, and again, strengthening as he got the movement right, then speeding, rubbing against her, gripping her hand firmly, seeing her give it up again, let herself go completely, bent almost in anguish against the cushions. Tom almost lost it again to watch her dissolve in that passion. If anyone had told him that morning...

And he wondered why he gave a damn about *any* other morning, when his heart was beating through his chest and his legs were on fire and the rest of him was about to detonate.

She barely heard his moans by then, her strangled peals came without restraint. And then, when she felt like the growing quaver would surely drive her mad, when it couldn't ebb now that he was thrusting as vigorously as he could without pause, she finally felt the tremor ripple and burst. Her thighs clamped hard around him and she bucked up; she did not hold back her scream and he pushed it further, harder,

driving her over and over as every muscle in her body tightened and shuddered and the release poured through her again.

He let himself slow a little, enjoying the feeling of her orgasm quaking around him while relieving some of the ache from his hips. It was great to be able to manage another go, but it was called the long haul for a reason, and he realized in a irksome flash that he wasn't twenty anymore. Nevertheless, getting his breath, he resumed his pace, strong and steady, quickening gradually, concentrating on the hot slickness inside her and those delicious sounds she continued to breathe. Ready to tease her again with his touches now that she'd come down, he decided he couldn't get enough of watching her throw her head back like that as she gasped and rocked against him. At that point, though, it was killing him.

His one hand holding her hip, his other caressing her from her belly to where they were joined, B'Elanna's legs fell and her back arched, thrusting her breasts up and her head back again as she heard herself moaning his name. Then, she felt his hips slap against her, felt his hands tighten. Finally crying out, his head dropped back as he came, filling her once again with his warmth. She shuddered and held on, savoring the throbbing sensation between them and the look of grateful release on his face. Seeing that alone, she could almost turn them over and go for more if she thought they might survive it.

Tom drove into her a few more times, feeling his body tremble and release as she helped him on. He jolted and gasped and cried out again, until finally, that incredible agony washed away, leaving him to collapse on top of her once more.

Immediately, the exhaustion and satisfaction settled into his limbs, leaving them all but numb. His eyes closed in thanks to whatever forces there were out there when he felt her slim, strong arms slip around him again, her soft breath on his collar, then her lips, gently tasting his skin. He gave himself totally to her attention for over a minute, until he imagined he could move again.

Turning his head, nudging her to look up, he kissed her--as best he could, anyway. He still could hardly manage but to pull them down the rest of the way, until they were sitting on the floor, their limbs entwined, their breathless kissing giving way to an embrace, sated, trembling and at last, at rest. He caressed her back, distractedly tracing her lean muscles and bones, but then held her close again when she shivered.

"Computer," Tom said, nuzzling his nose and cheek against B'Elanna's neck, "increase room temperature three degrees."

She smiled again, already warm, wrapped up in him. She appreciated the thought, though.

He kissed her shoulder, tasting the slight salt of her perspiration and grinning when she hummed her approval. Above them, the environmental controls kicked in and a flush of warmth filled the room. She sighed, rubbing her cheek against his chest, gently kneaded her fingers into his long muscles.

"Is that better?" he asked her softly.

"Yes, Tom," she whispered. "Much better."

"Why don't I have a bed like this?"

Several hours after he helped her to her feet and guided her back to his bedroom, she was still gladly

engulfed in several huge, soft pillows and a fluffy comforter, all settled atop a soft, foam-top bed, lightweight but "toasty," to put it in his words. That added with his steady warmth, she had no desire to go anywhere that morning, despite the job she'd taken back the afternoon before--which presently included a heap of maintenance and run prep.

"You have to buy it, B'Elanna," Tom smiled down to her, trying not to look at the chronometer again. But then, he knew it'd be better to get there early rather than hear Maryl's arch reminders invade that perfection wrapped around him.

"I don't know how you get out of bed."

"It was easy enough before. Today's going to be hell."

Snickering lightly, she adjusted her arms and legs, closing her eyes against his soft, dry skin. They'd showered before finding their way to his bed, and she sighed through a small smile to remember his showing her what *else* a sonic shower was good for. But she blinked the memory away for the time being. They'd eventually have to get up and get back to their jobs. She shouldn't get herself worked up again. For that matter, moving had begun to meet her with an unusual shot of soreness. She could only imagine how he must feel.

Back to their jobs. Back to work, the day-to-day, now as a couple. Plainly, Tom wanted to continue seeing her. She wanted the same. But it *would* be different, and not knowing how that would work should have made her less easy than it did. She thought maybe the apprehension would hit her later...or maybe it wouldn't. She was curious, however, how to start with the others. She was certain everyone knew about Tom kissing her on the gangway by now thanks to Maryl. Should she wait for Ridge to make a comment--because he would soon enough--or should she say something? Neither option appealed to her. Not that anyone's opinion there would affect her, and it'd probably just be a little ribbing, but she did have to work with them; she didn't want her position to be compromised....

Grumbling to himself, Tom slid his hands down B'Elanna's body and turned them over to press his lips to hers. "I have to go soon," he apologized, caressing her skin, slipping his hand between her thighs, then around and up again, sure to remember every curve and muscle.

"I know," she breathed, willingly distracted. She knew his hands were capable of many great things, but the way they moved over her was better than she could have ever imagined. Deciding to return the favor, she directed her own touches down and around him, playfully eliciting a low rumble from deep in his throat.

"Hell with it, I'll give Maryl the captaincy," he grinned, pressing into her hand.

Laughing, she let him go, rubbed his back instead. "When you put it like that, you should definitely go now."

"Stay as long as you want, get some more sleep if you like," he offered, already knowing his day was going to feel like years, knowing what was waiting for him on the other end. *That* was the thing to get used to, he told himself with an easy grin. He would...and in some ways, he likely wouldn't too. He couldn't imagine not anticipating a moment like that, or the several they'd made the night before.

But then, he *would* have to--anticipate a while, starting right then. Kissing her once more, he rolled unwillingly away from her deliciously warm frame and onto the cold, dark bunkroom floor. He tried not to wince or look too stupid as he pulled himself stiffly to his feet, then walked around the corner to his closet. No question, his morning coffee would be accompanied by a strong analgesic if he planned to

make it through his shift. If he got the Guerdon off the ground in one piece, he'd be impressed.

B'Elanna meanwhile, settled back into the pillows. With a deep breath, she was almost asleep again--almost, as her thoughts began to nag at her. So she listened to him rustling around in his closet, then in the main room, muttering to himself after apparently checking the comm, then walking back around to the bathroom.

"We only got half the plasma converters," he told her as he reached inside his cabinet.

B'Elanna sighed, closing her eyes. "Damn them," she muttered, then shrugged. "Not that I expected them to give us all we needed, but we do need them, Tom."

"We'll have to swing back to Irtrin, then," he replied. "I'll clear it with Maryl. She's probably already guessed it by now."

"Okay." Rolling her shoulders, she made herself relax again while he shaved and checked his nails. A minute later, he came back in, dressed in his usual shirt and trousers with his hair neatly combed. Save his hair--which mussed easily, she'd quickly learned--he was just as she had come to know him, except... "Where's your coat?"

He kneeled at the bedside. "Left it on the bridge yesterday."

Looking up into his admiring gaze, one she now knew he'd pointed in her direction many times over the past couple months, she finally had to ask again: "How *are* we going to handle this? With the crew, I mean."

"They'll get used to it," he said simply, slipping his hand under the covers to lay his fingers on her belly, then stroke teasingly south. Leaning down to her, he kissed her gently, familiarly. "Damn, I wish I could slide back in there, get warm again," he breathed against her lips, touching her hair, her cheek, tracing her shoulder. Seeing the question return to her eyes as he backed away, he grinned. Much as she denied it, she did care enough about what people thought...enough, anyway, that she didn't catch hell. It endeared him even more to know it.

"You know what you do, B'Elanna? This is how you handle it: First, don't tell them anything. Let them use their imagination. Then, when you feel like they're going to start pulling your leg, just look at them and smile a little. Don't say a word; just give them a smile that says you know it all and everything they're thinking, too, then walk away. Shuts them up every time."

"Oh it does, does it?" she said, lazily sitting to press against him when his hand slipped under her back and guided her up. She thought about when she saw him at play on the Starfleet grounds years ago, that old, nagging memory that had never really left her; she easily believed that he'd handled people just like that. "I think I'm scared to know how you were when you were a kid."

"I was a good kid," he whispered, softly kissing her again. "Full of myself, and I got in trouble sometimes. I was used to being looked at. Good and bad in that. And I want to see you again tonight, if the engine doesn't explode and we manage enough time for a sandwich."

She grinned. "You think we'll eat?"

"I'm pretty sure we'll get to that," he returned gamely, laughing to press to her once more, holding her close to nuzzle her neck before finally breaking away. "I'll never get out of here if I don't run fast." He pushed himself up and onto his feet with only a tiny grunt. "I'll see you tonight?"

"Find me at nineteen hundred," she told him, falling deep within the pillows as he disappeared around the corner. Seconds later, she heard the door swish open and shut with a little rattle and crack.

She breathed a short laugh. "Another for the list," she whispered, then decided it was her turn, and it was time indeed to get on with it. Reaching out in all directions, she stretched, arching her back and neck, then curled up on her side. Those sheets and the comforter were so perfect, though, and again shamed her for having stuck with what had come with the quarters...that she needed to get to for fresh clothing. Forcing herself to kick her legs out into the cooler air of the room, she finally scooted herself out of the bed.

The main room held little evidence of their goings on last night. The viewport had been opened to filter in the sunny day; the sofa cushions were in place and her clothes had been casually folded and set neatly upon the arm. Her short navy boots, still spread open at the cuffs, sat on the floor below. Approaching, she shivered a little to recall what they'd done there not seven hours ago, feeling his hands, lips and body pressed against hers. She could hear their sounds, see his face, feel his breath, feel his friction pushing her...

She grabbed her clothes and pulled them on, understanding why Tom had needed to escape, too. They'd never get through that day without shutting it off at some point.

She straightened up the bed before she left, then made sure her shirt was straight, too, as she came back into the living area, even if she knew it was only fifteen meters to her quarters and everyone except Nadrev and Savan was on duty. She slowed then paused as she passed the dining table on the inner side of the room. It came back to her so easily, his soft, ragged voice, his tired but thoughtful gaze...

"When you were growing up, did your teachers ever say you had a lot of potential?"

"Yes."

"They did me too. People used to tell me I'd do great things when I grew up. Personally, I thought I could do great things then."

B'Elanna smiled, not doubting that.

"Looks like you've got yourself an engineer, Tom."

"...I was almost afraid you'd call me captain."

"I learn quickly."

And learned so much more, and grew, got and did so very much more than she ever could have expected when she pressed her thumb to that contract. In a million years, she could not have predicted how her life would be changed on that crappy little freighter, with its laissez-faire crew and drunken exile captain. In the worst possible place, she hadn't done half bad after all.

Her smile stayed with her long after she strode out of his quarters, finally ready to start another day.

"Sorry to drag you up here this morning. I tried to comm you last night, but you didn't have your pin on. Is the box in your quarters also on your repair list?"

B'Elanna pursed her lips. As expected, Maryl had pounced on the topic the moment an opportunity opened up. Knowing her, the Bajoran had been working all night on how to broach the topic. Setting in the new power relay, then getting to a knee to see the contract liaison's board light up, B'Elanna forced her teeth to stay together while she set the protective plating back into its grooves. Glancing up, seeing that Maryl still expected a response, B'Elanna consciously made the corners up her lips turn up as she played a shrug. Then she packed up her tool kit.

"Well," Maryl asked, "where were you?"

"Call me if you need anything else," B'Elanna replied, pulling herself to her feet with her free hand. Turning, she saw Tom standing in front of Savan's station, coat on and unbuttoned as usual, waiting as the Vulcan worked on getting their clearance codes from the base authority. Apparently, he'd been watching Maryl's attempts to goad them both, but his gaze returned to his engineer as soon as she appeared again. B'Elanna felt her gut quiver and her blood stir. Indeed, the ship would have to explode to make her break their date that night. Things were very new, and she understood that--but she planned to make as much use of it as it was making of her. From there on, she wasn't backing down.

Passing Tom as she headed for the corridor, she turned back, touched his chin and gave him a light kiss, and then another. His hand immediately found her waist, and he met her stare with a clever, knowing look when she pulled back again.

"See you later," she whispered. Flashing a little smile back at Maryl, B'Elanna left without another word, completely at ease.

Maryl stared at Tom, whose captivated gaze had followed the engineer out.

"I don't care what you two do in your free time," Maryl quickly professed. "But you know I'll hunt you down if the engineering share doubles."

"Nor can we afford another technical assistant," Savan added with a frown and a flick of her brow.

"And you'd better be on time tomorrow."

"I have the authority to dock your share for negligence of duty."

Laughing at them both, Tom waved it off as he made his way down to his station. Checking the last of the transports, his lips turned up to see that the junked shuttle Nygorra had scraped up at the last minute had indeed been beamed into the old aft parts bay. Tom owed her one for that, not to mention the great deal she'd cut for him, and he made a mental note to pick her up one of the new mille-dittin puzzles at Ibaten. In the mean time, he and B'Elanna had a new challenge of their own to play with. There were quite a few leftover ideas for them to try to work out...

A bleep sounded behind him; Savan reported their clearance codes had been retrieved and input. Throwing a careless grin at Maryl, he finally sank into his seat and tapped on his console. "Let's get the hell out of here, warp whatever."

As the engines slowly powered on, the contract liaison finally grinned back. "Gladly."

XIII. Home Field

Two and a half days to Ulinas.

Leaning back in his seat, Tom closed his eyes again. He'd been counting down for over a week. But then, on that third straight run from Hidirin on their revised route, they all had been.

Finally accepting that they needed a break from getting beat up despite the cost, the crew agreed they should take the long way around to Ulinas, Irtrin and Velir. Instead of skimming the Cardassian border and DMZ, from Ulinas they flew the inner border of the Argolis Cluster and Tagra, skimming Betazed, then turned in toward the border, stopping at Minjau, Ibaten and finally Hidirin.

One problem with that trajectory was the thirteen days it added to the route, a matter they'd had to work out with their contractors on both sides of the run, rewriting a few contracts and dropping two others. The leg between Betazed and Ulinas was also quite long. No stations or available civilizations stood between the two planets. They could not pass Betazed without full assurance that they had enough power and supplies to last them at least twelve days. In a crunch, they could divert to the science station near Capella, but that was not something any of them wanted to do.

Not that they'd had to. The new route Tom, Maryl and Savan had worked out had been much quieter. Only a few times since they were raided outside Irtrin six months ago had a Maquis ship knocked on their door. But on that more heavily patrolled route, Starfleet was usually close enough by that any pokes were inconsequential. In one case, the USS Fidar had already been tracking the Guerdon and swooped in when it saw the tradeship start running like hell. Maryl later found out that the Maquis ship and its crew were captured soon after. Though Tom still didn't like working in such close proximity to Starfleet, it was nice to know there was one more predator on the other side of the cell, leaving his ship without a scratch and on time.

The other downside to the route was having to give up on any deals they might find at Dirud or Podala. Moreover, they had planned to avoid most of the Kalandra Sector and the Bajor Sector, unless something too tempting to resist cropped up. Staying largely inside Federation territory cost them dearly in small change and would do no favors to their contacts down the line, but considering what they were saving in repairs, no one was complaining...too loudly.

Safe as it was, too, it was often *too* quiet--more boring than it could ever have been before--and they still didn't have nearly enough funds to build a holosuite or even a simulator. Tom had been squirreling parts here and there for several months, but it remained a long way away, were it at all possible. His ever-present wish list had far higher priorities, like the new navigation array he was now aware of them needing rather than just wanting. The plasma injectors were acting up again, too, and needed upgraded

parts to handle the supply they now had to buy. So, there would be no holosuite in the near future. Worse, there also had been little means or time for diversion stationside. Everyone on board increasingly needed a break, which would happen after that third run's end at Irtrin.

Speaking of breaks, Tom noted to himself as he opened an eye to check the chronometer again.

A minute later, Savan came onto the bridge, taking her station precisely on time, as always. Tom pushed himself up to his feet and headed around to her station.

"All's blue," he told her, sauntering up to her station. "Keep an eye on the radiation levels coming around the L-five-four section of the cluster. B'Elanna thinks that's where we were hit with the ionized radiation. It's an unstable arm."

"I will monitor it."

"If it becomes active and I can't get here in time, just go around it. We're within our window."

Savan nodded, then glanced toward the door. "Goodnight, Tom."

Tom mouthed his thanks and followed her cue.

Several minutes later, he sauntered into the main engine room. He didn't expect to see B'Elanna there, though it was a few minutes after they'd agreed to meet. Peering around the next corner, he saw her waving her tricorder behind the power transfer conduits. Her mouth was straight and her eyes were nailed on the readouts coming back to her. Tom grinned.

"Hey Tom," Ridge puffed as he came through with a flat of thermal plates under an arm. "Want me to get her?"

Tom shook his head. "My fault for not calling first, anyway. Ping me when she's finishing up, will you?"

"No problem," said the tech cheerfully as he continued into the section.

Tom turned around and headed back up to deck one. Usually plasma injector diagnostics put B'Elanna back about a half hour or so, a little more when the main computer wanted to toy with her temper. Swinging into Maryl's office, he grabbed the blue PADD she'd uploaded the day before. Coming into the lounge, Tom got a soda from the replicator and sat down to read the latest. There was nothing new or terribly important to them, else he'd have heard about it already, but it passed the time well enough, albeit in an increasingly grisly way.

He skimmed the headers, dipping into a few technical advance notes, picking grime from his nails leftover from that morning's RCS excavation. He'd forgotten to hit the sink on the way out and so settled on wiping his hands on the sides of his coat. He shrugged at the idea of cleaning it, however. He would be going back to do more digging tomorrow. But that was tomorrow.

"*I'm reading a ping, Captain--and another. She's getting closer!*"

Tom looked back at the comm speaker. "That bad, huh?"

Ridge chuckled. "*This long on, you know I'm running out of material,*" he returned. "*Now come get the boss before she starts me on something *else* tonight.*"

"On my way," Tom returned, pushing the PADD to the center of the table for Nadrev to find then

getting to his feet. Finishing off his soda as he crossed the room, he dropped off his glass on the way out. Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he took his time on the walk aft, even stopping to idly kick the rusty guard rail of the lift. They really did need to fix that thing sometime. Maybe during their downtime...or maybe they could replace it. Oscar might have the parts and the Guerdon would be there.

They'd already decided to take the long dock at Ulinas after a quick Irtrin drop off. Everyone seemed to prefer the planet for downtime; moreover, the orbital dock was very inexpensive. Better still, B'Elanna's father had offered Tom and B'Elanna the use of his flat just outside of town. He would be on a work site that time around and so the place would be empty. Aside from enjoying the flat and nearby lake, they could also use the communication devices there to see about arranging a few runs to get them by until the Hidiri religious season had come and gone and the work year began again.

In the past, that downtime had been spent working runs on the Bajor side of the border, but Tom and Maryl agreed it would be a better idea to look closer to Zarilar and Lígara, or just make another few runs to and from Minjau if she could find something needing to be shipped that'd be worth their time. Trying to deal anywhere near Deep Space Nine lately was little better than suicide, now that Starfleet had officially thrown its gauntlet into the conflicts. The newsfeeds now read almost like old war flicks in Tom's mind--propaganda included.

How far we've come after all, he'd frowned when he read the obituaries on both sides. Years of fooling ourselves into thinking we've never kill our own again, or feel the need to, without pride in diplomacy and charity. In the end, your stand against the system is enough to make you no less the enemy than the Cardassians had been...and still actually are.

But he shrugged away those thoughts for the mean time. It was not his fight. They'd done their part and had been properly screwed for their efforts. There wasn't a damn thing he could do except feel bad for anyone stuck in the middle.

Gladly letting his thoughts fall back into the present, Tom came down the stairway into the main engine room to find B'Elanna standing in the middle of it.

"You're late," she stated and moved to set the last of her equipment into the storage closet.

His lips turned up despite seeing her fatigue. She'd been on an extra shift thanks to another potential deflector issue. "Hope you haven't been waiting long."

She shook her head. "Actually, I was just finishing up the port relays."

"How'd they come together?"

"Pretty well. I'd like to find some new connection rods."

"Hmm." Tom quickly considered their present coordinates. "Can it wait until Ulinas?"

She shrugged. "We don't need to make any special calls, if that's what you're asking."

"That's what I'm asking. Good."

"We'll be sure to get the right ones if we order them from Velir, anyway," she concluded.

"How about dinner then?"

"Sounds great. I'm starving." She looked back at Ridge. "Do you need anything else?"

"I've got it," the tech dismissed with a wave behind him. "You kids go have fun."

Falling beside her, Tom met B'Elanna's pace out of the engine room and back up to the lounge.

Just another day on the route, a bit revised but not too bad all the same.

Tom leaned his chin on his palm as he felt his eyes want to close again. He'd have piped on some music if he thought it would help, but it would probably only make matters worse. His mind was all too disposed to distraction.

He'd had enough sleep, but morning paperwork never failed to make him want to crawl back into the sheets. That B'Elanna was out of the shower and shuffling around half-dressed, getting herself together, made the necessary even less appealing. Worse, all of his business that morning had to do with money--and moneys that needed attending to before they got in communications range of Ulinas. So, he pulled another long sip of coffee and forced his eyes to widen as the numbers scrolled and sorted at a flick of his thumb.

"Are you sure you're awake?" B'Elanna asked as she came out of the bedroom. Boots in a hand, her hair cursorily brushed, her eyes scanned the table for coffee even as she noticed his abject boredom.

"I am," he said, offering her a smile when he looked back at her. But then he shrugged and gestured with the PADD in his hand. "Just doing the budget. You know I love it."

"Hmm, well, you could simplify the whole process by letting me mete out the portions," B'Elanna grinned back.

Tom chuckled. "Yeah, you and Maryl can fight instead. Wanna captain a ship?"

"No way in hell."

He laughed again and entered the last numbers into the field. Looking it over one last time, he transmitted it to Maryl's station for later debate and picked up another PADD. Scanning over their sign-off schedule, Tom blinked. "I see you're off for a two hour block when we get in. Is your dad not gone yet?"

"No, he's at Torgal-Five already," she told him. "I have an appointment with Dr. Odar, and it probably won't even take that long. I need to have another checkup, take care of some technical things."

"Another already?" Tom queried, peering over to her. "Anything I need to be nosy about?"

"No," B'Elanna replied. "With all the chemicals and radiation I deal with, they say I need more checkups. He fixed my arm so well, I'm willing to trust his opinion."

"True. Good."

"The things you're probably thinking about don't need to be handled again for a while," she finished pointedly.

"Okay," he nodded and got back to his report. "When you get back, check in with Maryl for the transfer, then. Savan's going to handle the bio-shipments personally and probably won't need you after all."

"Okay." Leaning a hand on a chair, B'Elanna smiled to feel his hand touch her hip. She leaned over to press a kiss to his pleasantly turned lips. His fingers tightened a little, a small hug on her thigh. "Good morning to you, too." Having once believed solitude was her best friend upon waking, she had come to really like being able to share the beginning of the day with someone. Tom was more the "morning person," but he was usually quiet and never pushed her to get moving. Straightening, she looked over at the carafe on the other end of the table. "You got coffee?"

"It's the same I brought in with us last night," he apologized. "It's still pretty good, though."

"As long as it's warm."

Tom slid a mug over to her when the comm beeped above his head.

"*Just got the budget, thanks.*" It was Maryl. "*But I might have some real excitement for you this time.*"

"What's that?"

"*You, Captain Paris, have a subspace message coming in over a Starfleet *priority* channel.*"

Maryl seemed amused, but Tom instantly felt the blood run out of his face, for not only its never happening there before, but for what that always meant for civilians back on Earth. "Open it on my screen here," he ordered, leaning across the table to check its power. They'd been running on essential systems only again during the long leg to and from Betazed.

"*There? That thing works?*"

"I'm sleeping with the engineer," he reminded her as the screen activated. "Open the channel, Maryl. If they're taking the trouble to contact me like that, I'm betting someone in the family's dead."

"*Oh, yeah. Sorry. Here you go.*"

Readying himself for any number of possibilities, Tom pushed the PADDs aside and waited. Seconds later, the Federation emblem put a cold shot in his heart he hadn't expected, but then thought it should have happened. He never imagined he'd see that transmission header again--and in some ways, hoped he wouldn't. Finally, the screen opened up to reveal a middle-aged woman sitting at a glass table in a finely decorated, light blue room.

Immediately, she started back in her plush white seat. "Tom!" she breathed.

His expression fell into a similar degree of surprise, though tinged with relief to see her face and not someone else's. "Mom."

"You're... I was expecting something...different," Carol Paris stammered, catching up with the visual she was getting. Puffing a breath, she tried again. "You look wonderful."

"Thanks." He braced himself anew. "What's wrong, Mom? What's happened?"

"Oh, nothing at all, Thomas," she replied, her posture recovering and tone crisping in response to his

question, "aside from the fact that you've had a command for over three years, you look and sound in perfect order and yet haven't managed to tell me a thing about what you've really been up to--a subject we *will* be covering in full another time."

Tom bit the inside of his lip. He had been meaning to get to that letter...

"But that's not why I'm here," she continued.

Tom sighed with relief. "You're on a secure channel. I thought someone was dead."

"Your father may be soon for not using the resources that I have tonight."

His lips twitched upwards. "Then what's up?"

"Truth? I'm turning sixty in a few weeks. I want my children home to eat cake and ice cream with me. Simple as that. --I know, secure channels ought not to be used so frivolously, but after playing the bride of Starfleet for thirty-five years, I think I've earned a pass or two." Carol's eyes drifted over to the form trying to stay out of the viewscreen's range, even while holding onto the edge of the table to fuss with something below it. "And who is this?"

Tom glanced over to see B'Elanna grimace. He shrugged and looked at his mother again. "Her name is B'Elanna Torres."

"Girlfriend, I'm guessing."

"My engineer, too," Tom completed.

"I see." Carol brightened and craned her head as though she might get a better look at her that way. "Does she speak?"

Against her better judgment, B'Elanna gave up her boots and moved to Tom's side. For the audio alone, B'Elanna discovered where Tom had gotten his nagging wit--from a real professional. Briefly examining the blue-eyed lady with her swept-up, wheat blonde hair and fair golden skin, she knew where the rest had come from, too. "It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Paris," she said with a hint of caution.

"Just Carol, dear. Runny nosed cadets call me Mrs. Paris. And it's nice to meet you, too. I hope I have another chance to talk to you, but I also hope you'll forgive me just now. I still need to make my son feel guilty enough to pay us a visit."

Tom sighed. "Mom, I'm glad everything's all right and I want to come home to celebrate with you--really, you're right that it's been too long--but I have a business here, a ship--"

"Oh, I know all about your business now. I've been researching your Guerdon all night. You see, one of Craig Barlston's friends happened by the officer's commissary this morning after he left his ship at McKinley for a refit and I was fortunate enough to be introduced. You wouldn't happen to remember a certain Lon Dokaru in your tra--"

"Oh, for God's sake!" Tom cried out, throwing his hands in the air. "Sixty light years away and I'm *still* stuck in a small town!"

"You've been away so long, dear," Carol returned, "I think you might have forgotten that we Parises know *everyone*--and when we don't--"

"The ones we know know everyone else," Tom said, nodding quickly. "So you found me through Captain Dokaru."

"He was quite impressed with you. I, meanwhile, was *mortified*. This man knew more about your goings on than I did, and I had to smile my way through it. Thankfully, I'm a practiced expert; any less a talent would never have managed the feats I did--and over eggs and toast, no doubt. But again, Tom, we'll have that talk when you get here." She looked down at a PADD, deftly snatched up with her long fingers. "I have you booked for a full guest compartment on the Ambassador Class Starship Lensk, under the command of Captain Poida. It's leaving in four days, two days after your expected arrival at Ulinas. I sincerely hope, Thomas, you'll be on it."

"I have a run to finish, Mom. We're expected at Irtrin to drop off our remaining cargo before we head back to Ulinas."

"Rearrange the delivery," she dismissed. "They do it all the time."

"On a cash free Federation route, that's easy," Tom told her. "The trade system works a little differently out here. I'm not just going to drop my crew, my ship and all our business off on the wayside for cake and ice cream."

She blinked her surprise at his firm response, but was not deterred. "Send the bill to me, then. I'll also cover whatever funds you're not making during your trip. What is it? Latinum out there? Tell me how much and I'll see it's delivered to your ship before you get back. You know I have the resources to manage that as well, dear."

It was Tom's turn to halt with surprise. Not for a very long time had he seen his mother playing hardball. Worse, it was the first time she'd ever aimed the game at him. And she wasn't done.

"You're my baby, it's my birthday, it's been four years and a rough time when last I saw you. Come home a little while, Tom. Please."

Tom easily understood he'd been broadsided now, her plaintive gaze spinning in his head with her words, stirring around all his ship's plans and schedules. His heart was still recovering from the relief that everyone in the family he hadn't bothered to really talk to was all right, which slowed his processing of the moment. One thing was clear, though: There wasn't a chance she would take "no" for an answer. If he found every excuse, she'd match them--had probably already worked a list of responses before securing the channel--leaving him with only one workable response.

"I'll do what I can."

"Do more than you can," Carol Paris replied softly and abruptly cut the transmission.

Realizing a couple of seconds late that she'd essentially hung up on him, Tom coughed out his breath with a laugh. "I can't believe that just happened." He looked back at B'Elanna. "Remind me never to answer another secure channel."

B'Elanna snickered softly and hooked up her second boot. Taking the chair beside him, she said, "Savan could probably make the run to Irtrin, or we could re-crate the stores in tribaride holds and send them on a Beralan shuttle."

"I like the shuttle idea more," Tom said. "I don't like anyone else flying the Guerdon right now, especially with Maquis hunting in and between the stations. They won't bother a Beralan transport." Leaning back, he mulled it over. "Six or so days flight one way, about a week in San Francisco, trip back."

Three weeks plus prep...only put us a week behind our plans..."

"No one would mind having the extra week as long as it's paid for, after six months on."

"How about you?" He looked at B'Elanna. "Like to come meet the folks?"

She considered it for several seconds, holding his steady gaze. "I could."

"You don't have to this time," he said, "but I eventually want my mom to meet you." Leaning over to the control panel at the end of the table, he pulled up a transport directory. "Dad, too, if you can handle that."

B'Elanna vaguely understood what he was saying there, and she knew his offhand manner well enough to know he wanted her to join him, but shrugged it off to pour herself a coffee. "Well, I showed you mine. I'd might as well get a taste of yours. And, it might be nice to see Earth again, maybe get some parts we can't out here."

"I'm still not doing anything until I know we can arrange this right, though," Tom nodded, trying not to look too happy she'd accepted. "Mom's obviously got a ton more connections than I ever will; for that matter, ships fly both ways."

B'Elanna's lips turned up. "Yes, they do."

"Well, you know how I hate to agree with you," Maryl said as she pushed the last piece of farja toast around on her plate, "but you really are a well of bad luck."

Looking back from the replicator, Tom snorted. "What'd I do this time?"

"My youngest sister is getting married," Maryl told him, obviously displeased, "to Rakabi Osyr--a sniveling toad if you ask me, but I wasn't there to protest. In any case, she's requested my presence, so Ridge and I will be using the layover to make an appearance."

B'Elanna finished her eggs and halved her coffee as Maryl filled them in, then asked, "When would you be back? There are a few things I'd like to get done before we break dock."

"Trust me, I won't be staying there any longer than necessary," Maryl promised.

"You'll have to take a Federation transport there and back to make it with any cushion, though," Tom said. He took his seat and reached out for his PADD. "Since I'm in their system again, thanks to my mother, it shouldn't be too much to arrange a quick transport over. It'll be fast and a lot safer than tagging a ride and there's a transport every third day right now."

"Free of charge?" Maryl asked, brightening.

"It's Starfleet," B'Elanna shrugged.

"I never imagined I'd ever start liking their way about things," she grinned and gave Tom an affected nod. "And royalty does produce some benefits."

"Shut up," he muttered, only half joking. "I'll reserve the space right now if you want."

"And so I'll have your assistant back in time to do whatever you've got on his list, B'Elanna." A moment later, though, Maryl sighed. "And I guess I couldn't avoid Bajor any longer, the family, all of the aunts. Just like you and Earth, right, Tom?"

Tom's gaze remained fixed on the PADD. "Yeah. They eventually catch up with you, don't they? Even when they don't mean to."

B'Elanna snorted. She knew all about that, already.

The weather was much the same when last Tom Paris had held a bag on the ramp of the Guerdon, looking up at its boxy hull and remarking bitterly to himself about its ugliness. Sunny, clear, a little breeze, it was a kind of day that he'd felt in complete opposition to at the time. Hurt, angry, hung over and taken correctly for a fool, he soon learned that he'd been locked into a contract that would hold him to that crappy freighter and its crew's well being, much to his horror. He'd soon submitted to it, though. He'd felt secure there, he could keep them moving, and everyone except Livich wanted him to stay. So he had. As long as he'd had a bottle about him, he'd been fine with that next level of ignominy--and relative anonymity.

Three years later, Tom looked back at his ship as he and B'Elanna got down the gangway and stepped onto the tarmac. His duffel strap over his shoulder and his opposite hand resting on the small of her back, he shook his head in wonder. Though in far better condition, the old barge was just as ungainly. However, his perspective was so different, he could hardly sort out his feelings with just that glance. It was going to be a trip full of that, he knew.

They had drydocked the Guerdon at Ulinas's repairs and holding base on his mother's tab and left the ship with Savan and Nadrev, who not surprisingly looked forward to the peace and quiet. They would work on the ship and take some time to themselves on the planet. Savan in particular planned to work on their updated contracts and try to arrange some fresh deals if she could find any on their present route. She also wanted to investigate any possible opportunities further up along the Federation border, closer to Trill, Caldik and Ligara. Having relatively little to do otherwise, she felt confident she could produce some results.

Savan also sent her captain off with a list of parts he and B'Elanna could procure on Earth without raising suspicion and at no cost.

"I wish you both a productive journey," she added.

Tom blinked, might have grinned had the Vulcan not already turned back to her work. "See you in a few weeks."

Ten minutes later, as they got to the tunnel that would take them to the transport, Tom looked back one more time and actually felt his heart pang when he saw the Guerdon there, powered down and resting on its struts. It almost looked lonely for space, for its given purpose. Tom sighed to know what it was: He would miss his ugly little ship and his long-settled crew and all the angst, hard work and even boredom that came along with them. Without his ever trying for it, they were part of him now.

Looking back, too, B'Elanna offered him a nudge and a little smile. "You ready?"

He finally brought his attention back to the lady beside him and smiled back. They weren't the only things that he had become attached to. "Always," he returned and started them off again.

They noticed eyes upon them before they even left the USS *Lensk's* main transporter room.

As they crossed the hall, checked their location and started down to get to the turbolift, they were stopped by a tall, junior lieutenant with a PADD in his hand. "Are you consulting here?" was the first question they were asked, friendly but truly wanting to know.

Tom looked at the officer askance, then shook his head. "We're taking the transport to Earth. I'm Tom Paris, this is B'Elanna Torres."

The officer tapped on the PADD and colored. "Oh, my apologies, Captain Paris! Your assigned suite is on deck eight, section thirty-two. Would you like an escort?"

"No," Tom said, more shortly than he'd meant to. The last time he was "escorted" on a Federation starship, it was straight to a brig--by one of his off-duty buddies who didn't give him a second glance, even when he activated a force field. Pushing the memory down again, Tom waved his hand. "Thanks, but I think we'll manage, Lieutenant."

"Yes sir," the young man said, but didn't resist taking a last peek their way as they turned out of the room.

The looks that met Tom and B'Elanna on the way to the turbolift were no less inquisitive. Meanwhile, they examined their fellow travelers, likewise en route to their quarters or perhaps off to dinner, most all adorned in pure primary and secondary colors or soft pastels, maybe a pattern here or there; comfortable, well-coordinated outfits that flowed from one point to another. The people's attire was by no means alien to the two. They had both grown up on well provided for Federation worlds; fashion had not suffered any great changes during the century.

Coming into the enormous and shockingly well-appointed suite and catching themselves in a mirrored wall, however, they realized that while native to the inner Federation, they had drifted away long enough ago to forget that people not knee deep in engine parts didn't need to dress in dingy, heavy duty trousers, block toe boots, thick, cross-seam shirts and durable jackets.

"No wonder people are thinking we're the hired help," Tom chuckled and went to throw his duffel onto the dresser in the next room. "We're still dressed to scrub coils."

B'Elanna did not move from the mirror as quickly, blinking at her own realization, then glancing at her bag, which was filled with several days' worth of variations on her current theme, save one nightgown. "I don't *have* anything else."

"We'll hit the replicator in a while," Tom called back, dismissing the topic as quickly as he'd brought it up. "Come get a look at this sonic shower."

She grabbed the handle of her bag, gladly distracted from herself with the mention. "It's going to be

that kind of afternoon, then," she grinned, finding her way through.

There were many more differences for them to notice, such as the quiet, smooth ride of an A-class ship, the many, many features right inside their quarters, the food and entertainment and most of all, the holodecks. Immediately floored by the improved level of detail and programmability, Tom swore he'd get a new power generator to support a holo-emitter matrix if it killed him. "After I get the navigational array," he added, knowing she would say it. But his attention went right back to that holodeck. He had kept up with the advances off and on, but being in that room and seeing it around him was a totally different game.

It was a game they played quite often, too, as they were otherwise completely unoccupied, a state foreign to them both. It had been years since they had absolutely nothing else to do or think about but get to Earth on time for his mother's party. Even Tom on the Guerdon's most boring days had to keep his eyes on the sensors and the engines--and monitor everyone else's business, too. As the one in charge of every system on the ship, B'Elanna was constantly on the move either physically or mentally. When they were stationside, they were doing something the ship at least half the time. Thinking back on it, they agreed that their only business-free break was their sailing jaunt on Ulinas almost a year ago.

Not being members of the Lensk's crew, there was only so much technical catching up they could gain access to, so back to the holodeck they went, or up to the forward lounge for more to eat from that equally enviable replicator.

"So we'll collect two cross-beam pattern matrices," B'Elanna noted over one dinner.

Tom tapped it into the PADD. They had already listed everything they might fairly get to start building a holo-matrix and had moved onto upgrading the replicator. "We'll need their raw food stock, though."

"Easy enough." She grinned at him. "Now we have to figure out how to power all this."

"Add it to the list of how-tos," he returned, stroking her leg with his under the table.

"Says *you*," she scoffed, nudging him back with her knee. "I'm the one who has to rebuild anything we screw up."

"Yeah, but I have to pay for it--and explain it to Savan and Maryl."

"Hmm." Her eyes drifted out towards the generous bar, where the ship's doctor stood, enjoying an off-duty drink and chatting with another crewmember there. "Savan should have a new examination table, too, shouldn't she?"

Tom laughed and popped that onto their list. "We're really going to make the most of this trip, aren't we?"

"Might as well," she shrugged, her grin unfazed, "for all we get out to this side of the quadrant."

Tom sighed and leaned back in his seat. "God, how *am* I going to handle this?" He looked at her askance. "You know how much I wanted to do this, right? This has been working on me since Mom cut the transmission. I mean, I'm not insane about seeing the family again, but I finally started getting into this comfortable place with myself."

"Well, you know for that alone it couldn't last."

He grinned. "Yeah, I just don't learn."

"So if you're comfortable...?" she started.

"I just don't like the idea of having to answer for myself," he filled in, "feeling like some kid. Problem is, because I didn't start the dialogue, I kind of *do* need to explain what and why. Worst part about that is not knowing how much I'll have to, so now I don't want to come off as defensive. --You see where that's heading, right?"

"I thought you were trying not to think too much." She leaned up on her elbows to keep him in her eyes. He didn't show that side of himself often, that irritating insecurity, but she always knew it was there. In an upside-down way, she shared it. She would always have lingering doubts about herself thanks to events and absences in her childhood. Things were still frosty with her mother, as well, despite a couple tepid overtures on her part.

She remembered how her father once observed, "You're enough like me that you question yourself and everything around you, and enough like your mother to resent that it bothers you. --And your mother's probably just angry you can't tell her to her face."

Maybe Tom had a similar problem. She had not forgotten how Tom tightened up one night when they dined with her father, when he asked about Admiral Paris and how exciting it must have been to grow up in such a dynamic family. He had no idea of any trouble in Tom's past. Tom remained pleasant, but he skillfully changed the topic as soon as possible and seemed half distracted for the remainder of the night.

"I wish I could advise you," she said, piecing together her words as she spoke, "except to say don't expect anything--from them or you. You know who you are and you know what you do, and they don't yet. Be who you are and let them see you. What they make of it is their business. We'll be going home in a week, anyway."

His smile returned, warm to regard her again. "Funny how you say you can't help, but you give me just the help I need." Reaching over, he touched her hand. "Thanks."

She turned her hand over to wrap her fingers around his.

On the fifth day, Tom left B'Elanna at the open labs to share lunch with Captain Poida--a courtesy traditionally extended to visiting captains on Starfleet ships. Tom wasn't too keen to accept it, in truth, but B'Elanna suggested it wouldn't hurt and he knew it might be seen with suspicion for a human captain to turn down such an offer. Being still a little paranoid about their former dealings with the Maquis and potential responses to his past reputation in Starfleet, Tom knew it'd be a bad idea to inspire any curiosity about their attitudes or behavior.

So Tom went, arriving on time in a neat new suit and a pair of good shoes, tried to enjoy the honor for what it was worth and succeeded in at least one sense. It remained gratifying to be accepted as a captain among those people. Sure, his ship would be little more than a garbage scow to most eyes there, but rank was rank, and the captain had spared no time in personally welcoming him and B'Elanna aboard and sending someone to help them find what they needed. Tom knew his mother wouldn't set up something like that, so he was sure it was Poida and his people. As with Dokaru, it was a show of respect he would never take for granted. That anyone remotely affiliated with Starfleet would give him the time of day remained a pleasant surprise to him.

He did have to make an effort to enjoy the meal itself, however. Captain Poida was a kind man of great intelligence and stature, but Tom quickly figured out why he was running a sleek Federation

transport and not a science or exploratory ship, though he had started out as a science officer. Tom had to fight to keep himself from yawning through most of the lunch as the elder statesman spoke on and on about politics and the various "sights" along the route. Thankfully, he wasn't the only guest at the table, so the attention was not solely on him and he could distract himself with the place settings and what everyone else's meal looked like.

He was never so glad to tackle a half-Klingon onto a general issue bed that afternoon.

The next afternoon, they dressed, he in a dark colored shirt and trousers, she in a warm tunic suit, and they took their now heavier bags down to the transport. Greeting the ensign on duty as they entered the main transporter room, they stepped behind the other people there, waiting their turn, staring around at every piece of technology they knew so well but didn't have...and yet would someday, if they could ever manage it.

Only one person in the room noticed the couple that time, but she moved out into the corridor again before they could return her attention.

When they finally materialized at the public transport pad, Tom's eyes first found the long, narrow park along the seaside. Within it were a playground and gardens, trails and trees down the way. It was empty just then, but it would fill soon with children, people exercising and casual passers-through. He could see them all already, for having seen it all of his young life.

He'd played there as a boy, in that park. He'd taken his first swimming lessons in the little inlet just beside the garden row, paddling like mad with his mother holding him under the arms and his sisters ready to catch him. He'd run through it, fast as lightning, after his father had taken him down a few rungs over a bad test score. And that was just the park. Even the salty air and the cries of gulls assailed his memory just then. Sounds, smells, sights, he never, never imagined seeing again...

"A little warm today, this time of the year," Tom said softly, one clear thought in the jumble.

B'Elanna shivered and pulled her new coat around her more snugly. "Very toasty."

He rubbed her back, warming her a little and trying to feel something real. The more he stood in that place, the less it seemed like he was actually there. "Let's get walking, then," he suggested. "The house is that way. You'll warm up, too."

"Sounds good."

He took her the long way around to get out of the park, keeping their pace brisk. Though indeed a little warm for an April morning and the sun was peeking through the haze, it was still several degrees cooler than the Guerdon's bottom deck. The upper decks were at least five degrees warmer than that. B'Elanna seemed to feel better after a few minutes, though, so he turned them to their original path. It was only a few blocks away.

He was steering, but she was looking forward and so was the first to see a lady in a long, white frock and leggings with her wheat blonde hair pinned up high on her head. B'Elanna had only seen her once, but she was unmistakable. "Tom," she said softly.

Tom's eyes came off the garden they were passing and spotted his mother. As nervous as he thought he should be, all of that seemed to dissipate to see her approaching fast. He even smiled. She looked as beautiful as ever. Stepping up his pace, he saw her expression fall into pure relief as she opened her arms. He gladly fell into them and they grabbed him tightly against her.

Then, she cried out--no words, but a sob, as if she hadn't expected him to show up after all. For almost a minute, she held him there. Letting his duffel slide to the pavement, Tom returned the embrace, kissing her cheek when she let him go just enough. She pulled away a little, then, to look up into his eyes, examine every detail of his face and finally smile at what she saw.

"Well, it's about time," she choked, then cleared her throat and composed herself a little. "I'm so glad you came home, Tom, finally."

"It's good to see you, Mom," he returned, "even better than I expected."

She squeezed his arms. "I'm glad."

Stepping back, Tom reached out for B'Elanna's hand. "Mom, this is B'Elanna. B'Elanna, my mother, Carol."

"It's nice to meet you in person," B'Elanna said.

Carol touched the younger woman's hand, but only to pull her closer for a hug and to kiss her cheek. "Welcome to my home, B'Elanna. Consider it yours along with anything you need--and anything else, just ask, please." Backing up, waiting for Tom to get his duffel strap back onto his shoulder, she started them down the street again, up an incline and into a long row of ancient-looking homes with small, bright green lawns. "It'll just be us three today, so you'll have plenty of time to settle in. Your father won't be home until tomorrow morning. --You *can't* have forgotten how Vulcan meetings never end on time. He'll be back for lunch before meetings over at Starfleet Command, so you can brace yourself then."

Tom chuckled. "Thanks, Mom."

"Now, I'm sure you're not hungry after being on that ship, so we'll walk to the house and I'll get you something to drink and a snack, instead."

"Real food, too," Tom grinned. He'd almost forgotten--or likely had tried to, considering what his usual diet consisted of.

"Whenever possible, at least," Carol returned and peered over at B'Elanna. "I *will* spoil you, you should know--if Tom's not warned you already."

B'Elanna laughed a little, her eyes catching his. "He mentioned it a couple times."

Five minutes later, Tom had stopped again. Looking up at the clean, white neo-Victorian house, he recalled that he'd last seen it in a furious stupor four years ago. Parting with some last words he couldn't say to their faces, he had his duffel bag in his fist and his itinerary set for a course straight to Minjau.

Standing before it again, Tom hardly knew which was more unreal, the memory or the present. Stepping through the open cut-glass door, he felt like he was walking into a recreation of someone's life he knew by heart. So long had the place not been his--since his first year at the Academy ten years ago--that he had ample time to disassociate from it. But to see it all the same, his mother breezing by as if he hadn't been gone a day, the same pillows on the sofas, the pictures on the walls, even the flowers in the vases, was surprisingly disturbing.

"For all you had going for you, the best of everything. Now look at you."

"I don't think the dust's been changed since I was here last," Tom whispered, shivering at the voice in his head.

Meanwhile, B'Elanna was astounded by the casual elegance that greeted her, much as she expected it of such a venerable family. Or at least Ridge had always guessed Tom "grew up rich." Right down to the comfortable furniture in the adjacent parlor and the house's proud antiquity, she could see how Tom had come from there--and how it wasn't his, either. "It's beautiful," she said.

"Yeah, it is," Tom agreed joylessly. That wall was the one he'd leaned on, hearing his father down the hall tell his mother he'd been betrayed by his own son and he never thought he'd raise a boy as best he could and have only to see that child throw it all away. That chair was the last he'd sat in there, and the last he stood from when he couldn't take another word of admonishment from his father. He'd strode out, swearing to them and himself he'd never return....

And now he had to remind himself that it'd happened.

"I'm making some juice here in the kitchen!" Carol called back to them from far down the hall. "You two coming?"

"Coming Mom," Tom called back and remarked to himself how he said that so familiarly.... It took B'Elanna to get him moving forward.

On the other side of the bright, open kitchen and the large, wood block table which sat in the center, Carol Paris dug her heels into the flagstone floor as she turned her wrist above the manual juicer. The orange was fine, quite wet and sweet for the off-season. She could have used the automatic juicer, especially as it was for more than just her, but the exertion felt good just then.

The time had flown by behind her back; the remainder of her son's youth had been stolen away on the other side of Federation space. Tom had grown fully into manhood there, off on his own. She noticed his growth first when she saw him; he looked startlingly like her brother at that age, right down to the darker, thinning hair cut short and his lean, muscular hands. His face had slimmed, too; his eyes seemed to have hardened. Or perhaps there was simply more behind them.

Similarly, Tom's personality looked to have settled somewhat--not surprising considering what he'd been through and what line of work he'd lately adopted--another surprise she was still quite curious about. Waiting for his arrival, she had looked a little into what traders of his sort did along that route. With the addition of hostility in the area, it could be by no means an easy living. By its nature, it could not be stable or certain, either.

But maybe Tom had needed that, needed those challenges and the kind of loyalty that comes with a ship and small crew to pull him out of the depression that had overcome him after the court martial and the complete dissolution of his father's support...that horrible last afternoon in the house. Carol couldn't ask him yet about all that, though. He was still hardly in the room, trying to keep control of his nerves with his quietness. If he was anything like he used to be, a little time was all he needed. She had other issues to start with, anyway.

On that thought, Carol gave his son's girlfriend a friendly gesture to come in the rest of the way. She was a lovely young lady with a quiet nerve of her own and a gaze that missed nothing in the room. At least half-Klingon, her responses and posture spoke of her taking after the part that wasn't that, which had to be an interesting mindset. "So, B'Elanna, what do your parents do?" she asked.

B'Elanna froze for a moment, then quickly chose not to elaborate for the time being. "They're geologists."

Glancing again at her guest, Carol continued, "Are they together, or are they apart?"

"Apart," B'Elanna answered, blinking with surprise at the lady's equal portions of insight and tact.

Carol poured a glass. "Do you see them often?"

"I've seen my father recently. I've written my mother."

"Hmm, you should talk to your mother, B'Elanna, go visit more often." She squashed another orange half onto the juicer. "I don't like to pry usually, but I speak as one of the breed: There's no worse condition in life than wondering where your child is and how they are. Letters prove they're alive, but seeing their face guarantees the truth and means all the world."

Tom whistled at her smooth tone. "You got that knife in there just right. You need a little help twisting it around, Mom?"

"I think I can handle it on my own, Tom, thanks."

"Nice to know you've been keeping your strength up over the years."

"I've had ample opportunity to work out lately. Your father's been a great help."

Their eyes pinned upon each other's at that; a moment later, they chuckled and shook their heads. Carol stepped across and placed her hand on her son's cheek as he returned an apologetic grin. "Just don't *ever* do that again, Tom," she told him. "Not that you could. I have your warp signature on file, now. I can find you anywhere."

Tom looked at B'Elanna, but she threw him a warning stare before he could speak. "I'm not in this."

"Sorry," he chuckled, returning his attention to his mother. "Really, Mom, I won't let that happen again. I promise."

Carol held his gaze for a few moments before nodding. "Have a seat."

Moving to the end of the table, he grabbed a chair and sank into it. "Uncle Pete sent those oranges?"

"Just yesterday," she confirmed, serving them both before making some for herself. "He'll be up for the party, too. --Go ahead, B'Elanna, you and Tom can start before me."

B'Elanna continued to stare at the bright orange and pulpy liquid. "I haven't had real juice since I was a child."

"My brother has an orchard in Nevada," Carol told her, going back to work. "I told you, prepare to be spoiled--and enjoy it."

Breathing a little laugh, she picked up the glass and drank, then closed her eyes when the taste hit her tongue. Enjoying that much at least would *not* be a problem.

"Try it again."

"I'm tired of this."

"It's not worth playing at all if you don't keep at it, son. You have to try until you succeed.... Now keep on the mark, see the target... Jump! --Now go! Get around it! Go around it again! There!"

"I did it! I did it, Dad!"

"You did at that! That's what keeping at it gets you, son! You'll have the best scores on the field in no time if you just keep up like that."

"Thanks, Dad."

Tom's eyes turned away from the square of grass. Long after he'd given up the game, that square, made just for him, remained. His father had made certain of that--for any grandchildren that might be interested, he insisted.

Tom stuffed his hands into his pockets and moved them on through the yard.

B'Elanna squinted when the sun came out again then stretched out her arms as they made another turn. Walking around the back of the Paris' expansive backyard, carpeted with deep green grass and littered with garden plots or the occasional massive tree, she felt like the "tour" would never end. Tom's quietness made the trip feel even longer, though she wasn't sorry for it. It was nice to have a little break from the steady conversation inside. Finally seeing the back corner of the fence, she noticed a large shed burrowed behind a row of bushes. "What's out there?"

Tom stopped upon first sight of it. "That's the garage," he said softly. "I wonder..."

B'Elanna glanced up at him. "What?"

Tom strode around the bushes and looked in the nearest window. "Oh my God."

"Tom!" Carol called from the back door of the house. "Honey, I'm sorry but I have to drop by the gym for a few minutes and reset the computer. Lola messed it up again and the remote link is messed up, too."

Looking back as his mother came down the steps, Tom had to laugh. "She's *still* doing that? Why does anyone leave her alone there?"

"Greg's on vacation and so am I--except for the time it'll take me to get everything straightened out."

"It's no problem," Tom told her. "We're just wandering around, anyway."

"Maybe you'll like to come by and spar a little while you're here, too?" his mother offered with a smile. "It's been ages since you've been able to pin me in a naktari hold."

Tom chuckled. "And it'll be another age or two before it happens again. I'm way out of practice."

"Then I'll have to help you back into it. How about tomorrow after lunch? I'll need to check on Lola, anyway--unless you and B'Elanna have other plans."

B'Elanna shook her head, though her eyes were on Tom. She had only heard brief mentions from Tom about his learning some martial arts during high school, but he never mentioned from whom he'd learned it. "Actually Carol, I'd really like to see you and Tom spar--and that naktari hold."

Grinning, Tom closed his eyes. "God, I'm going to get in so much trouble here."

"You already are," she informed him.

Carol snickered and turned to leave. Waving behind her, she said, "See you in an hour or so."

"She'll be running in here in no less than two if Lola's still as happy to help," Tom quipped.

B'Elanna was still staring at him, though. "You never told me your mother was your instructor."

"We all leave little maternal things out from time to time," Tom rejoined and left it at that. He'd known hardly anything about B'Elanna's mother until a few weeks after B'Elanna decided one day to write her. The Klingon mother in turn insisted upon a letter from *him* to verify her daughter's identity. The next attempt at communication prompted the mother to ask about him *personally* and his intentions with her daughter, to B'Elanna's great surprise and embarrassment. Tom handled the situation with proper bluntness to satisfy the woman's demands, but his having little warning coupled with her mortification had led to his and B'Elanna's first "big fight" as a couple.

B'Elanna crossed her arms and held her ground. "You're still in trouble."

"You want to get in some too?" he asked, pointing with his chin back toward the garage. "Wanna learn how to drive?"

She blinked. "It's still there?"

"Like everything else here--like I'd never left it."

B'Elanna moved around him and peered in the window. The old, skunk-striped Charger car sat there, just as he'd described it to her. Tool cases neatly lined the wall and an old-fashioned lamp hung in the middle. She hadn't been too thrilled when he had told her about it, just saw it as one of his many antique hobbies and a reason he had a knack for figuring out various engineering problems. But seeing it in person, she had to admit she was curious to see more. "Where could we drive it?"

"The Audubon," he answered. "There are hundreds of miles of highway still in tact. Just takes a call to the society and they'll transport us out to whichever station we choose. We could burn an hour, be back in time for dinner."

She hummed at the thought. "I think I could figure out a--what did you call it?--a stick."

He coughed a laugh. "Considering your repertoire thus far, I'm *afraid* you could learn it."

"I haven't killed you yet," she teased, wrapping her arm around his waist.

Tom laughed and slid ahead of her. "I go first--you watch," he promised, opening the door for her, "then I'll teach you the rest. We'll fix the transmission together later."

"Sounds good to me," she smiled back as he walked around to the comm.

It only took a couple minutes for him to make the request. The transport would be in eight minutes,

which gave Tom enough time to check the artificial fuel, fill the tank and check the oil and the battery. Amazingly, everything was in good order; only the battery needed a jump for lack of use. Maybe his mother had someone look in on the garage for him, he thought. It was very clean in there.

Escorting B'Elanna around to the passenger side, he opened the door for her and watched her settle herself in the seat. He moved quickly into his own, placing his hands on the wheel and sliding them around.

But then when his hand fell onto the stick, he found himself gazing at the wall. Then it hit him. "I leave my ship to come back to see the family, sixty light years," he breathed, "and I'm sitting here the first afternoon in this four hundred year old car." He coughed a laugh, shaking his head. "How many times did I sit here and try to figure it all out? I had so much...and at the same time, I wanted so much." Glancing over at B'Elanna, his lips turned up. "I'm still getting over being here, and yet I'm sitting here with you, in this thing...this world I could control."

"We all need that sometimes."

"I tried to make myself think that it could apply to the world outside," Tom mused. "I learned the better of that pretty quickly. Well, maybe I got a handle on parts of it, but a lot's still out of my hands."

"Do you *want* to be able to control everything?" she countered.

"Good point." Drawing a deep breath, sinking back in the seat, he snaked an arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer. He smiled when she scooted herself near. If they weren't about to beam across the planet... "Maybe just control the base office managers--and that damned PIS we left ticking."

B'Elanna laughed. "Thanks for reminding me."

"Right," he agreed. "We'll have enough of that when we get home. Might as well enjoy this while we have it." Glancing at the clock, he flipped on the automatic seat harness--not an original part by far, but requisite on the public roadways. Hardly visible and not confining unless a wreck occurred, it didn't diminish the aura of danger one bit, aside from knowing it was there. "Ready?"

"You bet."

The transport took them only a second after she spoke, rematerializing them on a wide, lit street in the middle of a moonlit night. Looking around, a little surprised to suddenly be in the middle of the night, B'Elanna could see the outline of mountains in the distance.

Tom flipped on the headlights and cranked up the loud, rumbling engine. His smile returned to hear that old sound greet him again. His left foot depressed the clutch and his hand tightened on the stick, sliding it into gear. "Oh yeah, that's a good thing."

Feeling the powerful motor humming around her, B'Elanna felt herself smiling for the promise of excitement. "So, how fast does this thing go?"

"I thought you'd never ask," he replied and stepped on the gas.

Myriad memories still swam in her half-conscious mind, dreams of white-lined road flying under them, twists and turns and dips that made her heart race and her breath catch, his arm around her, showing her how to move the one side, depress the other, and his breath on her neck, and a breathless return. They didn't get out of that car right away. Then a dinner she savored from first course to last despite her distraction. She still banked and rolled and sped, her heart still raced as she held on... Her equally preoccupied lover led her upstairs to his boyhood room and took her mouth with his upon arrival.

"I'd like to go driving again," he'd whispered as he nibbled her neck and quickly rid her of her new tunic.

B'Elanna had quickly learned when they first came together a half year ago that Tom liked beds only for sleeping. Moments after her clothes hit the floor, he reinforced that knowledge on a soft, tufted rug with a creaky board somewhere beneath it, sounding in counter-time to their rhythm and moans....

Then, a clinking not quite in tune with the rush of dreams piqued her conscious mind, and she felt Tom's very comfortable bed, the blankets around her and Tom pressed behind her, naked and utterly still save his small, warm breaths in her hair. His arm, draped around her, held her perfectly balanced on her side. Another clink, then a creak, and the dream made way for morning.

Opening her eyes, she saw Carol, dressed and neatly made up, setting a tray with an elegant coffee carafe, two cups and some wrapped pastries on a side table by the gold-lit window.

"Shh," the mother said softly as she came back through the room, smiling at what she'd already had a good look at--not to mention heard the night before. "It's still early. You go back to sleep, B'Elanna. It'll stay hot."

Finished, Carol slipped out again without another sound.

Spoiled's going to be a mild word for it at this rate, B'Elanna smiled to herself. Sighing into the deliciously warm covers, smelling some citrus-like fragrance in the air, and reminding herself she had absolutely nothing to do again that day, she turned over and back into the nook of Tom's arm. He breathed a deep purr and wrapped his arms around her.

"C'mere," he whispered, his eyes still unopened as he pulled her body onto his and lowered his chin enough to kiss her. His strong fingers kneaded the small of her back.

"This trip just keeps getting better," B'Elanna smiled as she let her legs fall open to straddle his hips.

He chuckled quietly. "The shower in the other room has real water," he told her, resting his hands on her backside to hike her up a little more.

B'Elanna's eyes widened. Already a great fan of sonic showers, she could only imagine what Tom wanted to do with a *water* shower.

She grinned. Such varied adventures were the last things she'd expected in coming to meet Tom's parents. She certainly wasn't complaining.

Hearing soft footsteps behind her Carol glanced back and saw her son's girlfriend padding in with the coffee tray, her short hair damp and curling around her face that morning, partially held back by a thick,

teal headband to match her casual tunic and pants set. Like the day before, the older woman had to do a silent check of her long held assumptions before offering the girl a smile. "You can go ahead and put those by the sink, B'Elanna. Thank you. --And good morning."

"Good morning," she returned, crossing the kitchen to set the tray on the counter. Seeing Tom's mother in the middle of cutting berries for breakfast, she said, "Can I help?"

"Oh thank you, dear, but no. I've got this all but done. I just have to pour and serve."

"I'm going to have a walk around before breakfast, then. Is it soon?"

"About twenty minutes," Carol replied. "Take my sweater there on the hook. It's still chilly."

"Thanks."

When B'Elanna slid on the long, fluffy knit sweater, she smiled at Tom as he stepped in, still wearing the grin she'd left him with. "I'm heading out," she told him.

"See you when you get back," he said, touching her arm as he passed to greet his mother with a hug and kiss on the cheek. "Morning, Mom. What are we being stuffed with this time?"

She giggled. "Waffles with strawberry compote and whipped cream."

"God, we're going to *really* hate our replicator when we get home," he moaned, casting a doleful look at B'Elanna. "Sure we can't get one while we're here?"

B'Elanna grinned. "We might need to try."

"Speaking of picking things up," Carol said, chopping the last of the berries and dumping them into a bowl, "I need you to transport over to the Façoille farm sometime today and pick up some cheese, milk and bread for tomorrow's breakfast. The girls are staying overnight and I'd like to make good quiche and toasts."

Tom scowled. "You want me to trudge out to Lavigerie and ride ten kilometers for stuff we can get here?"

She cast a sidelong look his way as she picked up a bowl of egg whites and a whisk. "Please don't be difficult."

"I'm being difficult already?" he asked her.

"I can't send Moira," she insisted. "The last time I did, she brought a gross of peppercorns and three dozen eggs. Kathleen won't even go--she'll send in an order to some person in town and they'll get it all wrong. You speak French, you'll know what I want, and you know how to get around with the traditionalists out there."

Stopping in the door, B'Elanna turned yet another surprised look Tom's way.

He could only grin at it. The Cardassian border had not yet inspired him to utilize his knowledge of non-standard Earth languages and cheese tapping ability. "Ask me later," he said.

"Count on it," B'Elanna replied lightly and went the rest of the way outside.

"It's just that I wasn't expecting to have to go out that way," Tom continued to his mother, moving to set the dishes B'Elanna had brought down into the refresher. "It's been a while since I was there."

Carol began beating the eggs concertedly. "It's been a long time since you were *here*, too," she responded, "so forgive me for making up for a long list of things I've needed."

Turning, Tom stared at her. Carol stopped, set the bowl down. Looking back at him, she sighed.

"Mom..."

"No, that was me." Turning back to the window over the counter, staring at the yard, seeing her little boy at play there, she shook her head, tried to push the memory away. "I just... I guess I wish I could make the last five years go away if I just treat it like nothing ever happened. But that *won't* happen, and nothing's coming out now, Tom." She sniffed, reigning in her emotions even as they welled up. "You went away, and I still don't know what really happened to you, or if I could have done something to prevent it, or helped you more. I feel like I should have been able to help you more."

Tom moved to embrace his mother from behind. Tucking his head into the nook of her neck, he squeezed her warmly.

"Why can't you just let him be a kid, Owen?! He's not a cadet to be run down at your every convenience!"

"He's fifteen years old and needs to start acting responsibly!"

"He's fifteen years old and is going to get into mischief from time to time. He's a kid having some harmless fun. Leave him be."

"That harmless fun isn't always going to be harmless. I want him out there retrieving that pod if it takes the rest of his vacation!"

"It's in orbit!"

"All the more reason he'll learn not to do that again."

"Actually, he'll probably enjoy that part."

"And, um, Mom, Dad, I'm standing right here, you know."

"Go to your room!"

Tom opened his eyes and exhaled.

Carol hugged his arms against her. "What happened to you out there, honey?"

"A lot," he started, hardly knowing where to begin--or how much to tell her. All that he'd worked to overcome, all that he was still doing, all that he'd been through, now sat like plain, dumb facts in him. The nature of his work made it so, and things had been going so well for a time that he had been able to put many of his issues away. Enough was bubbling up by just being there. Dredging up his more recent past to clean the slate with his mother was even less appealing, but she did deserve it. His soon-to-arrive father wouldn't ask, but eventually would be curious enough to bother him into a confession, too.

"I can give you the details when we're able to sit down," Tom went on, "and I will do that this week."

What I can say right now, about what happened... I didn't write much, but that was because in my twisted way, I didn't want you to worry. I didn't want you to get hurt any more than I'd already hurt you."

She looked up at him. "*You* didn't hurt us, but what happened to you did."

"It was still my issue, Mom," he quietly insisted. "I deserved the fallout. It's okay. I accept that. I screwed up twice over and was screwed up for a long while because of it. I won't lie and say I licked my wounds, because I didn't. I had a lot of help with that long after I made things worse. In any case, when I started getting it together, I still didn't know what to say. I just didn't get to that so-called 'right time' to tell you anything but that I was still okay and still traveling around the border. It's totally my fault, not being upfront with you, and I am sorry about that, Mom. I'm sorry you were hurt; like I said yesterday, I won't let that happen again."

She stared deeply into his eyes. His confession had come sooner than she had expected and had far more meaning and feeling than she could ever have desired. "I believe you," she whispered. "Thank you."

"I want to tell you about my life, Mom," he promised. "But again, I want a good time for that. There's a lot to say and I don't want to load you up right now, before the party and all."

She nodded slowly. "I understand."

His mouth twitching into a grin of thanks, he then asked, "How *are* things with Dad?"

That time, Carol sighed, shrugged. "Not good. But we'll work it out."

Tom kissed the top of her head. "Okay."

"Mom, we're back!" Tom called as he helped B'Elanna haul in the extra sack of hothouse pears and figs she'd collected at the farm when she saw those also available. Tom made a mental note to add a hydroponics chamber to their list. Snickering to himself as they waved goodbye to Monsieur Façoille, he had a feeling they'd need an extra ship to carry back their wares were they to fulfill their list on that trip. "Mom?"

"Back here, honey! Did you get everything?"

"Did we!" he laughed, looking at a very satisfied B'Elanna as he led them into the hallway.

"I want one of those pears first," B'Elanna smiled back, hauling the second bag onto her shoulder again.

"I don't think we'll be carrying many of *those* back," he joked.

"You might be right about that."

Coming into the kitchen, he hefted up his main delivery: a bag of baguettes, two liters of fresh milk and a round of Cantal cheese, and the fruit in another sack. Accustomed to hauling parts as he was, his shoulder still screamed with relief to have the strap off it at last. "All set, Mom. Monsieur Façoille sends his regards."

Turning around again, Tom jumped.

His father was standing at the other end of the kitchen table and staring straight at him.

"Do you expect me to believe what I have just been told?"

"You have to."

"It's true, then."

"Yes, sir."

"...Then, I suppose you have a lot to answer for, Thomas. Do not expect me at the hearing. It's time you faced your mistakes like an adult."

"I thought that's what I was doing, by telling the truth."

"The consequences of your irresponsibility and dishonesty are not over yet and may never be. I'll speak to your mother, but for your own sake, I can no longer be involved."

In the entrance, B'Elanna had stopped and set down her bag, and Carol managed an uncertain smile. "Thanks for going out for me," she said, trying for a shred of normalcy even as she looked between the two.

Tom coughed a small laugh, gesturing at the man across from him. In his full uniform, probably having just come from the transport, his father was as unreadable as ever, though thankfully far less unpleasant than the last time they'd seen each other. "Dad, I didn't see you there."

"Tom," returned the admiral with a nod. "You're looking very well, son."

"Thanks," Tom said, then moved back to the entrance to introduce B'Elanna.

"It's nice to meet you," she said politely, though her skin was still prickled from when she had come in and see the bald, barrel-chested official snap his attention up from the table. It was as though he had seen a ghost at first, but then the expression melted into the plain one he still wore. Worse, Tom had flashed a look she remembered from over a year ago, that hard, straight stare that let nothing by it. She'd always assumed the liquor made him like that. Apparently, there was more to it. Thankfully, this time, it didn't outlast his introducing her.

"My wife has told me many nice things about you, B'Elanna," the admiral said in a rich, practiced tone that at the same time was by no means disingenuous. "I look forward to knowing you more during your visit."

"Thank you," B'Elanna replied with a little smile, though unsure of what else to say.

Carol moved in at that. "So, Tom, Monsieur Façoille had everything?"

Tom immediately returned to his mother's side of the table. "And some," he grinned. "We got there at a good time. Also, he got some fruit in last week for jarring but was selling the extra. B'Elanna grabbed the lot."

"I did not," B'Elanna said and brought her bag all the way in. Tom helped her lift it onto the table. "Not all of it, anyway, and some of this is for you, Carol, and there's something here for..." She looked at

the admiral again. He had already reclaimed his seat and his tea, but was still watching his son until she asked him, "What would prefer me to call you?"

The older man blinked. He had not expected the question--a surprise in itself. He needed an appropriate answer nonetheless. The young lady was not associated with Starfleet, unlike the friends Tom used to bring to the house. Even Moira's husband, an officer, called him "sir." But he could not ask that of this one. Though still quite young to him, she was not a child and was a professional in her trade. Though she worked for his son, they were in a relationship--a recollection that twitched his mouth downwards momentarily--so she should not be thought of as merely an employee of his son's. And then, she was already familiar with his wife, which secured his decision.

"You call my wife Carol, so you may call me Owen if you like."

"Good choice," Tom commented under his breath as he started pulling the fruit out of the bag. He handed B'Elanna her ripened pears. "Want me to put the milk away?"

"Yes, and let's get ready for lunch," Carol agreed, anxious to progress things. She could see her son's movements becoming automated, his eyes turning down. "I've replicated club sandwiches and we'll slice some of this wonderful fruit--something simple before the party."

Tom nodded. "Simple. Yeah, good idea."

"My son was not to be fielded into some simple career knocking crates around."

"Guess that's all I'll be good for. I'm leaving tomorrow for it."

"You had so much potential, so much hope.... I'm ashamed, Tom--ashamed of myself for having let something like this happen."

"Yeah, I guess you are."

"For all you had going for you, the best of everything. Now look at you."

"I won't waste any more of your time. I'm out of here."

"You're own your own, then. Do not expect to come back here asking for help."

"Oh, don't worry about that--or me coming back at all."

"I didn't intend that--"

"No, you never do, do you? Don't wait up."

"Thomas--"

"Tom, wait!"

"Sorry, Mom, but... Just sorry. I have to get out of here."

"Owen, tell him not to go. Owen! --Tom!"

"Tom?"

He jumped when he felt her hand on his arm and he snapped his stare up to his mother's. He felt his blood only just returning to his head--starting with his cheeks. "Yeah?"

"Are you all right, dear?"

Tom looked around at B'Elanna's curious gaze, then back to his mother's. He didn't dare ask how long he'd been distracted, or look at his father. He thought it'd be easy to do as B'Elanna suggested on the Lensk, keep his cool and just let them see him. To that moment, it had been going great. But suddenly it was hard...and he still didn't want to look his father again just yet. "What can I do?"

Preparations went quickly. The remaining fruits were set into storage baskets and the place settings were pulled from the cabinets and drawers. B'Elanna brought a few pears and a small round of soft cheese at Carol's suggestion and they worked with the older woman's quiet instruction to prepare them. Tom began setting out the plates, then the glasses and the napkins, moving around his father without a pause. Then he went to get the silverware.

"Your mother tells me," Owen started, breaking the cycle of kitchen noises, "you'll be here until Wednesday."

"That's right," Tom answered, setting out a fork and knife, then moving to the next place.

"What ship are you taking back to...Ulinas, yes?"

"We're taking the USS Cheswick back to Ulinas."

"Captain Gorman, yes?"

"Yeah. --Mom, is there more coffee?"

"A few more cups," Carol answered, turning around with a plate full of stacked sandwiches. As B'Elanna took her seat and Carol began to serve everyone's plate, Tom grabbed a mug from the cabinet and poured it full before sitting next to B'Elanna.

"That'll run your nerves up, son," Owen commented, failing at lightness as he reached for the salt.

"Just where I like them," Tom replied and drew a long sip of the hot liquid.

Carol only shook her head and cut her sandwich in half. "Would you like the knife, too, B'Elanna?"

B'Elanna snorted. "Thanks."

Unfortunately, that quip was the only break in the silence that hung over the table for the entirety of the meal. B'Elanna already knew from Tom that his father didn't like much talking at mealtime, saving the conversation for afterwards--which, Tom explained, for a man who had to listen and talk all day was understandable--but the silence was palpable. The tension between them was obvious in their few words, but they carried on as though they were strangers sharing a table. The admiral went as far as to gesture at a peppershaker. Tom reached out and slid it over to him, not even looking up. Their meals with Tom's mother could not be more different.

B'Elanna ended up finishing her sandwich well before the others, moved on to the pears and brie, then refilled her juice three times--overfilling herself in the bargain.

Tom looked over at her when she finally leaned back. "Are you okay?"

"I ate a little too much," she said. Looking at Owen, she caught his glance.

"Maybe take some time on the patio, while it's warm," Carol suggested. "We can get all this, dear."

Though she was a little chagrined at attracting that kind of attention, B'Elanna did like the thought. "I think I will. Thank you."

As she stood up, the wall panel beeped behind her and she looked at it, then to Carol.

"I'll take that," Owen said, setting his sandwich down to wipe his mouth and fold his napkin. Moving to the panel behind B'Elanna's seat, he read the origination code and furrowed his brow. He opened the channel. A yellow-haired official appeared a moment later. "Yes?"

"Good morning, sir. I'm Gaddri Kivo-Salovidras from Ulinas Central Control. This is a subspace transmission for Captain Paris. Do I have the correct residence?"

Owen started back and glanced over at his son, who was already out of his chair and heading toward the panel. "You do."

Tom moved in as his father moved aside. "Kivo-Salovidras," he greeted the woman, "is there a problem?"

She chuckled. "Your ship's still there, if that's what you're asking. But Savan requires you immediately regarding ship's business. Is Torres there, too?"

"I'm here," B'Elanna said with a nod the station officer's way.

"Go ahead and patch us in," Tom ordered.

"Wait, Tom," Owen said suddenly. Catching his son's attention, he gestured toward the hallway. "If it's business, you might be more comfortable in the den, with the desk and a better control module."

Tom was surprised. The only times he had been allowed in the den in the past was to receive materials and be lectured. Not that he was stupid enough to argue a change in that tradition, though, so he nodded. "That'd be great. I probably have some sign-offs to review."

"I'll open it up," the father replied and walked out to do just that.

Tom caught his mother's hopeful grin before following. "B'Elanna, you want to check it out, too?"

"Are you joking?" she returned. "I want to see what she was able to get."

"No telling with Savan."

They turned in the hall to go down another one, which at the far north side of the house became a large den. Bathed in rich gold and green and shelved with antique books and artifacts, the otherwise clean-lined room was cozy and formal in the same glance. Owen was already at the other end, activating his console and pulling up his monitor on the brown granite desk against the well-equipped side wall. "Savan," he said, watching the Ulinas transmission signal change over to an alarmingly antiquated comm pattern. "Vulcan?"

"Only the best," Tom grinned, moving to the desk when his father stepped back from the screen. Quickly tapping in his clearance code, he came face-to-face with the woman in question. "Good to see

you, Savan," he said.

"Tom," she replied with a blink then looked past him at B'Elanna. "B'Elanna, it is good you are also available. I have acquired the relay lines you ordered and the dilithium, among other items."

"Where did you find dilithium?" Tom asked, pulling up the data Savan was already transmitting.

"It is not important," the Vulcan replied. "It is in good condition, as are the PTC channels you hoped were in stock at Irtrin and Velir. They were purchased at a fair price and are en route to Ulinas. Security measures require full review and sign-off for all these items, however; thus my intrusion at this hour."

"We just finished lunch," Tom said. "It's fine."

"Three AM is fine if you got those channels," B'Elanna added. She had been enjoying her vacation more with each day, but suddenly it all came back to her and she couldn't wait to get back to work. That particular replacement had been on her list for months. "They have the borosilicate under-layers, right?" Half the reason they needed replacement, B'Elanna knew, was because the present set were not of the correct composition to handle Federation quality drive plasma--another shortcut her predecessor took that cropped up long after the fact.

"Yes, they are the standard make," Savan answered.

Tom finished uploading the inventory and security contracts and gave it a quick scroll. "How long do I have to turn this around?"

"Quickly would be most convenient."

Tom fished around in the nearest drawer for a stylus. "Give me an hour to read it and I'll get back to you."

"I will be waiting."

Holding the transmission, Tom looked over at his father. "Mind if we use your desk for a little while longer?"

Snapped out of his gaze, Owen shook his head. "Not at all. I'm due at Starfleet Command soon. Take your time." Leaning over the desk, he activated a higher and more stable channel for them and moved the held transmission onto it, then pushed the extra chair around for B'Elanna.

"Thank you," she said and took the seat.

The two immediately opened up the first file and started to read. Belatedly, Tom looked up and gave his father a brief grin. "Thanks, Dad. Tell Mom we'll be done in about an hour if she still wants to drag us to the gym."

"I will."

Owen watched as the two looked back to the information scrolling and stopping in turns before them, suddenly and completely at work and in their element...his son's element. B'Elanna made a few comments about the dilithium and Tom started tapping notes into a separate screen. Their conversation grew as they came to the deal itself, what their Vulcan crewperson had actually paid for the materials. Then they moved on to the PTC channels and B'Elanna dove into the specifications. Tom leaned back and waited for her comments, keeping out of her department, it seemed, and glad to do so.

Tom had relaxed again, was back to the life he'd taken on.

Watching a few seconds more, the admiral turned and left.

His hand slipped around her waist as they came down the stairs--early for the festivities, but his sisters had arrived and he admittedly wanted to get the initial greetings over with. "At least I could get all the difficult people done in one day," he said, light but honest.

Earlier, while she slid on her dress in the bathroom, B'Elanna watched Tom in the bedroom; sitting in the chair by the window, he slowly pulled on his boots, his stare cast elsewhere. "Meeting your dad went well," she said. "He seemed to accept you back all right."

"Yeah," he said softly. "That was all right."

"It was pretty quiet, though," she observed pointedly.

Tom frowned. "Considering how we said goodbye the last time, I didn't expect we'd be having a good laugh. No, better we keep it simple. We just aren't going to see eye to eye on things and I've pissed him off too much. We'll get through the week. Actually, I think it's easier to say nothing so we *don't* argue."

B'Elanna grinned ironically. "Your father, my mother."

Chuckling, he looked over as she came out of the bathroom. He found his feet a moment after a smooth whistle escaped his teeth. Wrapped in a violet silk cocktail dress, finished with very sheer black stockings and heeled shoes, B'Elanna had *never* looked like *that* before. Not that they had any occasion for dressing up when anywhere near the Guerdon, but he suddenly thought it was a great shame they didn't. "That," he told her, letting his stare offer equal praise, "looks gorgeous on you, B'Elanna."

Her mouth turned up. When she saw it in the replicator on the Lensk, she had a feeling he'd appreciate her choice. "Thanks."

His fingers drifted down her sides and around her as soon as she came close enough to touch. He drew a deep breath. "Actually, we might not get downstairs with you looking that good."

"I'm sure you'd rather we didn't," she countered, moving forward to smooth the navy coat he'd gotten back from a real tailor only an hour before, then straighten the shirt collar beneath it with an appraising smile. "But we didn't come forty light years out of our way to stay in your bedroom...much as I've gotten to know it already." Brushing the coat's hem over his hips then leaning up, she gave him a quick kiss. "Besides, I want cake."

"If you insist," he grinned. "But I still think my menu's better."

Rolling her eyes, she started them to the door. "Come on. Let's get your day over with."

So, he escorted B'Elanna down the stairway and around into the front parlor, his hand around her waist, his fingers gently stroking the soft fabric until he saw his sisters, both talking to their father until he nodded Tom's way.

Seeing Moira, he couldn't help his big smile, and he braced himself when she hurried across to hug him tight. "It's about time you got back home, you idiot!" she laughed in his ear before she kissed it. "You look great, Tom!"

"You too, Moira," he smiled and looked around. "Where's Adam?"

"Home with Nicky. He has a cold and I thought we'd better not send you back to your ship with a plague."

"My science tech thanks you," Tom joked and moved aside. "This is B'Elanna."

"How do you do," B'Elanna said, quickly looking Moira over. Though her appearance was little like her brother's, save in height and slimness, there was no doubt what side of the aisle she stood on. She had the same gleam in her eyes that Tom and his mother shared--among other traits she immediately took advantage of.

"Oh, you're the one Mom jabbered on and on about last night," Moira smiled devilishly then jerked her thumb towards the back of the room. "Tom, go suck up to Kathleen. I want to enlist your engineer."

He gave her a fond smile. "Yeah, I'm in trouble."

"You're just figuring that out? Scram."

B'Elanna laughed and followed Moira to the kitchen. "I think you just saved his night," she told her.

"Tom always needs a little playful abuse," Moira told her matter-of-factly. "I love him to pieces and missed him to death, so I don't mind getting over the rest a little more quickly than the others. I'll get you around to Kath and steal him later. Right now, you get to help Aunt Jean and me fix the outside comm speakers. There's a problem with the lines at the power relay and we're stymied."

B'Elanna blinked. "You really *do* need an engineer."

"Sorry. --And I promise, you won't get dirty. That really is a beautiful dress. Anyway, it's probably just the computer. Dad always messes with it, further proving why they don't let good command officers off the bridge. Just over here."

Another hour quickly passed as the sun began to set in the misty sky. Heating lamps came on in the expansive yard, as did the full complement of lights. The music piped on soon after Moira let out a cheer for their success. The party soon after was underway.

Family arrived early, as always, then some friends, none too fashionably late that they missed the admiral, dressed in a civilian suit of light brown and beige. He remained not far inside the gate, ostensibly checking the lamps but observant enough of the entering people to give them a quick wave. Arriving guests knew to give him a casual hello, then file in along the path on the side of the house, make their way around to the buffet and find the hostess. Draped in a long, white dress and with her hair pulled up in a romantic twist, she greeted them all warmly, thanked them for coming, complimented outfits and invited them to synthehol wine and punch and a few spreads of food.

She had done this all before. They had, too.

"Yeah, we've all been to this party a hundred times," Tom grinned to B'Elanna as he led her out into the yard. "The only difference is that it's Mom's birthday. But we might find some diversions outside the general meet and greet."

"How so?" B'Elanna asked. Having had a good start to that evening and accepting rounds of compliments she was not used to receiving (as in all her life, she'd never been praised by so many in one place for her appearance), she now had to force herself to relax. She had been to "this party" a total of zero times in her life and the numbers of incoming guests were doubling every other minute. B'Elanna had only been to a few get-togethers before, two of those while at the Academy. She'd stuck by her then boyfriend, ate food, had a few drinks, talked to a few people and then left early.

Seeing her unease, Tom gently took her hand. "Allow me, B'Elanna, and I'll find you an outlet when it comes together. Trust me, it'll be there soon enough."

She furrowed her brow, but let him have his role that time. Though she wasn't surprised to see him fall into it, she did watch with great interest as the man she first knew as a quiet, embittered and unwilling captain stretched out his hand to his mother's guests, greeting them and introducing her around as though he did *that* for a living, instead. A few seconds after saying, "Hi, Uncle Pete," he let go of her hand to embrace the man. But then he answered the same questions: He was home for a visit and would be going back in four days, he was doing great and she was his girlfriend and lead engineer on his ship. Not one of them asked him what he was doing. Under his breath, Tom told her that he didn't need to elaborate for that crowd, lest he say anything "embarrassing."

"Why would they think it'd embarrass you?" B'Elanna asked.

"Not me. My father." Tom frowned. "He doesn't like answering for me, so it's easier if I don't add content."

Though that information was not very reassuring, but B'Elanna soon got into the routine of thanking people, nodding and answering a couple vague and polite questions. Uncle Pete and a few of the other family members gave her a sidelong look, probably wondering about how serious they were. Tom had long ago confessed his busy and varied dating history, so she didn't take it the wrong way. It was all about him.

"So you finally got it together!" his other uncle, a slender, bald man in a black suit, smiled when they all met at the refreshments table. He reached over to his brother Owen, who was standing nearby to assess the levels in the bowls. "See, Owen, you worry too much. Tom's doing great!"

"Indeed," Owen replied and moved away.

B'Elanna looked up as Tom snorted and shook his head. She saw a flash of anger in his eyes when he looked at his father, but he recovered a few seconds later and drove them out for another loop around the party, at which point B'Elanna stopped trying to remember the people he was introducing her to. She realized Tom was working on automation, too--or he was until he suddenly stopped and smiled to a group in the middle of the yard by the fountain. Some were sitting at the benches, the others stood with their glasses pressed between their clean, precise fingers.

"Like clockwork," he breathed and took her hand again. "B'Elanna, the people over there are Aunt Jean's brother-in law and a few of his friends, who happen to be friends of Mom's from school. Ilia Marciano is one of the directors of new technology at the Daystrom Institute and Jean's brother-in-law Arnold is a professor of cybernetics at Nairobi University. The rest are techs, too. They always find each other at these things." He gave her hand a little tug. "Come on. You'll like this group."

"You're so sure," she wavered. "I keep up with the feeds, but I'm nowhere near that kind of league."

"You will be in about five seconds," he returned.

B'Elanna was still frowning when he introduced her around the small circle of men and women. It was a little grating to know he was doing so purposefully, trying to ingratiate her among those "peers." Though, she was impressed that one of them did ask what Tom was doing for a living and the others looked interested in his answer. She still felt her teeth clench together when Tom brought up--"by the way"--their ship and never-ending power problems.

"We just found out that we've secured a set of Federation-standard PTC channels," he continued, "but we're still expecting compatibility problems with the reaction assembly. Getting the plasma emission output right has been tricky since before I got the ship."

"Hmm," said Tisho Kea, pursing her mouth with thought. "Have you tried realigning your PIS?"

"I have," B'Elanna jumped in. "It's an issue with the materials. The Bolian quench blocks weren't designed to handle as much pressure as we need to support the output the newer PTC requires."

"It sounds like you've got quite a bowl of soup, there!" Ilia Marciano laughed.

B'Elanna straightened. "We make it work."

"My favorite kind," he assured her. "During my fellowship, I worked on a crusty Vulcan science frigate that could hardly get to Andoria and back without our having to go catch the warp core. Best two years of my life."

B'Elanna laughed. "What model was it?"

"An Ellis Arc-Five-Nine Epsilon."

"I used to play with those in my neighbor's back yard when I was growing up," she told him.

"I played with them, too--too much!"

That took as long as I expected, Tom grinned when B'Elanna laughed again. He leaned down. "I have to go to the toilet. Be back in a bit. Is it getting chilly yet?"

"No, I'm fine for now," she answered, offering a grudging smile of thanks. But then, he *had* been at that party before. He knew he'd be able to find her a save, a place to make friends and get information, just as easily as he knew how to work a deal at the stations, or charm a manager, or play someone at the dom-jot table. At last, she knew where that ability had been grown.

"Now tell me," said another on the other side of the group, "are you having magnetic alignment problems, too?"

Sipping her drink, B'Elanna nodded and began to explain the Guerdon's systems hodgepodge.

Taking the back way to the kitchen door, Tom managed to slip inside without being stopped until he turned down the hall.

"Tom, look at you!" said a smiling, elderly lady in passing. "How nice you could come home for your mother."

"It's good to be here, Mrs. Turro," he said, even meaning it a little just then. "I hope you don't mind, but--"

"Oh, no, I won't lock you in just now, but I'll find you later."

"I'll probably be here," he grinned and ducked into the side hall. Halfway to the den was a small lavatory, which he used to some great relief--he should know better than to drink multiple lemon seltzers with a straw--and freshened up a little. Looking in the mirror, he smoothed down his recently trimmed hair, straightened his shirt collar. As everyone was pointing out that night, he surely wasn't that kid in the pictures on the wall anymore. Explaining them all to B'Elanna had already reminded him how much. Still haunted sometimes by a far scarier version of himself, however, Tom admitted he preferred his most recent incarnation--the one that lived through it.

He wasn't the only one who was thinking of his changes, he discovered as he came out into the hall again. In the den nearby, the mention of his name pricked his ears.

"...grown--and improved on himself, too. Remember when we saw him, honey?"

"I certainly do! --You wouldn't know about this, Owen, but last year after our ship was diverted from Betazed, we were taking on repairs at--what was it, dear, Minjau? Well, we were passing through the main base--hideous sprawl I was shocked to see inside the Federation--and we saw Tom, of all people, coming out of what we assumed was his ship."

"If you could call it that," said the man. Tom recognized the voice. Pressing his memory for a moment, he got the names: Steve and Allida Hopper. He went to school with their son, who had become a terraforming engineer. He'd shaken their hands outside with B'Elanna earlier and they were thrilled to tell him about Garrin. "I was surprised to learn it was space worthy."

Like you'd know, asshole, Tom smirked. But then, placing himself at Minjau a year ago, the Guerdon still had a few big patches on the starboard hull from the Hugora attack.

"You have to know, Owen, Tom looked...terrible. Really terrible--ill... We tried to say hello, but he must not have heard us. He might have been, you know, *drinking*. --I mean, it's no secret, right? That he had problems?"

"Certainly, he made no secret of his vices," said his father curtly. Tom knew the tone instantly. "*Get on with it*," it meant.

"How the year's done nothing but good for him, though!" Allida continued, backpedaling expertly. "Like another man. Perhaps love's helped him heal. I did like her."

"That girlfriend of his must have whipped him into shape," added Steve with a chuckle. "She's a sharp one, probably doesn't put up with any nonsense. Tom's latched onto something good, there."

"Haven't talked to her much, yet," Owen said neutrally, "but she seems to be an interesting and intelligent young lady."

Tom grinned at that translation, too: "*Don't tag a woman I have yet to judge for myself.*"

"But Owen, you can't be enjoying Tom's choice of career," Steve said frankly. "I don't mean to rub a wound, but it must be difficult, after everything you put into his education and upbringing. Our boys had the same of everything. It makes no sense they ended up in such different circumstances."

God damn, some of my parents' friends can be pricks, Tom remarked to himself.

"Tom's done what he could in a bad situation," replied Owen coolly. "No, I certainly would not have

approved his settling for the outer trade circuit, but I no longer have a role in his life choices. And with all due respect, Steve, I would like to change the subject to one more appropriate to the occasion. Tonight isn't about Tom, as it so often tends to be; it's about Carol and celebrating her birthday."

Well, that's a good idea, thought Tom as he returned to the yard. Oddly, the Hoppers' snips didn't piss him off as much as he thought they should. There was no sense in being angry with people for confirming one's expectations, even in such a spectacular way as they just did. The people there were his parents' friends, a close circle who met often. They all probably knew by now what "the disgraced Paris" was doing for a living--forced to do for no other option after his terrible disgrace, they likely thought. That was fine with Tom. They never knew him, anyway.

He would have liked to be pleasantly surprised, however. So it did burn a little. And he didn't like their involving B'Elanna in it. "Whipped me into shape," he whispered bitterly. The Hoppers were snobs, sure, but he didn't remember any racism slipping into their language. But how could he have before? Before the accident, when he was still playing their game, he was considered one of them. Worldly wise as he believed himself to be, he wouldn't have seen it nearly as easily. On the border, there were so many different races that people hardly noticed anything but what they carried for currency. Most Starfleet officers had been trained to at least keep their mouths shut when they *hadn't* been trained out of their preconceptions.

He almost hoped the Hoppers or someone else would make such a slip around him.

And maybe he wished he didn't give a damn about his father's approval. It stung most that Tom did want it. Deep down, he knew he did, like some stupid kid who really did try hard, tried again and worked and survived and fought and overcame, and now wanted the recognition he felt he deserved from the man least likely to offer it.

I did not want to put that issue back on my plate just for being here, he grumbled to himself as he grabbed the screen door handle. *Though I should have known it'd never left*. Stepping outside again, Tom stopped on the stairs, flashed a brief grin to a passing greeting. He didn't bother noticing who it was. They were all the same and weren't his people anymore.

B'Elanna was still in the middle of the group of fellow engineers, intent on the conversation around her and adding a word or two on occasion. He was glad to see it and ducked out her line of vision. Glancing across the yard, he found Moira watching others and swirling her mock daiquiri around in her bowl-shaped glass. Catching her attention and then her smile, Tom went to her and wrapped an arm around her to give her a hug. He leaned down to her ear. "Want to blast out of here?"

"It's not been two hours and you're ready to escape?"

"If it weren't for Mom, I wouldn't have been here in the first place," he replied.

Moira nodded. "Yes, she told me she had to guilt you pretty badly."

He shrugged. "I guess I couldn't hide out there forever, much as I wish I'd been able to sometimes."

"Who crawled up your nose this time?"

"No one," Tom replied, plucking up a small bunch of grapes. "Just flew too close to the candle again."

She eyed him, then nodded. "Speaking of candles, come help me with the cake," she said and rubbed his back. "We already agreed you're the one to carry it out, since you look like you got your coordination back. --Or it seems like it. You *did* give up that poison, right?"

"Yeah, I did." He grinned. She was the first person to ask--and good, too, as now he wouldn't have to tell anyone else.

"Then you definitely carry the cake," Moira confirmed. "Mom'll be blowing out candles on my face if I do it."

Tom laughed and hugged her in his arm again.

A half hour later, B'Elanna turned as the others around her did. Everyone, in fact, "Ooed" and "Awwed" their way closer to the main table as the lights changed and the music was turned off. The buffet had been cleared away and the table was reset with fresh plates, a large stand and pillar candles. When Marciano steered B'Elanna around to the front of the crowd so she could see, she watched her boyfriend carry a massive, layered cake with a virtual fire on top down the back porch steps and into the yard. Moira and Kathleen followed, clapping their hands and getting everyone else involved in beginning the ancient birthday song. It soon echoed up from the yard with a booming beat and occasional cheer.

Carol, elegant and thrilled, gave up her circle and moved to meet her children, tugging her husband and a couple young nephews with her behind the table. B'Elanna smiled, remembering her seriousness over subspace when she contacted the Guerdon. The mother had gotten just what she wanted for her birthday. For the moment, she had not a problem in the world.

That must be a really nice feeling, B'Elanna mused.

"Thank you all for coming," Carol told the party, "and for joining me in celebrating my sixtieth birthday. It's been a lovely ride thus far. I look forward to the second leg. Thanks most especially to Owen and my beautiful children, who are all the reason I love the twists and turns as much as I do. I love you. --And now let's see to this cake, before it gets inducted into a wax museum!"

Laughter rolled around the crowd and Moira started whacking Tom on the back, making him laugh and grab her into a hug. A moment later, he caught B'Elanna's eyes, making her laugh, too. Seeing this, Carol held up a hand and hurried around the table and to the crowd to take the younger woman's hand. "Come on, dear. Come along."

"But this is for your family," B'Elanna protested. "I'm not--"

Carol gave her a look--oddly, the same look she gave Tom when he dissented. "I like you, B'Elanna, and it's my birthday. You can argue when *yours* comes around." Tugging her hand, the mother brought B'Elanna around to Tom's side then moved to the middle again.

"Take a good breath," Tom told B'Elanna as he put his arm around her.

"I think I can manage that," B'Elanna returned, glancing at Moira when her arm wrapped around her from the other side. The sister gave her a peck on the cheek.

"Welcome aboard," she smiled and looked at her mother again.

Carol raised her arms to her guests. "Help me out here, yes?"

"One...two...three!" came a rousing cheer and a roar of applause as the family leaned forward and extinguished the cake.

"Then there's Gil, over at Podala."

Leaning back in Tom's arm on the patio swing, B'Elanna pursed her lips into a grin. "Best part about the new route."

"He's by far the stupidest scam artist to hold a good job on the circuit," Tom assured his sisters.

"And he *manages* the entire station?" Kathleen inquired incredulously.

"Even we wonder sometimes how he manages it," B'Elanna quipped.

The elder sister smiled. "At least he provides some entertainment value."

"We take it where we can get it," Tom told her, leaning back in the seat. "For that much, I almost miss him."

"Maryl would drag you over the nacelles if she heard you say that," B'Elanna said, but then looked up to him, "though I agree...a little. That end leg is long."

"How long is long?" Moira asked.

"Almost twelve days if we maintain speed," B'Elanna told her, "which with no days off and staggering eight hour shifts--"

"On the good days," Tom inserted.

"--gets pretty old after a week. And when we get to Ulinas, we're offloading and taking on more parts and supplies."

"Sounds like a lot of work," Kathleen noted.

"It is, but it's not a bad way of life." There, B'Elanna grinned. "On the Guerdon, at least. Not all tradeships offer the same perks." Smiling down to her, squeezing her warmly, Tom explained their revised route, tactfully blaming the Maquis aggression in the area but leaving the actual reasons out. He didn't want more questions than he could handle. Thankfully--and probably for not knowing anything about that area--his sisters took the information and left it at that.

"Well, maybe I'll meet you there sometime soon," said Kathleen as she leaned up to grab another handful of peanuts. "I have a four month study starting soon on Betazed." Her lips turned up. "I'd love to see this junker Dad's all in a bunch about."

"Is that what he calls it?" Tom grinned, his eyes lighting up. Aside from his conversation with the Hoppers, he hadn't heard his father's assessment. Kathleen was an expert at digging for them, though she did not always share her findings.

"My mistake. I think 'antique barge' was his exact wording."

Tom chuckled. "Well, at least he's not exaggerating."

"Yes, we all know Dad's the master at *that*," Kathleen replied dryly.

He ignored that. "Anyway, if you're out that far and we're coming through, I wouldn't say no to a visit."

Just don't expect anything near to the comforts of Starfleet."

"No wonder you like it so much," Moira teased.

He threw a grape at her. "So what's this latest project about?" he asked Kathleen.

She considered his question. "Are you really interested?"

"I can't know unless you try me," he returned and drew a long drink from his glass.

As Kathleen began to talk about her group's latest exo-genetic studies, B'Elanna remembered she had a glass in her hand and finished off the synth-wine in it. It was rather good and was half the reason she remained unmoved on the swing, half-reclined against Tom's side, pleasantly sleepy well past midnight. Synth also had some relaxing effects.

With the mention of her work shifts, she realized how much she really had to be running on natural energy and adrenaline to keep up as she did on the Guerdon. Tom, too. Luckily, they both knew well how to relax when those shifts were off.

There, they relaxed, too, and she remarked to herself yet again how nice a family Tom came from. They were the kind of family she looked at from the outside as a child and wished she had. Wished no longer--at least for the while: His mother and sisters--even the stark and unromantic Kathleen--had essentially adopted her. Carol and Moira were so personable and welcoming, always there with a hand on her shoulder or her arm, or offering an impromptu hug. Among the many things she was learning about him there, B'Elanna learned where Tom had gotten his "touchy" side.

After everyone had been served cake, the elder woman had given her a quick hug of thanks.

"Does that bother you, dear?" Carol asked.

B'Elanna shook her head as she swallowed her bite. "No," she answered. "I'm just not used to it--from women, I mean. My mother wasn't like that."

"Well, don't let us get too pushy, because we really can be sometimes," Carol smiled, then asked, "Does your mother live on the Klingon homeworld?"

"She does now, yes. She went back after I left our home on Kessik."

Carol poked her fork into the rich chocolate. "Great people to know if you're not a clown, but the heat there makes my hair frizz."

She laughed. That Carol could manage to amuse her about that place made B'Elanna like her all over again.

"You spent time there as a child?"

"A little, when Mother insisted," B'Elanna replied. "I didn't like it there. It was...too hot."

"Hmm, well, don't let yourself freeze *here*. You make sure Tom goes and gets your sweater the minute you get a chill. You should know by now he never minds. Now come meet my old friend, Tana. He's in material requisitions."

The rest of the evening had gone much the same, meeting and greeting people she very likely would

never meet again, then finding a few more conversations. By midnight, the energy had begun to fade; coffee was served and at last, the guests finally filed out, small group by small group with warm goodbyes, thanks and best wishes. Then the family had helped put everything away. They knew that post-party well, too; with everyone at work, all evidence of it had been erased from the yard within a half hour, and from the kitchen a half hour after that.

The parents had called it a night soon after, leaving the Paris siblings, B'Elanna and a few cousins out on the patio, burning the last of their energy away, rocking, swinging, sipping and talking in the cool, misty, moonless night.

The talk revolved around Tom, then B'Elanna, about their work; Moira talked about her family, Kathleen told them about her career, Jimmy explained his latest hobby. Then they talked about their friends, their parents, the cake and one more glass of wine to finish off the carafe. Seeing him barely glance at the drink, Moira noted Tom's sobriety. He vaguely explained that his habit finally proved itself unworthy of his liver then smoothly changed the topic again. B'Elanna hardly moved through most of it, thoroughly enjoying the time--and the time off--with them.

Indeed, it was so easy and familiar between them all that she had to remind herself she was new to the group and that Tom had been away for years. There, Moira was catching up on trade route details and Kathleen was talking about dropping by for a visit, another one of the cousins said he'd be at Starbase 375 and maybe they could meet sometime, too.

And though she knew everything about Tom's history, B'Elanna had to wonder how bad it must have been in that family four years ago, that their father essentially disowned his son and the son was compelled to leave that place for the Cardassian Border, not looking back until his mother finally came after him--and everyone let that happen.

She soon got a clue.

A tap, a slide, a clink and a shuffle.

B'Elanna was getting through her meal quickly again.

Like the lunch the day before, breakfast the next morning was incredibly delicious, but relatively formal and eerily silent. Halfway through it, B'Elanna promised herself she would never complain about a noisy, chatty meal again. The gossipy Moira and cheerful Tom had been replaced with two mute adults eyeing each other on occasion but otherwise unexpressive. Everyone else was focused on their meal or, from time to time, the centerpiece. The only words spoken were at the beginning of the meal were to compliment Carol's cooking. B'Elanna said so, too. She'd been a child at her grandmother's house the last time she'd enjoyed a breakfast as much.

She did not, however, enjoy the quiet, particularly knowing how that family could be, and especially without the comfort of a rumbling engine or beeping systems beneath her. Only the clinks of silverware and the occasional brush of fabric could be heard. It only added to her unease there.

Occasionally, she caught Tom looking at his father and vice versa. Somehow, their eyes never met. Both men's expressions were unreadable--which B'Elanna knew well enough wasn't a good thing on Tom's

part. The night before, they had gone straight to sleep and were up late and hurrying that morning, so they hadn't been able to talk. But she knew something was bothering him. Had he and his father argued? Had he gotten one question too many? He pretended not to be bothered by the guests, but she could see how they subtly wore on his patience after a while.

At last, the meal ended, with more compliments to the cook, who soon took her leave to start straightening up the kitchen. The siblings all relaxed with their coffees, leaning back in their seats, visibly more at ease...for the moment.

"I meant to ask you, Tom," Owen started, "if you got your business yesterday settled adequately."

Tom shrugged. "It was just a list of parts sign offs. It was fine, thanks."

Owen's lips turned up as he considered his son again. "Must be quite a change for you, having your own command. Outside the Federation border, too, you must be up against a great many challenges."

Tom felt his bristles rise while his arms unconsciously crossed. His father was on to something--likely, a bug the Hoppers had put in his head the night before. "Actually, Dad, it's pretty boring most of the time. But we manage to miss the occasional planet when we're trying really hard."

B'Elanna snorted before she could think better of it. Tom still loved to bring that up, probably because it had scared the hell out of him.

"I'm not making the observation to be flip, Tom," his father replied. "I'm glad to see you've been able to rise above the circumstances you had brought upon yourself, handle some real responsibility again."

"Actually," Tom told him, coffee cup still in hand as a grin twisted his mouth, "getting the captaincy was accidental. I was scammed for it over a pass five at dabo. I was pretty drunk that night."

Moirra and Kathleen stood at the same time and took their dishes away to the kitchen, abandoning B'Elanna.

"Why must you start this, Tom?" Owen said slowly.

Leaning back in his seat to cross his legs, Tom shrugged. "I'm not lying."

The older man sighed. "You'll have to overcome your sarcastic amusements if you're to lead with any long-term success, son."

"Lead *what*?" Tom asked. "I sit on a bridge and steer a tradeship. It's not like I do anything important out there."

B'Elanna blinked a stare Tom's way. He was amazingly good at understatement. Even with his sisters, he didn't go into an eighth of what he did on the Guerdon, but stuck to joking about the stations and some of their mishaps. Now, he seemed to want his father to believe he was just an over-ranked pilot.

"Not important?" Owen returned. "Once again, Tom, you neglect to see that your position, however inconsequential here, makes you responsible for *lives*."

"And once again, Dad," Tom returned, "you conclude too much about too many assumptions."

B'Elanna looked at the entrance to the dining room. Now she knew why the others didn't try to talk at the table, if that was any indication of a typical conversation.

"Had you remained here and faced your many issues instead of running away, perhaps I would have less to assume."

"Or maybe more," Tom replied.

Just as B'Elanna was crunching her napkin onto her plate, Moira leaned in around the corner. "Could the resident engineer help us in here--right now? I think that stupid reclamator's going to send us back chunks this time."

B'Elanna gladly grabbed her plate and followed the younger sister back. Rolling her eyes when she came into the kitchen, she nodded quickly to Moira's apology and asked, "Is this how it was before?"

"Save the volume, yes," Kathleen told her, taking her dish.

"That's just an after-dinner mint in there," Moira agreed.

"Drop it," Carol told them both. "I'd rather do without the editorial page."

Dutifully, the sisters held their tongues and got back to helping clean up. B'Elanna peered over at the darkened reclamator.

"Oh no," Moira told her with a smile. "I was lying this time. It's fine." She pointed at the cheese and bread on the table. "We can seal that for the preserver, though."

Grudgingly, B'Elanna went to it. Suddenly, the airy, pleasant atmosphere of the household had been exchanged with blame and sarcasm. When Tom said he and his father didn't get along, she had no idea it was like... B'Elanna sighed. It was everything she knew when she last knew her mother--save the bitter humor, which was actually more annoying. B'Elanna knew Tom's methods. He was toying with his father, trying to irk him more. *Why* he was didn't register at all with her.

So much for just letting them see him and ask their questions. But she should have known that wouldn't happen. Owen was a little too pointed in his observations about Tom's business, then distant when Tom seemed to need reassurance. She couldn't tell sometimes if the man was pleased or not; apparently, Tom had trouble with it, too.

"Maybe were you to make yourself available to better guidance, this 'tired argument' would not be necessary."

Owen was heading in. B'Elanna felt her shoulders tense, especially when the now predictable response came.

"Yeah, discussing this more is going to do a lot of good. I obviously can't get this right on my own."

They came fully into the kitchen now, each handing their plates off when Kathleen held out her hands. Everyone else otherwise looked down to their work or to each other. B'Elanna scowled at them all. For all their liveliness elsewhere, the Paris women certainly weren't about to get involved in that conversation, though they clearly were listening to it. Worse, the men hardly noticed them now.

"Have I mentioned how anxious I am to dangle from the line again after finally getting loose of it?"

"Rather than never try to fulfill your responsibility, even in the face of your potential."

"*Your* potential sounds more like it."

Growling to herself, B'Elanna went to the coat hanger for her jacket.

Carol turned when she heard the door open. "Where are you going, dear?"

"I don't need to listen to any more of this," B'Elanna answered and walked out.

Hearing her, Tom slumped a little and gave his father a hard look. He pointed it down soon after, though, sighing to himself. A moment later, he turned and left the kitchen again to grab more from the table. His sisters came out soon after.

"Great job keeping it cool," Moira admonished him quietly.

"Well, we at least kept it together for Mom's party," Kathleen added dourly.

"I thought we'd all be adults here this time."

"Why would you expect them to change, Moira, when nothing was resolved before and nothing's going to be now?"

"To hell with all of you," Tom muttered. Dropping a pile of utensils on the tray Moira was carrying, he strode down the hall and disappeared.

Moira swore between her teeth.

When the front door shut several seconds later, Kathleen simply shrugged. "See you in four years."

He didn't go far, just to the park, just far enough to take a breath. He tried to remind himself that he didn't have to deal with that anymore. He sure as hell didn't put up with that much crap from anyone else--but then, he'd managed to earn the respect of the community along the border--such as that community was. They knew him, they trusted him to follow through as best he could, and they left him alone otherwise. That his father refused to see any of that...

But Kathleen was right. Nothing had changed. Maybe he *was* acting up per the usual, but his father still took every opportunity to play gain the lead over him, took every chance he could to lecture him. Tom was long done with lectures. He'd been through too much to have to listen to that.

How often had he come to that park with similar thoughts?

Slowly, he turned and started back to the house. His sisters had to leave soon, anyway. He should at least say goodbye to them. He didn't last time.

"Moira, Kathleen, both of you to your rooms. Now."

"But why?"

"What did we do wrong?"

"You followed him, for one, and though you wisely backed out before any real trouble came about, your brother has to learn that his errors of judgment don't just affect him."

Tom took a deep breath, feeling his face grow hot in the cool, misty air. He might as well have been thirteen again.

"You expect me to sell my ship, knuckle down and--do *what*, precisely?"

"Perhaps redevelop the talent you know you have, for one."

B'Elanna almost turned right back around. Only the sight of the admiral sliding on his uniform tunic and pocketing a PADD held her in the foyer.

"However, I do wonder why I imagine I might convey any sense to you, when you can return nothing but sarcasm."

"Maybe revise your approach and we'll see how far your sense goes," Tom said. Standing in front of the fireplace, his arms crossed and eyes set straight, he had long dropped that sarcasm and went straight to annoyance. "But let's start with this: I am *not* giving anything up to suit anyone but myself."

"That doesn't surprise me, son" the admiral replied, reigning in his remaining ire. "Nevertheless, I hope we will be able to speak more agreeably when I return. Your mother doesn't deserve to have to go through this again." He almost said more, but finally closed his mouth and left the room. "Excuse me, B'Elanna," he said politely, moving around her to pass through the door.

"It's about damned time," Tom said under his breath and gave up his place at last. Seeing B'Elanna's glare point at him that time, he blew a humorless laugh through his nostrils. "Are you going to have a chunk now, too?"

"Inviting everyone today?" she asked.

He rolled his eyes. "Have at it."

"Not that I'd *like* to give you the satisfaction right now," she stated, "but you could *try* not to denigrate yourself just for the pleasure of pissing him off. Why are you making yourself look like an idiot when you claim to want his respect?"

Her start surprised him, but he shook his head and turned his eyes toward the window. "It's the same damn crap in another career."

"Eighteen stations along the route and I've never once seen anyone make you drop your hand," B'Elanna countered.

"He's not a station hack, he's my father. And it's not as if he's trying to get what he needs from me. He wants to see what he *wants* to see, to run me down into his gully again so I can get back to failing to be the best and the brightest."

"Your father doesn't have to *try* to do *anything*. You gave up your control on the first response--then *invited* him to pursue you again and again. No wonder you two never get anything solved!"

Tom's eyes narrowed. "Since when did you become a family counselor?" he demanded.

"Since the day you asked me to come 'see yours' for a while," she shot back, "and the minute I had to listen to you two run each other down with me sitting right there! I might as well have been an extra chair, for all you cared about how everyone else at the table felt. That's not like you, Tom. --Or I thought it wasn't. Obviously, I'd made some assumptions of my own."

Tom froze; his breath halted and his expression fell. Seconds passed as he watched her hold her ground. His eyes turned down first, then diverted to his old brown coat, which was slung over the banister in the hall. His mother had sent it to be mended. It must have been delivered while he was out. He walked over to it and snatched it up by the collar, then faced her directly. "I need to get out of here," he told her. "I need to walk."

B'Elanna blew a cheerless laugh. "More walking?"

"I have to get away from here, get my head straight. I can't think when everything around me reminds me of fighting." Holding her stare, he added, "You want to come with me, B'Elanna?"

She first felt "no" on her teeth, but seeing his need behind his invitation, she assented with a blink and said, "I'll grab my jacket."

"Grab the list, too. We can shop a little, shorten tomorrow's work."

"Fine."

As she disappeared up the stairs, Tom slid his coat on and went back to the kitchen. "Mom, we're going out. We'll be back later."

Carol looked around. "Where are you going?"

"Just out, walking, whatever."

"Just walking?" she asked carefully.

He snorted. "We're not going back to Ulinas for another few days."

Carol assented with a tilt of her head. "When will you be back?"

"Do you have dinner planned yet?"

"Not yet."

"Then sometime after dinner." He offered his mother a little smile and a compromise. "You want to meet us? Maybe Sills' Grill?"

Tempted, she raised a brow at the thought, but shook her head a moment later. "No, you two go ahead. Your father plans to come home at four and I should make something." She waved away his responsive expression. "We have more plates in the air than yours, sweetheart. He was gone for two weeks and..." She smiled, uncharacteristically sheepish, "Well, maybe I should be the one to make an effort."

Tom nodded, getting the hint. "See you later."

"Well, I'll be! You're the last person I ever thought I'd see again!"

"Such as I am," Tom grinned, shaking the hand of the lieutenant who stopped them along the walk outside the Academy grounds.

"How are you, Tom?"

"Well," Tom replied and introduced B'Elanna to him. "Perry and I went to the Academy together."

B'Elanna nodded and said hello, but otherwise stood aside.

"What have you been up to?"

Tom chose the short version. "I've been captaining a tradeship near the Kalandra Sector."

"I'm almost jealous," Perry smiled. "It must be great to be able to walk in your own shoes, call your life yours."

Tom grinned. "Yeah, it is."

Only when Perry had said goodbye and good luck did Tom sigh and look over at B'Elanna, who had followed the man with her eyes. "A near stranger and it's so simple to know everything I have," he thought aloud. "But I get around my father and I suddenly think I'm some loser again, even while I know better."

B'Elanna looked up at him, but said nothing.

"I'm being an ass today," he said, knowing better than to condescend her with a question.

B'Elanna pursed her lips. "And some," she said honestly.

"I apologize."

She watched him for a few seconds, watched his steady gaze hold hers, his body remain straight and still to wait for her. "Accepted," she said at last.

Looking over the wall at the pristine grounds, he touched her hand and gestured that way. For some reason, crossing through there out of their way seemed like a good idea. She showed no resistance, and so he offered her another apology in a small grin aimed her way. "I don't know why I do it. It just...I just fell in there, like I fell into a bottle, like I fell into...the Guerdon." He laughed. "I can be so lazy."

"Careless," she corrected.

He took the word for all it meant, as it did mean a great deal more and was indeed more correct. Just being on Starfleet Academy grounds was enough to remind him how much. "Yeah. I can be that."

"But the opposite is what I know about you," B'Elanna added. "And you know that and your crew knows that. Why can't your father know that?"

Tom thought about that for a minute, slowing their pace nearly to a stop. "Maybe I don't want him to find fault in that, too. I wouldn't be surprised if he did."

"So that'd be his opinion, which has nothing to do with what's really happening out there, what you know you are." A moment later, though, she shrugged. "Then again, maybe I shouldn't criticize, considering what I've been dealing with, with my father--and now Mother."

"There's no sense in comparing diseases," Tom said. "Besides, you're right that it was rude of us--of me--at breakfast. I shouldn't have piped up in front of everyone like that."

"Your mother and sisters are pretty used to it," B'Elanna observed.

Tom laughed quietly. "They ought to be. I mean, Dad and I didn't fight a lot when I was growing up, not until the last few years and especially after the court martial. Mom tried to patch things up, tried to get us together, but there was just too much built up, and we were too pissed off to see straight." Shaking his head, Tom looked dolefully across the lawns. "And here I am, an adult, a captain, on my own, and I'm acting just like I did before I left, like some damned hurt kid. Just like before, all we seem to be able to do is bring out the worst in each other, when all we want is the best."

Crossing the central mall and through the line of Boothby's old elms, they found a bench in the cool, filtered sun. B'Elanna pulled out the list and re-categorized it according to location. The Guerdon's age forced them to have parts procured or replicated at several auxiliary sites. Energy and space were naturally being saved for newer and more common ships of the day. While she worked, Tom leaned back, crossing his legs and peering unobtrusively over her shoulder.

A sound caught her attention, then, making her glance up and across the bright green lawn. She lowered the PADD and straightened. Tom looked out, too.

A group of cadets was crossing the lawn, jostling and laughing, teasing and carrying on. One of the girls snatched a young man's PADD and sprinted off, laughing all the while. He set off on a chase, determined to catch her.

Tom touched B'Elanna's hand. She turned hers over and closed her fingers on his.

Watching them disappear around the path, he softly recited, "What deep wounds ever closed without a scar? The hearts bleed longest, and but heal to wear that which disfigures it; and they who war with their own hopes and have been vanquished, bear silence, but not submission..."

B'Elanna's eyes turned to him, but his gaze remained fixed on the grass where the cadets had been, lost there between quick blinks. Tom still knew quite a bit of that canto, still quoted it from time to time, often to himself when he didn't think anyone was listening. Hearing the words, she could see him among them, on the green, jostling and laughing, so free and so totally himself--so she had thought. She would never have imagined that young man had all the tension and insecurity that she had, only in his own way.

"I still wonder," Tom quietly continued, "where I'd be now if it hadn't happened--the accident. Where she'd be, too, but mainly me." He paused, blinked. "And then I feel like a jerk for being glad sometimes it *did* happen, because I wouldn't sacrifice what I've had to fight for, what I've had to learn--everything I've gained. Would I have fulfilled my expectations any more if I'd stayed on that track? I know I'd have fulfilled *his* goals eventually, but would I have been satisfied with *me*? I was having a good time then, but I wasn't really happy. I knew I didn't have my own life and I didn't like that. Cass always wondered why I kept buckling in when I hated doing it."

"You wanted him to be proud of you," B'Elanna answered. "You still do."

His lips turned up. "I guess I shouldn't have expected it, though."

"Nothing is what we expect, Tom," she said softly. "And the more you press it to come as you want it to, the more it hurts when you don't get it."

He thought about that. The cadets' laughter still echoed across the yard, though he couldn't tell where they were anymore. "How do we get anything right, then?"

"There's a difference between working for what you want and expecting it to happen just because you're worked for it. You of all people know how that goes."

Tom sighed through his smile, pulling her close to his side in a warm embrace. Turning his head, he kissed her temple. "Yeah, I do."

It was almost as if they lived there. How quickly that had happened in his mind.

Carol had told him how much they couldn't get over the real air and unusually warm, sunny spring. It greeted them again that day, upon their return to the house not long after thirteen hundred. After an entirely successful morning of antique ship parts requisitioning, they gladly returned to the sun-spotted patio after lunch, stretching out on the generous porch swing to continue their plans to fulfill their list.

Having taken some updates and reports down and seeing his wife still smarting from another failed attempt to settle their differences, Owen took his work outside as well. Settling himself at the table on the shady side of the patio, he glanced over at the two. B'Elanna was on her belly with her shins on Tom's lap, remarking about the remaining parts on their technician's list and the upgrades they would eventually need "if we keep adding parts like that to the jungle we're flying." Tom sat with his arm over the backrest, occasionally closing his eyes to enjoy the feel of the sun on his face as he gently pushed the swing with his feet. They seemed totally at home there.

"Well," Tom said, "we're going to have to upgrade soon enough, considering what we've got waiting at the holding dock. No more low-powered mish-mash means we'll have to clean up the rest."

"I'll like to know when," she quipped.

"Next time Mom pays for our drydock, I guess," he returned, earning a kick of her foot.

"I like these port relays, though," she sighed. "They're so much more efficient...and available for replication."

"Then get those, too. Hell with it. We'll find time."

"And then we'll install them where?" B'Elanna laughed. "I'd need a whole new impulse assembly."

Tom leaned back and closed his eyes. "It'll go into the three-delta-eight bin with the rest of the collection. But at least we'll have it."

"Why not take the time off and get it done right?" Owen asked, genuinely curious.

"We have to pay our way out there, Dad," Tom said, unmoved and not looking over. "We can't afford to lay off for a month on our own tab."

The older man sighed. "You could work closer to home, not need to worry about such details."

"My contract liaison is Bajoran," Tom informed him. "She doesn't want to be far from her family."

Owen smirked and began to peruse his PADD. "A noble thought."

B'Elanna's eyes did not rise from her reading, either. "If you'd wanted to know where your son was, you'd have found him. Your wife did in fifteen minutes once she decided to."

Owen turned a look at her for that, then glanced at Tom. His eyes remained closed, but the tiniest twitch had touched his mouth. Owen returned to his reports, letting the silence take over.

Tom's hand stroked B'Elanna's thigh adoringly. She gave him a bump of warning to not take it any further. He chuckled.

"B'Elanna? Could I trouble you and ask for some help?"

She looked up at the sound of Carol's voice. She was standing in the kitchen door with a shopping bag in her hand.

"We can finish this later," Tom said quietly.

Shrugging, B'Elanna rolled over and got to her feet, then went into the kitchen with the mother. The moment the door closed, she caught her jacket.

Carol breezed by her, pulling a bag strap over her shoulder. "I've got my list. You have--? Good, you have yours. Let's go shopping."

Still feeling the sun on her skin and the movement of the swing, B'Elanna needed a moment to catch up. Carol already had her hat on her head, too. "We just got back from requisitions."

"I need you to help me a while longer, dear," she replied and started down the hall with a long, easy gait that was so much like Tom's. "Please, B'Elanna. I need your help."

Sighing and starting after her, B'Elanna pulled on her jacket and stuffed the PADD she'd been working on into her pocket. "Help with what?" she asked.

Carol waited until they were out the front door and halfway across the street to tell her. "Well, I need more fresh bread for tonight and French toast in the morning and there's an assembly depot not a few blocks past it where you can make some requisitions, so we both can get things done."

"We don't need to make any special trips. Tom and I got a lot done. I planned to have the last parts we needed replicated at the central facility. We already put in the requests."

"To whom?" Slowing slightly, Carol gave her a sidelong look. "You're probably quite adept at making deals on the border, but I know Earth's facilities much better--and Tana's already agreed to help, remember? You won't need to swim in any red tape doing it my way." She threw a gesture back towards her house. "Besides, those two need to be left alone a while--preferably on a deserted island, but I couldn't arrange that. I thought we should just keep the peace, but now I'm sick of the manners. Really, I'm about to kill my husband just now."

B'Elanna snorted, finally getting it. She picked up her pace to match Carol's. "Will there be any more fruit in town?"

Carol took B'Elanna's arm and hugged it to her side. "You bet."

Hearing the front door around the other side of the house close and the women's voices fade down the road, Tom stretched his arms back, leaned his head into his hands. "I guess this is the part where we have our cathartic talk," he smirked.

Owen mirrored the expression. "Your mother is nothing if not crystal clear."

"She means well."

"Indeed."

A long silence took over the space, each man back to his previous diversion. Owen tapped through a few pages of the report he needed to approve. Tom closed his eyes again and gave the swing a few lazy pushes. The birds grew loud and busy in the trees above them; fountain water echoed against the gate. Occasionally, a ship could be heard high above: a transport, a shuttle, a low-alt cruiser.

The sun peeked through the clouds and Tom opened his eyes to see the side of his father's head. How familiar that view was to him--how familiar it all was. Like he never left--it really *was* freakish to Tom that he felt just then like no time had passed. But it *had* passed, and he *had* changed in many respects and, most importantly, he was in no way beholden to his father anymore. He no longer had anything to do with Starfleet and did not live on Earth. What could he lose? Why should he spend one more day miffed at his father for being entirely himself?

"I heard the Hoppers talking to you at the party," he said.

Owen's brow rose, then fell again as he released a slow exhale. "They showed their colors quite remarkably."

Tom's lips turned up to hear him acknowledge it. "That can't be easy, hearing them, like that."

"It would have been easier if they were the only ones to make themselves free to comment," Owen replied. "Surprised the newsfeed hadn't picked it up, your coming home."

"Give 'em a little more time, Dad," Tom returned. "They probably had some pesky Maquis incursions to cover this week."

Owen sighed. "Still the joking about what should have remained *private*--in our family."

Tom frowned. "They were writing about *me*, Dad, about *my* mistakes, not yours. It's no more humiliating to have not only the worst day of your life but your resulting stupidity broadcast across the Federation than to be the father of that screwup. Hell, half the reason I *stayed* on the DMZ border was because it was the one place where people either didn't read the feeds or just didn't give a damn about me or my family."

"What was the other half?"

"That I felt like I deserved to be there," Tom answered frankly, etched with the not too distant memory. "I felt like I needed to be punished."

"Your court martial wasn't punishment enough?"

Tom scowled at him, but then shook his head. "No, I guess you *haven't* done anything wrong enough to understand. The court martial was a ritual humiliation and a slap in the face for the lie, but it did nothing about the bigger crime of letting myself be distracted for a few seconds."

"A lesson you finally learned--the hard way," Owen observed somberly. "It's very sad to have to learn diligence like that."

"It's sadder that *you* still equate it with a lesson plan," Tom shot back. Finding his feet, he crossed to the table and leaned over a little to face the admiral. "I lost my best friend out there, but no one seemed to give a damn as long as they believed it wasn't my fault! The minute I confessed to falsifying the record, I might as well have done it on purpose. Is that what you thought, too?"

"No, son," replied Owen quietly. "What I thought--and I say this with the understanding that you deserve the truth--was how much you had disappointed your every potential, me and the family, with your recklessness and weakness."

"To hell with potential!" Tom retorted. "You were pissed because it made the news! Because I wasn't even the salvageable presumptive heir anymore!"

"And you refused to accept the responsibility entrusted to you as an officer."

"Responsibility? I showed up and flew the shuttle, Dad; I did my job. Yeah, I let myself get distracted, but I never asked for that accident--never asked Cass to die gagging on my lap! How the hell could anyone think it was an issue of accepting responsibility?"

"Perhaps for the seeming ease with which you falsified your logs and reports," the admiral returned coolly.

"Well, just to set the record straight--again--I never *meant* to screw that up, either. --But I did, Dad. It didn't happen on purpose, even if I knew I was doing it, even when it..." He exhaled, shaking his head to get his whirling thoughts back in check. When he stopped, all he could manage was a whisper. "It was just like the accident. Once I started spiraling, I couldn't stop it and...and everything was spinning, until the crash. And it was dark...and all I could hear was everything I'd destroyed."

Tom's eyes locked on a glass on the table. He'd never put it like that before, but now, finally, it was making sense. For the first time since they pulled him off the Shuttle Viking, and almost a year after Masdi's advice, it came to him and he understood... "I made that accident happen, over and over...for years after it happened. Until the Berlin, and I almost did..." His breath left him.

"You will get through this, son, if you remain strong. The loss will always be there, but someday, you'll look back and will know how your character was built..."

Hanging on his son's words that time, Owen blinked when he stopped, tried to catch Tom's gaze. It didn't waver. "Almost?"

"Almost did what I expected would happen when we were spiraling," he went on, soft, distant, seeing the scene...seeing everything else that followed it. "I expected to be dead--and hoped it'd happen, in a way, for what I'd done. If anything says I didn't want to face my responsibilities then, it'd have been for that. Dying there would have been a hell of a lot easier on me than the next few years were. But I didn't get that, so I tried to kill myself in every other way, except literally. I sometimes wonder if I falsified the reports knowing I'd be discovered and punished more, or just more miserable for my conscience."

Turning his eyes down again, Owen sighed.

"I honestly can't remember which it was, except that I was younger than I made it seem," Tom continued. "I was scared, and I never asked to get on the fast track of Starfleet, either, so maybe I was sabotaging that, too." On that thought, Tom straightened. "I did it for you, Dad. I got into the Academy and officer's training because that's what you wanted and expected; I wanted you to be proud of me and I loved piloting, so at first I thought that had to be right. But the more I was in it, the less I was satisfied with where I was going, and when I lost it, I lost you, too...and I hated the hell out of you for deserting me when I needed you the most. --Not that I had it in me to want much comfort because I was in such a pit, but I still felt like the one person who *could* help me had passed me off to the JAG like a bag of waste because you couldn't handle the indignity. But I deserved that, too, I guess."

He stopped there, staring directly into his father's eyes as they flashed, then widened, then closed momentarily.

"I suppose," the admiral said slowly, almost unwillingly putting the words he needed together, "I did not have the corner on disappointment." He paused to look at his son again. The young man was still standing straight and firm before him, with no fear or hesitation in his eyes. He had grown out of that...but not out of the need. His particular insecurity remained plainly set in his gaze, along with the pain, courage and intentness. And perhaps that would always be a part of him, a check for the overconfidence he needed on occasion. "For my part in that, Tom, I apologize. I should have at least told you that I wanted you to overcome your obstacles, to move forward somehow. But I was angry, too--too angry and, yes, embarrassed, to realize my love was perhaps too tough for you to interpret."

"You had a right to it," Tom allowed. Pulling the chair next to his father's, he lowered himself into it. "You have to admit, though, when I screw up, I never do it halfway."

Before he could think not to, Owen chuckled. "Indeed, that's one area where I never had to motivate you."

Tom laughed, an easy laugh that loosened the knot his chest and made his shoulders relax as he leaned back into the firm, deep cushion. Smiling with a sudden fondness for the man across from him, he wasn't bothered that his father's posture and expression had changed very little, was only slightly more pleasant and that he'd explained very little in return. He had offered the olive branch Tom needed in return for his confession, without expectation or further blame. It'd been a long time coming. "And I'm sorry for my part of the arguing. I let you get to me too easily."

The admiral's small mouth curled at one end. "Well, I admit my angle was not entirely accidental."

"Something I definitely got from you," Tom noted, "being a pain in the ass with a purpose."

"I hope you have come to put it to good use."

"You've never had to deal for deuterium on a backwater trade station," Tom told him. "You'd be amazed at the tricks they try to pull to spare themselves a single joule of power or a strip of latinum--and they never learn better. Playing with them is the only way to work off the insult."

Hearing the ease of that statement, the admiral considered his son yet again. "You've accepted your life in that field, haven't you?" he asked, tinged with a particular sadness, but not disapproval that time.

Tom's lips turned up again as he nodded. "Yeah, Dad. I think I have."

Owen's brows flicked as he breathed a small laugh. "A great irony, that for all your natural talent and

inclinations, and for all the many facets of your personality and taste, simplicity's ruled the day."

"Yeah, maybe. Though I wouldn't call it simple--or less challenging. Spend one typical leg in our engine room and you'll know how much we're up to. Less diverting is usually the best way to put it in general, though it still has its moments."

"I should think any occupation would. But the *trade circuit*, Tom. It's so far from what you were, or could have been."

"I'm not disagreeing with that," Tom assured him. "Much as you never expected it, I wouldn't have considered it an option five years ago, either. But I don't think I've done half bad. Hell, I'll even go out on a limb and admit that I *like* it, now--the life I've made, at least. And the circuit kind of grows on you after a while. It's not advanced, it's not the best of the best; my ship's constantly on the brink of falling apart and crooked's a good name for half the people I have to deal with stationside. But I have great people on the crew, a woman I love and the respect of a few people out there--which is all pretty amazing, considering the condition I was in when I learned the ropes. Not to mention, I couldn't have told you how many strips were in a bar when I got out there, nor did I care as long as I could pay my tab eventually. Either way, I'll be damned if I'm ever ashamed of what I've made for myself."

"It *isn't* what I had in mind," the admiral agreed. "And while we're being very honest this afternoon, I'll always think it's well beneath you. However, I am glad you've made something work for you, Tom, and that you've gained some real pride in your achievements."

Tom smiled. "Thanks, Dad. And thanks for saying so."

The admiral nodded shortly, unaccustomed to such heartfelt chats. For that matter, he'd gotten what he wanted from his son. It was time to move on. Finally disengaging his PADD, he set it aside and leaned forward a little. "Now, son, tell me about this route. I remember the space quite well from my time on the Al-Batani, but it was some time ago and I have shamefully little knowledge of the trade practices there."

"Well," Tom started, leaning back to consider his answer, "I can start with what the Guerdon's typical run is like. We've changed it recently because of the Maquis activity..."

Some time after that beginning, Tom rose to get the carafe from the kitchen, only half-spent and still quite warm. He eagerly returned to his father and refilled both their cups before sitting again. With a simple question, Tom continued to satisfy his father's surprisingly sincere curiosity.

On their trip over, Tom had heard B'Elanna's advice, but hadn't imagined talking about this "new career" nearly as much as he did just then. Perhaps it was their reconciliation, perhaps it was just nice to have his father's interest, but the details flowed out, one station after another, one manager, another depot and even a few planets his father knew of but had not had any experience with--quite a new experience for Tom. His father had never been to Velir, for instance, nor met a Velirian. Tom was glad to fill him in and then explain the Ligarans' recent research when the topic turned that way. He told his father more about his crew, about his hulking ship and, while judiciously only grazing their run-ins with the Maquis, told him how they had come upon the USS Berlin a year ago.

"Actually," Tom observed, "after our stint there, I was surprised you hadn't heard about it."

"To be honest," Owen admitted, "the information would have had to be sent directly and purposefully. I was at Starbase 24 for two months for a series of conferences last summer and your mother and aunt were vacationing. We would have had to be found. Still, B'Elanna had a good point about our not finding

you. Your mother and I did worry, despite the letters saying everything was fine and you were just taking in the sights; but indeed, we didn't make inquiries. Perhaps we should have. I suppose *none* of us knew what to say."

"Unusual state as that is for us." Tom shrugged. "I got lucky in a lot of ways, got what I needed when I needed it. I still have a lot to do, but we're getting there. Hell, B'Elanna and I might even get our latest shuttle up to Starfleet code. --It's how we've been keeping ourselves challenged out there, rebuilding junkers and selling them. We're on our third, which should probably be faster than the Guerdon and up to code if we can get the constrictors we're looking for. We've redesigned it from scratch and created a full new sensor array for it. We have our eye on a well-placed science team who might be interested."

"That is encouraging," Owen said, brightening, and also glad to move onto another topic. "Have you any other projects in the works?"

Tom chuckled. "My list is upstairs. If I had my way, the Guerdon would be rebuilt from the frame bolts out. For three years, I've been expanding on a plan of how to do that within the boundaries of my contract. We're even trying to scrape together enough parts for a holosuite. --Long runs and all really get boring when the ship isn't about to blow."

"You would think so, would you?" Owen smiled.

"I speak from lots of experience," Tom promised, then gave his father a fresh grin and a wink. "You wouldn't happen to have any connections *there*, would you? I'm willing to make a deal for that...maybe over a game or two of dabo if your people are so inclined."

The admiral laughed. Indeed, the boy would always be a part of the man.

"...After that bottle was gone between us, Jerod dared me I couldn't hold them down. Pride notwithstanding, he had to wager me five strips to take the bet. God, I was never so sick in my life--and it was *replicated*! I almost stopped us at Dirud to get to the clinic there--or at least have *somebody* beam that stuff out of my gut. As it was, Savan had me on anti-nausea hyposprays for days."

"Knowing Jerod, he probably enjoyed every moment of that win."

"He did," Tom nodded, still chuckling. "Ridge goaded me about it more, though. --Still does."

B'Elanna snickered. "When you caught that cold a couple months ago, he replicated a plate for you."

Tom looked at her. "He did?"

"I beamed it into space before he could bring them by," she replied, then peered over to him. "I didn't think you needed the mention, either."

Tom gazed back at her adoringly and said, "What would I do without you?"

"Hate your engineer," she replied simply, then gave Carol a wink. The mother was reclined on the lawn chair with a wide scarf tied around her undone hair and sipping a tall raspberry tea. Her lips turned up at their story and their play.

They had found themselves on the patio yet again the next morning after breakfast, when the admiral had retired to his den to work on reports and they'd cleaned up the kitchen. How easy it all seemed now, five days into that non-routine. Tom had remarked as they dressed it would take them a month to get back into the rigors of the Guerdon and the route. "--Not that I regret a vacation every now and again!"

B'Elanna understood--and agreed. Indeed, it'd been good to get off the track she'd been on nonstop for three years, and it had been both unusual and rewarding to be so welcomed by Tom's family. Even the admiral had made her feel a kind of belonging there; after he and Tom came to terms, he was now noticeably gentle and solicitous, even curious about her work and upgrades. He promised to line up a few contacts if she was serious about continuing her studies and experimental systems, and would arrange at least one introduction before they left Earth.

That wouldn't be for another day and a half, plus the six day trip back to Ulinas. Soon enough, they'd be thinking wistfully about their visit and the relaxed lifestyle that slid from day to day and seemed to end too soon, once it was over. Installing what parts they could in the Guerdon would be good, though. It would be good to be busy again. She never thought she'd be so anxious to crunch numbers.

"So Jerod and Ridge are your assistants?" Carol asked between sips of her tea.

"Jerod was," B'Elanna said, "but he was killed a couple months after I came aboard. I thought I said that."

"I'm so sorry," Carol breathed. "How was he killed?"

"We were attacked by a Maquis cruiser," Tom told her, "during the early incursions a year ago."

Carol was both surprised and frightened in retrospect for her son. "You said you'd suffered some trouble from the Maquis, but I didn't imagine it was bad enough to kill one of your crewmen."

"There isn't a tradeship on the border that hasn't had at least a few blows," Tom deflected, reaching out to refill his glass. "The Guerdon's age didn't help us out. But we eventually recovered and got back on track. We still miss Jerod, still talk about him. He was a great guy."

"My other assistant is Nadrev," B'Elanna picked up, "who had been working part time on the Guerdon as often as we could afford him."

Carol understood and dropped it. As she hoped, Tom had finally opened up about his past four years with B'Elanna's occasional assistance. It was heartbreaking at the same time it was reaffirming to know what he had been through. His recovery was slow but certain when it did happen. He still seemed uncomfortable with certain topics, though, so she let the conversation go where he wanted it to that time. Eventually, she knew she could loosen him up on the details, if he had come so far in but five days. "Nadrev sounds Bajoran," she offered.

"That right," Tom confirmed. "Maryl is too. You talked to her when you confirmed our dock."

"Yes," Carol smiled. "She seems very sharp."

Tom and B'Elanna chuckled at that. "Good word," B'Elanna grinned. "She's a good friend, but she likes to be on top of everything."

"Another nice way to put it," Tom joked.

"And so it's just you six? Amazing how well you keep things together. --But then, you know what sort

of ship I'm accustomed to traveling in. There's ten people for every--"

She stopped, suddenly distracted by the creak of the gate behind them. She was not expecting anyone that day. But when Carol recognized the ruddy-haired form in issue black and red crossing the garden then stepping deftly onto the patio, she had to laugh to address her. "Kathryn! My goodness, the last person I expected to see today. I thought you and your sparkling new command would be far off by now!"

"A small delay," the visitor informed her, training her polite smile. "You know how that sort of thing can happen."

"Would you like some tea?" Carol asked, well seasoned enough to know not to ask for details. The upright new captain wouldn't give them, and Carol knew she would find out for herself in due time.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Paris."

"You're here to see the Admiral."

"Actually, I'm here to speak with your son," she said, moving smoothly around the swing to come fully into his view, "but I'd like to visit with Admiral Paris while I'm here, too."

Tom peered at her askance, not rising to greet her just then. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd heard from your father's staff that you were visiting," said the captain, "and I was curious... It seems we have a mutual friend."

"We do?"

"Yes, and I was wondering if you'd seen him recently. His name is Tuvok."

Tom furrowed his brow, shook his head. "No," he said slowly. "I don't know anybody by that name. What does he--he? ...What does he look like?"

"Dark skinned, Vulcan, about your height." Her eyes studied him carefully as she continued, "He's been working around the DMZ border for some months now."

"What station?" Tom asked, feeling B'Elanna stiffen in his arm. He forced himself not to look at her, but continued to address the other captain, if only to hold the woman's full attention.

"I can't say offhand. He's moved around a few times. But he does know you. He'd mentioned you in some detail in one of his communiqués, very soon after he arrived on the border."

Tom snorted. "I'm on the trade circuit, a lot of people just happen to know me."

"That's interesting, and yet a little confusing to me."

"Look, Captain...?"

"Janeway."

"Captain Janeway," Tom continued, "I have no idea who your Tuvok is. If he remembers me from some station, then...he remembers me from somewhere. I promise you, I have no idea who the guy is."

"Perhaps you *couldn't* remember?"

He caught the reference. "I've been on the wagon almost a year now," he informed her.

"I see."

"My father's in his den, by the way," Tom told her, markedly changing the topic. "You know how to get there?"

Her brow rose, even as her stare hardened. "As a matter of fact, I don't."

Tom pointed over his shoulder to the house. "Go in that door, hang a left, then a right three meters down, at the palm plant. The hall opens up to his den."

Janeway gave him a nod. "Thank you."

"Have a great day." When Janeway turned and he heard the door, he waved off his mother's first comment. "She's after something and trying to be clever. Speaking of which..." He looked at B'Elanna. "What?"

"I met Tuvok," she said immediately.

His eyes widened. "*You* did?"

She squeezed his hand. "He was the Vulcan on the Liberty, the other guy who helped out while you were unconscious. He guarded the door and helped the medic with your operation." Her breath halted as she shook her head. "No wonder he was so solicitous when the others weren't around."

Tom's eyes closed. "Oh shit," he breathed, feeling his heart thud as the man's face flashed into his mind, now that he knew the man's real location. He had looked in the door a few times after Tom had awoken, watched him carefully, but they never spoke. If he'd heard the man's name, he didn't commit it to memory. "God damnit."

"What is it, Tom?" asked his mother, leaning up to touch his leg. "Honey, what's wrong?"

Tom looked at her again, steadied his breath. It was all he had left now that the blood was gone from his head. "Mom, I'm going to tell you this because Captain Janeway's in there talking to Dad right now, but I don't need questions. I have a feeling you'll get it in a minute, anyway."

She turned her head from side to side in dread. "Oh no, Tom...you didn't...*align* yourselves with..."

"We *had* to do what they said," B'Elanna jumped in. "They'd already torn the Guerdon apart. We'd already lost Jerod..." Stopping herself, she glanced at Tom, letting him finish.

"We ran some supplies for the Maquis," he said, "food and medical supplies to the colonies, power units and other special items to a couple bases, just a few runs, just to get them off our back, buy some protection, because we really were hurting. We'd hoped it'd just be the few runs the captain had asked for, but then he came back for more, knowing I'd been a pilot and could get where he needed me to go. The time we met this Tuvok was the last time, Mom, and it almost got B'Elanna and me killed. We haven't been contacted since a month after that, when they got someone else off our back--and I'd like to keep it that way."

"I'm afraid that's not going to be possible."

Tom turned around. Janeway had already returned. His father stood behind her, stone-faced in his

dismay. He must have been in the kitchen; they'd probably heard everything through the window. Worse, they now had confirmation that B'Elanna, thus the crew, was complicit with his Maquis dealings. Tom sighed and turned around again to see his mother's paled features.

"Let's go over your not knowing 'my man' again, Mr. Paris," Janeway said, trying not to sound too triumphant as she came around to face him.

"I really *don't* know him," he told her, forcing a smirk onto his mouth just to tick her off. He could forgive his father and come to terms with being kicked out of any decent career in piloting, but Starfleet smugness would always annoy the hell out of him. "But you know that, and if he's your plant and giving you good information, you know I haven't had dealings with that ship in over six months. So why don't you have a seat and get to whatever point you're trying to make, Captain."

Carol drew a nervous breath. "Tom, she's only here for information, I'm sure."

"I know, Mom," he replied, "but I'm not a cadet, nor a junior officer anymore. I'm another captain and she knows it. But she refuses to respect that; she went inside and got my father, because she thinks that's going to make a difference." He turned his attention back to Janeway. "Come sit down and ask your questions. I'll answer what I can, simple as that."

"I'm afraid it's not," Janeway replied dryly. "You are obligated to answer *all* of my questions." She moved into the seating area but remained standing. "I believe you know the possible consequences of your actions *this* time, yes?"

"Yeah," he returned coolly, "I've seen how Starfleet handles the service fleet. Seems trying to survive's about on the same level as truth: Just not the fashion." He stared at her for several seconds. Her face went unchanged. "I'm sure it's my honor to be at your service, Captain Janeway."

"I'll get straight to the point."

"That'd be nice."

"You assisted with the setup of a base shortly within a region called the Badlands."

"That's right."

"You and an assistant--I'm assuming it's you, Miss--plotted a course through the plasma streams to the base."

"Leave her out of this for now," Tom told her. "Yeah, I got the shuttle through and a map was made."

"Well, then, it's quite simple, Mr. Paris. I need you to recreate that map for us and help guide us through the Badlands so we can find Captain Chakotay's ship."

Tom stilled, not for fear, though a certain amount of dread had slid into his heart at the mention of the man's name. The woman before him sounded like she was going off on safari and digging trenches along the way. "Like it or not," he told her evenly, "it's *Captain* Paris, Ms. Janeway, and I honestly don't remember how to get there. It was a day of points and recourses and avoiding plasma streams; we got in and crashed landed on the planned planet."

"Crashed?" Carol blurted out.

Tom ignored her. "I was out for days after that because of the injuries I sustained."

"Maybe a trip to the area will jog your foggy memory."

B'Elanna growled with impatience at the back and forth. "Who the hell do you think you are to come in here and accuse him of *anything*?" she demanded.

"Are you saying I should accuse you instead?" Janeway queried. "We can do that if--"

"No," Tom cut in firmly. "I'm the captain of the *Guerdon* and I took full responsibility for my decisions, even then."

Janeway nodded. "Excellent. Then we can expect you in ten days?"

He scowled. "To do *what*? They aren't nearly stupid enough to go back to a place the Cardassians have tagged and bugged."

"We know," Janeway told him, withholding a sigh at her next piece of information. "However, the *Liberty*, along with my officer, was last detected at the same entry point reported to us--the same one you used to get to the camp in question. We're not taking anything for granted in our search."

"An entry point doesn't mean anything," Tom dismissed. "They could turn right instead of left, go up or down--ships can fly in all sorts of directions if you aim them right and the Badlands isn't just a spot on the map."

The woman pursed her lips at his condescension. "I realize that. I have seen the map. I need a better one."

"And if I still can't remember to your convenience?" Tom asked.

Janeway raised her chin slightly. "Then you'll be arrested, your crew will be assigned to high security parole, ankle cuffs and all, and your ship will be confiscated, likely dismantled. If you have any doubt of this, perhaps the warden at Raos-Five will allow you to speak with your friend Dejin Hirro, who with her crew was quite uncooperative."

Tom's eyes narrowed as he squeezed B'Elanna's tensing hand. After a couple seconds, he heard her take a long, steadying breath. He did the same. They weren't going to give the officer the satisfaction of ripping her apart.

"Now, let me tell *you* something," he said, low and sure, "though it's registered as an unaffiliated freighter, my license was written on Bolarus, by the local Jildwan Court, thus independent of Federation guidelines. You can come after me as Starfleet loves to do, but my crew and I are legally bound to serve the terms of our contracts. My ship is *my* ship and my crew is *my* crew, and they'll *all* be waiting for me when you're done with your list of dire consequences, because I'm the only one who can release them. My own contract is not alterable unless I find a suitable and willing replacement and witness and sign it--and I assure you that's not going to happen. Take it to Bolarus--now, if you like--and they'll tell you the same thing the advocate told me. You can't touch it." He twisted his lips into a cynical grin for affect. "I might be the loser, though, since confiscating that pile of crap would probably be the best thing that ever happened to it. So why don't you try another route of persuasion, like one I'll actually care about?"

Owen and Carol shared a look as B'Elanna forced down her grin. She had to admit she loved seeing Tom riled up like that. Unlike the family fights, she certainly felt no discomfort watching him stick it to that other captain.

Janeway took it all stony-faced, though clearly, she was not pleased with his response. "Nevertheless,

you will be arrested and convicted of treason and there won't be a trade station in the quadrant who won't know about it."

"There won't be a trade station in the quadrant that won't know about my cooperating with you."

"I can see to it that your work with us remains confidential."

"That'll get leaked within a half year." Tom shrugged. "I'm damned either way."

"Except I can and will have a say in the conditions of your parole," the other captain corrected him. "Any Bolian court will gladly put your license on hold if I decide to recommend it, for as long as I recommend it. They will see why it is necessary."

Tom glared at her. "You would crash all my deals and the pot of an entire crew scraping by for a living over some useless information? You would take down six lives for an outdated map?" He shook his head. "You can go straight to hell, Captain Janeway. I'm not buying."

Her mouth pursed and she swung her attention back to the other man there. "I understand, Admiral, why you would not want to be involved in this matter, but I think you might want to look into this further and speak with your son about it in more detail."

"When do you plan to embark, Captain?" he asked her.

"Eighteen hundred, San Francisco time."

"You will be contacted before then," Owen told her.

With that, Janeway offered Carol a respectful nod and farewell, then left the yard as assuredly as she had entered it.

When the gate closed, Owen looked at Tom and opened his mouth, but Tom cast a warning glance his way. "Don't even think about lecturing me, Dad, when you weren't there. --Then again, you *should* know where I've been and why I had to make the decisions I did, to save my ship and my crew."

"I know one must make compromises in the field," Owen agreed tightly. "But a terrorist group..."

"Trust me, the *last* thing I wanted to do was help them," Tom asserted, "especially when I thought the Liberty's captain was behind tearing the Guerdon apart and killing my friend. But I had five more people to think about, along with all our futures, such as it looked. Saying yes to Captain Chakotay was one the hardest things I had to do and it sure as hell wasn't at my convenience."

The admiral drew a slow breath, measuring his son with his heavy stare. Finally, he nodded. "Very well, I'll look into this, Tom. I won't promise you anything, but I'll help if I can."

Tom felt his eyes sting slightly as it registered. For the first time since he was a boy, he was damn glad the man before him was his father. It didn't matter if he could help or even get a kilobyte of information for him. His father wasn't going to judge and wasn't going to correct him. Rather he was going to be there this time, win or lose. Just by offering, Tom knew it was an oath. "Thank you, Dad."

A couple of hours later, the rains started. Almost on cue, Owen came into the kitchen where they were finishing their dessert and coffee. Carol busied herself with cleaning even after her husband sank into a seat beside his son. He set the PADD in his fingers down and gestured to it.

"They want you to play ball, Tom," he said simply.

Tom drew a slow breath. "How badly am I screwed?"

"As captain, you will have to accept the full consequence for your ship's involvement with the Maquis."

"Which I have. Go, on."

"I was saddened when I read about Dejin Hirro's conviction for similar offenses," he noted. "She was involved with another ship in the same sect and was stripped of her freighter and any potential for command until she would be allowed to apply for reinstatement. Betazed has indefinitely removed her from consideration."

Though his heart sunk for Dejin, Tom couldn't help but snort at the news. "Beat up as she'd been, she was probably too pissed off to want to give Starfleet anything. She probably *told* them to arrest her and take her ship. I was wondering where she'd been, though. They kept that one quiet, at least."

Owen's mouth turned up knowingly. "It can be managed, when they want it that way. And apparently, the same offer is open to you. Cooperation will guarantee Starfleet's best attempt to keep your capitulation and mission with them classified. The record will show instead that you've been on Bajor while your ship awaits a new dilithium chamber. Finding and delivering the correct part would require a few weeks, and you would be 'seen' there on occasion."

Tom frowned. "The more they sweeten this deal, the more I don't like it."

"The consequences of your refusal are serious enough that you may want to reconsider that," Owen warned him. "You most definitely will go to prison, the term determined by your level of cooperation; your Bolian contract would be able to be held for up to four Bolian years with just cause, which I am certain Captain Janeway will provide when she is able to make a motion. Your crew as accessories will indeed be convicted, released on outmate parole and left with permanent felony records and a guaranteed untidy reputation on the DMZ trade route."

"As well as they see how embarrassing such a turn of events could be for me," the admiral continued, "it would be little in comparison to how your life and career will be altered. It is doubtful you will be able to return to the route you've enjoyed these past three years and unlikely you'll be able to secure a route in Federation space on the same terms."

Tom swore between his teeth. "Should have known it was too much to ask for, trying to survive." Leaning back, he closed his eyes and suddenly saw it again... "Jerod was blown into pieces on deck three. Damned idiot went to secure the holds when the ship was being ripped apart and we were screaming at him to get back to deflector control. Ten minutes later, all I saw was his arm behind the forcefield. Savan worked for a whole day to collect all of the bits that weren't blown into space for the capsule." Opening his eyes again, he saw his parents staring sadly at him. He felt B'Elanna's hand on his arm. "I wasn't going to let that keep happening. It already had; we couldn't take much more."

"That is understandable, son," Owen assured him.

Tom took another breath and let it out. Glancing over at B'Elanna, he shrugged slightly. "Guess I have to deal with the devil again."

"Just let's hope we get out of it more easily this time," she replied.

He furrowed his brow. "We?"

"You just flew the ship," she reminded him. "I told you where to go."

"You did go, then," Carol said.

The younger woman nodded and returned her attention to Tom. "If they want an outdated map, I'll give them one."

"You don't have to do this," Tom told her. "I don't want you involved."

"I know. But that's not up to you. I'll contact Janeway if I have to."

At that, he grinned despite himself. "I *should* insist you stay, considering what happened the last time you volunteered to tag along."

"Oh, so it's *my* fault now?" she rejoined, making them both laugh.

He placed his hand atop hers and gave it a thankful pat. Sighing off his grin, he nodded to his father. "I can't stand to have any direct contact with Janeway right now, Dad. Really, just thinking about her ticks me off. Could you arrange a text communiqué? I'll get on it in the morning."

"I'll make the contact myself if you like," Owen offered.

"That's really nice of you Dad, thanks. But line up the text for a follow-up, please." He pushed himself to stand. "Far be it from me to appear like I don't care enough to write."

Picking up his and B'Elanna's dishes, he brought them all to the counter for his mother. Putting his arms around her from behind, he gave her a hug. She sighed deeply and held his arms warmly against her.

"Really, Thomas," she said, buoying up her verve, "if you go a week without getting in some sort of trouble, I'll call the media myself."

Chuckling, he kissed the top of her head.

They moved to the living room after Owen returned to his den to make the contact and finally finish his reports. Resigned to that development, Carol nevertheless went upstairs to talk to her sister in private. The house quieted as the rain outside picked up, pattering against the roof two and a half stories above them and sliding down the front of the house. The windows, cracked to allow the air to trickle in, admitted an occasional gust and little sprays of water.

Sunk into the sofa, warmed by the holo-fire in the little hearth on the north wall, they watched the gusts, the curtains blowing in, then being sucked out when the drift changed, like a ghost on a wire. It captured their attention during every pause in their conversation.

"The problem is," he softly went on, "when I get off this mission of mercy, the Maquis are going to find

out about it eventually, and they're going to kick our asses."

"They've done that already," B'Elanna replied. "They'll just have a better reason to come find us personally."

Tom sighed. "Chakotay's a good man," he said quietly. "I don't like his business, but...I hate turning him in--if you can even call it that. I know we're not going to find them if they've gone in deep... He isn't one of the bad guys. He's just fighting his good fight."

B'Elanna nodded, remembering her conversations with him as well. Patient, honest, tough, he wasn't the same kind of captain that Tom had come to be, but he was a good one, nonetheless.

"This would be a lot easier if I didn't respect him so much," Tom went on.

"It sounds weird," B'Elanna ventured, "but I think he'd understand in the end, why you had to make this deal. He knows as well as anyone that people, especially out there, do what they can to get by."

"I like thinking that," Tom said, then sighed again, "but I don't like it all the same."

"I don't either."

"And if the deals aren't bad enough... Well, hell, we're in it deep as it is. I'd try to find another route if it weren't for Maryl."

"It always comes down to her." B'Elanna puffed a breath of impatience. "You know, Maryl needs to learn how to take a transport. We've killed ourselves along that border, never considering a route somewhere safer because of her. But since I came aboard, despite six stops at DS-Nine, the first time she's actually gone down to Bajor and seen her family, for a wedding, is when we came here. She's probably already back on at Ulinas yelling at people."

Tom snorted. "Yeah, you're right."

"I think Maryl's problem with getting off the border is that she doesn't *know* anything off the border."

"You're right there, too."

"She needs to deal with the idea of getting to know another region of space...at least until things cool down."

"That's not going to be for years."

"Which translates into how many family visits?" B'Elanna responded.

Tom grinned, nodding. "Yeah. I'll talk to her. Obviously, a lot of things are going to have to change with the times." He breathed a long sigh, inhaling the steam from the mug in his hands. "There's a lot to think about."

Backing off the topic, B'Elanna leaned back with him. Reaching out to the side table, she slipped her fingers around the handle of her cocoa mug. Carol had made them a pot of hot chocolate for the cool evening, complete with fluffy marshmallows and mint stirs. B'Elanna was in primary school the last time she had enjoyed one. As it was, it did what it could to take the bite off the other issues at play, just as the mother had hoped. "You didn't think you'd be handling this much business when we came here."

"Oh no, I *knew* I'd have to deal with some kind of bullshit," Tom assured her. "I just wasn't expecting to get tagged about the Maquis. Not yet, anyway."

"You called it after the Sygra run," she recalled. "You remember that rotten heat? I remember you saying after Chakotay left that you'd be nailed and he'd fly free."

"Yeah, I remember it." He shook his head. "I didn't expect to have to chase after him, though." He finished his cocoa in a few more swallows then set his mug on the table. Giving her knee a squeeze, then leaning forward, Tom stood up. "I feel like packing a bag."

"I'll be up after a while," B'Elanna told him. "I like hearing the rain."

Tom grinned. "Yeah, it does sound nice."

She closed her eyes as he walked away, oddly quite able to block off the business for a while once she could concentrate on the patter and gusts outside. The room suddenly became quite still, but even then, in that big sofa with her cocoa and the fireplace and the soft lights around her, she felt completely at ease.

How sad it was, that Tom had needed so much to get away from that beautiful, comfortable place. It was obvious he appreciated his childhood home and loved his family, but he simply couldn't live there. Every time he came to appreciate life in that society, it found a way to betray him.

She leaned her head back, breathing in the sweet, salty air that slipped in through the soggy windowpanes, cooling the fire lit room. It would be good to visit again someday.

The changes to come... The idea should have made her more nervous than it did. All her life, change had meant a great deal of unpleasantness at best: the loss of her father, her mother's attempt to send her to Klingon school one season backfiring and sending them straight back to Kessik, after which they never got on well again; leaving Kessik, the Academy and then leaving the Academy, her subsequent jobs, one after another. Some of those changes were brought on by herself, others came to her, but they all had been things she looked back on with some amount of negativity.

Only since she was literally picked up by the Guerdon did her life, despite a bump or two, begin to feel positive. She had made real friends, reunited with her father, had come to feel comfortable with familiarity and even found love with a man she at first would never have pictured for herself. For the first time in her life, she felt secure and supported enough to accept that oncoming challenge and change with real confidence. Before, their current predicament would have been seen as a fight to come, an instant negative she needed to set on an even keel, and maybe she'd find some satisfaction in the bargain. Now she knew she need only keep her eyes open and her back straight and they'd get through it eventually. Even if she was equally unhappy with the situation, she knew she was no longer alone, and there would always be more choices than the obvious.

Besides, if the last year hasn't killed us... she grinned to herself. But then, Tom would be the first to jokingly remind her of how the odds work.

One hour to Bajor.

It was a humiliating arrival, too. Due to their "sudden power failure," they had been picked up and turtle docked to the helpful and conveniently located USS Makkar. After some "failed warp drive repairs" and the complete collapse of their dilithium chamber, the Guerdon was politely "assisted" to a drydock the Makkar arranged with the Bajoran officials on the Guerdon's behalf.

His frown decidedly pressed into his cheeks, Tom seriously had to wonder if a single person on Deep Space Nine would believe it. *Well, maybe. The Guerdon was once well known for its sudden mishaps and outdated systems and the Makkar regularly orbits Bajor during the ambassadorial sessions.* Maybe it was just that he still didn't believe he was having to go through with that deal--and now B'Elanna, too. Though she obviously doubted B'Elanna's actual usefulness, the crisp new captain was all for taking on anyone she could use for information, so Janeway had allowed "Miss Torres" to join him.

For her part, B'Elanna admitted she liked cooperating with Starfleet about as much as she had liked helping with the Maquis.

"Good," Tom replied with a frank nod when it came up again. "You stay here, then. Really, I don't think you should come."

"No deal," she said. "I don't like you going in there alone."

"It's a brand new ship."

"That doesn't matter in the Badlands."

"Point taken."

"And the real point is," B'Elanna told him, "that I helped you start this; I have a responsibility to help you finish it, like it or not."

"You don't think I should have accepted the deal?"

"That's not my decision, Tom. I'm not the captain and I'm not threatened with a prison sentence. I *am* the person who made the map that got you noticed by Tuvok as someone useful. I wouldn't feel right about letting you take all the blame for it."

"It's my place to."

"Yes. But I'm on the docket anyway and I'm not changing my mind."

He'd dropped it at that. In truth, much as he didn't want her involved, he was glad to have company. He still didn't enjoy being around Starfleet people, though he knew it was getting better there. On the downside, instead of guaranteed spite, he never knew who'd be giving him grief nowadays. It was almost easier when more people hated him.

Opening his arm panel, Tom scanned a few last minute arrangements. They would be tractored down into the drydock and secured there. While he and B'Elanna supposedly were arranging deals for their needed parts, Savan and Nadrev would be taking the newly completed shuttle out on a couple of short collection runs. He needed to sign off on that; then, he and B'Elanna would leave for Deep Space Nine to sign off on one of their quickly made deals, stay overnight as the Voyager received the last of its incoming crew, and then be reported to have taken the first shift transport back to Bajor. Tom had no illusions about how that would fly from kiosk to kiosk.

It's a crap business no matter how it goes.

He still hated having given Starfleet any information at all about their Badlands trip a few days before. Despite his decision and her determination, he and B'Elanna had grumbled about it the entire time they'd marked the chart provided for them, a map of the entry area and initial heading and what active areas they remembered there. Tom almost hadn't transmitted their work and was glad Janeway was holding off on the other data for the time being. He knew damned well the plasma streams alone made that map completely unusable--a thought that festered.

"They're making an example out of me," he realized to B'Elanna as they didn't sleep that night. Holding her warm, dry body against his, closing his eyes as he sighed into her hair, he added, "Chakotay had twenty other ships in his coffer, which he'd been working with before and after we were in his books. It was sheer luck for Starfleet that we'd gone into the Badlands and did the work we did--sheer luck that my name is what it is. And either Janeway lied through her teeth about confidentiality or she and my father are way too confident in the system that's pulling this deal. I give it three months and it'll be on the newsfeeds, thanks to some inside source. They'll need to scare more people into submission when they go after the next captain of importance."

B'Elanna gently kneaded the tense muscles at the small of his back. "What worse is that it wouldn't be surprising."

"They're all bastards when it gets down to business," he concluded quietly.

Two days later, Tom closed his panel then closed his eyes, willing himself to just let it go and let the three weeks happen. Every way he looked at it, he was screwed and the whole crew knew it. Of course, their acceptance had taken an easier route.

Still enjoying the prodigious stock of parts and pieces brought from Earth, Maryl, Ridge, Savan and Nadrev had all taken the bad news with relative reserve. They were typically supportive of his decision to save their asses again, and likewise comfortable enough in their protected state to curse Starfleet for dealing him another sucker punch. He didn't blame them. Forced parole far away from home and a lasting record as an accessory to treason was nothing to sneeze at in their line of work...when one was an honest dealer, anyway. But then, even dishonest traders would no longer be trusted after having so much contact with Starfleet. Tom recalled Seska's spray of venom when she accused Tom of being in line with Starfleet just for having been helped by them. Certainly, she had been after him for her own psychotic reasons, but her passion and paranoia wasn't seen as unusual.

Tom thought again about Chakotay and the last time he saw him, when they'd been raided outside Irtrin territory. He'd have to have tracked the renegade Maquis ship to come the Guerdon's aid as he did--or maybe he was tracking the Guerdon. Tom didn't know. But Chakotay certainly had gone out of his way to step in, then wrangled with the other Maquis captain to get their parts back--asking nothing in return.

Was it a payback? An apology? Chakotay made sure to let Tom know that he'd unloaded Seska and wouldn't be calling on the Guerdon again. That was not the mark of a dishonorable man.

Chakotay was not a dishonorable man.

Tom pulled a deep breath, feeling his nails dig a little into his palms.

"Tom," said Savan, "we are being hailed by the USS Voyager on a secure channel."

"Yeah," he muttered. "Bring her up."

Janeway appeared just as he chose to open his eyes again. Her bright stare scanned and recorded his bridge in only a few seconds, then focused on him. Her thin mouth parted a beat before she actually spoke. "We have received the final confirmation from Captain Avillas. We will be expecting you in thirty hours?"

"We'll be there."

Her chin rose as she eyed him carefully. "Your...assistant is not required on this journey," Janeway reminded him. "We would be just as happy with her data."

"Tell her that," Tom replied. "I already tried to. Not *very* hard, but at least a little effort was involved. I'm afraid if you want me, my assistant's along for the ride unless you absolutely forbid it."

Janeway came as close to rolling her eyes as she could without actually doing so. "Your quarters have been arranged. I'm assuming one will do. You may report to my ready room when you arrive."

"I can't wait," Tom smirked. "Is that all?"

She stared at him for a couple seconds before answering. "For now."

"Great. Guerdon out." He punched off the viewscreen and blew out a breath to stay planted in his seat. Even if he *could* go somewhere at that point, there was nowhere to go.

How often he'd felt like that in his life, he couldn't count. He hated it all the same, even while he once again was walking right into that box and letting them seal him in.

He blinked when he finally realized Maryl was laughing. He looked over.

Her smile remained wry. "I haven't seen you hate a woman so much since Livich jumped her contract."

Tom snorted. "Yeah, this one's special," he said. "But at least Janeway gets credit for doing her job and sticking to it. We just happen to be on the other side of her fence."

"The way she comes off, I'd say that's a good thing," Maryl observed.

"Maybe."

"I will have the sign-off for you in two hours," Savan told him. "I have received the inventory list and will mark it as inspected. You and B'Elanna will be able to take the third shift transport to Deep Space Nine and arrange for the retrieval. I have informed B'Elanna just now."

"Thanks," Tom said. Leaning back, he glanced at his monitor, then closed his eyes again. Forty-five minutes...

"Torres?"

B'Elanna almost didn't turn around at her name. Though she'd been on that route for over a year, she was still getting used to people knowing her. It was nice, really...some of the time. Looking at the

source of the voice, though, she knew it was a good thing on that occasion. "Lieutenant Carey?"

He smiled widely. Coming onto the station's generous promenade with his iced coffee in hand, he switched hands to shake hers warmly. "I almost didn't think it was you," he said. "And Captain Paris. I hope you both are doing well?"

"As can be expected," B'Elanna grinned back.

"Full lieutenant now?" Tom noted, gesturing at the man's pips. He never forgot a junior officer, having been one himself.

"A few months ago," Carey confirmed, "and now a transfer."

"You're on the Voyager?" B'Elanna asked.

"I am. I'll be the assistant to the chief engineer."

"Congratulations!" B'Elanna and Tom both said, the latter shaking the officer's hand. Older than the usual lieutenant in his position, Tom guessed that Carey had spent the earlier part of his career as a non-com. He was too relaxed in his manner and obedient to his superiors to have had a record or been knocked down in rank, while he still seemed to know his job. In any case, the man had every right to be as proud as he looked.

"Actually, I'm off to it when I'm done with this. You two just passing through?"

"You could say that," Tom told him. "In and out, really--parts hunting and trying to rebuild a warp drive from the outside in and as quickly as possible. It's been an interesting pain in the neck so far... But you've seen the Guerdon from the inside. You know what we're dealing with."

"I wish you every kind of luck," Carey nodded.

"And good luck to you, too," B'Elanna told him. "Maybe we'll see you around sometime, if you're coming back to the station."

"We might pass through again," Carey answered, properly vague. "Goodbye for now, then." With a toast their way, he returned to his party in the bar.

Tom glanced in before setting himself and B'Elanna off again to get to the habitat ring. "That was convenient," he said quietly.

"Think anyone at the bar heard that?" B'Elanna asked.

"It's run by Ferengi. Odds are pretty damned good. Carey being there saved a lot of time."

"It did. It was good to see him, all the same."

"Yeah. It was."

Wrapping his arm around her, he turned them smoothly into the access corridor. No more words found them the rest of the way in, and his stare remained pointed at the grate deck until they got to their section.

The game was all too easy to play. He'd long been good at it. A few more weeks and maybe he

wouldn't have to play it again.

He knew better than to count on that.

They had him.

She sighed through her smile as she felt her shirt slide off her arms, his gentle fingers following its path before returning to her sides. Soft, savoring kisses followed the seam in her bra as it was parted. As that too met the floor, his lips wandered to a breast to tease a nipple, and he smiled against her skin when she sighed at the contact. His hands slid to her waist to work open the seam there.

B'Elanna relished it. Tom was a maddeningly patient lover when he wanted to be; often when they had the time, he took his sweet time, touching and tasting every part of her, undressing her so deliberately that she was tempted to throw him down, strip and pounce. But in truth, she appreciated that very open and tactile brand of foreplay, loved how he built them up, teased and tantalized, until they both wanted each other thrice as much as when they began. Her former boyfriends could never boast of attempting anything similar. B'Elanna had never known sex from start to finish taking over fifteen minutes until she and Tom were together.

She grinned to herself as her trousers slid away and he gently pressed her to sit on the edge of a sofa. They had absolutely nothing to do for the while. They'd be reporting to the Voyager in eight or so hours and it was afternoon to them just then. They had a possibly rough few weeks ahead of them and a full schedule on tap immediately following their "final repairs." B'Elanna had not doubted that Tom wanted to make the most of their stay in that little bunkroom. The moment the doors swished shut behind them, he had pressed up behind her, slipping his hands around her to press on her belly, touching his lips to her neck.

Ten minutes later, he finally peeled her socks off, kissing her inner thighs, moving upward as he divested himself of his remaining clothes. B'Elanna gladly let him take his time there, too.

"Ahh," she breathed as he pulled her down to straddle his thighs. With a lift and tilt her hips, she moaned softly as his length filled her; then he pulled slightly out again. Pressed against the edge of the sofa, she arched into his motion, catching onto his rhythm; then she leaned back as his hand ran up her belly and chest and embraced her shoulder. She rose again at his direction, letting him continue to set the pace that time.

He slowed after a few minutes, though, and she noticed for the first time that he wasn't looking at her. Unashamed about any facet of intimacy, Tom also liked to look her in the eyes when they made love and had admitted on a few occasions how he loved to watch her face reflect her ecstasy. That wasn't happening there.

Instead, when their eyes met, his face reflected everything but enjoyment: It almost reflected fear.

Finally, he stopped, gasping out his breath with frustration, slumping. He didn't move, but his erection quickly faded and his body cooled. "I'm sorry," he whispered tightly. "I'm just not...not in the right frame of mind. I can't...not think."

B'Elanna likewise did not move. He had never done that before; she hardly knew how to handle it but

to ask, "What's wrong?"

He laughed quietly. "Everything's wrong, B'Elanna. You know that. We shouldn't be here." Still holding her hip in one hand, his other hand fell into hers. His eyes turned down, he yet felt some strength return when her fingers wrapped firmly around his...asking him again. "I wanted nothing to do with the Maquis and Captain Chakotay," he told her, "and I hated the guy for sucking us into his business like he did...and now I'm paying for it. I should hate him more than ever for that alone. But I don't." He looked at her. "I can't."

"I know," she said softly, almost in relief for hearing him voice her dichotomic feelings.

Falling out of her, he pulled her more comfortably onto his lap. His head still spun with the business that had wrecked their lovemaking, which alone annoyed him. "It's not right for Janeway and the rest of them to come after us and ruin our businesses, our lives, over data they don't really need in the first place. They took down Dejin, Keegar, the Goedra--and now us. And that's just who we know about. What did we try to do but survive in the middle of this shit that *they* brought on?"

"And now look how far I've come: right back to playing into exactly what they want, capitulating to make things easier in the long run. Who's it going to hurt, right? Nothing we give them is going to be any use to them. But I'll do it to save my ass and yours in the bargain--but not lives. Our lives aren't on the line. --Talk about not sticking it out. Once again, I made the deal against my conscience...for convenience. I'll have a clean record but I won't forget about what I did for it...again."

B'Elanna held onto him, holding his stare now, too, feeling the same shame sink into her gut. Starfleet hadn't killed anyone on their ship, but they were about to kill everything else they'd built, but she wasn't nearly as resentful of them. Confidence in one's future was one thing, but complacency...

"I can't do it again, B'Elanna. I can't go back to that. I feel...I feel like I'll never break free, if I do it again. They'll always have a hold on me if I don't live up to myself and tell them at least once to go to hell. --Not to mention that fact that it's *wrong*--and I *knew* it was wrong the minute they twisted me into it."

"You did know that," she agreed. "So did I. We're both guilty of it this time."

He sighed. Squeezing her hips gently in his hands, he brought his gaze surely into hers once again. "I know it's going to make things hard for you and the others, and I'll always be sorry for that, but...I'm going to contact Janeway and tell her I'm not going. You can still go if you want to--"

"You know I won't--and don't."

"Then I'll tell her we're not going, and she can say whatever she wants to the Bolian magistrates." He sighed, nodding. "And then I'll be able to sleep again."

A long pause sat between them.

"Maybe..." B'Elanna said thoughtfully, "Maybe this is what you have to live up to, Tom. Maybe this is how you commit to your freedom, by being this willing to give it up." Staring deeply into his liquid gaze, she brought her hands up to press her palms gently against his cheeks; then she stroked his temples with her thumbs. "Maybe all that potential we've always talked about meant you standing up for your beliefs, for what you know is right and walking head-on into the consequences of being that honorable."

He felt his heart beat deeply in his chest to hear those words. "You agree with me, then?"

"Would it matter if I didn't?"

He considered that. "In the end, probably not. But I admit, I'd like it better if you supported me."

A warm, knowing smile found her face, lit her eyes. "I support you, Tom," she assured him. "In fact, I don't think I've ever known anyone as brave and good." She ran her fingers through his hair. "But I knew that already."

Taking her fingers into his, he pressed his lips to them. "Will you be waiting for me when I get out?"

"I'll be there." Leaning forward, she bridged the gap between them with a soft kiss, then the rest of her, warming them instantly.

"I'll be looking for you," he breathed, bending to nuzzle her collar.

"You'll find me.... And maybe," she whispered, her lips twisting up as she ran her hand down his torso, "I'll do something like this."

Tom blew a smooth breath through his teeth when her expert fingers grasped him gently, then increased their firmness as she ratcheted him up again. Kissing her, he hiked her leg around his hip for better access to his reprisal. "We won't make love again for a long time," he warned her softly, his breath against her neck before he tasted it. Humming a little at her ministrations, he added, "We'd better make the most of this."

"I fully intend to," she grinned, then gasped when his hands pulled her up at the hips and he drove back into her again.

He pressed her against the cushion, caressing a nipple before capturing her hand. Their fingers wove and clutched together and Tom started into her again. "Oh, now that's better," he breathed.

"Mm, yes...that's good," she softly agreed.

Thrusting with several long, hard strokes, arching against her until her lips parted with a keening moan, he relished in her beautiful face, watched her give in to their pleasure, which quickly built and surpassed where they'd been just minutes before. When he felt like he was going to come, though, Tom stopped and pulled her close against him again to kiss her full, warm mouth and knead her back into a sinuous arch. Her soft growl inspired him anew.

Pulling them upright once more, he whispered devilishly upon her lips, "Show me the most of it."

She grinned. A moment later, his back hit the carpet with a thud.

Sated, exhausted, but cleaned up and neatly dressed, they walked hand-in-hand down the promenade toward the bar and kiosks the station of late seemed to excel in. They nodded to people they knew, stopped a couple times to share a few words with vendors they had dealt with and confirmed the rumor that the Guerdon was off the route for the time being. Then they continued around the ring.

Their pace was gradual, but not too slow. They'd done everything the needed to do. They were ready.

"That's the deal. The decision's been made."

Staring back at him and B'Elanna through the Guerdon's main viewscreen, his crew was silent at first, processing that change in plans in their own way. They'd taken his reasons well enough, and they understood that he meant to do what he said. But then, he had always been like that and usually upfront about it. It'd been since Tom took over that their ship had come to enjoy its current benefits and relatively egalitarian structure. He'd "pulled rank" only very rarely, when he had been forced to. They had come to trust him well enough to follow without question...*serious* questions, at least.

This latest business was a different matter, of course. He was handing them a permanent criminal accessory record and the destruction of their positions as they knew them and had asked them to accept it out of hand. For his part, he promised to make certain they all would have positions after his sentence was served, on the Guerdon or somewhere else. But their present livelihoods were very likely over.

Maryl finally frowned. "That's it?"

"Yeah, that's it," Tom confirmed.

"I don't like the idea of having to be shipped far away from home to help serve your sentence," she told him.

B'Elanna blew a breath. "It's not like you're being kept close by on Cardassia Prime," she snapped. "We'll get off easy with post-sentence assistance thanks to his connections, so shut the hell up and deal with it. Tom's put his life on the line for us over and over again. The least you can do is take a vacation."

"Well, I didn't say I wouldn't!" Maryl insisted, then shrugged. "I didn't like that woman, either, Tom, so you go do what you need."

Tom couldn't help his grin, though he managed to press it down a little.

Savan bowed her head briefly. "This is unpleasant; however, we were a part of the initial arrangements and so bear some responsibility. Moreover, you must do what your conscience demands."

"It can't be any worse than being in this region lately," Nadrev said.

"Guess I get some real oysters, soon, too," Ridge put in, giving his captain a smile. "You're doing all right, kid." There, he laughed. "And besides, we've done a lot worse before you! We'll get by just fine. Like the ladies say, you look out for you for a while."

Tom's smile warmed. It still amazed him sometimes; he couldn't have asked for better friends, but got them, anyway. "Thanks."

Slowing to cross a junction, B'Elanna's hand turned within Tom's. She felt the length of his fingers, their warmth and softness. He did not try to squeeze or play, but held on all the same. She glanced up to

see his gaze set straight ahead, easy, almost relaxed. He didn't try to talk, joke or work off any nervousness, because there wasn't enough there for him to be bothered by.

The captain sighed and frowned when she accepted the incoming transmission. In the middle of all the last minute nonsense and the latest news from home, she really didn't have time to listen to more glibness from Tom Paris. But she went to her desk anyway and steeled her neutrality as she flipped on the monitor.

"Captain Janeway," Paris greeted with a quick nod.

"You wanted to speak with me?"

"Yeah. Look, I appreciate all the arrangements you and your people have done on our behalf, but I'm afraid you'll have to go it alone. I have no love for the Maquis, but I don't think it's right to help you, either. We will not be joining you today."

Her brow rose. "I see."

"Don't bother sending security to get me. I'll handle that on my own."

"I will be certain of that," Janeway told him.

"That's just fine. Just give me an hour to contact my parents and get my things together here. --And do whatever you feel is best with the Jildwan court when you get back. I'll accept whatever they decide, as will my crew. Not that we have much choice, but you won't get any argument from us."

Janeway looked long into the other man's straight, unabashed face. No sarcasm had touched his tone that time; instead of challenging her with his stare, his eyes were calm and sure. Instead of being half-reclined in his seat, he sat straight, his chin up. He obviously thought the matter out and knew what he was doing. Unfortunately, it wasn't what she wanted. But she couldn't control that, anymore. Maybe she never could. Either way, she'd have to make do with what she had.

"I'm sorry you won't be able to assist us," she finally responded.

"Good luck to you, Captain Janeway," he said, sincere in that wish at least, considering where they were going.

She accepted it with a quick nod. "And to you."

They came around another bend and the first of the kiosks. The station bar was nearing. In a few minutes, she would have to turn back around for the berths. The transport they were fictionally going to take back to Bajor was going to carry her after all. She would meet Nadrev at the main gate then return to the Guerdon to wait with the others for their orders. None of them knew how long it would take the authorities to do what they needed to do, or if they would be jailed, or simply put under guard, if the ship would be left at Bajor, or ferried somewhere. If anything unnerved her just then, it was not knowing

what to expect there. Thankfully, she had some errands to do to pass the time.

"I don't know why you insist on spending half the day staining your hands when we have a perfectly good replicator."

Carol sighed and continued to squeeze the berries between her strong fingers. "You know perfectly well my shortcake is ten times better than anything a program can do."

"That's what *programming* is for, Carol."

"Oh, and who's going to do that programming to my satisfaction? You?"

"I might, given the time."

"The last time you put a recipe in the box, all I got was a pair of elastic gloves!"

"That was a simple error in the sequence--" Owen stopped when he heard the beep. Trying not to sigh with relief--he knew his wife had already won that debate--he stood and moved to the little monitor. Activating it, he glanced at the header. "It's a message from Tom."

Carol turned. "They haven't set off yet?" Taking a towel from the side of the sink, she wiped off her hands and came around the table. "I hope everything's all right."

"Could just be sending a letter from the ship."

"This is Tom we're talking about, dear."

"Hmm. Well, let's see." Owen initiated the playback.

"Hi Mom, Dad," said Tom, trying for a little grin. "Just wanted to give you a little heads up..."

"Uh oh," Carol muttered.

"Mm hmm," Owen echoed.

The hazy light of the station bar soon found them, warming the colors of their clothes, drawing them to look in. The Ferengi owner had designed the frequency by hand, probably, so to elicit that very response. Tom wouldn't be surprised, anyway. His memory easily recalled the lousy, watered down ale and bad food, but also that the place was always packed.

The owner was there, too, leaning in on his evening snack: A dark haired ensign with eyes larger than the coasters on the counter--and growing still as the Ferengi pulled his trap door shut.

"*Warned*--about Ferengi, were you?"

Tom snorted. "Here we go."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "He's at it again."

"Slurs!" the bartender spat. "About my people. At the Academy."

The young officer paled. "What I meant to say was--"

"Here I am trying to be the cordial host, knowing how much a young officer's parents would appreciate a token of his love..."

"Oh God, that's just too much," B'Elanna snickered then peered up at an equally diverted Tom. "Think we should we do something?"

"Yeah, hang on a second," Tom said and stepped into the bar. Reaching in a bowl for a stale nut and waving off the other bartender's attention, he stopped a few stools down and waited. He didn't need to wait long. Quark's dramatics quickly grew to a fever pitch; the young ensign before him was about give birth to an ulcer as he sputtered everything but his ID number. A year and a bit ago, Tom would have ignored the sight--as did most of the other patrons--but now his curious mix of amusement and pity couldn't go untreated. For that matter, it wasn't as if he'd be back at that station any time soon.

"They're not for sale!" Quark bellowed, sending the young ensign digging into his pockets. "Now, inform your commanding officer that the Federation Council can expect an official query from--"

"How much for the entire tray?" the ensign interjected.

"Cash or credit?" Quark returned.

On that beat, Tom leaned over the end of the bar. "Those are really pretty, Quark," he observed.

"Thank you," said the bartender quickly, his eyes still pinned on his prey.

"I shipped three flats of these from Kytrel a few months ago," Tom went on. "Jilda paid about fifteen strips per crate. A little steep, I thought, but she likes the Volnar lobis the best to aerate her hydroponics flats. Are you dealing by the flat or the gross?"

Quark grinned at the ensign. "Don't mind the captain there. He's just a low-grade trader trying to slip in on this precious commodity. Speaking of which, I believe we were about to negotiate a price?"

The ensign looked up at the fair-haired captain, who raised a brow at him. Looking at the bartender again, he reached out and pushed the case away.

Tom chuckled and threw a few strips of latinum on the bar for the Ferengi's trouble. "See you around, Quark," he called behind him and rejoined B'Elanna, who stood, arms crossed and laughing at him.

"You just *had* to waste good latinum on that," she admonished.

"I'd pay more for less entertainment," Tom rejoined, casting a glance back at the younger man, who had lead the way out but stopped not far outside of it. Tom gestured back at the bar. "Didn't they warn you about Ferengi at the Academy?"

The younger man laughed and walked out to him. "They did...um, Captain...?"

Tom nodded. "Paris."

"Thank you for that, Captain Paris."

"No problem. Everyone gets sharked stationside at least once." Wrapping his arm around B'Elanna's waist as they headed a little further out, Tom gave him another look over. "Let me guess: You're on the Voyager."

"Yes, sir."

Tom opened his mouth to excuse the ensign's formality, but then he decided not to mind. "Excited?"

"Yes, sir. I've been looking forward to this since...well, for a long time."

Tom drew a long sigh. All the passion, desire and newness, written all over that kid's face... He laughed a little at himself. *It's weird when you start thinking them young.* But the ensign was young--by way of fresh, with everything ahead of him. He plainly wanted it, probably worked hard for it. That had to feel terrifying and exciting and wonderful all in the same moment. Tom only briefly recalled feeling like that, long ago, and indeed, it left him feeling very much like the grand elder, there. But that was okay. He wouldn't give back what he had now, even that day.

"It's the best time of your life coming up," he finally said. "Enjoy every second of it, Ensign. You won't regret it."

The young man seemed a little surprised by the sudden turn of topic, but he didn't argue it. "Thank you, sir. I'll...I'll try."

Tom laughed. "It's probably time for you to report for duty."

"Yes, sir. You're right. Thank you sir."

"Good luck."

With a polite nod to B'Elanna, the ensign turned and walked straight-backed down the promenade.

"Ensign!" B'Elanna called.

He swung around. "Yes ma'am?"

"The berths are the other way." He looked around and scowled. She grinned. She had turned the wrong direction at least a few times on her first visit there--though she never admitted it to anyone. "Wait over there a second. I'm going that way, too."

As the ensign stepped over to where she pointed, B'Elanna looked up at Tom. Reaching up to cup his face in her hands, smiling as his fingers caressed her brow, her cheek, her mouth, she pressed herself against him.

Tom then sifted his fingers into her hair and pulled her to him. Kissing her openly, feeling her soft lips against his, then pressing his mouth to her cheek, her jaw, her neck, he suddenly felt his heart pounding. He breathed against the rush of blood, let her bring his face up again, kiss him once more. He returned it, stroking her soft curls, brushing her shoulder, taking her small, strong hand into his, then finally forced himself to take a step back. She did the same.

With a small squeeze, Tom let her hand go and nodded. B'Elanna's lips turned up as she nodded back.

With that, she turned around to find the man from the bar waiting and trying not to stare. Straightening her back, sucking up a fresh breath, she propelled herself forward and in the correct direction. "This way, Ensign," she told him, in no less firm a tone than she might use with Ridge or Nadrev.

Tom looked after her until she was gone around the turn. They had decided before that it would be easier that way. In truth, he just didn't want her to have to watch.

He turned around.

Across from Quark's bar and down not a quarter section sat the station security office. It was barely an office from the look of it, though, just a hole in the wall with a panel spread, a desk and a couple chairs. It seemed just enough to fit the man who worked there. Tom had only met the chief of security a couple times before, once in passing during a registration mix up, and then again when there was a problem with a conversion scale. Even then, Tom hadn't dealt with him directly. That had been Maryl's job on both occasions. But he remembered the man's face and name.

"Officer Odo?"

"Yes." He turned from his panel and examined the man in the entryway with a sweep of his gaze. "You may come in."

"May I sit?"

"Certainly," said the security chief with appropriate amounts of both curiosity and caution.

"Thanks." Moving around to one of the chairs before the desk, he took a deep breath and lowered himself into it.

In his turn, the chief claimed the seat behind his desk and folded his hands upon it. "What can I do for you today?"

"You can call Starfleet Command and tell them to prepare a cell for me. My name is Captain Tom Paris, and I'm turning myself in."

XIV. The Lot

"Please turn."

She did as asked and looked at the dot as the scanner flashed over her eye three times, taking a thorough reading.

"Thank you. And your authorization card?"

She pulled it from her pocket and set it into his waiting palm.

"Thank you. This way, ma'am"

With that, B'Elanna Torres was admitted into the central division of the Auckland Penal Settlement.

With a breath, she turned to follow the guard into the dome-topped transport, telling herself not to cross her arms or shuffle around. Taking a step back and grabbing the handle, she kept her eyes on the main installation as they quickly started forward. The civilian complex looked as it should: slick walls on a boxy frame, low to the ground, surrounded by visible forcefields--and likely several more that couldn't be seen. Surrounding it all were lush green grounds, enormous, billowing trees and a bright blue sky above; the water reflected it perfectly. The birds swooped and teased, and squirrels jumped and scurried. The air was warm and a little wet. It was a perfect spring day.

She hardly thought about it.

It's going to work out, her mind reiterated instead. A little more time, a little more patience...

A whizz of energy rushed through the cabin, then the plain-toned, "Clearance accepted."

She could still hear the nagging buzz of the forcefield long after they passed through it. That they made it so obvious annoyed her even more. Though she had built and rigged many, she had never liked them. Ships depended too much on fields and too little on good layout, which would prevent the need for all that interference and wasted energy. Also, they were too easy to bypass. Having directly passed through so many of late made her even less enamored with them. She truly never wanted to know one was around her again, unless it was on the outside of a hull.

How she hoped she'd get to work on a hull again--especially the one they'd had to forsake to the will of two governments. They seemed all too determined to leave their futures in the air until they were forced to call a shot.

But she shook her head at that, as it was long out of her control--had it ever been in her hands.

But it will work, she promised herself yet again. Nothing was impossible if she simply believed in what she wanted. She'd proved that already, twice over during their time on Earth. She'd tripped--she was at least half human, after all--but she got up with no more damage than a little dust on her knees. With but a little impetus, she was able to go forward again without berating herself too much.

Now it was time to take another step.

Looking back, she didn't have to wonder why she was all too ready to take it.

"*Mister Paris' record is clear. His irresponsible conduct and lax ethics have easily extended to a complete disregard of Federation law.*"

Several rooms away, B'Elanna snorted.

They weren't permitted to attend the sentencing because of their security issues, his complete admission of guilt and the JAG finally choosing a closed court session due to the relationship of the guilty man to a high ranking Starfleet officer. Instead, they were magnanimously invited to watch the neat little circus from a nearby chamber as they waited to see what their own future would be. The five of them hunched around the wall monitor and stared at the scene as though it were cliffhanger holo-fiction.

Tom sat on one side of the room with an assigned representative; the JAG was flanked by disapproving officers on the other. How low this wellborn kid had fallen, they seemed to say. The prosecutor naturally became their voice. Look how Admiral Paris' troubled son had finally been caught in the safe nest of Starfleet before he could do any more *real* damage, the prosecutor asserted, then suggested they protect themselves and prevent similar outrages by showing their Federation that birth will not spare any guilty party from justice.

"I shoveled fewer kilos of crap on the farm back home," Ridge said, waving a finger at the slim, neatly tucked commander as she circled the room. "She's trying to make him nervous with all that. --Good luck, ma'am."

"It is not uncommon for legal experts to attempt to make the accused respond through such methods," Savan told him.

"It's a waste of time," Maryl said. "They can't accuse a man who confesses. He's already said he'll take what they give."

"They want more," Nadrev shrugged, "and they can waste whatever they want. We're in their territory."

B'Elanna felt her heart sink every time she looked at Tom's face, set firmly, eyes straight--taking it head-on, indeed. To his strength and his credit, he gave them absolutely nothing, not even a smirk, to counter. He told them nothing but the facts--what they already knew, then resumed his silence. They tried to prod him again; he looked unconcerned. It was beautiful.

"He'll never give them what they want," she stated, then straightened as the officer walked another circle and offered a small monologue that B'Elanna hardly heard but for "independent ships posing a threat to the future security of the Federation." With that, the argument was finally closed. The JAG looked over his information for several minutes before looking across the room to Tom.

B'Elanna's breath caught as she leaned toward the screen a little. "This is it."

"*Thomas Eugene Paris,*" the JAG said, "*you have confessed to the crimes of treason, willful dealing in contraband and shipment of materials and weapons in violation of the Federation-Cardassian Treaty of 2370. You are hereby sentenced to twelve months imprisonment in the high security Auckland Penal Settlement, after which sentence, you will be required to serve an equal portion of residential-based parole.*"

A year in hack, another at your parents' house--so there, B'Elanna translated.

"*Your otherwise irreproachable record and personal habits have mitigated your sentence, but let me personally express my feelings of surprise and, may I say, disappointment in seeing you in my chambers this afternoon under such circumstances...*"

Tom hardly blinked at the condescension, but B'Elanna knew how hard it had to be for him. Once again, his people were slapping him in the face and seeming to take every advantage of the opportunity he'd given them.

"*Your sentence will begin without delay. Your crew will be contacted and informed of their particular sentence. Your trade contract will be settled upon Captain Janeway's recommendation to the Bolian magistrate at Jildwan. This trial is adjourned.*"

Standing and shaking his assigned defense representative's hand with a quick nod, Tom moved at the security officers' gesture. As he passed it, Tom gave the security camera a wink. B'Elanna breathed a little laugh. He knew she'd be watching if they let her; she knew that gesture was for her. B'Elanna almost reached out to the monitor in reply, but he was gone before her hand left the table.

Twenty minutes later, the JAG's lips twitched up to sentence the rest of the crew: twelve months at the parole facility at Sedona.

They soon understood his sardonic amusement. Parole was a euphemism for what they got. In reality, they were assigned to a low security detention center--which in fact was a mental torture chamber for most who served time there.

Eighteen other ships' crews had been stuffed into the facility by the time the Guerdon's crew joined them and greeted them with no more than a dull look-over. They did not ask what the crew had done, nor did they care. They had already been forced to busy themselves for months on end with little more than newsfeeds, simple projects and sleep. It was mind-numbingly dull. Unfortunately, a falling out there only landed perpetrators in a real prison. Used to much the same lifestyle that the Guerdon's crew was--constant work, little sleep and little routine outside station procedures--parolees determined not to make things worse for themselves were soon half-mad for nothing to do but watch the time pass while knowing their lives would probably never be how they had been before.

B'Elanna was the first to follow them to that point.

"God damned Federation..."

"Prophets, not again." Her head pressed firmly against her palm as she turned her eyes up, Maryl hissed through her teeth. "Do I really have to listen to this for a whole year?"

"Eleven months, now," Ridge mumbled from his chair by the window as he tapped on a puzzle.

"...sticking us here with nothing to do but watch the sky go day to night. You'd think we'd be better on

a work detail."

"Get a hobby, B'Elanna," Maryl griped as she picked through a pile of book PADDs then looked over at Savan, who as usual was reading. "Has she been at it long?"

The Vulcan did not respond.

"Why should I have to *be* at anything?!" B'Elanna demanded and swung around for another lap around their common room, her security anklet slapping viciously against her leg. "They stick us here so we'll be *completely* useless when we get out--and *won't* get back to what we're able to do! That's their tactic, and we'll end up with no more promise than any other frontier slag scratching around for work. I've been there. It's nowhere I want to go back to."

"You're right. Maybe some memory games," Maryl said. "I'm sure there are a couple in the community hall Digto hasn't eaten yet. --And he's probably better company than Engine Specialist Take His Crap and Deal with It." She got up and left.

"Federation assholes," B'Elanna continued as if the Bajoran hadn't been there. Staring at the window as she passed it, the only thing holding her away from it was that she knew the fields wouldn't let her go through. "They're so happy to keep people like us on their leash."

That time, Savan looked up from her PADD. Only her eyes followed the wildly pacing half-Klingon, and her mouth did not twitch but to say, "You did not hesitate to reap the benefits of what the Federation could offer in better times, B'Elanna."

Stopping on a dime, she whipped her glare back to the Vulcan. "What?!"

"We are serving time for knowingly committing a crime against the Federation. I also do not agree with their policy, but as a Federation citizen, I must respect it. We all must. There is no other choice. However, I agree that inactivity can be debilitating. I can only suggest that you would benefit from occupying your time more productively, as your current route of expelling your energy is...increasingly useless." Returning her attention to her PADD, she added, "Shall I bring you the newsfeed when it arrives?"

Throwing up her hands in frustration, B'Elanna strode toward the personal quarters. "I'm done with all of this," she spat. The moment the hallway surrounded her she stopped. Sucking a breath, hissing it through her teeth, she turned and pressed her back against a wall only to stare at its peach-colored counterpart.

As always, Savan was right.

"Damnit."

Another week of restlessness passed before B'Elanna was given good reason to take the advice. Two days after that, she shared it.

With good behavior and cooperation at Sedona, parolees were permitted a three-hour day leave once every two to three weeks. B'Elanna spent one of those leaves each month visiting Tom at Auckland. According to Carol, it had taken some very quiet wrangling on the admiral's part to allow a parolee to visit her fully incarcerated captain, but the admiral saw some use in it, so the strings were pulled and B'Elanna was admitted to the public visitor's room for an hour.

Following the guard from the transport to the visitor's room, B'Elanna stuffed her hands into her

pockets and tried not to look around. Though she'd been there already, it was hard to ignore the place. Deliciously green, she could not see the next building--the main administrative building that fronted the actual penitentiary, through which Tom would pass to get to the civilian complex. Instead, she saw the trees swaying with the breeze, tickling the sunlight through the leaves on the deep green ground and throwing ripples of light on the deep blue lake beyond.

The memory found her, then, and she didn't have to wonder why.

She saw the lake they'd sailed on at Ulinas: that deep purple-blue water, surrounded by those gorgeous hills and glades and rippled by a gentle wind just right to speed their little boat.

How handsome he'd looked there--still a little pale and drawn, but he was so alive that day, too. A few weeks into their relationship, he'd confessed he hadn't been hitting on her "in the formal sense," but he really had wanted her to respond to him. His hair had turned in the breeze, his eyes had sparkled with his sudden mischief, and when they sailed, she'd heard him laugh, fully and freely, for the very first time.

Well, not for the first time, she smiled to herself as she walked into the visitor's room.

Not in all her dreams had she expected to be so completely captivated by any man--particularly without wanting to be. Finally free of the acrimony that'd plagued the ship for two months since Jerod's death, the last thing she'd expected was to fall for the man who'd been at the center of her anger. She'd finally put it aside, not bothering to figure it all out. But she *had* responded to him, at first with some mild repartee and then as a friend. Those feelings had nothing better to do but grow from that point--as had his feelings for her.

To that day, though, every time she closed her eyes and thought about him, she remembered that smile in his eyes, and that laugh, the wind and the waves rushing around them. The memory always made her heart beat a little harder.

A completely different façade met her at the visitor's table. Her mouth fell open when he dropped into his seat.

His eyes were dark-circled and distant; his mouth was flaccid. His hands, so strong, so agile, were pressed flat on the table just before the forcefield. His posture was loose. His skin was pale. Rubbing the anklet against her other leg, B'Elanna could have sworn she was looking at him the week she came aboard the Guerdon, and she hated Starfleet all over again for it. Of course, anyone might have expected he wouldn't be having as easy an experience as the crew was at Sedona. Auckland was very pretty, but Tom was in full lockdown and assigned to a daily work detail. Still, he looked like he was brushing up against death again, which should *not* have been predictable.

"What the hell happened?" she asked.

"Another Maquis," he said, his voice quiet and hoarse, "pushed a little too hard. I couldn't stop myself." He sighed, shaking his head at the memory. "I just got out of solitary yesterday. I had to beg to see you...really beg."

B'Elanna felt a shot of pain in her chest. Without having to ask, she knew he had to have hated doing that. And yet, he had done it--and admitted it to her. She drew a deep breath. "You shouldn't be treated like that," she said.

"I punched back," Tom muttered, already finished with his feelings on the matter and too tired anymore to complain. "I got what everyone else gets. I didn't deserve anything less. The other guy got

the same."

She blinked her acceptance, shrugged slightly. It was as surprising to her as it was an issue with him. She knew one of the Maquis would jab him the wrong way eventually. Even if he'd done right by Chakotay, Tom had been "fired" by a Maquis captain and thus suspect. Every inmate there knew it within a week of his arrival.

Sliding her fingers distractedly over the smooth glass tabletop, B'Elanna nodded and found his gaze again. Though exhausted, he seemed to have needed a confirmation that there indeed was something on the other side of his sentence. She knew the feeling. A week after Savan's pointed correction, B'Elanna had remained prey to hopelessness, convinced in turns that they were going to be released into complete uselessness, then realizing the place was getting to her, only to go to sleep and wake up to the same mood.

Or she had until she'd plopped down into a free room chair and heard the news Starfleet had finally declassified, which subsequently swept over the entirety of the Federation she'd been cursing. Weeks of agitation were replaced by numb shock over torrents of what-ifs. Now she got to pass on the favor.

"Did you hear about the Voyager?" she asked. "Are you allowed feeds in here?"

He shook his head. "What happened?"

"They released the news to the public last week. Janeway and her ship disappeared in the Badlands. They went in on schedule and never showed up again."

Tom's face flushed. "Oh my God."

"They've been listed as officially missing," she went on, her gut twisting a little to relive her own first reaction in his expression, "but the word is they're just gone. There's no trace of the ship."

He coughed an ironic laugh at that. "I can't help but feel a lot better about being here," he remarked. "I'm sorry for the people aboard and the families, but...that's almost too hard to believe."

"Yes." B'Elanna touched the edge of field, letting her nail activate it slightly. Pulling it away, she caught his attention once more, held his somber gaze. "It puts a lot in perspective."

"It does." Leaning back, he shrugged. "But I knew what I was in for when I turned myself in, B'Elanna. We all knew what'd happen. Well, maybe not Sedona, but we knew it wasn't going to be a party. Still, I guess I can't wonder anymore if maybe we should have gone along after all, if I'd have saved us a lot of pain, even when they... I wouldn't wish that on anyone. They were just starting out, just beginning." His stare turned down. "That kid at Quark's. Remember him?"

"I thought about him too," B'Elanna admitted, unwillingly recalling her goodbye and good luck to the young ensign at the fork that split the transports and the Federation berths, his polite but real smile and thanks. Kim. Ensign Kim. Remembering his name, she couldn't put the memory away again. "He probably worked from grade school up to get where he was."

"But you know he knew the risks of going out there. We all do. Just that he was so new, with everything ahead of him, all his plans and expectations..." Shaking his head, he leaned forward to set his hands near B'Elanna's again. "A lot of perspective."

Her eyes remained closed the entire transport back to Sedona, her arms crossed, her breath deadly still. How stupid she felt for thinking before the trial they had a handle on it, that simply to be proud and

strong would take care of their situation. All parole had made of her in barely six weeks was a whiny engineer with strung out nerves and nothing to do. But how much worse it could have been... She felt like an idiot.

Without a doubt, Tom had done the honorable thing and she would never regret supporting it. That had not been in question. But the boredom *had* gotten to her; the attitudes of the officers and that JAG had rubbed her badly and left her bitter for remembering them. She craved her work and usefulness, her lack of sleep, her constant fussing over a warp drive that really wasn't worth fixing for all the failures soon to repeat themselves and a ship that'd never really seen a better day. The replicator still spat lousy food and the corridors were as dingy and worn as they'd ever been, the engine room was a nitpicker's nightmare, and still she wanted nothing more than to get back to it all someday.

The ship in question was sitting at a drydock base in Manitoba, hibernating as they festered. Even with Janeway out of the picture, they still didn't know if they'd ever get their license back, or what would happen to the ship. It technically belonged to Tom, but they could revoke his rights to it if Starfleet suggested they should. Like Starfleet, Bolarus had complete control of their fate. In a way, they always had, and she was just imagining they had any control at all.

And then she knew she was letting it all drag her down. That Tom *didn't* do as they requested this time, he'd freed himself from the many hooks waving around him and bought them a free pass in the bargain. Once their sentences were over, ship or no ship, they would be able to walk away and have no one pulling their strings again...so long as they didn't break any more laws or get anywhere near the Maquis.

And they were certainly better off than those poor people on Voyager, whom they had almost joined. There was no way B'Elanna could take anything for granted anymore, knowing how they must have perished. She knew what those plasma streams could do. It wouldn't have been quick.

So, she returned to her cubicle bunkroom and finally pulled out the bags she'd been allowed to bring from the Guerdon. Not bothering to activate the lighting, but relying on the stark sunbeams piercing the filtered glass, B'Elanna pulled out her clothes, boots and some of her personal effects and finally put them in the provided drawers. On the rail above, she hung up her coats, her three tunics, three trousers and the long sweater Carol had bought her when they'd gone out shopping. She folded her dresses and good nightgown into a side drawer. She then set her work boots and "regular" shoes all underneath on the racks. She pulled out the soft, gray-blue coverlet that she'd taken from Tom's bed, running her nose against the fleecy edge and taking in his scent before setting it on the nearby bunk.

Sliding the bag across to set at the end of the wardrobe, she heard a clunk and a light beep. Furrowing her brow, she knelt and reached in to see what it was.

It was Tom's travel sack. Tom used it every time they went "shopping" on the bases; B'Elanna had known it from their first expedition together on Podala. Before he turned himself in, he'd asked her to go by his quarters and pack it with her things. She'd just managed to grab it and the blanket before the guards came, so she'd never looked inside. When she did, she instantly knew why that old-fashioned bag had been on his mind.

"Computer, lights to full," she ordered and waited the few seconds it took for the room to brighten.

"At least you won't be wasted here in the meantime," he'd said the day he'd hired her, turning his eyes down and away, trying for indifference when in truth it was all he had left to hope for.

The PADD was old, dented, hardly able to upload without whacking it on its side to get the lines to

knock together right. She'd often chided Tom for not getting rid of the thing. To B'Elanna's surprise, however, it powered on immediately and was ready for input--and it had quite a bit more on its bank than even she was aware of. Feeling very much like she was reading his diary, she ignored the twinge in her gut and absorbed everything she saw. Page after page, file after file, specs, schematics, depots, analyses, costs, priorities...

"I just got to thinking that you'd be happier if you had a challenge that was possible to meet--or at least tempting enough to try."

"How right you were, even then," she whispered, touching the screen, then shutting it off.

Looking around that spare, plain room, her brain began to click, and her eyes found the window, the stark blue sky beyond it.

It was possible...

They weren't permitted much in the way of equipment and no communications save one ten minute communique each week, but they did have access to the general systems there and, to her amused relief, pencil and paper. *Tom would be so proud*, she'd grinned to herself when she pulled what she needed out of the replicator. She ended up using that to transcribe everything she could and the center's rudimentary computer to make what calculations she needed.

With just that much, her mood improved dramatically and her sleep shortened by a couple hours. She used the extra time well. It didn't take her long to learn at Sedona that there wasn't much more for any engineer with naught but megajoules of unspent energy to do but plan and plan big--and trust it might see the light of day.

It was her only way out of there with her wits in tact.

The framework drawn, her mind set, she finally decided to share.

"So what's this?" Maryl asked tiredly. She'd hardly spoken to B'Elanna in two weeks--also bored to tears and still angry.

B'Elanna set the paper presentation on the table before them. "Our new hobby," she began and grinned as they all leaned in.

Such was her plan, so complete and encompassing, that even her precious off time was soon spent on it. B'Elanna didn't have to wonder why. She never had faced projects and problems halfway. It was either full force or not at all. She had more than enough time to immerse herself just then, too. There was only one hitch in the process, but she quickly figured out how to get around that.

When Carol finished wrapping her anklet snugly against B'Elanna's leg, she glanced up to see the younger woman's reaction. "What do you think?"

B'Elanna grinned and shook her leg a little to test it. The pesky anklet stayed perfectly in place. "That was a really good idea," she said. "Thank you."

"No sense in having a run if you can't enjoy it. So where to today?"

"How about the park? Officer Hassert says there's a good café on the other side of Piney Ridge, just inside of town."

"Sounds perfect."

With that, they started on their run through the facility grounds, the morning sun low in the pink-orange sky behind them. As they crossed over the cypress-lined sand and scrub grounds to the back gate, B'Elanna regularly looked over at the blonde-haired lady who knew everyone. Everyone she knew knew everyone else, too. B'Elanna was counting on that truism. As they finally came out of the back of the facility, cleared their exit with the guard there and immediately found the park trail they'd chosen, B'Elanna finally slowed their pace a bit.

"I need to ask you about your friend Tisho Kea," she said.

"Oh?" Carol puffed, casting a curious eye her way. "What about her?" "It's something I'm working on."

"You found yourself something to do at last?" Carol smiled.

B'Elanna looked ahead again, barely seeing the firs passing them on either side. "Tom never got a chance to tell you about it--not in detail. But do you remember that old PADD he carried around when we visited?"

Carol laughed. "Yes! Leave it to Tom to find the oldest workable technology available."

"Well, I have it now, and we're using it."

"What has this to do with Tisho?"

B'Elanna sped their pace again and pointed down the ridge trail. "This way."

"Let's go," Carol replied and followed the younger woman's lead.

So they enamored themselves to their new goal, and they cooperated around the facility in every way possible to earn their rights to interfaces they could actually work on and more time on the free room simulator. Some other volunteer work paid off in other ways. Maryl and Ridge were permitted to take their leaves together as a reward. Savan was permitted to attend a series of science symposiums, which ran long and several days together. Nadrev was granted leave to take classes at a nearby university. B'Elanna earned another few hours of leave, which she applied to dinner with the Parises on two occasions and her visit with Tom, who had made some turns of his own.

After the solitary experience, he'd insultingly followed through with everything he was told to do and did it with intent to impress. He'd worked to the bell, volunteered in the mess and even assisted new inmates. It was insulting work and it was sometimes hard to say, "How can I help?" every time they approached him with a job, but he'd gotten through it, day after day, and kept himself busy in the bargain.

By the fifth month there, Tom was resigned, tired of the game but trudging along to make the most of it, keep his morale in check and retain his right to see his girlfriend every few weeks. Her fingers at the forcefield, resigned as well to withhold the crew's surprise, B'Elanna wished more than ever she could give him the physical support she knew he liked to back up all her words.

He seemed to understand. A couple times, he teased the forcefield, gesturing towards her face as if to caress her cheek, his gaze intent and locked onto hers, his lips turned slightly up. How well she knew that look, how firmly ingrained her memory it was... She left Auckland that day wanting him so painfully, she briefly considered what it might take to break into the place.

Thankfully, she needed to take no such steps. A message from the admiral arrived soon after she returned to Sedona and everyone from the crew was invited to hear it. It was about Tom--and positive news for a change. His good behavior, hard work, previous clean record with his ship and, finally, a signed agreement to not return to the DMZ region knocked his sentence and subsequent parole in half. His crew, equally productive and clean, would enjoy the same benefit.

"Maryl, Nadrev," Owen continued, "as Bajoran citizens, you will have the right to return to your people's territory if you choose to serve your probationary period there, but your travels will be limited to the Bajor Sector until the Provisional Government sees fit to release you to extended travels." He bowed his head slightly. "I apologize this could not be negotiated."

Maryl smirked. "Thank you, Admiral, but I don't think we'll need to worry about that. I think I already have a deal to work out there."

Ridge snorted and rubbed her back.

"I will remain with the Guerdon," Nadrev told him, then shrugged, "if there's still a Guerdon to report to."

Owen sighed. "That is still undecided."

"In other words, locked up in the Bolian courts," Maryl stated with a quick nod. "Can you tell me who's judging the file?"

"I can provide you with a name," Owen told her. "Though I don't see how it would be of any use to you now."

"Just get me the information, please," Maryl replied. "It may well not be any use to me, but I'd hate to not have the opportunity to insult the Jildwan one more time."

B'Elanna still hadn't said a word. She heard the voices around her, but her thoughts easily overtook them.

It was done. They'd be free soon. It was over...

She hadn't wanted time to accelerate so much in her life--not until she realized how much they still needed to draw out in those few weeks left to them. Not that she minded a little pressure, but they'd been purposefully taking their time with it before. The moment the connection was cut, B'Elanna had the PADD in her hand and was on her way back to the free room, motioning to Nadrev and Ridge as she passed. They shrugged and trundled along after her, as though they really *were* back to work.

Four weeks and three days later, she woke in Tom's bed at his parents' house. Stretching every limb, she could feel her unbound leg first, then the softness of the sheets; then she felt the dream return--him there, embracing and kissing her, feel his warmth bathing her, his skin sliding against hers... Then she could see him as he was when they pressed together that last time on Deep Space Nine. She shuddered to think that a man had been able to make her feel like that...but she was damn glad he could, too.

In less than a half day, it wouldn't be a dream anymore.

Sliding out of the bed, she flipped the comforter back into place, then walked over to where she had her clothes laid out. Quickly getting into the leggings and undershirt, she poked her feet into her shoes and slid on her long tunic. Closing the seam down her side, she brushed down the lightweight fabric and curled her toes in her shoes. Stepping back to assess the result, she grinned and nodded.

"Good," she said to herself, looking particularly at her feet.

Aside from the smart new tunic suit, she also was finally free of the security anklet, which had at last been removed the day before. To her disdain, she had learned that Tom would have to wear his for another three months as he served his first stage of parole. So into her bag went the stretch bandage Carol had brought to Sedona for their jogs. It did nothing about the weight and feel, of course, but at least it prevented the chunky ring from bouncing around.

Then again, at this point a security necklace wouldn't get in my way, she smirked to herself.

For that matter, B'Elanna knew none of their feet were going to be much of a concern. She grabbed the badges she'd been sent and double checked her cards, then slipped through the door for the front stairs. She was down the flight and passing the living room seconds later.

"I'm going!"

"When will we see you, dear?"

"Tomorrow, about the same time, I think."

"Don't forget to contact me when you get there."

"I won't."

"Good luck!"

Admiral Paris peered over the top of his PADD as the lithe figure strode away, grabbing her sweater off the rack on her way out. The front door hadn't closed behind her before her feet hit the sidewalk. "I don't know why we can't be there to greet him."

Carol gave her husband a belabored look. "Owen, it's been over six months. What do *you* imagine he'll be thinking about ten seconds after his discharge is finalized?"

Owen turned his eyes back down to his work. "I still think he should come back here, be with his family."

"I think that beachside rental should be just the thing to take the damage," Carol rejoined. "Besides, it's lunchtime there. B'Elanna got a nice long nap before you got home, so they'll have a lovely day, stay overnight and come back here for lunch tomorrow..." She gave him another look. "...just like we planned."

He shrugged grudgingly. "Not that I had a say in it."

Carol rolled her eyes and returned her attention to her letters. "Moirra and the boys will be here for the weekend. Should I order something special?"

Owen grinned. "Local's fine, Carol. We have enough special coming by."

"Yes, we do," she said and sighed a happy breath.

"Please wait here. The processing has not been completed. Would you like someone to come for you when the release has been finalized?"

Having stepped off the transport directly into the facility waiting room, B'Elanna nodded. "Yes, thank you."

Seconds later, she was alone in the boxy, marble-floored room. There were windows in all directions but one. The benches were plush blue vinyl. The scanners in the room were so powerful that she could feel her nape hair tingle. B'Elanna began a slow pace around it all, glancing out the windows. The lawn was so green, the air was crisp and fresh with the last sheen of the cool morning dew... His voice as she last heard it echoed in her mind, making her heart beat a little harder in anticipation.

She recalled so clearly their mutual resignation, though she to her guilt had procured some measure of hope on the outside. She thought at first to save sharing it with him until later, but then had decided that maybe he needed something else to hope for, too--even if it might lead to some disappointment....

"Miss Torres?"

She turned quickly around. "Yes?"

The guard motioned with his tricorder to a PADD in his other hand. "I'll need you to sign in and verify your identity once more if you are to traverse the facility."

"Is there a problem?"

He shook his head. "Just a code mix up. It shouldn't take long to reapply for your clearance badges."

She grinned a little to herself and approached the officer to give him another scan. He thanked her, apologetic for the wait.

"It's not a problem," she told him. "I came early."

"Good planning, that," he said pleasantly. "It shouldn't be long, ma'am."

She nodded and let him go without another word. She could afford to be generous, as the guard's manners had a satisfying aftertaste. It was not the first time she'd been there, after all, but the reception certainly was different now that she was a regular citizen...again.

Turning another lap, she felt all over again how much she wanted it to work--and that *that* was the real source of any remaining anxiety. Now that she had something tangible to work towards, now that they were moving on to that next thing, she really wanted it to work as she saw it. But then, she did not doubt that no matter how it panned out, they'd *make* it work.

She'd tripped, but she hadn't fallen again. She was stronger than that now.

So she took a deep breath, let her shoulders fall and smiled to herself. *Not a bad two years' work, really.*

B'Elanna's attention snapped up when the door on the other side of the room swished open, but seeing only the guard pass through again with but a glance her way, she resumed her pacing. Stopping to turn, she gave into temptation and rubbed her ankle against the other one. It felt great to have nothing there,

but she was still getting used to that.

The door opened again.

"Miss Torres?"

B'Elanna now saw an older guard at the entrance, her face set in perfect firm neutrality. In a blink, B'Elanna knew the woman was from the main facility. "Yes."

"This way, please."

She followed the guard out of the hall and into the bright green park. Shaded with long, leafy trees, it bridged the area between the civilian center and the main administrative building, from which Tom had been led for each of his visit sessions. B'Elanna had a couple of times watched from the window as he was guided through, his hands in magnetic cuffs, his mouth straight, his eyes pointed concertedly down, giving away nothing. She could almost see him on the path still, not seeing her as she neared. Blinking, the image faded and she turned into a shady grove with the guard.

A meandering path wandered away, went around, split then turned over a hill, completely burying the former building and almost making her wonder for a moment if they'd left the settlement without her knowing it. Finally, as they rounded another row of firs, she spotted the administrative building; short and glassy, it tried to fit in with the beauty it had invaded with only partial success. The path they were on led straight toward the main entrance.

B'Elanna kept her eyes on it as they neared--focused so much, in fact, that she at first didn't see the man standing at the corner of the grove, arms at his sides, looking at her. Another glance corrected her, though, and she coughed a laugh to realize that she was seeing the real thing.

It was Tom, dressed in the same clothes he'd worn the day he surrendered himself on Deep Space Nine, his hair trimmed short and his face a little gold from his work outside.

Feeling her breath catch, she stopped. But as soon as the guard stepped back and away, B'Elanna started forward again.

Tom wasn't nearly as distracted. As soon as the guard backed off, he quit his pause and the building behind him, not bothering with a smile or even a blink as he sped to a stride. They easily cut the distance between them, forgetting the sidewalk and crossing through across the thick, moist lawn. Seconds later, he grabbed B'Elanna into his arms and kissed her soundly. She gasped and held on when her feet left the grass.

He swung her around in the momentum, opening their kiss as he felt her arms sliding around him to squeeze him even more tightly. His own hands could not be enough places at once, but settled on her hips as he relinquished her again to her feet. Breaking away from her, Tom touched her face, her mouth, slipped his fingers through her thick hair and over her strong, slim shoulders. Then he smiled, breathing a laugh. She was everything he wanted and expected to see--but even better now.

"Thank you for coming," he finally said, then kissed her again. "Thank you."

She couldn't help her amusement at his relief. "Did you think I wouldn't show up?"

"Every catastrophe came to mind last night." He nuzzled his nose against her ear. She'd used that herb-based shampoo, he could tell, and that sesame oil--and the thought of soon catching the tinges of it on his tongue made him a little dizzy. Straightening again to smile down to her, he remembered all over

again how beautiful she was and how incredibly lucky he was. "Even just now when I saw you, I thought I could be dreaming."

"I told you I'd be there when you got out," she reminded him.

"And I know I woke up today."

"The day's just started," B'Elanna smiled, sliding her hands into his and giving him a playful nudge toward their destination. She had what she'd been waiting for; now it was time to go. She was more than ready to take those first steps--the first of which leading them out of that place. "But you'll have to tolerate another day of captivity."

Tom's brows rose with his grin. "I'm all yours," he returned and gladly let her lead him back to the civilian center and the waiting guard.

Another round of choice was poured for each at the large, glass-topped iron table, which was nestled on the far side of the sun-dappled patio. They all were glad they'd chosen to keep it simple and leave the reunions and celebrations at the Paris house. The city was far enough away that only the occasional transport could be heard, and the weather had grown warmer and pleasantly moist that afternoon. The gathering was almost as nice as knowing what B'Elanna had waiting in her pocket.

"I could almost forget it all and stay here," Ridge smiled, holding Maryl in his arm.

"You said the same thing about the Bayou yesterday," Maryl scoffed.

"Yeah, I guess anything beats Sedona."

"Or New Zealand," Tom grinned and leaned back to catch a peek of sun when the clouds briefly revealed it. He got plenty of sun working outside at Auckland, but the cool San Francisco rays were always welcome on his face.

"I found the Arizona climate hospitable," Savan told them all as she looked out at the yard she had only heard about, eyeing the interesting flowers and vines in the nearby garden. "Incarceration would of course render any location unpleasant."

"You don't say," Ridge chuckled and raised his glass. "To hospitality, then!"

Maryl eyed him. "To getting off this grassball."

"To beginning anew," Savan added with a nod her captain's way.

"Now that's a toast," Tom smiled and drank. Then he regarded them again. "I know I put you all out, doing this. I'm grateful to you."

"Well," Maryl shrugged, "some good's come from it, I guess."

Ridge looked expectantly at B'Elanna. "Speaking of which..."

Finishing off her lemonade, B'Elanna set her glass aside. "You want me to go first?"

"As if you could wait any longer," Ridge clucked.

She gave him a look as she got to her feet. "We've been busy enough since yesterday to stave off any extra impatience."

Tom chuckled at the reminder, but then realized that he wasn't in on all of it. "What's going on?" he asked, raising a brow toward B'Elanna as she took a step away from him and stuck her hand into her sweater pocket.

Glancing over at the kitchen door, she nodded to the people coming out--Carol and Owen with trays of appetizers in their hands, which they deposited onto the buffet before finding a seat. Moira and her family followed.

"Is it time?" Moira asked, pulling her little boy onto her lap after claiming the lounge swing. Her parents settled into the thick cushions of an adjacent sofa when they saw the other woman nod.

Tom's grin grew. "Okay, what?"

"Just a little surprise," Ridge goaded.

"A small diversion," Nadrev added.

"Quiet, you two!" Maryl hissed, then looked up at her friend. "Go, B'Elanna."

"Well..." B'Elanna began, moving around to where they all could see her, even as her eyes remained on Tom. "The first time I had dinner on the Guerdon, I still had the mobile regenerator patch on my knee and bits of Mesler's engine under my nails, and I was already talking about getting into the engines for all the mess they were and for all I wanted that open job. I was with Ridge and Maryl and you were sitting with Jerod, talking about getting parts and your never-ending search for a navigation upgrade that'd suit you. You were ribbed pretty good for it, too."

B'Elanna smiled. "But for all I didn't trust you then," she went on, "you said something that never left me, not in all the ups and downs between us. You said you'd been forced to accept a lot by being the Guerdon's captain, but there were some things you never would give up on. And you never did--on more than what you were talking about just then."

She walked back to Tom and pulled her hand out of her pocket.

Tom looked down and saw his old PADD. At her nod, he took it, turned it on and saw the turning graphic--his ship...with over three thousand design annotations. Furrowing his brow, he looked at B'Elanna again.

"The navigational upgrade was the one thing we *didn't* work out," she told him, her voice warm as his expression reflected his understanding. "I know I'm breaking my contract there, but that part of the deal is just going to have to come out of your share."

Tom blinked. "You mean you..." He looked at the graphic again.

"There was no way I could get it all on *that* piece of junk," B'Elanna chided and pulled out a slick new PADD from her other pocket. "But you'll find this one has everything you need to know about our plans--*your* plans, Tom."

"All of it?" He still could hardly believe it. He'd been working on "the list" since he'd gotten the Guerdon four years ago. He'd plotted out everything he thought could be done from the hull to the isolinear nodes--and had even entrusted a good portion of that list to B'Elanna in her contract, hoping but

never expecting more than a quarter of that would ever be put into action. "You developed *all* of the upgrades?"

"All the specs are in and check out." She gave the PADD to him, looked up into his shining eyes. "You're free, just the way you wanted to be. It's time to make your dream happen."

Coughing a laugh, Tom said, "It's not often when I don't know what to say, but..." Looking at the pleased faces around him, he drew a deep breath and continued, "Thank you."

"So I take it you don't mind," B'Elanna joked. There, he laughed fully and embraced her, feeling his heart thrum for all he knew she had to have done in only a half a year. They *all* had to have worked their asses off to complete the specs alone, much less line up the requisitions and begin to make the Guerdon everything he'd thought it could be, if only they had the right parts and opportunity. "You're just..." Parting just enough to gaze down into her shining eyes, he continued, "Really, that was the best thing you could have done for me...besides showing up."

"Then you don't mind having to deal for the nav array yourself?"

"Not if I actually have a place to put it," he returned, half serious.

"Yes," Owen said, reaching out to pour himself a glass of lemonade as his son finally released his girlfriend to look at him, "well, your contract liaison seems to know a few people on Bolarus."

"If yelling at them counts as knowing," Nadrev added under his breath.

"She spoke with the court officials and it seems that your contract had little contest, son. The license is under reevaluation as your precise business must necessarily change. But should you find yourself an acceptable occupation and use of the Guerdon, I can see no reason for the Jildwan Court to withhold your rights to it. It is in their interest for the ship to remain in service."

Tom stared at him for several seconds as that next surprise registered. Janeway was gone--never had the chance to follow through on her threat. Probably for good taste alone, no one else wanted to take her place in pushing for a full denial of their license. If omission had ever blessed him before, it was nothing compared to that stroke of ironic luck.

"I am certain you will find some acceptable choices on this side of the quadrant," the admiral continued, "if you look hard enough."

Tom snorted. "You just had to get one in, didn't you?" he joked.

Owen's mouth turned up on one side. "I'm not exaggerating, son."

Carol rolled her eyes and laughed. "I give up."

Still in Tom's arm, B'Elanna peered up at him. "Actually, I was waiting for you to be able to help me," she said, "since I'm losing my assistant." Her smile faded slightly as she looked over to her tech. The brawny, dark skinned man returned a look of such sincerity, a little lump betrayed her throat to see it. But taking quick breath, gesturing his way, she finally opened it up to him. "Your turn, Ridge."

Tom turned his attention the tech's way. "What's going on *now*?"

"Going away is a better way to say it." Ridge gave him a sheepish grin. "Sorry, Captain, but it's really Maryl's fault," he said. "I just fed her fresh oysters. She did all the work."

"Shut up!" Maryl admonished.

Tom looked at them, almost figuring it out, but not quite ready to guess. He waited for Maryl to show him some mercy--or, more accurately, more impatience.

"It seems we won't be able to join you for this next leg, whatever it is," she told him. "Ridge finally had enough of a break from that deathtrap of an engine room to get me pregnant."

Tom's dubious expression melted into a big smile as he moved around B'Elanna to hug his contract liaison. "Maryl, that's great!" Turning, he gave Ridge a firm embrace as well. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks, buddy," Ridge grinned, "We *are* sorry to leave you like this, right now with everything changing and all. But Maryl's due in only a few months and they need the job she's taking filled right now. We have to get cracking."

"You know I'm not going to mind in the end, considering the reason." Still, Tom sighed to think on the rest of it. "But God, losing you *both*? What are we going to do without the two people who got me aboard in the first place?"

"Oh, don't worry about that," Maryl dismissed. "I've had a couple of weeks to arrange some interviews. You know I'll find you live bodies whenever that's needed."

Tom chuckled. "Yeah."

"Unfortunately," she went on, "with a ship like the Guerdon in this well-polished neighborhood and not being able to confirm any contract will go through at all or even the nature of our business, I only had a few people show. There'll be a couple of second interviews if B'Elanna lets you alone long enough. Meanwhile, I'll be deserting you to start working with my sister on some reconstruction projects on Bajor. They need a provisions expert."

"You'll have no problem there," Tom assured her, glad to hear that much at least.

"Yes, I think it'll suit me. I mean, this *is* a nice place, but..." Maryl paused to grin, allowing at last a flash of sentiment to creep onto her features. "Well, maybe it's time for me to start helping my own people get back to this point, now that I know what this point looks like."

Tom's smile broadened, his moment of selfishness melting away. "You'll be great at it, Maryl," he said sincerely. Then he looked at the tech beside her. "What about you, Ridge?"

"Homemaker!" he laughed. "I've been on the go since I was fifteen. About time I settled down and got boring."

B'Elanna rolled her eyes. "You don't get to retire yet," she told him flatly, "not after all the work I did with you. Expect your primers on a monthly basis."

Reaching over, Ridge squeezed her shoulder in his big hand. "Can't wait, Cricket."

"I hope you're not cutting your losses too," Tom said to Savan as he set their work out on the table the next morning and she inspected one of the copies, preparing for their revised crew meeting.

There were no shares to divide, or even a ship to get back to, but there was a good deal of business

nonetheless. Not two days out of Auckland, reunited with his girlfriend, family and crew, Tom was glad to get back to it, too--to something resembling the work he knew. He'd been cut one hell of a break by being let out as soon as he had been, and he wasn't about to waste a minute of it...though in a fleeting moment he *had* been tempted to send the JAG a bunch of roses and a Valentine's card.

All night long, they had talked, plotted and got some more input from his parents. After a long goodbye to Maryl and Ridge, who needed to catch the transport leaving early the next morning, they continued to send out communiqués, make a few inquiries and read over the terms of his parole again. He was permitted to work in prearranged locations eight hours daily outside of his assigned residence during that time, but he had to remain on the North American continent. Tom saw no problem with that.

"Mom can't send me on errands, too," he'd grinned in afterthought.

Still restless and overtired by the time they wandered up to bed, he and B'Elanna had considered if their only real route of "business" would be worth their full attention. The prospects she and Savan had looked into earlier were mainly technical and development assistance to the various projects and societies throughout Federation territory, connections Carol had been helping B'Elanna establish. Neither opportunity seemed like necessarily exciting work, though--even less so than the long, boring legs on the border, but it was an occupation so Tom would take it. Still, his ideas on how to occupy himself without neglecting that concentration had quickly begun to fester.

"I'd like to get into programming again," he mused aloud, a little sleepy at last. His old room, barely lit, had grown cool and a little damp from the weather outside and the bathroom moisture, not yet quite dissipated. After showering, they'd jumped into that fluffy comforter set, shivering at the feel of the soft cloth against their bodies before they pressed together. Everything still had a delicious feel about it; they could hardly get enough. Not that Tom had once tired of the feel of her warm, dry skin against his, or the singular pleasure of running his hand around her lower back and over her rump. He merely had come to appreciate it even more, having been deprived of it.

"You're good at it," she agreed, molded against his side and dreamily watching the moonlit fog roll by outside the window. It never failed to mesmerize her. "I'm good at it, but it's my field. You have an instinctively visual mind; it's part of what made you such a good pilot. It'd be worth developing, seeing what else you could do with it."

He grinned at that. "Yeah, maybe some holo-programming, too."

Sighing a small laugh at his characteristic bent for a little fun, she shrugged at it a moment later. "I don't see anything standing in the way. If I can go after my engineering certifications on the side, I'm sure you can manage another degree or two."

He paused there, looking at a little lump in the comforter he guessed was her foot. "Funny, I ought to be terrified, but I'm anxious to see how it goes."

"I am too."

"Kind of nice, isn't it?"

Her hand moved over his taut midsection then moved teasingly downward. "So is this," she smiled and leaned up to nuzzle a kiss underneath his chin when her hand reached its destination. Her tightening grip and his pulling her on top of him had immediately dropped the topic for the time being.

The next morning before breakfast, he slipped into his father's office and requested the information on

courses and programs from a few of the better technical institutes on Earth. *No better way to spend parole*, he told himself. *Scam for a first rate navigation package to adapt to the Guerdon and get another education.*

Then he laughed and added, *And get our staff back to six...or maybe even seven.*

Before those prospective specialists showed up, however, the crew still needed to decide on their formal charter. Whatever they came up with, they would need to run it by the Jildwan after finding someone to make the initial deal with them. B'Elanna and Nadrev had started on that problem as soon as breakfast had been completed, leaving Tom and Savan to set up and wait.

"It was bad enough reneging Maryl and Ridge's contracts," Tom continued, "but if you're planning on doing something else, I'd like it if you let me know now."

The science technician raised a brow his way. "It would be no more productive for me to continue my studies elsewhere," she informed him. "Also, I am interested in this new direction we are considering. It would be an adequate means of continuing our practice and would utilize talents I believe we have not had the opportunity to fully visualize."

Tom nodded. "Yeah, you're right. Even so, I never thought I'd miss the route as much as I do sometimes still."

"You miss the route, I believe, for having little else to replace it at this time."

"You really think we'll get our contract rewritten and turned back, then?" he asked her.

"It is hopeful."

"Then I guess we are," Tom returned. "You haven't been wrong yet."

"You suggest I leave myself the opportunity to be ignorant of the obvious," Savan replied with hardly a glance at his responsive chuckle. Taking her seat at the far end of the table, she folded her hands. "In the interim and thereafter, our proximity to Starfleet Medical has encouraged me to continue my botanical studies through a series of joint fellowships, which I believe will not impede my work upon the Guerdon."

"Like I'd care if it did," he dismissed. "Set it up however you want...*when* we get the ship back."

The Vulcan blinked and assented with a single nod.

"That'll be soon!" B'Elanna announced as she and Nadrev came out of the kitchen door. Striding across to Tom, she looked over at Savan. "We can contact the Jildwan representative and transmit our proposal for discussion. I think we have our deal."

"They took it?" Tom asked, looking down at the PADD she'd brought with her.

B'Elanna grinned. "You were right. Mingling at your mother's party was worth showing up."

"You arranged Marciano's proposal? Great!" Of all the ideas, working with Marciano was the most appealing. He liked the idea of being affiliated with the Daystrom department director, as anything involving Daystrom meant a steady influx of long-term projects. For that matter, his mother wouldn't have kept the man as a friend for over thirty years without good reason.

"And Professor Kea," B'Elanna confirmed, nodding. "We'll definitely need to finish the upgrades before thinking about *that* leg--and a complete revision of three hold sections, per their requirements--and we'll have to have the wording and the actual charter for the Jildwan settled before they're able to reissue the application. But I think it can be done." There, she smirked. "Maryl would be so impressed with herself for everything she taught me."

"How far *is* Deep Space Six?" Nadrev queried. He had not thought to ask before.

Tom snorted. "About as far away from Cardassian territory as we can manage inside the Federation," he answered. "We'll need to bring a *few* books for that trip." Though lightly put, he was excited about what he saw on the PADD, despite or perhaps because of the added changes to the Guerdon. If all went as planned, even the ship's designation would need to change. "So we'll be running civilian physicists and technicians out to the science stations in that sector."

"And letting them work while they're aboard," B'Elanna finished, "along with shipping their supplies and equipment, maybe do some courier work between the points."

"Don't they have people doing that already?" asked Nadrev.

"Starfleet's busy elsewhere right now," Tom reminded him and gave B'Elanna a look askance. "We *are* going to need a few more redesigned areas, though. We'll have to take out the whole of deck three forward."

She cut a look his way. "I'm sure you're disappointed."

"Devastated," he returned, already rethinking the entirety of deck three. He'd wanted to tear that place apart since Jerod was killed there. *And I know exactly where to put the holodeck*, he added to himself with a wistful grin. *He'd have loved that.*

"That in mind..." B'Elanna looked at her remaining technician. "I'm sorry to have to do this to you, Nadrev, but you'll need to move up a notch and become my primary assistant. You deserve it--and then again, you don't."

Nadrev chuckled. "I'm happy to be grateful and insulted," he accepted.

"I don't know if I'll find someone else I like around here, though," she sighed then cut her eyes at Tom. "Maybe you'll do for now."

"Hell no," he returned. "I'll be busy flying the ship."

"They call it autopilot for a reason, Tom," she deadpanned.

"I'm sorry, but that's just not in my contract," he rejoined. Looking at Savan, he asked, "Did you send the request?"

"We should have our reply soon," the Vulcan answered.

"So we stick to the..." He glanced through the schedule Maryl had meticulously written out for him. She always had been convinced he was unable to manage a day on his own. "So we're interviewing for the new contract liaison first?"

"If I may suggest," Savan said, "operations manager might be a more fitting title in our new charter. It also opens the position to more technical responsibility, coordinating the various departments, passengers

and projects, should this deal be finalized."

Tom nodded and tapped the information in. "Has a nice ring to it. You'll work that into the license?"

"I shall."

Tom poked at the PADD again and raised his brows. "Well, whatever it'll be called, they're late. Can we write that into the description, too?"

"What, Paris?" called a voice behind him. "Prison's made you a dog for the bell?"

B'Elanna and Nadrev laughed when Tom's eyes closed and another smile crossed his lips. "Maryl *did* have to dig deep," B'Elanna told him.

"You people are just too much," Tom said and turned around to see Dejin Hirro leaning against the fence beside the gate, arms crossed and grinning from ear to ear.

"Let's get this straight," the Betazoid stated. "I won't be chained to your little temple of love forever, but I need to bide my license prohibition without killing some people for stealing my ship. So I'll get you restarted and reorganized, wait around a few years then help you find a new sucker for so-called adventure--that is, if you don't mind a crusty old hag telling you what to do."

"And I thought I'd never be able to replace Maryl," Tom quipped and gestured to a seat nearby. "Welcome aboard."

Dejin immediately gave up the fence, moving around the table to take the seat on the other side of Tom. "So what's first?"

"This," Savan said, rising. "B'Elanna, we may speak with the Jildwan representative now."

Tom waved them off. "Dad said to use his office. Let me know when you need me. I'll catch Dejin up."

"It'll probably be about a half hour," B'Elanna said.

"Whatever it takes. Do you need me to contact Marciano at any point?"

"As soon as we're done with Bolarus. --Right, Savan? You two can start her contract." "Sounds great." Tom turned his attention back to Dejin. "You know I'll be tough on you, right?"

"It'll make you more fun to break," Dejin replied gamely, leaning back to consider the drink choices on the next table. "So what's this B'Elanna's got up her sleeve with upgrades? That sounds like fun."

"More than you know." Tom gazed across at the engineer in question as she and his science tech went inside. "You know, I had no clue how it was to really love someone until I loved her," he said softly. "And she's proving why I fell so hard for her all over again. I still can't believe everything she's done about the list. When you see it, you'll understand what I'm talking about. Then again, she knew what it meant to me to see it actually happen...what it could mean to all of us, I guess."

Dejin nodded, eyeing him wisely. "I guess you're already broken in, then."

He grinned. "Damn right I am."

"Just as it should be," she said approvingly, "and about time, Tom." She patted his arm. "Well about time."

Four months to takeoff.

Tom poked at his arm panel until it creaked up. He cast a sidelong look at the old monitor as it slowly powered on.

It was convenient for all involved in the deal, really, to start the Guerdon's new charter off with some cushion for preparation. Crunching a good deal of numbers--and a few heads while she was at it--B'Elanna managed to rework the priority list and, with Tom's input and Savan's careful eye, get deck three's rebuild underway first. After she had completed arranging the layout and new systems with their contractors and shifted focus to supervising the grunt work, Tom took over handling the arrangements with Marciano and Kea.

That part of it was even more gratifying than he thought it would be. Now that the excitement--and anxiety--of freedom was settling down and his crew had been revised, he felt like he was in control of his destiny again for the first time in over one and a half years--if not several more. For months after his agreement with Chakotay, Tom had been nagged by his trepidation, correctly believing that he'd be tagged for his involvement eventually. But having come clean and served his time, and now that he was waiting out his parole, working on that dream with B'Elanna and submerging himself in his new education, among the many other personal milestones he'd faced of late, Tom faced that next step in his life with a strange feeling of disassociation at first. He quickly and gladly adjusted to his new reality, however.

Once he and Marciano had gotten on track and the final contract had been signed off on, workers had begun to come like army ants to the Guerdon. With B'Elanna and Nadrev's direction and their occasional help, they'd torn down bulkheads, rerouted endless system bundles and relocated the many massive hold casing blocks. Deck three had once housed their best holds; they would now be housed on deck four. Two new lifts had been installed so the personnel in transit could traverse the decks more efficiently. Tom had dismantled and recycled the old one with a whistle and a smile. For her part, B'Elanna had taken her best laser ratchet to the Guerdon's main computer with great pleasure, wishing Ridge were there with her to personally rip it out.

Hearing her comment on that, Tom had sent him and Maryl images of B'Elanna shoving a section of the old ODN off the deck four ramp on an anti-grav. "Look what you've reduced us to," Tom had joked in a caption, "removing systems with technology. Shame on you."

Awaiting the new ODN unit, B'Elanna, Nadrev, Dejin and their new assistant tech, Compton, had then started in on tearing the engine room apart, front to back. Between meetings and his own installation work, Tom had resumed his old habit of coming to the deck one overhang to check on them. Unlike in the past, however, he'd smiled down at them. Theirs was the best noise he'd heard aboard the Guerdon in a long while, that organized chaos his engineer was conducting. He always looked forward to joining them in it.

Just then, however, the ship was silent. All systems but general lighting and the temporary ODN were inactive at that time.

Tom was settled in his seat, tapping through his antiquated monitor to upload some navigational stats onto a datachip they'd be taking to a better computer. The GNS unit he'd secured would definitely not have ever worked on the Guerdon before, but with the expansive upgrades, he was able to look for

exactly what he wanted. It was without question the best parts hunt he'd ever been on. Because of his choice, they had to make a few adjustments to the nacelle design and forward frame, so he and B'Elanna had the added fun of haggling over those changes together.

Sitting on the support bracket beside the seat, his elbow resting on her thigh, B'Elanna looked on. His hand drifted aimlessly over her knee as the numbers slowly fell into their destination; then he leaned back. "It's going to take a few minutes, with that ODN," he said.

"Everything's rerouted through the safety lines, too."

"We have the time," he shrugged, relaxing in the old cushions. It felt good to be back in the one comfortable piece of furniture original to the ship.

"I'd like to get some food soon, though," she admitted. "I could eat those iso-bundles over there."

He glanced up at her. "Didn't you have lunch?"

She pursed her lips. "I might have forgotten what time it was again."

Tom grinned. "But you're always so punctual."

"Ridge isn't here to remind me anymore."

"Yeah, let's keep blaming him," he nodded. "It works so much better that way."

She poked him in the shoulder and leaned back against the cross brace. The data transfer chugged on, but didn't offer any noise. Instead, a faint creak or beep from time to time echoed in the space, then a panel reset chirped behind them--sounds they never heard when general systems were operating. It was odd to B'Elanna, who thought she knew every peep of that ship by then. Then again, she did now.

"You know," he said quietly, breaking the void, "every time I sit here and it's really quiet like this, I remember that fight we had at Andal." He laughed quietly. "You really took a few chunks out of me that night."

B'Elanna colored. "I try not to remember that." "I like to," he admitted. "It reminds me how glad I am things changed."

"You have a funny way of appreciating what you have," she joked, sliding down into Tom's seat when he eased her closer.

"Keeps things interesting."

"As if nothing else does."

He laughed again. "Point taken." B'Elanna leaned into his arm to watch the remaining numbers go by, cluster by cluster. And her mind did go back to that fight on the bridge when they were on Andal, exhausted and angry and set to detonate. But then she recalled the look in his eyes when he caught her in his arms the day the Maquis boarded the ship, and then the time Tom and Jerod tossed rhymes back and forth until Savan looked as though she would implode. Then B'Elanna could see her first time on that bridge, en route to Podala, so consumed with proving herself in the face of her remaining frustrations and insecurities...

"Come on in, B'Elanna. --All the way in. Don't make me make it official."

"You'd think she'd wilt if she gets too far away from the warp core."

B'Elanna leaned her head against his shoulder, her eyes continuing to follow the scrolls. "I'm glad things changed, too."

He gave her a squeeze. "I know."

Finally, it completed. The moment it beeped, Tom plucked the data chip from the socket and pressed the monitor into its base. Sliding the chip into his pocket, he turned to press a soft kiss upon her lips and then rose, helping her to her feet as he straightened.

"For that matter," she continued as they moved around the station, "with everything we've started here, once all the upgrades are done and the runs become regular again, I'm sure we'll still have something to do."

"With our luck, the work will come to us," Tom noted.

B'Elanna grinned. "The Guerdon's always made sure we stayed so lucky."

"In every way possible," he agreed. Slipping his fingers around hers, he started them up the stairs and to the exit.

As they passed into the corridor, he gave the bulkhead an affectionate pat.

Ten years later, the ship was still steaming and its panels, now makeshift, were blinking inordinately when she fell into her favorite seat. Both the furniture and its occupant were shredded with age and care, but that was no secret, so she wasn't ashamed. The fact that both still existed after so much abuse was blessing enough. That the ship wasn't in a thousand pieces was quite simply a miracle.

She tried not to close her eyes; if she did, she knew they'd still be trying to wake her up a week later. She couldn't remember the last time she slept more than a few hours.

Instead, she raised her filthy arm to her head, willing herself to cool down. It had to be forty degrees on that deck, heat easily earned after the coolant assembly chose to malfunction in mid-trip. Her mind drifted back to those brisk mornings in San Francisco, and that green lawn, crisply dressed people and clear blue sky...soon to be hers again at last. It only mildly distracted her from the heat and stench for a moment, until another panel started to whine again.

Opening one eye, she peered over at it. It had already burnt itself out, however. It hadn't taken out anything along with it, though, so she didn't bother checking it.

I'll get a sonic shower soon, she sighed to herself. Now that all her big hopes had been paid off at last, the simple ones had room to breathe again.

She could breathe again, too.

Finally, it was over.

Not that she expected an actual break, but she resolved not to complain when she heard the footsteps at the entrance of the room. Among a great many other conveniences, most of the automatic doors had been disabled a couple years ago in a last ditch effort to squeeze every joule of power back into their systems. "Yes?"

"Sorry to disturb you, but you might want to see this."

"They're here?"

"We're here," he replied, the smile returning to his voice, "and they're meeting us."

"On my way." Pushing herself to stand, she followed him slowly onto the bridge, where on the viewscreen, a sleek Excelsior-class starship sat before them. Moving to the center seat, she lowered herself into it. Grateful and relieved as she was when they'd finally had to stop, she was too exhausted to pretend she wasn't. "Open a channel," she said to the Vulcan behind her.

A moment later, a slim, oval-eyed officer in crisp gray, black and red appeared before her, smiling proudly as he met the eyes of each person there. Indeed, he knew all the faces--at least from afar and a decade in the past at that point, right down to the former issue uniforms they still wore. Those same faces were haggard and dirty, still full of the fight they had waged on so many fronts to get themselves on the track to get home. It made that moment even more rewarding, though. The odds had finally been turned in their favor.

"Good afternoon, Captain Janeway," he said with a respectful nod. "I am Admiral Dokaru of the Federation Starship Berlin."

"It's good to meet you at last, Admiral Dokaru," Janeway said warmly, her gratitude resurrected upon registering his polite address, having waited so long to hear one like it in person.

"I'll bet it is." Leaning a bit forward for emphasis, he said, "A quarter of the fleet is closing in on our coordinates, but they will not arrive for another day. I suspect you might like, for how far you've come already, to bridge the distance to Earth yourself. May we be of any assistance in your repairs so that you may do so?"

That time, the captain's heart re-warmed enough that she had to breathe against the flush that followed. "I would like that very much, thank you, Admiral."

Dokaru gave his first officer a nod. The officer immediately tapped into his console and nodded back. "You'll receive a request to access your aft docking latch in a moment. We're seeing power fluctuations on that deck. Is the dock functioning?"

"Kim?" She looked over at her ops officer for a confirmation. The man gave her a quick nod. "One of the few things that are right now," Janeway replied lightly.

"Captain," Chakotay breathed from the engineering station. Scowling, then blinking, he glanced up to find Admiral Dokaru's grin aimed at him.

Dokaru returned his full attention to Janeway. "There were many groups working on the Pathfinder Project, Captain Janeway, one of which was quite anxious to be in the area when you planned to engage the last leg--one of our independent development vessels." With another nod, he added, "They helped to adapt the tunnel and anticipated most of your immediate repairs. Please let me know if you need anything else."

Janeway looked at Chakotay and the admiral in turns. "Thank you Admiral," she said and looked at her first officer with some impatience. "What is it, Chakotay?"

"This." He cut the transmission and zoomed in on the approaching ship. But even he started back at his first glance. It certainly wasn't what he expected, having seen the signage.

It was a boxy, freighter-type ship, no more than four decks deep, and it might have been ugly had its nacelles not been rebuilt to stretch generously out on gracefully-designed pylon arms, or its gray hull not been replaced with a slick, silver-blue duranium shell. Also gone was the stubby stem the former Maquis knew all too well. A sleek nose, lined with impressive sensor equipment and a compact forward deflector, now graced it from bridge to keel. As it gracefully banked and set itself up for docking, showing its smoothly angled starboard and running board loading dock, Chakotay's lips fell open. Indeed, the battered old Bolian freighter had quite likely been rebuilt from the screws.

"We are being hailed," said Tuvok from his station.

Chakotay got to his feet and moved beside Janeway as she found herself on hers.

The viewscreen had come on, revealing a civilian couple, one apparently Human and one part Klingon. Not yet forty, dressed neatly but also for work and standing in the middle of the well-appointed bridge, they stared back at the weary Starfleet crew much as Dokaru had. They too had been working the numbers for over six years to get the Voyager home, it seemed. They too were seeing a dream come true as much as Janeway was feeling it--and also a stab of déjà-vu as the faces filed through her memory. Then one of their voices found her ears...

"Captain Janeway, it's good to see you again."

Her brow drew down. "It can't be..."

"Tom Paris," nodded the man, his eyes crinkled with his grin. He rubbed the back of the well-rounded lady beside him, who released a satisfied breath as she took in the sight. "You might remember my wife, B'Elanna Torres?"

"Welcome home, Captain Janeway," said Torres, "and you too, Chakotay."

"Good to see you've been making some progress," the ex-Maquis returned.

She patted her belly with a laugh. "And some! But they're with their grandparents this week. We're here on a special run."

"We knew that tunnel would give you a rough ride," Paris added, "so we brought some provisions to get you going again. We're still the craggy old freighter on one deck at least."

"We're glad for that today," Chakotay grinned.

"Well then," the other captain smoothly returned, "let's get started." As Torres turned to direct her waiting assistants, Paris headed back to his seat, tapped open his console and glanced at Tuvok. His lips turning up as he transmitted the formalities, he looked at the other captain again. "DSS Guerdon requesting the honor of docking clearance."

At last, Janeway felt her smile press into her sore cheeks. "Granted with pleasure, Captain Paris."

"See you in a few minutes, then," he nodded, steering his ship into position with a brush of his fingers.

"Guerdon out."

Thus far have I proceeded in a theme,
Renewed with no kind auspices: --to feel
We are not what we have been, and to deem
We are not what we should be, and to steel
The heart against itself; and to conceal,
With a proud caution, love or hate, or aught, -
Passion or feeling, purpose, grief, or zeal, -
Which is the tyrant spirit of our thought,
Is a stern task of soul: --
No matter,--it is taught.

And for these words, thus woven into song,
It may be that they are a harmless wile, -
The colouring of the scenes which fleet along,
Which I would seize, in passing, to beguile
My breast, or that of others, for a while.
Fame is the thirst of youth,--but I am not
So young as to regard men's frown or smile
As loss or guerdon of a glorious lot;
I stood and stand alone,--remembered or forgot.

~~Byron

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Feedback is the only payment a fanfic writer can receive.