Stars in a Ruined Sky

by CaptAcorn

Summary

An AU version of the season 5 episode, Timeless. B'Elanna Torres was more than content running Voyager's engine room -- even before she dropped out of the Academy, she hadn't cared much for the idea of command. But now, abandoned by their captain and stranded on a desolate planet, Voyager's crew needs someone to lead them. With their ship destroyed and little hope of rescue, can B'Elanna help them all survive? (This story is complete, and will be updated 2-3 times a week)

PLEASE SEE AUTHOR'S NOTE IN PROLOGUE RE: CONTENT WARNINGS.

Notes

A huge thank you, as always, to my trusty beta, Sareki. Once again, she pushed me to make this story far better than it would have been otherwise. Photogirl1890 turned her eagle eyes on it, too, and thank goodness for that because man, I miss a lot of typos. And, as usual, I don't own any of these characters. I just like to torture... er, write about them.

This is a grim story of survival. As such, a lot of terrible things are about to happen to these characters. I know a lot of readers are worried about getting involved in a story that may upset them. On the other hand, many people don't like spoilers. As a compromise, as the end of this prologue, there is a note listing possible triggers that may give away important plot points. You can choose to skip or read it as you like!
Prologue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Only that the world out there is complicated,
and there are beasts in the night, and delight and pain,
and the only thing that makes it okay, sometimes,
is to reach out a hand in the darkness and find another hand to squeeze,
and not to be alone.”

- Neil Gaiman

Prologue

It’s a rare, brilliant afternoon. The air is crisp and clean, and the sharp scent of conifers fills my nose as I take a deep inhale. Even the ever present cloud cover has taken a day off – last time I saw a sky this blue, it was holographic.

It feels like a tease. One last taste of what we’ll all be desperately missing a month from now, or maybe sooner. Per Seven, we can expect a nighttime frost by next week.

But, for this particular moment, it’s glorious. I have to get outside for a minute, feel the wind ruffle through my dull, greasy hair and let the sun’s radiation warm my sallow skin. It reminds me, a little, of a long ago day – when hope was real and tangible, and not a long forgotten notion.

It was at the beginning of my failed tenure at the Academy. I was visiting MIT. They were developing a new circuitry model — one that, ironically, would be the forerunner of the bio-neural gel packs used on Voyager — and I’d been assigned a paper on ‘innovations in computer processors.’ Not the most gripping of topics, but back then, even the driest material seemed exciting.

My research could have easily been done in San Francisco. There was no reason I had to see the circuits in person. But it was my first time on Earth (as it turns out, my only time on Earth) and I was hungry and optimistic. I was going to be the first Klingon Chief Engineer, or maybe head up R and D at Utopia Planitia.

Everything I saw was a revelation. The lab’s facilities were cutting edge. Professor Eze was brilliant and kind, and encouraged me to apply for a summer fellowship. A glance around Cambridge revealed a haven for non-humans. But, oddly, what always stuck with me from that day was the weather.

My roommate had warned me the New England climate was terrible. She was a California native, from New Los Angeles, but had an uncle in Connecticut. “The winters are nasty, the summers are
humid and miserable. Why anyone would choose to live there is beyond me.” She’d always been kind of a whiner.

Which is maybe why her uncle had never invited her in the fall. My trip was in October, on a quintessential autumn day. The sun shone from a ciel-blue sky dotted with just the occasional cloud. The trees were awash in orange and red and gold. Eze and I walked along the Charles after he’d shown me around, and we followed our noses to a little farm stand selling bags of apples and freshly baked cider doughnuts. It was nothing like the continual mist that hung over San Francisco or the dry, relentless heat of Kessik, and I loved it. As I transported back to California, I was already plotting out a way I could do a joint degree with MIT and the Academy.

But though the sky above me now is a similarly pristine blue, and the sun is shining more strongly than I’ve seen since we crashed some eight months ago, I don’t feel much like the B’Elanna of that perfect October day – the one who thought her life was finally getting started. I’m feeling a lot more like the B’Elanna from the following January, when Cambridge was buried under a half-meter of snow and ice. The one that was suspended for breaking a TA’s jaw and missed her fellowship interview. The one that felt like every door had been slammed shut and had discovered yet another place she couldn’t make work.

Because I’ve been staring at this damn computer modeling for five hours straight and nothing has changed. I’ve tried tweaking every parameter, cajoling every algorithm, outright begging for a different answer. It always comes up the same.

It’s not fair. We’ve survived so much. The initial crash, the terrible winter. Losing our captain, our security chief, most of our friends. Malnutrition, illness, death. We’ve been fighting hard — for each other, sometimes with each other — but nearly all of us have kept going.

It’s all been for nothing. Because in nine months – a year if we’re very, very lucky – the lights are going out for good.

Chapter End Notes

SPOILERS BELOW

As I said above, this note contains a list of possible triggers for those readers that want them (and don't mind possibly spoilers). If anyone needs more specific explanations, feel free to PM on Tumblr. My username there is also captacorn. Here's the list, in no particular order: death, depression, discussions of self-harm, suicide, major injury and chronic pain, mild violence, hunting, pregnancy, and abortion. None of the tagged characters are the ones that die, if that helps. And I firmly believe in happy endings. I'm sorry if I missed any!
Day 40

Chapter Notes

Please see the author's note in chapter re: sensitive topics contained in this fic and where to find content warnings.

Tom Paris sat slumped on the edge of the biobed. “If this is a joke, Doc, your timing’s shitty.”

“It’s no joke, Mr. Paris.” The hologram’s tone was gentle at first, but when he noted Tom’s posture, it turned on a dime. “And stop slouching. It’s terrible for your back.”

Tom ignored the directive and the ever-present ache he had in his hips and spine. “God, I’m such an idiot. Here I was thinking you were giving me all those quizzes to distract me from my injuries.”

“That was an added bonus,” the Doctor replied. He held out a PADD. “These are the medical histories of the remaining crew. I wanted to put them all in one place for you.”

Tom slid off the bed, biting down on his lip when he landed rather harder than planned. “I don’t want them. This is bullshit. I’m not qualified to take over as CMO. We’ve just got to find a way to keep your program running. Have you even talked to B’Elanna and Seven yet? I’m sure between the two of them—”

“They’ve been trying to come up with a different answer since the crash,” the Doctor interjected. “Frankly, it’s only been in the last week I was sure you’d be physically up for the job. But all three of us agree now — this is the best, and really only, solution.”

Tom stared at the hologram, his mouth gaping. “All three of you? You’ve been discussing this behind my back?” He began to gimp around the floor of the makeshift sickbay. “I can’t believe it. B’Elanna hasn’t said a word.”

“Do you need an analgesic? That was a hard therapy session.” The Doctor took a step towards the biobed and patted the mattress. “You should take it easy the rest of the day. Sit back down.”

But Tom didn’t want to sit. He’d spent almost three weeks trapped in that damn bed, at first not able to even sit up without assistance, much less walk on his own two feet. Sure, he felt a shooting pain all the way up his back each time his left foot hit the ground, but it suited his mood. Perching on the end of the bed was hardly conducive to the very justifiable anger he was working on.

He shouldn’t have been surprised he’d been kept in the dark. It was par for the course these days. When Tom had first regained consciousness and expressed confusion as to why he was staring at the ceiling of the Sacajawea instead of Voyager’s sickbay, B’Elanna had just told him not to worry about it, to focus his energy on healing. Later, when he would ask why he was still barely able to move, and why the EMH had yet to perform a full reconstruction on his shattered vertebrae and pelvis, the Doc would only say they didn’t have access to Sickbay at the moment and threaten Tom with sedation if he didn’t rest. With the exception of Sam Wildman, no one else ever came.
In the end, Sam was the one who had filled him in. It had been a particularly bad day. The Doctor had decided it was time for Tom to try sitting up unsupported, but not even a minute passed before tears of pain started streaming down his cheeks and he felt like he was going to pass out. Sam quickly lowered him back onto the bed while the EMH determinedly ignored Tom’s frustrated entreaties as to why his recovery was so much longer and more painful than it should have been. Another hypospray of sedatives was loaded, but before the Doctor could give them, the shuttle’s comm system alerted. It was Seven, saying urgent medical assistance was required.

“Stay with him, Ensign,” the Doctor said. “His oxygenation tends to drop with exertion. Give him a dose of tri-oxime if necessary.”

Sam finished prepping the hypospray, but Tom’s arms still worked reasonably well, and he grabbed the woman’s forearm before she could administer the meds. “No, Sam,” he wheezed, struggling to fill the lungs that felt like they were held fast in a vise. “I’m sick of this. I want to know what’s going on.”

“Tom…” She shook her head, glancing back towards the door. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Maybe when you’re a little stronger.”

“I’m not a fucking child!” he barked. He closed his eyes and took several shallow breaths. “Please,” he said. “Just tell me. I can’t remember anything. I want to know what happened.”

Sam chewed her lip for a moment and darted one last look at the door. Then she took Tom’s hand in both of hers, and told him.

The quantum slipstream drive.

*Voyager* falling out of the stream. Crashing into the side of a mountain on an L-class planet. Much of the saucer section and the port side of the ship obliterated. Only forty-seven survivors.

“I guess now I know why Harry never comes to visit,” Tom said when she was done, turning his face away from the pity in Sam’s eyes. He hated that he couldn’t stop the quaver in his voice. “Can I have some time alone, please?”

“The Doctor didn’t want—”

“I don’t care what the Doctor wants!” he snapped, swiping at the hot trail of tears he could no longer stave off. “Go!” She touched his shoulder and he slapped her hand away even as he started to cough. “Leave me the fuck alone!”

She left, but only to return with the Doctor and B’Elanna in tow, the two of them speaking to Tom as if he were a toddler. He’d been sedated within seconds. The last thing he’d heard had been B’Elanna’s resigned: “It’s all right, Sam. I’m kind of glad it’s over and done with. He had to find out eventually.”

A month later, he and B’Elanna were sharing a shelter and a bed, but apparently there was still plenty she was choosing to keep to herself.

“Don’t blame B’Elanna,” the Doctor said. He brought over the chair from his small desk in the corner and gently, but insistently, pushed Tom onto it. “I was the one who didn’t want to tell you. I know you, Mr. Paris. You would have tried to delay the inevitable. We don’t have time for your stalling tactics.”

“It’s not stalling!” Tom insisted. “It’s common sense!” There were dozens of reasons why deactivating the EMH was an awful idea. It would barely save any energy! Tom didn’t know
enough to be responsible for the health and well-being of the remaining crew! What if his own health deteriorated again? But when the Doctor didn’t bother to argue, but instead let his rant proceed uninterrupted, a terrible look of compassion on his holographic face, Tom knew his pleas were futile.

“You’ll have access to my entire database. And in the case of an emergency, you can still activate my program. I’ll still be right here to help you, whenever you need me.” The Doctor moved back to his desk and got another PADD. “This is a… letter of sorts, I suppose. Some advice for you. Things I’ve learned in my four years as Voyager’s doctor. I thought you might find it helpful. And don’t forget to keep up with your physical therapy. It will go a long way in keeping your pain more manageable.”

Tom’s eyes widened and flicked between the PADD and the EMH. “Wait… you’re doing this now? You can’t! I don’t know what I’m doing!”

The Doctor gave a long-suffering sigh. “Of course you do, Mr. Paris. You’ve had the very best teacher possible. All of them, really — I’ve been programmed with the experiences of a veritable wealth of medical school faculty.” He took a step closer to Tom, thrusting the PADD in his face. “Take it.”

“No,” Tom said, shaking his head. “No! I’m not letting you dump this on me.”

“I don’t particularly want it myself, you know,” the Doctor remarked. “Being consigned to indefinite oblivion has never been high on my to-do list. But,” he added, this time his sigh more reflective, “the needs of the many and all that.”

Tom hauled himself back to his feet and took the PADD, suitably chastened. “Sorry. I wasn’t thinking of what this must be like for you. I guess I’m not making it any easier.”

“Not particularly,” the Doctor sniffed. His eyes softened and he put a hand on Tom’s shoulder. “If you don’t trust yourself, Mr. Paris, then trust me. You’re what the crew needs now. Someone for their medical needs, yes, but someone to be strong for them, too. I can’t think of a better man for the job.”

Tom reached his hand towards the Doc’s mobile emitter, but dropped it again, taking a step back. “Please, Doc. Don’t do this. I can’t lose anyone else. I can’t. Maybe in another week, or—”

“Now, Tom. It’s time. And it’s what’s best for everyone.”

Not for me. Not for you, either.

A mumbled goodbye, a couple of quick taps, and it was over.

It had surprised the pilot, the first time he’d noticed: when the Doctor used his mobile emitter, it grew warm. Not unpleasantly so — more like a comforting cup of tea on a winter’s day. Tom eased himself back onto the chair that was now, apparently, his. He made no effort to hide his wince of pain as he sat — he was alone, after all. Who was going to hear it? He held the emitter in his open palm, remaining still and quiet until long after the little piece of metal had grown cold.
A lot of chief engineers thought of their ships as living things. They’d talk to them as they would an actual person: pleading with the warp core to perform, trying to cajole the dilithium matrix into stabilizing. They’d thank their engines when they worked, and curse them when they didn’t.

B’Elanna Torres thought those engineers were idiots. She liked that she worked with machines. Machines were simple — if you understood a little physics, you could understand them. Machines didn’t have moods, they didn’t whine that you were mean or unfair, they didn’t have bad days or good ones. They just were. Why would anyone want to anthropomorphize them?

Having said that, as B’Elanna looked around the wreck that had once been her engine room, she couldn’t help but feel like she’d lost a friend.

But she’d lost plenty of those in the last couple of months, and she’d lose even more if she didn’t get to work.

Most of the conduits on the lower level had been long ripped apart, any useful components they’d found now serving as a power cell for a water purifier, or being re-purposed as a nitrogen enhancer to convince the reluctant soil to produce edible plants. (The one thing most of the remaining crew gave thanks for was the fact that leola root refused to grow here. B’Elanna desperately missed Neelix’s optimism and resourcefulness, but she had to admit she didn’t miss his cooking.) The lift to the upper level, of course, had long stopped functioning, so B’Elanna slung the strap of her toolkit over her shoulder and started to climb.

Despite the frigid air in the unheated starship, she was panting by the time she reached her destination. Her redundant lung meant she handled the atmosphere better than the full humans, but even she felt the effects of the thinner air. Her favorite console, the one in the corner where she could work in peace, was still untouched. She suspected her remaining staff was leaving it for her to cannibalize herself — either out of respect for her old preferred work space, or out of fear that she’d lash out at anyone that messed with it.

B’Elanna pulled off her gloves and ran a hand over the smooth surface. It was the same console on which, well over a year ago, she and Tom had made out when those aliens were screwing with their hormones. As she ripped off the first panel, she smiled at the memory.

The long distant memory. She and Tom spent every night together now, but she couldn’t remember the last time they’d used a bed for anything but sleep. Certainly it had been before the crash — even once Tom had recovered enough that he didn’t need to be constantly under the EMH’s watchful eye, he’d been far from well. At the beginning he’d needed help with even the simplest of tasks — showering, getting dressed. He was better now, a lot better, but most mornings were still a struggle. Each day, just past sunrise, B’Elanna would have to spend ten minutes or more gently stretching out his painful back and legs, ignoring the grunts and winces he tried to hide, warming the stiffened muscles until she could trust them to support him when he attempted to stand.
At least they were speaking again, although Tom was still short with her. B’Elanna didn’t entirely blame him for being pissy. She should have told him about the plan to turn off the Doc’s emitter. He would have bitched and moaned at first, maybe even dragged his feet a little over learning what he needed to as the Doctor had feared, but Tom, just like B’Elanna and Seven, was a pragmatist. He would have done what needed to be done for the good of the crew. What was left of the crew.

The panels were all off now, and she took a moment to blow warm air into her bare and freezing hands. There was enough usable material here she’d have to take two trips back to the settlement to transport it all. She shouldn’t have put off stripping this console for so long. The components here would serve a dozen different uses: augmenting the few replicators they had left, supporting the small range comm system Seven had devised, making sure the little collection of twenty shelters had adequate heat and power. It was stupid that she’d postponed harvesting this particular console’s components, just because of sentimentality.

A clatter of falling metal disrupted her thoughts. B’Elanna paused in her work and listened, sniffing at the air. Even though the planet was technically class L, this continent, at least, had its share of fauna. Mostly it was perching birds and some small herbivores, but last month, Tabor had been attacked by a predator not unlike an Earth cougar. The Bajoran had been lucky to only lose part of his left foot, but there had been a few sightings since, including around the wreckage. Fortunately, the animals seemed to be afraid of the shelters and the lights, and also had a distinctive smell even humans could detect. At the moment, though, the air was clear other than the lingering scent of ozone and plasma.

B’Elanna still suspected she had unwanted company.

“I can hear you,” she called, as she went back to ripping out the dorsal circuit link. “Why don’t you come and talk to me like a normal person instead of lurking in the shadows?”

“I was about to, Lieutenant,” Seven of Nine said as her head appeared at the top of the ladder. “I didn’t realize you were here until after I arrived in Engineering.”

B’Elanna rocked back on her heels and brushed a loose bit of hair off her face. “Seven,” she said. “Sorry. I didn’t realize it was you. I thought it might be—”

“It is not,” Seven said, the temperature of her voice dropping several degrees. “I think it unlikely she would come down here.”

“Yeah,” B’Elanna said, going back to her work. She knew better than to press the former drone on this particular topic. “I guess not. What are you doing up here anyway? I thought you were working on the replicators today.”

“I deemed that task beneath my abilities and delegated it to Lieutenant Nicoletti,” Seven said. “As we discussed, a bio-neural gel pack would be an effective power source for a subspace communications relay. I believe there is still a spare gel pack in the central core processor.”

B’Elanna’s hand clenched around the connector she was working on. “What the fuck, Seven?”

Bright Side Number Two about crashing into the side of a mountain and having most of your friends killed, (right below no more leola root): nobody gave her shit about cursing anymore. “As we discussed. Yeah, we discussed it, and I told you it’s a stupid fucking idea. We need that gel pack for the replicator and the thermal generator.”

“While I concede replicators and an effective heat source are important for survival, they will not aid us in getting rescued.”
B’Elanna pushed herself away from the console and jumped to her feet. “There’s not going to be anyone to rescue if we all freeze or starve to death! Leave the fucking gel packs alone!”

Seven raised an eyebrow and sighed. “As you wish, Lieutenant.”

“And I told you stop calling me ‘Lieutenant,’” B’Elanna snapped, taking a step towards the other woman. “Do you see a rank insignia on my neck? God, why do you have to be so damn—” She paused and let her shoulders drop. “Did you just say: ‘As you wish’?”

“You are, after all, the current authority in our community. I disagree with your decision… B’Elanna. But I will respect it.”

“’Current authority’?” B’Elanna pulled a face. “Now what are you talking about?”

“Commander Tuvok is deceased. Commander Chakotay is gone, presumably in the Alpha Quadrant or also deceased. Lieutenant Paris’ health precludes him from taking on any more responsibility than he already has. You’ve been coordinating the remaining crew, determining how to use our remaining resources, put various mechanisms in place to assure our continued survival. This would all suggest that you are, in fact, in command.”

“But,” B’Elanna started to protest, then stopped. There was no point in discussing the other remaining member of the senior staff. She blew out a long breath of air. “We’ve been so busy, I haven’t even thought about it. But I guess you’re right. I’m what’s left.”

“Not the most auspicious beginning to your tenure, but adequate. If you realize the error of your judgment regarding the gel packs, I will adjust my work schedule accordingly.” Seven gave her a curt nod then made her stately way back to the ladder to the lower level.

B’Elanna flipped the ex-drone’s back the bird before returning to her seat before the console. *Even when she’s doing what I want, she has to be a pain in the ass about it.*

Seven tilted her head back towards B’Elanna just as she reached the stairs. “Mr. Paris’ tutorial on common Earth expletives has yet to cover non-verbal gestures. I shall have to ask him to explain yours to me at our next lesson.”

B’Elanna laughed in spite of herself. One thing she’d learned in the past couple of months: it might be acerbic and it might be so subtle most people missed it, but Seven had a wicked sense of humor.

But once her brief laughter subsided and Seven had picked her way out of what was left of Engineering, B’Elanna finally registered what the other woman had said.

She was in charge.

*Fuck.*
Day 71

Chapter Notes

Please see the author's note at the beginning of the work re: content warnings.

Seven of Nine was still wearing her thermal jacket despite being within the relative shelter of the shuttle. It was unpleasantly cold at the nascent settlement that Tom Paris had recently christened Hoth (for no reason Seven could ascertain). She did recognize that she could be less fortunate. She could be of a species with a higher thermal neutral zone, like Vorik or B’Elanna Torres; her Borg nanoprobe might not have repaired the lung damage that still troubled Tom Paris; Voyager might have landed on this planet’s polar continent, where the average daily temperature was no more than two hundred degrees Kelvin. No doubt far fewer, if any, of the crew would have survived if they had not instead crashed at this more equatorial location. In addition, as Tal Celes enjoyed stating several times a day, spring would eventually arrive, and with it, warmer temperatures. Seven would adapt.

She had already made many adaptations: living planet bound rather than amongst the stars, focusing her considerable skills and knowledge on surviving their harsh environs rather than making Voyager’s systems more efficient. Tom Paris liked to call it ‘making the best of a bad situation,’ but Seven simply did not see any other viable option.

Unfortunately, not all of the remaining crew shared her attitude. Seven had observed that, while the majority of those left had adjusted their habits and expectations in accordance with their current situation, there were still several that seemed unlikely to thrive here. Even after seventy-one of this planet’s day-night cycles, Megan Delaney continued to spend an inordinate amount of her time mourning the loss of her sister. Scott Rollins made a new complaint daily about their available nutrient options despite never offering any solutions to improve them. Mortimer Harren spoke of nothing but his lost research and his inability to make further contributions to the greater scientific community.

“Your research was flawed and rudimentary,” Seven had noted on day forty-two, as the two of them worked on a short range sensor array. “It is unlikely your contribution would have been as notable as you believe.”

This observation did not improve Harren’s attitude.

On the other hand, the few remaining members of the senior staff (with one notable exception that did not warrant further consideration) had acquitted themselves admirably since their stranding. The EMH put aside his typical self-importance and accepted Seven’s suggestion that he be deactivated to conserve energy with unexpected grace. Despite Tom Paris’ chronic pain and the permanent damage to his pulmonary system, his attitude was consistently one of positivity and encouragement. Even B’Elanna Torres — whom on Voyager Seven had often found to be intractable and contemptuous — had shown remarkable equanimity in her new role as leader of their small community.

Today was an exception.

“Why are you so fixated on this, Seven? This isn’t even your area.” B’Elanna paced the small
cargo space of the *Tereshkova*. It had become a sort of briefing room for the community’s ‘leadership council.’ B’Elanna had eschewed a more rigid Starfleet command structure in favor of a ‘rule by committee’ model: Seven was responsible for developing and maintaining a communication system and sensors. Tom Paris was their acting physician and worked with Chell on their food supply, while Miguel Ayala was in charge of security. B’Elanna was in charge of the power supply; in addition, she coordinated the others and made the final decision in situations where there was disagreement. Today’s meeting also included Samantha Wildman. Seven had invited her ‘roommate’ along as the woman’s background in xenobiology had been instrumental in formulating her proposal.

“I am simply doing as asked, B’Elanna.” She still stumbled over it — the use of given names rather than ranks and surnames. It felt very non-specific. There was only one ‘B’Elanna,’ but amongst the survivors there was an Ai Swinn and an Ai Kyoto, a Tom Murphy as well as Tom Paris. But B’Elanna had made it clear they were no longer a Starfleet operation and therefore ranks no longer applied. Seven’s suggestion that they adopt Borg designations instead was summarily dismissed.

Seven continued. “You have expressed that I should be more focused on improving our quality of life here at Hoth, rather than searching for a means of rescue. My proposal fits that criteria, as it will augment our food supply. Further, we have no other immediate use for the *Baxial*. Its systems are incompatible with Starfleet’s, as Talaxian technology was crude and inefficient. Upon initial assimilation, the Borg noted species 218 contributed little to the collective.”

“Easy, Seven,” Tom said from his chair in the corner. “You’re on kind of sensitive ground here.”

Seven glanced at the deck plating beneath her feet before she realized Tom was speaking metaphorically. This realization did not aid in her comprehension of his remark. No one present here had any attachment to the *Baxial*, nor aided in the development of its technology. Yet Tom’s caution appeared to be prudent, as both B’Elanna and Miguel Ayala bristled at her words, and even Samantha Wildman frowned.

“Even though he’s not with us anymore,” Tom clarified, scratching at the beginnings of a ginger beard, “we still all associate the *Baxial* with Neelix.”

Seven nodded her thanks. With the Doctor now deactivated, Tom had taken over as her ‘social mentor.’ Frankly, he seemed more suited to the role than the hologram had. “I meant no offense,” she said. “I simply mean that it would be onerous to modify the *Baxial*’s systems to work with Starfleet components and even with an optimal outcome, the benefit would be minimal. I feel our time could be better spent elsewhere.”

B’Elanna gave a short huff. “So instead you’re going to let Harren fill it with chickens?”

“He’s already managed to tame a couple of the younger ones,” Samantha said. “And their eggs are fit for human consumption. If we can provide them with shelter — keep them safe from predators, confine them so they can’t escape — we might be able to cultivate a whole flock and have a new source of protein for the crew. Plus, it’s given Harren a new sense of purpose.”

“Does that mean he’ll stop whining?” Miguel Ayala asked. “If so, I’m completely on board.”

“I believe it will contribute to Mortimer Harren’s general well-being and therefore improve his efficacy as a member of the community,” Seven said. “Yes.”

“And I think Neelix would be honored that, in a way, he’s still feeding the crew,” Tom said. “Plus, since we’re not ripping it apart, we’ll have a vessel if we ever need to move somewhere in a hurry.”
“Once we clear it of livestock, you mean,” B’Elanna said, her face dark. “Aren’t the greenhouses doing well now? Why do we need more food sources? Especially ones that require their own source of food?”

Tom nudged her calf with his foot. “We could grow ten acres of plants, but we still need more protein. We can’t keep relying on replicated sources. It’s the right call, B’Elanna.” Seven had been surprised that Tom had not asserted his authority over B’Elanna as his health improved. He had, after all, been fourth in line for command of Voyager. When Seven had pressed him on the matter last week, he’d only shrugged and said, “Why rock the boat?” before changing the topic to the origins of obscure Terran idioms.

B’Elanna moved to the other side of the cargo bay, throwing her hands in the air. “Fine. Since you’ve all decided without me, let Harren have his damn chicken coop. Ayala,” she barked. “You still need to show me the latest scouting reports. The rest of you can go.”

Seven followed Samantha Wildman out the rear hatch of the shuttle, but not before noting how Tom approached B’Elanna with a hand to her shoulder. She saw his lips move but his voice was too low for Seven to hear the words. Whatever he said, it was not well-received, as B’Elanna shrugged off his hand and dismissed him with a curt nod.

The sky was its typical grey and there were occasional flakes of snow swirling amongst the rocks and patches of dead grass. Once out of the shuttle, Seven zipped the closure of her jacket close to her chin. She was donning her thermal gloves when she heard Tom call her. “Seven! Wait up!”

His pace was slow and irregular due to his injuries, but one advantage to their current situation was that Seven rarely had a pressing schedule to follow.

“Don’t take it hard,” he said when he reached her, his breath coming in short pants. “She’s under a lot of strain. It’s a good idea, even if B’Elanna didn’t say so.”

Seven frowned at him. “My idea was accepted and will be implemented. B’Elanna’s personal reaction is irrelevant.”

Tom grinned as he pulled a knit cap down over his ears. “Really, Seven, you’re a shining example for the rest of us. You heading to tell Harren now?”

“Yes.”

“Mind if I come with?” Tom asked. “I want to run a scan on the chickens he has so far — see if maybe we can use some of the males for meat when they’re older.” He paused. “Unless I’ll slow you down too much.”

He would, in fact, slow her down. The multiple comminuted fractures Tom had sustained during the crash has been inadequately repaired by the Doctor, as the majority of Sickbay’s equipment had been irrevocably damaged. His pace was also adversely affected by the scarring in his lungs as well as the relatively low oxygenation of the planet’s atmosphere. The ground between here and Harren’s shelter was uneven and rocky, laced with the occasional pocket of snow and ice. It was likely that she would need to assist the former pilot several times over the more difficult terrain, as he stubbornly refused to use any sort of assistive mobility device.

However, Seven also noted that during their time alone together, Tom often imparted her valuable advice on dealings with their fellow ‘castaways.’ In addition, she had still not forgotten that, over one year ago, Tom Paris was the first of Voyager’s crew to offer her unconditional friendship. She found that contemplating this memory often helped mitigate his more annoying attributes — both
those related to his current disability, but also those inherent to his personality. “You may accompany me,” she told him.

Their walk began in companionable silence. Tom declined Seven’s offer to carry the medkit he kept with him at all times, but did permit her to lend a supporting hand when their path was slippery or steep. Hoth had been established on the side of the mountain into which Voyager had crashed. They’d chosen an area a few kilometers below the crash site, where the pitch of ground started to level out. Approximately half the shelters were clumped together here, including Seven’s own — slightly larger than the others to accommodate her alcove. The Sacajawea and Tereshkova had also been settled here, with the remaining shelters and shuttles dotting the side of the mountain as it sloped towards a rocky valley below. Harren’s one-person shelter was the most remote and lowest in elevation, next to the still flight-worthy Baxial. When he’d chosen its location several weeks’ prior, Ayala had remarked that he would keep an extra close eye on Harren, in case the reclusive man tried to make a break for it.

“So do you think that is a likely outcome?” Seven had inquired. “Perhaps we should move the Baxial given it’s our remaining active vessel.”

“It was a joke, Seven,” Tom had told her. “He wouldn’t last a week on his own, and he knows it.”

Once she and Tom completed the steepest part of the descent towards Harren’s shelter and she allowed him a brief recovery period, Seven spoke: “May I ask you a question?”

“Yes.”

His breathing was mildly labored. Seven slowed her pace further. “I am curious as to the goal of our current existence.”

Tom coughed out a laugh. “Are you asking me what the meaning of life is, Seven?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Seven said. “In the collective, we sought technological perfection via assimilation. On Voyager, we were explorers as well as having the overlying mission of returning the ship to the Alpha Quadrant. We currently have no such objectives.”

Tom shrugged. “I think survival is the top priority at the moment.”

“That answer is unsatisfactory,” Seven replied. “Our immediate survival is assured. Several systems are being developed to maintain the health and safety of the community over the long term. I am unclear as to what comes after those systems are in place.”

“Well,” Tom said, “there’s always hope of rescue. Harry and Chakotay could come back for us any day now. Or maybe some friendly local alien saw what happened, or found the emergency beacon we launched before—”

“Rescue is highly unlikely given our inability to send a subspace distress signal. We have been on this planet for seventy-one of its days, each of which is twenty-six point three standard hours long. If a nearby advanced species were going to rescue us, it likely would have already done so. Further, the probability that Ensign Kim and Commander Chakotay survived their own trip through the quantum slipstream is only—”

Tom stopped walking and raised his hand. “I get it, Seven. So, yeah, rescue probably isn’t happening. But we still have to keep going.”

“Why?” Seven asked. “Based on my research, a minimum viable population of humanoids ranges from ninety-eight to one-hundred sixty individuals, and that assumes a single species. The
difficulties with cross-species reproduction likely increases that number. Hoth’s population consists of only forty-five organic individuals--”

“Forty-six,” Tom interjected.

Seven pressed her lips together, but made no other comment on his assertion. “Regardless, the number is well below what is necessary. Therefore, it seems likely that, over time, our population will dwindle until it will be difficult for those remaining to even maintain minimal quality of life.”

“For god’s sake,” Tom snapped, his words punctuated by short coughs. “Will you give it a rest? Why do you always have to—” He bent over at the waist, his coughing now alternated by loud gasping inhales. Seven took his arm and helped him sit on a nearby boulder.

“Do you need a dose of tri-oxime?” Seven inquired as Tom’s coughing fit persisted.

He shook his head no, even as his lips turned a faint shade of blue. It took nearly three more minutes, but his coughing lessened and his breathing eased. “Sorry,” he said, his voice hoarse. “I’ll be able to get up in another minute.”

“An apology is unnecessary,” Seven said. “It was not a situation of your own making. In fact, I suspect my line of questioning may have directly contributed to your distress.”

Tom smiled at her with his mouth, but she noted that the skin around his eyes did not crinkle as they typically did when he was in a more buoyant mood. “Nah,” he said. “It’s not your fault. It’s just the damn scarring. The cold air and the walk didn’t help.”

“Shall I help you return to your shelter?”

“We’re almost there,” Tom said with a shake of his head. “It’s fine. Help me up, will ya? This rock is going to freeze my ass off.”

They made it to their destination without further incident, although Tom did not engage Seven in further conversation. Once they shared their news with Harren and made a plan for its implementation, Tom told Seven to return to the central area of the settlement without him.
There was still a bit of sunlight left when B’Elanna left the *Tereshkova*. It continued to be cold as fuck, but at least the days were getting longer. The extra sunlight made B’Elanna feel something almost akin to hope.

She looked across the rough circle made by a collection of grounded shuttles and standard issue ‘Fleet emergency shelters. The one she shared with Tom was dark. He must still be in the *Sacajawea*. A nasty GI illness had hit the settlement last week when Dalby and Gerron had taken it upon themselves to go fishing in a nearby, newly-thawed pond. They’d neglected to have their catch cleared before making it into a rich soup. The worst was over and everyone was recovering, but Tom was still trying to isolate the toxic principle to see if it was something specific to the one fish species, or if all seafood had to be declared off-limits.

B’Elanna was worried about him. She was always worried about him, but she saw how the past week had particularly taken its toll. He’d fortunately not eaten any of the contaminated fish, but he’d also barely eaten or slept during the height of the thing. Now that B’Elanna was finally done with her own responsibilities for the day, she was determined to make sure Tom got a decent meal and a solid night’s rest.

She could use a good night’s sleep herself. During the day it was fine — B’Elanna was busy, she had no time to worry about anything but the next bit of equipment to repair, the next life-preserving bit of tech to improvise. But at night, when there were no lights but the faint starlight visible through the clouds and the only sound was Tom’s raspy breathing, all she could see when she closed her eyes was that day.

B’Elanna hadn’t even lost consciousness when *Voyager* had crashed. Within seconds of the ship settling into what was to be its final resting place, she’d jumped to her feet, shaken off her dizziness, and gotten to work. Engineering, protected as it was deep within the ship’s center, had suffered fewer casualties than many other departments, but it still hadn’t been pretty: Boylan lying a few meters away, his neck snapped with eyes blank and staring. Mendez’s torso crushed under a bulkhead, Henard screaming from plasma burns he’d suffered from a ruptured conduit.

He hadn’t lasted a day.

None of that slowed her. There was no one better than B’Elanna in a crisis. She made sure the core wasn’t about to blow, directed Vorik to work on getting internal sensors operational even as green blood streamed from his nose, organized those with functional arms and legs into rescue crews. Within seconds comm lines were open and she told anyone listening that Engineering would be their temporary command center until they heard otherwise.

She left Carey and his dislocated shoulder in charge, then ordered Dalby and Shimizu to go with her to Sickbay. Most of it was destroyed, but B’Elanna felt her first flash of relief when she discovered the EMH had had the foresight to download his program to his mobile emitter. He’d been (rightly) concerned that there might be issues with the ship’s holosystems as they passed.
“Come on,” she barked, directing the Doctor to join them. “The bridge is the next stop.”

It was tough going. Only four decks up, but no turbolifts or transporters, of course. The saucer portion had taken the brunt of the damage, at some junctions almost completely ripped away from the lower decks. And so fucking cold! Her hands were numb from the metal rungs of the ladders and there were already drifts of snow gathered in spots where the hull had fractured. As the four of them made their way through ruined corridors and half-crushed Jefferies’ tubes, yet to hear even a peep from anyone serving above deck five, B’Elanna steeled herself against what they would find.

Everyone on the bridge was dead. She knew it as soon as they forced the doors open. She could smell the blood, the burnt flesh, the organs ripped from their bodies. Toxic selafluoride gas filled the space. It would have asphyxiated anyone that survived the initial trauma. She clutched at the frame of the door, willing the bile back down her throat.

“B’Elanna.” She could barely hear the Doctor’s voice over the blood rushing through her ears. “You’re blocking my way. You need to let me get to them.”

“What’s the point?”

“We won’t know for certain until we do.”

Dalby shoved a respirator into her hands before donning his own and pushing past her. There was no need: as B’Elanna took her first steps onto the bridge she saw that the selafluoride fumes had an egress. There was a sizable hole in the view screen, admitting weak sunlight and a flurry of snow. She moved forward, her eyes scanning the conn, when her boot hit something warm and solid.

It was Tuvok’s body.

She knelt, taking a moment to close the Vulcan’s eyes. *Just get it over with, Torres.* One quick, shaky breath and she stood, ready to make her way to the conn.

“Doctor,” she heard Shimizu call from over by Ops. “Get over here! Seven’s still got a pulse!”

The Doctor was already busy with another survivor. Captain Janeway had been thrown far forward from her command chair, landing close to the rupture in the hull. B’Elanna heard her make a low groan in response to the Doctor’s ministrations. No doubt the captain’s location near the only fresh air on the bridge had kept her alive.

And if the captain survived, then maybe… B’Elanna shook her head. Stupid to think that way. Just find his body, confirm what you already know — he’s dead, he’s gone. Get it over with. She moved through the wreckage, stepping over what she realized was Tom’s crushed, overturned chair, and forced herself to look.

He was face down, bright red blood pooling on the floor around him from a deep laceration above his left ear. The lower half of his body was trapped beneath his console. A light dusting of snow lay across his back. He wasn’t moving.

B’Elanna knew she should just move on. The captain and Seven had somehow made it through this. There could be others. There were others, all over the lower decks. Someone had to coordinate the rest of the rescue efforts: designate people to help the Doctor, make sure they had power and heat, start figuring out what their options were from here. But it was OK to take a minute. Just one. Just to say goodbye.
The first and only tears she’d shed since the crash came when she’d taken Tom’s limp, cold hand in hers and gave it a gentle squeeze. It had been faint, so weak she’d thought for a brief moment she’d imagined it out of grief, but Tom had squeezed back.

B’Elanna shivered, both from the well-trodden memory and the oncoming cold of evening, and headed towards the Sacajawea. She’d come far too close to losing Tom — for days after the crash, his survival had still been uncertain — so she was going to do everything in her power to keep him healthy now.

She didn’t get very far in her mission before she heard someone calling her.

“B’Elanna!” Chell was jogging towards her, dressed in far less thermal wear than was typical of everyone else. B’Elanna envied him and Golwat. Their Bolian physiologies were uniquely adept amongst the survivors at handling Hoth’s low temps and questionable food sources. They hadn’t even gotten sick from the fish.

“What—” she started to snap, then took a short breath and added: “can I help you with, Chell?” Their situation, and B’Elanna’s burgeoning stress levels, weren’t his fault.

He was beaming. “I’ve got news about the fish!” They’d discovered that the fish that Dalby and Gerron had caught contained a paracrine gland that was unique to that species. “I went down to the river on the south side and caught two other species — no gland. We’ve already programmed two tricorders to scan specifically for the toxic enzyme. And I have a fantastic recipe for a stew that’s a sort of mix between a Terran cioppino and a Bajoran ratamba stew. You’re going to love it!”

B’Elanna was skeptical about the stew, but happy to have one less thing to worry about. She rubbed her hands against her upper arms and stamped her feet. “Good work. But maybe next time we can chat indoors? At least when it’s negative five outside? Besides, I’m sure Tom would have told me tonight.”

Chell frowned. “But he doesn’t know. He had Samantha and me working on it. He went to go help Megan.”

“What?” B’Elanna’s eyes automatically went to her shelter again. The lone, small window was still dark. “Why would Megan want his help? He doesn’t know crap about weather sensors.” But as soon as the words left her mouth she knew. Megan hadn’t wanted his help with the sensors. Her jaw clenched. “I suppose they’re at her shelter.”

Chell only shrugged before starting to rhapsodize further about his upcoming menu. Knowing the chatty Bolian was used to ruder treatment in the Maquis, B’Elanna simply walked away as he launched into a detailed description of how he was making the stock out of a mix of local roots and fish skin.

Despite how long it had been since it had functioned as more than a translator, B’Elanna’s hand automatically went to her comm badge in an attempt to contact Tom. She sighed and promised herself for the umpteenth time that reprogramming the badges to work with Seven’s jury-rigged comm system was her next priority. Right after boosting the sensors, reviewing Rollins’ proposal on new ways to power the generator, designing and building a solar battery, and so on, and so on. At any rate, she was clearly going to have to hoof it down to the shelter Megan shared with Nicoletti to find him.

Which she would do as soon as she dealt with whatever problem Celes was about to dump in her lap. “Can we at least go inside first?” she said when the Bajoran ran up to her, telling her they needed to talk.
It only took ten minutes to explain to Celes how to reroute the power coupling to the backup gel pack so B’Elanna could run a diagnostic on the primary in the morning; but it was another five to check in with Carey on the weather sensors that Megan, apparently, wasn’t bolstering; then fifteen to settle an argument between a still nauseated-looking Dalby and Vorik on the best use of the thorium they had left. “Just let him use it to power the greenhouses, Ken. We need food more than modern plumbing. We’ll dig a fucking latrine if we have to.” The sun had already begun to slip below the horizon before she could begin her trek to Megan’s shelter, jogging down the rocky path in an attempt to keep warm.

There was no response to her first knock, or her second. She was considering kicking the door down when it opened. Tom was on the other side.

“Sorry,” he said, rubbing at red and shadowed eyes. “It took me a couple tries to get up, and Megan… Well, she’s had rough day.”

Haven’t we all, B’Elanna thought as she moved into the relative warmth of the shelter. She saw Megan was still sniffling where she sat in the small dining area. B’Elanna knew she should be more patient with her and her grief. Based on their physical appearance, she’d always assumed the Delaney sisters were fully human; but a year or two ago, Harry told her one of the twins’ grandparents had been Miradorn.

“What does their grandfather’s species have to do with them serving on the same ship? In the same department, even?” she’d asked her friend, as they both dubiously poked at Neelix’s latest dinner time offering. At the time, B’Elanna had forgotten what a luxury it was — passing up food just because of the taste.

“Miradorn almost always reproduce in pairs,” Harry had explained. “Their twins are linked telepathically and like to stay in close physical proximity. Megan and Jenny aren’t quite that bonded, given they’re three-quarters human, but they’ve always worked best together.”

“What else do they like to do together, Harry?” she’d asked, raising a suggestive eyebrow and grinning widely at how his cheeks flushed at her comment.

God, she missed him.

So, yes, she could be a bit more patient with Megan’s protracted mourning. But Megan could also recognize that every single one of them had lost people. They were all struggling. And wallowing wasn’t keeping anybody warm, or fed, or healthy.

Tom had returned to the other woman’s side and was resting a hand on her shoulder. After a few minutes of drumming her fingers against her thighs and Megan not even acknowledging her presence, B’Elanna broke the silence. “Chell and Sam have good news about the fish.”

Megan and Tom both stared at her: Megan’s face puffy and red, Tom’s with a quizzical half-smile.

“You’ll have to tell me about it later.”

Clearly she was going to have be a bit more direct. “The sun’s pretty much down, Tom. Which means the temp will be bottoming out soon. It’ll be hell on your lungs.”

“B’Elanna—”

“It’s all right, Tom,” Megan interjected with a snuffle. “You’ve been sweet to listen to me for so long. I’ll be all right. Sue will be back soon.”

“Good point,” B’Elanna said, grabbing Tom’s coat and holding it out to him. “Joe said Sue was
just about done with the weather sensors.” The ones you were assigned to, B’Elanna thought as she held Megan’s eyes a beat longer than was necessary.

A final hug and a few murmured words in Megan’s ear and B’Elanna finally got him out. Tom waited until Megan’s door was shut before he started in. “Give her a break, will ya?”

“I have been,” she said, wanting to walk faster but keeping her pace slow so she’d be close enough to help him if he stumbled. “We all have. For about three months now. We don’t have a lot of bodies to work with here, if we don’t all—”

“Yeah, I know, B’Elanna. We all have to do our part,” Tom said, stopping every few words for a quick panting breath. “But she’s not slacking off, she’s sick.”

Her stomach clenched. “What do you mean, ‘she’s sick’? Something contagious? A virus or something?”

Tom shook his head. “Not that kind of sick. I mean, I think she has some variant of Complicated Grief Disorder. Her serotonin levels are way too low for a human, but Miradorns naturally have lower levels, so I’m not really sure at what point she needs treatment, or maybe this just needs to run its course? Psychiatry isn’t exactly my strong point.” He sighed. “Medicine isn’t exactly my strong point.”

B’Elanna’s mind had started wandering sometime after the words “grief disorder.” If it didn’t affect the health of the group as a whole, she didn’t have the mental bandwidth to worry about it. “I’m sure she’s fine.”

“You think this is a joke?” he snapped. She could hear the wheeze running below his words. That was definitely his crappy lungs. “I’m talking about a person! Our friend, actually. I’d think you, of all people, would be a little more sympathetic.”

B’Elanna bit down on her cheek, hard, to stop herself from responding the way she wanted to. ‘You, of all people.’ What an asshole move, throwing her depression back in her face. She had done nothing like what Megan was doing, or wasn’t doing. She had kept up with her duties. She had handled it herself, hadn’t bled her emotions all over anybody that stood still long enough to listen.

But getting into a screaming match was the last thing Tom needed. The more upset he got, the more his airways narrowed, and the cold, dry air was hard enough on him. The low temps were bad for his back, too — she could tell he was in pain, even if he’d never admit it. That’s why he was lashing out, and that’s why she had to let it slide. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

He pulled up short. “I’m right?”

“Yes,” B’Elanna said. “You’re right. Better mark this day on the calendar.” She pulled on his arm. “Let’s get inside. It’s freezing.”

Despite the stiffness in his gait and the noisy whistle she heard with each breath, B’Elanna didn’t tell Tom to sit down or ask him if he needed his inhaler once they were indoors. It had taken some
time for her to figure out, but he was touchy about his infirmity — if she helped him too much when he didn’t absolutely need it, he was less likely to ask for help when he did. She did allow herself a quiet sigh of relief when she heard him inhale puffs of the medication that helped open his airways.

“I heard we lost another replicator,” Tom said, his words still coming out short and breathless.

B’Elanna tensed as she hung her coat on the hook by the door. “From who?”

“Nicoletti. She said the impulse plasma relays keep blowing the circuits out. Why didn’t you say anything?”

She turned away from the pointed look Tom was giving her and walked the two meters to their ‘kitchen.’ “Because I’m dealing with it. You had enough to worry about this week, with everyone getting sick.”

Tom rested his forehead against his hands. “B’Elanna. You’re not alone in this, you know. You can talk—”

“Damn.” She stared into their food stasis drawer.

“What’s up?”

“Chell hasn’t made his delivery yet.” A couple months ago, Tom has proposed rigging up some kind of mess hall. They couldn’t have constructed anything that would hold the entire group, but he’d suggested that even something where twenty or so people could gather would be beneficial. ‘Foster a sense of community,’ was how he’d put it, making a dramatically pained face when Ayala had suggested he’d borrowed a page from Chakotay’s book.

“Nice try talking me out of it,” he’d shot back with a broad grin. “But it’s still a good idea.”

It had been a good idea, and at the time B’Elanna had just been happy to see him smile again. But she’d still shot it down.

“It’ll take too much raw material,” she’d pronounced, not meeting Tom’s eyes. “And too hard to keep it heated. Can’t do it.”

Which meant Chell and some of the others made food deliveries once or twice a day, and clearly he hadn’t made it to Tom and B’Elanna’s yet. She sighed. He’d eaten OK at breakfast, but she’d been too busy at midday to check in with him on lunch and since the crash his appetite had been temperamental. “I’ll go track him down,” she told Tom, reaching for her coat.

Tom reached around from behind and grabbed her wrist. “Don’t worry about it,” he said. “He’ll get here when he gets here. I’m not that hungry anyway.”

“You need to eat,” she said, but she didn’t pull out of his grip. “You look like you’ve lost more weight.”

He pulled down the high collar of her turtleneck and placed a series of kisses at the nape of her neck, the wiry hair of his beard tickling her skin. “I know a way you can help me work up an appetite,” he murmured. “It’ll help keep us warm, too.”

B’Elanna closed her eyes for a moment and leaned back into his chest. It had been a very, very long time. “Tom, I don’t know…”
“I think you know,” he said, turning her around to face him. “I think you miss it as much as I do.”

She couldn’t argue with that. Tom’s mouth worked hungrily at the spot under her jaw, his hands tugging up at her shirt until he could slide his hands up and under. They were rough now, chapped and dry from the cold, but B’Elanna didn’t care as his fingers pressed into the tight muscles of her back. She shoved her own hands up under his shirt, trying to ignore the ribs she could feel as her hands made her way up his sides.

They stumbled their way out of the small sitting area into the bedroom, neither willing to let go of the other. “God,” Tom muttered, tugging at his thermal undershirt. “All these layers are fucking annoying.”

B’Elanna laughed and pushed him onto the bed.

He didn’t land right. B’Elanna could see it happening as he fell but was too slow to stop him. His lower back hit the foot of the bed and he slid onto the floor with a pained grunt.

*Fuck.* “Tom?” B’Elanna shook her left arm free of the sleeve that it was trapped in and knelt on the floor next to him. “Tom? Are you OK?”

His eyes were closed as he leaned his head back against the bed. “Yeah,” he panted. “I just came down a little hard. Give me a sec, OK? I’ll be all right in a sec.”

*Shit. Why did I shove him like that? What is wrong with me?* she asked him, picking her own undershirt off the floor and putting it back on.

Tom opened his eyes and looked at her. “B’Elanna, I’m fine,” he said, putting his hand on hers. He pushed himself more upright, his movements slow and methodical, like he was trapped in mud. “Don’t get dressed. I’m fine.”

She was already off the floor and pulling her sweater on. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “What was I thinking? Chell could be here any second. I shouldn’t have let it go this far.”

“What the fuck?” he snapped, grunting as he pushed himself onto his knees. “You ‘shouldn’t have it let it go this far’? Now I don’t even have a say in our sex life?” B’Elanna tried to help him rise but he yanked his arm away. “I can do it!”

She couldn’t watch anymore. She couldn’t stand to see how much effort it took for him to climb to his feet, or take his next breath. She couldn’t keep looking at the ribs and shoulder blades that jutted out at sharp angles. She couldn’t keep thinking about how he’d looked, three months ago, broken and bloodied on the bridge.

Their discarded clothes marked a trail to the shelter door. B’Elanna pulled the layers back on quickly and carelessly, not even stopping when she realized she was swimming in Tom’s jacket versus her own. “I’m going to go look for Chell,” she said as she opened the door. She didn’t look back to see if Tom heard her.
Day 115

Chapter Notes

Please see the author's note at the beginning of the work re: content warnings and where to find them.

Tom checked the contents of his backpack one more time. He didn’t want a repeat of last week, when he’d gotten all the way up there and discovered he’d forgotten the PADD he’d wanted Janeway to have. The comm badges worked pretty well in the main part of the settlement now, but up by Voyager the reception was still sketchy, so there was no calling for someone to run up something he’d left behind, and it wasn’t practical for him to make a second trip himself. Before, he probably could have made the three-kilometer trek to the ship in half an hour. Now, getting up there and back would take him half the day.

He buckled the pack’s waist belt in place, holstered a phaser and grabbed his walking stick — the latter two items concessions to B’Elanna’s continual anxiety about his well-being. She’d tried to talk him out of going at all, of course, but Tom had (gingerly) put his foot down.

“If it was up to you, I’d never leave the Sacajawea,” he’d said in response to her protests, when he’d first told her he was taking the task over from Lang and Nozawa now that the weather was better.

“It doesn’t make sense for you to go. They can make it up there in half the time it’ll take you!”

“More like a quarter,” Tom had admitted before waving a medical tricorder. “But as CMO, it’s my responsibility to ensure the health of every member of our little hamlet.”

It was spurious reasoning — Sam could have easily gone to check on the captain as well — but B’Elanna had let it drop. Tom wasn’t sure if it was because she suspected he had other, private reasons for wanting to go, thought going once would get it out of his system, or if she just didn’t want to start a fight. At any rate, today would be his third trip. Hopefully it would be a bit more fruitful than the last two.

At least the weather was cooperating. He’d had to postpone the first time due to a brief but heavy spring squall. Even Tom had to admit him trying to clamber over boulders slick with rain was a stupid idea. But today the usually heavy cloud cover had thinned, revealing a sky that was at least thinking about being blue. He squinted at the too-distant sun and started towards the marked path that led up to Voyager.

“Are you sure you won’t take someone with you this time?”

Tom sighed. B’Elanna was striding towards him, her voiced worries projected loud and clear across the compound. Swinn, three buildings away, jerked up her head at the question but quickly returned to her work when she caught Tom’s look. “We’ve gone over this, B’Elanna,” he said when she was close enough for him to use a more discreet tone. “This is a one-person job. I can handle it.”

She silently checked him for the phaser, the walking stick, a warm enough hat. “The phaser’s got a
full charge? Lang said he’s seen some of those cougars around the wreckage.”

“Yes on the charge, and not for weeks on the cougars. Sam thinks they’ve moved to higher ground now that the weather’s warmed up.”

“What about an emergency beacon? The comm badges still don’t—”

“Work up there,” Tom interjected. “I know, since you reminded me ten or eleven times last night.”

“Right,” she said, biting on her lower lip. “Sorry. I guess this is that hovering you mentioned.”

Tom gave her a small smile and tried to keep the exasperation out of his voice. “Just a touch.” He leaned down to give her a kiss, but he’d barely brushed his lips against hers before B’Elanna pulled away.

“Your beard tickles.”

Tom turned back to the path. “See you in a few hours.”

“Don’t forget to eat lunch!” she called after him as reached the boundary of the settlement.

He briefly considered answering with a rude gesture, but settled for tossing off an irritated, “Yes, dear,” as he passed through the security force field.

Tom wasn’t sure how much longer he was going to be able to stand it — B’Elanna’s self-appointed role as Chief Mother Hen. He wasn’t going to pretend he was in the best of health, but he was hardly the same invalid he’d been right after the crash. At first, he’d assumed her anxiety would decrease as he got stronger; if anything, it’d gotten worse. If he so much as sneezed, she would whip out a medical tricorder. The nagging was no picnic, either: was he eating enough, sleeping enough, taking his meds? She was acting more like his mother than his girlfriend.

All the passion that had once been between them was gone, and he wasn’t just talking about their sex life (which appeared to be on permanent ice). Before, he and B’Elanna had never shied away from conflict. When Tom and Tabor had shared a wall back on Voyager, the Bajoran was just as likely to complain about the arguments he overheard as much as Tom and B’Elanna’s more amorous noise pollution. But, since the crash, B’Elanna seemed to be afraid to disagree with him. He’d gotten so fed up that at their last leadership meeting he’d made a series of ludicrous suggestions just to see if he could get a rise out of her. (“My next morale initiative is everyone adopts the name of their favorite ‘Captain Proton’ character.” “How ‘bout we put in a swimming pool? With a water slide!” “Let’s use remaining replicator power for an all-leola root feast. Just for old time’s sake.”)

All that had happened was B’Elanna had ignored him, and Seven had told him to put a sock in it. “Perhaps you could consult with Naomi Wildman on future ideas. She would provide a more rational perspective than you currently seem to possess.”

Maybe it was inevitable: the slow death of their relationship. It’s not like they’d been in a great place to begin with. B’Elanna’s depression, Tom’s poor handling of it – they had just started sorting out the pieces, had barely moved past sniping and banter to actual conversations. Add in the crash, his crappy health, fighting to keep the camp powered and fed – maybe a romance was a luxury they could no longer afford.

Or maybe it was just that B’Elanna didn’t want him anymore.

It had started as the tiniest, nagging doubt, when she’d turned her face away from Tom’s bare
chest as he’d dressed one morning. Then there was the way she tensed when he kissed her now, how she’d fled from his humiliating, aborted attempt to have sex with her nearly a month ago. Her rejection of every overture since.

It’s not like Tom could blame her. He was well aware of how his body had been changed by what had happened — gimping around the settlement, wheezing like an asthmatic bulldog. He was a shadow of who he used to be. He knew one of the things (the thing?) that drew B’Elanna to him in the first place was his stamina, his energy, how he wasn’t afraid to test his strength against hers. If Tuvok were here, he would have agreed it was the most logical conclusion: B’Elanna was no longer attracted to him.

Tom knew what he should do: stop with his usual strategy of avoidance, sit B’Elanna down and ask her straight out. Figure out if they were moving forward together, or if he needed to move on alone. The time had come for them to deal with this head on.

But not today. Today he was going to enjoy having a few hours by himself in this planet’s sad excuse for sun. He was going to pretend that he wasn’t responsible for the health of forty-five other people, that most of the other survivors hadn’t come to see him as a sort of de facto counselor and the receptacle for all their emotional woes, that he wasn’t crippled by scarred lungs and a ruined back. Today he was going to pretend he was the old Tom Paris. Getting some time to himself was not the least of the reasons he wanted to make the trek up to Voyager.

“Tom! Hey, Tom! Wait up!”

“Guess that alone time will hold for a few more minutes,” Tom thought when he saw who was calling him. “Hi, Naomi.” He waved at Sam, who was several meters behind her daughter.

The little girl held a small spray of the first wildflowers of spring, tied together with a satin purple ribbon that was frayed at the ends. “I thought you said I could go with you this time,” she said, her free hand on her hip and her lips pursed into a tiny scowl.

“I said you could maybe go with me some time,” Tom clarified, bending towards her with his hands on his knees. “She’s still not really in the mood for company.”

“Why not?”

“Good question, kid.” Tom glanced over Naomi’s shoulder at the girl’s mother, who gave Tom an apologetic shrug. “She’s still having kind of a hard time. I think she doesn’t want to be a bother.” It was close enough to the truth, and far less hurtful.

“But I’m her assistant!” Naomi said. “I could help her with stuff.”

Tom knelt to the ground with a grunt. He was almost certainly going to regret this action in a few minutes, but he’d always hated it as a kid — being surrounded by adults that all loomed over him. “I know you could, Naomi. And you’d do a great job, too. But then who would help Harren take care of his flock?”

Naomi gave a dramatic sigh and waved her hand dismissively. “Mortimer doesn’t need my help every day. Those birds pretty much take care of themselves.”

Tom’s eyebrows shot upwards and looked at Sam, who was chuckling quietly. “He lets you call him Mortimer?”

“What else would I call him?” Naomi asked. “So, are you taking me or not?”
“Sorry, Squirt. No can do.” Honestly, if he could trust their erstwhile captain to behave herself, Naomi’s resilience and unshakable optimism might be just what the doctor ordered. But given how Janeway had acted the last time he’d been up there, Tom wasn’t taking any chances. He’d rather disappoint the little girl now than risk having her psyche crushed by her damaged idol. He chucked her gently under the chin. “Those for her?” he asked, gesturing at the little bouquet.

Naomi nodded with a disappointed sigh. Tom had her tuck them into the side pocket of his pack and promised he’d deliver them. “I swear I’ll bring you to see her as soon as she’s ready. But before you go back to being Captain’s Assistant, maybe you should practice by assisting me first.”

“With what?” she asked eagerly.

Tom thrust a hand out to her with a grin. “Getting me off the ground.”

Sam, of course, did the lion’s share of the work in helping Tom back to his feet, but Naomi was happy to tug and push, laughing all the while. Never in a million years would he have chosen to have her stuck on this god forsaken rock with the rest of them, but he had to admit — getting to see her cheery face every day sometimes felt like the only good reason to get out of bed in the morning.

Naomi ran off in a flurry, having spotted Ayala and his hunting party returning from their morning rounds. “She seems to have gotten over her aversion to eating fresh meat,” Tom remarked. The rabbit-y creatures that inhabited the cliffs around the settlement had turned out to be nutrient dense and easy to catch, and last week they’d taken down three good-sized hoofed animals crossing over the mountain.

“I’m still having some trouble with it,” Sam admitted with a guilty look, “but in the end, hunger definitely overrides the cute factor.”

“How are her night terrors?” Tom asked as they watched Naomi trailing after the hunters. “Any better after the treatment?”

“It’s hard to say.” Sam shrugged. “Maybe? But let’s give it a little longer. She tolerated it well, at least, and after what happened with the first medication…”

Tom’s stomach clenched with a newly familiar feeling of insecurity laced with a sizable helping of guilt and anxiety. He’d tried a mild sleep aid on Naomi first, supposedly benign even in the youngest of children, but he hadn’t realized how her mix of human and Ktarian DNA would impact her metabolism of the drug. “I’m so sorry about that. I should have done more research first. I didn’t think—”

“Hey,” Sam said, grabbing him by the shoulder. “That wasn’t an accusation. It was one bad night. You don’t need to keep apologizing. There’s no way you could have predicted what would happen.”

“The Doc would have.”

“Maybe,” Sam conceded. “But you know what he wouldn’t have done? Sat up with her three nights in a row, telling her stories until she fell asleep. Stop being so hard on yourself. You’re doing the best you can in an impossible situation.”

Tom squeezed her hand in thanks. He used to think he’d known Sam pretty well, before the crash. They’d worked together in Sickbay on several occasions, after all. But turned out he hadn’t. Now Tom realized he’d thought of her as little more than Naomi’s mother and the person that
periodically facilitated his escape from the Doc’s clutches.

His first glimpse of her strength of character came when they’d been stuck in the Flyer together, buried on that planetoid, but their current situation had really brought it to the fore. Her steady, quiet demeanor had been a rock for the rest of the survivors, and her xenobiology background had proven indispensable. Sussing out new food sources from the local flora and fauna, determining the relative danger posed by various insects and toxic plants, figuring out the best way to protect themselves from the larger predators — Sam had had a hand in all of it. Not to mention her now being his chief medical assistant. Tom wasn’t sure what he’d do if he didn’t have her soft-spoken reassurances to rely on.

“I’d better get going,” he said. “I don’t want to lose too much sunlight.”

Sam eyed him for a moment. “Are you sure you don’t want me to go instead? You were limping pretty badly after last week’s trip.”

Tom scowled in response. “Et tu, Samantha?” She’d become something of a confidant as well — including hearing about much of his current frustration with B’Elanna.

“Sorry,” she said with a laugh. “I’ll let you get to it. Naomi! Wait for me!”

The first two kilometers of his journey were fairly manageable: a dirt path well-marked through the short, stubby grass, the grade still not pitched too steep. Over his last two trips, Tom had figured out the best places for him to take breaks — largish rocks close to the trail, big enough to sit on but not so low he had trouble getting up again. But the last kilometer was a doozy. Tom took a long drink from his water bottle and shook out his legs before he began. The mountainside angled up more steeply now, with several areas that necessitated crawling over massive boulders and the rest of it covered in gravel — the absolute worst sort of footing for a guy with an unreliable leg. Last week, he’d had to take ten minutes on his return trip to heal a sprained wrist, as well as an assortment of scrapes and bruises he’d gotten from a fall. If B’Elanna had seen them, she’d have probably locked him in their shelter before she’d have let him come up here alone again.

He was panting hard when he finally reached Voyager, his knit hat long packed away and his hair dark with sweat despite the stiff wind that came off the mountain peak. He dropped into the bench Nozawa had made on one of his trips up here, jury rigged from a piece of hull that had broken off the starboard nacelle. “It’s easy to spot,” Kashimuro had told him before his first trip up here. “Off to the left at trail’s end. I put it right where it gets hit by the midday sun. Me and Tim agreed we needed a place to take a breather afterwards.”

“From the hike?” Tom had asked, a little surprised. Nozawa and Lang were both enviably fit, even before the crash. The trip between their camp and Voyager should have been a cakewalk for them.

“From her,” Nozawa had confessed. “You absolutely sure you want this job, Paris? It’s not a lot of fun.”

Tom gazed up at what was left of the ship he’d called home for over four years, feeling the same deep pang of sadness he did each time he looked at the wreckage. He could still hear Stadi, her voice rich with pride and anticipation: “Intrepid class, sustainable cruise velocity of warp factor 9.975, fifteen decks, crew complement of one hundred forty-one, bio-neural circuitry.”

The first time he’d taken the conn as chief helm officer, he’d taken a moment to regret the loss of the Betazoid woman that had first shown him Voyager. Back then, Tom had thought Stadi’s death at such a young age had been a terrible tragedy. But now, looking at their once beautiful, state-of-the-art ship twisted and ripped apart, reduced to a useless hulk of rusting metal and broken glass, he
wondered if she was the lucky one.

“OK, Paris,” he muttered as he pushed himself upright. “You’ve put this off long enough.”

The best way to board the ship now was an empty escape pod hatch on deck four — only two sections away from where his own quarters had once been. Getting in wasn’t easy — the starboard side of the saucer section was largely intact, but the hatch angled upwards at a sharp angle. Tom had to haul himself up through the short tunnel, grateful his arms, at least, had been spared serious injury, crawl several meters on his hands and knees, then drop through a hole in the decking onto what used to be the interior wall of deck five. He tried to control his fall as much as possible, but he still felt like his back broke all over again on landing.

A few shaky breaths, a passing urge to vomit (See, B’Elanna? There’s a reason I didn’t eat lunch yet.) and Tom made his way fore and up the three decks to the captain’s current place of residence. Deck two was still in something resembling the correct orientation, and once he’d emerged from the Jefferies tube at junction six, it was only a short walk to his destination. Tom used his wrist light to scan ahead. Either Lang or Nozawa had left a few motion-sensing lamps here and there, but their light was inadequate given how the corridor was littered with bits of bulkhead and open and stripped panels. He wondered, not for the first time, how Janeway had even gotten in here.

The mechanism that opened her door was non-functional, of course. Tom had to use the manual override to pull it open a few centimeters. “Knock, knock,” he called before yanking the door open wide enough for him to enter.

She didn’t have any lights on. It wasn’t completely dark, as there was a fair bit of sunlight streaming in through the windows. She’d done more cleaning since last week. Much of the rooms’ contents had been broken or otherwise rendered unusable by the crash, of course, but the one ‘mission’ Janeway still seemed invested in was restoring as much of Chakotay’s quarters as possible. Two of the chairs he’d had reupholstered in a sturdy, patterned wool had been patched and were sitting kitty corner to each other by the windows. Several pieces of clay pottery — some mostly intact, others with large pieces missing — lined the shelves. A wall-hanging was back up now, too — Tom remembered Chakotay once telling him it was Navajo-inspired.

He’d raised a nonplussed eyebrow when he’d first found out where the captain was now holing herself up. He’d sat only a few meters in front of them for years — theirs was not the typical captain/first officer relationship, particularly after New Earth. Tom thought Janeway’s choice told anyone what they needed to know about her state of mind. B’Elanna, however, had been dismissive.

“It doesn’t mean anything,” she’d said. “They’re just the only quarters with windows that are still intact. She probably just wanted whatever natural light she can get.” B’Elanna had been herding Tom towards their bed. He’d been newly released from the Doc’s care that day, and had decided it was time for someone to finally clue him in on everything that had been going on since the crash. The Doctor’s directive that he not be left unsupervised for the first few hours meant he finally had a captive audience.

“So she’s just up there, alone?” he asked, suppressing a pained grunt when B’Elanna lifted his legs up onto the bed. “No power? What does she eat? Did you leave her rations?”

B’Elanna scowled as she arranged a few pillows behind him so he could sit up supported. “No. We’re all heartless bastards and we left her there to die.” In fact, Janeway had been given power cells so she had lights and heat, and the Doctor had been going up there once a week to make sure she had enough food and her health was stable.
“It’s just so selfish,” B’Elanna continued to rant as she brought Tom a cup of the nutrient-rich broth the Doctor made him drink at least once a day. The taste left something to be desired, but Tom recognized he was probably the only survivor that got to eat something replicated on a regular basis, so he always took it without complaint. “She acted like she was doing us a fucking favor, when she told us her decision. ‘I don’t need anything.’” B’Elanna said, in a terrible imitation of Janeway’s gravel. “As if we could just forget about her, ignore the fact that our formerly fearless leader is up there alone, freezing and starving to death in the dark.”

“It sounds like she’s depressed,” Tom offered as he sipped the broth and tried not to ask when his next analgesics were due. *I can relate,* he thought but didn’t say.

“Then she needs to get over it,” B’Elanna had snapped before changing the topic.

But despite B’Elanna’s grousing, Janeway actually didn’t use all that much. She wasn’t eating nearly the calories she should have been, and the power cells only needed changing out every other week or so. Aside from the heaters, Tom had yet to see her using anything more high powered than a floor lamp. And, Tom noted with a shiver, she didn’t even have the heat on at the moment.

“Hey, Captain,” he called as he checked the power cell in its housing under the windows. “You coming out? You didn’t go out to see a show, did you? Maybe a hot date?”

“Stop calling that,” a low voice said from the bedroom.

It was his third time seeing her since the crash, but he still wasn’t used to it — how weak her voice was now, the slowness of her speech. He forced himself to keep to a jocular tone. “Sorry, I just can’t get my mouth to say ‘Kathryn’ quite yet.”

*Oh, for fuck’s sake,* he thought the second the words were out of his mouth. *Great joke to make to someone aphasic, Paris. Well done.* He pulled himself to standing and turned towards her. “I brought you some things.”

She shambled across the small space, refusing to look at him. Per the Doctor, she’d recovered most of the strength in her limbs, at least, but still had lingering issues with proprioception. Her right foot caught on a piece of torn carpet and she nearly stumbled. Tom forced himself not to reach out to help her. Partially because he wasn’t entirely sure she wouldn’t take him down with her if she fell, but also because he knew how much she’d resent it. “Have a…” she said, waving at him. “On my face. The… the…”

“Beard?” he supplied when it became clear that particular bit of vocabulary was lost to her today. He ignored her mismatched pronoun. “Yeah, for a couple of months now. It keeps my face warm. Plus,” he added with a grin, “I think it makes me look rugged.”

Given he was about ten kilos underweight, Tom knew damn well he was about as far from rugged as a person could get, but he hoped it might trigger a little mockery on the captain’s part. No such luck. She dropped into one of Chakotay’s chairs and stared out the window.

“Nice view,” he remarked as he lowered himself into the other chair. The windows pointed away from the peak that was *Voyager’s* final resting place. The rocky ground sloped down and away, a few clumps of spring grass sprouting here and there, a coniferous forest far in the distance, additional snow covered mountains even further. “You must get some amazing sunsets up here.”

“Wrong way.”

“Sunrises, then,” he said, even though he knew she had it backwards. He pulled out his medical
tricorder. “Let’s see how you’re doing.”

“No.”

“Do we really have to go through this again?” Tom asked, already scanning her. “It’s hardly an invasive procedure. Just a few quick passes with the wand and… we’re done. See? Painless.”

Her lungs were stable — no sign of the airway remodeling the Doc told him to watch for. She’d been exposed to the same pulmonary toxin that Tom had been, but the damage wasn’t as severe given she’d fallen closer to the hull rupture and a source of fresh air. Her neural pathways were showing little change, much as the Doctor had predicted. “She’s not going to get any better?” Tom had asked him when the Doctor had filled him in on the various deficits Janeway now suffered after the crash.

“If she were to participate in any of the rehabilitative therapies that I’ve prescribed, she would,” the Doctor replied. “Slowly, not as well as we’d see with a neurogenic stimulator, of course; but she would improve. Without that, though…” The hologram had trailed off, then had refocused on Tom’s own physical therapy session (much to Tom’s chagrin).

“I brought you a PADD,” Tom said. “The one I mentioned last week? The one I forgot.” Janeway showed no indication she’d heard him, but he soldiered on. “I’ve loaded a bunch of things on here: music, a novel, some poetry.”

“Can’t read.”

“I know you’re having some trouble with that.” He held the PADD within easy reach of her hand, but she made no movement to take it. “But I did some research in the Doc’s databases and I put some comprehension aids on here. There’s audio files, so you can just listen. And, if you want, there’s a program that will help you re-learn some of what you’ve lost — letters to start, then matching words to pictures, that kind of thing. That way you can do it on your own, you don’t have to—”

Janeway knocked the PADD to the ground with a clatter. “Don’t want it. Take it back.”

Tom leaned forward with a grunt and retrieved the PADD from the floor. “How about I put it on the table? In case you change your mind.” He went back to his pack, no more efficient in his movements than Janeway was. Time to bring out the big guns. “Naomi wanted me to give you something as well.”

He limped back over to the windows, carrying the little girl’s flowers. “She’d like to come visit, when you’re up for it.”

“No.”

Tom took a deep breath. “Maybe give it a little more thought,” he said. “It’s pretty amazing, how well she’s handling everything.” He reached for one of the more intact pieces of Chakotay’s pottery, thinking he could spare a bit of his water for the flowers if there was a chance it would perk Janeway up a bit. “I know if I’m having a crappy day, spending some time with—”

“No!” Janeway lurched to her feet, slapping at Tom’s hands. “Leave it!”

Tom stumbled backwards into his chair, nearly falling. He dropped the flowers to the floor. “Captain, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“Go, Tom!” her voice cracking. “Don’t come again. Don’t want visits.”
“Captain, you know someone has to come check on you. We can’t just leave you—”

“Send someone else,” she said, her voice becoming more slurred. “Don’t want to see you. Your fault.” She dragged herself back towards the bedroom. “Your fault.”

Tom didn’t bother to follow her. He checked her food stores, which were in far better shape than they should have been, then left her some more of their dwindling supply of ration packs and a small container of strawberries. B’Elanna had told him not to bring any more fresh fruit up here because she’d been leaving too much to spoil, but Tom had snuck some out of the greenhouse. The berries, he’d noticed, were one of the few things she ate with regularity.

Later, when he’d hobbled back into camp, his back and leg on fire, B’Elanna had been waiting for him. “You look exhausted,” she said, reaching a hand towards his shoulder.

Tom shrugged it off and kept walking. “If I stop moving, I’ll never get started again,” he said. “And I’m no more exhausted than usual. Or than anyone else is these days.”

She followed behind him, stripping the pack off his back as he walked. “I’ll take this back to the Sacajawea for you. Go back to the shelter and take an analgesic. Get off your feet.” She threw the bag over one shoulder and moved to walk alongside him. “How was she? Barrel of laughs as usual?”

“She’s fine,” Tom said, looking away to hide his relief at having the weight of the pack gone. “We had a nice chat, actually.”

B’Elanna stopped short. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Maybe you’re right then,” B’Elanna said as she caught up with him again. “Maybe she does just need someone to pull her out of her shell. You think you’ll be able to talk her to coming down to the camp?”

“Maybe. I don’t think we’re there yet.”

Apparently not trusting that he’d follow her instructions, B’Elanna walked him all the way back to their shelter. He couldn’t really complain, as there was no way he’d have been able to bend enough to pry off his boots at this point. She brought him a cup of hot tea, made from flowers that Vorik had cultivated, which he appreciated. She also pressed a hypospray of pain meds to his neck without asking first, even as it brought him relief. “Tom!” she exclaimed when she opened the pack. “You never ate lunch!”

He felt bad about lying to B’Elanna about Janeway. He really did. But if he told her the truth, she’d never let him go up there again. And he had to keep going. He had to make sure she was eating and had power, that she hadn’t completely given up. He had to keep trying to bring her back to them. Because Janeway had given him a second chance when no one else had. And because she was right.

Her condition – the slurred speech, the cognitive issues: it was his fault.
Seven was alone in the shelter she shared with the Wildmans, running her third diagnostic on her alcove in as many days, when there was a knock at their door. She closed her hand tighter around the tricorder but did not turn towards the sound.

Eleven silent seconds passed before there was a second knock and a call. “It’s Tom!”

With a short exhale, she rose from her crouch at the base of her alcove and opened the shelter’s door. “I am occupied.” Seven returned to the small bedroom that contained her alcove without acknowledging him further.

“With what?” Tom asked, following close behind.

Seven explained the issue. Her alcove was not operating correctly. Despite faithfully regenerating six hours every night, which had been adequate for optimal functioning for over a year now, Seven had found her level of efficiency was falling. “I fatigue more quickly than normal. I frequently find myself unable to focus on the task at hand, regardless of how vital it may be to the continued survival of the settlement. I have had no interest in working on the Yang-Mills existence and mass gap, nor even the fifth dimensional Poincaré conjecture, which I typically find diverting.”

Tom’s eyebrows shot upward. “You work on unsolvable math problems for fun?”

“Unsolved, not unsolvable. And your question is irrelevant.” Seven gestured at her alcove. “I suspect there is an issue with the power transfer from the dilithium reactor. I have yet to locate the exact problem, but it is the only explanation. My inability to resolve this is simply another symptom.”

“Carey told me he and Vorik checked it out, too, and didn’t find anything.”

“Neither individual is entirely proficient in Borg technology. Aside from myself, only Ensign Kim and Lieutenant… B’Elanna were able to achieve an acceptable level of competence in their understanding of my alcove’s functioning. B’Elanna has refused to assist me, and Ensign Kim, of course, cannot.”

A brief flash of distress crossed Tom’s face, as happened every time Ensign Kim’s absence was unexpectedly mentioned. Lately, Seven had made an effort to avoid referring to the man in Tom’s presence, and her negligence in this matter was just another sign that her current level of functioning was inadequate.

Tom gave her a small smile. “Yeah,” he said, “B’Elanna’s pretty busy these days. I can’t get five minutes and we live together.” He placed his medkit on the small desk next to him and opened it. “Maybe it’s not the alcove. Why don’t you let me take a look?”

“That would be acceptable.” Seven stood in place as he moved the wand of the tricorder over her.
Tom’s knowledge of medicine was far inferior to the Doctor’s, but it was always possible to reactivate the hologram if there was something seriously amiss.

He frowned at the readings, took another scan of her cranial implants, made some inputs into the tricorder, all while saying nothing more enlightening than an occasional ‘Huh.’ Seven shifted her feet. “What is wrong? Are you capable of treating me or should we activate the EMH?”

Tom removed his gaze from the tricorder after several seconds. He smiled again. “I think I can handle it.” It took an excessive period of time for him to return the tricorder to the medkit and close the case. He did not remove any hyposprays. “Sorry,” he said, lowering himself into the desk chair with a grunt. “I’ve gotta sit. I’ve been up since 5:30. Whicher fell off the sensor tower this morning and broke her leg.”

Seven had not fully appreciated Tom’s appearance when he first entered her shelter. Now she saw there were dark circles under both eyes, accentuated by the waxy pallor of his skin. She put her own anxiety aside and inquired after Whicher’s health, as she knew Tom would have suggested were he observing this conversation rather than being one of its participants.

His answering smile was wan. “She’ll be OK. It was a clean break, fortunately. Nothing a standard osteogenerator can’t handle. Thanks for asking. But we’re here about you. There’s nothing really wrong—”

“If you have been unable to find a medical issue,” Seven interjected, “I shall continue my work on my alcove.”

Tom held up a hand. “Let me finish. Your implants check out normal, which means this isn’t a regeneration issue. It’s not your Borg side, Seven. It’s your human one.”

“Explain.”

“Serotonin, glutamate, dopamine: they’re all just a touch out of whack,” he replied. “Which is pretty much a camp epidemic these days. You’re suffering from low-level clinical depression.”

Seven was suspect of his diagnosis — the Borg do not become ‘depressed,’ — but she supposed his readings of her neurotransmitter levels were correct. “How do you put them back ‘in whack,’ then?”

Tom ducked his head, but it didn’t hide his grin. “Fortunately or unfortunately, it’s not bad enough to warrant medical treatment. We don’t really have the resources to treat every minor mood disorder. But that doesn’t mean there’s nothing we can do.”

He was trying to help her. Seven was aware of this. But the suggestions Tom proceeded to make were so simplistic and absurd that Seven found it difficult to not berate him for his stupidity. Exercise, self-reflection, engagement with others, ‘get some sun.’ It was clear he was out of his depth. “Thank you for your suggestions. I will take it under advisement.” She hoped Tom would take this as his cue to leave her in peace.

He did not. “Seven, I get it. You want it to be something straightforward, a quick problem with an easy solution. We all want that. But human brains don’t always work that way. Look, it’s understandable you’re feeling a little… at sea.Nearly everyone here has felt this way at some point or another. As each day goes by, and the chance of rescue becomes more and more remote — you start to wonder what’s the point. But you should try to talk to someone about it. It helps. If not me, then maybe someone else, like Sam, or, or… someone.”
Seven picked up the medkit and held it out to him. There could be no clearer signal.

Tom still refused to take it. “I’m not leaving here until I feel like I’ve helped, at least a little.”

“This shelter doesn’t have sufficient space for a fourth occupant.” She put down the kit and exited the bedroom.

“I thought I was supposed to be the funny one,” he called after her. She heard the desk chair scrape against the floor and his grunt of effort. Tom appeared in the doorway between the bedroom and the larger central living space. “Talking will help, Seven. I swear.” He looked down at his boot tips for several seconds. “I mean, look at the captain.”

Seven’s head twisted towards him. “Elaborate.”

He limped closer. “Well, I’ve been going up there, what? Four, five weeks now? And I haven’t been doing anything special, really. I just talk some, let her talk. And she’s, um… better. Definitely. Much more like herself than she was. She might even be ready to rejoin the camp soon. Just having someone to listen to her has made a real difference.”

This was significant. The captain’s disengagement from the rest of the surviving crew continued to cause Seven some consternation, despite her attempts to put those thoughts aside. But if the captain’s mental state was indeed improving…

In the first days after the crash, once she had been released from her alcove, Seven had been the captain’s closest companion. Along with Tom Paris, they were the only survivors found on the bridge. Seven’s Borg implants and nanoprobe meant her traumatic brain injury and the damage to her lungs were inconsequential after fifteen hours of regeneration. Tom Paris’ injuries were the most catastrophic of the surviving crew; he therefore occupied much of the Doctor’s attention. This meant the captain, once her condition was stabilized, was often left alone. Seven had found this unacceptable and would station herself at her bedside whenever her other responsibilities allowed it.

Janeway said almost nothing in those early days, not even when Seven described, in detail, what had happened to Voyager and its crew. The captain, Seven knew, thrived on knowledge and would appreciate being kept informed even if her physical infirmity prevented her from being more directly involved. “Tuvok?” was one of the few things she would say that first week.

“Commander Tuvok is deceased,” Seven said each time she asked. “You, myself, and Lieutenant Paris were the only survivors from the bridge crew. The lieutenant’s condition is still precarious, although the Doctor has been working diligently to save him. Perhaps you would like to hear what Lieutenant Torres is doing to ensure the survival of the remaining crew?”

The captain never said yes, but she never said no, either, so Seven would tell her.

After eight days of recuperation, the captain was physically much stronger and would not remain in the biobed, despite the Doctor’s protests. This was encouraging behavior to Seven, as it was typical for Janeway. Seven took it as a sign that perhaps their commanding officer would be able to retake command sooner rather than later. With the Doctor’s reluctantly given blessing, the next afternoon Seven accompanied the captain on her first trip off the Sacajawea. She’d been bundled in thermal gear, the temperature being negative eleven degrees Celsius, so none of the crew members darting about the camp recognized their debilitated captain. Janeway attempted to take a deep breath of the frigid air, but it quickly turned into a hacking cough. After several seconds in which Seven held tight to her thin frame in support, the captain looked up.
“Voyager.”

“Yes, Captain,” Seven confirmed as they both observed the wreckage lodged in the mountainside above them. “As I have told you, the ship is beyond repair.”

The captain returned to the interior of the shuttle without another word.

She spoke even less as the days passed, often ignoring even the most simple and direct questions. Seven interrogated the EMH extensively, but he insisted that Janeway’s cognitive functioning was stable and suggested the issue was more psychological in origin. He had little else in the way of actionable advice to offer, and Seven became frustrated with both him and the captain.

In addition, Janeway was physically more independent, and Seven had many other duties to which she had to attend. By the second week after the crash, her time with Janeway had dropped significantly. “I apologize I did not come yesterday,” Seven said the evening of day fifteen, having arrived with a meal Chell had prepared for the captain. “I was assisting Lieutenant Torres with the alignment of the dilithium chamber in the new power station we have constructed. Would you like to hear the details of the process?”

“No,” Janeway said. “Leave.”

Seven approached her where she sat in what had been the pilot’s seat of the shuttle. “I have your dinner. Crewman Chell said this ration pack is a favorite among the human crew. It is called ‘fiesta quinoa salad.’” She extended the tray further towards Janeway, planning to leave it on the deadened console despite the other woman’s apparent lack of interest. “You must eat.”

But Janeway turned more quickly than she had any time since the crash, throwing her arm upwards and upsetting the food. “Go!” When Seven didn’t move, Janeway lurched to her feet. “Leave!”

At this point the Doctor rushed in from the aft section of the shuttle. “You must be quieter,” he hissed at the two women. “I have had a very difficult time managing Mr. Paris’ pain today, and he’s finally resting. I do not want him disturbed!”

Seven departed rather than cause Janeway or Paris more distress.

She stayed away from the Sacajawea and Janeway for the next two days. Seven had begun to doubt that her presence was desired or helpful. She did not enjoy the sensation. On the other hand, there were many times in the past that she’d wished Janeway had left her alone, yet the captain had persisted. Each of those encounters had been ultimately beneficial, despite her initial resentment. If she were similarly persistent in visiting the captain, might there also be a positive outcome? The thought occupied much of her background mental processes as she went about her daily duties ensuring the survival of the settlement.

On the morning of the third day, she was in the Tereshkova, working on constructing a new, short-range sensor net. Seven had decided it was time to reinstate her visits to the captain and planned to do so when the net was complete. As she calibrated the final section of relays, B’Elanna stomped into the shuttle. “What a piece of work,” the engineer grumbled as she started to dig through a crate of isolinear circuits and power couplings salvaged from Voyager.

“Are you referring to the sensor net?” Seven asked.

“What? No,” B’Elanna said. “Janeway.” She thrust her arm deep into the crate and pulled out a grade six sonic wrench. “There you are, you little bastard. I suppose she didn’t have the guts to tell you herself?”
“As I do not know to what you are referring, no.”

Fifteen minutes prior, Janeway had made an announcement to the Doctor and Lieutenant Torres. She was leaving the main settlement and returning to Voyager, alone. Seven was perplexed. “But I have made it clear to her that the ship is not repairable. What does she hope to accomplish?”

B’Elanna snorted. “She’s not hoping to accomplish anything, Seven. It’s like when we were stuck in that damn void all over again. She’s going into hiding. She’s given up. If anyone was still fooling themselves that the Great Kathryn Janeway would somehow ride in with a plan to save the day, they can officially pack it in.”

Seven’s throat felt oddly constricted. It was difficult to swallow. “Perhaps,” she said, “you or others have made her feel unwanted.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” B’Elanna snapped. “You think this is my fault?”

The engineer’s jaw clenched. Retreat was Seven’s best option to avoid confrontation and acquire more information about Janeway’s announcement. She glanced down at her work before returning the engineer’s glare. “Or perhaps she is sensitive about her cognitive and expressive difficulties. We should reassure her that her presence and contributions will still be valued even if they are not as constructive as they might have been prior to the crash.”

B’Elanna stared back at Seven for several seconds, then dropped her shoulders. Her mouth twisted into a small, tight smile. “I don’t think that’s going to do it,” she said, her voice softer than was typical. “You know she isn’t even trying to get better, right?”

“Explain.”

“She won’t do any of the rehab the Doctor has given her,” B’Elanna said, rising to stand. “Not the cognitive exercises, the speech therapy, nothing. Janeway could be better than she is, Seven. She just doesn’t want to be. Like I said, she’s given up.” B’Elanna zipped up her parka and exited the shuttle. “Let me know when that sensor net is ready.”

Seven attempted to return to the sensors, but she found it difficult to focus on the task. When she burned the tips of her fingers on a misaligned relay twice in three minutes, she, too, left the Tereshkova. The Doctor was pompous and often lacking in empathy. B’Elanna’s irritable temperament made her difficult to talk to. Perhaps if Seven spoke with Janeway, she would be better able to convince the captain of the error of her decision to isolate herself.

She walked towards the Sacajawea, where Janeway had been residing despite her improved medical status. When she reached the shuttle, Samantha Wildman was exiting. The biologist’s face was sympathetic. “If you’re looking for the captain, Seven, I’m afraid you’re too late.” She pointed in the direction of the summit.

The captain was at the edge of settlement, just starting on the rough path that lead to the foundered starship. Her pace was slow, but her gait was determined. She ignored Crewman Dalby calling her name. It took little effort for Seven of Nine to catch up.

“Captain Janeway. I have been informed you are leaving the settlement.”

Janeway didn’t even turn her head to acknowledge her.

“Isolation is not conducive to your recovery, nor towards the well-being of the settlement. I urge you to reconsider.”
Still no noise other than Janeway’s elevated respiratory rate. Seven elected to adopt a strategy that Janeway herself had utilized many times as Seven was first learning to adapt to Voyager. She would speak her mind and assume the other woman would listen.

“Lieutenant Torres has informed me you have not been participating in the Doctor’s rehabilitation protocol. I am sympathetic. When I was first separated from the collective, the Doctor put me through many such protocols. Spending excessive time in his company can be onerous. You would not be the first to refuse appropriate medical care in order to escape his ministrations.”

She still didn’t speak, but Seven caught a slight twitch of Janeway’s mouth. Some might interpret it as an attempt at a smile. Or perhaps an attempt to conceal one.

“I wish to offer my services. I will familiarize myself with the Doctor’s recommended therapies and assist you in implementing them. You helped me find my way as a member of Voyager’s crew. I will now repay the favor.”

The captain finally stopped her ascent up the trail. “Don’t want…” She shook her head. “Can’t help you. Want… to be alone.” She began to walk again.

Seven followed. “I do not require your help. I am offering you my help.”

Janeway grunted and shook her head again. “No! No! Not… I can’t help you,” she repeated. “No. I…” She smacked the heel of her hand against her temple.

Seven grabbed Janeway’s wrist to prevent further self-trauma. “That will not resolve your aphasia. Only the Doctor’s therapy will help. You must return to the settlement and accept my assistance. It is the only acceptable option.” Janeway pulled against her grip, but Seven would not release her. “When I was first separated from the collective, even the sight of you angered me. You forced me into a state of individuality that I did not ask for. You told me one day I would understand you were helping me to become the person I was meant to be. I did not believe you then. But I understand now. I see how you have helped me. So now I will do the same for you. I will force you to stay here, with us, until you understand that we can help you become the person you once were.”

With a quick, decisive snap that took Seven off guard, Janeway freed her arm. “No!” she croaked, her voice hoarse. “Should have never…” A tear fell from Janeway’s eye, and she swiped at it roughly. “Should have left you. Stay behind. Don’t deserve….” She turned back towards the trail and moved away.

Seven tried to parse out Janeway’s collection of words and what they might mean. The Doctor had explained she often had trouble with word order — an object might be swapped with a subject, for example. Pronouns had been particularly difficult for the captain and she often skipped them entirely, or confused one with another. Could there be a positive interpretation? An opening for Seven to help the woman that had helped her many months ago, when she had felt so alone and unmoored?

As she had watched Janeway lurch up the trail those many weeks ago, without even a backwards glance, Seven had been unable to find such an interpretation. The captain had rejected her overtures, as she had the Doctor’s. Based on her final words to Seven, perhaps she even regretted freeing her from the collective. Seven had deemed further contact with Janeway was an inefficient use of her time. If the other woman no longer wished to have contact with her, Seven would not force it. There were over forty other survivors in the settlement. Seven would find others to fill the role that Janeway had had in her life.
But despite this resolution, Seven had found herself contemplating Janeway more frequently than she would have liked. In the earlier days, she would observe Lang and Nozawa after their visits to Voyager, listening for comments on her former mentor’s health and state of mind, though she would never ask either of them directly. It had been a generally unsatisfactory exercise, as neither man had had any information to report other than confirmation of her continued survival and that they had replaced her power cells and rations. She noted that once Tom had taken over the task of visiting Janeway, he would make an effort to discuss the captain’s status when she was present during briefings, although generally he had little to say beyond that he was of the opinion she was making ‘progress.’

So for him to clearly assert that her condition was improved was of note. He had never before expressed the opinion that her returning to camp was imminent. “The captain’s state of mind has improved significantly then?”

Tom inspected his fingernails. “I don’t know if I’d use the word ‘significantly’…”

“No!” Tom looked up, reaching his hand towards her. “No, it has helped, Seven. I just mean… she still has a ways to go. She’s not ready to come back yet, but she’s at least considering it now. Which is a really good sign.”

“Perhaps another member of the settlement should accompany you on your next visit. If talking to one individual is beneficial, than two would be more so. I volunteer.”

“No yet,” Tom said with a tight-lipped smile. “She’s been asking about you, about everybody. But I think it’s still hard on her — people seeing her the way she is now.”

Seven nodded. Prior to the crash, Janeway had been a dynamic and accomplished individual. Her current level of disability would be difficult for her to tolerate. Seven’s high level of functioning would accentuate the captain’s inferiority, but Tom Paris, given his own infirmity, would not make her deficiencies as glaring. It was best that Janeway be allowed some modicum of control over whom she would see or not.

“So it’s important you try to take care of yourself,” Tom continued. “The captain has a lot of guilt about what happened. She’d be crushed if she knew you were having a hard time. On the other hand, if I tell her how great everyone’s doing, it’ll go a long way to making her feel better about things. She’ll want to come back down.”

Tom’s reasoning was sound. As Voyager’s commanding officer, Janeway was ultimately responsible for the failed attempt at using the quantum slipstream drive. This responsibility was inevitably accompanied by a great deal of remorse. If the captain felt the settlement and the remaining crew were thriving despite the crash, perhaps it would alleviate some of her guilt. “You have obviously given the matter considerable thought,” Seven told Tom. “I cannot fault your logic.”

“High praise from you.” Tom grinned. “I only wish Tuvok were here to witness this momentous occasion.”

“As do I,” Seven said. “I will comply with your advice.” She directed a pointed glance out the common area window. “Although ‘getting some sun’ may prove difficult.”

Tom’s grin grew wider. “Touché. But you’ll try the other stuff? Maybe socialize a bit more? Try talking about how you’re feeling?”
Seven nodded. She continued to have her reservations, but if, in the end, her efforts might facilitate the captain’s return to Hoth, it would be a constructive use of her time.

“That’s great, Seven,” Tom said, clapping a hand to her upper arm. “It’s going to help, I swear. Everything’s going to be better soon.”
Day 155

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder that you can find (spoiler-ish) content warnings at the end of chapter one. We're starting to really get into it, folks.

“Shit!” B’Elanna stuck her bleeding knuckle into her mouth. She’d been trying to realign the conduits on the damn plasma flow converters since 0500. The days were getting warmer; but the hours before sunrise were still often below freezing, and the work was too delicate for gloves. She inspected the damaged finger. It was a deep scrape, bordering on a full blown laceration: a three centimeter long flap of skin gone and blood steadily welling on the surface. Tom would be up by now; she should have him heal the cut properly.

No, B’Elanna decided. That would take too long. She was almost done, and if the converters weren’t realigned by the time alpha team tried to take advantage of their scheduled shower time, she’d be hearing about it all day. She pulled out a small box of dermaplasts that she’d pilfered from Tom’s supplies a few weeks ago. One would do the job well enough.

Nine minutes later and with only one to spare, B’Elanna got the converter squared away. She pulled on her gloves, but they were cold, too, and not much help. She glared at the fussy equipment as she stood, squelching a desire to give it a firm kick. It wasn’t the converter’s fault, after all. It was meant to be operating on a starship, protected from dust and ice and the cold. She should be happy it worked at all. Having to baby the damn thing every week or so was a small price to pay for sonic showers and running water.

If only they could get the solar batteries to work. B’Elanna had come up with the idea almost three months ago, but had turned over the project to Carey given all the other directions she was being pulled in. Replacing their deuterium was impossible. Rollins had found a local molybdiunm derivative, but mining was no small undertaking, and it wasn’t renewable. True, they were just powering a couple dozen buildings, not flying at warp speed, but they needed energy sources they could rely on for the long haul.

Unfortunately, all of Joe’s solar battery efforts had so far been for naught. They were now up to nearly fifteen full hours of sunlight a day, but even the atmosphere on this damn planet had it out for them: it was chock full of bromosite particles. While they didn’t prevent the sun from helping the sparse vegetation grow, they were hell on the solar panels. Even with five fully operational batteries, there was only enough power to run the heat and light to two shelters for a week or to power a single replicator — not enough to even justify the energy they’d used to manufacture the damn things. Joe was trying to devise a bromosite filter to protect the panel surfaces, but he’d yet to come up with a workable solution.

On top of that, food was getting to be a problem again. The greenhouses were doing well — Vorik’s last two plantings had been more successful than even he had predicted. But once again, they didn’t have enough protein. The larger hoof stock Ayala and the others had been hunting successfully for a month had migrated out of range. They still caught a fair number of ‘rock bunnies’ as Shimizu has christened them, but Sam had told B’Elanna that they had to be careful not to over hunt and harm the population. Harren’s chickens could only produce so many eggs. She
was kicking herself for not authorizing the smokehouse Chell had proposed. Instead, whatever
meat had been left over once the stasis chambers were full had been fed to the chickens or thrown
away to rot.

Then there was the hail storm. It had hit two days ago, seemingly out of nowhere as far as the
settlement was concerned. Most of the buildings were made of strong enough stuff that the damage
had been minimal — a few cracked windows, Rollins and Whicher’s place got a good sized dent in
the roof that needed repair — but the seedlings Vorik had transplanted the day before had been
obliterated and there hadn’t been enough warning to secure all the chickens. Six had been lost and
Harren was taking it out on everybody, even Naomi. He’d told the little girl he didn’t need or want
her help anymore, reducing her to tears.

The worst part was that they should have known the storm was coming. That was the whole point
of the atmospheric sensor net: to monitor the weather so they could prepare. B’Elanna and Seven
both knew that one bad storm or prolonged drought could ruin them. It was why Seven had made
the net one of her first priorities — having a reliable way to track patterns and to predict future
weather accurately could mean the difference between life and death. When the storm had hit, the
two women had been together in the Tereshkova. After it had become clear it was no passing
shower, B’Elanna had exploded.

“What the hell, Seven? Isn’t the whole point of your precious sensor net to warn us about shit like
this?”

Seven’s face had remained calm, but she had to shout to be heard over the hailstones pummeling
the sides of the shuttle. “Yes! And if it were monitored properly by the person to whom you
assigned that task, then we would have been warned!”

It had been too loud for B’Elanna to bother retorting, and what would have been the point anyway?
She’d suspected even then that Seven was right. Once the storm was over and she made it to the
Drake where the computer core was housed, B’Elanna had confirmed it. Megan, whose
background in stellar cartography should have more than qualified her to read a damn weather
report, had missed all the warning signs.

Almost five months in and Megan was no better. B’Elanna had been patient — they’d all been
patient with her — but even the simplest tasks seemed beyond her. B’Elanna knew a confrontation
was long overdue. Tom had been making excuses for her for weeks, but B’Elanna no longer cared
that she was depressed by their situation or her sister’s death. Megan’s behavior was selfish,
careless, and dangerous, and a million dead sisters wouldn’t change that. All B’Elanna had to
decide was what she was going to do about it.

But first, a shower. She was on alpha team, too, and if she missed her slot today she’d be out of
luck for the next two. Sometimes it felt like those few minutes of warmth was the only thing
keeping her sane. B’Elanna grabbed her tools and began her walk home.

“B’Elanna.”

She sighed and closed her eyes. Vorik. The young Vulcan was heading towards her with his
measured gait.

“Make it quick,” B’Elanna called back to him. How was it logical to move that slow in such cold
weather? “I want to get in the shower before time’s up.”

She watched as his walking speed increased incrementally. God forbid he jog or anything. “Hurry
up, Vorik,” she said with another glance in the direction of her shelter and the sonic waves that
would cleanse and warm her.

“Was the plasma converter misaligned again?”

B’Elanna glowered at him. “Tell me you didn’t stop me just to ask that.”

“Indeed not,” Vorik replied. “However the issue of power transfer is tangentially related to my concern. As you are aware, we are relying almost entirely on greenhouse produce for our current food supply.”

B’Elanna nodded, punctuating it with a ‘get a move on’ gesture. You’d think getting to the point would be logical, but in her experience, not many Vulcans agreed.

“Tom and Chell have requested we grow more variety in some of our vegetable stock. While the legumes and lettuce greens have been plentiful, they have both suggested more nightshades and, ideally, citrus trees, to provide the crew with more nutrient diversity. Most of the Bajorans and some of the humans are now requiring vitamin supplements to avoid deficiencies.”

“Great,” B’Elanna replied, edging towards her shelter. “Carry on. Tell Nicoletti I gave the OK to replicate whatever seeds you need.”

Vorik took a step closer to her. “You misunderstand my question. I was confident I would obtain your permission to replicate the seeds. But the issue is energy.”

Of course it is. “You told me the solar glass was working fine. You’re already using nearly a third of the power we produce. How can you need more?” Her still-frozen hands balled into fists. Despite what her staff had believed, B’Elanna was not oblivious to the way her management style was described: ‘mostly fair but occasionally scary as fuck.’ She knew the engineering department had kept a running tally as to their chief’s ‘tells.’ Not for the staff’s weekly poker game that she occasionally dropped in on, but for her mood. The list was extensive: obvious things like how quick she was to smile. Her tolerance for Knowlton’s crappy puns. Braided hair was an especially positive sign, while a bouncy leg or tapping foot was an early warning. The double clenched fists, though, were the biggest red flag. “If you see them,” she’d once overheard Carey tell a tech that was newly serving on alpha, “don’t bother her unless the warp core is about to breach.”

Perhaps Vorik didn’t notice them now because of her gloves, as his face was implacable as always. “The solar glass is, in fact, working as intended. But for us to be able to produce a sufficient quantity of citrus fruit particularly, we need another greenhouse. Temperature and humidity requirements for optimal growth differ markedly from those of our current crops. We will also need —”

“Enough!” B’Elanna barked, taking a small bit of satisfaction when Vorik took a step back. “Do I look like fucking genie to you?”

An eyebrow raise. He’d just raised his fucking eyebrow at her. “I am unfamiliar with your ref—”

“ Forget it.” The dermaplast had broken free of her finger and B’Elanna could feel a trickle of blood inside her glove. “I’m not a replicator. I can’t just make a greenhouse appear out of thin air!”

“I was not expecting such. I am simply making the request that you—”

“God, Vorik, just write it the fuck down and let me take my damn shower!”

Vorik nodded and took another step back. “Of course, B’Elanna. My apologies, as my intention
was not to overburden you.”

She pressed the heels of her hands against her temples and lowered her voice. “You didn’t. It’s just been a long day.”

“It is 0703.”

_Fucking Vulcans._ “Just… make a proposal for everything you need and give it to me by tonight.”

Another nod. “I will also consult with Mr. Carey. Perhaps his solar battery project will facilitate my own. The extra energy produced may be adequate to construct and power a new greenhouse.”

“No!” B’Elanna said. Carey was feeling bad enough about the so far failed project. There was no reason for Vorik to make him feel worse about it. “Joe’s got plenty on his plate already. Give it to me. I’ll figure out the best way to get you power.”

There was also no reason for B’Elanna to have bitten the young Vulcan’s head off. It wasn’t his fault. He was doing his job, producing the food they all needed to keep going. “And Vorik,” she called out as he walked away. “I’m sorry for snapping at you. You’re doing a good job.” He paused just long enough to acknowledge her apology with a final nod.

The sun was casting its first weak rays of light when B’Elanna reached her shelter. At least she managed to avoid anyone else giving her another headache to deal with. After she was clean and warm, she’d take a few minutes to eat whatever Chell had left and review the current list of issues on her docket. There were dozens of requests like Vorik’s — this one needed replicated supplies, that one needed more time on the computer core. They were all perfectly well-supported and reasonable requests, and B’Elanna couldn’t possibly satisfy all of them. Maybe not any of them.

The lights were on when she entered the shuttle. _That’s weird._ Tom was usually at the _Sacajawea_ by now and was as diligent as B’Elanna about conserving power. That’s when she heard the singing.

Tom had always sung in the shower. B’Elanna hadn’t been the least bit surprised the first time she’d heard it. Of course he sang in the shower. What else could she expect from someone so uninhibited, so utterly convinced of his own charm? He wasn’t bad, either. Sometimes he picked the wrong song — one that was just out of his range, or with a melody a bit too complex for him to fully master. But the mistakes were part of why B’Elanna had always loved it, although she’d never told Tom that. It was endearing, hearing him doing something imperfectly but full of gusto, something he did for no other reason than it brought him joy.

After the crash, of course, he hadn’t sang for weeks. Just getting into the shower had exhausted him, and he’d been ashamed by how he’d needed to use a chair, how B’Elanna or the Doctor would have to help him dress afterwards. But about two months in, a couple of weeks after they’d deactivated the Doctor, she’d heard it while sitting in their living area, hand-wiring a new phase coupling: _You’ve Lost That Loving Feeling._ It had always been one of his favorites. His voice had been weaker than before, and she’d heard more pauses for breath than she used to, but it still made her smile.

She sure as hell wasn’t smiling now.

He didn’t take long — nobody could these days — but it was enough time for B’Elanna to work herself into good old fashioned snit. She dropped into one of their dining chairs and crossed her arms across her chest.
“Oh,” Tom said as he left their bedroom. “I didn’t know you were here.”

“I’m not sure why you’re surprised,” she said through clenched teeth. “I’m on alpha team. It’s my scheduled shower time. You know, the time you just used.”

“Well,” he said, looking away from her scowl and going to the shelving unit. “I missed my time yesterday and you weren’t here when yours started. I didn’t think you were going to use it.”

“You thought wrong.”

Tom exhaled sharply. “Then take my next slot, B’Elanna. God. How was I supposed to know? It’s not like you’re ever here anymore, anyway.”

He was goading her. She knew he was. He’d been trying to force an argument for weeks now. She would not rise to the bait. B’Elanna had too much responsibility now, too many people that looked to her to be a leader. She couldn’t allow herself to snap at the least provocation.

But she had really wanted that shower. “I’m not here because I’m busy, Tom. I’m the one everyone comes to with every stupid problem. I’m the one that has to keep the lights on, and the heat going, and—”

“Oh, right,” Tom snapped back as he bent over the housing for their spare power cell. “How could I forget that you do everything while the rest of us are just sitting around eating bonbons? I’ve tried to help you, B’Elanna, and you never let me. Now you’re going to accuse me of not pulling my weight?”

“I didn’t say that!” It was a touchy subject for him — whether he was doing enough around the camp. It was a stupid thing to be worried about, honestly. Everyone knew he’d been injured far worse than any of the other survivors. Everyone knew he took care of all their medical needs. He did plenty, and B’Elanna was tired of having to constantly tell him so. “God, why do you have to be so—”

She stopped when she heard his gasp of pain. He was trying to change out the power cells, but the one on the left always got jammed. He must have wrenched his back badly — it was rare he’d allow an audible reminder of his injuries these days. “Let me help you.”

“Oh no,” Tom panted, his lips curled in a sneer. “I don’t want to burden you with another stupid problem.”

“Don’t be an ass,” she said, hip checking him lightly so he moved to the side. She pulled the cell free with a quick jerk.

“What did you do to your hand?”

“What?” She followed his line of sight to her injured finger. She thought she had finally stopped the bleeding, but removing the power cell had triggered it to start oozing again. “Oh, it’s nothing. It’s from the plasma converter. I’d already forgotten about it.”

“Sit down.” Tom pulled out his medkit and sat at the dining table, gesturing for her to join him. His voice was soft now. “Is that where you were this morning? Converter acting up again?”

“Just like every week.” She leaned into her chair. Tom held her gently by the wrist, turning it this way and that to heal the damaged skin.

“You did a good job on this,” he said, returning the regenerator to its spot in the case. “Or a bad
job, I guess.” He soaked a washcloth in water from their small sink and scrubbed her skin free of
dried blood. When the job was done, he raised her hand briefly to his lips and kissed the newly
healed skin. “All done.”

“Thanks.” She pushed her chair away from the table, but Tom didn’t let go of her.

“B’Elanna.” He waited until she settled again. “I’m sorry. About the shower. I really didn’t think
you were coming.”

“I know,” she said, leaving her hand where it was. “It’s not a big deal. I can wait another day.”

“Is there anything I can do to help? With keeping the lights on and the heat going, I mean?”

B’Elanna met his steady gaze, his eyes still a bright blue despite the ever-present shadows below
them. Maybe she should talk to him about it — the failed solar cells, Vorik’s greenhouse demands,
hers worries about the food. He was right — he’d offered time and again to talk to her, help her with
anything he could. He was the only one left that had gone command track at the Academy.
Janeway hadn’t always gone it alone; she’d had Chakotay and Tuvok. B’Elanna had been trying to
do it by herself — she hadn’t wanted to give Tom another thing to worry about. She knew how he
constantly battled his pain and exhaustion. But sometimes she felt so damn overwhelmed.

“I don’t have a lot time right now,” B’Elanna said, giving his hand a squeeze. “I have to meet
Seven in fifteen. But maybe tonight over dinner? Maybe we could talk?”

“I’d like that.” Tom smiled at her. “There’s a lot we should talk about, really. I’ll ask Chell if he
can save some… Shit.”

B’Elanna lifted an eyebrow. “Not one of my preferred entrees.”

“I forgot it was Tuesday,” he said. “I usually have dinner with Megan on Tuesdays.” Tom sighed,
before shaking his head and smiling again. “You know what? I can push her to tomorrow. She’ll
understand.”

B’Elanna bit the inside of her cheek. “Are you sure? If it’s a regular thing…”

“No,” Tom said. “It’s fine. In fact, she’s one of the things we should talk about.”

“Oh?” She tried not to visibly bristle. Talking about Megan wasn’t exactly on her agenda.
Although maybe it wasn’t a bad thing. Maybe Tom was ready to admit how detrimental Megan’s
attitude had become, and the two of them could come up with a real solution.

“Yeah,” Tom said. “We can talk more later, but I want to consult the Doctor.”

B’Elanna shoved her chair back with a clatter and jumped to her feet. “You want towhat?”

Tom frowned at her. “It’s not like I asked to fire up a holodeck and hang out at Sandrine’s. That
was the agreement — if I thought I was in over my head, I’d activate the Doctor.” He ran his
fingers through his hair. “I don’t know what else to do. Talking hasn’t helped. I’ve tried two
different medications and they haven’t done anything. I’m worried, B’Elanna. I need help.”

“What we need is for her to do her damn job,” B’Elanna snapped. “You know she missed the
storm, right? I went over the sensor reports — there were a half dozen signs that might have
warned us.”

“Which is why we need to get her some real help! If Megan was herself, she would never be
sloppy like that.” Tom pushed himself up from the table with a grunt. “Why are you fighting me on this? I’m not asking a lot — just an hour to talk to him.”

“Do you have any idea,” B’Elanna growled, “how much energy it would take to reactivate and run his mobile emitter? Even for an hour? How much heat that represents? How much replicator power? It’s not right for one person to be sucking up so many resources!”

“What the hell are you talking about? What resources?” Tom demanded, his knuckles white as he gripped the chair.

“All the time you’ve spent with her, when you could have been doing other things. The medications you’ve replicated for her. The food her carelessness ruined. And now you want to activate the Doctor! When does it end, Tom? Like my mother used to say: you don’t serve your best blood wine with rotten meat.”

Tom barked out a laugh. “You’re quoting your mother at me?” He took a step back from the table and let his shoulders drop. “She’s my friend, B’Elanna. I thought she was yours, too. Doesn’t that matter to you?”

B’Elanna paced a tight circle, her finger nails digging into her palms. Why didn’t he get this? That she had to prioritize the settlement over friendship, over one person’s emotional issues? She slammed her fists onto the table. “What matters to me, Tom, is making sure people aren’t going to starve. Or freeze to death. Making sure that we have enough medicine if another virus hits. This isn’t just about Megan! It’s about the forty-five other people that I’m also responsible for!” She pressed her arms against the wall of the shelter and fought an urge to bash her head against it. “No. I refuse to let you activate him just because Megan is sad.”

Tom limped up behind her. “Fuck you, B’Elanna,” he said, his voice low but taut. “She’s not just sad and you know it. You had the same damn thing! How do you not understand what she’s going through?”

That again! B’Elanna took a slow, deep breath before she turned to face him. “Oh, I understand plenty. I understand that when nearly everyone I cared about was slaughtered, that I still did my fucking job. I understand that I didn’t expect everyone to bend over backwards to make me feel better or cover up for me. I understand that I got treated and I moved on.” Her hand lashed out and grabbed Tom’s shirt near his collar, pulling him close. “But you know what I don’t understand? I don’t understand how you can spend all this time holding Megan’s fucking hand, when you didn’t even notice what I was doing to myself!”

Tom’s pale cheeks flushed red under his beard. “That’s not fair,” he muttered, his eyes dropping away from hers.

B’Elanna let go of his shirt and pushed past him. “Life isn’t fair, Tom. If it was, we wouldn’t be stuck here on this frozen chunk of rock. The solar batteries would work, or we’d have enough food, or Megan would get off her ass and pitch in like everyone else. And maybe someone would notice how much I’m doing to keep us all alive.” She snatched her coat off the hook near the door. “Eat dinner with whoever you damn want, because you’re not eating it with me.”

He didn’t bother to stop her as she stormed out of the shelter.
Day 170

Seven of Nine was excited. This was not a word to which she would have previously ascribed to herself, but even with her considerable vocabulary, no other word would suffice to explain her current mix of anticipation, enthusiasm, and agitation.

She had discovered a possible means of rescue.

When Tom had first made his suggestions on how to improve her abnormal neurotransmitter levels, Seven was skeptical. She did not see how meditation or interacting with other members of their community could address her feelings of ennui. She did, however, find it encouraging that Captain Janeway had responded positively to similar interventions, and therefore endeavored to follow his recommendations. To her surprise, she found that Tom was correct. After conversations with him or Samantha, Seven often felt a sense of relief. Playing kal-toh with Vorik was diverting, although she was a markedly superior player. Correcting Mortimer Harren’s mathematical proofs had also been a satisfying activity, but he had not agreed and had canceled their second scheduled meeting. Seeking another way to occupy her time, Seven had asked B’Elanna to which other tasks she might apply herself.

B’Elanna had requested that Seven review some of Megan Delaney’s analysis of the atmospheric sensor readouts. Given recent events, Seven found this a wise precaution and was happy to comply. During her review, she had noticed something unusual about the ionosphere of the planet they currently called home. It was ionized, as was the case with most L- and M-class planets, but the stability of the free electrons in the outer layers was far greater than typical. Upon further exploration, Seven had discovered multiple types of exotic baryon particles in great abundance. Theoretically, the variety and unusual quality of these particles might boost an electromagnetic signal to the point that they could send and receive subspace communications, even without an orbital relay beacon. With no knowledge of the capabilities or attitudes of local alien species, this was of limited benefit. However, if they were able to build and launch a relay beacon, they might be able to send a simple binary-coded message all the way to the Alpha quadrant.

There was, however, one sizable obstacle Seven would have to overcome before she could take the initial steps in implementing her plan: B’Elanna Torres.

Her working relationship with B’Elanna had improved markedly after the crash. Seven suspected this was because the engineer was no longer ordered to work with her. Now that B’Elanna could choose when and how to engage the former drone, their interactions were generally fruitful and free of antagonism, if perhaps more terse than most humans would prefer.

But their improved individual relationship did not alter B’Elanna’s recent worsening attitude. In the early days after the crash, B’Elanna had been efficient and self-possessed. She’d immediately assumed leadership during the crisis and had been tireless in her mission to ensure the immediate safety and survival of the remaining crew. As the weeks had passed, however, and urgent tasks had given way to those more related to maintenance and long term survival, Seven had noted that while B’Elanna’s efficiency had persisted, her equanimity had not.

This was a not an issue confined to the half-Klingon. Most of the survivors had experienced some level of emotional imbalance as time had passed and it became apparent that their current situation was almost certainly a permanent one, just as Seven had. But the difference between the other survivors and B’Elanna was that only B’Elanna was in control of access to the computer core. The core that Seven required if she were to have any hope of making her theories a reality.
Seven inhaled deeply before entering the Tereshkova.

“What?”

It was more a growl than a greeting. Not a promising start to their interaction. “B’Elanna. I need to make a request.”

“Get in line,” B’Elanna said, still not looking up from the solar panel she was scanning. “And if it’s about needing more power or time on the computer core, then don’t even bother.”

Seven, of course, would not relent this easily. Her request was important, and she would make B’Elanna understand this. But having spent considerable time observing B’Elanna’s interactions with others, as well as discussing B’Elanna directly with those that she worked with most often and most successfully, Seven knew a change of tactics was in order.

“Well?” B’Elanna said. “What do you want, Seven? I’m trying to concentrate.”

“Is there something wrong with the solar panels?” Seven asked. “Joe Carey mentioned that they were not as useful as he had hoped.”

B’Elanna’s head snapped up to glare at her for a beat before returning to her work. “He shouldn’t have told you that. I’m still working on them. Although it would help if I could get five minutes without an interruption.”

“Explain the problem.”

Her directness earned her another glare, but B’Elanna explained the issue with the bromosite particles and how they interfered with the solar radiation’s ability to fully charge the photovoltaic cells of the panel.

“Species 1018 had a colony located on Zeuon IV. The atmosphere had a high quantity of aerite particles.”

“Thanks for the Borg factoid of the day, Seven, but I’m not sure how that’s supposed to help.”

Seven raised an eyebrow but resisted the urge to make a retort. Antagonism would not get her time on the computer core. “Aerite and bromosite have similar properties in terms of electron affinity and atomic radii. Species 1018 had a power supply that relied heavily on solar radiation. I may be able to modify some of their technology for use here.”

B’Elanna sat back on her heels and lay the tricorder in her lap. “You think you remember enough? About how their tech worked?”

“I was Borg. My recall is excellent.”

“Of course it is.” B’Elanna stood but kept her eyes directed at the panel. “I’ve never worked much with solar power. Most of my training has been on starships, after all. Not a lot of solar power in deep space. So, it’s not… it’s not exactly my area.”

“You have done an exemplary job supplying energy to the settlement considering the limitations of your education.”

B’Elanna snorted. “Thanks, I guess.” She held out the tricorder to Seven. “So, you can take this over for me?”
Seven nodded and accepted the device. “I will add it to my current responsibilities.” When she saw B’Elanna stiffen, she added: “It is no hardship, B’Elanna. I am... happy to help.”

“Great. Thanks.” B’Elanna wiped her hands against her pants and picked up her coat. “Well, if you’re going to do that, I can go see why Rollins is bitching about the toilets again, and why Vorik’s unhappy with the new greenhouse plans. And Shimizu told me we’ve got three phasers that won’t hold a charge anymore, so that’s great.” She paused before closing the front of her jacket. “Oh, but didn’t you want to ask me something? What was it?”

Seven regarded B’Elanna. Her hair was lank and her skin sallow, accentuating faint hollows below her cheek bones. Her shoulders slouched, and new lines of tension had appeared around her mouth and eyes. Most of the survivors were similarly affected by their substandard nutrition and the low quality sunlight, but something about seeing those changes in B’Elanna left Seven particularly discomfited. Perhaps it was because the engineer had seemed to resist such a decline far longer than the others.

Regardless of why Seven felt this unease, it made her realize that sharing her ideas about the boryon particles was unwise, at least for the moment. B’Elanna appeared overwhelmed, reasonably so. Her current responsibilities at the settlement were considerable, and most had little in common with those of her previous role as chief engineer. It was possible she was even suffering from the same neurotransmitter imbalances as Seven had had recently. Presenting her with another issue to address, even one for which Seven would take full responsibility, would only add to her burden. There were also no guarantees Seven could successfully construct the communications array they needed with their limited supplies. It would be unkind to offer B’Elanna false hope about a theory that might only lead to more disappointment.

Further, it occurred to Seven that if she were instrumental in procuring a new, efficient source of energy for the settlement, perhaps B’Elanna would allow Seven some discretion in how that energy was used. Solving the issue of the solar panels first, then proposing she use that energy to power the computer core and develop a model for a new communications array: this plan was superior to Seven’s initial one, and would be one that she would follow.

“Well?”

“Having heard the other demands on your time,” Seven said to B’Elanna, who watched her with crossed arms and a tapping foot, “I have decided my request is now inconsequential.”

“OK.” B’Elanna secured the closing of her coat and put her hands in the pockets. “See you later then.”

Seven paused before embarking on a potentially ill-advised course of action. “May I make an observation?”

B’Elanna stopped at the hatch but didn’t immediately turn. “And we were doing so well.” She looked at Seven over her shoulder. “Go ahead.”

“Your appearance has diminished,” Seven began. “On Voyager, you had appealing grooming habits. That is no longer the case.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” B’Elanna’s hands balled into fists that she rested against each hip. “Was that your inconsequential request? I put on some lipstick? Spend more time on my hair?”

Seven recognized that she had not begun this conversation in the best manner. “No,” she said to
B’Elanna. “You misunderstand me. After a recent conversation with Tom, I have done some research on clinical depression in humanoid species. One symptom is a change in hygiene—”

“We’re stranded on an L-class planet, Seven! Do you really think my hygiene—”

“I found,” Seven said, pitching her voice higher than B’Elanna’s, “that when I was experiencing an episode of depression, I took less effort in neatening my hair and clothing.” She let her tone drop again once B’Elanna fell quiet. “I also found that my emotional reactions were more volatile than usual. I only wish to help, B’Elanna.”

B’Elanna had gone back to crossing her arms, but this time her posture was different — her shoulders sagged and her arms were wrapped tightly, as if she were giving herself a hug. “It’s not… I’m not really depressed,” she said. “I’ve been before. Not that long ago, actually. This is different.” She gave Seven a quick glance before looking down to the floor. “I’m just… tired. We can’t seem to catch a break, and there’s no end in sight. No good end, anyway.”

“Your feelings are understandable,” Seven replied. “I will remind you that those of us on the leadership team are always available to offer you assistance. You should utilize us as a resource more often.”

B’Elanna nodded. “Thanks.”

“I would also suggest you consider exercise. Meditation. Perhaps more social interactions with others. These are established techniques for relieving stress and anxiety.”

“Next thing I know, you’ll be suggesting I get some sun,” B’Elanna said with a snort. “You get that crap from your depression research?”

“From Tom, actually,” Seven said, the corners of her mouth lifting slightly. “I was similarly dubious at the beginning. While he is frequently irrational and I find his unserious tendencies frustrating, he is also capable of great caring. I am certain he would be willing to ‘lend an ear’ to you, much as he did for me.”

“Yeah,” B’Elanna murmured. “I think he probably would.” She threw back her shoulders and met Seven’s eyes. “Thank you. For dealing with the solar panels for me. And also… for the talk. For reminding I don’t have to go it alone. I appreciate it.”

Remembering a phrase that Tom had used back when her serotonin levels were particularly low, Seven replied: “My door is always open.”

“Seven,” Naomi Wildman said with a deep sigh. “You need to pull all the leaves off.”

It was a typically overcast afternoon, but there was no precipitation expected, so Seven and Naomi were making flower crowns in the small meadow behind their shelter. Seven did not see the point of this exercise, but in many situations it was more expedient to submit herself to Naomi’s sometimes irrational impulses rather than argue. As part of her efforts to forge more social contacts amongst the crew, Seven had begun providing supervision to the younger Wildman when Samantha was occupied, although she’d resisted this suggestion of Samantha’s at first.
“There are many more suitable choices for child care providers,” Seven had said. “Joe Carey and Miguel Ayala are both fathers. Andrew Assante was a school teacher before he joined the Maquis.”

“They’re all too easy on her,” Samantha had replied. “Everyone feels bad for her, being stuck here without any other kids, so they won’t set any limits. She needs to spend some time with someone that will be a little more firm. Expect her to behave, instead of letting her get away with everything. You’re very disciplined, Seven. You’d be a great role model.”

She had appealed to Seven’s sense of superiority in order to get her desired result. Seven’s awareness of the tactic did not make it less effective. It was not evident to the casual observer, but Samantha Wildman could be a cunning individual. Resistance, as one said, was futile, when the biologist was highly invested in a particular outcome.

So flower crowns it was. Seven picked up a blossom from the pile next to her and checked for extraneous foliage. “I will try to do better,” she reassured Naomi.

Despite her skepticism that such an activity would have any redeeming value, the construction of flower crowns was not, in the end, an unpleasant diversion. Naomi Wildman was undemanding company, and certainly braiding the stems Seven had defoliated would improve the girl’s fine motor skills — something that would be of use to the settlement once she was old enough to be a more productive resident in their community. Once the first crown was constructed, the child placed it on her own head and frowned.

Seven raised an eyebrow. “Is something wrong, Naomi?”

Naomi jumped to her feet, plucking the wreath of tiny white and blue blossoms off her head. “I got the fun job,” she said, placing the crown atop Seven’s head. “So you should get the first crown. It’s only fair.”

Seven raised a hand to the delicate flowers and offered the child a small smile. “Your gesture is appreciated. But the crown is more appropriately sized for you. You should wear it.”

Naomi grinned and retrieved the fruits of her labor. “We’ll make the next one bigger.” She sat down in the coarse grass and began to weave a second crown when she looked up and waved. “Hi, Mom!”

Seven stood and waited for Samantha. “Were you able to find any mushrooms suitable for consumption?” Despite traveling farther and farther afield, Ayala’s hunting parties were having difficulty providing Hoth with adequate meat. Vorik had suggested some of the local fungi might have high levels of protein; Samantha had accompanied this morning’s foragers to check for toxicity and nutritional value.

Samantha shook her head. “Sadly, no. We identified four different species, but three were renal toxins, and one releases toxic spores.”

“It is unfortunate your morning was not more productive. You are now able to resume supervision of your child?”

Samantha smiled at her. “Sure, Seven. Thank you for helping.” She looked down at Naomi. “And our first stop is to the *Sacajawea*. You need your vitamin supplement.”

“Is Tom going to give it to me?”

“No, honey,” Sam said, taking Naomi’s hand. “He’s not there. But I’ll do it quick, just like he does,
and then we can work more on your flower crowns.”

“No!” Naomi wailed, trying to yank her hand free. “It hurts when you do it! I want Tom!”

Seven spoke over Naomi’s whining objection. The child’s complaint was irrelevant as she must comply with her mother’s wishes regardless of her own preferences. “Why is Tom not at the Sacajawea?”

Samantha was attempting to pull Naomi from the ground. The child was not cooperating. “What? Oh, he went up to Voyager to see Janeway.”

“Today? His usual routine is to go on the third day of the week.”

Naomi’s hand was now secure in her mother’s grip, although the child was pulling and twisting, her mouth down turned into a pout. “I don’t know.” Samantha said, grimacing over her daughter’s antics. “Maybe there’s more rain coming? Come on, Naomi. Thanks again, Seven!”

Seven had not yet checked the weather sensors’ report for this week’s forecast. It was possible that Samantha’s explanation was correct. But there was another possibility as well. Tom had now expressed his optimism about the captain’s improvement multiple times to her, the most recent only two days ago. Perhaps he had decided to make more frequent visits in order to further foster Janeway’s recovery.

She considered the time. It would take her no more than forty-five minutes to reach the captain’s current quarters on Voyager, and her remaining duties for the day were not urgent. If Janeway were indeed considering a return to living with the rest of the surviving crew, then Seven reissuing her offer to help with her recovery may help sway her towards the correct course of action. Further, Seven recalled that Janeway had written a paper on subatomic atmospheric particles during her final year at the Academy. While Seven still felt that sharing her theories with B’Elanna was unwise, Janeway had always been invigorated by scientific puzzles. Perhaps giving her one to work on would also improve her outlook.

Her decision made, Seven obtained the PADD with her preliminary research and a supply of water, and headed towards the summit.

They’d recovered the last usable pieces of equipment from Voyager nine weeks ago, and Seven had not gone to the wreckage since. She had never, even during the initial salvaging trips, spent much time on the upper decks. Her focus had always been on procuring materials that would help power their settlement, and even if the upper decks hadn’t been largely destroyed, they would have held little to suit Seven’s needs. She was therefore not only surprised to see the level of disrepair of the crew decks, but also by how the desolation affected her.

As she headed towards Commander Chakotay’s former quarters, she passed through section eight, where Ensign Kim had once resided. His door was ajar by several centimeters, and Seven could see the interior. The ensign’s clarinet lay split into two pieces on the floor. She tried to open the door wide enough to allow entry, but the manual override was in disrepair, and she was unsuccessful. She left the instrument where it was.

When she was only a dozen meters away from Janeway’s current place of residence, Seven heard the sound of metal hitting a bulkhead with force. Seven moved more quickly towards the door, concerned that either Janeway or Tom were experiencing distress, when she heard a voice.

“Stop!” Although Janeway’s harsh shout could not be directed at her, given the captain was unaware of her presence, Seven stopped just short of the open doorway.
“Captain, you have to let me do this.” Tom’s voice was pleading.

“Don’t call that!”

“I’m sorry,” Tom said, and now Seven could hear the wheeze. The one that Tom often had when the air was too cold, or he had overexerted himself, or he was agitated. “Kathryn, then. I’ll call you whatever you want, but you need to let me give you this supplement.”

“Leave!”

“I can’t do that. You know I can’t.” Tom’s voice dropped and Seven leaned in to better listen. “You’re malnourished. You need to eat more. And you need to get outside. Your vitamin D levels are in the toilet.”

“Don’t care.”

“But I do,” Tom said. “I care a lot. I’m not going to let you waste away. I won’t, Kathryn. I’ll come up here every damn day if I have to, but I’m not going to let you die alone up here.”

“Don’t care!” Janeway repeated, but the harsh tone of a moment ago was gone. Now it was soft, and gasping. Janeway was crying.

Seven edged forward, just enough so that she could peer in through the open door but keep most of herself concealed. Tom and Janeway were on the floor. The captain was almost skeletally thin — Seven could see the prominence of the carpal bones of her right hand even from her imperfect vantage point, as well as the deep hollow beneath her cheek. She was folded into Tom’s arms, her back jerking with each sobbing breath. Tom pressed a hypospray to her neck, closed his eyes, and rested his forehead against her lank hair.

“You’ve got to start fighting, Kathryn,” he murmured. “Please. You have to. I can’t keep doing it for both of us.”

Seven stepped away from the door and turned back down the corridor. There was no need for her to stay. There was nothing for her here.
Day 178 a.m.

“You mean it?” Tom asked Megan as pressed a hypospray to her neck. They were sitting in her shelter’s dining area. “You really do feel better?”

“You think I’m lying?” She softened her accusation with a smile.

Tom returned the hypospray to the medkit. It had taken over seventeen weeks, three different false starts, and every minute he could spare combing through the Doc’s psychiatry texts, but he’d finally cobbled together a mix of neurotransmitter stabilizers that helped Megan’s depression. Assuming she was being honest with him. “Not lying, exactly,” he said, running a finger along the kit’s open lid. “Just… fudging things a bit. To make me feel like less of a failure.”

“You are not a failure.” She reached across the small table to take his hand. “How many people would have done what you did? All those hours you listened to me. All the times you made me get out of bed and made sure I was eating. You never gave up, Tom. I can’t tell you how much that means to me.”

He pulled his hand back to close the case. “It’s my job, Meg.”

“No,” she said, holding tight to him. “You did a lot more than your job. It’s important to me that you know that. That you know how grateful I am.”

Tom squeezed her hand in return and smiled. “I know.”

“No to mention that I’m sure you’ve been running interference for me.” Megan jumped up, clearing the table of her breakfast dishes and Tom’s empty water glass. It was the most energetic he’d seen her since the crash. “I’ve been so useless I thought B’Elanna was going to exile me to Voyager with Janeway.”

Tom forced a laugh because, of course, Megan didn’t know that both Seven and B’Elanna had mentioned that very idea at last week’s meeting. He was pretty sure B’Elanna had been joking. Seven, on the other hand… “But you really do feel better now? Not as listless? More focused? Because last time your serotonin levels were on the high side, and some of your old medical record’s corrupted, so I’m not completely sure what’s normal for you.” He pulled out the medkit’s tricorder. “Maybe I should run one more—”

“No, Tom.” She pulled the kit out of reach. “And give me that,” she added, taking the tricorder from his hand. “I’m packing this up. You are not allowed to scan me again until my next treatment is due.”

“I just don’t want to miss anything,” he said, watching as she futzed with the kit’s contents, arranging and rearranging. He stared down at his empty hands and wished she’d left something on the table to occupy them. “I’m glad you’re feeling better. But after how long it took — I want to make sure this isn’t just some temporary reprieve. That you aren’t going to relapse.” He felt a nudge against his shoulder.

Megan put the closed kit on the table in front of him. “You have to trust me, Tom. That I’ll ask for help when I need it. I can’t keep running to you every time I feel sad, or someone says…” She took a deep breath. “Someone says Jenny’s name. It’s time for me to take care of myself.”

She was right. Tom had done literally everything in his power to get her healthy again (short of openly defying B’Elanna and activating the Doctor) and he needed to trust that it was enough. That
he was enough. He raised his hands in surrender “OK. I’ll back off, I promise. If you promise you’ll tell me when, if you need help.”

Megan rolled her eyes. “I’m not even dignifying that with a response. We need to talk about something else. Anything else. Are you OK? You’re looking a little run down, even for you.”

“Gee, thanks.” Although Megan wasn’t wrong. When the weather and his other duties allowed it, Tom now headed up to Voyager twice a week. Janeway still wasn’t eating enough, and she wasn’t good about taking her supplements like she should. But the extra trips were no picnic. These days, Tom maxed out his (relatively generous) med ration on analgesics every week, and he couldn’t remember a time when he’d felt well-rested. Or even well-oxygenated.

“You know what I mean,” Megan said, nudging his foot gently with her own. “Everything OK with you?”

“Never better. Assuming you don’t count the crippling back pain and my inability to breathe.” He grinned, but he suspected it looked as false as it felt.

“You and B’Elanna are good?”

“Why wouldn’t we be?” Tom fiddled with the clasp on the medkit. Maybe he should check that Megan put everything back where it belonged. He’d modified the kit’s layout from Starfleet standard.

“No real reason.” She pulled the kit off the table, forcing Tom to look at her. “I just don’t see the two of you together much these days. I’m sure it’s hard — suddenly forced to live together, on top of everything B’Elanna’s responsible for, your injuries, and—”

Tom lurched to his feet, biting down hard on his lip. “What do my injuries have to do with anything?”

“Nothing,” she said, her eyes studying him. “You just look tired. I want to make sure someone’s taking care of you, especially given how much you’ve been taking care of me.”

“Thanks,” he said, reaching to take the kit from her. “But I’m good. B’Elanna and I are good. Just tired, like you said. Just like everyone — we could all use a break.” It was a good sign that Megan was asking about how he was doing. More like herself, her Voyager self. But it was time to move to safer ground. “Which reminds me: you’re coming tonight, right?”

They were having a bonfire.

Ayala and Shimizu had just returned from a trip down into the valley. They’d been more successful than anyone could have hoped, having come across a herd of a sort of largish sheep. Two of the animals were being preserved in Chell’s new smokehouse, but the largest was being cooked on a spit for the evening’s meal. “We’ve been here six months!” the Bolian had said at yesterday’s leadership meeting. “We need to celebrate!”

“I am unclear as to how you arrived at ‘six months,’” Seven had remarked. “Considering this planet’s lunar cycles, upon which the concept of ‘months’ is based, we have experienced only four complete cycles and therefore months.”

Tom had suggested she ease up a little, and got a cold glare in return. But a single ‘Seven’ from B’Elanna, and the former drone had conceded the actual number of months was irrelevant and that a positive community-based gathering would be beneficial to crew morale.
Megan made a face at his question. “I don’t know, Tom. I’m not sure I’m up for a crowd yet.”

“It’s not a crowd, Meg,” Tom said. “It’s just us. A few dozen people that have survived some of the four and/or six shittiest months on record. It’ll be good for you. You don’t have to stay long.”

Before the crash, Megan wouldn’t have missed something like this. Jenny would have never allowed it. *Come on, Megan. Come back to us.*

“Fine,” she said, rolling her eyes only a little. “If it means that much to you I’ll go.”

They said their good-byes and Tom headed back to the main part of the camp. Megan’s promised attendance was going in his personal win column.

It was a short list. He was barely keeping up with the camp’s medical needs. There were at least two novel vaccines he should have synthesized by now, and he found a new nutritional deficiency every week. (Who knew Bolians needed a certain amount of mercury in their diet for optimal kidney function?) Half the crew’s mental health was in the dumps: Naomi’s night terrors were back. Harren was more withdrawn than ever. Dalby ripped someone a new asshole every hour. Even Seven, whom Tom initially thought had been truly helped by some of the advice he’d given her, had become odd and distant in the past week. Then, of course, there was his relationship with B’Elanna.

It was both ridiculous and kind of impressive — how little he and B’Elanna managed to interact these days, even as they shared a shelter and a bed. Since their fight over the time he was spending with Megan, she’d started working longer and longer hours in the *Tereshkova*. At first, he’d tried to wait up for her, but each night his exhaustion and pain would win out.

His sleep was restless at best, though, and, despite her attempts at stealth, B’Elanna would wake him most nights when she slipped under the covers. Tom would lie and watch through half-lidded eyes as she curled her body as far from his as possible. Each time he thought about confronting her, and each time he wondered what he could possibly say.

So he let her think she’d gotten away with something, and by five each morning, when his pain wouldn’t allow even the illusion of rest, Tom would rise alone. B’Elanna, exhausted by her long days and progressively later nights, slept like the dead, and didn’t so much as twitch while Tom dressed in the dark and slipped off to the *Sacajawea*.

He knew it was time (well past time) for them to have it out. For Tom to stop hoping that things would magically get better on their own. For B’Elanna to admit how her feelings for him had changed. For both of them to face that they were never going to recapture what they had once had.

If only he still knew how to talk to her.

Because when was the last time? That she’d done more than nag him about his health? That he’d asked her about anything beyond a replicator request or an issue with the power supply? Not since *Voyager*. Not since before the quantum slipstream drive.

On the surface, it seemed like the crash and his injuries were what had changed things between them, but it was really the drive that was to blame. That’s what had thrown them off course in more ways than one. Tom remembered the night it started. He and B’Elanna had just finished eating in her quarters. It had been a good dinner and a better conversation one of the first they’d had after her depression. It had been about their childhoods — the nice bits for once — and Tom had been surprised (and pleased) when B’Elanna shyly admitted that she sometimes wondered what sort of mother she’d be.
Then Harry had happened. He’d burst in, not even waiting for the door to fully open, babbling about quantum matrices and benamite crystals. The first to fall, of course, was B’Elanna; science having always been her first love. Tom had been more wary, had tried to pass it off as another one of Harry’s get-home-quick schemes. But the enthusiasm of the other two had been infectious, and Tom had started considering possible navigational challenges of slipstream thresholds before too long. There hadn’t been time after that, for Tom and B’Elanna to talk about their relationship, or hypothetical babies, or their futures beyond how to get back to Earth.

Now Harry was maybe back in the Alpha Quadrant, but more probably dead; and Tom and B’Elanna weren’t Tom and B’Elanna anymore.

If Tom were a better person, a stronger person — he’d let B’Elanna go. He’d walk the camp until he found her, force her to sit down, and let her off the hook. He’d figure out other sleeping arrangements, he’d be the one to tell the rest of the camp. That it was too hard — trying to sustain a relationship in the face of their situation. That it was a mutual decision. That they were going to focus their energy on the remaining crew’s survival, and not each other.

But Tom wasn’t particularly good, and he certainly wasn’t strong, not anymore. So when he opened the hatch to the Sacajawea, he knew full well all that would happen was he’d maintain the status quo until B’Elanna didn’t let him anymore.

“Hey.”

Tom moved into the shuttle and blinked at the change in light. “B’Elanna.”

She was sitting at his desk, an off-color gel pack in her lap. “Its processing speed has dropped by eight percent in the last twelve hours. The Doctor used to scan them for me, if I couldn’t find an engineering issue. I thought maybe…”

“Sure,” Tom said, taking the gel pack from her. “I can take a look.”

It took a few moments for the diagnostic arch to warm up. They both stared fixedly at the little pack as they waited.

“Where were you?”

Tom looked up. “Huh?”

“You’re usually here by 0600, aren’t you? I was just wondering—” B’Elanna paused. “Never mind. You don’t have to tell me.”

Tom briefly considered inventing a medical emergency that had pulled him away, but given B’Elanna hadn’t fallen off a turnip truck recently, he decided to go with the truth. “I was with Megan. I have her on a new treatment.”

“So I heard.”

“You did?”

B’Elanna nodded, wrapping her arms around her waist. “From Megan, actually. She didn’t tell you?”

Megan had approached B’Elanna in the Tereshkova yesterday, to apologize. “She wanted me to know how bad she felt — about how many mistakes she’s made, all the balls she let drop. She told me she wasn’t going to be a problem anymore.” B’Elanna chewed her lip for a moment. “She also
very pointedly mentioned how much your treatment helped. Not just the latest medication, but all of it. Especially the time you spent talking and listening to her.”

Tom snorted. Megan’s earlier questioning on his and B’Elanna’s relationship took on new meaning. “Yeah, and it only took me four months to figure it out. Or is it six? What did we decide?”

“Tom.” She waited until he met her eyes. “I’m sorry. You helping Megan had nothing to do with what happened to me after the Maquis died. I shouldn’t have said what I did.”

“Except maybe I deserved it,” he said, grateful the biobed readouts gave him something else to look at. “I’m sorry I didn’t help you more, back then. I’m sorry I wasn’t a better… I’m sorry I wasn’t better.”

She came around the end of the bed and stood next to him until their arms touched. “I didn’t make it easy for you. It wasn’t all your fault.”

Tom wrapped his hand around B’Elanna’s. “I miss you.”

Her mouth quirked. “We live together.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I miss you, too.”

The biobed pinged. Tom cleared his throat and lowered the arch. “Seems our little pack here has a nutritional deficiency. Join the freaking club, buddy.”

“A nutritional deficiency? What the hell?” B’Elanna peered at the readings on the bed’s monitors. “How is that possible?”

“Selenium,” Tom replied. “It’s definitely low in selenium. You never had to give them anything on Voyager? Like a supplement or something?”

“Of course not,” B’Elanna said. “I would know if I had to… Oh, shit.”

“What?”

“Defrag,” she said, shaking her head. “It would have been done during defrag.” On Voyager, the computer would get defragmented once a week. It was an automated process, something Ops was responsible for, and part of it was flushing of the bio-neural gel system with a selenium-based suspension. “They aren’t connected to the main computer core anymore, so even the monitoring system didn’t know it wasn’t happening. God, I’m so stupid!”

Tom reached for her shoulder. “B’Elanna, this isn’t your fault.”

She pulled away and began to pace the small area. “How is it not my fault, Tom? This is my fucking job! If I don’t keep the gel packs functioning, we don’t have heat. And if we don’t have heat, then we’re fucked. Do you know we have maybe ten weeks before it gets cold again?”

“B’Elanna. B’Elanna! Stop.” Tom grabbed her by the upper arms until she stilled. “You are one person. You can’t possibly think of everything.”

“But—”

“But nothing,” Tom said. He looked into her brown eyes, and his heart ached for the exhaustion
and self-recrimination he saw there. “You need to stop acting like this is all you, and only you. Let us help you. We want to help you.”

The tension left her arms and he pulled her close. “I’m so tired,” she said into his chest.

“I know.” He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her hair, happy, at least, that she was letting him give her this small comfort. “Let me take care of the gel pack. I’ll figure out some kind of supplement to give it, and I’ll talk to Joe or Sue about how to work it into their regular maintenance.”

She pulled out of his arms. “Are you sure? You’ve got enough to do. And I know you’re not sleeping well. You get up earlier every morning. I don’t want you to——”

“B’Elanna!” He took as deep a breath as he could these days and tried again. “I’m fine. I can do this for you. I want to do this for you.” He paused to smirk at her. He didn’t get many opportunities like this anymore. “Although I do have one condition.”

Her eyes narrowed. “What?”

“You come with me to the bonfire tonight. No last minute excuses about a busted conduit, or a finicky power cell. You leave the stuff that can be left, you delegate the stuff that can’t, and you take the night off.”

She maintained her glare another millisecond before she broke and smiled at him. He missed her smile. “Deal.”

Tom grinned. One more thing for the win column.
B’Elanna had to admit: it was nice, having a night off.

Dalby and Gerron had spent much of their afternoon chopping firewood, while Jora and Murphy had led a group into the nearby forest to grab whatever downed limbs and kindling they could find. The result of their efforts was a roaring fire in the center of the settlement that sent flames and embers high into the twilight sky. Each person B’Elanna passed was smiling and animated. Naomi had convinced Kyoto and McCann to play a game of tag. Even Harren had come out of hiding to attend.

“Have a kebab, B’Elanna,” Chell said, handing her a thin, wooden skewer packed with juicy chunks of meat.

“Oh my god,” B’Elanna managed to say around her first mouthful. “This is amazing. You could have converted Chakotay to a carnivore with this stuff, Chell.” The Bolian beamed at her, then gave her a small foil packet of potatoes he’d roasted in the coals that burned under his spit.

She wandered a bit more with her potatoes before she confirmed her suspicions. Her supposed ‘date’ was a no show. “Has anyone seen Tom?” she asked Samantha and a few others. When every answer she got was in the negative, B’Elanna headed for the Sacajawea.

“When you proposed I take a night off,” she remarked when she found him there, digging through a drawer on the biobed, “I thought you were taking it with me.”

Tom gave her a sheepish grin. “Sorry. I was about to head over, but I’m missing a hypospray.” His medkit was sitting open on his desk, one small narrow compartment empty. “It’s driving me nuts. I know I put it in there this morning.”

B’Elanna pulled a hypospray off the shelf and placed it in the medkit, noting how Tom leaned heavily on the biobed for support. “Then it probably makes sense to go where the rest of the camp is and ask around. We’ve got a spare for now, and I’ll help you look later if no one’s seen it.”

When he didn’t move, she looped her arm around his and pulled him close to lean against her. “The deal was I go with you to the bonfire tonight. Not solo. I’m not the only one that needs a night off.”

Tom blew a stray lock of hair out of his eyes. B’Elanna considered sitting him down right then to cut his hair. He was getting really shaggy. “Everywhere,” he said. “It’s a supplement day. Tabor’s foot’s infected again. And two of Harren’s chickens have crop stasis. It would be easier to say where I wasn’t.”

B’Elanna pulled a hypospray off the shelf and placed it in the medkit, noting how Tom leaned heavily on the biobed for support. “Then it probably makes sense to go where the rest of the camp is and ask around. We’ve got a spare for now, and I’ll help you look later if no one’s seen it.” When he didn’t move, she looped her arm around his and pulled him close to lean against her. “The deal was I go with you to the bonfire tonight. Not solo. I’m not the only one that needs a night off.”

“No, you aren’t.” Tom sighed and smiled, then grabbed the medkit. “Just in case someone falls into the fire. Chell’s been fermenting some kind of berry juice for a month now.” He swept his arm out in a grand gesture. “Lead on, MacDuff.”

Once they joined the party, B’Elanna exchanged a meaningful look with Samantha, and the two women conspired to get Tom a spot close to the fire, where he could sit on a thick hide and lean his back against a felled log for support. “I should go look for Megan first,” Tom protested as B’Elanna lowered him to the ground. “I want to make sure she came. I’m worried she’s still isolating herself.”
“I’ll look for Megan,” B’Elanna said, waving Naomi over. It would be hard for Tom to move away from the fire if he had the chatty four-year-old in his lap. “You were at Voyager yesterday, you were hoofing it all over camp today. Just put your feet up for a bit, OK?”

“Don’t scare her off!” Tom called out as B’Elanna moved into the small crowd. But when she turned to glare at him, he winked and grinned.

She found the remaining Delaney sister standing alone at the edge of the gathering, a mug held close to her face and her gaze focused somewhere beyond the flames. B’Elanna called as she approached, not wanting to startle her. “Megan?”

Megan lowered the mug and blinked, turning to B’Elanna. “Hi. Did you need something?”

“Not really,” B’Elanna said. “Tom wanted to make sure you were here, but he’s beat. I told him I’d come find you.”

Megan gave her a tight-lipped smiled before taking another sip from her mug. “And you did. Tell him I kept my promise.”

“You can tell him yourself, you know.” B’Elanna shifted from one foot to the other. “He’s sitting by the fire.”

Megan shook her head. “It’s too hot for me over there.” She lifted her cup and started to move in the direction of Chell’s kitchen. “I need a refill, besides.”

B’Elanna pulled her coat tighter around herself. At midday, the camp got as warm as fifteen or twenty degrees now, but the nights were still chilly. Megan was as underweight as the rest of them, and from the smell, B’Elanna knew she had Vorik’s hot spiced tea in her mug. Too hot for the fire, but not for tea? “Everything OK?” she asked.

Megan stopped and turned. “Take care of him, B’Elanna. I know he’s a jackass sometimes, but he’s a good guy. And he loves you.” She disappeared into the darkness.

The odd non sequitur left B’Elanna uneasy. She should tell Tom. Maybe Megan wasn’t doing as well as she claimed. But before B’Elanna had taken more than a step, Seven accosted her.

“B’Elanna. Susan Nicoletti has informed me of the issue with the gel packs and the lack of selenium.”

So much for a night off. “You’re going to have to talk to Tom about it. I’m doing what everyone keeps telling me to, and delegating.” B’Elanna made to walk around her.

Seven moved to block her egress. “I would prefer to discuss it with you,” she said.

Supported by her Borg implants, Seven’s appearance hadn’t been much diminished by their situation. The hair she now kept in a functional braid was still lustrous, her cheeks were full and pink. But she’d been off this week. Not as social as even a couple weeks prior, and Sam said she’d canceled twice on watching Naomi. Seven was attacking the problem of the solar batteries with her typical single-minded focus, but that didn’t explain her new reluctance to talk to Tom or the cold glare she’d given him at their last briefing.

“I’d prefer to be warm, and eat my fill for once,” B’Elanna said, but she kept her tone even. “Tom’s your guy. He’s taking the lead on this.”

Seven lowered her chin and took a deep breath through her nose. A signal, B’Elanna knew from
long experience, that she was about to go full Borg. She held up a hand before Seven could speak. “Whatever it is — if you have a problem with Tom, or have some brilliant solution for the gel packs that you think only I can help you with — we’ll deal with it tomorrow. It’s a celebration. Or it’s trying to be one. Let’s just give everyone a break for a few hours, OK?”

Seven’s jaw worked. B’Elanna readied herself for a fight. She needed tonight. They all did. Even Seven, although she was probably too pig-headed to admit it. “I swear, Seven, I’ll take over the damn gel pack issue if it’s that important to you, but not tonight. Put it away for now. Please.”

Seven gave her a conciliatory nod. “My concerns are not pressing.”

An offer for Seven to join them by the fire was declined, B’Elanna added ‘Deal with Tom and Seven’ to her mental to-do list, and she returned to the night’s primary mission: pretend that this was just another party. That next month they’d be able to do something similar at Sandrine’s, or Neelix’s resort. Or maybe that this could be a yearly thing. That they would all still be alive to see next year.

She hit Chell up for another round of kebab and potatoes for Tom, and brought the meal to him where he sat, still trapped by Naomi. She made sure he ate every bite, declining his repeated offers to share even as her mouth filled with saliva at the rich, meaty aroma. Once all the food had been served and eaten, Naomi and Chell led everyone in a sing-along until the exhausted child passed out mid-note. As the fire continued to crackle, Kyoto entered the circle carrying an acoustic guitar. She plucked out a complex yet delicate melody and B’Elanna felt her chest tighten, although she couldn’t have said why.

“That’s Henley’s guitar, isn’t it?” B’Elanna asked Tom, snuggling against him under the blanket she’d wrapped around their shoulders. She hadn’t seen the instrument in months, of course, as Henley had died in the crash. The pilot and former Maquis used to bring it out on the holodeck, and even the mess hall. She claimed Bob Dylan as an ancestor, but no one believed her. “I didn’t know Kyoto could play.”

“I think it makes her sad,” Tom said into her hair. “She and Mariah had only been together a few weeks before the crash.”

B’Elanna dug a toe into the hard-packed earth at her feet. “I didn’t realize.”

“Makes you remember how lucky we are,” Tom said into her hair.

B’Elanna wrapped her hand around Tom’s. Even tucked under the blanket, it was ice-cold. “I guess it does.”

It was a good night. Naomi, of course, was the first to leave. Ayala carried her tiny frame for Samantha, his face carrying the same expression of tenderness it held on the rare times he spoke of his own children. Harren drifted off soon after, having barely spoken to anyone, though he did give Tom and B’Elanna a near-smile of farewell. The others all left in small groups of two and three, mostly with their roommates, although B’Elanna noted a few novel pairings as well. Soon, only Dalby and Gerron were left. “You should get him into bed, Chief,” Ken said, nudging B’Elanna’s leg with his toe. When she bristled at the innuendo, his face broke into a broad grin and he took a step backwards. “Because he’s half asleep! Don’t break my nose! Please!”

Ken wasn’t wrong. Tom’s head had gotten progressively heavier on her shoulder over the last half-hour. After Ken assured her that he and Tem would watch the dying fire until it was safely reduced to ash, B’Elanna shook Tom into semi-lucidity and hauled him to his feet.
By the time they got back to their shelter, he was shivering and wide awake. “You should have left me to sleep by the fire,” he grumbled as he crossed the threshold.

“Then who would have treated you for hypothermia?” she asked, pulling off his heavy coat as he limped past her. “I’ve already told you, it’ll take too much energy to turn on the Doctor unless it’s really important.”

“You’re all heart, Torres,” he called back, having already made it into their smaller and warmer bedroom.

Maybe it was because he used her last name, like he used to in the earliest days of their flirtation. Or maybe it was the bonfire. Seeing everyone so relaxed and happy, feeling so relaxed and happy herself — maybe that’s what made her pause in the bedroom door to watch Tom undress.

The room was lit only by a pair of small, dim lamps mounted on the headboard. He disrobed quickly, shedding the dirtiest outer layers but leaving the ones closest to his skin in place so he could hold onto the lingering warmth. Those only got changed on shower days, or sometimes on warmer mornings, when Tom could no longer take his own stink. B’Elanna listened to his teeth chatter until she couldn’t stand it another minute, then crossed to his side of the bed and threw their heaviest blanket around them both. “We can turn the heat up a little more,” she said into the soft skin just above his collar bone.

“I’m fine,” he said. She could hear the tension in his voice as he fought to keep his teeth still. “I’ll be good once I’m in bed.”

B’Elanna didn’t release her arms from around his shoulders. She pressed her face deeper into his skin and inhaled. There was a sharp tang of body odor, but it didn’t hide the deeper, musky scent that was Tom’s alone. “Is it like this every night? Are you always this cold?”

“I’m used to it by now. It’s just the new normal, right?”

B’Elanna eased him backwards until he was flush against the wall, nuzzling at the wiry red hairs that grew near the angle of his jaw. It would be good, to connect like this again. It couldn’t be like it was before – it couldn’t be – but that was OK. B’Elanna slid her hands around his waist. “We could warm up another way,” she murmured.

Tom pushed against her. “You don’t have to do this.”

She wrapped a hand around the back of his head, trying, and failing, to pull his mouth closer to hers. “I’m pretty sure I do,” she growled softly as she pulled him closer again.

He squirmed and twisted his head away. “No, B’Elanna.” He tried to push her back again, but his arms didn’t have the strength they used to. “Stop,” he panted.

B’Elanna let her hands and the blanket fall away, concerned by the panicky edge to his voice. She’d been so careful – had she hurt him somehow anyway? “What’s wrong?”

Tom closed his eyes and swallowed hard. “I don’t want…” He sighed and looked at her. “You don’t have to pretend. That things are the same between us. I know you feel bad for me or whatever, but I don’t want you like this. Like some kind of pity fuck.”

Oh. Shit. B’Elanna might have laughed if it weren’t for the raw look in Tom’s averted eyes. Wasn’t feeling ugly and insecure her job? But it made sense, thinking about it. His body was different now, there was no denying it. And they hadn’t had sex since the crash. Hell, they’d barely touched each other in weeks.
But it wasn’t for lack of desire. Or, it wasn’t for lack of desire for Tom specifically. B’Elanna was just so exhausted these days, and anxious, and dirty. She felt about as sexy as a geriatric targ. She’d just assumed Tom had felt the same way.

Plus, in the back of her mind, she couldn’t help but be a little afraid. They’d always been equally matched: in strength, in endurance, in passion. But now? B’Elanna remembered how she’d slammed him to the ground on Sikaris. She thought about bite marks and bruises. The time she’d teased him mercilessly even as he’d pled with her to stop, alternately laughing and groaning as he’d regenerated his cracked ribs. And, of course, what happened only a few short months ago – when she’d shoved him to the floor, then fled, her face hot with shame.

But her other half was human, right? B’Elanna could be gentle, if she needed to be.

She approached him again, slowly this time, and reached both hands to his neck. Never letting her eyes drift from his, she pulled him close and pressed their lips together. Soft but insistent, she let her tongue trace the edges of his mouth. The moment she felt his resistance falter, she pulled back.

“Does that feel like pretending to you?” she asked.

He gave a soft huff of a laugh. “It does not.”

That was all it took. B’Elanna fell into him, her kisses becoming more urgent and searching. Tom responded in kind and cupped his hands around the curve of her ass. His tongue entered her mouth and she pushed him hard against the wall behind them. Tom winced and went still.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed out. “I think I need to lie down.”

She immediately withdrew. “Shit. I’m sorry. Did I hurt you? We don’t have to do this now. We can —”

“B’Elanna. We do have to do this. Right now.” He gave her a tentative smile. “We just need to do things a little differently than we used to.”

B’Elanna grinned and pulled back the covers on the bed. “I’m flexible.”

“I’m well aware,” Tom said with a leer and a hint of his old confidence. “And I fully plan on taking advantage of that.”

She tugged off her own outer layers, giving him time to pull off his pants and slide under the covers. She climbed on top. “Is this OK?” she asked, making sure to keep her weight off his pelvis. “I’m not too heavy?”

Tom pulled the blanket up to cover them both. “You’re fine,” he muttered back, his eyes black with desire. “Other than you’re talking too much.” He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. She felt him grow hard beneath her as she glided her body against his bony chest.

He moaned in response and B’Elanna paused. Is that from pain? Maybe I am too heavy. She shook her head, then lowered it to press her mouth to his, forcing herself to stay in the moment. She needed this. They needed this.

Tom growled and thrust his erection against her stomach, one hand massaging her breast and the other nimbly making its way towards the warm, damp space between her thighs. She cried out at the attention paid to long-ignored places and bit down on his shoulder. Hard.
Tom yelped and B’Elanna froze. She could taste it – a drop of his blood on her tongue. She stared in horror at the crescent of teeth marks she’d left behind. “Fuck. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

Tom gave her a quizzical smile and cupped her cheek. “It’s fine,” he said. “Took me by surprise, is all. It’s been a while, since you’ve been in a biting mood.” He pulled her close again. “Now where were we?”

B’Elanna tried to remember. But now every time he shifted beneath her, she wondered if it was from pain. Every time he gasped, she wondered if it was because he couldn’t breathe. What was wrong with her? Shoving him against the wall, biting his shoulder – Tom couldn’t handle that now. Why did her Klingon instincts always subvert the human ones?

“B’Elanna.”

“What?” she said, going for his neck again and then changing course when she brushed against the mark she’d left.

Tom went still beneath her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” she said, keeping her face against him though she could feel him going soft. “I’m just wondering why I’m doing all the work here.”

He pushed at her until she had no choice but to roll off or fight him, and she sure as hell wasn’t going to do the latter. “If you’re so fine,” Tom said, “why do you look like you’re going to throw up?”

She stared at the ceiling. “Can’t you just let this go? It’s like you said: we need to do this now.”

“No, clearly we don’t. Not unless you’re going to be honest with me. I was right, wasn’t I? You don’t feel the way you used to.”

B’Elanna wanted to scream. She wanted to push him off the bed, demand he give her space, chase him out of the shelter like she used to back on Voyager. But there he was — with the beard that didn’t do enough to hide his hollow cheeks. Panting like he’d run a marathon even though they’d barely gotten started. Too painful to even sit up in bed without his back supported — and B’Elanna found she couldn’t make a sound.

“Damn it, B’Elanna, talk to me!”

She opened her mouth to speak when she heard the chirp of a comm badge. Letting out a deep exhale, she pivoted off the bed and started to dig around on the floor for her top. It was wasted effort. It wasn’t her comm badge.

“Nicoletti to Paris. Get here now! It’s Megan!”
Day 179

Chapter Notes

I felt bad leaving y'all on such a cliff hanger. And it IS the holidays after all! But now you'll have to patient and wait until Wednesday for the next one.

Just another reminder that if you're someone that derives benefit from content warnings, I strongly advise reading the ones I've left at the end of the prologue.

“Please state the nature of the medical emergency.”

Tom could only manage a single, gasped syllable. “Doc,” he panted, gesturing at Megan’s lifeless form on the biobed.

The hologram didn’t hesitate. He snatched the tricorder from Tom with his right hand and tapped commands into the biobed’s arch with the left. “Increase the neural stimulator to eighty millijoules.”

Tom tried to obey, but his vision had gone hazy and black around the edges. B’Elanna grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him onto a nearby chair before taking his place at the biobed’s control panel. He tried to speak, to explain to the Doctor what had happened, but he couldn’t seem to force out enough air to produce sound.

As soon as Sue’s comm had come through, Tom had thrown on a pair of pants and his thermal jacket, running to the women’s shelter as quickly as his crippled back allowed. He’d fallen and stumbled at least four times on the way there; B’Elanna had practically carried him the last few meters.

Megan’s body was already cool when they’d pushed their way into shelter and her bedroom. The usually unflappable Nicoletti was in tears on the floor next to her. “Kashi and I were just in the other room! Why didn’t I check on her sooner?”

As Tom did what he could with the limited contents of his medkit, B’Elanna slapped her commbadge. “Harren! Are you at the Baxial yet? I need that transporter!” Two increasing doses of epinephrine had no effect. Tom started CPR. “Where the fuck is Harren?” he hissed in between rapid thrusts against Megan’s chest.

The transporter got them two, maybe three minutes later. It was still too long. The second the three of them materialized inside the Sacajawea, B’Elanna snatched Megan from beneath Tom’s pumping hands and hauled her onto the biobed. She bent to help Tom rise, but he waved her off. “The Doc,” he said through gritted teeth as he clawed his way to standing. “I need the Doc.”

Tom got the arch elevated and pressed the neural stimulator to Megan’s ashen forehead. Fifty millijoules. Sixty. Seventy. No response.

But the Doc was here now. He would save her, Tom decided as he struggled to stay upright in his chair. The Doctor could fix this. He heard the hologram barking commands and readouts, but couldn’t focus on the words. Air came through a straw and the room went dark.
“The next thing Tom felt was the cold metal of a hypospray against his neck. His vision cleared and his lungs opened. “Megan’s OK?” he asked the EMH.

The hologram was watching him closely. “No, Mr. Paris. I’m sorry.”

“Then what the fuck are you doing? Go help her!” Tom tried to stand, but the Doctor pressed a palm against his chest to keep him in the chair.

“There’s nothing to be done. She’s brain dead. Even if I were to get her heart started again, Ms. Delaney is gone.”

B’Elanna was at the biobed, pulling a silver blanket over Megan’s face. Tom pushed the Doctor off and stumbled forwards. “Stop that,” he snapped. “She’s not… She can’t be…” He yanked the blanket onto the floor.

He hadn’t really looked at her face before. He’d been focused on her lack of pulse, the tricorder that showed no cardiac activity. He’d missed the scleral hemorrhages in both eyes, the bile staining her lips and cheek, the punctate bruising splattered across her face like purplish freckles.

The missing hypospray. “Dextromorphone,” Tom said dully. The same analgesic that allowed him what sleep he got each night. “She took an overdose.”

“Yes, Mr. Paris,” the EMH said over his shoulder. “An astute observation. The stellate formation of the petechiae is pathognomonic for a dextromorphone overdose. You’ve been studying.”

“Doctor,” B’Elanna said. “Now’s not really the time.”

“No. I suppose not.”

Tom squeezed his eyes shut. He wanted to go back. Back to this morning, so he could check his medkit and realize what Megan had done. Back to weeks ago, when he should have demanded B’Elanna let him get the Doctor’s help. Back to months ago, so he could stop Harry from ever turning on the slipstream drive, or even years ago — so he could never get on Voyager, or join the Maquis, or go to Caldik Prime or the fucking Academy. Why couldn’t he just go back?

“It wasn’t your fault.” B’Elanna had joined him on his side of the biobed and covered his hand with her own.

“Of course it wasn’t,” the Doctor said. “She’d clearly taken the overdose at least an hour ago. By the time you discovered what had happened, it was too late to do anything.”

And that was the crux of it, wasn’t it? He hadn’t known in time. Instead, Tom had thought she was just fine. Tom had thought Megan was back on track, that he’d fixed her. That somehow he, of all people, had discovered some miraculous cure for the depression that had eaten away at her for months. Once again, his arrogance fooled him into thinking he was better than he was, and once again, a friend was dead.

“Garbose to Torres.” A voice crackled through B’Elanna’s commbadge. “Sorry to wake you, Chief, but the gel pack running the thermal generator is failing, just like the last one. I’m not sure what to do.”

“Call Joe,” B’Elanna said. “Or Seven. I’m in the mid—”

“Go.” Tom couldn’t even look at her. “There’s nothing you can do here, and they need you.”
B’Elanna exchanged a few hushed words with the EMH, then gave Tom’s arm a quick squeeze. The blast of cold air that accompanied her exit made him shudder.

The Doctor maneuvered him back into the chair, and Tom found he didn’t have the mental or physical energy to resist. Within seconds, the hologram was waving a tricorder around his head. “Oxygenation is less than ideal, even with the trioxime I just administered. Cortisol, C-reactive protein, and your leptin/ghrelin ratio all indicate chronic sleep deprivation. You’ve no less than seven nutritional microdeficiencies, and you’re at least twelve kilos underweight. You’ve been taking very poor care of yourself, Mr. Paris.”

“Must be my hard partying lifestyle.”

“This is no laughing matter! Your health has deteriorated drastically since I was last activated.” The Doctor paused to raise an eyebrow. “Which was when, exactly?”

When Tom informed the Doc they’d crash landed almost six months’ ago, ship-standard time, the hologram began to buzz around the shuttle, poking into drawers and activating monitors. “Since I’m up and running anyway, we should take advantage. We’ll start with a review of everyone’s medical histories. Have there been other deaths? Major illnesses? Viral outbreaks? If you’re not the only one with nutrition issues — and I’m quite certain you aren’t — then we can work together to develop an appropriate supplementation protocol. You’ve kept your records up to date?” The Doctor eyed him. “Although perhaps step one is to get you to bed. It’s well after midnight.”

Tom stared past him at Megan’s uncovered body. B’Elanna had been right. He should have let her put the blanket on. Megan looked so vulnerable as she was — her dull eyes stark and unseeing. She might as well have been naked. Tom didn’t let himself look away, even as he asked the Doctor the question that had been plaguing him for months. “Why did you save me?”

“What on Earth are you talking about?”

“After the crash,” he said. “I’ve read my chart. I know how close to death I was. It must have taken a ridiculous amount of resources to keep me alive at first.”

“Yes,” the Doctor said. “But your injuries were repairable, as evidenced by your continued survival. Not that you’re doing much to maintain that.”

“But why did that matter?” Tom asked, rising to his feet with a lurch. “Just like you said when you were deactivated: the good of the many. Why waste so much on a pilot? We crashed onto a fucking planet. I’m not exactly putting my skills to use.”

“You also have medical training—”

“Fat lot of good that’s done.” Tom bent to pick up the blanket he’d knocked to the floor, biting down hard on his lip when his back and hips protested. “The camp would have been better off with you. B’Elanna would have kept you active if I wasn’t around. Plus there’s the captain.”

The Doctor began to sputter. “You don’t think I should have saved the captain?”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” Tom gently lay the blanket over Megan’s form and tugged each corner until it was smooth, tucking one lock of deep brown hair beneath the cover. “I meant, if you had just let me go, the captain would still be here, with us in the camp, instead of teetering on the edge of insanity on Voyager.”

“Mr. Paris,” the Doctor said. “That’s pure speculation. We don’t know what would have happened if I hadn’t treated you. You can’t—”
“Bullshit I can’t!” Tom barked, slamming his palm against the shuttle wall. “I told you — I read my fucking chart! And the captain’s! You delayed treating her brain injury because you were too busy saving me!”

The lines across the Doctor’s forehead grew deeper. “Had the captain normal mentation after the crash, she would have insisted I prioritize saving your life over her treatment. I’m sure of it. She would not want you berating yourself for her condition, or for what happened to Ms. Delaney, either.”

“Oh yeah?” Tom said with a sneer. “Then go up to Voyager and ask her yourself, since you’re so cocksure of everything. Because every damn time I see her, she tells me how it’s my fault.”

The Doctor kept going — brain injured patients often have emotional outbursts; perhaps her aphasia was playing a role; if she’d been herself, she’d have never said such things — but it hardly mattered. Because it wasn’t about what the Doctor thought, or even what the captain thought, for that matter. Tom knew the truth. He sagged against the bulkhead, his lungs leaden in his chest.

“You need sleep.” The Doctor had snuck up on him. “Now. You’ll use the bed in the fore section.”

“I should put her in stasis,” Tom muttered.

The Doctor took him by the shoulders and steered him out of the room. “I’ll take care of her.”

“We need to turn you off. Our energy reserves are shit.”

They reached the other biobed. The Doctor propped Tom against the wall, then lowered the bed height and shook out a blanket. “I think the current condition of my replacement warrants me staying online for a few hours.”

“I’m fine,” Tom said after a several second delay, genuinely confused as to how he could be on his back in a biobed.

“You’re exhausted, and you’re hypercapnic.” The Doctor pressed a hypospray to his neck. “That should address the carbon dioxide. Now something for the sleep deprivation.”

The second hypospray hovered a few centimeters from Tom’s neck before being lowered again. The Doc stared at him so long and so intently that Tom looked away. “Mr. Paris,” the Doctor said. “Tom. You are a valued member of this community. I want to make sure you realize that. B’Elanna, Seven, Samantha and Naomi. Everyone. They would have all grieved terribly had you not survived the crash.”

Tom would have laughed if he’d had the energy. “You’re being pretty transparent, Doc, even for a hologram. I’m not suicidal, if that’s what you’re worried about.” It’d feel too much like letting myself off the hook.

He waited for the Doc’s usual snooty disdain, for him to say how Tom was being ridiculous and of course he wasn’t worried. Instead, the hologram raised the hypospray and pressed it to his neck. “There are fast and slow ways of killing oneself, Mr. Paris.”

The sedative flowed over him like a heavy blanket. Tom closed his eyes, thinking of Megan. I’m sorry.
B’Elanna kept her eyes focused on the circuit readouts as she groped around in her tool kit. She got a handful of feathers and a sharp peck to the wrist instead of her hyperspanner.

“Harren!” she barked, for what must have been the fifth time that morning. “Will you do something about this damn chicken?”

She’d been working on the Baxial’s transporter, the camp’s only one, for the last two hours. They didn’t use it for much anymore — all but the heaviest equipment could be moved with hover clamps — and the lack of use had made the already long initialization time even longer. B’Elanna was doing whatever she could to bring the clunky tech up to Starfleet’s more efficient standards. Sorry, Neelix, she thought as she yanked out another of the Talaxian’s jerry-rigged phase converters.

A pair of legs appeared within her peripheral vision. Harren bent down to retrieve the offending chicken from where it was roosting in her tool kit. “This ‘damn chicken’ is named Elizabeth, and she and the rest of the flock provide twenty percent of our protein. You’d think you could be a little more tolerant given how much they contribute to our survival.” His voice was cold. The man was more attached to the ugly birds than any of the actual people in the camp; he had a short fuse when they were criticized.

B’Elanna’s was shorter. “Not today, Harren.” She punctuated her words with a threat-level red Klingon-style glare that would have made her mother proud. The cosmologist crumpled.

“No, sir,” he stammered, gathering additional hens as he backed away. “I’m sorry, sir. I’ll take them outside. They need some sun anyway.”

Another hour of work, and she’d trimmed seven, eight minutes off initialization, tops. Not the most efficient use of her time, she was sure Seven would opine. But it was exactly what B’Elanna needed: a straightforward problem, with a similarly clear answer, and a positive result. What more could an engineer ask for? B’Elanna couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so satisfied.

Then she remembered what she’d be transporting later.

From what the Doctor had said, the extra few minutes they’d lost getting the transporters online would have done nothing to help Megan. He’d also confided to B’Elanna that he wouldn’t have treated her depression any differently than Tom had. “Mr. Paris approached Ms. Delaney’s illness with a great deal of care and diligence, particularly given our limited resources. I can’t find fault with his approach in the least.”

Which meant B’Elanna was off the hook. Even if she’d let Tom activate the Doctor, even if she hadn’t blown off his concerns and instead made his worry over Megan all about herself and her own depression — nothing B’Elanna had done had contributed directly to the other woman’s death.

That didn’t change how shitty she felt.

That night, when she’d left the Sacajawea to help Garbose with the thermal generator, the first people she’d run into had been Nozawa and Nicoletti, hovering just outside the shuttle’s hatch. Kashi’s face had been hopeful, triggering a wave of nausea to grip B’Elanna’s stomachs, but it was Sue’s expression that still stuck with her. The junior engineer’s earlier panic had vanished,
replaced by a stoic expression that would have made Tuvok envious. B’Elanna hadn’t even opened her mouth before the other woman spoke. “Megan’s gone, isn’t she?”

B’Elanna tried to think of some suitable words of comfort, even as a corner of her mind was calculating how to address yet another failing gel pack. Sue put her out of her misery. “It’s OK, Chief. Thanks for coming so fast.” She turned her face away and gazed down the mountain side to her shelter. “I should go pack up her things.”

“I’ll stay with her,” Kashi said, giving B’Elanna a half-smile. “Sometimes she’ll open up to me if I’m patient.” He followed Sue as she started down the path away from the camp.

It had taken the rest of the night to deal with the damn generator. She’d replaced the gel pack easily enough, but it was clear they were all going to start failing soon if they didn’t address the selenium issue, so B’Elanna jumped on that, too. One less thing for Tom to worry about, if nothing else.

By the time she emerged from the generator’s small shed, it was near dawn. The first stirrings of the camp had begun. It was time everyone heard the news. As she’d worked on the gel packs, B’Elanna had toyed with the idea of using the comm system to inform the others — just entering it as another notice on the camp news feed. But she knew that was the easy way out. The coward’s way out.

She walked to the closest shelter and knocked on the door. Seven emerged from her alcove at 0500 every morning, and Naomi was an early riser, which meant Sam was, too. B’Elanna would start with them.

It went poorly. Maybe it was the lack of sleep, or more likely B’Elanna’s usual social ineptness, but it didn’t occur to her to warn Sam first before blurting out the news to the three of them over their breakfast.

Sam was livid. “You should have told me privately,” she snapped over Naomi’s hysterical sobs, “so I could have broken it to her gently.” Anger wasn’t an emotion one often associated with Samantha Wildman, but, of course, B’Elanna deserved it. Only a complete idiot would dump that kind of tragic news onto a small child without any lead up. She only felt worse when Sam had come to her later that day to apologize for being curt.

As the morning had worn on, multiple people had offered to help her spread the word: Carey, Golwat, Ayala. B’Elanna had turned them all down. Instead she’d traveled from shelter to shelter alone, at the end reciting the words by rote, her stomachs roiling from lack of sleep and food. All had been shocked, some had cried, a few had been angry like Sam, although no one else had directed it at B’Elanna personally.

Today was the memorial. B’Elanna had expected someone to volunteer to take it on, but as she’d thought about it, she’d realized there really wasn’t anyone. Nicoletti seemed an obvious choice, until B’Elanna considered her dull and emotionless response to her roommate’s death. Back on Voyager, Megan and Jenny often hung out with Jenkins and his crew, but that whole crowd had died in the crash. Harry wasn’t here.

Which left only one other choice, and B’Elanna refused to put one more thing on Tom. She’d asked the Doctor about his health, before she’d deactivated him again. He’d been evasive at first, pleading doctor-patient confidentiality until B’Elanna insisted she needed to know if Tom could keep up with his duties. “It’s not at the point where I need to stay activated,” the hologram
conceded. “Although that may not be the case for long if he doesn’t make more effort to stay healthy.” Not exactly the reassurance she’d been hoping for.

So B’Elanna had planned it herself. Chell had protested when she’d given him the time. “How am I supposed to pull together a proper honor meal in a day and a half? I used nearly all our reserve food for the bonfire!”

“My figure it out, she’d grunted, not having eaten for fourteen hours at that point, and having gone without sleep for even longer.

She had nothing of substance to say as a eulogy, only having known Megan in the most superficial ways. B’Elanna hoped that others might step forward at her prompting; that this memorial wouldn’t fail as badly as so many of the other things she was responsible for.

B’Elanna dropped off her toolkit at the Tereshkova and took a few minutes in the head to wash her face and hands free of plasma grease. When she stepped back outside, she reflexively looked north towards Voyager.

The ship was barely visible from this vantage point, only the aft tip of the starboard nacelle could be seen. She wondered what Janeway did up there. She’d asked Tom plenty of times, but he was atypically tight-lipped on the subject. At most she’d get a vague report of how she was ‘improving’ and how he was ‘optimistic.’ B’Elanna had begun to suspect he was lying, or at least deluding himself; she guessed Seven thought so, too, given how the ex-Borg had taken to glaring at Tom the last few times he’d mentioned the captain.

It was funny, really. Back on Voyager, especially in the early days, B’Elanna had spent her fair share of time pissed at the captain. When she’d sacrificed their way home for the Ocampans. When she’d used Tom to uncover the spy and left Chakotay in the dark. When she’d first brought Seven on board. But even at her angriest, B’Elanna had never let go of her (sometimes begrudging) respect for the woman. She used to marvel at how Janeway had handled it all: making impossible decisions with utter confidence. Taking on everyone’s grief or frustration, and rage, and never letting it get to her. How she could get up every morning, knowing she had almost a hundred fifty people’s lives in her hands.

Now that B’Elanna had taken over the role, she would have thought she’d have more sympathy for Janeway, not less. The woman was brain-injured. Her ship destroyed, her closest confidantes dead or gone. And B’Elanna had been sympathetic, at the beginning. She’d ignored the older woman when she lashed out, pretended she didn’t see when Janeway cried in frustration. Even when Janeway had left the camp, B’Elanna had been more resigned than truly angry. “What’s the point in stopping her?” she’d said to the Doctor at the time. “She needs to adjust to her new normal. Maybe she can do it better on her own.”

But the adjustment never happened. At first B’Elanna told herself Janeway just needed time, even as Lang and Nozawa told her how they dreaded their weekly check-ins. Then Tom was better, and wanted to take over. B’Elanna’s rational side knew this was a terrible idea — knew that Tom needed to haul himself up that mountain once a week like they needed a meter of snow to fall — but a dark, secret hope had taken root (Tom knows her the best. Tom can get her back.) and she’d sent him off with her reserved blessing.

But as each day passed and another power system failed, or insects destroyed a field of seedlings, or Megan fucking killed herself, that secret hope turned a little bit more into anger. Janeway had given up on them. She’d walked away, assuming that B’Elanna or Tom or maybe the Doctor would somehow fill the giant hole she’d left behind. Or maybe she just didn’t give a damn. There’d been so many times B’Elanna wished she could ask her questions, or for a bit of advice, or reassurance
that she wasn’t fucking everything up — but it had been made abundantly clear that was never
going to happen.

Her commbadge crackled to life. “Nearly everyone’s here, Chief,” Ayala said. “You on your
way?”

“I’ll be there in a minute,” she replied, tearing her eyes away from the ship she had once called
home.

The memorial was short and quiet. A dozen people spoke, a couple telling stories from Voyager
but most just saying how sorry they were she was gone. Seven said a few words, which surprised
B’Elanna. Tom stayed silent, which surprised her even more. He looked terrible. They’d barely
spoken since it had happened — he’d slept for over twelve hours in the Sacajawea, thanks to the
Doctor’s intervention, and B’Elanna had passed out over her console in the Tereshkova last night,
the first sleep she’d had since before Megan died. B’Elanna knew they needed to talk. She just
didn’t know what the hell she was going to say.

Once everyone had had their chance to speak, and Jurot sang the traditional Betazoid song of
mourning to close, B’Elanna tapped her comm badge. “Harren, you ready down there?” Not
surprisingly, Harren had volunteered to skip the memorial itself in favor of activating the
transporter beam that would disperse Megan’s remains.

“Chief, wait.” Sue said, her hand on B’Elanna’s forearm. Lang, Whicher, and Rollins stood just
behind her.

“Hang on, Harren,” B’Elanna said, pulling her arm free. “What’s going on?”

They didn’t want to use the transporter. The four of them, and apparently several others, felt a
burial was more appropriate, and had chosen a site for her down by the river. “It’s what she would
have wanted. It was her family’s tradition,” Sue said.

“By the river?” B’Elanna sighed, although at least she managed to suppress an eye roll. “Did you
consider what that might do to the water supply downstream? And how much energy it’ll take to
get equipment down there to dig deep enough to bury her? And what are we putting her body in?
You can’t just put it in the ground.”

This was the wrong response. Which, she supposed if she’d thought about it for five minutes
before blurting out the list of concerns that had immediately sprung to mind, she could have
realized herself. All of them started to immediately clamor in protest, but it was Rollins’ words that
rang out above the rest.

“Not all of us are Klingons, B’Elanna. Her ‘body,’ as you so delicately put it, means something to
some of us.”

This was also the wrong response. Yes, she’d been raised with a lot of Klingon traditions, and yes,
one of those traditions was to consider a dead body not much more than an inconvenience to be
disposed of, but that didn’t change the validity of her concerns. She wasn’t going to let them fuck
up their water supply, or that of the hundreds of native species that lived in this area, because they
were feeling guilty they hadn’t done enough to help Megan when she was alive. “How do you even
know what her family traditions were? Apparently none of you were all that close to her. Dispersal
by transporter was good enough for the ninety-eight people that died in the crash, so I’m not sure
why it’s not good enough for Megan.”

“But it wasn’t good enough,” Sue snapped back. “You made the call to use the transporters! You
didn’t even ask any of us! Do you have any idea how much that bothered Megan? That Jenny didn’t get a proper burial? That she had no grave site to visit? No place where she could feel her sister was still with her?”

It went on from there. Everyone, it seemed, now had an opinion — how B’Elanna should have checked everyone’s cultural preferences, or organized a better memorial service for the dead. She wondered where all these suggestions were months ago, back when they were still finding the bodies. Back when B’Elanna didn’t have the time or energy to be more sensitive about the dead because she had been fighting for the rest of them to survive. She glanced over at Tom once or twice during the onslaught, wondering if maybe he’d stick up for her. But he only sat on the log that was still left from the bonfire, his hand resting on the stasis chamber in which Megan’s body still lay.

“Fine,” B’Elanna said when she’d had enough. “You’re all right, and I’m all wrong. Take her for burial. Perform a full Bajoran death chant, if you think that would help. You officially all have my blessing.”

“Chief,” Carey said. “B’Elanna. No one means anything by this. We know you’re doing the best you can.”

B’Elanna gave him a brief nod of thanks then moved away from the crowd. Let them have their burial. What did it really matter? Later she could take a tricorder down to the river herself — to make sure they’d properly secured her remains and their water supply would remain clean. She’d take care of it, just like everything else.

She looked for Tom, but he was gone.

Her presence at the burial was clearly not wanted, so she stopped by the Tereshkova to check on their power levels, then headed to her shelter. It made her feel guilty, but B’Elanna couldn’t deny the feeling of relief that the others would be out of her hair for a while. That maybe she could lie down for a few minutes, or maybe even read a book. Anything to pretend that she wasn’t where she was.

Tom had apparently had a similar idea. He was already in their bedroom, folding his clothes into a neat pile on the bed. B’Elanna considered turning around and delaying their much-needed conversation a bit longer, but honestly, she could use some comfort right now. She longed to feel his arms around her, to press her face into his chest, even as bony as it was these days.

“Hey.”

He looked up briefly, but he didn’t smile. His eyes were red. “I’m glad you’re here. We need to talk.”

“I know,” she said, sinking onto the mattress next to his pile of clothes.

All his clothes. There was an empty duffle on the floor. “What’s going on, Tom?”

He was moving out. He gave her a list of reasons — he kept her up at night, she’d have space to work here instead of the Tereshkova, Sue needed a new roommate so she wouldn’t be alone — but B’Elanna recognized them for what they were. Grade A Paris bullshit. “Are you punishing me for something? Is this because I didn’t let you ask the Doctor about Megan?”

He finally met her eyes. “Of course not. Megan’s death isn’t on anyone but me.”

She got on her feet. There was no room to pace, so she settled for standing and staring at the wall
farthest from Tom. “So you’re punishing yourself, and I’m just collateral damage?”

“No. B’Elanna. I’m not trying to hurt you. That’s the last thing I want to do.”

“Too fucking bad,” she snapped. “Because you are.” She stood there, forehead pressed against the wall, listening to Tom’s raspy wheeze. If they’d been on Voyager, this would be when she’d kick him out, or flee to Engineering to bury herself in work. This would be the moment when she’d decide, for the umpteenth time, that it wasn’t worth it. That relationships were too hard, that Tom was too flippant and defensive, that she was better off alone. She’d think: Thank god that’s done with. And each time she’d be lying to herself, and each time she’d inwardly weep with relief when she’d open her door and find him there, flowers in hand and smarmy grin on his face.

But they weren’t on Voyager anymore. “I don’t understand why you’re doing this to me,” she spat out.

He came up close behind her, and B’Elanna willed him not to touch her. She didn’t think she could stop herself from shoving him if he touched her. “I can’t keep going the way things are,” he said. “Acting like everything’s the same. That we’re the same. It hurts too much. Every time you sneak into bed, thinking I’m asleep. Every time you pull away from me.”

“So this is my fault,” she said to the wall.

“No!” He took several panting breaths. “No. This is on me, too. I know you’ve been trying. But I’m not the guy I was on Voyager. The one you fell in love with. I can’t be the guy you deserve. Not anymore.”

“Fuck you, Paris,” she said, still not turning to him. “Fuck you, and your self-pity. You’re right — you’re not the man I fell in love with. You’re just another asshole that leaves the second things get hard.”

“B’Elanna,” he said. She could hear the tears in his voice. Pathetic. “B’Elanna, I’m not leaving you. I will always be here, whenever you need me. I just can’t be here. I’m… letting you go. Giving you one less thing to worry about. You’ll be better off. I know it.”

“Tell yourself whatever helps you sleep at night, Paris,” she said, bumping her shoulder sharply into his chest before moving away. She didn’t acknowledge his gasp of pain. “And get the fuck out of my house.”
Tom scrubbed at his face and stared blankly at the replicator panel. He’d slept like shit last night, and trying to remember what he’d replicated under whose account was proving to be a more difficult task than usual. He was beginning to think he needed to move again. Whose stupid idea was it, anyway, for him to take up residence in the room of the woman he felt like he’d failed more spectacularly than anyone since Caldik Prime?

Oh, right. It had been his.

Nicoletti had been bemused when he’d shown up at her door, bag in hand. ‘Cold hands, cold heart,’ was how he’d once described her to Harry, back in the days when he’d still used sarcasm and unkindness like a shield. The cold hands thing was still true (he visibly cringed when she took his hand to help him up her shelter’s low steps) but the heart comment was unfair. Sue, he now knew, was just stoic. She’d been raised on a Vulcan colony, after all. Yes, by two human parents, but the culture had rubbed off. Nicoletti wasn’t one for spleen venting.

But despite her surprise at his appearance, she’d been appreciative. “Thanks,” she’d said when Tom had explained that he thought she’d rather not be alone right now. “You’re right. Kashimuro offered to stay, but I didn’t want him to get the wrong idea. Think we were getting back together.”

It had taken nearly a week before she’d opened up to him. Tom had lain awake in what, until recently, had been Megan’s bed, listening to Sue cry through the shelter’s thin walls night after night. He had enough by night six and hauled himself upright to check on her. She’d let go finally — confiding in Tom her guilt and sadness and anger at Megan. Despite his exhaustion, Tom had been relieved when he saw how much more balanced she was the following morning, when she’d offered him her sincere thanks along with a cup of Vorik’s tea. “Don’t worry,” she’d told him with a gentle smile. “I won’t do that to you every night. I was able to meditate this morning, for the first time since… Well. Anyway, it’s helped a lot.”

If only Tom could figure a way to deal so effectively with own guilt.

Because it wasn’t just Megan he’d failed. It was B’Elanna, too, almost as badly. And Naomi, who still woke up screaming many nights. Maybe Seven, based on the way she’d been treating him lately. He certainly wasn’t doing the captain much good.

But, at least for Janeway, he could do this small thing. He pulled up the replicator’s logs again, seeing that he’d put the nutrient-rich broth under his own account, as intended. He switched over to Janeway’s account and called up her small allotment of protein supplements.

Before he’d been deactivated again, the Doctor had repeatedly pressed him to eat better. “You’re clearly not taking in enough calories, and you’re doing too much of all the wrong kinds of activity! Do you even remember the physical therapy exercises I showed you?” The lecturing had started the moment Tom had come out of his drug-induced sleep, the EMH perhaps hoping Tom would be too groggy to talk back. “I suspect I can’t do anything to stop you from going to Voyager,” he’d said, “but you could at least make an effort to improve your nutrition. I’m prescribing you the nutrient broth again. Yes, every day, and I’m informing B’Elanna of my recommendations as well. So no cheating!”

Tom had assumed that after he’d ripped B’Elanna’s heart out and stomped it into the floor for good measure, the last thing she’d be worried about would be his health, but he’d been wrong. She’d cornered him outside the Sacajawea two days after Megan’s memorial. Her voice had been flat and
she’d refused to meet his eyes. “Nicoletti showed me the replicator logs. You’re not getting the broth the Doctor recommended.”

“He’s overreacting,” Tom had said. “I’m fine, and we’ve got better uses for the replicators.”

“Replicating some soup takes a lot less energy than keeping the Doctor continuously active. I need a medical officer. Drink the damn broth.” She’d stormed off without a backward glance.

But Tom knew the Doctor’s recommendation was from an abundance of caution and didn’t take the camp’s perpetually dwindling energy supply into account. The hologram also hadn’t seen the full scope of Janeway’s decline. Tom was sure if he had, the Doc would agree her need for the extra nutrition was far greater than his.

So he packed the two thermoses alongside a week’s supply of vegetables, protein bars (and his share of Vorik’s latest crop of oranges). He even managed to score a hard-boiled egg from Harren’s chickens after some sweet talking to Naomi, who’d been reinstated as Assistant Flock Keeper two weeks ago. The little girl had recently mastered a decent side-eye, but the second Tom said it was a special treat for the captain, she had relented. “Mortimer won’t miss one, I guess.”

A shadow suddenly blocked the replicator shed’s overhead light. “My understanding is that the broth was for your own personal use.”

Tom startled, nearly falling off his stool. “Sheesh, Seven. What the hell? Have you been spying on me or something?”

“Yes,” she said, moving into his line of sight. “It has become clear to me that you are concealing certain behaviors from the rest of the leadership team. I am concerned your actions are not in the best interests of the community and now feel there is adequate evidence to confront you.”

Tom closed up the backpack. If she knew about the broth, he wondered if she’d seen the oranges and the egg, too. “The broth is for me,” he said. “I’m going up to see the captain and I thought I’d have lunch up there.”

“You have no response to rest of my accusation?” Seven’s eyebrow arched towards the low ceiling.

Tom tried to bend and retrieve the pack, but a sudden muscle spasm made him freeze and gasp in pain instead. “Like what?” he panted. “Your ‘accusation’ is a little vague. Do you think, maybe, I’ve weaponized my soup? Or I’m slowly rebuilding Voyager using replicated food so I can ditch the rest of you?”

Her mouth didn’t even twitch in response. Instead, she grabbed the pack, holding it just out of Tom’s reach. “You know that I suspect neither of those things.”

Tom stared back at her, tempted to try to snatch the bag from her hands but knowing he’d probably just fall on his face if he tried. A flare of anger welled up inside of him — much of it directed at his own disability, but a good part of it aimed at Seven as well. “I sure as hell don’t know what you do suspect. So spit it out, Seven. You’ve been acting weird around me for weeks now, and I’m sick of it. I thought…” That we were friends, he didn’t say. Because what a stupid, childish complaint to make, especially to an ex-Borg. “If you’re mad at me about something, just tell me. Because while I could list off two or three dozen things I’ve done to fail people lately, I can’t think of any that were specifically directed at you.”

She still didn’t turn over the pack. “You’ve been bringing extra food to the captain. If I were to
open this pack, what else would I find that was not intended for her?”

Seven had certainly done her research. Not that Tom would expect anything less. “So what if I am? It’s not like I’m stealing it. It’s my food share, I can decide who gets to eat it.” My food share plus one egg. But Janeway had visibly perked up last week, when Tom had given her his last one. It had been the most interested she’d been in food since the crash.

“It is not an appropriate allocation of resources. Kathryn Janeway is no longer an asset to the community, therefore she does not warrant receiving additional food beyond her basic nutritional requirements. You perform a vital service; your nutritional requirements should take precedence. I’ve noticed in recent weeks that your physical condition is in clear decline—”

“So just bread and water for the prisoner, huh? You’re all heart, Seven.” No way was Tom going to talk to another person about his health. Since when had it become everyone’s business, anyway? “Look, if the captain is going to get better, than I need to give her as much support as possible. If I think that sharing my food is part of that support, then it’s my business — because it’s my food and because I’m the CMO here.” He pushed himself to his feet and took the straps of the backpack.

“The captain is never going to get better.” She kept tight hold of the pack.

Tom dropped his hand. “Oh?” he sneered. “You’ve become an expert on recovering from a brain injury now?”

“No,” Seven said. “But when I observed your interaction with Captain Janeway three weeks ago, it became clear to me that you’ve been misleading the leadership team about her health status.”

Tom sank back onto the stool as Seven kept talking. She’d followed him up to Voyager, intending to discuss a scientific puzzle with Janeway. Instead, she’d seen how the captain’s speech impediment was still pronounced, that her weight had dropped precipitously, that her emotional state was unstable. “It is quite clear that, despite your repeated assertions of optimism about her progress, she has made no significant efforts towards recovery. It appeared as if her condition may, in fact, be worse.”

That was it, then. Seven would tell B’Elanna, B’Elanna would forbid him from going to Voyager, and openly defying her was one line Tom would never cross. “Are you really so angry with her?” he asked. “It’s not her fault, Seven. Not really. She’s just not the same person she used to be.”

Seven lowered the pack to the floor. “I have never indicated that I am angry with the captain. As I said, my concern is about the appropriate allocation of resources and your declining health.”

“Bullshit,” Tom said, sensing an opening. “My health sucks because I can’t breathe and I can’t sleep. An extra orange here and there isn’t going to change that.”

“You’ve been giving the captain your oranges as well?”

“No,” Seven said. “You’re not mad because I’ve been giving her my food. I don’t even think you’re mad that I fudged the truth about how she’s doing. You’re mad because she’s not trying. You’re mad because she left.”

Seven said nothing. Tom pressed his advantage.

“You’ve been giving the captain your oranges as well?”

“Not exactly my point,” Tom said. “You’re not mad because I’ve been giving her my food. I don’t even think you’re mad that I fudged the truth about how she’s doing. You’re mad because she’s not trying. You’re mad because she left.”

Seven said nothing. Tom pressed his advantage.

“Please don’t tell B’Elanna,” he said, standing again. “It would put her in an impossible position. Choosing me over Janeway. It’s not fair to her. She’s already got enough to deal with.” He took a step towards Seven and the pack that still lay at her feet. “I know I shouldn’t have told you she was doing better. I’m sorry. But you looked so sad that day, and I wanted to give you a little bit of hope.
Don’t punish Janeway for my mistake. You know if B’Elanna replaces me with anyone else, she’s never going to get better. No one else is going to keep trying like I will. And I still think she can come back.”

“Perhaps you are lying again.”

That was the problem, really, with being so good at deception. It was hard to convince people when you were telling the truth. Back on Voyager, Tom had thought those days, the ones where no one trusted him, were long distant. It was a little scary how easily he’d fallen back into old patterns. “I’m not, Seven. I swear. I may be crazy, I may be deluding myself, but I won’t give up on her. Please. Let me keep trying.”

“You will be honest with me from now on,” Seven said. “This is not a question.”

Tom nodded and took another step closer. “I promise. And no more fudging reports to the leadership team, either. From now on, I’ll just say she’s doing about the same. Please, Seven. Don’t give up on her, too.”

Seven retrieved the pack from the floor and helped Tom secure it on his back.
It had taken Seven more time than she would have liked — nearly thirty days — but she had finally constructed a solar-powered battery that satisfied her. The panel she’d designed projected a broad spectrum quasi-boson field that would repel bromosite particles, allowing the radiation from this system’s star to more effectively charge the power cell. Even the prototype was more efficient than the model Joe Carey had constructed; Seven believed that, with a few additional refinements, four batteries could provide over a quarter the energy needed to run the camp during the warm season.

In order to start applying those refinements, however, she needed to gather more raw materials from Voyager, specifically the hydrometallic coating from the main deflector. It was a suitable conductor but had very little use in any of the equipment used commonly in the camp, so was readily available. Today, she would hike with Tom to the wreckage to retrieve some.

“Sure,” he’d said yesterday when she asked if she could accompany him. His expression had been pleased. After their confrontation last week, Tom had confessed that he’d missed her companionship during the three weeks in which she had distanced herself from him. Surprising both of them, Seven conceded that she, too, preferred speaking to him versus not.

“But Seven,” Tom had added after a pause. “You get it, right? That you can’t see Janeway yet? She’s not ready. Even if she was, she’d need some warning.”

Seven readily agreed, having already predicted that Tom would make this stipulation. She did have an ulterior motive in wanting to go to Voyager with him, but it was not to see the captain.

Three days ago, after everyone else had left the most recent leadership meeting, B’Elanna had pulled Seven aside. “You and Tom seem like you’re friendly again.”

“We have resolved our differences,” Seven agreed.

“What was that all about, anyway?”

Seven paused before responding. Tom had made his reasons clear as to why he did not wish to inform B’Elanna of the persistent severity of Janeway’s disabilities. Seven did not entirely agree with those reasons. She was, however, aware (the entire camp was aware) that Tom and B’Elanna’s relationship had greatly deteriorated due to his decision to no longer cohabitate. Seven was concerned B’Elanna’s reaction to his deceit might be disproportionate. “It was a personal matter.”

B’Elanna’s eyes narrowed, but she didn’t press. “About going up to Voyager. Wait until Tom goes up to see Janeway and go with him.”

“He is not scheduled to return to Voyager until Thursday,” Seven said. “If I go today, I can begin work on the prototype three days sooner.”

“I know that, Seven!” B’Elanna wrapped her arms tightly across her chest and stared at the floor between them. “Look. I’m worried about him. He blames himself for Megan’s death—”

“Not an unexpected reaction,” Seven said, “given he is responsible for the camp’s medical care.” When she noted B’Elanna’s expression, she added: “I am not saying his claim of responsibility is correct. Only predictable, given his personal history and temperament.”

B’Elanna nodded. “Exactly. But my point is: he’s not taking care of himself. He wants to pretend his health issues aren’t a big deal, that he can do everything he used to, but he can’t. The Doctor
knows it, I know it, but Tom doesn’t seem to. So… go with him, OK? Make sure he’s all right.”

“You could accompany him yourself.” While Seven was aware of the discord between Tom and B’Elanna, she did not understand it. She had developed several hypotheses, but none would entirely explain Tom’s actions, and he had not been forthcoming when she’d attempted to discuss it with him.

“He’s made it pretty clear he wants me to leave him alone,” B’Elanna said, turning to a nearby console. “Will you do it or not?”

“I will comply.”

“Thanks.” B’Elanna had paused before adding: “And don’t tell him it was my idea.”

Seven was beginning to find the situation tiresome. It was clear from their actions and words when they spoke of the other that Tom and B’Elanna still cared for one another. Yet, other than curt exchanges during leadership meetings, they no longer spoke to each other, instead using the rest of the crew as a crude communications system: “Tell Tom we need a better calcium supplement sooner rather than later.” “Can you ask B’Elanna for time on the computer core? I need to run some simulations on a new antiviral.”

Back on Voyager, the Doctor had always encouraged her to form emotional connections with the rest of the crew. Seven had been reluctant, but understood his reasoning. It was clear that many humanoid life forms worked more efficiently with each other if there were some sort of social bond between them. Seven had had mixed success with this on Voyager; here at Hoth, her relationships were still low in number, but she would assess them as superior in quality. Cohabiting with Samantha and Naomi had proved to be an efficient way to strengthen their bonds. She missed Tuvok’s more extensive life experience and wisdom, but had found another acceptable Vulcan companion in Vorik. Miguel Ayala had shown her primitive, yet effective, survival techniques with which she had been unfamiliar. And while she continued to find him periodically frustrating, her renewed relationship with Tom still brought her satisfaction, although his once continual chatter had diminished markedly since Megan’s death.

Each of these relationships, as well as other, more superficial ones she had forged, did improve her life in the settlement. But the paradox that she had yet to resolve was that emotional bonds were also a source of weakness for much of the crew. Samantha, Miguel Ayala, Kenneth Dalby — all of them still spoke with sadness about romantic partners they had last seen in the Alpha Quadrant. Nearly every one of the survivors expressed longing for a dead companion from Voyager. Megan’s suicidal depression was directly linked to the deep bond between her and her sister. Tom and B’Elanna’s affection for each other had now been perverted into something detrimental to their functionality as a unit. And how had Seven’s attachment and care for Janeway after the crash given her any benefit?

Seven was long past the time when she would willingly sacrifice her individuality for the efficiency and comfort of the Collective. But she was not so enamored of her current existence that she could fully deny the advantages of being one drone amongst millions, all with a common mind and goal.

“Hey, Seven.” Tom was limping towards her. “Ready to go? Or should I get a head start? You could probably solve one of those math problems of yours and still beat me to the top.”

Of course Seven could not solve ‘one of those math problems’ in such a short time period. The entire reason they were diverting was because of the difficulty in finding a solution. However, she recognized that, since the crash, one of Tom’s more common coping mechanisms was self-
deprecation. “I could likely solve two in that time period. But I am capable of ambulating less efficiently if the company is adequate. I will come with you now.” She wondered at the flash of pleasure she felt at Tom’s answering, and lately rare, grin.

It was an overcast day and a fine mist hung in the air. Seven’s outerwear was damp by the time they reached the end of the marked path. She shivered, as the temperature had dropped several degrees since they’d left the camp, and her level of exertion had been minimal so far. She turned to observe Tom. He was several meters behind and his breathing appeared labored. “Are you well enough to continue?”

He nodded, but then dropped heavily onto a nearby boulder. Seven waited.

“Sorry,” he said after several minutes. “I usually take more breaks. I’ll be all right now.”

“Give me your pack.” The last kilometer of the path was far more strenuous than what had come before. It was illogical for Tom to carry his heavy backpack when Seven was far more physically capable and hers remained largely empty.

“I’m fine, Seven.” He grunted as he got to his feet.

“You’re obstinate,” she replied. “I am, as well. We will not go further unless you give me the pack.”

Tom made no effort to hide his displeasure. It was irrelevant, as he also handed Seven the backpack.

Three hours later, Seven declared her trip to Voyager a success. The hydrometallic coating was stripped from the deflector with minimal effort; she now had more than enough for her needs. As she exited the ship to meet Tom, she pulled up the hood of her jacket as the mist had turned into a light, but cold rain. Tom was already seated on the makeshift bench by the trailhead. His teeth were chattering and rivulets of water trailed down the back and sleeves of his coat.

“You should have waited for me inside the ship. It would have been warmer. Certainly drier.”

“And miss this gorgeous weather?” His voice was strained. “I don’t like to spend any more time in there than I have to.”

When Tom stood, Seven did not allow him to move towards the path back to the camp as she assumed he intended. Instead, she took him by the arm and led him back towards the ship. “You must eat before we descend.”

“I gave everything I had to Janeway,” he said, pulling feebly against her. “And I’m not up to climbing back inside there.”

“I have planned for both these contingencies.” She brought him to a dry area of ground sheltered by the starboard nacelle and removed several items from her pack: a sturdy blanket she laid on the ground, a portable heater, and a thermos of the broth the Doctor had prescribed. “Sit.”

Tom sat. “Did B’Elanna put you up to this?”

Seven did not like to lie. It would seem particularly inappropriate to do so, given she’d recently insisted Tom adopt a policy of total honesty with her. And unlike B’Elanna’s question three days earlier, Tom’s could not be deflected easily. “Yes.”

“Damn it,” he muttered, even as he shuffled closer to the heater.
They sat in silence for several minutes, Tom sipping from his thermos. Seven considered this was another opportunity to gain insight into the reasoning behind Tom’s decision to move in with Susan Nicoletti. “I require clarification.”

Tom sighed before responding. “About what?”

“Your relationship with B’Elanna.” Seven noted him stiffen. She continued. “Specifically, why you ended your romantic attachment.”

“Our ‘romantic attachment’ ended in the crash. I just made it official.” He passed her the half-empty thermos and climbed to his feet. “I drank your precious broth. Can we go now?”

Seven powered down the heater and began to fold the blanket with excessive care. Tom’s back was too painful for him to help her speed the process, and she knew once they began their return trip he would quickly become too winded to talk. “It seems your actions have had a negative impact on your relationship. B’Elanna’s general attitude and demeanor have worsened, yours has not improved. Therefore, you must have foreseen another benefit of which I’m not yet aware.” Tom stood at the edge of the dry patch of dirt, his back to her. She presented her leading hypothesis to him. “Are you considering taking over leadership of the camp from B’Elanna?”

Tom turned, quickly for him, and stared back her with his mouth agape. “Is that some kind of joke?”

“No,” Seven said, surprised, as Tom was quicker than most to recognize her attempts at humor. “It is what I have determined to be the most likely reason behind your ‘split,’ as Miguel described it. As there have been no personal benefits to either of you, and as there has been more general dissatisfaction with B’Elanna’s leadership since Megan’s suicide, I thought, perhaps, your decision to move into other quarters was part of a strategy to assume command.”

“General dissatisfaction’?” Tom took a step closer. “What are you talking about?”

Since the crash, there had always been a small number of the remaining crew that had reacted negatively to B’Elanna’s style of leadership. Janeway could, by turns, be warm and magnetic when required. Commander Chakotay’s leadership style was marked by openness and a steady demeanor. B’Elanna was not known for any of these traits. But, until recently, the malcontents had been a significant minority. Megan’s suicide seemed to have marked a change in the camp attitude, however: in the past three weeks, there had been more complaints about the austerity of the food and energy rationing, the heavy duty schedules and lack of ‘down time.’ Even some of the former Maquis and engineering crew, two groups typically unwaveringly loyal to B’Elanna, had made complaints in Seven’s hearing.

“What a load of bullshit,” Tom said. “Do those assholes have any idea how much B’Elanna has done for us? How much harder she works than everyone else? I want names, Seven. Clearly I need to have some conversations with people.”

“I suspect they would like that,” Seven said. “Many of the disgruntled crew have expressed the opinion that you should be in charge of the settlement, given your place in the chain of command on Voyager.”

Tom laughed, although once again, Seven had not made a joke. “Most of these fucking people wouldn’t have given me the time of day four years ago. And now, what? B’Elanna didn’t smile at them enough and they’re ready to throw her over for me? I don’t know whether to laugh or cry.”

Seven declined to point out that Tom had, in fact, already laughed. “Clearly I am incorrect about
your desire to assume leadership.” Tom only snorted, so she continued. “Then I still do not understand your actions in distancing yourself from B’Elanna. There has been no benefit to you, B’Elanna, or Hoth as a community.”

“Yeah,” Tom said. He pulled his hood up and stepped out into the rain. “I’m beginning to wonder myself.”

They did not speak at all during their descent. It took significantly longer than the trip up, as Tom required additional breaks. When they finally reached the settlement, there was no more than an hour of daylight left. Seven was frustrated that she would not be able to work long on her prototype, but that didn’t stop her from asking Tom one last question as she followed him over the threshold into the Sacajawea. “How did you know that it was not my idea to bring the broth and the other supplies for you?”

Tom wiped the rain from his brow and limped to the instrument tray to load a hypospray. “It’s not exactly your style, is it? Looking after people.”

Seven took a step back into the rain. “I am concerned for your continued well-being,” she said. “Even if I am unaware of the most appropriate ways to show it.”

Tom closed his eyes briefly and returned the hypospray to the tray. “I’m sorry, Seven. That was unfair. God, I’m just pissing everyone off these days.” He sighed and leaned against the biobed behind him. “It’s been a long day, and my back is a wreck. I know you care. I do. I just meant it doesn’t come naturally to you, being… nurturing.”

Seven nodded and left. She would now bring her salvage to the Tereshkova and do what she could on the prototype before they entered the energy brownout time period. Tomorrow, she would cancel her lunch plans with Naomi and Sam Wildman, and also her kal-toh game with Vorik. The Doctor had been wrong. Improving the settlement’s energy resources and seeking a means of escape from this planet — these should be her only objectives. Fostering social connections was an inefficient use of her time and mental resources. They brought her little benefit for the cost.
Day 213

Chapter Notes

I was going to wait until Wednesday to post this one, but you've all been waiting so patiently, and I don't wanna. Thank you so much to everyone that's been reading, especially those that have left kudos and comments! I appreciate every one!

As he did every morning, Tom took a few deep(ish) breaths before his first attempt to rise. Once he was finally upright, phase two involved stretching his back and hip as much as he could, in an attempt to loosen the muscles that had frozen into near immobility overnight. This inevitably led to phase three: a coughing fit. He’d gasp for air between each painful, hacking exhalation, in the back of his mind always wondering if this was it – the one that wouldn’t stop. If maybe this time, the inhaler wouldn’t ease his seizing lungs, or his oxygen would drop so low he’d pass out.

He never did. Each time he’d finally get a hand clasped around his inhaler; he’d bring the device to his mouth and force his trembling fingers to squeeze out a puff in time with his labored inhales. And each time, at least for a moment or two, he’d think about tossing the medication into the woods or a recycler; finally letting the crash kill him like it had intended to, so many months ago.

Twenty minutes after waking and accepting the fact that he was alive and facing another day, he was up and dressed. He made himself a cup of tea and took a little fruit and dried meat from the food drawer, all as quietly as possible, as it was not yet dawn and Sue was still asleep. Tom himself had slept especially poorly last night. It was the day for his weekly trip up to Voyager, and they were getting harder and harder on him. He’d decided to try halving last night’s analgesic dose so he’d have extra left over for tonight. Not such a great plan, as it turned out. He could almost hear the Doc in his ear, telling him if he’d only do the physical therapy it wouldn’t be so hard. And B’Elanna, once again pointing out that there were many others better suited to check on Janeway each week.

B’Elanna. God, he missed her. At night, when he crawled into bed alone. At meals, when he and Sue ate in silence. Even when the leadership team was all gathered together in the Tereshkova and B’Elanna was almost close enough for Tom to reach out and touch. (But not quite. She made damn sure she was never quite close enough for him to touch). He wondered again what he’d been thinking, when he’d left her.

At the time, Tom had truly believed it was for her own good. That he was nothing more than an anchor to her now. That he kept her up at night, that he distracted her with his crappy health, that he was probably dying sooner rather than later and it was better for her if they weren’t so close.

But the more he thought about it, the more he realized — his actions had been selfish and weak. What he’d done to B’Elanna — deciding for her that she was better off without him — it was really no different from what John Torres had done, some twenty-odd years ago.

And now there was nothing he could do about it.

The sun was just casting a few paltry rays over the horizon when he left his shelter. It was going to be overcast much of the day, but at least the rain was holding off until tonight. He needed to make a few stops before he could head up to Voyager: the Sacajawea for the bit of food he’d squirreled
away from his own share this past week, the replicator shed for Janeway’s vitamin supplement and
more broth, the generator shed for recharged power cells. He was glad, in a way, that his
intractable pain meant he was getting an early start. While he’d tried to discourage her, Naomi had
taken it upon herself to bring Tom an extra egg every week. If Tom got on the road before the little
girl got down to the Baxial, there’d be no reason for her thieving. The last thing Tom wanted was
for her to lose chicken privileges again because she’d pissed off the churlish Harren. Janeway
hadn’t even shown much interest in the eggs after the first one.

It was mid-morning by the time he got to Voyager, despite his sunrise departure. He rubbed his
hands together before entering the wreckage, cursing himself for forgetting his gloves. They
weren’t long past this hemisphere’s summer solstice, but it never seemed to feel much above
freezing by the ship. He wondered if Janeway could survive another winter up here. That’d be one
thing off my to-do list, he thought, then hated himself for thinking it.

His visit went as well as they always did, which is to say it sucked. He’d tried everything over the
past few months: positive updates on the surviving crew, speculation on what Harry and Chakotay
might be up to in the Alpha Quadrant, funny anecdotes from their time on Voyager. One day, out of
sheer desperation, he’d even tried talking to her about his father. Nothing too deep, just a little story
about a six-year-old Tom Paris mistaking his returning father for Santa Claus one Christmas Eve.
He might as well have been reciting a waste recycler manual for all the reaction he’d gotten.

Today, he was ashamed to admit, he’d lost patience with her: “God, Kathryn, do you give a shit
about any of us anymore? Did you ever?” She’d slapped him, hard, one long fingernail leaving a
thin scratch just shy of his left eye. Immediately afterwards she’d cried out and fled into the
bedroom. Tom had let her go. He didn’t know if it was smart or not, but he’d tried to respect that
space as hers alone. Give her a place to retreat from him, if she couldn’t take it anymore.

He donned his backpack of empties — thermoses, food containers, expended power cells — and
rose from the bench at the head of the trail. It was past lunch time, but he had no desire to eat the
ration bar he’d brought with him. He felt nauseated much of the time now, no doubt from some
combo of pain, guilt, and anxiety. Maybe a parasite or two, as well — those rock bunnies were
riddled with flukes and Chell’s vision had declined a bit from a cysteine deficiency. Which was
something else he needed to deal with, thinking of the panic in Chell’s face when Tom had told
him he didn’t think he could do anything about the peripheral vision he’d already lost.

Tom had been picking his way down the rocky slope for only fifteen minutes when he saw a dark
shape move in the mist up ahead. He lowered a hand to his phaser and sniffed the air, but it was
clear — no sign of the cougars that had recently made a reappearance in the area. As the figure
came closer he recognized it as humanoid.

Oh, shit.

It was B’Elanna. And given the way she was hopping from boulder to boulder like a damn
mountain goat, she was a woman on a mission. Maybe there’s a medical crisis? was his hopeful, if
morbid, thought. But then someone probably would have signaled his comm badge. Nope.
B’Elanna wasn’t looking for the town doctor. She was looking for him. This couldn’t be good.

“What the fuck, Tom?”

Definitely not good.

“Hi to you, too,” he said, sliding carefully down the boulder on which he’d just been perched.

“You’ve been stealing food for Janeway?” She jumped off her own rock, landing lightly in the
gravel next to him. “What the hell is the matter with you?”

Tom internally cursed Seven as B’Elanna launched into a verbal assault. Seven knew why he wanted to keep B’Elanna out of this, he thought she even agreed with him, at least a little. She could have at least warned him before she blabbed. He jumped in at B’Elanna’s first pause for breath: “Look, I don’t know what Seven told you, exactly, but it’s all my food that I’m giving her, so I’m not sure what—”

“Seven?” B’Elanna said, taking a step closer. “What the hell does Seven have to do with this? I’m talking about the eggs!”

When Naomi had discovered Tom had left without getting an egg this morning, she’d been inconsolable. It had taken Sam an hour just to get a coherent explanation out of the little girl, at which point Sam had gone straight to B’Elanna. “For god’s sake, Tom. Roping a child into doing your dirty work for you?”

“It wasn’t like that!” Tom said. “It was one time! I told her to stop taking them weeks ago.”

“So you admit you asked her at least once?” B’Elanna said. “That you told her how much Janeway likes the eggs, and maybe she’ll want to come join the camp again so she can eat more of them?”

“What? No!” Except maybe he had said something like that? He’d considered it, he remembered that. But hadn’t he decided it was too manipulative? Too low even for him? He rubbed at his eyes and leaned against the boulder he’d just come down from. God, I’m tired. “I don’t… She’s four, B’Elanna. She messes things up sometimes.”

“Nice. Blame everything on the kid.” B’Elanna’s eyes bore into him. “And what’s this about Seven? What else have you been hiding?”

What could he say? If he told her everything, she’d be pissed, but she was already pissed. He couldn’t possibly hurt her more than he already had, could he? “Nothing. I’m sorry about the egg. Eggs. I’ll talk to Naomi.” He pushed past B’Elanna and started back on the path to camp.

“Sam doesn’t want you to talk to Naomi. She’s mad at you, too.”

And Tom had thought he felt sick to his stomach before. “OK. See you back down here.”

“Damn it, Tom! We are not done here!”

He kept moving. It’s not like she couldn’t catch up to him without even breaking a sweat. Which she did, grabbing his arm so tightly he knew there was little point in him struggling. He suspected there’d be a bruise later but he kept his complaint to himself.

“What else are you hiding from me?” she demanded again.

He didn’t have to tell her the whole story. How thin Janeway was, how half of the extra food Tom brought was ignored and left to rot. How she didn’t even try to speak to him anymore. Maybe a half-truth would satisfy. “I’ve just been sharing my broth with her. She’s underweight and I’m worried with winter coming up. Seven found out, and I asked her not to tell you. That’s all.”

“Bullshit,” B’Elanna said. “I know you, and I know when you’re lying. And now you’ve got Seven in on it, too. Fantastic.”

Tom sighed. “In on what, B’Elanna? Why does everyone think I’ve cooked up some Great Soup
Conspiracy? Pun completely intended.”

“Why have you been so cagey about how Janeway’s doing, Tom? Why are you so invested in getting her back to camp?” She dropped his arm and turned away. “God, I can understand Rollins and Nicoletti, but I thought you, at least, would have my back.”

_Sue? Rollins? “What are you talking about?”_

When she spoke again, her voice was small. “You spend so much time and energy with her, helping her. You trying to hedge your bets? Make sure we have someone to take over when I’ve completely fucked everything up? Do you really have so little faith in me?”

Tom had pulled a lot of shit over the last several weeks. He knew this. He’d let B’Elanna down in more ways than he could count. But did she really think that was why he hauled his ass up here every week? “You’re kidding, right? You can’t really think my endgame is getting Janeway to take over the camp?”

“What am I supposed to think?” she demanded, the heat flaring back into her voice. “What else makes sense?”

“How about I feel bad about what happened and I’m trying to help her?” Tom said, his own anger growing. B’Elanna’s theory was even more ludicrous than Seven’s. “If you haven’t noticed, I’m the only one trying to make things better for her. I’d do the same for you, if you’d ever fucking let me!”

“Oh, yeah, you’ve been a great help,” B’Elanna snapped as she rounded on him. “Lying to my face! Standing by when half the camp lit into me at Megan’s memorial! Or how about when you fucking ran out on me? What a great show of support that was.”

“I’ve tried, B’Elanna!” He rubbed at his chest, willing the tightness to ease. He was not going to have a coughing fit right now. “I’ve offered over and over again to help you! But it’s always ‘go get some rest,’ or ‘you’re too thin’ or ‘take your meds.’ You treat me like a child.”

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“Of course. I should have known.” B’Elanna sneered. “This is about your ego.”

“It’s not about my ego,” he said, no longer having the breath to yell. How was it possible that he was so utterly incapable of communicating with someone he loved so much? The open patch of gravel they stood in was small, there’d be barely enough room for a third person, yet B’Elanna might as well be back in the Alpha Quadrant. “You don’t see me anymore. I’m just a walking collection of health issues to you. Just one more problem for you to fix.”

“Because all I fucking have are problems!” she barked. “I am trying so hard to keep this place together, and nobody gets it! Chell thinks Vorik is growing the wrong food, Vorik can’t grow different food because nothing else will take. Ayala tells me he needs more phaser power for hunting, but Garbose tells me recharging the phasers is killing the power cells. Seven wants a fucking prize for designing a solar cell we don’t have the resources to build, and you! You go out of your way to help Megan, to help Sue, Naomi, fucking Janeway, but you abandon me because I care too much—” She stopped, nostrils flaring and eyes darting back and forth. “Shit.”

“What? Do you—” Then the wind picked up and Tom caught it, too. Cougars. “Damn.” He pulled out his tricorder and scanned the area. “Damn. I’m picking up three, no four. Five. Coming this way, fast, from the east.” He pocketed the tricorder and pulled his phaser free from its holster. “Are you armed?”
“No,” B’Elanna said. “Can you make it back up to Voyager?”

Tom spared a quick glance for the steep, slippery path that stood between them and the wrecked starship. “Not in time,” he said. “But you could—”

“Don’t be stupid.” She pointed south, where a group of massive boulders had formed a series of shallow caves and tunnels. “Hiding somewhere downwind’s probably our best bet. Keep that phaser out.”

He moved as quickly as he could, tempted to drop the pack but knowing the loss of even a single medkit and some empty power cells would be keenly felt. B’Elanna darted ahead, squeezing her smaller frame between the rocks where she could, nimbly jumping on top of them when necessary. She kept glancing back, waiting when Tom got too far behind. She practically vibrated with adrenaline, likely fighting an urge to yell at him to move it as much as the one to run at top speed. “Go, B’Elanna,” he called out between pants. “I’ve got the phaser. Get out of here.”

“Fuck you.” She jogged back to him and stripped the pack from his shoulders. “And keep moving.”

The smell was nearly overwhelming now. Tom had never heard of them hunting in packs before, only solo or in pairs. They were calling to each other: short, high-pitched howls. Even over his own labored breaths, he could hear the scrabbling of their claws on the gravel. He wished B’Elanna would leave him. She could outrun them, still. She had enough of a lead.

The rocks were getting larger, and the one that blocked his path was up to his shoulder. As thin as Tom was now, he was still too big to fit between it and its neighbor. He reached for the top. If only he’d holstered the phaser first. What strength he had left was in his arms. That, plus the driving thrum of fear that pulsed through him, should have been enough to get him off the ground. But he tried to hold onto the weapon, and his bare hands were stiff with cold. One failed attempt, two.

“Tom! Give me your hand!”

B’Elanna was crouched on top of the rock, her eyes darting between him and the space behind them. They were very close now.

He put his free hand in hers. She pulled and he tried to help her. Tried to ignore the agonizing pain in his back as he fought to get himself up the rock. “Almost there,” she grunted.

They didn’t make it. Tom had just managed to wrap one arm around the top of the boulder when the lead animal slammed into him. Sharp claws dug into his back, the weight against his chest knocked him free of breath. He couldn’t even cry out when he saw another one ram into B’Elanna’s chest, throwing her to the ground. His hands came up automatically to protect his head and neck, his brain recognizing it was a lost cause but his body not quite realizing it yet. A third, lighter animal leapt over him, then a fourth; all of them calling out an odd series of chirps. They kept running.

Tom picked up his head. The cougars had moved right past them: two larger animals and what Tom now saw was a group of half-grown cubs. They were running full tilt into the forest, the slowest and smallest of them hopping on three legs. He coughed, hard, then winced at the sharp, new pain in his shoulders.

“Tom!”
“Up here,” he said, his voice harsh and low. He lay his face back against the rock, the rough surface irritating the skin where Janeway had scratched him earlier. His eyes closed.

“Shit.” B’Elanna was right next to him now. He could hear her open the pack. “Can you move at all?”

“Probably,” he said, although he wasn’t entirely sure. The adrenaline was draining out of him rapidly and Tom considered he might be content if he never moved again.

“They’re not that deep.” He could feel her gently pulling at the torn fabric of his jacket and shirt as she investigated his injuries. “But there’s already some bruising. Let’s get you back to camp.”

He felt about a hundred-years old as he pushed himself to sitting, but he still shook off B’Elanna’s supporting hand. “Did you get hurt at all? When you fell?”

“I’m fine.” She took his arm again, her grip more firm this time. “OK, let’s get off this boulder to start. Just slide down. Nice and easy.”

“I can do it, B’Elanna. I’m not a toddler.” Tom again tried to pull free, but she wouldn’t give. “Will you let go of me?”

She wouldn’t. “That thing slammed you into the rock, Tom. I know you’re hurting. Why can’t you just let me help you?”

He yanked hard this time, throwing them both off balance. B’Elanna recovered quickly, but Tom slid, pinballing between two rocks and landing hard on his right shoulder. He bit down on his lip to muffle his cry of pain.

“I hate to say I told you so,” B’Elanna said as she landed lightly on the ground next to him.

“Then fucking don’t.” He dragged himself towards a nearby, scrubby fir. “Why didn’t you run?”

“What?”

“You should have run!” he shouted, grabbing the tree’s small trunk and hauling himself upright. “You could have outrun them. I had the phaser, I was slowing you down. Why didn’t you fucking run?”

“So I should have ditched you?” she snapped. “Just like you ditched me in our shelter? Is that what you wanted?”

“I wanted you to get away!” he snapped right back. “I wanted you to survive! I didn’t want you to get dragged down out of some misplaced sense of honor. Why don’t you get that?”

Her glared softened a millimeter. “I did survive. We’re both fine, more or less. Why does it even matter?”

“Because next time maybe they won’t keep running, B’Elanna! Next time, maybe I’ll get you hurt or…” B’Elanna’s expression had changed. She’d gone back on alert, her eyes scanning the rocks and trees round them. “What? What’s wrong?”

“They kept running,” she said. “They were running from something. And one of them was injured, did you see that? All this time, we thought they were the apex predator here, but… Give me your tricorder.”
There was that adrenaline again. Tom handed over the scanning device then dropped his hand automatically to his holster.

His empty holster.

“Uh, B’Elanna?”

“Maybe whatever it was stopped,” she said, scanning the tricorder’s display before tapping in a new set of commands. “Maybe it gave up the chase. I’m not sure what these readings…”

A shadow fell over them and a loud buzzing filled the air, like a whole battalion of angry, swarming bees. Tom swallowed hard and met B’Elanna’s eyes. They looked up.

It was enormous. Tom’s initial, irrational impulse was to laugh. How had they lived on this planet for half a fucking year without ever seeing one of these monsters? From their spot on the ground below it, all they could see were massive shoulders and a shaggy, black head. Short, heavy horns curved forward from its temples, and its heavy muscled forelimbs ended in giant, grasping paws. It had a long, prehensile nose that quested the air, rising upwards to reveal a wicked set of canines. The buzzing pitched higher.

Tom put a hand on B’Elanna’s arm and began to ease them backwards. “Maybe it’s not very fast,” he said, noting, distantly, that his voice was shaking. “It’s so big. It can’t be very agile.”

As if responding to Tom’s derogatory assessment, the beast leapt off its rocky perch, landing neatly with a thud that made the ground shudder.

“Your phaser,” B’Elanna said as they took another step back.

“I dropped it.” He grimaced a quick apology at her incredulous glare. “When the cougar used me as a launch pad.”

“Great,” she said, slowly bending down to grab a baseball-sized rock. “Maybe if I hit it in the eye.”

The small, piggish eyes that were mostly protected by those horns. “Tough shot.”

“We could climb a tree,” she said. They were pressed against another boulder now. Nowhere else to go.

Tom’s left leg was trembling badly now, and his lungs and back were on fire. He wasn’t going to be climbing any trees. “B’Elanna. You have to go.”

She stiffened next to him. “What are you talking about?”

Tom grabbed her hand before she could use it to hold him back. “I can’t run anymore, B’Elanna. Even if I could, there’s nowhere to go. But I can keep it busy. You have to go.”

“You asshole,” she snarled. “Stop trying to play the hero. I’m not going anywhere.”

The animal took another step closer. Tom braced himself against the rock at their backs. He’d need every bit of strength he had left to do this, and he couldn’t hesitate. He gave B’Elanna’s hand a last, quick squeeze and launched himself at the giant beast.

“Tom!”

He kept his shoulder low and drove with his legs, remembering a long ago coach’s tips from his
brief (and ill-fated) tenure as a rugby player. It was like tackling a broad, furry tree. The animal grunted but didn’t give a centimeter. Tom fell hard, the small of his back landing against a sharp rock. He couldn’t move. He could barely take a breath.

The buzzing lowered in pitch to more of a rumble. The monster turned and loomed over him, its nose waving around in the air. Tom could feel its hot, stinking breath on his face. B’Elanna was shouting, but it sounded far away. Run, he begged her silently. Please. I love you. Run.

The sharp clink of a rock pinging off the creature’s horn stopped the buzzing for a moment, but the animal didn’t even turn its head. The damp tip of the nose brushed across his forehead. Tom closed his eyes and prayed for it to be quick.

A heavy, scratchy tongue slapped onto his face, then stopped. Tom opened his eyes and blinked through the fine sheen of saliva that now coated his lashes. The animal blinked back and licked him again.

Another buzz sounded, higher pitched and more like the hum of cicadas. Tom turned his head to the left and saw another animal — just like the one that stood over him, but in miniature. It took a tentative step towards him, then stuck a tongue in his ear. Tom lay as still as he could. B’Elanna had fallen quiet. It was possible she’d run, like he’d wanted her to. Not very likely, though. Even as he’d performed his useless gesture of self-sacrifice, he knew she’d never leave him to die alone.

They licked every centimeter of exposed skin he had – face, neck, hands – and they were done. The larger animal moved off without ceremony, its young tripping behind after a final curious look at Tom. He still didn’t move.

B’Elanna’s face appeared above his a beat later. “Tom? Are you OK?”

He stared back at her. “They licked me.”

Her mouth quirked. “I saw that.” She looped a hand around his shoulders and gently pulled him to sitting.

Tom wiped vigorously at his face. “God,” he said. “This stuff stinks. And it’s sticky as hell.”

Her lips were pressed tightly together and she turned her face away. It was an odd expression; one Tom didn’t recognize. She was probably embarrassed on his behalf. “I’m fine,” he said. “You can laugh at me if you want to. I must have looked pretty ridiculous, bouncing off that damn thing like I did.”

“Laugh?” She whipped her head up to face him. Two tracks of tears were streaming down her face. “You think I want to fucking laugh at what you did?” She slapped him hard in the chest and he grunted and coughed. “You are such an idiot! What did you think you were doing?”

“Saving your life,” he rasped when he got his breath back. He shifted his eyes downward. “I didn’t want you to get hurt because of me.”

“I decide when I need someone to save me,” she barked. She took a few panting breaths, then rocked back on her heels. “Are you sure you’re OK?”

Tom shrugged. “For me. For what I am now. Yeah, I’m OK.”

B’Elanna rose abruptly and moved off. Tom sat there for several minutes, deciding it was no less than he deserved — being left alone in the woods to find his own way back to camp. Just as he resolved that it was time for him to get his ass off the rapidly cooling ground, B’Elanna
reappeared. “I found the phaser,” she said, extending her hand towards him. “Do you want some help?”

“The phaser,” he said, taking her hand and letting her haul him to his feet. “That’s what you were doing.”

“What else would I have been doing?” she said, her tone still snippy. He was up and moving now, but she kept close to his side. They walked silently through the edge of the woods. It would take longer this way, to get back to Hoth, but it was an easier route.

“Tom?” B’Elanna said, breaking the quiet amongst the trees.

“What?”

“That whole trying to save my life thing?”

He knew what was coming – a list of all the ways in which he was an utter fool. At least B’Elanna might finally agree she was better off without him. “Yeah?”

She slipped her hand into his. “Thanks.”
B’Elanna couldn’t fall back asleep. A storm front had moved in overnight, and a clap of thunder had awakened her from anxious dreams. She considered getting up, maybe doing some of the work she’d skipped yesterday because of their little adventure, but she’d have to climb over Tom to get to her PADD, and she didn’t want to risk disturbing his sleep.

It had taken hours to get back to Hoth, between the circuitous but relatively easy route B’Elanna had chosen and Tom’s progressively sluggish pace. By the time they’d reached the boundaries of the settlement, the rain had started, they’d both been drenched, and Tom had been just conscious enough to keep moving. Taking the extra ten minutes to bring him to the shelter he shared with Nicoletti didn’t even cross B’Elanna’s mind. Instead, she steered him straight to her shelter and sat him down at the table. By that point, she wasn’t convinced Tom was even fully aware of his surroundings.

Samantha came within minutes of B’Elanna’s call, and together the two women gently cut away the jacket and shirt from Tom’s torn and bloodied skin. He winced a few times in response, but mostly lay still, his head pillowed on his folded arms and his breath coming in labored but steady wheezes.

“I’ve given him a broad spectrum anti-microbial,” Sam said after she’d regenerated the damaged skin. “And some trioxime. Do you know how much dextromorphone he’s taken today?”

B’Elanna started to shake her head, but was interrupted by a muffled voice. “Ten milligrams, last night. I’ll take thirty.”

Three times his regular dose? But a quick and worried glance at Sam, and the other woman gave B’Elanna a reassuring smile. “Thirty’s fine. A little low actually.”

“Rations,” was Tom’s explanation.

B’Elanna bent low and whispered directly into Sam’s ear: “Give him what you think he needs. I’ll take it from my account.”

Sam pressed a hypospray to Tom’s neck. He sighed, then raised his head. “Sam? I’m sorry. About Naomi. The eggs.”

“Forget it for now.” Sam gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze. “We’ll talk later, after you get some sleep.”

Tom dropped his head back to the table, and Sam stood to leave, giving B’Elanna a few last instructions and words of reassurance. Once the door was shut again and the cold outside air had dissipated, B’Elanna pulled Tom upright. “C’mon, Flyboy. Let’s get you dried off and warmed up.”

Fortunately, she still had the seat from when Tom had been early in his convalescence. She sat him inside the narrow sonic shower and stripped him, then fired up the warmest setting. “It’s not my shower time,” he mumbled over the cleansing hum, his eyes half-closed and head resting against the wall.
“You can skip your next one,” she said, allowing her hand to linger on his cheek for a moment.

There was nothing clean in the shelter that would fit him, so B’Elanna just dropped Tom onto the bed naked, covering him with every blanket she had. By the time she crawled in next to him a few minutes later, he was out cold. Maybe sleeping somewhere else for the night would have been a better idea — allowing Tom the space and quiet for the rest he desperately needed — but lying there in the dark, listening to his shallow, rasping breath, B’Elanna had felt soothed. She’d pressed her body next to his and laid a hand on his chest, falling asleep to the steady thump of his heart under her hand.

But her sleep had been troubled, and now B’Elanna sat awake, her back pressed against the shelter’s wall. The hammering of the rain against the roof and Tom’s slow wheezes played like a soundtrack to her doubt. Maybe it was just the uncertainty that consumed everyone in the long, dark hours before dawn, but she found herself questioning each of her actions from the night before — telling Sam to give him a higher dose of medication, stripping him of his clothes and putting him in her bed, even bringing him to the shelter that was no longer his. Would Tom be angry when he awoke? Was this just more of the hovering that had helped to drive a wedge between them?

“Have I ever told you how I was in my dad’s section of Survival Studies?”

B’Elanna startled and blinked at the unexpected voice. “How long have you been awake?”

Tom’s eyes were still closed. “He gave me a B-.”

She lay back down beside him, propping herself up on one elbow and leaving a few centimeters between them. “I’m not shocked to hear you were a lackluster student.”

“I wasn’t, actually,” Tom said, finally opening his eyes and meeting hers. “OK, sometimes I was. But not for that class. I worked my ass off. I wanted to show him, you know? That I could do it. That I could be as good as he wanted me to be.”

“So what happened?”

“What always happened. I disappointed him,” Tom said, his voice neither sad nor angry, just matter-of-fact. Which tore at B’Elanna’s heart that much more.

He’d done well on all the classwork, apparently. Solid A’s across the board. But during the final exam, when he’d been dropped along with four other cadets into the cloud forests of Matewur III, Tom, according to Admiral Paris, had made the wrong call. He’d stayed with a badly injured teammate rather than helping the others complete the mission. “It wasn’t a holodeck, you know? Tawhid was terrified, thought he might even have to lose his leg. I couldn’t just leave him there, waiting alone for the medic team.”

“Did your team fail the mission?”

Tom shook his head. “No, they did it. But they missed the rendezvous time by nearly twenty minutes. Dad was pissed. I was the one that was command track, I had been in charge. So he gave me a D. It was a good thing I’d worked so hard on the coursework, or I might have had to take it over again.”

B’Elanna fiddled with the edge of the blanket before blurting out her very mature assessment of one Admiral Owen Paris. “Your dad sounds like kind of a dick.”

Tom snorted a rueful laugh. “Back then I would have agreed with you, wholeheartedly.” He stared at the ceiling, taking a few deep breaths. “But now… I realize he was right.”
B’Elanna sat up a little straighter and waited.

“I thought he was just doing it to punish me,” Tom said. “Because I didn’t do things the way he would have. I was one-hundred percent sure I had done the right thing. You don’t leave a team member behind! And it was just a simulation: the mission wasn’t real, there were no consequences from them being late. Except now I know that wasn’t the point.

“What he was trying to teach me was how hard it was going to be – to be a good leader. That it’s not always about doing what’s popular or being everybody’s friend. A real leader does what’s best for the group as a whole, no matter what. They know that sometimes people are going to hate you for the choices you make, but you have to make them anyway.

“It’s not a lesson I ever learned very well. Maybe it goes along with being ship’s pariah at the beginning. Or maybe it would have been different if we were still on Voyager, or I were still healthy. But here – when it feels like we’re one bad storm or virus away from failure, I can’t seem to do it. I can’t make myself tell a hungry person they’ve had enough to eat, or to let go of one person’s issue because a dozen bigger ones take priority.” Slowly, methodically, he rolled onto his side to face her. “Lucky for us, we’ve still got someone who’s a natural at this tough call thing.”

B’Elanna flopped onto her back. So that’s what the stupid story was about – Tom justifying his lying about Janeway. He still believed the captain would come back and save the day, one more time.

“I’m talking about you, B’Elanna.”

She turned back to him and almost shied away from the intensity of his gaze.

“I have so much faith in you,” he said, his voice soft but clear. “So much that I kind of fucked up. So much that I forgot you might need to hear it once in a while.”

B’Elanna curled her legs into her chest. “I don’t know why,” she said. “All I’ve done is screw up. The food, our energy supplies, Megan. Janeway wouldn’t have—”

“What Janeway would have done doesn’t matter,” Tom said. “She’s not here, and… she’s not coming back. I haven’t really been honest with you, and I’m not just talking about the food. She’s not getting better. Sometimes I wonder if I’m making her worse, honestly.”

B’Elanna snaked one hand forward and rested it on Tom’s. “I guessed as much.”

He gave her a sad smile. “I should’ve known better. I’ve never had much luck pulling one over on you.” Tom turned his hand over and clasped their palms together. “So who cares if Janeway would be doing things differently? You’re not Janeway. You’re B’Elanna Torres, and you’re the smartest, toughest person I know. You can do this. You are doing it. And I’ll always be here to help you.”

“Thanks,” she said to her knees, willing at least one small corner of her brain to believe him.

“I’m so sorry, B’Elanna,” he said. “For moving out. If I made you think I didn’t care about you. I’m sorry I gave up what we had. I’d take it all back if I could.”

B’Elanna stared at their two hands still clasped together. “You’re not the only one who’s fucked up. I’m sorry you feel like I don’t see you anymore.”

Time for Tom to look away. “B’Elanna, you don’t have to—”

She reached out with her free hand and put a finger to his lips. “Will you shut up for a minute? You
know I hate apologizing, so let me get this out.” She scooted closer, laying one arm across him and resting her head on his chest. “I know I hover too much. And I’m sorry. But it’s not because you’re just another problem to me.”

The tears began to flow, and Tom wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “I hover because if I lost you,” she sniffled, “I don’t know what I’d do. Chakotay, Harry, Janeway. Voyager. They’re all gone. You’re all I have left. And if you… If anything happened to you, I don’t know how I’d go on. I don’t.”

He pulled her closer, murmured comforting words in her ear, but B’Elanna knew there was more she had to say. “Part of me wants to be with you again. Like we were on Voyager. But another part of me is afraid. I don’t want to hurt you.”

Tom’s body tensed and shifted beneath her. “It’s OK, B’Elanna. I told you — I get it. I know what I look like now. I don’t expect you to feel the same way towards me. We don’t have to try to be something we’re not anymore.”

She nearly started to bang her head against his chest in frustration. She pulled out of his embrace, swiping at the drying tears on her cheeks. “You’re such a jackass. I’m not saying I am not attracted to you anymore. I’m saying I don’t want to hurt you when we… I’m afraid I’m going to physically hurt you.”

“Oh.” He blinked back at her and she could nearly see the gears starting to turn. “That’s what you’re worried about? We can be careful. It was just a couple of ribs that one time, B’Elanna. I’ll be fine.”

“And the other time with your collarbone,” she reminded him. She’d avoided the Doctor for a week after that particular trip to Sickbay. She could still hear the humiliating lecture he’d subjected them to.

Tom was grinning at her. “I thought breaking a clavicle was good luck.”

She punched him in the shoulder — gently. “This isn’t a joke to me.” She sat up and tried to look as serious as one could while wearing thermal pajamas and sitting next to a naked man. “If we’re going to do this again, if we’re going to be together again, I need you to promise me something. Two somethings.”

Tom nodded and she continued. “You need to take better care of yourself. Eat enough food, do the exercises the Doctor gave you, have someone else go up to Voyager.” When he started to protest the last item, she waved him silent. “At least every other week, Tom. It doesn’t always have to be you.”

He nodded again. “OK, what’s number two?”

“You have to promise you’ll be honest with me. Tell me when you’re hurting, tell me if I hurt you. If I know you’ll be straight with me, then I won’t worry so much.”

“And you’ll stop hovering?”

“I’ll stop hovering.” She bit her lip. “At least I’ll try.”

He reached up to stroke her hair. “It’s a deal,” he said, his eyes soft. “Now I’m not sure you’ve noticed, but someone put me in this bed with no clothes on.”

She chuckled and inched forward. B’Elanna had always loved the feel of his hand in her hair.
“Because someone doesn’t have any clothes here anymore.”

The hair stroking turned into more of a tug. “Seems like you’re overdressed, then.”

B’Elanna fixed that with a few efficient movements and slid under the blankets to straddle him. “When you said you wanted me to stop hovering,” she said, lowering her face until it was a few centimeters above his. “Does this count?”

“No,” he murmured, sliding his hands up her back and pulling her in for a kiss. “It most certainly does not.”

Chapter End Notes

End of part one! Don’t worry, part two is all written and ready to go. Let's all take a breather and let them be happy for a minute before we start in on that this weekend, shall we? (But seriously, what DOES Janeway do up there?)
Day 237

Chapter Notes

Apologies to Jack Gilbert for using his lovely poem, A Brief for the Defense. Go read the whole thing -- it's widely available online.

Kathryn couldn’t remember when she started thinking of the assortment of broken knick knacks and other detritus as a collection.

That hadn’t been the point, when it started. It was only that she had been there, alone, every day. Unable to read, unable to think — she had needed something to occupy her hands and what little mind she had left. Cleaning Chakotay’s old quarters had been the only option. It had taken her nearly two full days to reach them, in the beginning. What a wretched journey that had been. The bodies, at least, had all been cleared. But the ship, her ship. Walking through the wreckage, bedding down one night in the corridors of Deck Four when she couldn’t force her legs to take another step — it had felt like desecrating a corpse.

So, no, wandering about Voyager had not been an option, not at first. Once she’d finally made it to her first officer’s former quarters (and no, actually, she did not wish to reflect on her choice of destination) it was a long, long time before Kathryn would even consider stepping foot outside them again. But patching up torn upholstery, arranging Chakotay’s broken pottery along the window — those were tasks even she could handle.

When she’d done everything she could there, she remembered that Harry’s quarters weren’t so far away. Only two sections over. The door had been jammed shut, however, and unlike Chakotay’s, the manual override was broken. So that had been the next mission — searching for an EMDO to force open the door. The closest ones were all missing from their compartments, likely taken by the surviving crew for their own salvage missions.

Kathryn had been out of luck until she made it down to Deck Six. She’d felt a flash of triumph when she’d seen the little device, snug in its housing, then was angry for allowing herself even that momentary pleasure. They wore her out — the emotional highs and lows, the swings in mood she couldn’t predict or control. She’d never been a stoic, but any Starfleet captain worth her salt didn’t let emotions ride roughshod over reason. She’d wondered many times since the crash, if this was what it had been like for Vulcans before the Time of Awakening. If so, Kathryn could not fault them for choosing their tight adherence to logic over constant emotional exhaustion.

Which was why, when she’d realized her newly found EMDO was only a few meters away from Tuvok’s quarters, she’d elected to make a side trip.

They’d been nearly demolished. She hadn’t needed the EMDO to open the door, as the entryway had been half-crushed, with the door bent in two. There was just enough room for her to squeeze through. Once inside, Kathryn could stand, but only just. She didn’t stay long. Tuvok, of course, had had few personal belongings anyway, as attaching sentimentality to inanimate objects would be the antithesis of Vulcan philosophy. But, hidden under his smashed coffee table, Kathryn did find his meditation candle, with only the barest of chips on the side.

She had wrapped it in a bit of blanket she found near Tuvok’s bed and tucked it under her arm for
her journey back to Deck Two. When she’d reached Harry’s closed door, Kathryn realized she’d left the EMDO down below. At the thought of traversing back down through the darkened corridors and Jefferies tubes, every meter of them treacherous with memories, she’d sunk to the floor outside Harry’s quarters and sobbed, clutching the candle to her chest. She didn’t leave Chakotay’s quarters for a long time after that.

But, although her range was exponentially smaller than it once was, one thing her subdural hematoma and subsequent stroke had not quashed was her desire for exploration. So, after eleven days of pacing around Chakotay’s two rooms, clutching Tuvok’s candle to her chest, Kathryn found herself itching to leave again. Back to Deck Six for the EMDO, except she’d forgotten, at first, where she’d left it and had to wander section three of decks three, four, and five before she passed by Ensign Vorik’s door, which made her think of Tuvok, which reminded her of the meditation candle she’d left on her bedside table and where she’d found it.

By then, of course, her rebellious brain had forgotten why she’d needed the EMDO in the first, but that had been easily fixed, as she passed by Harry’s quarters on the way back to Chakotay’s. (She still didn’t think of them as her own. She would never think of them as her own.) It became another exercise in frustration, though, as the door was dented badly near its upper track, and even with the EMDO she could only push it open a couple of centimeters before her arms began to shake with the effort.

It became something of a daily ritual. She’d touch the meditation candle each morning after waking, hoping vainly that it might bring her a fraction of the peace of mind it had once brought her old friend. She’d pick at some of the food that had been left for her, but only out of obligation, as nearly everything had the same, dull flavor. Chakotay’s pottery needed inspection — to make sure there were no new cracks, that each was in its assigned place. Then she’d make her way to Harry’s door, where she’d yank and curse until she earned another centimeter or two. Yesterday, she’d been able to get her shoulder in.

After that, she’d move to the next section of the ship on her list. Kathryn had found that keeping a list had helped. Her inability to read even the simplest words presented a challenge at first, but, oddly, she found she could still count and read numbers, and so she’d taken to making a series of marks on the bedroom wall to represent the next deck for her to visit. Each day before she left on her rounds, she would carefully count the marks and repeat the number over and over, until she matched the one in her head with the one printed on the wall of the deck.

Her own quarters on Three had been totaled, so nothing to be salvaged there. She did have some personal effects in her Ready Room — as far as she was aware, the space was intact — but the first time she’d tried to visit the bridge, she’d retched at the sight and had to flee. Now even the thought of going to what was left of Deck One made her stomach turn. But Parsons’ quarters on Three were still standing, and she’d found a picture of his nephew. Declan. Odd, that she could remember the name of a little boy that she’d never met, a relative of a security officer she’d exchanged perhaps a couple dozen words with over the years, yet couldn’t recall whether that same officer had lived or died in the crash.

There were other bits she’d been able to gather — a badly torn libretto of the Doctor’s she found in Sickbay, a single earring of Jenny Delaney’s, a sketchbook and a pack of charcoal sticks belonging to Ensign Baytart. She had a book of Tom’s, too, a hardcover of impressive girth, but as of yet she’d not worked up the courage to show it to him, or ask him the title.

She’d made it to Tom’s early on, perhaps a week or two before he’d taken over the supply runs from the settlement. His quarters were still relatively whole — only some overturned chairs and tables, a crushed bed — so she’d been able to get in and walk around them with relative ease. As
she’d wandered about, righting the furnishings that had once been his, she’d been suddenly seized by a feeling of guilt and anxiety, although at the time she could not have explained why. So she’d grabbed the book, the only portable thing that had been close at hand, and left. She’d not spent much time on Deck Four since.

Kathryn was a long way off from going to Deck Nine, where B’Elanna’s quarters were, and she hadn’t even considered going to the cargo bays.

Today, though, she only went to Harry’s, earned another hard-fought centimeter, and turned back. Because she also had a second list — one she kept on the wall on the other side of Chakotay’s bed. The same side on which she kept Tom’s book, to help her remember what the list was for. She used one of Baytart’s charcoal sticks, making the shortest lines possible to avoid using them too quickly. After each of Tom’s visits, she’d mark a day on the wall until his next one. It had been nine days since she’d last seen him.

This worried her, but only a little. Annoyingly, the pilot didn’t have a consistent pattern to his supply trips. In general, it was once every seven days. But if there was a heavy rain, he might delay by a day. Other times, he came early and there’d be a storm soon after. There was a period where he’d been coming twice a week, but Kathryn wasn’t blind. She saw the toll the trips took on him, and so forced herself to eat more regularly in hopes of keeping him away. At any rate, he had never before gone more than eight days between appearances.

She wished he wouldn’t come at all. It had been easier, when it had been Nozawa or the other one. (Landing? Long?) They’d been nervous around her. They hadn’t pressed her to talk, or told her to do the Doctor’s therapy, or forced her to listen to stories about people they’d lost or the person she used to be. Instead, they would drop off her supplies and flee their crippled former CO, engaging only enough to ensure she was still breathing.

It could be worse, she supposed. It could have been the Doctor, who would have harangued her with his usual unflagging enthusiasm. Or B’Elanna, who was unable to hide her Klingon’s pity for a creature so much more pathetic than herself. Or Seven. Thank god, at least, it wasn’t Seven.

But it was still hard to see Tom. To see how thin he was now, to see the lines of pain and exhaustion he tried to hide, to hear his wheezing coming down the corridor long before he crossed Chakotay’s threshold. To know that it was her fault — his pain, his labored breaths, his disability. Why had she done it? Why had she agreed to that risky, foolhardy plan? Was the Alpha Quadrant really so much better than the lives they had forged for themselves aboard Voyager?

The life she’d could have had aboard Voyager.

She thought of that last dinner. Vegetable biryani. Nothing like her grandmother’s — somehow she’d managed to make it both underseasoned and overly spicy — but Chakotay had manfully made his way through it, replying with nothing but that damned smile when she’d apologized for trying to poison him. He’d wanted to talk more, after dinner. About what she’d do once they made it back to the Alpha Quadrant. About what they’d do once they made it back. He’d spoken of taking her to Dorvan, of traveling to Indiana, of visiting Angkor Wat or New Tuvalu — places they’d both always wanted to see but neither had.

She’d wanted to say yes, to all of it. She’d planned to say yes — later. The next day, perhaps, when they’d made the trip successfully. She’d promised herself she’d say yes, as soon as they were home.

That night, though, she’d only given him a gentle smile and shown him the door. “You have an announcement to make, Commander,” she’d said, stressing his rank. Laying one more row of
bricks in the wall between them. “I think the crew would like to know that this time tomorrow, we’ll be having a celebratory dinner in the Alpha Quadrant.”

She hoped Chakotay had made it. She hoped he was home and safe and not in prison. She hoped he’d gone to Dorvan, and Angor Wat, and, perhaps, had traveled to Indiana alone — to meet her mother and sister and tell them stories about her. She hoped he wasn’t alone.

“Knock, knock!”

That was not Tom.

It was the same greeting he used, yes. One that irked her to no end. Why didn’t he just use his hand to knock, instead of calling out the words like he was starting a joke?

But it wasn’t Tom’s usual wheeze, his voice hoarse and strained from the effort of climbing through Voyager’s ruined decks. This was a vibrant trill. It was almost… operatic.

Damn.

“Captain!” the EMH said, beaming at her where she stood in the shadows of Chakotay’s bedroom. The space that, for the last several months, Tom had left sacred to her. The hologram studied her closely as he approached. “Why, you look terrible!”

Things deteriorated from there.

He bustled about the rooms, picking up clothes, shaking out her bed linens, poking through drawers. “When was the last time you cleaned any of this? You have a refresher, don’t you?” “It’s shameful how much food you’ve left to spoil. Do you realize how much effort the crew has put into growing this produce?” “Mr. Paris tried to warn me, but I have to confess I assumed he was being dramatic. He is rather prone to hyperbole.”

She’d watched him sullenly from a corner of the bedroom, wanting to protest how he rifled through her things, replacing many of them incorrectly, but not sure that, in her anger, she’d be able to produce much more than gibberish. At this last, though, she managed to string together two words: “Where’s Tom?”

The Doctor paused in his work, Tuvok’s meditation candle in his hands, and looked at her. Just for a moment. He returned his attention to the candle. “He’s a bit under the weather. I thought it best that I take over for a period of time. It’s quite a lot for him to climb up here.”

The averted gaze, the change in tone — it was obvious he was hiding something. He was a Doctor, for god’s sake. And not just that, but one of the most advanced pieces of medical technology to come out of Starfleet in a decade. He knew very well her language issues were expressive, and her comprehension was fine. Did he really think she wouldn’t recognize his dissembling as exactly that?

Kathryn moved to the windows of the living area and began to place Chakotay’s ceramics back in their proper place. It must be something about Tom. ‘Under the weather.’ The man had barely survived the crash and had been left a cripple. ‘Under the weather’ would probably be an improvement. It was probably about what had happened last week, the last time Tom had been up here.

It had been a bad morning. First, she’d made no progress whatsoever with Harry’s door. In fact, her feet had slipped while she’d been pushing against it, and when she used the EMDO to steady herself, she’d actually pulled the door closed by another two centimeters, losing the ground she’d
gained the day before. That should have been a sign that she shouldn’t venture further, that she should just go back to Chakotay’s quarters. Instead, she tucked the EMDO back into a shoulder bag she’d fashioned and made her way to Deck Seven, which was next on her list. She’d taken to bringing the device with her everywhere, as there were endless doors that needed prying open, and Voyager’s remaining EMDO’s were few and far between.

Which is why losing the only one she had found had felt so devastating. The Jefferies tube that lead to Deck Seven had collapsed, so she’d gone down a turbolift shaft instead. One poorly placed foot, and she’d slipped down a rung, her bag sliding off her shoulder and down the shaft, a fall of at least fifty meters. She’d clung to the ladder and cried for a time, then made her way back up to Six, finally deciding there was no point in continuing her explorations that day.

Tom was already in Chakotay’s quarters when she got back. Maybe having the extra time to recover from his journey was what had triggered it, but Kathryn didn’t really care. All she cared about was that he was singing. And not just any singing, but happy singing: something about blue skies and a sun shining so bright. Each note Kathryn heard as she trudged the final few meters to Chakotay’s quarters made her want to punch a wall.

“Shut up!” she shouted as she pushed her way through the door.

Which startled Tom, who had been examining one of the more fragile pieces of Chakotay’s pottery. He dropped it to the carpeted floor, but it still broke — Kathryn saw the sizeable chunk of handle split from the bowl. “Shit,” he said, “I’m sorry.” Tom tried to pick up the pieces, but Kathryn saw that, too — how his face closed off in sudden pain, and his hand went to his back.

“Get away,” she barked, angry at herself — of course she was angry at herself. She’d been the one to startle him, to make him drop the bowl. She’d been the one to send Voyager to its doom, and condemned Tom to a life of pain so severe he couldn’t even bend to the floor. But what could she do to punish herself? What else was left? And she had to punish someone.

She charged Tom, hands flying, smacking him about the neck and shoulders before she even recognized what she was doing.

“Hey!” Tom hunched his back and raised his arms over his head. “Kathryn, stop! Please! Captain!”

But she didn’t stop. She couldn’t — her arms swung and hit wildly of their own accord, until Tom began to cough and cough and dropped to his knees. Kathryn’s hands fell down to her sides and she backed away, unable to turn away as Tom gasped and retched, his face as red as the uniforms they once wore. He threw up a little, a sad pile of phlegm and bits of food now mixed in with Chakotay’s broken pottery. She should do something. She should get the medkit she knew Tom carried in his pack, but then what? She couldn’t identify the different medications, wouldn’t know which hypospray he needed.

Instead she sank to the floor near the bedroom, paralyzed by her incompetence. He was leaning heavily against the bulkhead now, his lips blue and his eyes closed, his mouth hanging open and snatching hungrily at the air in between his hacking coughs. Kathryn wondered if she was watching him die. What would happen after — would B’Elanna send someone, when he didn’t return to the settlement? Would she come herself? How would the half-Klingon respond, when she saw the man she loved lying dead on the floor next to Kathryn? Would she rip her former captain to shreds, in her sorrow and anger?

Was that, maybe, what Kathryn wanted?
But it didn’t matter, in the end. Tom’s coughing stopped, he dragged himself to the medkit by himself and pressed two hyposprays to his own neck in quick succession. His color resolved into its new normal of pallor mixed with dark shadows. A long time passed, and Kathryn watched the light outside pass from late morning to early afternoon as Tom rested and breathed. Eventually he opened his eyes and regarded her.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice rough and barely audible.

He was sorry.

She’d pulled herself to her feet then, and went to the bedroom, hoping he was still too incapacitated to follow. She’d never closed the door before — Chakotay had always set it to stay open and Kathryn was half-afraid that if she closed it, it would stick and trap her inside — but that day she’d taken her chances and slid it shut behind her. She hadn’t known, exactly, when Tom had finally left, as she stayed in the bedroom until the following morning. When she’d emerged, she’d found Tom had left, as always, her stasis unit filled with food, her power cell refreshed, and the PADD he’d brought her months ago, propped up in a place of prominence in the hopes that this time, maybe, she’d pick it up and use it.

So, no, Kathryn wasn’t really surprised to hear that Tom had begged off from the visits that tortured them both. She was surprised, however, at how much it hurt. “The Doctor coming now?” she said to the EMH, hoping he would understand what she was trying to ask.

He seemed to, a small thing for which Kathryn was grateful. “Next week, yes, I’ll probably be the one that comes. After that, though, it’s a bit up in the air.” The hologram was still busy dusting off her belongings and cleaning out her stasis drawer. “Once Mr. Paris is further along the road to recovery, I suppose it’s back to oblivion for me. My preference, and B’Elanna’s, is that someone else take over these supply trips. But we all know how stubborn Mr. Paris is.”

‘The road to recovery’? ‘Back to oblivion’? Kathryn frowned, trying to parse out what the Doctor was saying. “Tom’s sick?” she said.

The Doctor studied her face, giving her the same gentle smile he usually saved for Naomi. “Yes, Captain. As I said, Tom’s been ill.” He paused for several seconds before continuing. “He didn’t want me to tell you the gruesome details, but perhaps that’s part of the problem. He caught a respiratory virus that was passing through the camp, then developed bilateral pneumonia and a rather nasty case of pleurisy.”

Pneumonia? Pleurisy? The words meant little to her, other than being callbacks to the Gothic romances she’d once enjoyed. She thought of how she’d just sat there and watched Tom cough, had done nothing to help him. She’d seen the rain start to pelt the windows from her hiding place in Chakotay’s bedroom. Had Tom already made it back to camp by then? Or had he been caught out in it, subjecting his scarred lungs to further stress? “Tom’s OK now?”

“He will be,” the Doctor said, his voice still soft. “It was a bit touch and go for a while, but he’s doing much better now. I’m hoping he’ll be well enough to leave the Sacajawea by tomorrow.” The hologram went back to his housekeeping and more typical acerbic tone. “He’d like to be back in his own bed, and I’d like to stop listening to his near constant whining.”

Kathryn ignored him after that, sat in the closest chair and stared out the window, refusing to acknowledge another thing the Doctor said. It seemed to take hours, but he did give up eventually. He left her the customary food and a fresh power cell, but, of course, didn’t know about Tom’s ritual with the PADD. When he finally called out his good-byes, his holographic voice dripping with pity, she went to Chakotay’s lone bookshelf.
That’s where she’d last left it — the PADD Tom had made her months ago. She dusted it off and thumbed it on, for the very first time. She couldn’t read any of it, but Tom had thoughtfully included little pictographs next to each entry — a book for the ones she assumed were to help her read, an ear (a Vulcan one!) for the audio files. She chose one at random and hit play.

It was a neutral voice, female, although not the one from Voyager’s computer. It reminded her a bit of Kes, actually.

“A Brief for the Defense, by Jack Gilbert,” the voice said. “Sorrow everywhere. Slaughter everywhere. If babies are not starving someplace, they are starving somewhere else.”

Kathryn shut off the playback, buried her face in her hands, and wept.
An extra weekend update, because Treadstone asked so nicely.

Also, I meant to mention last time: EMDO (external manual door operator) is my made up acronym for those things they are always using to open doors. My head canon is that doors have a built-in manual override in case of power shortages, but the EMDO's are used if that override is jammed or whatnot. I figure most people would get that from context, but thought I'd explain just in case!

Finally, Naomi is reading from The House at Pooh Corner by A.A. Milne.

"‘Tiggers never go on being Sad,’ explained Rabbit. ‘They get over it with Astonishing—’" Naomi paused and chewed her lip. "What’s this word?"

Tom sat up and rubbed his eyes before squinting at the text. An extra fun side effect of this wretched virus he’d caught was keratitis. His eyes didn’t hurt much anymore, but his vision was still blurry. "Uh… ‘rapidity,’" Tom told her. "It means, ‘speed.’"

"I know what it means," Naomi said, "I just didn’t know how to read it. And the Doctor said you’re not supposed to rub your eyes."

Tom gently elbowed the little girl snuggled against him. "Yes, ma’am." He fell back against the massive assortment of pillows piled onto the bed. Where had they all come from? Had B’Elanna bullied the rest of Hoth into doing without just to make sure he could sit up comfortably? Tom smiled at the thought. "Go on," he said. "Keep reading. I want to find out if Tigger gets unbounced."

It had become a ritual, once it seemed clear the pneumonia wasn’t going to kill him — Naomi came once, sometimes twice a day, so they could read together. She had some serious skills for not quite five (aided by her Ktarian genetics) and, frankly, Naomi’s reading ability matched Tom’s convalescent mental powers. It wasn’t too big of a deal, if you fell asleep for half of The Tale of Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle, or Flotter and Trevis are Friends.

Tom rubbed uselessly at his chest as Naomi continued. It still felt heavier than it should. He tried not to dwell too much, but it was hard to avoid excessive rumination when he wasn’t up for much beyond getting himself to the bathroom. This illness had been, in a word, terrifying. He’d been treating others with the virus for two days before it hit him — dealing with a veritable parade of sneezing, coughing, runny-eyed patients. He’d given himself his usual immune stimulant, but none of the affected had been all that sick. He figured it would be waste of time and resources to synthesize a vaccine for what was essentially just a bad head cold.

He’d still believed that’s all it was that night, when he’d gone to bed right after their usual meager dinner, worn out and congested. Believed it even when B’Elanna had told him he looked like hell, and she was making him take a day off even if it meant she had to tie him to the bed. Stopped believing it when he’d awakened only a few hours later, simultaneously feeling like he was drowning and being stabbed in the chest. Shivering and drenched in sweat, he managed to wheeze
out a panicky “B’Elanna,” just loud enough to get her attention in the other room where she was still working. Tom remembered her coming to him, remembered the expression on her face as she told him to hang on, and help was on the way. Remembered thinking she looked like he was already dead.

The three days after that had passed in a haze of delirium and drugged sleep. When his fever had broken and he was capable of coherent thought again, the Doctor had explained (tactfully, as always) just how dire a situation it had been. “When you presented, or rather, when I was activated, your oxygen saturation was only at ninety-two percent. I had to put you on the transthoracic ventilator for eighteen hours. Frankly, you were in better shape after the crash.” Tom had had a steady (if very, very slow) recovery since then, but it only served to remind him that next time he might not.

It was ironic. For much of his life, he’d been an adrenaline junkie, lived for the thrill of the near miss. Only a few weeks ago, he’d spent a fair bit of time wishing he’d died in the crash. But now, having not only faced his own mortality but having made formal introductions and exchanged a firm handshake to boot, the thought of dying panicked him. Was it because it wasn’t his choices that were condemning him? It wouldn’t be a daredevil flying maneuver taking him out — just a bum pair of lungs. Or was it because he knew his personal expiration date was waiting just around the corner? The Doctor had tried to play it coy, but Tom knew the scarring in his airways was getting worse.

Or maybe it because of B’Elanna.

Things weren’t really that different between them since the Attack of the Cow Bear (or whatever that fucking thing was. God. Thinking about it still made him shudder.) They were living together again, yes, but neither had had the energy for much in the sex department. Tom still tried to do more than was probably wise. B’Elanna still nagged him about his health. And they still fought — wow, did they fight! And why wouldn’t they? B’Elanna was overworked, Tom was in near constant pain, they were both exhausted. So no, on the surface, their relationship hadn’t changed much at all.

Except in all the ways that mattered. B’Elanna talked to him now — confided in him about her worries, asked him his opinion on issues in the camp — often while they lay together in bed, or while she was helping Tom do the stretching and strengthening exercises the Doc was so passionate about. Tom had kept much of his promise, as well — he listened to her (most of the time) when she told him to take a break, he asked for help with things that he could do himself, but probably shouldn’t anymore. He’d even tried to break the news to Janeway about not going up to see her as much (although it hadn’t gone quite as planned). He and B’Elanna still fought, but they were just fights. They were about the best way to use the replicators, or what to do about Rollins’ progressively shit attitude, or who had eaten the last of the spinach because, damn it, Tom, you know they’re the only greens I can tolerate. I get queasy if I even look at kale.

Before he’d gotten sick, they’d tried to go to bed at the same time each night, often wrapped around each other for warmth. Tom would wake up after a few hours because of his pain or his breathing, but would be comforted by the presence of B’Elanna’s wiry body pressed against him. He’d stroke the soft waves of her hair, the ones that now fell nearly halfway down her back, and wonder if he was doing her any favors. As badly as his pneumonia had scared him, he suspected it had been even worse for B’Elanna. Maybe it would have been kinder, to let her continue to hate him. Maybe it would have been easier for her, when his scarred lungs finally couldn’t be regenerated again and she’d be forced to let him go. They were happy now, sure — or as happy as anyone could be, stuck in this subarctic hellhole. But would that just make it harder for B’Elanna when he was gone?
‘It’s a funny thing about Tiggers,’ whispered Tigger to Roo, ‘how Tiggers never get lost.’” Naomi looked up at him. “I wish I was like a Tigger.”

Tom smiled at her. “So you could be orange and stripey? Or so you’d be more bouncy?”

“So I would never get lost,” she said, snuffling a little.

Tom pulled her closer to his side. He knew she was remembering two weeks ago, when she’d gotten separated from Sam during a foraging trip. She’d gone to explore a rock formation that had confounded their sensors, and it had been over an hour before Ayala found her, uninjured but terrified. She’d refused to leave Hoth’s boundaries since.

“Can I let you in on a secret, Naomi?” he whispered into her ear.

She nodded, her eyes wide.

“I wish I was like a Tigger, too. I think all of us do, sometimes.”

He dozed after that, not really awake, but not entirely asleep either, as he could still hear Naomi’s barely-there baby lisp as she finished the Tigger story and moved onto one about Piglet. Something didn’t seem right — was there really a story where Piglet was a doctor and Roo was deathly ill? Had Rabbit always been bald? And he should be helping Piglet more. Wasn’t he the smart one?

“Tom?”

He opened his eyes and saw B’Elanna had taken Naomi’s place on the mattress. “Hi,” he said, his voice rough from sleep. “Naomi left?”

“Just a couple of minutes ago,” B’Elanna said, brushing her hand against his forehead. She was checking him for fever, Tom knew, while trying not to be obvious she was checking him for fever. “How you feeling today?”

“Better,” Tom said, letting his eyes drift shut and leaning into her touch. “Still like death, but more lightly sauteed than just warmed over.”

“Ugh.” B’Elanna’s weight shifted off the bed. “Can we not use cooking metaphors? I think about food all day long as it is.”

He shifted himself upright and rubbed his hands against his face to rouse himself. (He avoided his eyes this time. No need to get scolded again.) “How was your day?” he called out, as she’d moved into the main room of the shelter. “You got up early. I didn’t get a chance to ask you what you were up to.”

“I’ll tell you later,” she answered back, which was odd. Just as odd as her leaving at the crack of dawn, and sending Sam to check on him and make sure he ate breakfast, rather than doing it herself. She reappeared in the bedroom doorway, holding his jacket. “Feeling up for a little excursion?”

Tom’s nose wrinkled in distaste. “What’s the Doc want to scan for now? Didn’t he torture me enough yesterday?”

B’Elanna smiled. “Not the Sacajawea. You’ll like this. I promise.”

He suspected she was trying to distract him, but after being stuck in bed for so many days, he was an easy mark. Feeling a little like a kid being allowed to stay up past his bedtime, Tom sat up and
took the proffered coat. “Maybe I should put on real pants,” he remarked, although that seemed like a lot of effort.

“You’re fine,” she said, kneeling to help him put on his boots. “We’re not going far. The dress code is definitely casual.”

She guided him outside, where there was still a good amount of afternoon light. “Oh my god,” Tom said, squinting at the brightness. “It’s sunny.”


Carey had taken to making furniture during their brownout periods — he didn’t need much light to prep the dead wood from the surrounding forest and join the planks together. The results were more serviceable than aesthetic, but his chairs were sturdy and not uncomfortable. Joe had placed two a few meters from Tom and B’Elanna’s shelter. Just the right spot to watch the sunset, Tom noted, but also out of the Sacajawea’s line of sight.

He took the closer chair, which had already been prepped with a heavy blanket. “Is this an EMH-approved activity?”

“Absolutely not,” B’Elanna said, handing him a thermos of Vorik’s tea. “So keep your voice down.”

“Thanks.” He sipped the tea and they sat in silence, listening to the voices of the others as they gathered on the open patch of ground at Hoth’s center. He could hear Swinn’s distinctive laugh, Assante teaching Naomi how to play some sort of counting game. “So what’s going on?”

“What do you mean?” she said, decidedly not looking at him. “I can’t just want to spend some quality time with you in the sun?”

Tom’s eyebrows shot skyward. “‘Quality time’? Who are you and what have you done with B’Elanna?”

She fiddled with the hem of her shirt for a while, started to pick at a loose thread in her pant leg until Tom reached a hand out to still her.

“We’re done,” she finally said. “We’re going to run out of power. And I have no idea what to do about it.”

It was the deuterium. B’Elanna had had concerns from the beginning about relying on a deuterium-fueled system as their main source of energy, but they hadn’t had much of a choice. Theoretically, given how little power they had to use at Hoth compared to flying Voyager, the supply they had should have been adequate for close to ten years. That should have been plenty of time to figure out another way — to finesse Seven’s solar batteries, or maybe play around with a hydroelectric generator or a wind-based system. But the deuterium was degrading far faster than anyone had anticipated.

“It’s this fucking atmosphere,” she hissed, carefully modulating her tone. “There’s so much damn particulate matter. Mineral dust, aerosols, the damn bromosite. Every time we open a deuterium tank, more gets in. The filtration system in the shed is nearly burning out, but it’s still not getting everything. I didn’t realize how bad it was getting. I should have checked. Why didn’t I fucking check?”

“Hey.” Tom tried to stand and go to her, but she caught him in the act and waved him down again.
“Hey, B’Elanna. This isn’t your fault.”

“Why do you always say that?” she demanded. “What the fuck do you know about it, anyway?”

Tom took a breath and counted to five. She wasn’t mad at him, he knew. She was just mad. “What could you have done differently?” he asked her. “If you’d known a month ago? Or even six months ago? What could you have changed?”

Back to fiddling with her shirt hem. “I… Maybe… Nothing,” she said, her voice getting smaller with each word. “We’ve already been working on other energy sources. The filters are working as hard as they can; we’re using every one we have. So, I guess… nothing.”

That was it then. Deuterium was still providing almost eighty percent of their power. Once it was gone, they could maybe keep a couple of greenhouses running, but not much else. No more replicators, which meant no more supplemental food or vitamins or medicine. No more computer. No way to run Seven’s alcove. No more heat.

“How long?”

“Nine months. Maybe a year.”

“So we’ve got nine more months to plan,” Tom said, the falsity of his brightness irritating even himself. “Nine months is a long time.”

B’Elanna said nothing.

The rest of the camp was enjoying the dwindling sunlight — Kyoto had brought out Henley’s guitar again, and, based on the quality of Dalby’s singing, Chell had brought out his fermented berry juice. It was approaching the dinner hour; sunset wouldn’t be too long after. Tom wondered if B’Elanna would give him a hard time about staying out to see it. Those particulates that were going to bring about their demise probably made for a killer sunset. His chest was beginning to rattle, though, which meant he would need to cough soon, which meant she would almost certainly shoo him back to bed.

“Maybe we should get you back inside,” she said, only a few minutes later. Tom might have accused of her telepathy, but he suspected her sensitive ears had just picked up his increasing rales.

The exudate out of the bag, Tom allowed himself a few lung-clearing coughs before answering. “Come on, Mom. Just a few more minutes.”

B’Elanna glared at him, but there was no heat behind it. Tom smiled in return. “Who knows how many more of these I’ll… we’ll get. Before winter, I mean.” He bit his cheek at his thoughtless phrasing. “Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for.” Her voice was thick, and she let her hair fall forward to conceal her face. She jumped to her feet. “I’m at least going to get you some dinner. Wait here.”

By the time she came back, with a couple of bowls of stew and a hunk of Chell’s cornbread, her expression was calm but unreadable. “Since we’re flouting the Doc’s bed rest rule, can you at least eat a decent meal?” She’d gotten herself some of the berry juice, too; Tom got another scowl when he asked where his glass was.

Tom tried gossip (Nicoletti had gotten back together with Nozawa after all), he tried telling her about the stories Naomi had chosen to read him, he even tried talking about Chell’s stupid
cornbread recipe. When B’Elanna did little more than grunt or shrug at him, though, he fell silent and left her to her thoughts. At least she wasn’t making him go back to bed.

Because the sunset, as he predicted, was a real beaut. Lacy, golden clouds mixed with striations of salmon pink, all of it fading into bands of magenta and indigo. Not even on the holodeck had Tom seen one so lovely. Despite his straining lungs, the pain in his back, their failing energy supply, he found himself suffused with a sense of gratitude, if one heavily tinged with melancholy.

He tried again. “B’Elanna?”

“Yeah?” She was hugging her knees tight to her chest, her eyes trained on the horizon.

But now he found he didn’t really know what to say. That he loved her, he supposed, but she knew that. He now made a point of telling her every day. Maybe he wanted to say he was sorry he couldn’t fix things for her. That he was even sorrier he was probably going to die on her. But she knew those things, too.

He leaned towards her and tucked his hand around hers. “Nothing,” he said, then thought of what an anxious Piglet had said to Winnie the Pooh. “I just wanted to be sure of you.”
“Seven!”

Seven pursed her lips but did not turn at Naomi Wildman’s call. Instead, she walked faster towards the trail to Voyager. The temperature had dropped dramatically in the past fifty-two hours; the higher rate of activity would help keep her warm.

“Seven of Nine!”

The rapid patter of feet came closer. Seven considered accelerating her pace further — she’d easily outdistance the small child — but she’d have to jog to do so, which seemed an aggressive and undignified move. As she reached the edge of camp, she stopped and turned. “Naomi Wildman.”

“Where are you going?” the little girl panted, her chest heaving almost convulsively.

“I believe my destination is readily apparent,” Seven replied before frowning at the child. “Your breathing is excessive for the amount of exertion in which you’ve just engaged. Stop that behavior immediately.”

“Why are you so mean now?” Naomi demanded, hands on her hips. Seven noted that she had, at least, stopped resiping in her previously overly dramatic fashion.

“I am not ‘mean,’” Seven informed the child. “I am merely occupied with important tasks for the camp. Conversing with you negatively impacts my efficiency.”

“They can’t be that important,” Naomi insisted. “Tom says you haven’t visited him even once since he’s been sick.”

This was not entirely true. However, when Seven had last seen her erstwhile social mentor, he’d been on the ventilator and heavily sedated. She’d found the sight of the once gregarious man lying so still unnerving and had elected against visiting him again. “My presence at his bedside would give him little benefit. The Doctor provides him with the care he needs.”

“He needs company,” Naomi said. “He told me so. He’s better today, though. The Doctor says he doesn’t have to stay in bed so much anymore.”

“I’m gratified to hear this,” Seven said, and she was. Hoth would be negatively impacted if Tom were to die. They would need to keep the Doctor more regularly activated, for one thing. B’Elanna would almost certainly go through a period of mourning that would lessen her ability to lead. There were several others emotionally attached to Tom as well. It was fortunate for all of them that he would recover.

Naomi made additional statements in support of her statement that Seven was now ‘mean’ — she no longer played kadis kot with Naomi, she’d insulted Chell’s attempt at gumbo, she’d made Tal Celes cry. “I know Tal cries a lot,” the little girl said. “But it still wasn’t nice, what you said. It was just a little sensor glitch.”

Seven did not bother to argue. Naomi’s status as the youngest member of the camp meant her opinion on Seven’s social interactions was irrelevant. Further, Seven knew whatever she said, Naomi would find it an inadequate defense. The child was irritatingly rigid in her sense of morality. “I will take your comments under advisement. Please return to your mother or another responsible adult.” She deactivated the security forcefield and passed through, ignoring Naomi’s
continued calling. She knew the child would not follow her outside of Hoth.

Further delay was unacceptable — Seven had much to accomplish on Voyager. First, she needed to acquire at least half a kilogram of polyferranide. There was little of it left — all that had been easily removed and transportable having been moved to Hoth for use in the thermal generator. However, the plasma relay circuits were lined with it and could be stripped. It would be tedious and awkward work, but its procurement was vital. Once that task was complete, she then needed to travel several decks upward to Janeway’s ready room. Seven planned to hack into the captain’s personal command computer.

This would all be in service of constructing an orbital relay beacon, the next step towards Seven’s ultimate goal of sending a subspace message to the Alpha Quadrant. Over the last forty-three days, Seven had changed the focus of her daily activities. Previously, maintaining an adequate quality of life for Hoth’s residents had been her goal, as directed by B’Elanna. She helped to ensure their energy supply; used the sensors to monitor weather, predator activity, possible food sources. But Seven now recognized that such an existence was unsatisfactory. She must, instead, work on getting herself and her fellow survivors off the planet. Tom Paris needed more medical care than they’d ever be able to provide on Hoth. The Doctor deserved to exist as fully functional member of society, not just as a backup health care provider. B’Elanna’s engineering skills could be put to far better use back in the Alpha Quadrant than they were in this isolated community. And Naomi Wildman deserved a future beyond watching everyone around her perish from illness and, eventually, old age.

Seven, however, knew she was lacking in support from the rest of the leadership council. B’Elanna was only concerned with their day-to-day survival, perhaps appropriately so, but Seven found her unilateral focus short-sighted. She had attempted to express this in several meetings — B’Elanna must recognize that a long term existence at Hoth was a poor prospect for all of them — but had made little headway in changing the other woman’s mind. Tom and Miguel Ayala, both publicly and privately, said they fully supported B’Elanna. The implication was they would take her side in any direct conflict between the two women.

So Seven worked towards escape in secret. She performed her customary duties with her typical efficiency, but now any spare hours she had were used to garner their means of rescue. It had been the solar cells first — although once she’d improved on Carey’s original design, they’d been allocated towards food production rather than powering the main computer core as she’d hoped. She needed more processing power than a simple PADD would provide to run the hundreds of simulations needed to determine the ideal trajectory of the relay beacon. However, not getting access to Hoth’s computer core was only a minor setback. She’d found a new way to get the access she needed.

Her plan had come about from a conversation with Mortimer Harren, coincidentally on the same morning of her unsatisfactory visit with the ailing Tom. Harren had, with obvious reluctance, approached her to discuss a mathematical proof with which he’d been struggling. “If I can solve this,” he said, “that puts me in a good position to disprove Schlezhold’s domain paradox, which would completely undermine—”

“Her theory of multiple big bangs,” Seven finished for him. “I am well familiar with your interests.” She’d been irritated, that he’d interrupted her own work. Seven had been trying to genetically engineer a superior immune stimulant for Hoth’s residents. Clearly the one Tom had been using was inadequate. But before she had been able to tell him she had no time to help solve a proof that would do nothing to improve their current situation, Harren made an interesting comment.
“If only Torres would let me use the computer core,” he’d said. “Or maybe if I could hack into the captain’s system on Voyager, although who knows if you can even get it running anymore.”

“Elaborate.”

On all starships, the commanding officer had their own, self-contained computer core. It was kept isolated from the main core for security reasons. Only the captain had complete access — even her first officer required the security codes of two other senior officers to gain entry. Given the difficulty there would be in utilizing this core, B’Elanna had told those salvaging Deck One that it was pointless to attempt to recover it.

After Seven reached Voyager and gained entry to the derelict vessel, it took her three hours to strip the plasma relay circuits of an adequate amount of polyferranide. It had taken another one hour to climb from Deck Fifteen to the captain’s ready room. She’d skirted the edges of Deck Two, not wishing to disturb Captain Janeway in her seclusion, which added an additional seven minutes to her travel time. There was, at least, a pleasant surprise for her at the end of her journey — the ready room was remarkably intact. Given the state of the bridge, she’d been concerned the room, and therefore the computer, would be too damaged for her to access.

The command computer’s access terminal, of course, was at Janeway’s desk. Seven immediately went to work, hooking up a power cell to run the terminal and its server. She was disappointed to find that Starfleet encryption codes were more challenging to break than she’d expected. She took a moment to review her options, played briefly with a delicate teacup that she’d found wedged against the base of the desk chair. B’Elanna had the ability to help her, but would almost certainly refuse to, once she learned of Seven’s intentions. Harren, perhaps, might have some insight. He’d worked extensively with Starfleet computer systems, and, more importantly, he possessed a startling lack of curiosity for any topic that wasn’t cosmology or the care of his fowl. He would see her question as just another mathematical puzzle to solve, or perhaps a means to his own computing ends, rather than the first step in any secret plan of Seven’s.

“Seven of Nine.”

Despite the soft, uncertain way in which her name was spoken, Seven had spent so much of the day in silence that hearing even those murmured syllables caused her heart rate to accelerate dramatically. She looked up to meet Janeway’s equally startled eyes. “Captain Janeway.”

The captain’s appearance was unexpected. Seven had not discussed Janeway’s condition with Tom for some time, but as he’d reported no recent improvement, she assumed the older woman had continued her decline. She certainly hadn’t expected Janeway to be wandering the ship. The captain had not obviously worsened since the last time Seven had seen her, approximately seventy days ago. In fact, Janeway looked improved. Though she was still underweight, she no longer had the emaciated appearance Seven had seen previously. The captain also appeared to be moving more efficiently than when she had left Hoth for Voyager.

“What…” The captain paused and worried the inside of her cheek. “What are you doing?”

Each word was pronounced slowly and deliberately, with pauses of several seconds between some. But they were all correct. It was unfortunate that Seven did not feel she could reward the captain’s improved speech with the truth. “I felt it was an oversight — that no one had checked Deck One for salvageable components and materials. Despite the catastrophic damage to the bridge and much of the surrounding area, it seemed a worthwhile activity to look for such materials.”

Aside from this terminal, Deck One had been stripped as thoroughly as any other. Seven assumed Janeway’s seclusion and cognitive deficiencies would mean the other woman would not recognize
the lie, and she wished to end this interaction as quickly as possible. But rather than indicating she accepted Seven’s explanation, the captain moved to the desk, her eyes narrowed.

“That terminal,” Janeway said. “My terminal.”

“Yes, Captain,” Seven agreed. There was no reason to close the monitor, as Janeway wasn’t able to read what was on the screen. She would answer the captain’s questions briefly but completely. She would not be drawn into elaboration. Eventually, the captain would tire of the pointlessness of the conversation. She would return to Chakotay’s quarters, and Seven would return to Hoth so she could consult with Harren.

More quickly than Seven would have expected, Janeway thrust out an arm and spun the monitor towards her. She stared intently at the screen, the light casting shadows on her hollow cheeks and sunken eyes. Seven found herself suddenly uncertain. Tom, she knew, had made multiple attempts to help the Captain read again. Perhaps she had finally taken him up on his offer of instruction. She held out the teacup that was still in her left hand in an attempt at redirection.

“This is yours, I believe.”

Janeway looked up, glancing only briefly at the delicate bit of china before returning her steady gaze to Seven. “What are you doing?” Her tone was more sure now, the words spoken with confidence.

“Perhaps you have forgotten,” Seven replied. “I have already told you—”

“Lying.”

Seven’s spine stiffened. This was not the Janeway that had abandoned the crew for Voyager so many months prior, slouched and defeated. It was not quite the Janeway that had ripped Seven against her will from the Collective, either, insisting she knew what was best for the former drone. This Janeway was volatile and unpredictable. Seven’s initial shame over being caught in a lie transitioned into something more resentful. She stood and reached for the monitor. “I have work to complete. I have no time to listen to baseless accusations.”

Janeway snatched the monitor out of Seven’s reach with startling dexterity. She stabbed angrily at the screen. “Computer… Mine! No right! The captain’s only!”

At Janeway’s words, Seven’s resentment became a full-fledged burst of anger. “Captain!” Seven sneered. “You are the one with no right — to call yourself by that title when you abandoned your crew. It was your obsessive desire for ‘home’ that led us to attempt the irresponsible plan that has trapped us on this planet, and now you cannot even face the people you have condemned to a life of want and suffering. You hide here on Voyager like a child, lashing out at the only person attempting to improve our situation. I do not want your computer. I do not want anything from you. I will find another way. Unlike some others, I will not give up. And I will prevail.”

She detached the power cell and replaced it into her pack. As she swung the pack onto her shoulders, it banged hard against the desktop, sending the little teacup rolling onto the floor. Seven did not bother to track its progress, nor did she bother to give Janeway another glance as she pushed past her to reach the ready room’s door.

“Seven of Nine.”

Janeway’s tone was tentative again. The first time she’d spoken her name, Seven had assumed her hesitation was over the pronunciation, or perhaps uncertainty that she even recalled it correctly.
This time, however, Seven speculated that perhaps Janeway was uncertain of her reception. With some reluctance, she turned back to her former captain.

Janeway was slouched against the desk, one hand gripping the edge as if she were afraid her legs were about to give out from under her. In her other hand was the teacup.

“Janeway kappa alpha tau… two, seven, one.”

“Clarify.”


Seven regarded Janeway for another moment before returning to the desk. Her assessment of the other woman as volatile was certainly accurate. Of course, there were no guarantees she’d given Seven the correct code, or even remembered it accurately. But no, it was correct — within a few keystrokes, Seven was granted full access to the computer and its powerful core processor.

Several minutes later, when she rose her head to offer Janeway her thanks, she discovered the captain had taken the teacup and left.
Sam was near tears. Tom just looked nauseated.

“Are you sure about this?” B’Elanna asked them, flipping through the images on the PADD. Dozens of fish, salamanders, two kinds of juvenile water fowl — all dead. One thing she had prided herself on since landing on this frozen rock was that they’d made a real effort to create as little environmental impact as possible. Securing or vaporizing any toxic materials, carefully controlling hunting for minimal impact on the overall species population. They’d been so careful! What had she missed?

“Show her the data, Sam,” Tom muttered, staring firmly at the floor of the Tereshkova.

Sam started to reach for the PADD, but B’Elanna waved her off and opened the relevant file herself. She was no biologist, but even she could see the clear connections Sam had drawn from the necropsy results. “This bacteria, it’s unique to humanoids? You’re sure?”

“It’s unique to the Alpha Quadrant, actually,” Sam said. “I haven’t seen a single native staphylococcal species since Voyager was taken by the Caretaker. I think that’s why it’s been so devastating.”

“But why now?” B’Elanna demanded. It didn’t make any sense. They’d been on the planet for nearly eight standard months — why would their bacteria suddenly be affecting the planet’s wildlife, and why just in the river?

“Megan,” Tom said, finally meeting her eyes. “It’s all downstream from where they buried Megan.”

The problem wasn’t the small amount of bacteria the living members of Hoth were shedding. The problem was the sudden influx of Megan’s natural flora into the soil as she decomposed, and how it interacted with the planet’s native microbiome. Not only were the immune systems of the dead wildlife ill-equipped to deal with the foreign bacteria, but it had supplanted their own skin and gut flora, their only remaining defense.

“Damn it, I told them! I told them it was risky. I knew we should have used the transporter!” But even as B’Elanna cursed and raged, she was filled with guilt. She had meant to go down to the river to check, to make sure things had been done right. But then Tom had moved out, and there’d been so much else to take care of, and… And that was no excuse. She’d known what could happen — that an improperly secured burial could damage the local ecosystem. But she’d let it slide, pushed it down her list, and eventually forgotten it entirely. She was as responsible as Rollins and Nicoletti.

Tom, whom she knew still blamed himself for Megan’s suicide, looked pale even for him. And Sam — who had come to B’Elanna after the memorial, confessing she’d privately agreed that the burial was a bad idea, but had been afraid to go against the more vocal survivors — now she couldn’t seem to stop wringing her hands. There was plenty of guilt to go around, but wallowing in it would solve exactly nothing. B’Elanna slapped the PADD against the Tereshkova’s small central table. “So how do we fix this?”

They tossed around a few ideas, but Sam was concerned any intervention could make things worse. “It’s like cane toads in Australia, or honey bees on Andor — we interfere to fix one problem, and we create a dozen worse ones. The generation length for bacteria is so short that in the two months
since Megan’s burial, her flora has almost certainly become intertwined with the native microbiome. If we try killing all the *staphylococcal* species off, I have no idea what could happen to the microorganisms that are supposed to be here.”

B’Elanna started to curse whatever Starfleet bureaucrat decided a single exobiologist was adequate for a starship, when she realized much of the science department had been killed in the crash anyway. “We have to do something,” she insisted. “We can’t just let all these species die off.”

Tom glanced between the two women. “We can run simulations of the different options, but that means Sam needs the computer core.”

Which would use up some of their rapidly dwindling energy supply, Tom didn’t say. B’Elanna had yet to tell anyone but him about their looming energy crisis. Despite Tom’s many attempts at conversation, B’Elanna had barely even talked to him about it beyond her initial confession. Clearly it was time to change that. “I’m making a camp-wide announcement soon, Sam, but there’s something you should know.”

Sam, in many ways, was Hoth’s heart. She rarely got outwardly angry or frustrated, had a kind word for just about everyone. She still had much of her optimism, too — the undisputed champion of finding bright sides and silver linings. Watching her face crumple and her body collapse into Tom’s arms at the news of the imminent power outage, B’Elanna wondered how much of that optimism was built on the shaky foundation of a mother’s protective instinct.

“I’m sorry,” Sam said when she calmed, her unnecessary apology muffled by Tom’s chest. “It’s only… Naomi.”

“Don’t worry about it,” B’Elanna said, turning away from the scene. She knew what it looked like — the arrogant Klingon disgusted by human tears and weakness. But Tom could offer Sam far better comfort and reassurance than B’Elanna ever would, and there was only so much B’Elanna was willing to feed her own burgeoning sense of failure and self-loathing. “Use the computer if you need to. A few simulations won’t use that much deuterium.”

It wouldn’t. It was the difference between the power going out in two hundred and fifty days instead of two hundred and sixty, and B’Elanna would be damned if she left this planet in worse shape than they found it in. Maybe she couldn’t save her own people, but she could at least preserve the life that had already been here.

“She’d already had her hand on the hatch when Tom spoke. She didn’t really want to look at him. She didn’t want to see the disappointment in his face — that she’d done such a crap job of breaking the news to Sam, that she still hadn’t told the rest of the camp like he’d been urging, that she’d led them into this mess in the first place. Did he think she didn’t know what losing power meant? They couldn’t grow enough food to keep all of them healthy. Seven wouldn’t survive without her alcove. Tom couldn’t survive a winter without any heat. But as much as she liked to deny it, in many ways she was her mother’s daughter, and she wouldn’t take the coward’s way out. She turned to face Tom and Sam and accept their anger and disappointment.

But Tom’s expression was kind, if sorrowful. And Sam’s was, too, even as she wiped away her tears. “We’ll figure it out,” Tom said. Sam, blotchy faced, nodded in agreement.

B’Elanna wished she believed them.
She dried her sweaty palms on her thighs. The perspiration wasn’t from the heat — the temps had been in the low teens the last few days — but from nerves. B’Elanna had been putting off this conversation since her first suspicions about their diminishing energy supply, but their new environmental crisis was the kick in the ass she’d needed.

“Have you talked to Seven yet?” Tom had asked her daily since she’d told him. “No,” she’d reply, then change the subject. B’Elanna knew she had to. She knew Seven was the one other person in Hoth that possessed the know-how and ingenuity to have even a chance of solving this issue. They’d been at odds more often than not on Voyager, but the few times they’d managed to quash their respective egos long enough to work towards the same general outcome, Janeway had always been impressed with the results.

They were not the same adversaries that they used to be, but theirs was still not an easy relationship. B’Elanna had to be more focused on keeping people warm and fed, and Seven had been pushing to expand their efforts outward since the beginning. She knew Seven had been working on some secret project for a while now. She’d seen how disappointed the ex-drone had been when the new solar cells had been delegated for food production rather than powering the computer core. Seven had been more distant lately, too — in every sense of the word. Sam said Seven rarely ate meals with them anymore, and only came to their shelter to regenerate. She’d been shaving time off that regeneration — B’Elanna saw the energy usage had been dropping by a few minutes each day. And there’d been several days in the past few weeks she’d seen Seven head up to Voyager, although B’Elanna couldn’t hazard to guess what she was looking for in the stripped starship.

Time to find out. B’Elanna rapped her knuckles hard against the door of the generator shed. No response. She knew Seven was in here — Swinn had seen her enter not even five minutes ago. She checked the monitor outside to make sure no sensitive operations were running and pushed the door open. It was dim inside — Seven’s Borg implants made her capable of seeing in less light than humans. So did B’Elanna’s Klingon half. The other woman was kneeling next to the input console, tapping in a series of commands. Something she had exactly zero business doing.

“Seven?”

Seven’s body stiffened but she didn’t turn from her task. “I am occupied.”

“I see that,” B’Elanna said. Her hands balled into fists but she managed to keep her tone even. If Hoth was going to survive, they needed the Borg version of creativity, and B’Elanna wasn’t going to get it if she backed Seven into a corner. “But no one is supposed to be adjusting the input console without my OK.”

Not even a sideways flick of the eyes in response. “My actions have no bearing on overall energy output. I have carefully calculated how much regeneration time I need to sacrifice in order to produce the energy I need.”

“That’s not the point,” B’Elanna said, taking another step towards the console. Seven was making a valiant effort at concealing her work with her body, but B’Elanna’s patience was paper thin. Their energy issues were bad enough without Seven making unilateral decisions about where it should be distributed. Seven had said it herself plenty of times — she wasn’t used to hierarchies, or considering what others might want or need. The Borg had one mind and one goal, and everything else was irrelevant. Nearly two years gone, and Seven still thought she was her own personal collective. Fed up with Seven’s non-answers and secret agendas, B’Elanna bumped her shoulder
hard and sent the other woman sprawling.

“You’re diverting energy into the industrial replicator power reserves,” B’Elanna said, staring at the console readouts while keeping one hand stretched towards Seven to keep her at bay. “Why?”

“I am only able to shorten my regeneration time by so much before it significantly affects my productivity,” Seven said. She had regained her feet and was dusting herself off, but made no move towards B’Elanna. “In order to have enough energy to replicate the materials I require, I needed to start a reserve well ahead of my start date for construction.”

B’Elanna wanted to scream. Were all Borg so adept at not giving a straightforward answer, or had Janeway just liberated the most infuriating drone in the entire Collective? “What you need, Seven, is to regenerate enough to stay healthy and functional. What Hoth needs is whatever energy reserves it can get. Will you just tell me what you’re planning on replicating so I can make it official and tell you to stop?”

They were both standing now, close-mouthed and glaring, and neither giving a millimeter. Janeway, B’Elanna knew, would have ordered them to both stand down and work it out. Chakotay would have pulled her aside, chastised her for her short temper. Tom would crack a joke, Harry would have sputtered in his attempts at intervention. If B’Elanna followed her own instincts, she’d punch Seven in her stupid smug face.

But she didn’t.

As loathe as she was to admit it, B’Elanna needed Seven: her breadth of knowledge, her incredible focus, her creative yet analytical thinking. Seven needed them, too — if nothing else, to keep her alcove going, but maybe to remind her of her humanity, too. Like Tom had said, it didn’t really matter what Janeway would have done if she were here. ‘Their’ Janeway was gone, for all intents and purposes. But times like these -- B’Elanna still remembered the old Kathryn Janeway. The one who could look past an angry half-Klingon facade to see the talented engineer underneath, and past Borg implants to see a long lost human waiting to be found.

“Seven,” she started, her voice softer now.

“B’Elanna,” Seven said at the same time.

B’Elanna bit back a flash of irritation. She could be a bigger person than the Borg. “You go first.”

“I believe we can send a message to the Federation.”

B’Elanna forgot every bit of annoyance, anxiety, and righteous indignation that had been building since she’d gotten out of bed this morning and asked Seven to continue.

An orbital relay beacon, with a signal boost from an unusually stable variety of exotic baryon particles in this planet’s atmosphere. The idea was ingenious — the kind B’Elanna might have thought of if she’d still only been an engineer instead of the person charged with keeping everyone warm and fed. Seven hadn’t just designed a beacon — she’d designed one that could be constructed almost entirely from scrap materials they hadn’t found another use for. She was right about the baryons, too. Of course she was. Seven didn’t do things by halves. Launching it wasn’t a small issue, but they still had the Baxial. Harren could find another place for his chickens. The shuttle was hardly in peak condition, but it just had to reach orbit. Five years in the Delta Quadrant had made Tom an expert in getting a lot of performance out of not much. It wouldn’t take much deuterium at all.
Just enough deuterium to cut their remaining power reserves from nine or ten months to seven, at best. B’Elanna closed her eyes, her brief flare of excitement gone in a flash. “We can’t do it,” she said.

Seven’s response was predictable — incredulous, defiant, condescending. It was also entirely justified, and probably not that different than B’Elanna’s would have been if she’d been in the other woman’s shoes. “I’m sorry, Seven,” B’Elanna said when she couldn’t listen anymore. “It’s brilliant work. I mean that. But you don’t understand—”

“I understand that you are upset the idea isn’t yours.” Seven said, her expression matching Hoth’s warmth and hospitality. “You claim to have everyone’s best interests at heart, yet your fear and cowardice have kept us trapped here.”

Even as she slammed her fist into the generator’s housing, B’Elanna recognized that a year ago her actions might have earned her cooling off time in the brig. Sometimes it was nice being the one in charge. “Shut the hell up,” she barked, “and fucking listen to me for once! Yes, I’m afraid — afraid we’re going to freeze, or starve to death! We can’t survive without energy, Seven!”

“Survival,” Seven sneered. “That’s all that matters to you! You cannot see beyond the next month, or year. We will perish if we stay here. One by one each of us will die and be forgotten. I cannot spend the rest of my existence, stuck in this primitive environment, waiting for nothing but death. I will not!”

B’Elanna turned away. That was the worst thing about all this. Seven was right. What the hell was she fighting for? For them to live another few years, clinging to survival until each member of their tiny community succumbed to disease, or an accident, or suicidal depression? It was time to confess. To admit that she couldn’t see beyond the next year, because she wasn’t sure there was going to be one. Not for Hoth, anyway. “The deuterium’s running out,” she said, staring at the soft glow of the generator while she still could. “A lot faster than it was supposed to. We don’t have more than a year, tops.”

She told her all of it — the simulation results she couldn’t ignore, the filters she couldn’t improve, the best case scenario that wasn’t much better than the worst one, even the damn animals they’d killed. Once she started, she couldn’t stop, and Seven, to her credit and B’Elanna’s surprise, let her babble on without interruption. When she was finally done — had laid out every bit of her failure for Seven to rip apart and mock — B’Elanna placed her hands on the generator and bowed her head. She felt tears start to prick her eyes, but she did nothing to stop them. “So what the fuck would you like me to do, Seven?” she whispered. “Because I don’t know anymore.”

Seven remained silent for several more moments, no doubt confused by B’Elanna’s atypical confession of vulnerability. B’Elanna was confused by it herself. She’d never been one for showing her soft underbelly, particularly not to the Borg.

“I would like you to allow me to assist you.”

B’Elanna lifted her head.

“As you may recall, I have offered before,” Seven said. “And while you have charged me with specific tasks, you have not yet shared the burden of leadership.”

How could B’Elanna not make a face at that? She sounded like she was quoting a Starfleet command manual. “‘Share the burden of leadership’?”

“I have been reflecting, of late, on the leadership style of Captain Janeway,” Seven said.
B’Elanna snorted. “Hoping she’ll still make a reappearance and fix this disaster, huh?”

“No,” Seven said. “That would be futile. It is quite clear she is in no condition to lead and never will be if our circumstances do not change. I have, however, decided there are still lessons to be learned from her previous performance. You need a first officer.”


“Yes,” Seven said. “Your romantic relationship with Tom precludes him from being as objective as would be ideal. Miguel Ayala prefers to avoid conflict with those to whom he has given his loyalty. I have no such compunction.”

“I’ve noticed,” B’Elanna couldn’t stop herself from saying.

Seven ignored the snark. “We do not entirely agree on what the best for Hoth. But Captain Janeway did not always agree with Commander Chakotay. Yet, I believe their conflict often led to the captain making better decisions for Voyager and her crew. I am willing to fill that role for you.”

“I bet you are,” B’Elanna said, but her voice was softer now. This is exactly what she’d hoped for, wasn’t it? Seven’s help in solving their energy problem? She wasn’t wrong about Tom, or Ayala, either — both were supportive, both were happy to give her advice when asked, but neither was going to challenge her like maybe she needed. But first officer? “I’m still making the final calls, Seven. We need to be clear on that.”

Seven inclined her head. “Of course.”

“And this isn’t carte blanche for your relay beacon, either. I haven’t made my decision. There’s not a lot of point in sending out a message if we’ve all frozen to death by the time the rescue party arrives.”

Seven let out a little sigh, but she nodded again.

B’Elanna was almost definitely going to regret this. At least, she decided with a sigh of her own, Tom would get a good laugh out of it when she told him. She extended a hand towards the other woman. “Looks like you’ve got yourself a new job.”
Kathryn was waiting for the sunset. It had been cloudy all day, so she probably wouldn’t see much — just a gradual fading of the light until she was once again surrounded by darkness. But she liked to watch for it all the same. There’d been a brilliant one, not even a week ago. She’d wept at the vibrant wash of colors that streaked across the sky above the trees and mountains, glad no one had been there to see her sentimentality, but also sad she’d had no one to share it with.

Tom’s PADD was in her lap, opened to the list of audio files. She’d made no other attempts to listen to the poetry or the novels he’d included — the first had shaken her badly and she still had trouble distinguishing one title from another. But there were music files, too. Tom had marked those with a little quarter note for her, and those were all right. Many were instrumental — symphonies or jazz pieces from Earth’s far distant past. Some were more current songs with lyrics, but the ones he’d chosen were all upbeat and she found them comforting. It was nice, to not be in near constant silence anymore.

Kathryn also, tentatively, had begun to look at the other files. The ones with the speech exercises, and the ones that were meant to teach her how to read again. She wasn’t sure why she was bothering; she wasn’t convinced she’d made any progress. Lesson one, for example, had taken no less than five attempts for her to complete; by the time she’d finished lesson two, she felt like she’d forgotten everything from the first. Tom was probably wrong about how effective the lessons would be. This was hardly his area of expertise. The damage to her brain was extensive and perhaps she’d waited too long to start: for the therapy to help her as intended.

The Doctor probably could have told her if there was any point in continuing — he’d been the one that had first pushed the idea of speech and reading therapy way back when, before she’d left the camp. She’d last seen him only four days ago, during his second (and per him, likely his last) visit to Voyager since Tom had fallen ill. Kathryn should have asked him if she was just wasting her time. But she’d been afraid — that he’d confirm her worst fears about her potential for recovery, or lack thereof — and she’d kept her efforts to herself.

It was also because what she was doing felt a little like a gift. She’d refused to admit to the Doctor how worried she’d been about Tom, or that she missed seeing him these last, lonely weeks, but the hologram seemed to suspect. He made a point of stressing more than once that Tom was mostly recovered from his pneumonia scare, and that he had every intention of coming back up to Voyager once his health had sufficiently improved. (“In predictable defiance of my opinion,” he’d added, and Janeway had fought a smile at how some things never changed.) But she did miss him — his corny jokes, funny stories from Voyager, updates on Naomi. She even missed his well-intended deception — the sunny outlook about their lives since the crash that Kathryn knew he was faking.

She felt responsible for him, too. For all of them, of course, but maybe for Tom and his terrible injuries most of all. It was the height of irony, wasn’t it? Their resident daredevil being the only one cautious enough to catch the problem with the drive. Uncharitably, Kathryn’s initial reaction to his concerns was that he hadn’t had it very good back in the Alpha Quadrant. Perhaps his
ambivalence about what awaited him on Earth had made him create a problem where none had existed.

But no. Tom had worked all night with Harry to find a solution. He’d not hesitated a millisecond when Kathryn had ordered him to take Voyager out. He’d trusted her — that his captain would never take an unnecessary risk just to get them home.

Perhaps it was the very least thing she could do — to use the PADD he’d put together. To at least try to get better.

Kathryn rose from her seat by the window. The light was far dimmer now. Sunset had started, and she wasn’t going to see it this evening. A small chirp stopped her movement. It was the comm badge.

Seven had left it behind, in the ready room. That had been an odd encounter. Kathryn still wasn’t sure if she was more surprised by Seven’s actions or her own. She’d been enraged when she saw Seven accessing her secure terminal — as if they were still a Starfleet vessel and there was any reason to protect the information it contained. Seven’s rather pathetic attempts to dissemble and distract her had only made her angrier. But then, when the former drone had lashed out in return, Kathryn’s rage turned to remorse. Everything Seven had said was correct — that she’d abandoned her crew, that she was doing nothing to help them. Even worse, Kathryn saw the very personal hurt that Seven was trying hard to conceal. So she’d turned over her code, trusting Seven would do what she said and use it to help the others, and assumed that would be the end of it. Given how badly she’d disappointed Seven, she didn’t think the young woman would make any effort to contact her again.

But then she’d found the comm badge. Kathryn hadn’t gone far, after she’d given Seven the computer code. She’d been too curious, and had concealed herself in a dark corner that gave her an excellent vantage point of the only egress from Deck One. Once Seven had left, Kathryn had ventured back up to her ready room, hoping the power cell had been left behind and she could see what Seven was planning. No power cell. But there was the badge, neatly and deliberately placed in the center of the closed computer terminal.

Since then, she’d kept the badge close at hand. Moving it from one location to another, afraid she’d miss its quiet chirp if Seven activated it, but also wary of the symbolism of affixing it to her worn and dirty tunic. It had remained silent until now.

Kathryn took several slow steps to the windowsill where the badge was resting against Chakotay’s favorite bit of pottery. She ran her thumb over the cool, metal surface before giving it a decisive tap. “Janeway here.”

Her voice was low and hoarse. She didn’t have much volume anymore. The badge remained silent for several seconds and she wondered if she hadn’t been heard. Or perhaps her response was too slow, and Seven had given up.

“Captain,” Seven replied. “B’Elanna Torres is about to make a camp-wide announcement. I thought it might be of interest to you. I will mute your channel now.”

A soft click indicated Kathryn would be unable to reply — either to express appreciation to Seven for including her, or to inform her that she was wrong: Janeway had no interest in what was going on with the camp. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say she didn’t deserve to know.

Her thumb hovered above the badge. Another tap and it would be off. Then she wouldn’t hear the announcement. She didn’t know how functional the badge was — maybe she wouldn’t be able to
raise Seven again. Kathryn returned it to the sill and pulled a chair close.

“Thanks, everyone, for coming. I know it’s pretty miserable out tonight, so I’ll try to keep it quick.”

B’Elanna. It had been months since Kathryn had heard her voice. It sounded odd to her. Unsure in a way she wasn’t used to hearing anymore. More like the angry young woman that had broken Carey’s nose instead of her Chief Engineer.

“As you know, we have no way of re-supplying our deuterium while planetside. That shouldn’t have been an issue. Given our current power needs and rationing—”

“Excessive rationing!”

Who was that? Someone from Security, right? Whicher, maybe?

“Yes, I’m aware that’s what some of you think.” B’Elanna paused. Kathryn leaned closer to the badge. “As I was saying, we should have had enough deuterium to last us years, given our current energy usage—”

“Wait, ‘should have’?”

“Let her talk, Gantry!”

That was Carey, Kathryn was sure of that one. It had been a good choice she’d made — making B’Elanna chief and relying on Carey to get over their initial animosity and become her second. Carey was solid. A good man. (A family man. A family he’d never see again.) But he was a workhorse, not a superstar. She’d asked him once, back in their second year in the DQ, if he’d ever resented her decision. He’d been gracious, as always.

“I’ll admit, Captain,” he’d said, his expression sheepish. “My ego took a hit. But you were right. Maybe it’s from being in the Maquis, or maybe it’s just B’Elanna, but she’s adaptable in a way I’ll never be. I’m surprised she hasn’t figured out how to make the ship run on leola root by now.”

“But we… I didn’t take into account atmospheric contaminants. This planet has a lot of them. It’s corrupting our deuterium.”

Kathryn nearly slapped the comm badge away. She didn’t want to hear anymore. This wasn’t going to end well. Corrupted deuterium? How badly corrupted? Enough that it would start to affect the replicators? The thermal generator? Enough that the power would go out entirely? She rose and began to pace. B’Elanna was still talking, but Kathryn found she couldn’t focus on the words.

Before long, more voices began to explode from the little badge.

“Why are we just finding out about this?”

“What do you mean the power’s going out? We’ll still have replicators, right?”

“What about the heat? How are we getting through winter without heat?”

“Nine months?!”

Kathryn sank to the floor. She covered her ears with her hands, silently begging for Seven to turn off the transmission. A new voice broke through the paltry barriers she’d thrown up. Rollins. He must be very close to B’Elanna, for his voice to come through so clear.
“What are you planning on doing about this?”

“If everyone would shut up and give me a chance to talk, I’d tell you! Seven and Joe have been working on solar—”

“Solar! Pardon my language, Chief, but what the hell? Have you looked up at the sky lately? For solar you need some damn sun!”

“Easy, Rollins.” Tom. His voice was weaker, even, than it had been the last time Kathryn had seen him, coughing and gasping on this very carpet. “This isn’t her fault—”

“Hell, yes, it’s her fault! She’s the one that took charge from Day One. Acted like she owned the place! So she can damn well take responsibility for it going to shit.”

“Look, Rollins, if you have a better idea, I’m all ears.”

“Paramolybdium. Like I suggested months ago. We can mine it from those caves just north of here. It won’t take much processing to turn it into a substitute for the deuterium—”

“I’m sorry,” B’Elanna snapped back. Kathryn cringed at her tone. Rollins made Joe Carey look like a free spirit. He needed a delicate touch. “Did you get a degree in geology since we’ve been here? Mining? Are you kidding me? Do you have any idea what doing something like that will do to this planet? Why don’t you build a fucking combustion engine while you’re at it?”

“It’s a better idea than relying on a solar power source when we never see the damn sun! It’s like you’re more worried about the environment than the people that actually live in it!”

“Oh, please. You have no idea how much I’m dealing with, Rollins! You did it to Janeway on Voyager, and now you’ve just got a new target. Always so high and mighty, so fucking above it all! Keeping lists of all the ways we fail and never actually doing anything to help! You sanctimonious son of—”


Kathryn heard feet moving away, then. The murmur of a few more voices that she couldn’t make out, then silence. Seven had clearly ended the transmission, allowing for no questions or discussion. But that’s more than she deserved, right? When Seven had started the transmission, Kathryn had assumed it was an attempt to draw her back into life at the settlement. But perhaps she’d thought wrong. Maybe Seven just wanted to warn her — that before too long, there would be no more food deliveries, or power cells. That she’d likely starve or freeze to death if she didn’t come up with another plan beyond hiding on her derelict starship.

‘You did it to Janeway on Voyager,’ B’Elanna had said. Kathryn couldn’t say she was surprised to hear this, though it still stung. She and Rollins had never quite clicked. He’d been little more than an auditor, when he’d come on board at DS9. A representative from the Oversight Office on what was supposed to be a quick and final field mission before a promised promotion and a cushy desk job at HQ. He’d had a spouse, back on Earth, and a brother — one that had been permanently disabled at Wolf 359. Rollins had lost his taste for space and exploration long before he’d boarded Voyager, and he’d made that clear to his new captain from the moment he’d stepped onto her bridge. She used to laugh, usually with Chakotay, over the reports he’d submit each week — a list of all the tiny, unimportant ways she’d broken with ‘Fleet regs, regardless of how practical or useful those regs were on a ship stranded decades from home. Now it didn’t feel so funny.
It wasn’t supposed to be like this. They were supposed to be home, being feted by Starfleet, or at least back in service, perhaps helping with the war effort against the Dominion. To think of all the people she’d gotten killed, and was going to get killed as their power and heat and food drained away. How could she just continue to hide up here, knowing how her few remaining crew were struggling?

On the other hand, how could she help? She couldn’t read, could barely speak coherently. She wouldn’t be able to calm Rollins, or help B’Elanna come up with a solution.

Kathryn returned to the windowsill where she’d left Tom’s PADD. She tapped it lightly to illuminate the screen and lesson three stared back at her. She opened the file and began.
Day 255

Tom knocked on Ayala’s door and waited, shivering from the blustery weather. He hadn’t responded to Tom’s hails, but the comm system could be finicky on stormy days and the clouds looked like they would break any second. He knocked again. “Come on, Ayala! I know you’re in there.”

“I could be hunting,” came the muffled reply.

“Not in this weather,” Tom retorted, chuckling despite his worry. “Which, by the way, I’d prefer not to be caught out in. Or do you want to face B’Elanna if I get pneumonia again?”

The door opened, and Ayala waved him permission to enter. “What do you want, Paris?”

Tom lifted his medkit before dropping into the closest chair. “Just figured I’d fix your hand for you. Sit down, will ya? I’m not up for chasing you around your shelter.”

Ayala didn’t sit, but instead tightly crossed his arms, carefully tucking both hands under his armpits. “Why do you think there’s something wrong with my hand?”

“Because,” Tom said, “I found traces of your DNA on Rollins’ skin when I was repairing his broken jaw. He spun some tale about falling out of a tree, but given Naomi’s come up with more plausible stories than that, I figured I’d dig a little deeper.” He opened his kit and pulled out a tricorder. “Sit. Please.”

Ayala lowered himself into the chair closest to Tom and extended his right hand. As expected, the knuckles were abraded, and Tom noted a good amount of swelling around the base of the pinkie. “You fractured the end of your fifth metacarpal,” he said once he’d scanned the area. “I’m surprised. I would have thought you’d have better technique that that.”

“Chakotay was the boxer,” Ayala grunted, staring at the floor. “I’ve always been more of a phaser kind of guy.”

Tom ran the osteogenerator over the fractured bone. It was a minor injury and didn’t take long. “I appreciate you not using one on Rollins. I haven’t fixed a phaser burn in ages. I’m a little rusty.” He replaced his tools into the medkit. “To be honest, I haven’t patched up anyone after a fistfight in a while, either. What’s going on?”

“Maybe Rollins was telling the truth,” Ayala said, turning his steady gaze on Tom. “Maybe he did fall out of a tree and I hurt myself trying to help him.”

“You figured you could catch him with your fist?” Tom remarked. “Don’t try to bullshit a bullshitter, Mike.”

“What I’m trying to do is give you an out.”

“And I’m politely declining.” He did recognize and appreciate Mike’s efforts, but Hoth was too small for it to ever work for long. Any dissent in the group had to be out in the open and dealt with. Despite Ayala’s reputation as being one of fiercest members of Chakotay’s cell, he was not a violent man, and he kept his temper well in check. He wouldn’t have broken someone’s jaw over a food dispute or an overly long shower. It had to be big. And given Rollins had been on the other end of that powerful, if clumsily thrown right hook, Tom has a nauseating suspicion what that something big was. “If this is about B’Elanna, I need to know.”
“I think he’s trying to stage a coup,” Ayala said, flexing his newly healed hand. “He hasn’t come out and said it. But he has said that he thinks we need to ‘rethink our command structure.’ Says that B’Elanna just fell into the role, and with the new power crisis we need to consider if that’s the best choice.”

Tom’s teeth ground against each other. “And I suppose Rollins thinks he should be our top candidate to replace her?”

“Looks like. He says maybe we need to look at things from more of a ‘Starfleet’ perspective versus the more, and I’m quoting here: ‘seat of our pants method Torres subscribes to.’”

“Fucking asshole bureaucrat.” But even as he said it, Tom knew it wasn’t as simple as that. Rollins had never been B’Elanna’s biggest fan, or Tom’s or Seven’s. Anyone, really, that wasn’t regular ‘Fleet. But he’d never been nasty, either. He’d just put his head down, and done whatever job Janeway had asked of him. It would be easier if he were some mustache-twirling villain, but Rollins was just tired and lonely. Probably bitter, too. It had been five long years, after all — since he’d seen familiar stars, or could be sure he wasn’t going to be killed by the local hostile alien, or could rely on using a replicator when he felt like it. Five years since he’d watched a pair of Maquis rebels, a convict, a sentient hologram, even an ex-Borg get more responsibility and power than he’d had on Voyager. By now, he should be a lieutenant commander back on Earth, and every member of the Hoth’s leadership team should be in a Federation penal colony. Instead, that same collection of misfits had condemned him to this desolate planet with little to no hope of survival past a year.

But just because Tom could understand where the man was coming from didn’t mean he still didn’t want to kick his ass for being such an idiot. Rollins had barely been able to handle gamma shift — calling for one of the Big Three the second he had to do anything more interesting than keep Voyager going in a straight line. How could he possibly think he had the creativity or fortitude to keep a settlement going under these conditions?

“Thanks, Mike,” Tom finally said. “For telling me, and for trying to deal with it yourself. But I don’t think we’re going to be able to punch our way out of this one.” He packed up his medkit. “Guess I better go talk to B’Elanna.”

“I’m still with her, Tom,” Mike said, standing. “Pretty much all the Maquis are. Sam, Shimizu, Assante. Most of the engineers, except maybe Nicoletti and Nozawa. And who can tell with Harren?”

Tom stared back at him. “That’s maybe twenty-five people. You’re saying everyone else is with Rollins?”

“I’m saying everyone else might be convinced by Rollins. B’Elanna doesn’t come up with a solution to the power outage, Rollins makes a few good-sounding promises — she could be in real trouble. No one’s going to know he has no way of keeping those promises until it’s too late.”

The rain was still only threatening when Tom left Ayala’s shelter, but a few fat drops started to hit him before he was halfway home. He picked up the pace and pulled on his hood. How was he going to break this to her? This was pretty much B’Elanna’s worst fear realized. She’d worried about it from the beginning, she’d confessed to Tom before her announcement about the power outage: even if Tom was right and she was the most qualified to keep Hoth going — what if that didn’t matter? What if it mattered more that she be magnetic like Janeway, or warm like Chakotay, or at least exude superiority like Tuvok? “I can’t do it like you do, Tom. I can’t make people like me,” she’d said as she’d agonized over how to best break the news.
“So I am impossible to resist! I knew it,” he’d teased, hoping to lighten her mood.

She hadn’t taken the bait. “And now I have to tell them the power’s running out? It doesn’t matter if it’s not my fault — they’re going to blame me. Maybe even refuse to follow me anymore. And then what?”

“Hey,” he’d said, pulling her into a hug. “These people aren’t idiots. Even if a few of them do blame you for the power going out, they know you, B’Elanna. They’ve seen how many times you’ve saved Voyager. They’d have to be blind or stupid or both to not have the same kind of faith in you that I do. It’s going to be OK.”

Tom had genuinely believed that, when he’d said it. He’d really thought that no matter how bad things got, people would know — how hard B’Elanna worked, how smart she was, how no one else in Hoth stood a trible’s chance on Qo’noS of getting them through this. But it looked like his faith had been misplaced. Not the faith he had in B’Elanna — he still believed that if anyone was going to get them through this, it was her. But maybe all his fellow ex-Voyagers weren’t as smart or open-minded as he’d given them credit for. It was one thing to look the other way when a half-Klingon Maquis engineer saved your butt on the regular, but perhaps another when it turns out that half-Klingon wasn’t as omnipotent or infallible as you needed her to be.

He was only a little damp by the time he got back to their shelter. B’Elanna looked up from the gel-pack she was scanning. “I’m glad you made it before the storm got going. I was getting worried.” She gave him a happy smile as he shed his jacket.

Tom smiled back, even as he hated himself for having to hurt her like he was going to. He took the chair next to her. “What are you doing?”

She gave his cheek a quick peck before returning to work. “Seven had an idea, about how to make the gel-packs actually produce enough energy to be self-sufficient. Kind of a riff off photosynthesis. I’m doing a test run.” She gave the pack a pat that Tom had to describe as affectionate. “Gamma three-O here is notorious for being difficult. If her idea works on this little guy, we might be in luck.”

“How much power will that save us?”

B’Elanna shrugged. “Not a ton. It’ll maybe bring our usage down by five or six percent a week.”

“Six percent is not nothing.”

She flashed him a quick grin. One Tom hadn’t seen much lately. “It’s not. I have to give her credit — she’s got a knack for creative thinking.” B’Elanna put down the tricorder and sighed. “I should have given her more rein months ago. Maybe things wouldn’t have gotten so dire.”

They’d had this argument a time or six since B’Elanna had agreed to make Seven her ‘first officer.’ Tom shoved his hands through the hair B’Elanna had recently bullied him into cropping close to his skull. “And maybe it could have occurred to Seven to focus on our energy supply without you having to ask, instead of putting all her efforts into getting us off the planet. We’ve been over this, B’Elanna.”

“I know, I know,” she said, fiddling with the end of her braid. She looked up suddenly. The grin was back. “But maybe those weren’t such wasted efforts after all.”

Tom should stop her. He needed to tell her about the pot Rollins was stirring so they could come up with a plan of action. They’d ignored his growing dissatisfaction for far too long, and they
needed to put him in his place before he created real damage to their morale and day to day functioning as a community.

But she looked so damn excited. “Don’t keep me in suspense,” Tom said. “What’s the idea?”

B’Elanna told him about Seven’s idea for an orbital relay beacon and sending a message to the AQ. She thought it had a real shot of being successful. “It’s not exactly my area,” she said, “the electromagnetic properties of different baryon particles. But as far as I can tell, there’s no reason her idea can’t work. There’s a lot we need to figure out, though. Our planetside sensors don’t have the range we need, and each time we take the Baxial up it’s going to be a big power drain. Although I’m sure you’ll be thrilled to fly it as many times as we ask. God, it’s been months for you — since you’ve been able to fly.”

Yeah, and the last thing I flew I crashed into the side of a mountain.

“That’s the best part,” she said, digging through a short stack of PADDs until she found the one she was looking for. “Seven has this idea that we could re-purpose some of Voyager’s mining equipment into a hydroelectric generator. There’s that waterfall down on the south side of the mountain, remember? I had pretty much given up on the idea, since as soon as it freezes again the power output will go to shit. But if we get moving, we should be able to generate enough power before winter to replicate all the parts we need for the beacon. A real chance at getting rescued? I don’t see how we can not do it.”

Maybe this would be the solution, Tom considered. Even Rollins could get behind sending a message home. “When are you going to start telling people?”

B’Elanna shook her head. “It’s way too early for that. There’s too many variables, too many things that could go wrong. I want to make sure there’s a good chance we’ll get it to work before telling everyone.”

Shit. “B’Elanna, I don’t know that that’s a good idea. People are worried, especially given the power issue. Maybe giving them some hope is a good thing. I mean Rollins—”

“Ugh,” B’Elanna said, standing and stacking her PADD’s. “Can we not talk about Rollins? That petaQ gives me heartburn.” She moved closer to Tom, and straddled his lap. A clap of thunder boomed and she lowered herself onto his legs. “I can think of about a hundred better ways to pass this storm than talking about Rollins.”

He pulled his mouth away from hers. They needed to deal with this. “B’Elanna—”

She stood abruptly. “Is that too much weight? I’m sorry, I—”

“No,” he reassured her, and pulled on her hips until she was seated again. “It’s not that. It’s…” Her face was worried again, the little furrows her brows made as they drew together making a reappearance. They’d pretty much taken up permanent residence since the crash, and Tom, for a little while anyway, just wanted to make them go away. “It’s nothing,” he said softly, smoothing his fingertips against her eyebrows until she relaxed them. “I’m just being a dope. Let me hear more about these hundred ways to pass the storm you mentioned.”

She grinned again, although this time it had a tinge of the feral. “I think it’s better if I just show you.”
“I can get behind that,” he murmured before crushing his lips against hers.

They’d deal with Rollins later. It’s not like he was going anywhere.

It’s not like any of them were going anywhere.
Special thanks to Sareki for making my math sound slightly more plausible. She says it's still probably bordering on nonsensical for those of you who actually know a lot about math, but I promise it's better than what I had originally! (It's been a really long time since I've done anything more complicated than unit conversions...)
like an interrogation.

“I had never realized how much power it takes to run your alcove.”

“I don’t know why you would have, as Hoth’s power supply doesn’t fall under your purview.”

“Yeah, well, maybe that’s going to change at some point. You never know.”

Seven did know. B’Elanna would never relinquish responsibility for their energy needs to someone with an intellect as unremarkable as Rollins’. However, this knowledge had not made the conversation less irritating.

In contrast to Hoth’s many distractions, it was lacking in an important resource — skilled mathematicians and astrophysicists. B’Elanna had the knowledge, but not the time. (“I told you — this is your baby. I’ve got enough on my plate without having to check your math.”) Tom had some expertise in astrophysics, but not in the areas she required. (“Um… it’s been a while since I’ve done anything with atmospheric particles. I’m more of an interstellar kind of guy.”) Her attempt to consult Mortimer Harren was disappointing, to say the least. (“Oh, the Borg needs the help of little old me? Sure my brain isn’t too rudimentary to understand the problem?”)

Seven could do nothing about the lack of competent help, but she could do something about the distractions. Today, she used some of her stockpiled energy reserve and loaded a power cell to take to Voyager. She could work on the captain’s server in peace.

But three hours in the dark and damaged ready room, and she’d made no progress. A feeling of hopelessness had begun to creep upon her. If she was unable to calculate the particle vibration frequency, she’d be unable to properly target the beacon. If she were unable to properly target the beacon, there would be no point in launching it. If there was no beacon, then there would be no rescue and, eventually, no power. Seven’s small and limited world would become even smaller, one person at a time, until there was no one left.

This was unacceptable. She returned to her work.

Only to be interrupted by a soft and raspy voice.

“What are you doing?”

Seven looked up from the monitor. Janeway was standing half-shadowed in the door that Seven had left ajar, not wanting to have to force it open again when it was time to leave. “Captain.”

She took several steps into the room. Her gait was more confident now, Seven noted. Still not the assured stride in which she’d once traversed Voyager’s halls, but vastly improved from the uncertain shuffle she’d had the last time Seven had seen her. “No,” Janeway said. “Not captain. Not anymore.”

Seven recalled the words she’d said in anger during their last encounter. Although it was the truth, she regretted saying that Janeway no longer deserved her title. The other woman was, at least for the moment, irreparably damaged. Holding her to the same standards that Seven had once held Captain Janeway was inappropriate and fruitless. This Janeway deserved pity, not judgment. “How shall I address you then?” Seven asked.

Janeway paused and worried her lower lip. “Tom… He calls me Kathryn now. Sometimes forgets. But mostly he calls me Kathryn.”

Seven nodded. “That will be acceptable. Kathryn.” She returned to her work.
Janeway crept forward and leaned over the desk. “What are you doing?” she repeated.

Seven sighed. At least on Voyager, Janeway was likely to be the only distraction. Perhaps if she provided an explanation of her issues, Janeway would be overwhelmed and embarrassed by her persistent cognitive deficits and leave her be. “I am attempting to plot the targeting coordinates for an orbital relay beacon using the exotic baryon particles in this planet’s atmosphere.”

“Orbital relay beacon?”

“Yes,” Seven said, hoping the woman would not interrupt her again. “It is a beacon used to send an electromagnetic—”

Janeway waved her hand impatiently. “I know what an orbital relay beacon is,” and Seven noted an assuredness in her tone that she had not heard since the crash. “Where did you get one? They were destroyed.”

Seven raised an eyebrow. Perhaps Janeway’s deficits were not as extensive as she believed. “I have devised a plan to construct one out of spare parts that are not useful to Hoth’s functioning.” She went on to explain the unusual nature and variety of the planet’s atmospheric particles and how she planned to utilize stability to send a simple distress signal into Federation space. As she spoke, she detected a change in Janeway’s demeanor. Her hands became restless and worked each other like modeling clay. Her eyes darted about the room, changing their focus from floor to ceiling to the windows. She stood straighter, held her shoulders back rather than slouched forward.

“When do you build?”

“We may not build at all,” Seven confessed. “I have been unable to ascertain the precise frequency of vibration.”

“Can’t target the signal.”

“No,” Seven said, annoyed with Janeway for pointing out her failure, as well as with herself for failing at all. “I cannot.”

Janeway reached for the monitor. “Let me see.”

Seven kept a firm hold of the screen. “There is no point,” she said, her tone becoming short. She had no time to waste on Janeway trying to comprehend figures and symbols she couldn’t even read.

“Math,” Janeway said, locking on her own grip. “I can… math is different. Let me see.”

It was ridiculous. Seven, with all the knowledge of the Borg Collective behind her, was unable to solve this problem. How could one brain-injured human hope to succeed? She relinquished the monitor all the same. Janeway’s injury and subsequent stroke had apparently not diminished her obstinace. Once Janeway was done staring uselessly at the calculations, Seven would download her work, collect her power cell, and return to Hoth. While she found Harren’s superior attitude distastefull and unjustified, it seemed she would need to look past her dislike and request his help again.

“What are these?” Janeway asked, pointing at the screen.

Seven pursed her lips and defined the relevant variables. After several more minutes of drumming her fingers on the desk and watching Janeway frown at the monitor, she cleared her throat loudly.

“I have limited time here. I must continue my work.”
Janeway looked up and met her eyes with a steady gaze. “You’re doing it wrong.”

Seven reached for the monitor. Her patience was at an end. “Your attempt to feel important is tedious and—”

“Don’t solve the equation,” Janeway interrupted, with enough of her old command tone that Seven’s hand dropped back to the desk top. “Infer it instead.”

Seven’s eyes narrowed, but she had to admit to a certain curiosity. “Elaborate.”

“A derivative-free method.” She chewed her lip. “Bound constrained… Bound constrained… Mixed-integer optimization!” she finished with a quick but triumphant grin.

Janeway’s cognitive faculties clearly had improved since she had left Hoth, but the brief flash of optimism Seven had experienced vanished. “You are confused. Our problem doesn’t have constrained bounds. Further, our computational power is limited. It would require millions of calculations—”

“It does have bounds,” Janeway interrupted again, slapping her hand against the desk. “You said the free electrons were stable. That’s what you said. Use it. With an adjoint method to get the gradients. You won’t need so many calculations.” She returned her attention to the monitor and made a series of quick taps across the screen before turning it back towards Seven. “Look. It will work.”

Seven studied Janeway’s work. Her initial skepticism dissipated quickly. It was rough and lacked precision, but Seven could see how the approach might solve her conundrum. “I stand corrected. Your idea has merit.”

A broad smile broke out across Janeway’s face. The first Seven had seen since the crash. “Borg know-how is no match for human…” Janeway’s brow furrowed and her shoulders dropped. “Human…” She shook her head. “Don’t know the word.”

“Your language failure is irrelevant in light of your assistance with my work.” Seven watched as her work, now improved by Janeway’s input, downloaded into her PADD. “Thank you.”

Janeway shook her head and turned away. “Tired. I need to go.”

Janeway’s gait was unsteady again as she made her way to the ready room door. It concerned Seven. Chakotay’s quarters were only one deck down, but she’d have to walk across four sections to get to the only Jefferies tube that was still accessible. Perhaps Seven should accompany her. As she stood to disconnect the power cell and do just that, it occurred to her just how often Janeway must traverse Voyager’s decks unaccompanied. It seemed unwise, for someone with her deficits to spend her time in such a high-risk environment. She did not appear to be wearing the comm badge Seven had left her — if she fell ill or became injured, it could be several days before someone would arrive to assist her. Janeway’s insights into the issues with the beacon showed that she was able to be a contributing member of Hoth’s society again. There was no reason for her to continue to sequester herself here on Voyager. “Kathryn, wait.”

Janeway paused in the doorway, the perfect reverse of her appearance only half an hour before.

“You should return with me to Hoth. You can assist me with my work. Perhaps you will also have insight into how to preserve our remaining energy supply. It is clear that you can once again be useful to our survival and rescue. Further, it’s unsafe for you to remain here alone, particularly with winter approaching. Coming with me is the only logical choice.”
Janeway placed a hand against the door frame and her shoulders drooped and trembled. “No,” she said, her voice nearly inaudible. “Leave me alone, Seven. I’m never going back.” She left without speaking further.

Seven’s face burned. Why had she expected a different response? Time and again, she had attempted to help Janeway — to provide her with emotional support, to give her a sense of purpose — and each time her efforts had been rejected. This was not her way. Seven of Nine did not continue to pursue a course of action that had previously proven futile. She would not accompany Janeway to Chakotay’s former quarters. She would honor her former mentor’s request, and leave her alone. Even half destroyed, Voyager was still a considerable size. It would be easy to avoid its lone occupant.

Despite this resolution, Seven left the ready room less than ten minutes after the captain. It was a long enough interval that they did not need to interact further, but short enough that Seven could ensure Janeway returned safely to her chosen place of residence.
B’Elanna put down the sonic wrench and rubbed her fingertips hard against her temples. She’d been battling a headache on and off for days. Asking Tom for an analgesic was tempting, but she hated to use the rations. He’d said he’d been working on learning new massage techniques for pain relief — maybe he’d be willing to use her for practice. She smiled at the thought — and the various suggestive comments she was sure he’d make. She picked up her wrench and flicked it back on.

Then fumbled it a moment later when a sharp and sudden rap sounded against the Tereshkova’s hatch. She popped her burnt fingers into her mouth, then uttered a muffled curse. Why had she been so clumsy lately? “Come in!”

It was Joe. B’Elanna forgot her stinging fingers when she took in his appearance. His hair was overgrown, sticking out from his head in unruly, coarse curls, but that was nothing new. What was different was the assortment of leaves and sticks that adorned it, in what seemed to be a very deliberate fashion. She nodded towards his head. “Trying a new look?”

Joe frowned a moment, then stuck a hand into his hair. “I thought she took them all out,” he said with a sigh. “Naomi. The only way I could convince her to come with me to gather wood yesterday was if I promised to play ‘Elephant and Piggie’ today.”

“‘Elephant and Piggie’?”

Joe nodded. “It’s a series of books. My boys used to love them, and I showed them to Naomi a while back. A bird lands on the elephant’s head, and they build a nest. I,” he said, starting to pick out the bits of nature, “was Gerald.”

“Gerald?”

“The elephant.”

B’Elanna giggled, unable to get past the image of her stolid assistant chief with a long trunk and a family of birds on his head. The glare she got in response only made her laugh harder.

“If you’re done,” Joe said, once her chuckling faded to an occasional snort, “I brought you lunch.” He reached into his satchel and pulled out one of Chell’s meal containers. “When I saw Tom earlier for my supplement, he asked me to make sure you got some. Said you didn’t eat much at breakfast.”

B’Elanna rolled her eyes, but inwardly felt a rush of affection for both men. This wasn’t new — even back on Voyager, Tom had often enlisted her second-in-command to make sure she ate regularly and adequately. It had always driven her nuts — especially when Tom had confessed that it was primarily self-preservation that led him to do it (“You can be a little prickly when you’re hungry, B’Elanna.”) but here on Hoth, where it was rare for anyone to eat their fill, it felt more like caring than being managed. “Thanks,” she said as she reached up from her seat for the container. “I didn’t eat much at breakfast.”

“Sounds good,” she agreed, although she didn’t actually think so. It was usually one of her favorites, but today even the idea of it was making her stomachs roil. B’Elanna hoped she hadn’t
caught one of those flukes. Her GI tract had always been resistant to the parasites before, but no one’s health or immunity was quite what it used to be. She’d have to ask Tom to scan her later.

First, though, she had to find out why Joe was looking at her like that. “I’m guessing you’re not just here for the food delivery.”

He sat down at the other end of the workbench. “Is that the control panel for the industrial replicator?”

B’Elanna pursed her lips, but she didn’t push. It was an old tactic of Joe’s — to ease into whatever bad news he had to give her — and she couldn’t begrudge him for it given how many times she’d bitten his head off over the years. “I take it ‘don’t kill the messenger,’ isn’t a popular saying in Klingon culture,” he’d remarked once, after she’d broken a PADD in half over her desk and told him he was lucky she hadn’t used his head. “Yeah,” she replied in answer to his question now. “I wanted to see how hard it would be to reconfigure. I’m considering building a hydroelectric generator to run it.”

“Does that make sense?” he asked. “We won’t be able to use it once the river freezes over. Seems like a lot of effort.”

B’Elanna shrugged. Joe didn’t know her long game yet and she wasn’t ready to tell him. “Not so much. We can re-purpose the excavators along with the sonic rotors from the macrodrill to build the generator. And I might be able to eke some power out of it over the winter, as long as there’s at least a little bit of water flowing.”

Joe sighed and looked at his shoes. “You’re not going to like what I have to tell you, then. I’ve got a competing request for that equipment you want to use.”

Rollins. Of course, it was Rollins. He’d approached Joe yesterday, asking him how hard it would be to get the mining equipment down from Voyager. Tom had warned her that he was getting more restive, but actually making plans for equipment without consulting her? This was a new level of defiance.

“He’s gotten pretty stuck on this paramolybdium idea,” Joe said. “I’m not sure you’re going to be able to get him to back down.”

“But it’s so stupid!” she said, slamming the wrench to the tabletop for emphasis. “One, it’s not renewable. How long could the supply nearby last us? Six months? A year? We don’t have a single geologist left. None of us knows enough about molybdium compounds to dig it out safely. Plus, we have no idea what effect the mining will have on the ecosystem.”

“I’d cool it on the ecosystem stuff, Chief,” Joe cautioned her. “I know where you’re coming from, but it makes people think you care more about some dead fish than you do about us.”

B’Elanna clenched her hand back around the wrench. “That’s such bullshit—”

“I said I know where you’re coming from,” Joe repeated, his hands raised. B’Elanna sat back in her chair with a huff, but fell quiet. “I get it, I do,” he continued. “I’ve talked to Sam about it, I know Earth’s history. If we’re destroying the native species, god only knows what we’ll do to ourselves if we’re not careful. But not everyone’s in a place to hear that right now. People are scared, B’Elanna. And they make stupid decisions when they’re scared.”

She could tell Joe about the beacon. At the moment, only the leadership team knew. Tom had been pushing for her to make the plan with the beacon, along with the prospect of rescue, more widely
known. Seven, on the other hand, had sided with B’Elanna. “As the months have passed, I have noted declining executive functioning and emotional stability in much of the crew. They have been expressing increasing dissatisfaction with life at Hoth, and further, are less forgiving of restrictions placed upon them by the leadership council. If the initial attempt at constructing the beacon were to fail, or if we are unable to construct or launch it at all, we may experience a collective rebellion against our leadership.”

Tom had tried to get Ayala on his side, but the quiet man said he’d defer to whatever B’Elanna decided. “Group psychology isn’t my thing,” he’d said. “But if you need me to shake some more sense into Rollins, let me know.”

B’Elanna knew he’d been mostly joking, but she couldn’t help but wish it was as easy as popping Rollins a good one in the nose. Maybe the Klingons had it right: honor, leadership — these were privileges earned in battle, even if that battle was against time and the elements. Someone like Rollins, who lurked in the background, always insisting how he’d do a better job while never having the stones to actually try anything — he’d never get anywhere in Klingon society. He’d be ignored like the coward he was.

She could trust Joe, she knew. And Sam, and Dalby, and a dozen of the others. But the more people that knew, the harder it would be to keep it a secret. B’Elanna needed to be sure first. She couldn’t take the idea of having to confess yet another failure to the rest of Hoth, and she definitely couldn’t give Rollins another reason to accuse of her incompetency. “Look, Joe, I know people are scared. I’m scared, too. But resorting to mining a resource we know barely anything about? No. We’ve got a long way before we sink that low.”

“So, it’s just ‘no,’ then?” Joe said, and B’Elanna recognized his tone. It was the one that he’d always used when he thought she was being particularly unreasonable.

And he was right enough of the time that B’Elanna needed to temper her answer. She was the better engineer — they both knew this — but he was better at the people part. “Let him go up the caves, run some scans,” she said. “Let him think I’m mulling it over. It’ll keep him busy until I have a better idea to tell people.”

Joe nodded and stood to leave, reminding her once more to eat something. B’Elanna waited until he left then pushed the container to the side. Her head was still throbbing, and she suspected even cracking the lid might send her stomachs over the edge. She went back to work.

Only to be interrupted again, ten minutes later. This particular interruption didn’t bother to knock, though. She never did.

“I have news.”

“Is there a modifier that goes with that news, Seven?” B’Elanna put the wrench down again and rubbed her face, a bone-shaking weariness settling over her without warning. Maybe she was anemic, too. She’d slept over seven hours last night — far more than average. Tom had suggested she take an iron supplement months ago, probably back before Megan. She’d turned him down at the time, as he’d said it had been preventative more than a treatment for an actual deficiency. Had he examined her since then? The Doctor hadn’t, she knew. She’d turned him down flat both times he’d been active. Why hadn’t she listened to Tom? Spending the tiny amount of energy on a supplement was probably a lot more economical than now having to get treated for a full blown nutritional deficiency. “Great,” she muttered, “this is the last thing I need.”

“B’Elanna?”
“Forget it,” she said. “Now is your news good or bad? I’d like to be prepared.”

The corner of Seven’s mouth twitched in response. The news was good. Maybe the best B’Elanna had gotten in months. Seven had figured out how to target the beacon.

“You’re sure?” B’Elanna said, taking the PADD Seven handed her. She smirked at the look she got from the former drone. “Of course you’re sure,” she said as she started to scan. It wasn’t long before her mouth fell open. B’Elanna thought she might start to drool before long. “Seven, this is... amazing. Elegant even. I have no idea why you wanted my help with the calculations last week. You were clearly capable of doing this all on your own.”

Seven made no response, which was unusual. She typically reveled in taking credit for work well-done. She was also scrupulously honest. Hide information? Absolutely. Flat out lie? Never, as far as B’Elanna knew. Which meant she almost certainly had gotten help from someone else. There weren’t many options. “Harren actually deigned to help you, huh? That’s impressive by itself, Seven. Don’t feel bad. We all need help sometimes, as you and Tom like to constantly remind me.”

“It was not Harren.”

B’Elanna frowned. Then who? Voyager’s crew hadn’t had many people with a theoretical physics background in the first place, and, aside from Harren and Megan Delaney, the ones that did had all died in the crash. Tom had maybe studied some of this stuff back at the Academy, but, while she loved the guy, his brain had almost certainly discarded most of his less practical astrophysics knowledge for twentieth century trivia, not to mention the medicine he’d had to learn. She couldn’t imagine him being able to help Seven with this level of calculus.

As she reviewed the math in the face of Seven’s continued reticence, though, B’Elanna thought some of the proofs and theorems used did seem familiar. She’d definitely seen work like this before. It had just been a few years. Not since their first year or two back in the Delta Quadrant. “Janeway?”

Seven, with obvious reluctance, nodded.

B’Elanna sat back in her chair. So that’s what all those trips to Voyager were about. “You’ve been seeing her.”

“It was not intentional.”

B’Elanna rose, despite her tiredness, and went to the wall monitor to check on Hoth’s power flow. She stared at the numbers for several long seconds. All was as it should be. That was to say, it was going to shit.

“I went to Voyager in search of supplies to build the beacon,” Seven said. “I also found the captain’s command server useful, given the restrictions on using Hoth’s computer core. Janeway found me. I did not seek her out.”

“She’s better, then?” B’Elanna asked, fiddling a bit with the power outflows.

“In some ways, yes,” Seven said. “But in many others, she is not.”

Meaning Janeway wasn’t planning on coming back. “Maybe I should go up there,” B’Elanna said, not realizing until the words left her mouth how much she wanted to see her former captain. “Tell her she needs to come up with a new game plan. We won’t be able to keep up the food and power deliveries much longer.”
“I have already informed her of our energy issues. As well as the plan with the beacon, of course, as she helped me with the calculations.”

“Of course you have,” B’Elanna said to the monitor. “Thank you. One less thing for me to worry about.” The dull ache that had settled behind her eyes suddenly blossomed into a sharp pain across the back of her skull. She pinched the bridge of her nose hard, and slowly inhaled. “And good work on the beacon,” she said, when the pain had faded back to its previous, more tolerable levels. “Go ahead and start working on the launch trajectory now. I want to get as much figured out as possible before we even think about actually building the thing.”

“Are you all right, B’Elanna?”

_God._ She looked so bad even the Borg could tell something was off. “I’m fine. Just tired. I’m probably anemic. Tom suggested a supplement months ago, and I never took him up on it.”

“You should rectify that promptly,” Seven said. “If you are to lead us effectively, you must maintain adequate health.”

B’Elanna rubbed at her eyes and turned back to Seven. “The Borg equivalent of ‘take care of yourself,’ huh? Like I said, I’m fine. I live with our local doctor, as you might recall, so I’ll have him look at me later tonight. Get back to work. We have a lot to do.”

Seven gave her customary nod and left, allowing B’Elanna to sink with relief back into her chair. She picked up her wrench once again, although put it down almost immediately. The replicator would have to wait for another day. Maybe one where her head wasn’t pounding, and her stomachs weren’t twisted in knots. One where Rollins wasn’t plotting against her, the captain she had once seen as a mentor hadn’t abandoned her, and she didn’t have a permanent power outage looming over her head. B’Elanna laughed, although their situation was about as far from funny as you could get. She picked up the wrench and went back to work.
Day 278

Chapter Notes

A Happy New Year chapter since I won’t have time to post again until Thursday.

Tom’s eyes slid shut as he dropped his head onto his desk in the Sacajawea. It would just be for a few minutes. He’d been reading the same paragraph for the last fifteen — maybe if he took a little nap it would finally make some sense. Or maybe not: he’d learned more medicine since the crash than he’d thought possible, but nanoprobes and Borg implant stability? It was all so over his head, his piloting skills might come in handy more than his medical ones. Sweet oblivion called and he let himself slip into its welcoming darkness.

Only to jerk back to alertness a minute later. Did he smell… chocolate?

Tom blinked at the plate that had appeared in front of him: chocolate frosting on yellow cupcake, with a single lit candle on top. He was hallucinating; it was the only answer. Clearly his lack of sleep had finally caught up with him. Although he’d never heard of a hallucination smelling this good.

“Happy Birthday,” Sam said from behind him.

He spun the small stool around. The exobiologist was beaming at him, clearly pleased with her surprise. “What?” Tom stuttered. “How did you…? Is it really my birthday?”

Sam’s cheeks pinked, but her smile didn’t falter. “Maybe. I’m not entirely sure. I tried to convert the Terran date to the stardate, and then reconcile that with Hoth’s rotation, but… Well, let’s just say there’s a reason I went into biology — it’s the science with the least math. But we’re in the general vicinity.”

Tom pulled the plate closer, doing his best to not visibly drool. “It’s a shame, really,” he said, poking at the icing with his finger. “I’ve never cared for chocolate.”

“You don’t?” Sam said, leaning over his shoulder. “I could have sworn on Voyager I’d seen you eat— Tom Paris!” Apparently she’d caught sight of his broad grin as he’d popped his chocolate-covered finger into his mouth. “You are such a jerk! I’ve been saving replicator rations for weeks for this! I should just eat it myself.”

“Don’t you dare,” Tom said as pushed himself upright and wrapped Sam in a tight hug. “And thank you.”

She pulled back from him and cupped his bearded cheek for a moment. “You’re welcome.” She sighed as she pushed him back onto his stool. “I just wanted to do something nice for someone. Every day here — it’s so grim. I’m tired of it, Tom.” She paused and studied his face for a moment. “But not as tired as you look lately. Now blow out your candle before wax gets all over the cake.”

Tom blew out the flame, removed the tiny candle, and took a generous bite. He closed his eyes to better savor the dense and slightly bitter chocolate as it contrasted with the sweet cake that dissolved against his tongue. It took considerable self-control to not pop the entire dessert in his
mouth, but he knew he’d save at least half for Naomi, no matter how much Sam insisted he didn’t have to.

When he opened his eyes again, Sam was leaning against the desktop and studying his PADD. “What is this?” she asked, frowning.

“What’s been keeping me up at night. It’s everything the Doc knows about Seven’s ‘unique Borg hybrid physiology.’” Tom sighed. “I’m worried about her.”

“Because of the power issues?”

“That, yeah, but also: have you noticed how worn out she looks lately?” Tom almost laughed, recognizing the irony in him saying anyone looked run down. “I know she’s been scaling back her regeneration times to stockpile energy, but I’m worried she’s cutting things too close.”

Sam nodded. “She’s barely in our shelter anymore. Or, at least not when Naomi and I are awake. Which means she can’t be regenerating much more than five hours, tops. It doesn’t even make sense. How much energy could she be saving doing that? What use could it possibly have?”

Tom shrugged and picked at his cupcake. He didn’t like it — not being able to tell Sam about the beacon. But B’Elanna had been clear — she didn’t want anyone beyond the leadership council knowing about their plan. Although Sam didn’t need to know why Seven wasn’t regenerating to help him figure out how to deal with the consequences of it. “Can you take a look? Maybe your background will help you make heads or tails of this. Mine certainly isn’t.”

Sam smiled, but it wasn’t an optimistic one. “I can look, sure. But this falls way out of my area of expertise. I studied microbiomes and interstellar life forms. Advanced vertebrate pathology, complicated even further by inorganic implants? It might as well be in Klingon. I don’t think I’ll do any better than you have.”

That was it, then. It was all down to him. He could talk to B’Elanna about activating the Doctor, he knew. But he wasn’t sure how much even that would help. He and the Doc had discussed the topic a little, when Tom’s pneumonia had made him the hologram’s captive audience. He’d been too sick to follow the Doc’s lecture closely, but he’d gotten the gist of it.

“It’s important Seven continue to regenerate regularly, and for long enough intervals,” the Doctor had told him. “If she doesn’t, her implants will surely begin to malfunction. Even if we still had the fully operational sickbay of Voyager, implant failure is a challenging and delicate condition that is not easily remedied. In these prehistoric environs, even I would have a difficult time trying to stabilize her. You don’t have a prayer.”

In other words, chatting with the Doc for an hour wasn’t going to translate to any brilliant solutions to keep Seven healthy, and that’s surely as much as B’Elanna would be able to give him right now. She couldn’t sacrifice what remaining power they had to save one individual, especially not now, with Rollins maybe fomenting a rebellion. “Fuck,” he said, dropping his head into his hands.

“Hey,” Sam said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “It’s going to be OK, Tom. We’ll come up with a way to help her.”

Sure they would. Just like he had for Megan.

Because how could he possibly fix this? If it wasn’t from her dwindling regeneration periods, then Seven’s implants would surely fail once the power did, and there’d definitely be no Doc to help them then. Tom didn’t know how much longer he’d be able to do it — treat illnesses and injuries,
working to keep everyone healthy when they were all just slowly marching towards certain death. What was the point of any of it anymore? Because maybe they’d be able to get a beacon into orbit that might send a signal all the way to the Alpha Quadrant? And possibly someone friendly would receive it and send a ship to help them? He was a betting man, but no way would he take those odds.

Then he looked at Sam. Gentle, kind Samantha — who probably had to lie to herself and her daughter a hundred times a day just to keep from screaming, and cheered herself up by replicating him a cupcake. And Tom smiled, and put his hand over hers, and said. “Of course we will.”

The sudden crackle of his comm badge broke the quiet. “Paris!” It was Harren. “Paris, I need help! Now!”

He slapped the badge. “Harren? What’s going on? Are you near the Baxial? Can you transport?”

“No!” He was panting heavily, each word punctuated by a sharp exhale. “No one’s there. I’m coming to you now!”

Tom lurched to his feet and fired up the biobed. He’d never heard the uptight man sound so agitated. “Sam, load me some hyposprays. Epinephrine, trioxime, triosylate. All the usual suspects. It doesn’t sound like Harren has the breath to give us much info.” He slapped his comm badge. “Paris to Ayala. If you’re around, head my way and keep an eye out for Harren. He’s got some kind of crisis, and might need help.”

Ayala responded a minute later. “I’m there. We’re on our way.” The security officer’s voice was taut with anger or worry, Tom wasn’t sure which. “It’s Naomi.”

Tom met Sam’s eyes across the bed. “The Doc,” he started to say. “Sam, go activate the—”

The hatch slammed open. “Paris!” Ayala barked as he burst into the room and dropped Naomi’s tiny, trembling body onto the bed.

Tom got to work. The little girl was moaning and her mouth worked like a fish ripped from the water. She had her arms wrapped tightly around her folded legs, as if to still the tremors that wracked her sweat-soaked frame. “Bronchoconstriction, bradycardia, hypotension. She’s cyanotic. Harren!” he barked as he continued to scan the little girl. “What the hell happened?”

The cosmologist had come in after Ayala, his hair damp and face red with exertion. “I think,” he panted, “some kind of mushroom.”

“She ate one?” Sam demanded from her spot by Naomi’s head, her hand tangled in the little girl’s matted blond locks. “Naomi wouldn’t do that!”

“No,” Harren gasped out. “Not ate. Just breathed in the spores. They were under some rocks. One of the chickens got loose… Elizabeth… I couldn’t fit. I sent Naomi to get her.”

If he wasn’t desperately trying to diagnose and treat the failing child in front of him, Tom might have slammed Harren into a bulkhead. “What the hell did you do, Harren?”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know. I didn’t think—”

“No,” Tom snapped, loading a hypospray with trioxime. “You fucking didn’t. Put on a respirator and bring me some of those mushrooms. Now, Harren!” Tom pressed the hypospray to Naomi’s neck and allowed himself a millisecond of relief when he saw her dropping oxygen levels stabilize. “Mike, activate the Doc!”
Ayala bumped Tom hard as he tried to maneuver his way past the biobed, but Tom didn’t even acknowledge it. “Miosis, ptyalism, diaphoresis, bradycardia, hypotension,” he muttered as his eyes flicked between his tricorder and Naomi’s trembling body. “I know this, I know this. Ayala!” his voice rose to a shout. “I need the Doctor!”

“I’m trying, Paris, but I can’t get the damn thing to power up.” He slapped his commbadge as he pushed his way back to the exit. “Ayala to Torres! I need your location!” He paused for only a second in the open hatch. “I’m coming back, Sam. I’ll be right back.”

“Sam,” Tom said, keeping his voice as calm as he could manage. “I need you to get a central line in her, OK? We need her blood pressure up, so we need fluids.”

He saw the instant her expression changed — from panicked mother to competent nurse — and he didn’t think he’d ever admired anyone quite so much. “Got it,” she murmured, turning to the shelf and grabbing the equipment she needed.

Tom pressed a series of hyposprays to Naomi’s neck. Vasoconstrictors, positive intropes, bronchodilators. They all worked to keep Naomi with them a little bit longer, but none of them were working enough. She was dying. Tom was following all the rules, checking off every box on his medical emergency check list, and she was still dying. *Think, Paris! Put it the fuck together!* He stared at the readouts on the biobed’s arch, willing his brain to make the connection.

Mushrooms, Harren had said. She was exposed to some kind of mushroom spores. Mushroom sounded like muscarine. Tom adjusted the scanner. “That’s it!”

“Tom?” Sam’s expression was steady, but her voice shook. “Do you know what’s wrong?”

“Acetylcholine,” he said, sparing her a quick glance. He pushed past her to the medication cabinet and began pulling containers off the shelf. “Her acetylcholine levels are normal, but all the receptors are active. There’s an Earth toxin that does the same thing. Her parasympathetic nervous system has been sent into overdrive, and I need to stop that.” He finally found the box he was looking for. He pulled out a vial and loaded it into a hypospray with shaking hands. “She needs atropine.”

He pressed the hypospray to her neck and waited. *Please, god, let me be right. Please.* Naomi’s heart beat just a little faster. Her blood pressure stopped its downward plunge, then slowly began to rise. Her airways began to open and her heaving chest slowed. The tremors faded and the rictus of pain that had crossed her elfin features eased. “Naomi?” Sam whispered, as she slipped back into her role as mother. “Naomi, sweetheart, it’s OK. I’m right here.”

“Mommy?” Her voice was so tiny, Tom strained to hear it over his own laboring breaths. “Mommy, did Mortimer get Elizabeth out?”

Tom stumbled from the biobed on legs made of jelly, and dropped back onto his stool. B’Elanna burst through the hatch, tapping furiously on the holoemitter’s miniature interface even as she crossed towards Naomi’s bedside. With a shimmer, the Doctor appeared. “Please state the nature of the medical emergency.” He immediately looked down at the biobed’s readouts and frowned. “This child is fine. Or will be, with additional supportive care. Why ever did you waste the energy to activate me, Mr. Paris?”

Tom gave the Doc a broad, if shaky, grin, even as B’Elanna knelt before him and studied his face in concern. “Sorry, Doc. Guess I just missed you.”
Eight hours later, Tom was back to sitting at his desk and staring at the Doc’s incomprehensible text on Borg physiology. Once the hologram had done a more thorough exam and confirmed Naomi was stable and would make a full recovery, Tom had talked with him for over an hour. They’d reviewed any changes in crew health from the past month, Tom got his own physical and was declared “not significantly worse than before,” and the EMH got the news about the power.

“You could have told me last time,” he’d sniffed.

“Sorry,” Tom said, and he really was. “B’Elanna didn’t want you to worry. She’s still hoping we’ll figure out a solution. But it didn’t feel right, not telling you at this point. The fact is, Doc…”

“I may not be activated again.”

Tom nodded. He tried to offer reassurances that they’d keep his program safe. “I’ll make sure your emitter gets up to Voyager, if things start to go south. That’s the best hope someone will find you, once… Well, you know.”

He’d expected a snarky retort, or at least a disdainful sniff, but the Doctor’s expression had held only pity. Discomfited by the hologram’s atypically open sympathy, Tom had changed the subject to Seven and her implants. Unfortunately, his earlier suspicion that there was little even the Doctor could do in their current circumstances proved correct.

“Even before the crash, I had been working on a method of weaning Seven off her remaining Borg components. Every simulation I tried ended in total shut down of her cortical node. Maybe if I had a fully equipped lab and years to study the problem, but… I don’t think there’s anything we can do for her if we have no power.”

“How bad is it?” Tom had asked. “Will she just go to sleep, or…”

“I’m afraid it will actually be quite painful.”

Tom rubbed at his face and put down the PADD. Why was he even bothering? If the Doc didn’t have any ideas, what hope did he have? He eyed the recently vacated biobed. When he’d had his brief flash of medical brilliance and realized the antidote for Naomi’s condition, he’d been filled with a rush of pride and relief. It wasn’t Megan again. It wasn’t Caldik Prime. Tom Paris could still save the day.

But now, as he thought of the fate he’d saved Naomi for, he wondered if perhaps it would have been better if he’d failed.

The hatch opened and Tom turned at the rush of cold air. “Hey,” he said, as B’Elanna crossed the threshold into the shuttle.

“Hey yourself,” she said, a covered bowl in her hands. “Where’s Naomi?”

“Back with Sam in their shelter,” he replied. “Doc said she’d be fine now, no reason for her to stay here. She’ll sleep better in her own bed. Is that dinner?”

“I figured you wouldn’t have eaten yet.”

“You figured right,” he said, lifting up the lid. He grimaced. Fish stew with leola root. Fucking
Vorik had finally figured out how to grow leola root. “Thanks. I guess.”

“I know,” she said. “It is very nutritionally dense. Neelix was right about that, at least.”

Tom smiled at the thought of the cheerful Talaxian. What would he have said, if he were here now? How would he have made the best of things? “You OK?” he asked B’Elanna. She stood on the opposite side of the small room, studying the labelled containers on the shelves as if she hadn’t seen them a hundred times before.

“Sure,” she said, tracing a finger along one shelf. She turned to him. “Actually, I don’t know that I am.”

Tom’s heart began to pound just a hint faster. He put down his spoon. “What do you mean?”

It had been going on for about a week, she told him. Near crippling fatigue, a constant headache, numb fingers, brief but intense waves of nausea. “This afternoon I threw up.”

He pulled out his tricorder, hoping she didn’t notice his trembling hands. What a hypocrite he was. Not ten minutes ago, he’d been thinking how maybe it would have been easier if they’d all died in the crash, or he’d let Naomi go versus condemning her to what life she had left in this wasteland. Now, at the mere suggestion that something might be taking B’Elanna away from him, he found himself on the verge of a full blown panic attack. “Why don’t you hop up on the bed?” he said, pleased he’d at least kept his voice steady.

She sat quietly but swung her legs back and forth, not unlike how Naomi behaved for her weekly vitamin shot. Her cardiac output was up, he noted, and her hemoglobin was down. That didn’t have to be so bad. It could just be a nutritional deficiency. B’Elanna was one of the only people left not already on a supplement, and that was mostly because she refused to take the time for a physical. Tom moved the wand lower, praying that that was all he would find. But no, there was something else. Her kidney function had altered — renal plasma flow had increased, and her glomerular filtration rate was up, too. And her hormones… Tom blinked. “No way. This can’t be right.” He adjusted the tricorder.

“Tom? What is it?”

Tom waved the wand around her abdomen, stared hard at the tricorder, then turned the wand on himself. “Oh. Shit.”

“Tom!” B’Elanna’s voice took on an edge. “What is going on? Why are you scanning yourself?”

He looked at her, his mouth agape, not sure how she would feel about the diagnosis. Not sure how he felt about the diagnosis. “My implant,” he said, vaguely aware this wasn’t the most pertinent information. “I forgot I was on imurantin when I had pneumonia. It would have inactivated my implant.”

“Your implant?” B’Elanna said. “Why are you worried about… Oh. Shit.”

Tom watched the emotions flicker across her face: confusion, disbelief, realization, all tinged with a hint of panic. He was pretty sure her expression mirrored his own.

“I’m pregnant.” Her eyes bored into his, daring him to tell her she was wrong. Maybe begging him to.

“You’re pregnant,” Tom confirmed.
As the words left his mouth, a series of images flashed into his brain, banishing the anxiety that had been there. A tiny baby, with brown eyes and forehead ridges, cradled in B’Elanna’s arms. A toddler girl, running across the grass to him. A laughing boy being tossed into the air. A smile broke across his face and a long forgotten feeling hit him. He thought it might be joy.

“B’Elanna…”

She was already off the bed and pacing. “This is insane. You’re doing something wrong. I can’t be pregnant.”

He held the tricorder out to her. “You are,” he said. “Look yourself. But it’s going to be OK, B’Elanna. We can—”

“No. No!” She shook her head. “Do you know how hard it was for my parents to get pregnant with me? They had to see a half-dozen specialists. Both of them had to get fertility treatments. I can’t have gotten pregnant, just like that. This is impossible.”

“You haven’t been taking your boosters,” he reminded her.

“Because you have an implant!” she snapped. She let her breath out in a short huff, wrapping her arms around herself. “I didn’t think… It took replicator power, and… and you have an implant. Shit. I don’t understand. I’ve lost so much weight — my cycle hasn’t been regular in months.”

“Life finds a way,” Tom said, taking a step towards her. He knew what she was thinking. If you’d asked him an hour ago if he thought bringing a baby into this half-frozen world was a good idea, he would have passed out from laughing. Yet, here they were — still freezing, still hungry — and a baby seemed like the first thing to make sense in a very long time.

She looked at him, the panic coming back to the forefront. “Uh-uh. No, Tom. We can’t do this. We can’t—”

He gripped her arms, gave her a tentative smile. “Yes, we can, B’Elanna. The beacon—”

“Isn’t much more than a Borg pipe dream right now!” She pulled away from him. “We have no idea if we can get it to work. And even if we can — how do we know anyone will even respond? This is crazy. How can you even consider this?”

Tom came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. He buried his face in her hair. It was coarse now, and often greasy, but Tom didn’t care. “Because I love you,” he murmured. “Because think of how crazy it is that this baby even exists. How many odds we had to beat. How can we just give up on that?”

He could feel her shaking her head against his face. “No, Tom. I can’t. A baby?”

Tom eased her around to face him. He cupped her face in his hands. “Will you at least think about it? It’s so early — barely three weeks. We don’t have to make a decision right now.” He wasn’t sure if his next words were to reassure B’Elanna or temper his own burgeoning excitement. “Anything could happen.”

She searched his eyes a long moment. Tom willed himself not to rush her. “Please, B’Elanna.”

Her nod was slight, but it was there. Tom folded her into his arms and gave into hope.
Day 292

Chapter Notes

I’d like to share this conversation that caseyptah sent me some time ago (I think it was right after Tom moved out of the shelter.)

Husband: How is the fanfic novel?
Me: It's terrible. Everything is terrible.
Husband: Sooooo... it's bad?
Me: NO IT’S CLEARLY SO GOOD HOW DO YOU NOT UNDERSTAND I JUST SAID THAT

Seven pulled the zipper of her jacket close to her chin. The continually dropping temperatures were already tiresome. She did not look forward to the predicted twenty plus weeks of winter weather. They must begin construction on the hydroelectric generator soon to produce the needed energy before the cold arrived in earnest and the river froze over.

Which was why she was heading to Voyager today. All of her preliminary calculations were complete and B’Elanna had given Seven permission to move forward on the beacon. They knew how to target it, and Seven had even been able to boost their planetside sensors to the point where they would likely only need to utilize the Baxial when it was time to launch the beacon. Today she would inventory the mining equipment on Voyager and ensure it was in good working order, then finalize her plans for the generator. B’Elanna would speak to the camp about the generator and the beacon tomorrow evening, when the weather was predicted to be relatively mild. She had asked Seven to organize a community gathering.

“What will be the ostensible purpose of this gathering?” Seven had asked. B’Elanna had been quite successful in keeping all knowledge of the planned attempt at communication contained within the leadership council. As far as Seven was aware, there had not been even the slightest hint of gossip on the subject.

“I don’t know,” B’Elanna had snapped. She’d been particularly irritable this week, even for her. “Just tell them it’s our last chance to get together as a group before winter comes. Make something up. I don’t care.”

Seven was not particularly adept at ‘making something up’ so had just instructed everyone to gather at the appointed time via the message system, and did not elaborate further. The other survivors would know the reason soon enough.

Before she could start her ascent to Voyager, however, Seven noted something troubling. She changed direction and began to stride across Hoth’s central square. “Naomi Wildman!” she called. “Where are you going?”

Naomi stopped running and turned to wait for Seven, hands on her hips. “Why do you care?” she demanded, once Seven was in ear shot. Naomi had gotten progressively more disrespectful towards Seven in recent weeks. She seemed resentful of the time Seven had been spending working in isolation, and any explanation Seven had offered about their reduced interactions had been deemed insufficient. This did not mean that Seven’s sense of responsibility towards the child had
As one of the more physically capable members of this community, one of my duties is to watch and protect the weaker individuals.”

Naomi’s mouth puckered into an angry pout. “I am not weak!”

Seven’s own lips pursed in impatience. Of course the child was weak compared to the other adult members. She was a child. But with Naomi’s young age came an immaturity that was to be expected. Seven endeavored to be more diplomatic. “You were gravely injured only two weeks ago. This caused your mother, and many others, a great deal of distress. I only wish to ensure that you are being appropriately cautious in your activities.”

Naomi’s arms now crossed tightly across her chest. Her expression and physicality were not unlike those of B’Elanna when she was feeling similarly obstinate. “I’m just going to help Mortimer with the chickens. It’s not a big deal.”

“Mortimer Harren was the individual that allowed you to become injured two weeks ago. You will understand if I doubt his trustworthiness when it comes to your care.”

“B’Elanna yelled at him,” Naomi said, her posture easing. “So did Tom. And Mike and Joe. By the time Mom got to him, he was all yelled out and he just kept saying ‘Sorry, sorry, sorry!’ Mom thought I was asleep but I heard the whole thing. Anyway, he’s a lot nicer to me now, even though I told him I don’t mind him being so grumpy. It’s not his fault. No one’s ever told him how to make friends, I think.”

Seven raised an eyebrow, mildly perturbed at how much Naomi was aware of camp happenings. “I see.”

Naomi dug a toe into the dirt. “What about you?”

“Clarify.”

“Were you distressed?” Naomi asked, staring at the ground. “Like Mom, and everyone else? When I got hurt?”

Seven felt an odd tight feeling in her chest. She had not been regenerating adequately. Perhaps that was the issue. “Yes,” she said to Naomi. “I also experienced distress at your injury. I do not wish any harm to come to you.”

The girl threw herself at Seven and wrapped her arms tightly around her midsection, causing Seven to stumble slightly. “Thanks,” Naomi mumbled into Seven’s abdomen.

She kept her hands raised for a moment, unsure as to how to proceed, then placed both on Naomi’s shoulders. “You’re welcome,” she said.

Naomi continued to cling to her, and Seven was conflicted. She had much she needed to accomplish on Voyager, yet being the recipient of Naomi’s affection when, in recent weeks, she had more likely gotten disdain, was not unpleasant. She began to shift her feet when Naomi pulled her face away slightly. “Will you play kadis kot with me later?” the child asked.

“I will,” Seven said, looking down with a smile as she finally pried the girl’s arms away from her waist. “But now I must go to Voyager.”

“For what?”
Unexpectedly, Seven felt an urge to share everything with the child. There was no wisdom or logic in this course of action, so she quelled the impulse. She did, however, choose to give Naomi a small ‘hint.’ “I am working on a surprise for the camp,” she said. “Which will be revealed tomorrow evening.”

“What is it?” Naomi said, her eyes widening.

“A surprise,” Seven repeated. “You must be patient. It will be a good exercise for you. Please have the kadis kot board prepared at 19:30 hours. You may go help Harren with the flock now, but remember to be careful.”

“OK!” Naomi said, sprinting off towards the Baxial. “I will! And I’ll have the board ready, too!”

It did not take long for Seven to reach Voyager, the cold temperatures being additional motivation to keep a rapid pace. Despite having already completed the calculations that she needed, her first stop was the captain’s ready room. She’d been doing much of her work there over the past several weeks. It was a more secure location, and also a quieter one.

When she arrived, she noted that the computer monitor was in a closed position as she’d left it. She moved closer to the desk and it had, however, been moved since last time she’d used it. Seven always left the monitor centered on the desk. It was now shifted several centimeters to the left. Janeway had come.

Her feelings towards Janeway remained conflicted, which was a source of some irritation for Seven. While she had denied it to Tom many weeks ago, Seven was now able to admit, at least to herself, that she felt some anger towards Janeway. It was the former captain’s fault they were all in their current predicament. She could lay some blame at Harry Kim’s feet as well, but he was not here, and Janeway was. It was also Janeway’s fault Seven was here at all — trapped on this primitive and environmentally hostile world rather than still existing, oblivious and content, in the Collective. There were many days when Seven was not confident which situation would be superior.

But despite Seven’s anger, she still found herself frequently craving Janeway’s company. B’Elanna, Tom, Sam and Naomi — they had all created a space in Seven’s thoughts and life that she would now deem unfillable by any other individual. But, despite her many efforts at replacing the older woman with others, Seven must also say the same about Janeway.

The two women had not had direct contact in approximately five weeks — when Janeway had once again declined to return to Hoth. But each time Seven had come to the ready room since that interaction, she would find addenda to her work. They were minor things — refinements to her math more than anything else. But they were, Seven had to admit, helpful in making the both the targeting and the launch of the beacon more precise.

Seven did not know if it were mere coincidence that Janeway never came when she was in occupancy, or if Janeway was deliberately avoiding further interactions. She tried to avoid excessive contemplation on the matter.

Today there were no changes to any of the beacon’s specifications. Perhaps this was Janeway’s way of expressing approval. Or perhaps she simply no longer cared. Seven closed the monitor. She knew further attempts at predicting Janeway’s erratic behavior were fruitless. All Seven could do was endeavor to banish the woman from her thoughts. Success was inevitable, even if it might take an undesirable amount of time. She would not return to the ready room again.

Instead, she would focus on the work at hand. Seven made her way to the aft turbolift shaft, and
began her long descent to Deck Fourteen, where Voyager’s mining equipment was kept.

Upon reaching Deck Thirteen, she heard voices.

“Lopez, be careful! We damage that macrodrill, we don’t have another one.”

It was Scott Rollins, and he was correct. The macrodrill was the only one with which Voyager had been equipped. Its sonic rotor was also instrumental to the generator that would enable them to build the beacon with minimal impact on Hoth’s energy reserves. Seven discontinued her measured pace down the shaft’s ladder and slid the remaining half-deck of her journey. The door between the shaft and the corridor was propped open, as was the door to Cargo Bay Six.

Seven stood silent in the doorway for several seconds, allowing the bay’s occupants to remain ignorant of her presence. There were five of Hoth’s residents present: Rollins, Lopez, Nicoletti, Whicher, and Murphy. They were early in the process of disassembly of the macrodrill. This was not acceptable. She must evaluate the sonic rotor while it was in place and activated in order to fully assess its suitability for the generator. “You must stop this activity immediately,” she said.

The occupants of the cargo bay froze and looked back and forth between each other. Seven noted that the other four directed the majority of their glances towards Scott Rollins, so that is where Seven directed her next question. “What are you attempting to do?”

Rollins gave her a broad smile, revealing a large number of his teeth. This was not a typical expression for him. He rarely smiled, and when he did, it tended to be of the close-mouthed variety. “Hi, Seven,” he said, stepping towards her while gesturing at the others. “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask the same of you, and I have,” Seven said, before projecting her voice across the bay. They had not stopped. “I will repeat myself — you must stop the disassembly of the macrodrill. Comply. Now.”

They did. This was satisfactory. Seven returned her attention to the still smiling Rollins. “I am here with the authority of B’Elanna Torres,” she said. “I do not believe you can make the same claim.”

Rollins’ smile faded. “No, you’re right,” he said, taking yet another step towards her. He was uncomfortably close now. “I can’t. But what does that matter? It’s not like we’re on Voyager anymore. She’s not the Chief.”

Seven’s eyes narrowed. “She is the leader of our community.”

“By whose authority?” Rollins’ breath was unpleasant, the sour smell indicative of mild dehydration and that he’d had Chell’s latest leola-based stew for lunch. Seven turned her face to the side.

“Given the senior staff remaining, B’Elanna was the only logical choice.”

“Maybe,” Rollins said, taking a step back. “But maybe we need to take a closer look at that choice. Consider if everyone agrees it’s the best one.”

Seven did not bother to respond. Rollins, and she assumed the four that accompanied him, clearly did not support B’Elanna’s leadership. But their opinion was irrelevant. Hoth was not a democracy, and further, they represented barely more than ten percent of the population. B’Elanna’s knowledge and experience more than qualified her to lead them, and she had the support of Seven, Tom, and many others whose skills were of paramount importance to the continued success of their settlement. If their survival had been dependent on these five — two lower-level engineers, an
astrochemist, a security officer, and a mid-level bureaucrat — they would have long perished. Rollins and his group were harmless and not worth any more of Seven’s attention.

“You should all leave now,” she said. “I have tasks I need to accomplish, and your presence is hindering them.”

Again, the five exchanged glances amongst each other, particularly with Rollins. Seven raised a hand to her comm badge. “I will get Mr. Ayala involved if necessary.”

Rollins raised a hand. “No need, Seven. We can see that you’re busy.” He gestured at the others. “Come on, guys. Let’s let Seven get back to her work.”

Once the others had left the bay and had climbed a considerable distance up the shaft, Seven began her scans of the macrodrill and other relevant mining equipment. It was all in suitable condition for the conversion to the generator. Once B’Elanna made her announcement to the community, Seven would call for volunteers to join her on Voyager and begin construction. If all went according to plan, they would have the generator in the river and working within thirty-six hours of the announcement.

Seven would not accept Rollins or the others if they offered their help. She found their attitudes distasteful. Working with them would surely be onerous. She briefly considered that she might notify B’Elanna of their actions today, but ultimately discarded the idea. She had informed them that their activities were not permitted, and they had desisted. When Seven had volunteered to act in a ‘first officer’ capacity, she recognized that some of this would include her dealing more directly with the other members of their community. This certainly qualified. It was a good thing — to alleviate some of B’Elanna’s burden, especially given her negative mood of late. Seven would not trouble her with this situation.

Besides, she had a game of kadis kot to play.
B’Elanna rested her forehead against the cool metal of the toilet bowl and tried not to think about how long it had been since they’d last run a cleaning cycle. She took a few deep breaths — mouth only! — and tried to rise.

Only to fall to her knees and start retching again.

“Will you please let me give you an anti-emetic?” Tom asked from just outside their tiny bathroom.

“Too many rations,” she groaned back.

“Too stubborn,” Tom said as he crowded himself in beside her. B’Elanna was about to yell at him to give her some space, when she felt a cool, damp washcloth across the back of her neck.

She sighed and closed her eyes. “Thanks. That helps.”

He left her then, although she knew he was lurking nearby. When the audible evidence of her churning stomachs ceased, Tom reappeared in the doorway. “I have something else that might help.”

“No meds, Tom,” she grunted. It took a couple of attempts but she got to her feet, slapping away his offered hand. The last thing they needed was for him to wrench his back.

“Not meds,” he said, now placing the hand on the small of her back and guiding her towards their small dining table. “Just some mint tea. All made from stuff in the greenhouse.”

B’Elanna sat in front of a steaming mug. She wrapped her hands around its comforting warmth and inhaled the sharp, yet soothing smell of mint. Tom laid one of their blankets around her shoulders. The headaches had faded, thankfully, and the fatigue and numbness in her hands had improved once Tom had started her on an iron supplement. The nausea, on the other hand, got worse every day.

“Think you can handle some breakfast?” Tom asked.

“Depends on what it is,” she said into her mug. That was the worst part. Within minutes of the nausea abating, her stupid stomachs would starting grumbling for food again — just not always the food they had on hand.

She heard Tom shuffling around their shelter and opening the stasis drawer. He made a worried sound and B’Elanna looked up at him. He was trying to look happy. He was not doing a very good job. “So,” he said, his smile more of a rictus, “we have leola root stew or… leola root bread.”

B’Elanna could hardly believe what came out of her mouth next. “Actually, that sounds really good.”

Tom’s grimace changed to a surprised frown. “Which one?”

“Both,” B’Elanna said, waving him towards her. “Bring ’em over. But, can you make it cold? I want it cold.”

It took Tom a few minutes to adjust the drawer’s settings and chill her a plate. “Maybe you should
take it easy today,” he said as he waited. “Just stay here. Put your feet up.”

B’Elanna snorted. “Right. That’ll go over great. ‘I know you’re all worried that we’re going to freeze and starve to death by this time next year, but I’m going to take a personal day.’ Rollins will call for my head.” Her legs bounced. How long did it take to cool down some food?

Tom slid the plate in front of her, his eyes widening as she dug in with gusto. “I’ll make up something,” he said, passing her a napkin. “A GI bug, maybe. Who cares what Rollins thinks?”

“According to what Ayala told you, at least half the camp,” B’Elanna said, pausing a moment for another swallow of tea. “And it’ll just mean I’ll have to do twice as much work tomorrow.” She went back to her meal, rolling her eyes at Tom’s still troubled expression. As usual since they’d found out about the pregnancy, B’Elanna was torn between appreciating his concern and wanting to slap him across the face. At the moment, she was leaning towards the latter. No wonder he’d been so pissed off back when she’d constantly hovered over him. “You should get going if you want to be back before dark.”

“I can go another day.”

B’Elanna stuffed the last of the bread in her mouth and got up from the table. Ignoring Tom’s protests, she picked up his pack and strapped it onto him, jamming a hat on his head and a phaser in his holster to boot. “You’re going today. Freezing rain is moving in overnight, and Seven’s not sure when it’s going to clear. Thank you for the tea, and the washcloth, and the foot rubs, but I’m fine. I am not the first pregnant woman in existence.”

Tom made a face. “I’m getting annoying, huh?”


She watched him for a few minutes from the doorway, as he limped towards the path up to Voyager. He was going to have to stop soon, make someone else take over the supply trips until next spring. Even better if he could convince Janeway to come back down, but B’Elanna had long given that up as an unattainable fantasy. Tom was still fighting hard for his optimism, but if anything, he’d said, Janeway had been more withdrawn the last time he’d seen her. Seven would barely speak of her conversations with the other woman, but what little she had said wasn’t encouraging.

Once her empty plate and mug were washed and dried, B’Elanna sank back into her chair. Her hand passed briefly over her abdomen before she abruptly shook her head and fixed the loose strands of her braid. The crushing fatigue she’d felt a couple of weeks ago was better, yes, but she still felt tired much of the time. Although how much of that was the pregnancy and how much was discouragement was hard to say.

It was such an idiotic idea — a baby! Now! Even if they weren’t headed straight for a permanent power outage, B’Elanna wouldn’t have wanted to condemn a child to this life. Because what kind of life was it? Not even fifty people, struggling to keep themselves warm and fed each day. Not nearly enough of them to start a real colony. And the resources a pregnancy and an infant would take! It was selfish, really.

On top of that — assuming B’Elanna could have a successful pregnancy in this shithole and the baby survived its first, fragile months — what would the long term be like? Everyone getting older and older. Each person the child knew and loved getting sick or hurt, eventually dying, until the child itself died. Alone.
Tom was trying his hardest to not pressure her, but sometimes he couldn’t help himself. “Think of how happy Naomi is despite everything,” he’d say. “Think of how everyone takes care of her.” Or she’d hear him humming: soft, gentle songs. Not the ‘rock and roll’ he usually preferred. Lullabies, she suspected, although he’d always deflect if she asked him what it was. He’d be a good father, B’Elanna knew, from watching him with Naomi. One of those endearing, sentimental dads that would coo over his babies and clown around with his kids.

There was a part of B’Elanna that wanted to give him that. A part that saw the baby just like he did — a promise, of sorts, that they had a future. A bit of hope.

A bigger part of her, however, knew that it was wrong. She couldn’t do it to the others: create another mouth to feed and body to clothe. She couldn’t do it to Tom: make him watch a child she knew he would adore struggle and suffer alongside the rest of them. She got back up from the table, her hand rubbing her abdomen again. She also couldn’t do it to herself: create a life that could get ripped away any minute by disease or the elements.

She just didn’t know if she was strong enough to end it, either.

A loud knock disrupted her thoughts, and she opened the shelter’s door. “Joe,” she said in greeting. “Sorry. I know I’m running a little behind. Just give me—”

“B’Elanna,” he interrupted, ignoring her gestured invitation to enter the shelter. “It’s Rollins. We need to go. Now.”

The nice thing about working with the same people for nearly five years was you developed your own shorthand. The reason Joe was such a good second was because he didn’t panic. He didn’t bother her with every little thing. If Joe Carey said something was a big deal, it was a big fucking deal. B’Elanna threw on her jacket and boots, not bothering to fasten either. “What’s going on?”

Joe explained in between comming Ayala and Dalby to join them. Rollins had finally done it — what Tom and Joe had been warning her about, and she’d stupidly been ignoring. He’d brought a team up to Voyager during the brownout period last night, and taken the mining equipment. “What the fuck?” she barked as they jogged together, out of Hoth and towards the northern cave system. “He doesn’t know what he’s doing! What’s he going to do, just aim the macrodrill at the side of the mountain and hope for the best?”

“He’s been doing those scans, remember?” Joe panted, trying to match her pace. “You told me two weeks ago to give him the OK.”

“I assumed he’d write a report or something, not blow up the damn mountain!” She picked up speed. “We need to stop him. I need that macrodrill.”

They heard it before they could see it — the drill wasn’t a quiet piece of equipment. An irate Seven of Nine wasn’t too quiet, either.

“I informed you yesterday that you were not authorized to handle this equipment,” Seven was yelling over the sound of the drill’s rotors.

“You told us to stop taking it apart,” they heard Rollins shout back. “And we did. As you can see, it’s perfectly intact and in working order.”

As B’Elanna came over the rise with Joe, she saw that a good chunk of Hoth had gathered — excluding the Wildmans, all the former Maquis, and half the remaining engineers. He did this on purpose, B’Elanna realized. He called them all here to see. Only a half-dozen of those gathered
seemed actively involved in running the drill and the excavator. The rest were gathered in groups of three or four, all whispering and darting looks around the small clearing.

*Looks like we’re having this out once and for all.* B’Elanna stepped up to Seven’s side, putting a hand on the other woman’s arm. “Shut it down, Rollins,” she said, her voice a low growl.

Rollins turned to her, bumping Seven hard to the side so nothing stood between him and B’Elanna. “And why the hell should I do that, Torres?”

“Because,” she said, never taking her eyes from his, “I need that drill for something else. Because you don’t know what the hell you’re doing. And because I’m in charge around here.”

“And why is that?” he demanded. “I sure didn’t sign you up for the job.” He looked around the clearing. “How about the rest of you? Does anyone else remember taking a vote? No? OK, then.” He grinned at B’Elanna and took another step closer. “Seems like you’re decidedly lacking in support, Chief. So how about you take a step back and let someone else take a turn?”

B’Elanna’s fists clenched hard. Did this *petaQ* think a few extra centimeters in height was going to intimidate her? B’Elanna had been pushed around by much bigger deals than Rollins before, and she’d always been happy to push right back. The facts were on her side: she was an engineer, she was one of the few with the knowledge and experience to keep Hoth going, and maybe even get them off this fucking rock. Rollins was just a sniveling little bureaucrat, and B’Elanna would not let him forget it. She closed the gap between them until their chests bumped together. “If you think you scare me, Rollins, think again.”

“Oh no,” he said, not giving any ground. “Nothing scares the Klingon. Not even the idea of losing our heat, or lights, or food. Who needs any of that when you have your honor? This is all just another battle to you, right? Well, you’ll forgive me if I don’t think it’s such a good day to die.”

Rollins thought she was too Klingon, huh? Well, B’Elanna would be happy to show him exactly how Klingon she could be. Her lips curled back in a snarl. “Listen, you moron. I’m saying this once more since you were too stupid to get it the first time. You need to back the hell off, or you and I are going to have a problem. Shut it down.”

“Or what?” Rollins sneered. “You’ll break my nose, hoping it’ll make me fall in line like Carey?”

A haze of red filtered across B’Elanna’s vision. Her hand flew out and grabbed Rollins by the collar. “You son of a—”

She was interrupted by a chorus of protests: “Let him go!” “Back off, Torres!”

Stunned, she took a step back. Rollins had over twenty centimeters and probably thirty kilos on her, and they thought she was the aggressor? She was the one in the wrong here?

“You don’t understand,” she called out to the crowd. “We don’t know anything about mining here. We have no idea what we’ll do to this cave system, or—”

Another round of grumbled complaints. “Here we go again.” “She cares more about this planet than us.” “Maybe she should worry more about fixing our problems than bossing everyone around.”

But one voice in particular penetrated the din.

“Maybe give him a shot, Chief.”
B’Elanna, still nonplussed by how the crowd was turning, turned to her right. It was Garbose. He used to be on alpha with her on Voyager. Starfleet enlisted, and always a good guy. He’d never given her crap about being Maquis, or half-Klingon. He’d worked hard for her from day one, every morning tossing her a jaunty salute in greeting, a broad grin crossing his earnest round face.

His smile now was apologetic. “It doesn’t seem like you’ve got a better idea yet, right? So maybe give this mining thing a shot.”

“We’re all scared, B’Elanna,” Nicoletti added, taking a step away from where she stood by the controls of the macrodrrill. “You were a good chief, but this is different. Maybe if Janeway were here. Or Chakotay.” B’Elanna stared back at her and Sue averted her eyes. She still had more to say, though. “But they’re not, and you’re not getting the job done. We need to try something else.”

“Tell them, B’Elanna,” Seven said.

She turned to meet Seven’s ice-blue eyes and blinked, for a moment not sure what the former drone meant. The beacon, it occurred to her a beat later. She wants me to tell them about the beacon. But as she looked around the gathered crowd, only a handful of sympathetic faces amongst the resentment and discontent, B’Elanna realized the beacon didn’t matter. These people didn’t want a promise that help might come someday. They didn’t want to face the grim reality of their future, or lack thereof. They wanted someone who would solve their problems right now, and, barring that, they’d settle for someone that claimed they would. B’Elanna knew she couldn’t do either.

“You tell them, Seven, if you want,” she said, her voice dull. She looked around at the others, none of whom would meet her eyes. “And the rest of you can have what you want, too. I’m done. It’s all yours, Rollins.”

She headed back towards Hoth, ignoring Dalby’s and Carey’s calls to come back. She could pack up their things, she thought. Snag some food, a few power cells, and head up to Voyager. She could easily get up there before Tom was back. Maybe the two of them could stay there, with Janeway. Or maybe they’d forge their own way somewhere else — lower in the valley. It might be warmer there. The winters might not be so cold.

B’Elanna shook her head. What a stupid fantasy. Tom wouldn’t survive a winter outside of Hoth, and he wouldn’t feel right about leaving the few people that supported them behind. Truthfully, she didn’t either. They weren’t going anywhere. Instead, B’Elanna would have stay right where she was, keep her mouth shut and do whatever Rollins told her to do, all while everything she’d worked for fell apart around them. She swiped at her suddenly damp and burning eyes.

Then the wind shifted, and B’Elanna froze.

Nylanil. That smelled just like nylanil.

B’Elanna charged back up the hill, pushing through the gathered crowd. “Rollins! Don’t you smell that?”

He was next to the drill. He’d been arguing with Seven and Carey, but all three fell silent at B’Elanna’s yell. “Nylanil gas!” she said. “This whole area reeks of it.”

Rollins sniffed the air, then waved a dismissive hand. “I don’t smell anything,” he said. “And we’re not idiots, as much as you like to say it. I scanned for nylanil before we started. We even put in a vent just in case. We know what we’re doing.”

He turned back to the drill and muttered something to Nicoletti. B’Elanna waved Seven and Carey
“Give me a tricorder. Now.”

Seven offered hers, an eyebrow raised. “An interesting attempt at diversion, B’Elanna, but I fear not a convincing one.”

“It’s not a diversion,” she snapped. “I smell it.” She scanned the tricorder’s readouts. “But I don’t see anything here…” She made a few taps, then looked up at the other two in horror. “Because it’s not the nylanil we’re used to. It’s some kind of isomer. And it’s even more combustible. Shit. We need to shut this down now. You two, get Ayala and Dalby, and get everyone out of here. Do it at phaser point if you need to.”

Carey was already moving but Seven stared back at her. “What will you be doing?”

“Dealing with Rollins,” B’Elanna said. “Go, Seven! Get everyone to safety!”

Rollins had already moved on from the drill and was walking towards the excavator. B’Elanna grabbed him by the shoulder. “Rollins, we need to stop this!”

“Forget it, Torres,” he said, shaking loose from her grip. “You turned things over to me, remember? I’m in charge now. I’m not going to give that up just because you changed your mind two seconds later.”

“Damn it,” she snapped, shoving the tricorder in his face. “Look at these readings! We’re right on a pocket of nylanil! It’s just not the isomer we’re used to — you would have missed it on a basic scan!”

He took the device roughly from her hand, and for a moment B’Elanna feared he was going to toss it to the ground. Rollins started to scan the screen, though, and she saw the moment he comprehended the readings. “Fuck,” he said, looking at her with eyes widened in fear. “Fuck. What do we do?”

“Shut it down, Nicoletti!” B’Elanna yelled, turning from Rollins. “Now!”

Sue glanced up, but based on her irritated and defiant expression, she’d not been able to hear B’Elanna’s concerns over the drill’s rotors. “Look, Chief, I’m sorry, but—”

With a whoosh of air and a blast of heat, the first puff of gas ignited, sending a ball of flames high into the air before it dispersed.

B’Elanna shoved Nicoletti out of the way and began to shut down the drill herself. “Why is this thing so fucking slow to respond?” she demanded of no one, looking over to where Murphy was running the excavator. “Turn that off, too! We need to get all the heat off!”

Behind her, Rollins had finally been spurred into action. “Whicher! Gantry! Get that fire suppression equipment prepped and ready. Lopez and I are going to seal off that vent!”

Seal off the vent? B’Elanna looked up, sure she’d misheard over the finally slowing whirs of the drill’s rotors. Rollins would know better, right? Even he had to know increasing the pressure on a highly flammable and already overheated gas was a bad idea. She scanned the area for him and Lopez, trying to see what they were actually up to.

“Oh, fuck,” she muttered when she spotted them, aiming their phasers at the rocks above their single ventilation hole. Sealing it tightly only a few seconds later, and before B’Elanna could get out her next words. “Rollins! Lopez! Get the hell away from there!”
They both turned to her, her voice loud now that the drill had fallen silent. B’Elanna had just enough time to register Rollins’ look of befuddlement and curse the man’s idiocy and arrogance when the rock face exploded outward in a roar of sound and flame.

Buzzing in her ears.

The scent of fire and chemical coolant.

The rusty tinge of blood in her mouth.

Her cheek pressed into the gravel and rock.

B’Elanna raised her head, each of her senses coming back online one after the other. She saw the others running through the smoke and haze. She next registered Dalby, spraying retardant over the surrounding trees. The high-pitched ringing in her ears faded until she could make out the voices of Joe and Nicoletti, directing others where to aim their efforts. A hand brushed her cheek and she startled, then realized she couldn’t move anything below her waist.

“Easy, B’Elanna.” Ayala was kneeling next to her, staring intently into her eyes. “You with us?”

“Yeah,” she coughed, then spit a mix of grit and blood into the dirt. “But I can’t get up.”

“The drill’s on you. We’re clearing it away now. You in any pain?”

She did a quick mental inventory, then shook her head. “Nothing bad. I’m just trapped, I think. What about everyone else? Is anyone—”

“Nothing big,” Ayala said. “Far as I can tell. Just bumps and bruises. Carey’s nearly got the fire contained. Just try to relax, OK? We’ll have you out in a jiff.”

With a quick squeeze of her shoulder, Ayala rose and moved somewhere behind her. That’s when his words hit her. The drill. It fell on her. Which meant… “Ayala, is the drill OK?” she yelled back.

“Hang on, Torres,” he grunted back. “We’re almost done.”

She felt the weight shift away and she pulled herself forward, clambering to her feet once she was clear. The drill was a wreck. A massive chunk of rock had taken out the entire front half, likely destroying both of the sonic rotors. It was unusable. Seven’s beacon was all but a lost cause. She stumbled against the rubble and a hand grabbed her arm to steady her. “Sit down, B’Elanna. You might be hurt.”

It was Rollins.

B’Elanna ripped out of his hand and rounded on him. “Get your hands off me.”

He fell back a step, arms outstretched. “Take it easy, Chief! I was just trying to help!”

She charged, shoving him hard into the now destroyed macrodrill. “‘Chief’? What, now that you’ve fucking ruined everything, you’re happy to let me be the leader again?”

Rollins slowly climbed back to his feet, Nicoletti coming to help him. “Look,” he said, his face flushed red. “I realize I didn’t handle things perfectly—”

“You blew up a fucking mountainside, Rollins!” she said, barely controlling her urge to launch herself back at him.
“You’re right, B’Elanna.” Nicoletti stepped between the two of them, her eyes focused on her old boss. “We shouldn’t have gone behind your back. But Scott was just trying to help. Maybe if you’d given his idea a shot instead of just shutting him down—”

“I didn’t give his idea a shot because it was stupid!” B’Elanna fired back at her. She turned her back on the two of them, and paced a tight circle. She should just walk away. Leave the rest of them to fend for themselves and see how they liked not having her to whine to every time a light flickered or they didn’t get enough for dinner.

Maybe it wasn’t such a terrible idea — getting Tom and moving south into the valleys. She could convince all the Maquis to come. Carey. Seven. Sam and Naomi. It would be hard, sure. But they’d figure it out. They could just run away from here. Leave it all behind.

B’Elanna closed her eyes and took a breath. That’s what it would be, wouldn’t it? Running away.

She turned back to the clearing. The fires were all out now, most of the haze had lifted. Despite her orders to clear the area, no one had gone very far. Even those Rollins had tried to exclude had appeared, no doubt having heard the commotion. B’Elanna climbed atop a nearby boulder and cleared her throat. She wished Tom were here — if only because he would have never believed she’d attempt something like this.

“Everybody listen up!”

All eyes were on her, and she was immediately filled with regret. She was a doer, not a talker. Inspiring people was a Janeway thing, and she was for sure not Janeway. She wished again for Tom — he would know what to say. He would be able to convince everyone to move on from this and realize that their only hope was to trust her. She could practically hear him now.

Then she smiled. If she knew exactly what Tom would say, why couldn’t she just say it? She cleared her throat again and looked up at the waiting crowd.

“I’m not one for big speeches, so I’ll keep this short. This place sucks. Our situation sucks. And chances are, it’s going to get worse before it gets better. If it gets better. But we can keep going, if we work together. I was going to make an announcement later today, about a beacon Seven of Nine designed. A beacon that might let us send a message home.”

She paused for the shocked whispers to move through the crowd and dissipate.

“Unfortunately, a key component of building that beacon is now lying destroyed under a few dozen kilos of rock over there. But,” she said, swallowing hard. “I’m not giving up.” She met Seven’s eyes, then, and got a nod of acknowledgment. Seven was still with her, at least.

“You don’t like me very much.” She ignored the few sounds of protests that arose. “It’s fine. I’m used to it. I don’t like a lot of you all that much, either. But the fact is: that doesn’t matter. Because you know — you all know — I’m the best person to keep this place going. So sure, you can have Rollins lead you. I’m sure he’ll be nicer than me. Be everybody’s pal. But he won’t get the job done.” She hopped off the rock and headed out of the clearing. “You know where to find me if you want someone who will.”

She would go up to Voyager. But just to find Tom and tell him what happened. Maybe she’d talk to Janeway, too. B’Elanna thought she might like to talk to her old captain. She had just adjusted her path to more of a westerly direction when her legs turned to mush. She put out a hand, but there was nothing there to steady her.
What the hell? Maybe she’d gotten more banged up in the explosion than she thought. Or maybe… Her hand went to her abdomen. The baby, she remembered, as a haze of black fell across her eyes.

“B’Elanna?”

“Give her some space!”

“Someone call Tom. He’s up at Voyager.”

B’Elanna blinked. Sam and Joe were hovering over her, and she was on the ground again. “What happened?” she asked, pushing herself to sitting.

“You fainted,” Sam said, eyeing her with concern. Joe put a supporting hand on her back.

“Stupid,” B’Elanna said, dusting herself off. “I didn’t eat much this morning. I’m sure that’s all it is.”

“Don’t get up,” Sam instructed. “Let me get a tricorder and make sure—”

“No!” B’Elanna barked, then flushed at the startled look in Sam’s eyes. “I mean, don’t go to any trouble. I’ll have Tom take a look at me later. It’s fine, really.” There was no need for anyone else to know about the pregnancy yet. It might be a moot point, after what just happened. An embryo couldn’t survive something like that, right? She got to her feet — despite Joe’s and Sam’s pleas to stay put — but regretted it when her stomachs turned over.

Sam was immediately at her side. “At least let us take you down to the Sacajawea,” she said. “Mike went to get Tom, we can wait for him there.”

Given she wasn’t sure her legs were going to get her there on their own, B’Elanna agreed. Joe made sure Seven had things under control at the caves, and then the three made their way back into Hoth. Once they finally reached the medical shuttle, B’Elanna gave Sam what she hoped was a reassuring smile, but she suspected the other woman saw through the facade, given the gentle hug she got in response.

It was odd, B’Elanna considered as she leaned into the other woman’s steady embrace. It’s not like she and Miral had ever been close. B’Elanna hadn’t been close to any older women, really. Not since her abuela — and she’d died when B’Elanna was barely five. But despite that, what she wanted right now more than anything — more than enough food to eat, or the beacon, or power, more than Tom, even — was for a hug from her mother.
Day 293 p.m.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tom dropped onto one of the conveniently located boulders he’d christened his ‘rest stops,’ but nearly jumped up again when his butt hit the frigid rock. His break would have to be a short one, or he’d never get up again. He took off his gloves so he could get at his water, carefully tucking each one into his pockets so they wouldn’t fall to the ground out of easy reach. What would have been a barely noticed inconvenience a year ago now had the potential to derail his whole day. Along with the cold weather, his back pain had returned with a vengeance.

B’Elanna had been right about not postponing coming up here. The cloud cover was already heavy over the summit, the sky the color of an old bruise. If he couldn’t convince Janeway to come back down to Hoth soon, he’d had have turn the supply runs back over to Lang and Nozawa until spring — assuming the two men would be willing. They were currently alternating the weeks Tom didn’t go, but Lang, especially, was grumbling about it more and more. Their old captain might have to come back to Hoth, or face starvation.

Tom hoped that the real meat of winter would hold off a few more weeks so it didn’t come down to an ultimatum. He needed more time. Because she was better. He’d seen it the first visit he’d made once he’d recovered from his pneumonia — her words were clearer, her gait more confident. She’d even asked him a few halting questions about his health, how things were with the others. It had encouraged him, that she was making an effort to look outward for once. He thought (for real this time) that it might be a sign she’d come back with him one of these days. But by the time he’d seen her again, a couple weeks later, it was like all their progress was lost. She was withdrawn again, sullen. On his last visit, she’d sobbed inconsolably as soon as he’d arrived, clinging to him when he’d gone to leave. Not exactly the Janeway that had once taken on the Borg. He’d asked Seven if she had any insight, knowing she’d spoken with the captain a few times recently, but the former drone was nearly as tight-lipped. All he could do was keep trying and hope that this latest setback was a temporary one.

At any rate, Tom couldn’t convince Janeway to come to Hoth if he didn’t haul his ass up there to talk to her first. With one last look at the oppressive sky, he gripped his walking stick hard and got himself upright. No time to dawdle if he didn’t want to get caught in the rain later.

Each step on the near-frozen soil was like jamming needles into his hip and spine. The wind was picking up, too, as he got closer to the summit. Tom might as well be naked by the time he got to Voyager, for all the protection his worn jacket provided against the frigid air. He tried to remember what it was like to be hot — dripping with sweat, the relief of stripping down and diving into an ice cold lake. He couldn’t remember what it was like to not be in pain, or to be able to take a full breath. But it was best to not dwell overmuch on that, and especially not on what would happen to him once they didn’t have replicated meds anymore, or enough power for heat.

Fortunately, his mind had recently found a suitable distraction. One that sometimes meant he had to work to keep a sappy grin off his face. One that might have made him sing as he hiked to Voyager, if only he still had the lungs for it.

He and B’Elanna were having a baby.

It was crazy to already be so attached. Tom knew this. B’Elanna was only five weeks along. She was underweight, exhausted, and under constant stress. It was a miracle she’d even gotten
pregnant. On top of that, he knew all the reasons it was a terrible idea to bring a baby into their current situation. B’Elanna was ambivalent about the idea at best. He knew his current role was mostly to support her in whatever decision she ended up making.

Yet he couldn’t stop thinking about it. Would the baby have his eyes, or B’Elanna’s nose? Would it come out blond or brunette? Would it be quiet and serious, like the little girl Tom imagined B’Elanna to have been; or would it be a hellion that would make them want to tear out their hair, as Tom’s mother had always implied about him?

He wished there was at least someone he could share his excitement with. But he and B’Elanna both agreed it was best not to tell anyone about the pregnancy yet, with things so uncertain. Talking to B’Elanna wasn’t an option either. She had told him she needed space on this, time to consider the options and decide what was best. She didn’t even want to know the baby’s sex.

“It’ll be easy to tell, B’Elanna,” he’d told her. “I’ve already scanned the genetic code for serious defects—”

“Are there any?”

Tom’s heart had lifted at the touch of panic in her voice. Maybe she was getting attached to the idea, too. “No, of course not. I would have told you. But a few quick adjustments, and we’ll know the whole code — if it’s going to be a boy or girl.”

“No. I don’t want to know. I can’t start thinking about it that way yet.”

He took a breath. Pressuring B’Elanna into anything rarely ended well. “OK, I won’t tell you. But do you mind if I just take a—”

“No!” She’d jumped off the biobed at that point, taking the tricorder from him. “If you know, you’ll let it slip. I know you will. Can’t we just take some time? Figure out how we feel about what we already know before we find out anymore?”

Tom, of course, already knew how he felt about it. Had pretty much known since five minutes after he found out. But her uterus, her call. So he’d just smiled, kissed her on her ridges, and promised he wouldn’t say another word until she told him she was ready to discuss it.

It was getting harder to keep that promise every day. He couldn’t help it. The baby had become a sign to him — that maybe they did have a future. That the beacon’s signal would go through, that help was on the way. That Naomi would meet her father, that Joe would see his kids again. That maybe Tom wouldn’t spend the rest of his life in pain, and B’Elanna could get a break from her constant worry. It was a lot to put on a little clump of cells, but that didn’t change the fact that that was exactly what he had done.

He’d reached the final kilometer of the path to Voyager, the boulder-strewn, steep section that he dreaded. “Sooner I start, sooner I get it over with,” he reminded himself, pausing for a quick swallow of water.

Then he heard the explosion.

It had come from the caves north of Hoth. He could see a flock of birds take off from the area, a few wisps of smoke. “What the hell?” He cursed himself for not bringing a set of binoculars. Hitting his comm badge got him nothing but static — dead zone. Shit. He spared Voyager a quick glance before making his decision. Janeway would have to wait.

While the terrain wasn’t quite as treacherous as that final kilometer up to Voyager, Tom didn’t
have an easy time of it. There was no worn path like the one directly into Hoth, no convenient rest stops — not that he would have taken advantage. The possible causes of the explosion ran through his mind. They didn’t keep any equipment up there, and the only animals worth hunting in that area were the rock bunnies. They used low powered phasers for those; blowing the little rodents into smithereens would hardly make for good eating. It didn’t make any sense.

And then it hit him, as his lungs burned and his legs were screaming at him to stop, or at least temper his pace: Rollins. He’d been going on and on about mining lately, ever since B’Elanna’s announcement about the power. It was an idiotic idea — none of them knew enough about mining or ore processing to make it worth their while — but he’d latched onto it with the determination of a bulldog with a prized chunk of bone.

But he couldn’t have been stupid enough to try something on his own, could he? The two people that did know anything about mining — Tabor had worked in one in the labor camps, and Golwat had minored in geology at the Academy — were both B’Elanna loyalists. They would have never helped him without checking with her first.

“Never underestimate the potential for stupidity in a desperate soul, Tom,” his father had once said after returning home from a particularly trying mission. A twelve-year-old Tom had laughed at the time, thinking his dad was making a rare joke. But he’d seen some twenty years’ worth of desperate souls since then, himself included, and a good deal of the accompanying stupidity. He picked up his pace.

But couldn’t sustain it. He’d barely made it halfway to the caves when he hit a patch of loose gravel and fell. “Damn it!” His walking stick had fallen out of his hand and was laying over a meter away. Tom tried to get up without it but only managed to stumble again. Didn’t matter. He’d crawl if he had to. Rollins had clearly done something stupid, and there could be people down there hurt, or worse. B’Elanna could be one of those people. He took as deep a breath as he could, and tried again.

“Paris!”

Tom looked up, and saw Ayala jogging towards him from the direction of the explosion. His face was red from running, and there were a few smudges of ash and dirt on his face, but Tom didn’t detect any panic there. Of course, it was Ayala. He probably hadn’t even panicked when Tom had been busy crashing Voyager into the mountain they now called home. “Here!” he said, waving his hand in the air. He decided to wait for help rather than try to get up again on his own. He wouldn’t be good to anyone if he threw out his back.

“Tried to comm,” Ayala panted as he helped Tom to his feet. “Only got static. It’s B’Elanna.”

Tom’s face must have said what his mouth couldn’t, because Ayala’s expression steadied. “Hey, Paris, she’s OK. She wasn’t really hurt, just fainted. Sam and Joe are walking her to the Sacajawea now.”

His lungs agreed to start breathing again, so Tom could press for details. “What the hell happened?”

As they started back towards Hoth, Ayala filled him in — Rollins’ attempts to undermine B’Elanna, his ill-conceived mining plan, the explosion. “She got trapped under the drill — and yeah, the drill’s a goner — but she seemed OK. Nearly broke Rollins’ jaw right after. Then she gave this speech—”

Only Tom’s worry kept him from stopping in his tracks. “B’Elanna?” he panted. “A speech?”
Ayala gave him a small smile. “Yup. Pretty good one, too. Short, anyway.” He pulled on Tom’s arm. “Uh, why don’t we slow down? Sam’s with her, and you look like hell. Take a breath. You won’t be much help if you pass out on the way.”

He hated that Ayala was right, but that didn’t change reality. Tom nodded and stopped, leaning heavily on the other man as he freed his water bottle. “Tell me the rest.”

Ayala’s reticence was notorious, so Tom suspected some of the nuance was lost in the telling, but he felt a surge of love and pride when he found out what B’Elanna had said in response to Rollins’ pathetic attempt at mutiny. “Good for her,” he said with a smile.

The Sacajawea had a full house by the time they got there. Tom could hear Dalby’s raucous laugh the moment the hatch was cracked. “You should have heard it, Chief. Seven ripped him a new one after you left, and every single one of Rollins’ cronies made fast tracks. Remind me to never piss off the Borg.”

Tom pushed past the half-dozen Maquis and engineers that had gathered inside the makeshift sickbay. “B’Elanna?”

She was perched on the edge of the biobed — disheveled, dirty, but very much alive and eating soda crackers. “Joe got them for me,” she explained, wiping crumbs from her mouth. “I was feeling queasy.”

“Did you run any scans yet, Sam?” Tom asked, but he never took his eyes from B’Elanna’s.

“Not yet,” Sam said. Tom could hear the confusion in her voice. “She wanted to wait for you.”

Tom didn’t need a tricorder to see how exhausted B’Elanna was. And anxious. Not so different from how he felt, then. “Can you guys clear the room?” he said, trying his best for nonchalance. “You’re sucking up all the oxygen, and I need as much as I can get.”

It took several minutes for them all to leave, as each one had to clap B’Elanna on the shoulder or remind her that they’d had her back from the beginning. Despite the pain in his hips and spine, Tom had to pace to stop from physically booting them all out the hatch. Finally only Sam was left. “Do you need any help?”

“That’s OK, Sam,” Tom said, once he got a quick head shake from B’Elanna. “Why don’t you go back up to the caves? Make sure no one has any injuries that need tending. Even superficial stuff should get regenerated — we don’t want to risk infection.”

Sam quashed a look of curiosity and grabbed a medkit before taking her leave. The minute he heard the hatch close, Tom flipped open the tricorder and began his scans. “Did you hit your head at all?” he asked, remembering the Doc’s repeated warnings about medical tunnel vision. “Any disorientation, or headache?” No point in asking about nausea.

B’Elanna shook her head. “My ears rang a little, but that was probably just because it was so loud. The explosion, I mean.”

Tom only nodded as he moved the tricorder wand towards her abdomen, afraid of how much his voice would shake if he spoke. Her vitals were all normal — no real change since the last time he’d scanned her, only a couple of days ago when he’d caught her napping after lunch. B’Elanna was fine, then. That was something — a big something. Tom could deal with anything else if B’Elanna was OK.

But he really, really hoped the baby was OK, too. He adjusted the tricorder’s scanner. There wasn’t
a ton of information out there about Klingon-human pregnancies, and much of it was extrapolation. Klingons had a shorter gestation — the equivalent of thirty Terran weeks — but the fetus was only a quarter-Klingon, so what that did to the equation, Tom wasn’t sure. Her placenta seemed fine, as far as he could tell, and her amniotic fluid levels were stable. As for the embryo...

There was a heartbeat.

“What is it?” B’Elanna asked. When Tom looked up, her eyes searched his. “Tell me. Did I lose the baby?”

Tom smiled through the tears that had just sprung to his eyes. “The baby’s fine,” he said. “It’s got a heartbeat.”

B’Elanna shoulders sagged and she let her breath out in a rush of air. Tom began to buzz around the shuttle. “Let me get the fetal scanner. It’ll do a more thorough job,” he said. “I won’t check the genetic code, I promise. But we can make sure the spinal cord’s OK, and the brain. That’s already starting to grow at this point, given I can detect a heartbeat. And it’s probably got little hands now, and feet. Can you imagine? I can make some holoprojections, if you want.” He paused to glance at her. She was still slumped where she sat. “Still too soon? That’s all right. I can make sure it’s OK without doing any imaging. But I’m sure it’s fine. You may be half-human, but your uterus is all Klingon. Our baby might as well be wearing a suit of armor.”

“Tom.”

“Sorry, sorry,” he said, returning to her side. “I know. I’m being annoying again. I’m just so relieved, B’Elanna. That you’re OK, but the baby, too. I know you’re not sure what you want to do yet, but I gotta be honest with you. I want it. I want this baby. And I think we can make it work. I know we can.”

“Tom,” B’Elanna said, ducking her head so that the loose strands of her hair hung in front of her face. “We’re not going to have this baby.”

He cupped his hands around her cheeks, bringing her face up to meet his. B’Elanna’s eyes were shining with tears. “Didn’t you hear me?” he asked, stroking her cheeks. “The baby’s fine, B’Elanna. It’s OK. Look at the tricorder yourself.”

B’Elanna placed her hands over his, and pulled them into her lap. “Tom. Listen to me. We’re not having a baby. There’s too much that can go wrong, and I can’t… I can’t do it. Not to the baby, and not to us. I’m sorry. We have to terminate.”

Later, he would feel terrible about his reaction, but in the moment there was little he could do to change it. His legs went first — he might as well have been standing on air. Then his vision went hazy, and B’Elanna’s voice got tinny and small. “Tom?” he heard her say before she gripped his arms in a tight hold. “Tom, let’s go sit. Come on. That’s it. Put your head down.”

It was maybe five minutes before his head cleared and his lungs opened up again, B’Elanna staying right beside him the whole time. “Sorry,” he mumbled, ashamed at what he’d done. As if this were something that was only happening to him.

“Me, too,” she said, and he knew she was crying.

It wasn’t long before he was crying, too.
I know there are going to be people upset with me for having B'Elanna's pregnancy end this way, so I wanted to write a little note of explanation.

I do not begrudge anyone that wants to write a relatively happy survival story (or even a depressing one) where the crew has crashed but ends up having kids. You do you! But I felt like there needed to be a story where someone chose the alternative, for all the reasons B'Elanna gave: the risk to the mother, the resources a pregnancy and newborn use, the fact that they don't have enough people to start a sustainable colony, having to watch your baby or young child take ill or die.

I also wanted to write a story where a character's abortion was more of a selfless choice. Ultimately, despite part of her really wanting to have a baby with Tom, B'Elanna chooses to end the pregnancy (and Tom does ultimately support her in this, as devastated as he is) yes, because it's the right choice for herself, but also because it's the best decision for the whole community.

Thanks, as always, for reading!
Day 296

Chapter Notes

If I have made you very sad, consider checking out Caseypthah's fun Harry and B'Elanna friendship fic, Coffee and Analgesics! A sure cure for all the angst I've been tossing at you!

Kathryn was sitting on a corner of Chakotay’s bed, wrapped in several blankets and working very hard at not being angry. She hadn’t been successful so far.

She had no right — to feel resentful of the worsening cold and how she’d had to ration her food the last three days. She’d told B’Elanna the day she left she expected nothing from the remaining crew. Kathryn had had every intention of taking care of herself. She hadn’t had much of a plan, as addled as she’d still been the day she’d gone back to Voyager, but she’d had every intention. She’d left the others because she’d become a burden, a leech incapable of contributing to the survival of the group.

But she’d gotten spoiled. When Nozawa had shown up that first day months earlier, she’d raged at him — the words had been gibberish, but the meaning had been clear. She would take nothing from the rest of them. He’d dropped the food and the power cells by the door and fled. Kathryn had meant to leave the supplies untouched, but her fingers and toes had been numb from cold, and she hadn’t had a thing to eat in two days. The famous Janeway stubbornness had lasted only three hours. The following week, when Lang had appeared, she’d tried the opposite tactic and ignored him entirely. That time, her resistance had lasted half a day.

Resistance was futile, or so they said.

Kathryn had formulated a new plan, then — one where she’d wait out the rest of the winter and then make her way south, towards the valleys and hopefully a warmer climate. She’d be stronger by spring, she’d decided. More capable of foraging on her own. But then there had always been a reason to postpone — Tom was expected that day, or there was a storm, or she had a bit of a cough. Now winter was just ahead, and she was still here — nothing but a useless parasite.

So no, it wasn’t fair that she was angry. But Tom had said he’d be here three days ago, and that’s what she’d planned for. Now her food was nearly gone, her power cell was empty, and if no one had come yet, maybe no one was coming at all.

Although maybe that was what she deserved.

She usually didn’t ask for a guarantee from Tom as to when someone was coming next — she’d ration out her food and power to make sure she had some padding in case the supplies were delayed by weather or another circumstance. But the day of Tom’s last visit had been a particularly bad one for Kathryn. An hour before his usual arrival time, she’d finally made it into Harry’s quarters. She’d known the clarinet was broken — had seen so from the gap in the door. But handling the cracked bell and bent keys up close, finding the shattered glass overlying a photo of Harry’s parents, tripping over the ‘ray-gun’ prop that Harry had once used in Tom’s Captain Proton program — it had made everything she’d lost (everything Voyager’s crew had lost) fresh again.
She took the bell and left the rest behind, trying to shove the door shut on the memories within but
finding it was as difficult to close as it was to open.

She kept a tight lid on her sorrow and tears as she trudged back to Chakotay’s quarters. The anger she could tolerate — she’d take it out on the bulkheads, the furniture, sometimes, regretfully, on Tom — but the grief made her feel weak and useless. She didn’t want him to see her like that — reduced to weeping like a small child. But, as with all her emotions, she had little control over her despair. Her tenuous hold slipped as soon as he made his appearance, his thin face bright with its usual false cheer when he greeted her. Her tears broke free only a moment later, and when she couldn’t stop the sobs that closed off her throat and burned her chest, Tom had rocked her in his wasted arms until she calmed.

He tried to get her to speak afterwards, to tell him what had made her so distraught, but as was usually the case when her emotions flamed out of control, she couldn’t summon any of the words. He gave up after she mutely pushed him away, told her he’d leave her in peace and that he wasn’t sure how much longer he’d be able to keep coming given the worsening weather. Kathryn panicked. She knew, of course, that the day was coming when Tom would have to stop — once it stayed below freezing and the snow moved in, he’d never be able to make the trek up from the camp. But hearing it from him was different. She was still conflicted about his visits — being faced with a broken and subdued Tom Paris made her guilt flare anew every damn time — but he was also her lifeline. The one person that seemed convinced maybe someday she could be Kathryn Janeway again.

So she’d grabbed his heavy jacket before he could put it back on, prompting a confused frown from Tom. “What’s up?”

“When are you coming again?”

Tom sighed. “I’m not sure. Seven says the weather could turn any day now and we might not get a lot of warning. But someone will come, I promise. Nozawa or Lang, probably. Although there is another option: you could always come—”

“No!” Kathryn shouted, backing away. She wasn’t going back. Why did everyone want her to go back? How could she, after all she’d done?

Tom raised his hands and softened his voice. “It’s OK, Kathryn. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“When are you coming again?” she repeated, stressing the pronoun.

He’d rattled off a list of reasons that he couldn’t promise anything — all of which she recognized as completely legitimate — but it didn’t mitigate her need. “Please, Tom.”

He relented. “Two weeks, then. It’s my best guess, OK? If the weather’s crap, no guarantees. But I’ll try, Kathryn. I promise.”

But Tom was three days late, and Kathryn was cold and hungry. There’d been some rain, yes, but the day he was scheduled to come had only been cloudy, and it had been clear since midday yesterday. If anyone was that ill, or badly injured, they would have activated the Doctor. And if Tom were sick again, then someone else would have come. So Tom must be fine. He had to be. The alternative was unacceptable.

Or perhaps the niggling fear she had in the back of her mind was correct. Perhaps B’Elanna had decided to put an end to the deliveries. Kathryn couldn’t blame her if she had. Maybe there were no more supplies to be spared for their former captain. Maybe that’s why B’Elanna never came to see
her. Kathryn had always chalked it up to what were probably a hundred other demands on her time, but perhaps it was because B’Elanna knew she needed distance. It would be easier, wouldn’t it, to cut off someone who’d become more an abstraction than a real person?

Kathryn jerked up from the bed and began to pace, unable to keep still as her body was flooded with shame and anger. What had the crash done to her? How had she become such a wretched creature, so wracked with self-pity she couldn’t even fend for herself anymore? She imagined what her father would think of her now. Owen Paris. Harry. Chakotay. They wouldn’t even recognize the person she’d become. She grabbed the nearest object — the hefty novel she’d found in Tom’s quarters — and lifted it to throw against the wall.

“You here?”

It was Tom.

Kathryn dropped the book with a soft thunk onto the bed and peered out into the living area.

Tom’s back was towards her. Something was off. His movements were rushed and careless as he yanked out her spent power cell and dropped some food containers into her stasis unit. “What’s wrong?” she asked from the door, her voice, as always, rusty from disuse.

“Nothing.” He didn’t even turn to look at her.

Kathryn crept forward. This wasn’t like Tom at all. He was always upbeat when he arrived, working, usually without success, to keep his pain from her. The very few times he’d lost his patience it had been her fault — because she’d ignored him or because her brain decided he was a suitable receptacle for the self-directed rage that as her constant companion. Kathryn wasn’t sure how to handle him being withdrawn. A year ago, she might have pulled him into her ready room, encouraged him to talk, perhaps ordered him to open up if he refused; but their dynamic was so different now. She wasn’t his captain or mentor. She was his… patient, she supposed. Or maybe dependent was a better word.

But perhaps she was also still his friend. She nudged him with the PADD. He was always trying to get her to work on her reading and her speech. Maybe seeing she’d taken his advice would cheer him up. “I’ve been working on this.”

“Good for you.” Which was the exact same thing Tom had said the last time she’d shared her efforts. Although that time it had been said with kindness. Today the delivery was flat.

“How’s Naomi? Does she want to come visit?” she asked, increasingly desperate for him to engage her. How did he not understand, how much she needed this brief connection with another person?

“She’s fine, and I think she’s given up on the visit idea,” he said, lowering the power cell back into place. “I’m just about done here. I’ve got to get back. Nozawa will probably come next week.”

That was it? He made her wait three days longer than he promised and he couldn’t even give her five minutes? Or at least an explanation? Her hand gripped tight around the PADD and she imagined slapping him with it. When the loud whack registered in her ears, she realized that’s exactly what she’d done.

“Damn it,” he snapped, backing away from her and rubbing his shoulder “When are you going to stop pulling that shit? I’m not your whipping boy.”

Why had she hit him? She hadn’t meant to hit him. She threw the PADD to the floor and shouted the only explanation she had. “You were late!”
His eyes rolled to the ceiling as he shouldered his pack. “For crying out loud,” he muttered before turning to her with a glare. “Today was the first day I could come. I’ve got other responsibilities. Do you think we’re all just sitting around, playing cards down there? Didn’t you hear the explosion?”

Explosion? She had heard that, hadn’t she? Three days ago. The day Tom was supposed to come. She’d heard the boom, saw a few wisps of smoke from the woods, and then she gone back to her sulking without giving it a second thought. “You promised,” she said, but her voice was barely more than a whisper.

“I promised?” His features contorted into an ugly sneer. “You want to talk about promises, Kathryn? How about the promises a Starfleet captain makes her crew?” He gestured at the dented and dirty walls. “I don’t think this is what they meant when they said ‘the captain goes down with the ship.’”

He was right to be angry with her. She never asked him how he was handling things, never checked in on B’Elanna, or any of the others. It hadn’t even occurred to her to wonder about an explosion that must have only been a few kilometers from their settlement. How the mighty have fallen.

“Sorry,” she said, then stumbled her way towards the bedroom. “Don’t come again,” she added. She didn’t deserve anything from them. Not anymore.

“Good for you,” he said again, and now the words were mocking. “Running away to hide. Best not to find out what anyone else has been going through lately. Might get in the way of your self-pity.”

Kathryn stopped. Not at the words — it was nothing she hadn’t said to herself a hundred times before. But at his voice. It had cracked. Like he was trying not to cry. She turned and saw him, nearly bent double over the dining table, his arms shaking. “Tom?”

“B’Elanna’s pregnant,” he said, his voice rough and barely audible.

She crept back to him. Placed a hand on his shoulder. Remembered how she used to do that when he sat at the helm.

“So stupid,” he said, taking an angry swipe at his eyes. “We were so careless. She stopped taking her boosters. To conserve energy, you know? I forgot to check my implant after I was sick, and who’s heard of an accidental cross-species pregnancy? When does that ever happen?”

Kathryn kept her hand where it was, but her stomach turned. “The baby is… is it sick? Is B’Elanna sick?”

Tom shook his head. “The baby’s fine. A perfect specimen, as the Doc might say. B’Elanna’s OK, too.” He took a few shaky breaths. “We’re not keeping it.”

Her hand fell back to her side.

Tom straightened and cleared his throat, but he didn’t look at her. “It’s the only thing that makes sense. I had this idea… It doesn’t matter. B’Elanna’s right. We don’t have the resources to support a pregnancy, or a newborn.” Tom rubbed at his reddened eyes. “It’s hard, so much harder than I would have thought, but the alternative? Having the baby, only for it to get sick or malnourished…” He shook his head. “It’s better this way.”

Kathryn put her hands up to her ears and felt her throat close. It was as if his news had sucked the oxygen from the room. She began to moan.

“Kathryn?”
She turned to the shelves by the window and began to grab each of Chakotay’s bowls, dashing them to the ground. What had she done? She’d been so driven to get them home at all costs, so worried about what it meant to be stuck in the Delta Quadrant, that she’d never thought of everything she had risked. She sank to her knees, grinding them into the broken pottery and began to smack her balled hands against her temples.

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.”

The ice in Tom’s voice startled her, and she looked up, her hands falling open into her lap.

“Did you even hear what I said? B’Elanna is pregnant. We aren’t keeping the baby.” He barked out a laugh when she said nothing. “God, you still don’t get it. Not everything is about you! Not every loss is yours! This is happening to us, Kathryn, not you. Which maybe you’d notice if you got your head out of your ass and stopped feeling so damn sorry for yourself.” He adjusted his backpack and put on his gloves. “I’m done. I’m tired of breaking my back every two weeks to come up here, only to get smacked, or ignored. I’m tired of you thinking everything that ever went bad since the beginning of time is the fault of the great Kathryn Janeway. B’Elanna said we can keep making supply runs through the winter, assuming anyone’s willing to come up here. After that, you’re on your own.” He limped towards the door and shoved it open. “Good-bye, Captain.”

Kathryn sat on the floor, staring at the closed door, for only a few minutes. She let a few tears fall, which she wiped from her eyes herself. She picked up the PADD from the floor, and cleaned up the broken pottery as best she could. She went to the bedroom, found her flimsiest blanket and ripped it into several large pieces. Once that was done, she selected the only bowl of Chakotay’s that she’d left intact and carefully wrapped it in a piece of blanket. She did the same with Tuvok’s meditation candle, and the bell of Harry’s clarinet. It took a while, to find a suitable piece of luggage. The satchel she used on her collection runs would never hold enough. But Chakotay had a fair-sized backpack under the bed. It would do.

Once the bag was three-quarters full, she peered out the windows. The daylight was growing dim, and while she was far stronger than she was when she’d come up here nine months ago, she still didn’t move very quickly. She’d have to stay here one more night. Tom had left her a decent share of food — including three oranges, which were her favorite. She ate one, along with a light meal of broth and cornbread, and packed anything non-perishable into her pack. She’d have to put the rest in before she left.

The only question was Tom’s novel. She still couldn’t read enough to tell what it was other than thick and heavy. It would be an inconvenience, lugging that substantial tome around on her back. Kathryn put it in the bag.

Tom might want to read it again.

It was time for her to give it back to him.
B’Elanna was trying very hard to focus on her work, and not on checking the darkening skies outside the window. Clearly she was failing, as the tricorder in her hand gave an angry beep. “Yeah, yeah,” she muttered, returning her attention to the device and making a few quick adjustments.

The gel pack sitting on her dining table should have been more than enough to keep her attention. It was the third pack that had undergone conversion to being self-powered, and it was by far the most successful. Pack Epsilon Two-Three had produced enough energy to run for up to eight hours. If their deuterium supply were stable, the energy savings they’d gain by converting all the gel packs would be enough to power all the greenhouses for months.

Too bad their deuterium supply was still steadily going to shit. Also too bad both sonic rotors from the macro-drill had been destroyed, eliminating any chance of building a hydroelectric generator. Too bad even Seven’s redesigned solar batteries were finicky most days, and too bad B’Elanna was pretty much out of ideas.

It came down to this: they invest a chunk of their remaining power into the beacon and run out of deuterium no more than five months from now, or they limped along until the end, waiting for someone to have a new stroke of genius that would likely never come.

But neither their energy issues nor the successful gel pack upgrade was foremost on her mind at the moment. B’Elanna stared at the door. Right now she just wanted Tom to come home.

Her decision about the baby had crushed him. He was trying so hard to hide it — reassuring her she was right, that he supported and loved her — but what Tom sometimes forgot was that she knew him as well as he knew her. She saw how low he’d carried his shoulders the last few days, the way his smile didn’t reach his eyes. There’d been no smart-ass commentary, no smarmy grins. All of these changes had existed to some degree since the crash, but the pregnancy and its subsequent end seem to have broken his optimism in a way B’Elanna worried was beyond repair.

“When do you want to do it?” he’d asked her the day of the mining accident, his voice still thick from crying.

She was tucked tightly into his arms. “Is it a complicated procedure?” she asked, resting her head against his chest.

“No. Not at this stage. Should only take a few minutes. You’ll need to take it easy for a day or two, that’s all.”

“Can you show Sam how to do it?”

He pulled back, keeping his arms on her shoulders but searching for her eyes. “B’Elanna, I’ll do it. It’s OK—”

She shook her head. “It’s not. I won’t do that to you. Not if there’s another option.”

He’d tried to talk her out of it, said he wanted to support her any way she needed, but B’Elanna didn’t budge. In the end she hadn’t even let him be there. Sam had taken care of it yesterday, when Tom was up at *Voyager*. It had been easier for B’Elanna that way — not having to see the grief he was incapable of hiding. It gave her the distance she needed to go through what she knew with absolute certainty was the best thing for everyone. He’d been so gentle with her when he’d
returned to Hoth just before twilight — bringing her a hot water bottle, tea, a few cookies he’d begged off Chell. He’d also been terribly sad.

And now he was almost an hour late, and it was starting to rain.

Another twenty minutes passed, and B’Elanna decided she couldn’t wait anymore. She slapped her comm badge. “Torres to Paris,” she said, hoping the weather wouldn’t interfere with the signal.

The door opened. “I’m here, B’Elanna,” Tom said, heaving himself over the small lip of the threshold.

She watched from the table as he shed his damp coat and hat, then bent to help him with his boots. He waved her off as he dropped into a chair. “I can do it. It’s fine.”

“I’m fully recovered,” she reminded him. “You checked me over yourself.”

“I know,” he said, grimacing as he pulled off boot one. “But—” He interrupted himself with an explosive sneeze.

B’Elanna frowned and reached a hand to his forehead. “You’re getting sick again.”

Tom pulled away. “It’s nothing,” he said, and now B’Elanna heard a touch of hoarseness in his voice. “Just a little virus. I treated Dalby and Gerron for it the day before yesterday and they’re both fine now.”

“Is that why you were late?” she asked, ignoring his protests and pulling off his second boot for him. “Is it going around the camp?”

“Not exactly,” he said, before he sneezed again. “Just Tabor, Jarmand, and Celes. It seems like mostly a Bajoran thing.”

“Except for you and Dalby,” B’Elanna said, getting up for some of the vegetable soup Chell had just delivered. “Eat something, take your meds, and go to bed.”

“It’s just a cold, B’Elanna,” he said, and she was pleased by the whine in his voice. Tom didn’t whine when he was really depressed.

“The last time it was ‘just a cold’ you ended up on a ventilator and were bed-ridden for two weeks.” She put the soup in front of him and kissed his temple, silently giving thanks when it felt cool against her lips. “We don’t have the resources to fix your wheezy ass again. Eat your soup and get some rest. Do what you’re told for once.”

He gave her a small grin and picked up the spoon. “Yes, ma’am.”

Less than an hour later he was in bed and out cold. B’Elanna ran the medical tricorder over him once she was sure he was asleep. She was no expert but had picked up enough of the basics to know his oxygen level was OK, and the virus was already succumbing to the immune stimulants he’d dosed himself with after dinner. She breathed a quiet sigh of relief and slipped back into their living area.

No longer distracted by worry for Tom, B’Elanna finished her scans of the gel pack and made some notes for Seven on her PADD. There were a few more refinements they could make on the next one, maybe eke out another hour or two of power from each charge. She dropped the PADD onto the table and rubbed at her face. Like an hour or two would make any real difference. The work on the gel packs was just glorified procrastination. What B’Elanna really needed to do was to
make a decision about the beacon.

If they wanted a real chance at getting it launched and in orbit, they had to do it before the winter weather began in earnest. Tom might have once broken half the piloting records at the Academy, but he was nine months out of practice and would be flying a poorly maintained alien shuttle built with decades-old tech. They had no more than three or four weeks before the snow-producing nimbostratus clouds would park themselves over the mountain they lived on, and bring heavy amounts of ionic interference with them. It’d be hell on the Baxial’s sensors, and B’Elanna would like it if the little shuttle, not to mention its crew, made it back to Hoth in one piece.

They missed this window, and sending a beacon up wasn’t a safe option until spring — by which time they probably wouldn’t have enough energy left to build the damn thing, much less get a shuttle into space. So it was now or never.

Seven, of course, was pushing for now. Ayala, just as predictably, shrugged and said if B’Elanna didn’t want him to shoot it, he didn’t have an opinion. Tom had been so sad and preoccupied by her abortion that she couldn’t make herself press him for an answer.

So it was down to her — put all their eggs into one big orbiting basket, or dole them out, one by one, until they were gone for good. “Maybe Harren’s chickens can lay some more,” she muttered, before laughing to herself. What a disaster. She should have let Rollins take this shit show over — it was exactly what the (recently humbled) jackass deserved.

A tentative knock at the door startled B’Elanna from her reverie. After a quick peek into the bedroom to make sure Tom was still resting undisturbed, she went to find out what the latest real or manufactured crisis was.

It was Janeway.

“Hello, ‘Lanna.”

The rain wasn’t too bad — it was really more of a drizzle, though a cold one. B’Elanna grabbed her coat and stepped through the door. “We can talk out here,” she said, pulling up her hood. “Tom’s not feeling well. I don’t want to wake him.”

Janeway’s worried frown was just visible in dim light from the outdoor lamp. “He’s sick again?”

“I don’t think it’s serious,” B’Elanna said, eyeing her former captain. She was thinner than before, but she was standing straighter. Her speech was clearer, too. “But I don’t want it to get serious. He needs his sleep.”

Janeway shifted her weight a bit, looked around the camp as each shelter’s outdoor lamp winked on in the darkness. “The snow will be here soon,” she finally said.

B’Elanna snorted. “Is that why you came all the way down here? To talk about the weather?”

Janeway shook her head and sighed. “No. No, I… This is hard.”

“I’ll bet.”

The other woman started to speak several times: opening her mouth, closing it, uttering a single word then stopping again. B’Elanna tried not to look obviously impatient. Janeway had finally hauled herself and a good-sized backpack all the way down here, B’Elanna supposed the least she could do was let her get out what she had to say in her own time.
“I came to say sorry.”

Just because B’Elanna was willing to let Janeway say her piece didn’t mean she was going to make it easy for her. “To whom, exactly?”

Janeway gestured vaguely around the circle of shelters. “Tom. You. Everybody. I shouldn’t have left.”

“No,” B’Elanna agreed. “You shouldn’t have.” She fell silent again. Janeway owed them a lot more than a single apology, and B’Elanna was happy to leave her on the hook until she got it.

Janeway sighed again. “I… felt guilty. Knowing I got you stuck here. What the crash did to Tom. I couldn’t look at you every day.”

B’Elanna barked out an angry laugh. The arrogance of this woman. “And you’ve got the corner on guilt, I suppose?” She started to pace a tight circle, because her first instinct — giving her disabled, former CO a smack across the face — wasn’t exactly good form. “You think I don’t wake up every day feeling like shit that I missed the issue with the slipstream drive? You think if Harry made it back to the AQ that the guilt isn’t eating him alive?”

“I pushed you and Harry,” Janeway mumbled to her feet. “You rushed it because I made you.”

“And we should have pushed right back!” B’Elanna snapped. “God knows I’ve done it before.”

A wisp of a smile crossed Janeway’s face. On some level it was nice to see, but B’Elanna was far from done. “And what about Tom? You know why he goes up to take care of you, right? It’s because he blames himself for how bad off you are. He thinks the Doc should have fixed you instead of him. Or how about the fact that he was flying Voyager when it crashed? Or Megan! You think we don’t all feel terrible about Megan?”

“Megan?”

“You don’t even know, do you?” B’Elanna shouted, panting in her rage. “You’ve been so busy wallowing up there, feeling guilty, that you completely forgot about the forty-five people you fucking left behind!”

Janeway looked up then, catching and holding B’Elanna’s eyes for the first time since she’d said her initial hello. “I deserve this.”

“Damn straight you do.”

Janeway tried another smile, this one just a touch hopeful. “I’m here now, ‘Lanna. I’m not going anywhere. I won’t leave again.”

This was her chance. B’Elanna could give it all back. Not the power issues, but the rest of it — the worry, the responsibility, the decision about the beacon, the disgruntled survivors. It could all be Janeway’s problem again, and B’Elanna could go back to where she belonged: just an engineer, her only responsibility machines that worked or didn’t. The temptation was undeniable. “First we need to clear something up.”

Janeway nodded, but her expression was unreadable. Did she want to be captain again? Was that the real reason she’d come down from Voyager? Maybe she’d heard the explosion and figured B’Elanna had fucking everything up. Or maybe that had been Rollins’ next power move, and he’d gone to get the captain himself.
Only one way to find out. B’Elanna cleared her throat. She must have really gone off the deep end
to be doing this. “I’m in charge around here. I’m the one that’s been here, every day, busting my
ass, and I’m not going let you waltz back into camp and take over like you haven’t been MIA for
nine months.”

Janeway blinked. “No. No, that’s not why I came back. They’re your crew now. I… I just want to
be here. With the rest of you.”

“OK,” B’Elanna said with a nod. “OK. I’ll take you down to Nicoletti’s. She’s got an empty bed.”
She reached out a hand. “I can get that pack for you. It looks heavy.”

A moment’s hesitation, then Janeway slid it off her shoulders. “Thank you.”

They were walking down the path to the lower shelters, B’Elanna pointing out which structures
were what, when Janeway spoke again. “Tom told me. About the baby. I’m sorry.”

B’Elanna shrugged as best she could. What the hell was in this pack? Did she bring the rest of
*Voyager* down with her? “It’s fine.” She shook her head, wondering how that sounded. But maybe
this was the one person here who could understand how she felt right now. “I mean, I’ve thought
about it — becoming a mother someday. Especially since Tom. And if things were different, if we
were somewhere else, I’d probably be as broken up about it as he is. But here? It’s the only
decision that made sense.”

Janeway put a hand on her shoulder, and B’Elanna stopped, thinking perhaps the other woman
needed some help on the rocky path. But when she turned back to her, Janeway was smiling. “I
hope this doesn’t sound…” She shook her head. “I don’t remember the word. But I want you to
know: I’m proud of you. And I’ve missed you.”

B’Elanna smiled back. “I’ve missed you, too.”
Kathryn nibbled at the corner of the dry biscuit she’d found in the food bin. It was dense but rather flavorless, and there appeared to be raisins in it. She’d never cared much for raisins.

A mug appeared before her, the steam smelling of spice and berries.

“They’re better if you dunk them,” Susan Nicoletti said with a tentative smile.

Kathryn smiled back. “Thank you.”

Nicoletti sat across from her, concentrating on eating some fruit and her own biscuit far more than the activity probably warranted. Kathryn sighed. She’d only been back three days. Maybe it would get better, but it was clear no one knew quite how to treat her. Half of them were so deferential she was surprised they didn’t bow when they saw her, the other half refused to make eye contact and would do little more than grunt in her direction. Her new roommate still insisted on calling her ‘Captain,’ despite the many times she’d been asked not to.

“I should go,” Kathryn announced once she’d managed to choke down nearly the whole biscuit (the tea had helped). “I don’t want to be late.”

“Of course, Captain,” Nicoletti said, immediately standing once Kathryn did.

She went back into her bedroom — the one that, she now knew, had once belonged to Megan Delaney — and grabbed her pack. Most of the items had been taken out and carefully placed on the table by the bed, but there was one thing that she still hadn’t dealt with yet. When she returned to the living area, Nicoletti was cleaning the dishes — including the ones Kathryn had used.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t think. I didn’t use many dishes…” Kathryn waved vaguely in the direction of the mountainside.

Susan flashed her a quick smile, then returned the attention to the sink. “It’s fine, Captain. You shouldn’t have to do things like this. I don’t mind.”

Kathryn put a hand on Susan’s shoulder. “I mind. I’m your roommate, Susan. Not your captain. That’s not who I am anymore.”

Susan turned off the sink and nodded. “OK, Cap—.” She smiled. “Kathryn.”

One down, some forty-odd people to go.

The air was bitter this morning, with a flurry of tiny snowflakes swirling down from the clouded sky. It would be a cold walk up to the Sacajawea. Tom wasn’t expecting her for another twenty minutes, but anything was better than sitting in awkward silence with nothing to do but twiddle her thumbs. Besides, their shelter was near the outskirts of Hoth, and it was uphill the whole way to the settlement’s central square. She’d find some way to kill the time.

Despite the early hour and frigid temps, there were a few of the crew just emerging from their own shelters. Ayala gave her a tight nod from where he sat on his front stoop, packing for a three day hunting expedition he’d be leading tomorrow. It was the equivalent of getting a hug from the reserved security officer, but was hardly an invitation to chat. Kathryn returned his nod with a smile and moved on. Gantry and Lopez were out delivering fresh power cells, but both averted their eyes when she greeted them. Celes gave her a friendly wave, but looked like she was about to
faint at Kathryn’s quiet “Good morning, Tal.”

She heard a familiar impatient tone as she approached the main camp. “I don’t know, Vorik. You did work as an engineer for the better part of a decade. You were sometimes even a competent one. Can’t you figure it out yourself?”

Kathryn smiled and changed her course towards the Tereshkova. By the time she reached her new destination, Vorik was already heading towards the greenhouses and B’Elanna was opening the hatch. “B’Elanna,” Kathryn called out.

“Inside,” B’Elanna said, waving her into the shuttle. “It’s colder than Fek’lhr’s left ass cheek out here.”

It amused her, how much freer B’Elanna was now. She was possibly the most talented and innovative engineer Kathryn had ever worked with, but seeing how she was now — Kathryn had new appreciation for the tight control the half-Klingon had kept over her impatience and disdain for all things Starfleet back when they’d been on Voyager. “I’m going to see Tom in a few minutes,” Kathryn said once the hatch was closed. “But I’m glad I caught you first.”

“Sure.” B’Elanna was already focused on the energy readouts from the thermal generator. “What’s up?”

“I’ve been thinking,” Kathryn said, then stopped. Why was this so hard? She and B’Elanna had talked for almost two hours the day after her return — her former chief engineer being the one member of the camp that was treating her like a normal human being. She’d shared just about everything with Kathryn — their looming power issues, the decision she had to make about the beacon, even a little about her worries for Tom. B’Elanna wasn’t going to judge her, or be patronizing. She’d want to help Kathryn with this. Spit it out. “I’ve been thinking about what I can do.”

“Do?” B’Elanna spared her a quick glance before moving onto a stack of PADDs on the workspace. “Do about what?”

“Do as a job,” she explained. “I want to help.”

B’Elanna put the PADD in her hand down and bit her lower lip. Not an encouraging sign. “OK,” she said, drawing out the last syllable. “Let’s think about this. We can probably agree hunting and security patrols are out of the question. We’ve got a decent number of engineers still, so I don’t really need anyone else on power supply maintenance or equipment repair. Chell could always—”

She met Kathryn’s eyes and grinned. “OK, no kitchen duty. Harren won’t let anyone but Naomi near his damn chickens, but how do you feel about gardening? Vorik might need an extra set of hands.”

Gardening. Kathryn tried to suppress a pang when she remembered how Tuvok would come to her ready room to deadhead her neglected violets and water her anthurium — all while she fought to keep a straight face at the reproachful frowns he gave her. She remembered, also, a patch of tomato plants that she never got to see ripen and the man with whom she’d shared that little plot. “Not gardening,” she said.

B’Elanna fiddled with the end of her braid and huffed an impatient sigh. “I’m not sure, then. I’ll give it some thought. There’s got to be—” She brightened. “Have you talked to Seven yet? I know you helped her with the math for targeting the beacon. Maybe she can use you on the sensors.”

Kathryn’s throat tightened. Working with the sensors had been her initial idea as well. Her reading
ability was better now, and the math was appealing. But when she’d approached Seven yesterday about it, the younger woman had been… ‘Dismissive’ was the kindest interpretation.

No, asking Seven wasn’t going to help her with her problem, but it was clear B’Elanna had other things to worry about besides a bored Kathryn Janeway. “That’s a good idea,” she said, zipping her coat closed. “I’ll ask Seven.” She shouldered her pack, turned towards the hatch, then paused. “Do you have time for lunch later?”

B’Elanna was already reabsorbed in her PADDs. “Uh, not today, no. Maybe tomorrow, though, OK?”

Kathryn nodded and left B’Elanna to her work. If she left now, she’d only be five minutes early for Tom. That wouldn’t seem too desperate, right? But as she came out from between Murphy’s shelter and the generator shed, she saw a familiar blond head opening the hatch and passing into the Sacajawea. Kathryn sank back into the narrow alley.

“We would need to make several accommodations given your persistent disabilities. I don’t wish to expend the effort only for you to change your mind about being a member of our community again.” That’s what Seven had said to her yesterday when Kathryn had asked about helping with monitoring the sensors. It was a bit unfair, given how hard Kathryn had been working on her reading and her speech, and the level of progress she’d made. Her work might be a bit slower than most, but the one area in which Kathryn had still been honest with herself was her abilities and her limitations. She’d offered to do the work because she knew she could do it.

But it was only what she deserved, right? Given how many times Seven had tried to help her — tried to give her a purpose again — and Kathryn had turned her down. How could Kathryn fault her now, for being unwilling to risk another rejection? So she hadn’t pushed back on the sensor issue, but she had tried to apologize. “Maybe we can talk later,” Kathryn had suggested. “When you have some free time.”

“I do not have ‘free time,’” Seven had replied, never meeting Kathryn’s eyes. “I have many duties, and cannot forgo them for social interactions.”

All of which meant that Kathryn was going to give her a wide berth. Let Seven come to her, when she was ready. Because how many times, back on Voyager, had she pushed Seven to talk, to socialize, to be more human? And where had that gotten them? No. This time she wouldn’t force anything. She would follow Seven’s lead for once.

The metal exterior of the generator shed wasn’t much shelter from the biting cold, but Kathryn leaned against it as she listened for the sound of the Sacajawea’s hatch. It wasn’t too long — ten, maybe fifteen minutes — but the wind seemed to cut directly through her hiding spot, and her lack of movement didn’t help either. Kathryn let out a sigh of relief when she finally heard Seven leave.

“Six hours, every night,” Tom was saying. “Doctor’s orders.”

“I will comply,” Seven replied, and was her voice shakier than usual? “I appreciate everything you have done for me, Tom. It is important to me that you know that.”

She watched from the alley as Seven made her way across the square towards the sensor shed. There was no question — her gait was slow, and a bit unsteady. Nothing like the confident Borg stride Kathryn used to know so well. And nothing that Kathryn could fix, or even ask her about.

Once the coast was clear, she crossed to the Sacajawea for her appointment, grateful for the warm
interior. Tom was at his desk, with his back to the door. He shivered as Kathryn closed the hatch. “Sorry I’m late,” she said.

Tom shrugged as he pushed himself to standing. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve got plenty to keep me busy.” He went to the cabinet and pulled out one of the drawers, not even glancing her way. “You just missed Seven.”

“I know.” Janeway pulled herself onto the biobed, waving Tom off when he tried to lower it for her. “That’s why I was late.”

Tom snorted. “What? You’re hiding from her? That’s not much like the Captain Janeway I know.”

Which was a pretty sharp dig, even for him. But they hadn’t really talked since that last, terrible fight on Voyager. The morning after her return, as she’d been debating how she could possibly make amends for everything she’d done, he’d shown up at Nicoletti’s shelter. “B’Elanna said you were sick,” she’d said by way of greeting, but he’d deflected all of her questions about his own health.

“If you’re staying for good, then come up to the Sacajawea later,” he’d said, quickly establishing he was in the ‘no eye contact’ category. “Now that I can monitor your brain chemistry daily, it’s safe to put you on a mood stabilizer. I thought it might help.”

Because, as angry and sad as he was, Tom was still looking out for her. Which only made Kathryn feel worse about how she’d been treating him.

“I’m not hiding,” she said now. “I’m doing what she’s asked. I’m giving her space.”

“Well, don’t give her too much,” Tom said, starting his scan of her cerebrum. “She could use some support right now.”

Before Kathryn could press him for more information, though, he shook his head and changed the subject. “So,” he said, giving her a quick smile that didn’t touch his eyes. “Feeling any different yet?”

“A little,” she said, amazed that she actually did already feel different. “More… steady. More like myself.” And more aware of just how terrible and selfish her behavior had been these last long months. Really, why would Tom want to be anything other than a doctor to her now?

He studied the readouts on his tricorder. “Your norepinephrine and GABA levels are a little low,” he told her. “But I don’t think we’re far off. I need to keep checking your levels daily for maybe another week, but once they’re stable, I’ll give you a replicator file. You’ll be able to just dose yourself, come in once a week for checks.”

Kathryn didn’t miss the flash of pain on his face when he bent to his instrument tray to pick up a hypospray. She’d seen it yesterday, too — his movements were stiffer, his face even more haggard than usual. B’Elanna had told her how bad their power issues were — that they were rationing replicator use more than ever. Was Tom cutting back on his analgesics?

“How long?” she said, not sure when the new rationing had gone into effect.

“I’m not sure, honestly,” he said, cleaning up the tray. “Normally a patient with your type of injury would only take this for a few weeks, until your new synapses stabilized, but since the Doc was never able to properly stimulate your damaged neurons…” He shrugged an apology.

“No,” she said. “That’s not what I’m asking. I meant: how long can we keep replicating
medication?”

“Oh,” Tom said, limping away from her towards the tall wall shelving. “You don’t need to worry about that. Meds are a priority and most are a minor power drain; they’ll get cut off last. We’ll wean you off long before that happens.” He reached up to put the small case of hyposprays on an upper shelf when he froze. He let out a gasp and dropped the case to the floor. “Fuck,” he muttered, resting his head against the shelving unit, his breath coming in short pants.

Kathryn slipped off the biobed and padded up behind him. “I wasn’t worried about my medication,” she said. “What can I do?”

“Nothing, nothing,” he hissed. “Just a cramp. It’ll pass in a sec.”

At least she could pick up the mess for him. Kathryn knelt to the floor, ignoring his protest, and gathered up the scattered hyposprays and med vials. By the time she’d placed them all back in the case, Tom had hobbled back to his stool and eased himself onto it.

“Sorry,” he said, turning back to his desk. “You’re all set. You can go.”

She could go. She could accept that she’d ruined their friendship and he’d only care for her as much as was ethically required. She could recognize that her actions had condemned her to her current status, trapped in a weird limbo between unapproachable former captain and pitiable camp pariah. She could give up on the idea of finding any useful occupation, and just stay the hell out of everyone’s way.

But first, she could at least return his book.

She dug into her backpack and hauled it out. “I brought you something.”

His back tensed and he ran his fingers through his hair. “I don’t have a lot of time, Cap—”

“Please, Tom.”

His shoulders dropped and he sighed before wheeling his stool to face her. He blinked when he saw what she was holding. “Is that mine?”

“I got it from your quarters. I thought you might want it back,” she explained, pressing the heavy book into his hands. “I tried to read it. I’ve been doing the exercises you gave me, but…” She shook her head and looked at her shoes, trying to hide her frustration. “I can’t do it. I couldn’t even figure out the title.”

Whatever response she’d been expecting, it certainly wasn’t for him to burst out laughing. Her mouth fell open in surprise. As terrible as she’d been to him, he’d never been cruel before.

He caught her eyes and shook his head. “Sorry. I’m sorry. I’m not laughing at you. It’s just that you should have started with something a lot easier than this.” He let one final snort escape. “It’s not in Standard, Kathryn. That’s why you can’t read it. It’s *Les Misérables*, in the original French. My mom taught me the language when I was a kid, and this was one of her favorites. I replicated it years ago, when I was missing her one day. I thought it would make me feel closer to her.”

Kathryn relaxed her shoulders. Of course. Julia had minored in linguistics, she recalled, and spoke nearly a dozen languages if Owen was to be believed. “Did it?”

Tom shook his head, still chuckling a little. “I didn’t get very far. Turns out I can’t read it that well anymore, either.” He idly flipped through the pages, and before long his face was again shadowed
by grief. “I never got it before. How the things I did, all the times I disappeared on her — how much each loss must have tortured her. How did she ever get through it?”

A year ago, she would have put her hand on his shoulder. Maybe even opened her arms in an offered hug. “I’m so sorry, Tom.”

She hoped he understood. That she was sorry about the baby, but also about the times she’d screamed and hit him. She was sorry for the way she’d been blind to his suffering and grief because she’d been so wrapped up in her own. She was sorry she’d gotten him so badly injured and stuck in this wretched wasteland. She was sorry in so many ways and for so many things she no longer had the words to explain.

For what felt like a long, long while, Tom didn’t look at her, only stared at the book in his lap, rubbing his thumb against the cover. She turned to go — she’d have to come back tomorrow, after all. She could try again tomorrow. But then he spoke.

“Kathryn, wait.”

She stopped and turned, and he was smiling at her. Not the impudent grin she used to know so well, but something softer. Something like forgiveness. He raised the book. “Thanks.”

But even that smile did little to hide the shadows under his eyes, or the lines of pain and fatigue etched across his forehead. Maybe there was more she could do for him, after how much he’d helped her. Maybe they could still help each other. “I want to do something for you.” At his confused frown, she gestured around the shuttle. “There are a lot of jobs I can’t do. But maybe I can clean up here? Get you things, so you don’t have to be on your feet so much?”

Tom laughed again, but this time Kathryn felt like she was in on the joke. “What, you wanna be the muscle of this outfit?”

Two could play at this game. She planted her hands on her hips and unearthed whatever she had left of the famed Janeway glare. “I’m in better shape than you,” she retorted.

“Just barely,” he grumbled, but he couldn’t hide his grin. He pushed himself upright and guided her over to the shelves. “I could probably use a spare set of hands. Sam’s doing a lot more of the house calls now, and I hate taking away her time with Naomi. It’s mostly grunt work, though. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Kathryn nodded. “That’s fine.”

“Sterilizing instruments, re-loading hyposprays. Transporting meds from the replicators. Real mind-numbing stuff.”

Was he testing her? “I’m happy to help. However you need me.”

“You can do the inventory, too, maybe. Review the use logs and reorganize the med drawers for me. If you can manage the reading, that is.”

Yes, he was definitely testing her. He’d always been such a brat. “I’m sure I can handle it, Tom.”

“And then there’s the necropsies. Sam would be thrilled to give those up.”

That one earned him a sidelong glance, but Tom was staring quite fixedly at the controls of the autoclave. “Necropsies?”
“Yeah,” Tom said, tapping in a few adjustments on the panel. “Sometimes the hunting parties will kill something new we have to check out, or just come across some carcass or another. I’ve got one in the cooler right now, actually. No idea what it is — four sets of eyes, covered in these weird spines — like a hedgehog had a baby with a spider. And the stink! It makes leola root smell like roses. Maybe you’ll have time for that after lunch?”

Kathryn pursed her lips together. “I know what you’re doing, Tom.”

“Oh?” he said, blinking those deceptively innocent blue eyes at her. “Am I doing something?”

“Nothing would make you compare leola root to roses,” she said with a snort. And then, suddenly, she found her eyes were filling with tears. *Guess that mood stabilizer hasn’t really kicked in after all.*

“Kathryn?” Tom immediately turned to her, putting his hands on her shoulders. “Damn. I’m sorry. I was just kidding around. I didn’t mean to—”

“Thank you,” she choked out, wiping the tears from her eyes. She put a hand on his chest and smiled. “I just want to say thank you.”

Even through his unruly beard, she saw his cheeks flush. “I didn’t do anything. Just brought you some food, let you talk when you wanted. Anyone could have done it.”

“But anyone didn’t.” Janeway hesitated only a moment before leaning into his chest and wrapping her arms around him. “It was only you, Tom. You never gave up on me. And that was everything.”
Another day, another misaligned conduit.

B’Elanna blew into her frozen hands as she waited for the plasma flow converter to restart. It seemed to make sense at the time: housing the thing in a glorified lean-to versus an actual shed. They’d had limited building materials to work with, it was a generally sturdy bit of tech, and it would be too dangerous to have it in the same shed as the generator. It had just never occurred to B’Elanna how many times she’d have to come out here in the cold and, on this particular day, the snow, to realign the fucking thing.

By now, at least, she had it down to a science — less than five minutes of work and it was whirring away. She put her gloves back on and took a few minutes to shovel off the roof of the lean-to. They weren’t expecting more than ten centimeters, and it was a light snow, but no reason to take any chances.

Afterwards, she jogged to the Tereshkova, cursing when she hit a deceptively deep drift and her boot filled with snow. How the hell was she going to handle months of this crap until spring? She tried to remember that they were still in a pretty good place — they had heat, lights, and enough food to survive (if not to ever really feel satisfied) — but some days it was a lot harder than others.

Once she was inside, she called for the lights and plopped onto the nearest chair to pry off her boot. Most of the snow had already melted into an ice cold water that had penetrated right through the sock and down to her foot, but at least she could dry it over one of the heating vents.

“Have you injured yourself?”

B’Elanna startled at the unexpected voice, nearly falling off her chair. “Seven! What the hell?” The former drone was standing in the corner of the shuttle by the sensor output monitors, leaning heavily on the adjacent bulkhead. “And no, my foot’s fine, just cold. But why were you in the dark? Everything OK?”

Seven held one hand above her squinting eyes and used the other to slip a hypospray into her pocket. “I am… also fine. I was experiencing a headache, but it has improved.”

“You sure about that?” B’Elanna said, studying the other woman as she slowly straightened. Seven and Tom had been arguing for weeks about her not regenerating enough. “Because you look like crap. Maybe you should have Tom take a look at you.”

“I have,” Seven replied. She tucked a few errant strands of hair back into place. “He is well aware of my health status, and I do not wish to discuss it further.”

“OK,” B’Elanna said, turning her chair to face the work table. She didn’t like it, but she also knew it was a waste of time to push Seven into talking when she wasn’t ready. She didn’t appear to be in immediate danger, and B’Elanna could ask Tom about it later. He wouldn’t give her any details — his medical ethics won out over his love of gossip — but she could at least make sure he knew about the meds Seven was hiding in her pocket. She extended her half-frozen foot over the nearest vent, wiggling her toes in the blast of hot air. Time to get to work.

Which would be a lot easier if Seven wasn’t lurking over her shoulder, silently shifting her weight back and forth.

“Is there something you need, Seven?”
“In my role as your executive officer, I am wondering if you have arrived at a decision.”

And there it was: Seven’s daily inquiry into the beacon.

It drove B’Elanna nuts that she kept asking. She wasn’t an idiot — she knew the whole camp was on tenterhooks, waiting for her to make a call. No one was pestering her directly (with Seven being an irritating and persistent exception) but Tom was apparently fair game.

“About half of them want you to launch it,” he’d told her two days ago over dinner. “And the other half are begging me to convince you not to.”

“Which half are you in?” she’d asked him.

He’d shrugged apathetically, as he’d been prone to doing since the baby. “Six of one, half dozen of the other. We could be screwed either way.”

Janeway hadn’t been much help, either. “It seems like a decision between a conservative route and taking a risk,” she’d observed once B’Elanna had laid out all the arguments.

“Basically,” B’Elanna replied, thinking she knew exactly which path Janeway was leading her towards. Because who was the biggest risk taker B’Elanna had ever known? “So you think I should launch it?”

But she’d been wrong, as the next thing Janeway had done was shake her head and give B’Elanna a wistful smile. “I didn’t say that. Taking a risk doesn’t always pay off, after all. Sometimes when you gamble, you lose.”

The problem being, of course, that if B’Elanna didn’t gamble, they were still going to lose. It was just going to take longer to get there. “I think,” she told Seven, staring unseeing at the PADD in her hands. “I think we’re going to build it.”

“You sound uncertain.”

B’Elanna turned to stare at her. “Of course I’m uncertain. You think this is an easy call?”

“I do not,” Seven replied. “But it would be preferable if you expressed more confidence in your decision.”

B’Elanna dropped the PADD to the table and launched to her feet. She’d been agonizing over this for days, going back and forth over the pros and cons until her eyes had crossed, and it still wasn’t good enough for the Borg. “What do you want from me, Seven?” she demanded. “A promise that I’m doing the right thing? Because I don’t know! Maybe it will all work out, and Starfleet will be here inside a month with a shiny new ship and food for all. Or maybe we’ll blow nearly everything we have on this thing, and it’ll get destroyed by the next comet. This isn’t about picking the best option, it’s about picking the least bad one.”

Seven lifted her chin in that ‘I am Borg’ expression of arrogance she was so fond of. Whatever her ‘health status’ was, it didn’t appear to be bothering her at the moment. “If you have this much doubt, then taking the riskier path is likely inadvisable. Perhaps you should give it more thought.”

What the hell? This was her fucking idea, and now that B’Elanna had jumped on board, she didn’t like it anymore? Her jaw worked as she fought to keep her tone controlled. “As you well know, Seven, if we don’t try the beacon now, we’ll never be able to. That snow out there is just a preview of what’s to come. We’ve got maybe two, three weeks before a launch isn’t an option. If I give this any more thought, then the weather’s going to make the decision for me.”
“If we do not launch the beacon now,” Seven sniffed, “then we will have more time to come up with an alternate energy source — perhaps as long as another fourteen months given the modifications to the gel packs. It is possible that we’ll be able to find a more sustainable power supply in that time, and construct a beacon later.”

B’Elanna began to pace, then stopped when she put her stockinged foot into a slush puddle. “Possible, but not fucking likely. What, have you been holding out on me? You’ve had some other genius idea to save the day?”

Seven didn’t even have the decency to look embarrassed. “No. I do not.”

“Yeah,” B’Elanna snapped. “Me, neither.” She dropped back into her chair, her anger spent and foot once again damp and cold. “We don’t have the resources to keep experimenting. The failed solar cells, Rollins’ stupid mining plan — they’ve killed us. So yeah, maybe we’ll figure something else out in the next year; but more likely we’ll hit another patch of bad luck and get sunk in a hole so deep we’ll never dig our way out. I’m not big into ‘let’s hope for the best’ as a strategy. At least if we launch the beacon, we’ll go down fighting.”

“I agree.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. “You agree.”

“Yes,” Seven said. “It should not surprise you. The beacon was, after all, my idea. I have lobbied for it since the beginning.”

“Oh my god, Seven,” B’Elanna said, wondering once again why she’d fought Rollins so hard to stay ringmaster of this particular circus. “What the hell was this stupid conversation about, then?”

Seven then did something so unexpected that B’Elanna completely forgot all her anxiety and frustration. She sat in the chair across from B’Elanna. Yes, Seven might sit to eat a meal. Or she might crouch on the floor to reach a low panel. But to have a conversation? With B’Elanna? No. She liked her power poses — spine straight, chin up, shoulders back. It was hard to lord Borg superiority over someone if you were sitting across from them, slouched in a chair. “Are you sure you’re OK, Seven?”

At that, she leaned back, just a centimeter, and her pale skin flushed; but then she blinked and the brief flash of unease was gone. “I am fine. But I do wish to explain myself.”

“This should be good.”

“You expressed a great deal of uncertainty about your decision,” Seven began. “A state in which I have not often seen you.”

B’Elanna snorted. “I guess not. Indecision is one of the few faults no one’s accused me of.” She sighed and fiddled with the end of her braid. “I’ve never had to make a decision quite like this one, though.”

“No,” Seven said. “You have not. You have, however, frequently argued with me — both here at Hoth, and before, on Voyager. While I generally find your obstinance tiresome, I have never faulted the passion with which you debate your position.”

B’Elanna didn’t have the faintest clue where Seven was going with this, but her interest had certainly been piqued. “Thanks, I guess.”

The corners of Seven’s mouth curled upwards in the faintest hint of a smile. “It occurred to me that
perhaps you needed someone to convince you. I knew that I had done all I could to do so, and it had yet to be effective. In my opinion, the remaining leadership team nor any of the other residents of Hoth were likely to be any more successful. So, I concluded the best person to convince you of the correct decision was: yourself.”

B’Elanna sat back into her chair, her mind running through the argument about the beacon she had just, allegedly, won. “You used reverse psychology on me? But… that’s the oldest trick in the book. That doesn’t even work on Naomi.”

Seven’s smile widened, just a hair. “And yet it seems to have been an effective strategy in this instance.”

“Sometimes, Seven,” B’Elanna said, shaking her head, “I really hate you.”

Seven blinked back at her. “This is not new information.”

B’Elanna couldn’t help but laugh. When had it happened, that she and Seven had become friends? She recalled a long ago conversation in Engineering, on that terrible, wonderful Day of Honor, when Chakotay had had to order them to work together. What would he say now, if he could see them? She gave Seven a little smile of her own. “This isn’t one of those times, you know. I can’t believe I’m thanking you for manipulating me, but… I appreciate it. Your support.”

Seven inclined her head in acknowledgment, but said nothing. She looked tired, B’Elanna thought, although maybe they all did. Not that they could do anything about it — if this beacon was getting launched, she’d just quadrupled the length of her to-do list. “We better get started then,” she said, pulling her boot back on and rising from the table. “I guess step one is telling everyone.”

“I agree,” Seven said, standing as well. “I will compose a notification to be posted on the camp-wide feed.”

“Actually,” B’Elanna said. “I’d like to tell everyone in person. Although now I wish I’d let Tom build his mess hall way back when.” She peered out the Tereshkova’s small aft window. The snow had slowed to just a few flakes swirling around in the wind, but the weather hardly looked welcoming. Tramping around from shelter to shelter, no doubt getting another load of snow in her boots, would not be her first choice for how to spend a morning.

But she would do it. It was a risky decision she was making, and it was one she knew a lot of people didn’t support. B’Elanna would likely be spending a lot of the next few hours defending herself. But that was OK — because she knew it now. This was the right call, and, as crazy as her methods were, she was grateful Seven had helped her see it.

It didn’t matter if they had ten more months, or fourteen, or twenty. There was no future for them on this planet. Sure, maybe they’d be able to find a new power source, or find a way to keep going past the power going out, but mere survival wasn’t enough. It never would be. “Can I ask you something?” she said, glancing at Seven over her shoulder.

“Of course.”

“Do you think we can make this work? Really, I mean. Do you think anyone will actually get our message? Come to rescue us?”

Seven walked up and stood next to her by the window. “I believe that if there were ever two individuals that could accomplish a task such as this, it would be us.”

B’Elanna nodded, pulling on her coat and hat. “Then let’s get to work.”
Tom bit down hard on his lip as B’Elanna pushed against his leg. He’d slept like crap last night and had woken up for good just past five, immobilized by the pain in his back and hip. He’d lain there, frozen and trembling, for nearly half an hour before B’Elanna woke up herself and saw the shape he was in. She’d been applying heating pads and stretching him out for the last fifteen minutes. “That’s too far,” he muttered as she tried to eke out another few centimeters from his unyielding hip joint.

“No, it’s not,” she said, leaning in harder. “You were able to flex it more just two days ago.”

A fine sheen of sweat broke out across his forehead. “Stop. It’s too much.”

“Just a little further,” she coaxed.

“It fucking hurts, B’Elanna!” he barked, his eyes tearing. “Stop!”

She dropped her hands and immediately withdrew, sitting down hard on their mattress. “Sorry. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—”

“No,” he said, dragging himself back and up onto his elbows. He breathed through a brief wave of vertigo. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to yell at you.”

B’Elanna stood and padded over to their dresser. She waited until he was fully upright, then tossed him a pair of heavy socks and a fresh set of thermals. “This has got to stop, Tom. You need to take your pain meds.”

He only winced a little when he pulled off his shirt, replacing it with the clean one. “I am taking them.”

“I’m not sure who’s more stubborn: you or Seven.” She started peeling off her own nightclothes. “I know you’ve cut your dose back. I’ve told you a hundred times: there’s no point. Meds don’t use that much energy. You cutting your dose in half, Seven shaving an hour off her regeneration — it’s false economy. Just take what you need.”

“Until I can’t,” he muttered.

“What?” B’Elanna’s voice was muffled from the turtleneck caught around her ears. Her head popped through the collar a moment later. “Did you say something?”

“No,” he said, taking her hands when she offered them to help him stand. “Thanks. For helping me this morning.”

She smiled and gave him a quick peck on the cheek before moving into their living area. Tom gathered the dirty clothes she’d tossed onto the bed and put them in the ‘fresher. He wondered how they’d wash them, once the power was gone. Soap and water, he guessed, although where they would get the soap was beyond him. What the hell was soap, anyway? Some kind of plant? An animal product? Just another thing they had only five more months to figure out.

Along with how he’d be able to keep going if he was in constant pain, or if he couldn’t take a full breath. Because, despite what B’Elanna thought, he wasn’t skimping on his meds in an overzealous attempt to conserve energy. He was doing it because they were launching the beacon, and because, despite what the sunnier residents of Hoth believed, their chance of rescue was still only
fractionally more than zero. He was cutting back because a few months from now, when they had
to turn the replicators off for good, he’d wouldn’t have a choice in the matter. He’d figure out how
to live with his pain, or he wouldn’t.

B’Elanna popped her head back into the bedroom. “Are you coming? Breakfast is ready, and I’ve
got the tea on.”

He limped into the living area and sat at his usual place, grimacing at the hypospray he found next
to a bowl of blueberries and a hardboiled egg. “B’Elanna…”

“Just take it,” she said. “We launch in two days, and you can barely sit up straight right now. How
are you supposed to fly like that?”

She had a valid point, and Tom didn’t really want to explain the true reasoning behind his med
rationing. Maybe it was his chronic pain, or maybe it was because B’Elanna finally had a goal to
work towards beyond surviving another day, but somewhere in the last couple weeks, they’d
flipped attitudes. As they passed each milestone to get to the launch — replicating the few parts
they couldn’t get from salvage, constructing the beacon, plotting out the targeting vectors — Tom
had sunk deeper into a depression over the futility of it all, but B’Elanna had become energized.
Somehow, she’d convinced herself they had a chance of getting out of here. Who was Tom to take
that away from her? He injected the meds into his neck and closed his eyes, letting out a long
breath as the numbing sensation took hold.

“Is that what’s bothering you?”

Tom popped his eyes open. B’Elanna was sitting next to him, studying his expression. “Huh?”

“Is it because you have to fly again? It’s got to be weighing on you some, piloting for the first time
since…”

“I totaled Voyager?” he supplied with a snort. Her eyes grew concerned, so Tom tossed her a
reassuring smile. “No, it’s fine. I’m not worried.”

He really wasn’t, although it was clear B’Elanna didn’t believe him. She spent the rest of breakfast
telling him all the ways he hadn’t failed: “It was the slipstream drive that caused the crash, Tom.”
“No one could have landed Voyager under those conditions.” “All you had were port thrusters. It’s
incredible you got us down as well as you did.” But Tom knew all that, just as he knew he felt
guilty anyway, just as he knew he’d be able to fly the Baxial as well as if he’d never left the conn.
He’d pilot Neelix’s old bucket just fine — that had never concerned him. He just wished he still
felt like there was a point to it.

But he forced himself to smile, hoped she was distracted enough that she didn’t see how false it
was, and thanked her for her reassurance. Because at least he could make B’Elanna feel like she’d
helped. If he couldn’t manage that, the next thing that would happen is she’d apologize about the
baby again, and that was the last thing either of them needed.

“I better get going. I’ve got a house call to make,” Tom said, pushing back from the table.
B’Elanna got him his boots, and Tom wished, as he did every day, that she didn’t have to.

“It’s warm again today,” she said as she did up the laces, and Tom laughed that five degrees was
her current definition of ‘warm.’ “The rest of the snow should melt, at least.”

“That’ll be better for the launch,” he said. “Nothing in the forecast?”

“Clear skies, or close enough, for the next five days,” she said, grinning. “We might actually pull
this off.”

He smiled back. “We might at that.”

A few minutes later, trudging through the frosty grass and scattered piles of slush towards Sam and Seven’s shelter, Tom silently thanked B’Elanna for forcing the analgesic on him. It was a relatively warm day, but still cold enough that it would have been hell on his joints if he hadn’t taken that dose with breakfast. He rarely went anywhere other than the Sacajawea and home these days, the dropping temps making more extensive walks sheer misery. While he had no reservations about flying the Baxial, he wasn’t entirely sure he’d survive the trip down the rocky path that led to it.

Fortunately for him and Seven, she lived only a little outside the central square. Tom was barely panting when Naomi opened the door. “Hi, Tom!”

“Hey, Squirt,” he greeted in turn, flopping into the closest chair. “Help me with these, will ya?” he said, shaking a booted foot at her. “I don’t need your mom yelling at me for tracking dirt everywhere.”

She chattered at him while she tugged, telling him about a new history lesson Assante had started with her and the latest chicken mishaps. He wondered if she’d clued in about what was going on with her roommate. Seven was doing an admirable job of faking good health while out and about in Hoth, but he had to believe it was a challenge to maintain her facade around the clock.

“Do you need anything else?” Naomi asked once she’d pried off both his boots and put them by the door. “I have to go help Mortimer. Elizabeth is being a real pain about moving into the new coop. She keeps sneaking back into the Baxial.”

Tom tried to hide his grin at her self-important tone. Although, having once had his own run-in with Harren’s alpha chicken, he couldn’t blame the guy for wanting someone else to deal with her. Normally a sweet-tempered bird, she was as fierce as any Rottweiler when she was broody. “I’m good, Naomi, thanks.”

He moved into the smaller bedroom, which housed Seven’s alcove. Sam was sitting near its console, keeping a close eye on the monitor. Seven, eyes shut and face slack, was still ensconced within. “How did last night go?” Tom asked her.

“Good,” Sam answered, unsuccessfully trying to keep a massive yawn in check. “She’s been in there for seven hours, and her readings have been steady. I think the gel pack did the trick.”

The day after the mine explosion, Tom had been shut up in the Sacajawea, desperately burying himself in any work that didn’t make him think about pregnancy or babies. He’d been formulating a new supplement for a barely significant vitamin K deficiency a few of the humans had developed when he’d gotten a frantic call from Celes.

“It’s Seven!” she’d shouted through the comm, the feedback from her shrill cry making Tom cover his ears. “She’s collapsed!”

He’d limped to the sensor shed as fast as he could — meaning far too slow — taking a few seconds to call Sam to meet him there. When he finally got to her, Seven was conscious but disoriented. “The slipstream drive,” she kept saying. “It is faulty. We should not engage it without further testing.”

She’d refused to be secured to the hover stretcher until Tom promised her he was just taking her to brief the rest of the senior staff. “We don’t want this to get all over the ship, right?”
“Agreed, Lieutenant,” she agreed, her eyes unfocused as Tom coaxed her to lie back. “Maintaining a certain amount of discretion is wise.”

Tom had thought it was just Seven cutting back her regeneration cycle again. They’d had the argument a few times over the past several weeks: Tom would tell her the amount of energy she was saving wasn’t worth the impact on her health; Seven would argue that she was an autonomous being allowed to make her own decisions. He’d tried to convince her to stick to at least five hours most days, but she’d never been the most compliant patient.

Unfortunately, her collapse was the result of something far worse than Seven being uncooperative. Her implants were failing, and her alcove was the cause.

It was the damn contaminated deuterium. A month prior, Seven had proposed a method of utilizing the partially degraded material. “I can modify my alcove as a test device,” she’d offered, and B’Elanna, though reluctant, had to admit they needed to salvage every milligram they could. The idea had looked like a good one, to start — all Seven’s initial tests had shown her alcove was functioning perfectly.

Unfortunately, she hadn’t been monitoring her implants as closely. That first morning when Tom had shared his findings, her initial reaction had been one of vehement denial. “Your knowledge of Borg technology is rudimentary at best,” she’d sniped at him. “And your intellect is vastly inferior to mine. The only explanation for you finding an issue I’ve missed is that you are in error.”

He’d been too worn out to argue with her, so had only left her with his data and an offer to talk whenever she was ready. Only two hours later she’d arrived at the Sacajawea to apologize. “My earlier attack on you was unjustified. I am sorry for any harm I may have inflicted. I would like… I need your assistance, if you are still willing.”

“Don’t worry about it, Seven,” he’d said, knowing how much that admission had cost her. “Let’s just sit down and figure out how to fix this.”

As of yet, they hadn’t had much luck. Even changing back to the pure deuterium wouldn’t help, as they had no way to flush the contaminants from the alcove’s power conduits. To make it an even more difficult task, Seven refused to let Tom tell anyone about the issue other than Sam. “I’m not saying we need to make a camp-wide announcement, Seven, but at least let me tell B’Elanna. She may have some ideas on how to help.”

But Seven had stood firm on her desire for privacy. “B’Elanna already has a great number of tasks and difficulties to occupy her. Her primary focus must be the beacon. My personal health concerns would only be a distraction.”

Two days ago, however, Tom had found a workaround. The self-powered gel-packs were getting more and more refined with each conversion, and B’Elanna had mentioned she wanted to try them in different systems. “How about Seven’s alcove?” Tom had asked, keeping his voice casual. Maybe if he could get the alcove off deuterium entirely, they could at least stop her from getting worse.

“Sure,” she’d said, thankfully distracted by the last beacon launch projections. “That’ll work.”

Seven had raised an interested eyebrow at his proposal, which was the Borg equivalent of being declared a genius, and had made the necessary modifications to the pack and her alcove yesterday. Last night was their first trial.

“Why don’t you go get some sleep, Sam?” Tom said, peering over her shoulder at the alcove’s
readouts. They looked better. Not great, but better. “I can take over now. She’ll be up soon.”

Sam made a few feeble protests, but she was clearly exhausted and didn’t have much fight in her. “She can be a little unsteady when she first comes out of it,” she warned Tom before going to her own bedroom. “Call me if you need help.”

It only took another twenty minutes before Tom saw signs that her cycle was ending. He stood, hoping Sam had been being overly cautious and he wouldn’t need to catch Seven when she came to. Pain meds or not, he was barely able to keep himself upright these days.

Fortunately, Seven was more than capable of standing on her own two feet. A brief flutter of eyelids and she was alert and ready for the day. “Tom. I am pleased to report the experiment was a success.”

“No, not so fast,” he said, gesturing for her to sit on one of the chairs Sam had put by her alcove. “Why don’t you let me give you a second opinion?”

He wasn’t as unequivocally happy with the results as Seven seemed to be, but Tom was relieved to see her implant function had at least stabilized. “Sodium/potassium ratio just a touch low, and your blood pressure’s back up to normal,” he pronounced. “I’m not sure this is the whole solution, but it’ll buy us some time at least.”

Seven nodded and moved into the living area. “Agreed. I must go to the Tereshkova now. I have much work to do before the beacon launch.”

“Seven, wait!” he called, hobbling after her. “We need to talk about this.”

She was already reaching for her thermal jacket. “What is there to discuss? As you said, we have ‘bought some time.’ Once the beacon is in orbit and transmitting our distress call, we can consider other ways to improve my implant performance.”

Thinking back to B’Elanna’s comment an hour ago, Tom decided Seven was definitely the more stubborn one. “B’Elanna’s going to want some data back on how the gel pack worked in your alcove,” he said, waving his tricorder at her. “She’s pretty smart. She’ll figure out what’s been going on as soon as she looks at it.”

Seven put down her jacket and her eyes narrowed. “You have manipulated this situation towards an outcome that you desired.”

“What can I say? It’s a talent,” he said with a shrug. “Look, we need her input on this. I’m glad that we’ve figured out this much, but it’s just a band-aid.”

“Band-aid?”

“A temporary fix,” Tom explained. “Maybe very temporary. We need to figure out a better solution now, while your health is still decent. B’Elanna can help.”

Seven picked up her jacket again but only wrung the hood in her hands. “B’Elanna must prioritize the needs of all Hoth’s residents. My individual health is irrelevant.”

It bothered him how Seven, even more than two years on, thought she mattered so little to the people around her. Tom would give her a hug if he didn’t suspect it would freak her out completely. “B’Elanna will think your health is relevant. I do, too. So do Sam and Naomi.” He paused to consider how far to push her. He looked at her guarded expression and settled for, “So do a lot of people.”
Seven’s face relaxed a fraction, and she gave Tom a curt nod. “You may inform B’Elanna. Now I must go.”

Tom had every intention of letting her do that — he knew what the beacon’s successful launch meant to her. But then a clump of her hair fell to the floor as she pulled it into a neater twist, and her hands shook as she fastened her jacket closed, and he found the resolve to push forward. Tom knew, maybe better than anyone at Hoth, that you couldn’t let these things lie too long. Seven had grown a lot in the ten months since the crash. Living in such closer quarters, being in a position of leadership — it had propelled her emotional development forward in a way that might not have happened for months or years if they had still been on Voyager. She’d formed real, deep bonds — with Tom, B’Elanna, Naomi and Sam. But there was still one, significant relationship that still needed addressing. And, even with this new gel-pack ‘band-aid,’ Tom knew there was a pretty tight deadline for Seven to figure it out.

“There’s someone else who might be some help, too,” Tom said as she pulled on her hat and gloves.

“You may inform B’Elanna,” Seven repeated, punctuating her words with a cold glare. “I do not wish anyone else to know. As Hoth’s primary medical provider, you are ethically obliged to confidentiality if—”

Tom put up a hand. “I know what my obligations are, Seven. I think I’ve made that pretty clear, given I haven’t breathed a word about your health issues to anyone. But can we at least talk about it? She’s different, Seven. She came back, she’s taking a new medication. She’s trying.”

“If Janeway wishes to pursue a relationship with me,” Seven sniffed, “she may approach me herself. Asking you to be an intermediary is inappropriate; it is an inefficient use of your time.”

Tom couldn’t help but laugh at that. “That’s a great idea, except for the fact that I know she has approached you and you basically told her to fuck off.” He softened his tone when he saw Seven’s hurt expression. “Janeway’s not the one asking. I am. Give her a chance.”

It’s not that he didn’t understand where Seven was coming from. Janeway had been there every step of the way when she’d first been freed from the Collective, largely against her will; their relationship had always been complicated. He suspected neither woman would appreciate the comparison, but he’d seen hints of his own relationship with his father in the one between Seven and Janeway. The approval-seeking, the resentment, the need for support but also independence. Trying to figure all that out when one person often had the emotional maturity of a teenager and the other was recovering from a traumatic brain injury was a veritable minefield of misunderstandings and hurt feelings.

“Look,” Tom said when Seven remained silent. “I don’t want to push you into something you’re not ready for, but you’ve got a lot going on right now. I understand wanting to pretend everything’s fine, but it’s not. And maybe you can use some help working through all of it. I’m sure Janeway would be happy to listen. I know she’s made some mistakes, but she does care about you.”

Seven put on her hat and picked up her gloves. “I have others that help. Samantha. B’Elanna. And you, unless you are withdrawing your previous offers of support.”

Tom sighed. “You know I’m not.”

“Then I do not require anyone else,” she said. “I must leave or we will not be adequately prepared for the launch.”
She left the shelter, not quite slamming the door but closing it with more force than was warranted. Tom returned to her bedroom, taking a few last readings off her alcove before snapping shut his tricorder and replacing it into his medkit. As he did so, he bumped his bad hip into Sam’s chair, knocking a half-empty mug of cold tea onto the floor. “Fantastic,” he grumbled, limping back into their kitchen area for something to clean up the mess.

What would have once taken him not even five minutes was now an over fifteen minute ordeal — having to pull out a rag from under their sink, getting on the floor to wipe up the tea, getting off the floor once he was done. By then, most of the benefits of the analgesic B’Elanna had given him at breakfast had long worn off. He dropped hard into one of the dining chairs, needing a minute to recover before venturing back into the cold. His eyes locked on a pair of objects neatly placed by the front door, and Tom was torn between laughing at the absurdity of the dread that now filled him and crying at what he’d been reduced to.

There was no one around to help him put on his damn boots.
There was a strong wind blowing in from the north. It made traversing Hoth’s central square particularly unpleasant. Seven pulled her hood lower across her face and increased her pace.

She was already behind schedule. Tomorrow, when the winds were predicted to be significantly less powerful, Tom would fly the *Baxial* into a high orbit of this planet and B’Elanna would launch the relay beacon. Readying the small ship was under the purview of Joe Carey and several other of *Voyager*’s engineers. The final preparation of the beacon, however, was Seven’s responsibility, and there were many tasks she needed to accomplish by the end of the current day.

B’Elanna was already at the *Tereshkova* when Seven arrived. “Hey,” B’Elanna said, her stare intent. “Tom told me what’s going on with you. Why didn’t you say anything?”

Seven tensed. Her distaste for the anticipated conversation was certainly a factor, but she suspected that would not be an acceptable reason to present to B’Elanna. “I did not wish to trouble you. The issue is still minor. It will not impact my performance in a significant way. I would have told you if I believed otherwise.”

B’Elanna turned back to the console she was working on and began to stab at the interface. “I’m not accusing you of anything, Seven. I just meant I would have helped, if you’d let me. I don’t know why you have to be like this.”

“If you engage with the control panel any more forcefully,” Seven observed, “you may damage it.”

“Yeah?” B’Elanna barked back. “Maybe I feel like damaging something. Between you and your implants, Tom going off his pain meds, and Janeway wandering around Hoth like a restless ghost, I’m ready to be done with the whole lot of you!”

Seven blinked. “I am sorry that my lack of candor has caused you additional stress. That was not my intention.”

B’Elanna sighed and leaned heavily against the console. “No, I’m sorry. I’ve been an asshole.”

This was an interesting development. Seven was perplexed by how her failure to disclose her implant issues would result in B’Elanna having such a negative self-assessment. “Explain.”

B’Elanna still did not turn towards her. “It’s never occurred to me — what it meant for you. The power going out. I’ve been so obsessed with the heat, with the replicators. Tom. I should have realized how scary this all must be for you.”

Seven stiffened. “I am not scared.”

B’Elanna turned her face towards her then, and gave her a small smile. “No. Of course you aren’t. But I’m still sorry.”

Seven wasn’t sure how to respond, or if further response was even necessary. It made her uneasy, having B’Elanna express sympathy for her condition. It seemed out of character. Their relationship was one built on mutual respect for the other’s skill and talent; and mutual dislike for the other’s preferred method of approaching most situations. “Tom and I have devised a method of powering my alcove that has temporarily alleviated the problem. I am sure, once the beacon is launched, we will discover a longer term solution.”
“It’s top of the list,” B’Elanna said, with a forthright gaze that made Seven shift her weight and look away. “Keeping your alcove going. I have thought about it at least that much. We can jerry rig something with the heat and the lights, I think. And we’ll make do with what food we can grow and hunt. Replicating meds and powering your alcove — I’ll make sure those are the last things we have to give up."

“If we have to give anything up,” Seven asserted.

“If,” B’Elanna agreed. “If. So let’s stop jawing and get to work. We’ve got a lot to do.”

They worked in relative silence the next two hours, the only sounds those of the shuttle’s computer system and an occasional comm from the Baxial when Carey required a consultation. Seven appreciated B’Elanna’s ability to work quietly and efficiently without extraneous conversation. It was a skill many humanoids seemed to lack. She did wish, however, that B’Elanna’s work did not require such bright ambient lighting. Also, there was clearly an issue with the Tereshkova’s environmental controls — one minute it felt quite warm so that Seven had to wipe a thin sheen of perspiration from her face, the next she would be seized by a full-body shiver due to the cold. They would need to address it once the beacon launch was complete.

“Are you OK?”

Seven looked up at B’Elanna’s question, frowning when she noted the other woman’s concern. “I am functioning adequately.”

B’Elanna returned Seven’s frown. “Are you sure? Because you look pale, even for you.” She grabbed Seven’s hand. “And your skin’s clammy. Maybe I should call Tom.”

This was why Seven wished for the currently minor issue with her implants to remain private. The concern B’Elanna was exhibiting was unnecessary, and stood in the way of their work. She jerked her hand back. “As I said: I am functioning adequately. Using the gel-pack to power my alcove has stabilized my implants for the time being. Your solicitude has become irritating. Please desist.”

“Look, Seven, my ‘solicitude’ is not—”

“Carey to Torres.”

B’Elanna slapped her comm badge. “Now what?”

“Sorry, Chief,” Carey said. “I’ve tried three different methods, but we’re having no luck optimizing the guidance system on this tin can. If you’re busy, though, I can call Tom and see if he can come down. He may know a workaround he can live with.”

“No,” B’Elanna said, rubbing at her face. “Don’t call him. He’ll just try to get down there and break his leg or something. I’ll be there in ten.”

Seven experienced relief. If she were left alone, there would be no further inquiries into her health. This was a highly desirable outcome.

“Listen up,” B’Elanna said as she pulled on her coat. “I get that you’d prefer to go into hiding and lick your wounds, but that’s not going to happen. This is too important for me to come up here in an hour and find you passed out under a console. I’m sending someone to help you.”

Seven bristled. She was experiencing deep regret over giving Tom permission to share her medical information with B’Elanna. “I do not need assistance. I am fully capable of completing the work.”
“I’m not worried about your ability to do the work, Seven,” B’Elanna said, pulling on her hat and gloves. “I’m worried about your ability to stay upright long enough to do it. This isn’t up for debate.” She slapped her comm badge as she headed out the shuttle’s hatch. “Torres to Celes. I need your help with something.”

There were twelve pleasurable minutes in which Seven was allowed to work uninterrupted. Now that she was able to turn the lights down, her headache was quite mild — barely more than a minor distraction. And she could complete most of her work at the table — the brief moment of dizziness she experienced upon standing was unimportant. She shivered with both cold and displeasure when the hatch re-opened.

“Seven?” Tal Celes said, her voice annoyingly uncertain. “B’Elanna said you needed my help?”

If B’Elanna’s intention was to make Seven’s day less difficult, she had chosen exactly the wrong strategy. Within only nine minutes of Celes’ arrival, Seven’s headache was back in force given the many times the anxious Bajoran miscued her inputs into the beacon’s targeting scanners, causing the console on which she worked to beep in alarm. “Sorry,” Celes repeated over and over. Seven pinched her nose and willed her to be silent.

“Should I maximize the power input into the communications array?” Celes asked when she apparently deemed two minutes of silence excessive. “Or I could increase the plasma inflow into the orbital relay?”

“You should do neither,” Seven replied, staring fixedly at her own work. “As either action would cause the beacon’s targeting system to overload, thereby making the launch tomorrow impossible.”

“But B’Elanna said you needed help—”

“B’Elanna was in error,” Seven said. “If you wish to assist me, then leave. I will be more efficient if allowed to work undisturbed.”

“Oh no,” Celes said, moving uncomfortably close. “B’Elanna was very clear. ‘Don’t leave her alone,’ she said. ‘I don’t care if she threatens to assimilate you, you stay in that shuttle.’”

“Celes,” Seven said, abruptly standing and ignoring the black that edged her vision as a result. “Your continued presence in this shuttle is compromising not only my equanimity but also the safety of this—”

The hatch opened, admitting a rush of wind that swallowed the rest of Seven’s words.

“Tal?”

It was Janeway.

“Cap… Miss… Kath…” Celes stuttered.

“Tom is asking for you,” Janeway interjected with a gentle smile. “You were supposed to see him an hour ago.”

Celes smacked herself in the forehead. “Oh, Prophets. Oh, no. Has he been waiting? Of course, he’s been waiting. Why didn’t he call my—?” She glanced down at her chest. “Because I don’t have my comm badge. Is he mad? He’s not mad, is he?”

“I’m not sure at this point,” Janeway said. “I’ve been looking for you for nearly a half an hour.
This triggered an even more frantic burst of activity as Celes spun right, then left. “Oh no. Oh, Cap — Kath— I’m so sorry. In this wind! And the cold! I’ll go right now. I just need to get my coat, and I’ll…” She spun again, this time in a full circle. “Seven. I’m not supposed to leave Seven.”

Seven’s jaw clenched. This was too much. It was one thing for B’Elanna to instruct a crew member to stay close, but quite another for that crew member to then share those instructions with others, particularly Janeway. “Celes. Stop speaking and leave.”

“But B’Elanna—”

Janeway stepped between the two women and raised her hand. “It’s fine, Tal. I can stay. Go see Tom.”

Celes’ eyes darted back and forth before, whether out of deference to Janeway’s previous authority or fear of Seven’s burgeoning anger, she grabbed her coat and fled the shuttle. With the hatch once again closed, Janeway turned to Seven and offered her a tentative smile. “I hope that’s OK with you.”

“It is not.” Seven returned to her seat. “But apparently even the slightest admission of weakness equals a loss of autonomy.” Her face flushed hot when she realized what she had just confessed and to whom she had confessed it.

But, to her surprise, Janeway did not inquire further, but instead sat across the table from Seven and gestured at the monitor. “You’re finalizing the vectors on the targeting array.”

“Yes.”

There were several more minutes of silence. Only ten minutes prior, Seven would have believed that such a quiet environment would be conducive to her work, but now she found it as distracting, if not more, than Celes’ gibberish. Maybe if Janeway weren’t just sitting there, occupied by nothing other than looking around the small room, her presence would be less disruptive. “Would you like to assist me?”

The naked gratitude in Janeway’s face was as disconcerting as the silence. “If you’d like.”

Seven activated the monitor nearest Janeway’s station and verbally led her through the vectors she needed completed. While the older woman’s assistance was surely not needed, Seven conceded (to herself, at least) that it did lessen her burden. The pressure building behind her ocular implant was becoming increasingly troublesome. The shorter her list of tasks, the better.

Another hour had passed in comparable silence when the pressure became acutely intolerable. Seven could not completely quell a gasp of pain as her hand went to her eye.

“Seven?” Janeway got to her feet. “What is it? Should I call Tom?”

“No.” Seven groaned as the pain spiked again. Her hand dropped to the pocket of her sweater and she groped futilely at the opening. “He… he knows. I have… I have…” She closed her eyes against the light and pain. It did not help.

Janeway was soon next to her, her hand digging in the pocket Seven couldn’t quite manage to access. Within a few seconds, Seven felt the cool metal of a hypospray pressed to her neck, and Janeway’s hand rubbing broad circles across her back. “Breathe,” she murmured. “That’s it. In and out.”
Only a few more seconds passed before the medication took effect and the pain ebbed to its previous tolerable levels. Seven straightened and shrugged off Janeway’s hand. “I am well now. Thank you for your assistance.”

“Of course,” Janeway replied, but she did not return to her seat.

“The hypospray’s effect will last several hours,” Seven said, eyeing Janeway over her shoulder. “There is no need for you to continue to stand there.”

“Seven,” Janeway said and Seven let out a long breath through her nose. She suspected yet another dreaded conversation was forthcoming. One rather striking way in which being a Borg drone was superior to individuality was that there was no need for all this incessant talking.

“I know you don’t owe me anything,” Janeway continued. “Especially not your trust. But I want to say that I’m sorry. I should have never left the camp. It was so hard for me to be here, for me to feel useless. Particularly given that it was my fault we crashed here.”

Seven had no interest in listening to Janeway wallow in continued self-pity. She still had numerous tasks to complete — tasks that would work towards getting them off this planet. This was a time to look forward, not obsess over actions that could not be reversed. “Your apology is irrelevant. Please return to your work or leave.”

“Maybe it is,” Janeway said. “But I’d still like to offer it to you. What I was going to say was: none of it is an excuse. My head injury, my guilt. It doesn’t change the fact that I should have never abandoned the camp, or you. So, even if it doesn’t help to hear it, I am sorry. I hope… I hope the fact that I’m here now, and that I won’t leave again… I hope that it shows you how much I mean it. And I hope that, someday, you’ll trust me again.”

She returned to her previous seat and pulled the monitor closer. Seven watched as Janeway concentrated hard on the screen before making a few cautious taps on the console. Seven speculated that — as time went on and if no better solution for her damaged implants was found — she, too, might find her intellect and abilities diminished. She might also become less capable of contributing than she was now. Seven wondered if she would be able to face this possible future disability with any level of grace or acceptance.

“Kathryn.” Once she had Janeway’s attention, she continued. “While we still have several things left to accomplish in order to ensure a successful launch, your assistance has reduced my work time significantly.”

Janeway raised an eyebrow. “You’re welcome?”

Saying the next words was both difficult but unexpectedly satisfying. “Since we will be finishing earlier than I had anticipated, I will have unexpected free time. Perhaps you would like to come to our shelter for dinner. Samantha is teaching Naomi and me how to cook.”

Janeway smiled. “I’d like that.”

Seven returned her attention to her monitor, but the calculations she was currently performing were rudimentary and required little thought. “I will caution you that, while Naomi shows great enthusiasm, she is the inferior student. I would not suggest ingesting anything that she has prepared without close supervision.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said, and Seven detected amusement in Janeway’s tone. She found it pleasant to hear again.
“I am glad that you have returned to Hoth.”

“I am, too, Seven,” and Janeway reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “I am, too.”
Day 310

Chapter Notes

This is a long one. You might want to make yourself a cup of tea or something.

B’Elanna jogged circles around Tom as they made their way across the central square. The wind wasn’t bad, but the sun was just sending its first, weak rays over the horizon, and the morning was bitterly cold. She stopped when he did, at the top of the path down to the Baxial. “Come on,” she said, tugging on his arm. “The faster we get started, the faster we get down there.”

He was staring at the steep and rock-strewn ground they needed to traverse. “You go on ahead,” he said. “I’ll catch up.”

It was a tempting offer. Even across the flat green, his pace was far slower than hers, and she was anxious to get on with the day. It would be veritable torture to stay with him as he picked his way down the mountainside. But it’s not like Tom was slow by choice — if he fell and hurt himself, it might put the whole mission in jeopardy. “It’s fine,” she said, bouncing to stay warm. “Maybe it’s best I keep an eye on you.”

Tom’s eye roll was visible even with his hood pulled up. “I’ll be careful, B’Elanna. I know what my limitations are.” He poked her gently in the thigh with his walking stick. “Go. You’re making me antsy. Start the pre-flight. I don’t trust anyone else to do it right.”

Which was bullshit, as B’Elanna knew very well he’d go over it again himself no matter who did it. But it was relatively harmless as far as bullshit went, and maybe they did both need a few minutes apart to collect themselves before their brief, and maybe last, return to space. “OK. Take it slow, all right? There’s no rush.”

She bounded down the path, occasionally turning an ear in Tom’s direction for any evidence of distress. The Baxial was already bustling when she arrived, Joe and a few others doing the final prep the ship needed before take off. “Morning, Chief,” they all said, in varying levels of cheer and grumpiness, depending on how much they liked arriving at work with the sun.

“We got you something,” Garbose said, a bit shyly. He’d apologized a time or six since his brief defection to Rollins, but was still clearly battling some guilt. He gestured at the eight other people scattered about Neelix’s little ship. “We all pooled our replicator rations.”

Joe came forward, carrying one of the ubiquitous metal mugs from Voyager. They couldn’t have. Raktajino.

Raktajino.

“We got you something,” Garbose said, a bit shyly. He’d apologized a time or six since his brief defection to Rollins, but was still clearly battling some guilt. He gestured at the eight other people scattered about Neelix’s little ship. “We all pooled our replicator rations.”

Joe came forward, carrying one of the ubiquitous metal mugs from Voyager. They couldn’t have. B’Elanna sniffed the air and grinned. They did.

Raktajino.

“Thanks, guys,” she murmured, wrapping her cold hands around the cup. She took a moment, inhaling the rich, earthy aroma and relishing her first sip, even as it burnt her tongue. Everything here was just about ready, she saw as her eyes roamed the small cargo bay that housed the beacon. Which meant there was only one thing left for her to do.

B’Elanna put on her best Klingon glare, met the eyes of each of the men and women on the Baxial,
and started barking out orders. “What are you all sitting around for? Carey, start the pre-flight. And why don’t I hear the impulse generator? Pretty hard to get into space if we don’t have a warmed up engine!”

“Yes, Chief!” they each snapped back with a grin, scuttling off to various tasks as they were assigned. “Garbose, wait,” she said. “I’ve got a special job for you.”

“Anything for you, Chief.”

“Go outside and make sure Tom’s making it down OK.” It was taking a long time, even for him. The path wasn’t that treacherous, and there were a half-dozen shelters en route if he got into trouble, but it was still pretty early. Who knew if anyone would hear him if he fell? “Just maybe, uh…”

Garbose grinned at her. “Don’t let him know I’m doing it?”

She clapped him on the shoulder before heading up to the cockpit. “I knew I picked the right man for the job.”

It was another fifteen minutes and half her raktajino before Tom showed, dragging his bad leg as he made his way to the pilot’s seat. “Glad you made it,” she said. “Do you want to—” She stopped when she saw how his chest heaved and his eyes were squeezed shut. “Hey. Do you need your inhaler?”

He nodded and she went to him, giving Garbose a nod of thanks. The tech was peering around the cockpit’s doorway, his brown eyes wide and concerned. “We’re good,” she told him. “Go see if Joe needs anything.” B’Elanna dug her hand into Tom’s left pocket and pulled out the inhaler. She put it up to his mouth and wrapped his hand around it, using her own to keep it steady. “How much dextromorphone did you take this morning?”

“Only ten,” he said, once his breathing eased enough that he could pull the inhaler from his mouth for a breath. “I was saving it. I knew this trip would be rough.” He took another long pull. “I’m OK. Just give me a few.”

B’Elanna nodded and left the cockpit, shooing away the engineers hovering just outside the door. Tom hadn’t gotten much sleep last night, and it would not help his mood if he caught their looks of concern and pity. “Tell Carey to bring me the pre-flight list once he’s done,” she said to the nearest body. “I’ll take care of everything up here.”

She slipped back into the co-pilot seat and began running through the checks on the primary systems, deliberately choosing any tasks that didn’t require Tom to move. If she thought it were a viable option, B’Elanna would postpone by a day or get a different pilot; but they’d lose the weather if they waited any longer, and Tom was the only one left with a level one flight certification. She simply couldn’t trust this job to anyone else.

His coughing had woken her up several times overnight; by the fourth, Tom asked her to get him some trioxime, as the inhaler was clearly doing squat. “What else can I do?” she’d asked him, gently rubbing his chest in a futile attempt to ease his labored breaths.

“Nothing,” he wheezed. “Go back to sleep. No reason for us to both be exhausted.”

She’d intended to ignore his directive and stay up with him, but the next thing she knew, her alarm was blaring and Tom’s side of the bed was empty. Once she got dressed, she found him in the kitchen, making tea. “Did you get any sleep?”
“Enough,” he said, faking a smile. “I’ve flown harder missions on less.”

Which was hardly reassuring, but what could she do? She knew how hard things were getting for Tom — not just his pain and his breathing, but also his concern for Seven, not to mention what would happen to all of them once they didn’t have access to nutritional supplements, or dermal regenerators, or replicated medicine. But putting off the flight wouldn’t help with any of that. All they could do was keep moving.

B’Elanna tried not to make it obvious that she was watching him as he slipped the inhaler back into his pocket. His chest was moving much easier now — the Baxial’s tiny cockpit was warmer than their shelter, at least. He pressed a hypospray to his neck, then powered up the console. “Have you cued up the nav sensors yet?”

“No. I was waiting to see how you wanted them set up,” she said, respecting his desire to ignore what had just happened but already wondering how they’d get him back to their shelter at the other end of the day. She couldn’t imagine he’d agree to being carried by stretcher, but it was a lot of power to use the transporter. Saving his pride could hardly justify the expenditure.

As expected, he ran through all the systems she’d already checked, but he was adept at the alien set-up, and it didn’t take long. His speed surprised B’Elanna, given the odd organization of the Talaxian systems. It had taken her a solid week to feel comfortable with it. “What, have you been studying?” she asked.

He gave her a grin that hinted at the cocky pilot he used to be. “Of course. Underneath this dashing exterior lies the intellect of a dedicated scholar.” He shook his head and laughed. “Actually, Neelix, uh…” He let out a deep sigh, his brief, buoyant mood vanishing. “Neelix took me out in her once.” He ran a hand over the console. “He was really proud of this little ship, you know?”

B’Elanna reached across the small cockpit to squeeze his hand. “And he’d be even prouder, knowing what we’re about to use it for.”

Half an hour later, and they were ready to go. Seven had joined them by then, with Janeway in tow — much to both Tom and B’Elanna’s surprise. “We have fully vetted the beacon’s targeting scanner, subspace transmitter, and orbital stabilizers, as well as other, less vital systems,” Seven announced. “Kathryn is now also well versed in the beacon’s primary mechanisms. Although, of course, not as thoroughly as I am.”

Tom gave an amused Janeway a wink before turning his chair to face Seven. “Are you trying to poach my new assistant?” he asked and B’Elanna grinned at the teasing she heard in his voice.

Seven raised an eyebrow. “I am not. I’m sure Kathryn will have time both to perform whatever tasks you require as well as be trained on our current sensor network. I thought it wise, given my current health status, to ensure Hoth had a suitable replacement should my implant function continue to deteriorate.”

Tom slumped down in his chair, Janeway dropped her head, and B’Elanna found herself both feeling sorry for Seven and wanting to pop her one for sucking all the air out of the room. “I think that’s our cue to leave,” she said finally, deciding anything was better than the heavy silence, “Before you decide to give us the Borg version of a pep talk.”

Despite B’Elanna’s concerns, Seven managed to wish them both good luck with the mission without making any additional dire pronouncements. Janeway gave Tom’s shoulder a tight squeeze and B’Elanna a reassuring smile. “Come back safely,” she said.
And then there were two. B'Elanna commed Carey to ensure all the engineers had disembarked, then powered up the engines. “Ready whenever you are,” she said to Tom, who gave her a brief nod in acknowledgment, and fired up the thrusters.

She’d always liked watching Tom fly. Even early in Voyager’s journey — back when she’d thought him little more than another shallow child of privilege that chased anyone slow or stupid enough for him to catch — it had been fascinating to her. Not just because of the grace with which his nimble fingers flew across the conn, but also because of the ease he clearly felt when at the helm. Tom wasn’t half as clever as he thought: she’d only spoken with him a few times before it was obvious his cynical facade was just that. But even his perma-smirk vanished when he was flying — his expression was focused but open, his body coiled but never tense. B’Elanna had never experienced feeling at home in her own body like Tom did when he was in the pilot’s chair.

Which was, perhaps, why this flight was making her so sad. Their ascent was flawless, their acceleration was smooth — to anyone outside the ship, they wouldn’t know a thing was wrong. But B’Elanna could see it — how stiff his movements were, the grimace he tried to hide when he reached for the outer controls. It was costing something for him to sit there, and B’Elanna was heartsick over it.

“We should achieve outer orbit in five minutes,” she said, turning back to her sensor panel. “Remember there’s a dense belt of asteroids between this planet and the next. Watch out for meteors. And we need to time this right — make sure we release the beacon just as we hit apogee for optimal placement. We can take two orbits at half-impulse to plot this out, but no more if we want enough power to land again.”

“Yeah, B’Elanna, I know,” he snapped. “I helped you write mission specs, remember?” He ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. “Sorry, my back’s just… I got it. Two orbits, half-impulse, watch out for rocks, decide where to set up shop. Why don’t you make sure the beacon’s prepped and ready? I may only be able to give you a couple minutes of lead time once we’re situated.”

In other words, he felt like crap and was tired of pretending otherwise for her. A rush of anger pulsed through her. Not at Tom — she suspected he thought this flight was pointless, but she also knew he was doing his level best to hide it. But she was so damn sick of being here. Hoth in general, but also this situation — one precarious step away from certain death, constantly teetering on the edge of extinction. No wonder Tom had become so convinced they were all doomed. Because what did they have to look forward to? Slowly freezing and starving through this winter and probably the next, futilely watching the skies for salvation that would likely never come?

And yet… B’Elanna had never called herself an optimist, but she remained unconvinced that their fate was so dire. Maybe it was her engineer’s mind set — every problem had a solution if you just tinkered with it enough. Or maybe she was just deluding herself. Either way, B’Elanna knew there could still be a future for them, for all of them. She wasn’t giving up on that. She wasn’t going to let Tom give up on it, either.

She stood to head aft to the cargo bay when the sensors she had trained on the beacon let off a shrill alarm. “Why does everything Talaxian have to be so damn loud?” she muttered as she shut it down, feeling just a tad guilty that she was including Neelix in that assessment.

“What’s wrong?” Tom had positioned the Baxial into an outer orbit, and was starting his first pass around the planet.

“I don’t know.” She translated the readings with her tricorder and scanned the monitor. “It looks like… something organic? In the cargo bay with the beacon.”
“Oh,” Tom said. “Probably just some nesting material that was missed. Or,” he gave her a small grin, “maybe that’s where Neelix kept his spare furflies.”

“No, no,” she said, sliding over to the bioscanner controls. “I checked that bay myself before we put the beacon in. Besides, it can’t just be a bit of bio-slime or a piece of hay — it would have been picked up already. This is something moving, something complex. How long was it between Seven doing the final beacon check and take-off? Maybe an animal snuck aboard.” She rose from her chair and grabbed her phaser. “I’m going down there.”

“With a phaser?” Tom asked, sparing her a quick glance. “What the hell do you think it is?”

She shrugged as she made a few quick adjustments to her tricorder. “It’s probably just a rock bunny or something. Or maybe it’s something else. I don’t know, Tom, that’s why I’m going to check.”

He frowned at her. “Maybe you shouldn’t go alone.”

“You have another option?” she said. “It’s not like you can leave the conn, and even if you could, you’re going to crawl around under a beacon, looking for stowaways? We’ve got one shot at this launch. I’m not taking any chances.”

Now he looked really worried. “At least keep an open comm, OK?”

“I’ll be fine, Tom,” she said. “Just fly the ship.”

She jogged down to the small, aft bay and called up its internal sensors, on the off-chance they’d caught something that the ship’s scanner had missed. Nothing — just the same vague readings she’d already seen. Annoying that she had to waste time on this. Chances were it was just a rodent of some sort, seeking shelter from the cold, or thinking it would find some scrap of food. She should just let it get spaced along with the beacon and call it a day.

Except maybe they’d picked something up after launch. This planet wouldn’t be the first to support a complex life form in the outer layers of its atmosphere. B’Elanna had seen weirder shit during her time on Voyager, and having some mysterious unknown lurking around their only chance at rescue didn’t sit well. She flipped her phaser onto high stun and opened the door.

It was dark in the bay, other than the dim green lights that ran along the edges of the floor. “Computer, lights,” she said, and for a brief moment the space was illuminated. Then a shower of sparks flew out of the main overhead light, and the space once again fell into near darkness. Apparently whatever was hiding in here had also short circuited one of the bay’s power conduits; which meant she really needed to find the fucking thing. She just wished she’d equipped herself with something a little better than the half-charged wrist lamp she now pulled out of her jacket pocket.

The air was clear of any scent other than ozone from the broken light. She wasn’t getting much from her tricorder, either, likely because it wasn’t programmed to look for whatever life form they were harboring in here. But it did at least tell her it was about fifteen meters ahead of her and to the left — meaning it was directly under the beacon’s fore targeting array. “Fan-fucking-tastic,” she muttered, dropping to her knees and scooting under the main body of the device. “Not only am I searching in the dark, I have to crawl the whole damn way.”

She’d made it about ten meters in when she heard an odd clicking noise, just ahead. Which might be claws of some kind. Or maybe teeth? She took a tighter grip on her phaser and eased forward another few centimeters.
“B’Elanna?”

The sudden and unexpected sound of Tom’s voice made her jump to her feet. Too bad she was still underneath a duranium-plated beacon with only about ten centimeters of clearance. “Shit!” she barked as her head whacked into the beacon’s underbelly. “What the hell is the matter with you?!”

“I told you I wanted to keep an open comm. Are you OK?”

“I was fine until some stupid petaQ startled me and I smacked my head!” she hissed. “Now shut up! I think I heard something.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know! You keep talking to me and I can’t hear it anymore!” She slapped her badge to silent and shuffled a little further towards the source of her readings.

Click. Click. Click.

B’Elanna froze. It was right there. She raised her dimming wrist light and caught a quick flash of red. It couldn’t be very large if…

“Ghuy’chat!” Something had stabbed her hand. B’Elanna pushed backwards, trying to scuttle away, but her attacker was relentless — jabbing at her ankles, grabbing her pants. She kicked out her left foot, but felt only glancing contact. She whipped her wrist-lamp around, but saw nothing. “Where are you, you son of a bitch?”

Click. Click. Click.

B’Elanna tried to slow her breathing to better localize the sound. It was further away now, and to the right. She raised her phaser and set it for a wide beam. This time, she wasn’t taking any chances. She’d find out what the fucking thing was after it was dead.

"Peep."

Peep? That came from a little to the left of the clicking sound. Deciding her curiosity outweighed her blood lust after all, she lowered the phaser and aimed the wrist light.

Three fuzzy lavender heads peered back at her. They were tiny, no bigger than apples. They certainly couldn’t have been the perpetrators of that vicious attack. B’Elanna reached out a tentative hand.

Only to get another sharp stab to the wrist. “Qu’vatlh!”

Her attacker answered her with an angry squawk. Because her attacker was a goddamn chicken.

Muttering the filthiest words she could think of in Standard, Spanish, and Klingon, B’Elanna scooted backwards away from the wrathful hen and her offspring. She slapped her commbadge before sticking her bleeding wrist against her mouth.

“B’Elanna? What’s happening? I’m going nuts up here!”

“One of Harren’s fucking chickens is down here. She decided to lay her eggs under the damn beacon!”

“Which one?”
B’Elanna frowned. Was he OK? “The only beacon we have, Tom,” she said slowly.

“I mean, which chicken?”

She rolled her eyes. “The one I’m going to space when we launch this thing.”

“No, B’Elanna, wait! We can’t just let her die.”

“Oh yes, we can. Her and her three little devil’s spawn, too.”

“The eggs have hatched? Hang on, is it Elizabeth?”

B’Elanna closed her eyes and took a deep breath. This was getting ridiculous. Her main, really only, concern was if there was some kind of bio-matter that would affect the launch or operation of the beacon that was their last hope of survival. Rogue members of Harren’s flock did not qualify, and so she was one-hundred percent done with this situation. “She didn’t give me her name when she was pecking the crap out of me. I’ll be up in a second.”

Except that’s when the begging started. “She was just protecting her young.” “She’s Harren’s best layer.” “Elizabeth is Naomi’s favorite.” This was not how B’Elanna imagined this day going — her, bleeding, crouched under the beacon, listening to the man she loved passionately fight to save the life of a fat, angry bird. “Enough!” she finally barked. “It doesn’t matter how lost the flock will be without her, because she thinks I’m evil incarnate and she won’t come near me!”

“Check your right pocket.”

He certainly knew how to keep her interested. She did as she was told, and pulled out a piece of Chell’s dense cornbread wrapped up in a napkin. “Tom?”

“I thought you might get hungry later. But now you can use it to catch Elizabeth. She loves the stuff.”

“So now I have to give up my lunch to this thing, too?”

“Please?”

Grumbling the entire time, B’Elanna went back on her hands and knees and scooted forward. She kept her wrist light aimed low, in hopes of not startling her avian nemesis, and started talking in the most soothing voice she could manage. “Listen up, bird,” she said, absolutely putting her foot down at calling the damn thing by its name, “I don’t like you. You don’t like me. But we’ve got a common goal here — you and your chicks not meeting certain death in the cold vacuum of space. So how about you not be a shit head, eat some of this damn bread, and follow me out of here?”

The chickens were in visual range now. Elizabeth was eyeing her closely, her speckled grey head cocked to the side. B’Elanna broke off a piece of the bread and held it out in her hand. “Come on, you asshole. Take the bread.”

Elizabeth answered with low rumble. Who knew chickens growled? B’Elanna sprinkled a few crumbs onto the deck and slid back a half-meter.

Two of the chicks darted forward and grabbed the crumbs. One immediately ran back to hide behind its mother, but the other stayed where it was, giving B’Elanna a peep of inquiry.

“That’s it,” B’Elanna said, still keeping her voice low. “You I can work with. I’ve got plenty more where that came from. Come on.” She continued to slide backwards, leaving a trail of crumbs in
her wake. Her new ally followed her, cautiously at first, and Elizabeth began to squawk in alarm. But soon its appetite outweighed its mother’s caution and it began to snatch the crumbs with growing enthusiasm.

Chick number two had no desire to be left out, and left the safety of its mother’s underside to share in the bounty. Elizabeth was now beside herself, marching back and forth under the beacon, pecking at her remaining offspring when it tried to venture past her. Another half-meter and B’Elanna was out, scooping up her two collaborators and cupping them in her hands with a good chunk of the remaining bread. “I’ll settle for two out of four,” B’Elanna called back as she walked towards the bay’s hatch. “You’ve got thirty seconds to follow me out of here.”

As soon as the bay doors slid open, B’Elanna heard the rapid click of chicken feet come skittering across the deck. She waited until Elizabeth and her final chick made it out, and closed off the bay. “I need proof that I got you assholes out of there,” B’Elanna said to the anxious mother, “so these two are staying with me. Come or not.”

Elizabeth came, clucking in worry when chick three couldn’t make it up the stairs to the cockpit. B’Elanna gave her a sidelong glance when she went to pick up the straggler, but apparently Elizabeth had decided cooperation was her best route to getting her brood back and she didn’t protest. Their little party made it to the cockpit a few minutes later, where Tom had been keeping himself busy. He’d made a nest in the cooking unit on the aft workstation. B’Elanna frowned when she noted the familiar burgundy wool that made the bulk of the nest. “Is that my scarf?”

He turned and beamed when he saw the three tiny heads peering at him from B’Elanna’s cupped hands. “You got them!” he said, reaching out to relieve her of her feathered burden. “Come on, Elizabeth,” he clucked to the hen that was now circling his feet. “Let’s get you all settled.” Tom was a man transformed, arranging the chicks and the remaining cornbread in the nest he’d made. “I figured Neelix’s heating coil would be comfy,” he explained as he worked. “It’s just on the warm setting. That should be OK, right?”

“Yeah,” B’Elanna said, nonplussed. “I’m sure it’s fine.”

“He was always going on about not heating leola root too quickly,” Tom said, apparently forgetting his back pain as he managed to bend down for Elizabeth without so much as a wince. “So I’m assuming the warm setting must be pretty gentle. We should keep an eye on it, though. We don’t want to cook them by accident.”

Considering she’d just given up her lunch to them, B’Elanna thought she might like to cook them on purpose, but knew that was best kept to herself. She shook her head and moved towards the co-pilot seat when she heard a familiar tune. “What’s that you’re humming?” she asked Tom. “I know that song.”

He looked up and flushed crimson. “Oh, it’s nothing,” he said. “Sorry. I know my humming drives you nuts. I’ll stop.”

It didn’t drive her nuts, actually, although she’d always teased him about it. The song was bugging her though, and she began to quietly hum it to herself as she slid into her seat, trying to remember where she’d heard it before.

Tom was back in the pilot’s chair, but he turned back frequently to the nest, replacing escapee chicks and chatting with Elizabeth. “You did a good job hiding these guys,” he told her. “You just picked a bad spot. But we’ll find you a new one, don’t worry. You just keep on being a good mother, and we’ll handle the rest.”
Mother. That’s where B’Elanna knew that song from. Her mother. It was a Klingon lullaby. Which means Tom must have learned it for the baby. For their baby. The one that they would never get to have. B’Elanna sighed and focused on her sensor panel.

Tom had been collecting data while she’d been on her mission of avian-directed mercy, and they were right on schedule. Less than five minutes and they’d hit the apogee, send the beacon off, and have nothing more to do but keep their fingers crossed. “Any issues with meteors that you’ve seen?”

“Not really,” he said absently, replacing a chick into the nest before turning back to the conn. “There’s one on the edge of the belt, coordinates seven-zero-five-two you should keep an eye on though. Its behavior’s a little erratic compared to the others.”

“Got it,” B’Elanna said, locking onto the relevant hunk of rock. “I think we’ll be in the clear, though. Its vibration frequency is still on the low end. Even if it does go, the expected trajectory will take it away from the beacon.”

“One minute to optimal launch site.”

B’Elanna opened the cargo bay’s doors and lowered the forcefield. “Ready to launch at your mark.”

“Five, four, three, two, and… go.”

One tap and it was away. The Baxial’s viewscreen was little more than an enhanced window, so B’Elanna could only watch via the sensors. “And we’re away. Beacon has achieved orbit and is maintaining. I’ll message Hoth and tell Seven to fire it up.”

Tom made a few taps on his console. “Shutting down impulse drive to conserve power. We’ll be over Hoth in ten minutes and we can land.” He slumped back into his seat. “That’s it, then?”

B’Elanna nodded. “That’s it. Nothing to do now but wait.” And try to find a new way to power the replicators, heat the settlement, and feed their people.

Tom scrubbed at his face, then leaned his head back, closing his eyes. He was obviously exhausted. B’Elanna toyed with the idea of keeping the Baxial in orbit for an hour or so, and letting him get some rest. She shook her head. It was a bad idea — they’d have to cut it way too close with the ship’s power reserves, with no room for error if anything went wrong. As much as she hated to do it, B’Elanna reached over to gently shake him to alertness.

Except she didn’t need to. One of the chicks had decided to go exploring and let out a peep of indignation when one of its feet got caught in the threads of B’Elanna’s scarf. Tom jerked upright and spun around to help it. “Hey, hey,” he cooed, scooping the little ball of fluff into his hands. “You’re kind of a troublemaker, aren’t you?”

B’Elanna froze, her hand still outstretched. Tom was murmuring something unintelligible to the chick, a gentle smile on his face. He then pulled open the chest pocket on the fur-lined vest he’d taken to wearing in an attempt to protect his ravaged lungs and popped the tiny lavender bird inside. “You want to be up front, right? Where all the action is? That OK with you, Elizabeth?” As if the hen knew what he was asking, she gave a contented cluck in response, settling deeper into her scarf-nest with the other two members of her family.

It was the most ludicrous thing she’d ever seen, and B’Elanna felt a nearly overwhelming rush of love for him. It hadn’t really been about the baby. Or, at least, not that particular baby. Tom just
needed to know there was something ahead — someone he could take care of, something he could do to help. He needed to know they had a future together, and B’Elanna suddenly knew exactly how to show him that they did. “Hey, Paris,” she said, her voice soft.

Tom looked up, his smile quizzical. “Yeah?”

B’Elanna smiled and scooted to the edge of her chair, taking his right hand her in her left. “Will you marry me?”

Tom blinked and his mouth opened and closed a few times. “Will I… What?”

She nudged his knee with her own. “I’m proposing, you idiot. I want to get married. Will you marry me?”

He shook his head and laughed, and B’Elanna, in a flash of what she’d thought was a long buried insecurity, wondered if she’d read everything completely wrong and he was about to leave her again. “B’Elanna, what are you—”

But whatever he’d been about to say was swallowed in the bellow of the Baxial’s alarm system.

B’Elanna pulled her hand from his and spun back to her station. “Damn.” Her hands tapped a series of commands into the sensor panel. “It’s that meteor. When Seven activated the beacon’s shielding, it got knocked out of its flight path and now it’s on a direct intercept with the ship.”

Tom’s hands flew across his console. “The impulse drive is still powering up. How much time until impact?”

“Not long,” she said, wishing she didn’t have to run every reading through the translation matrix. “Maybe… thirty, shit, no, twenty seconds.”

“I’ll have to rely on thrusters, then,” he said, and B’Elanna’s mouth fell open to see a broad grin break across his face. He was enjoying this. “Couldn’t be bothered to do any upgrades on this thing when you were getting it ready, huh?”

“I’ve been a little busy,” she growled, doing what she could to speed up the warm up on the drive.

“No biggie,” Tom said, his voice jaunty. “I like a challenge.”

“Five seconds to impact!”

The Baxial wasn’t fast enough. Tom had given the little ship enough of a jump that the meteor missed making a direct hit, but it was big and was traveling fast when it hit the atmosphere — even the glancing impact was enough to send them spinning out of orbit.

“Increasing inertial dampers!” B’Elanna shouted as the ship lurched hard to port. Her hands scrambled for purchase on the control panel, and she lunged forward to input the needed commands.

Tom was still in his seat, but just barely. His face was red with pain and concentration as his hands skipped across the helm controls, and he fought for control of the little ship. “I’ve got you!” B’Elanna called out to him, keeping the console in a death grip as she dragged herself across the small space and activated his seat restraints. “You’ve gotta slow us down! If we go too far out, we’ll never have the power to get back to Hoth!”

“I know, B’Elanna!” he said, flashing her an incredulous glare as the belts snapped into place. “I’m working on it!”
Tom was now strapped in, but neither B’Elanna nor the chickens were so lucky. As the ship rolled back to starboard, B’Elanna slammed into the aft console, and she saw the two chicks from the nest go shooting into the air. She dove forward, making a desperate, instinctive grab, and caught them both. Elizabeth squawked and flapped around the small cockpit, sending a flurry of grey and black speckled feathers into the air.

“Tom!” she shouted, curling herself into a protective ball around the chicks as she rolled across the decking, bouncing aft to fore and back again.

“Hang on!” Tom called over his shoulder. “Almost…” The ship lurched to a sudden and total stop and Tom let out a huff of air. “Got it. All stop.”

B’Elanna lowered the agitated chicks to the ground and Elizabeth landed, immediately running to her offspring. Dusting off her clothes and picking several feathers out of her hair, B’Elanna slowly rose to her feet.

Tom’s eyes ranged over her as he released the restraints and put his vest chick down so it could join the others. “Are you OK?” he said. “Did you get hurt?”

“No,” B’Elanna said, dropping into the co-pilot seat with a thud. “I did not.” She spared the sensors a quick glance. Not too bad. She’d like a little more leeway, but they’d be able to land without too much trouble. Time to get back to the matter at hand, then. She plucked a feather out of Tom’s beard. “I am waiting for you to answer my question, though.”

Tom frowned. “Your question? What—” He stiffened. “Wait, you were serious? About the marriage thing?”

B’Elanna’s eyes narrowed and she lowered her voice into a growl. “You think I’d joke about something that like that?”

“No,” he stammered, his own eyes going wide. “But the timing. We’ve got the power issues, and launching the beacon, and winter… I just never thought… I mean I did think. Before. I always thought. Not that I’d assumed anything,” His shoulders sagged. “I love you. You know that, right?”

She couldn’t hold her glare anymore and started to laugh. Tom was so cute when he was bewildered. “I do.”

“And you want to get married? To me? Now?”

She stood and moved towards him until she was straddling his legs. “Maybe not right now. Maybe we should land the shuttle first. But yes. I want to get married. To you.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist but wouldn’t meet her eyes, instead pressing his forehead into her chest. He was quiet for a long moment, the only sound his noisy breaths. When he spoke again, his voice was soft. “Why, B’Elanna? What’s the point?”

“The point,” she said, leaning back and tugging on his beard until he looked at her, “is that I love you. And you love me. And we have a future together. I don’t know how long it is, or what it looks like. But we have one, and I want to share every minute of it with you.”

His mouth quirked even as his eyes brightened with tears. “Every minute? Are you sure about that?”

She sighed and laughed, then punched him lightly in the chest. “OK, every day, at least. Although
sometimes I’m not sure why. So what do you say, Paris? Will you marry me?”

Tom stared at her for what felt like a long, long time. B’Elanna’s throat tightened, wondering if she’d done this all wrong, if all she’d done was remind him of the future they should have had, instead of the one they were stuck with. Then his hand cupped her cheek, and his face broke with a loving smile, and he pulled her lips to his. B’Elanna felt his love in that kiss, and his desperation, and maybe, just a hint, of his hope.

When they finally broke apart, they were both panting. Just a little bit. It was going to be a long flight back to Hoth. B’Elanna only hoped Tom had enough energy to follow through with what he’d just started. “I guess I have my answer, then,” she murmured, tracing a finger along his bearded jaw.

Tom kissed her again. “I guess you do.”
Chapter Notes

I’d like to give a shout out to Photogirl1890 and her lovely story about Tom Paris leaving Auckland, Re-Entry. It was that story that made me ALSO want to put chickens in a fic. Thanks, PG, for the inspiration!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Chapter Two: Getting to Know Your Drone. Now we will review the complex and fascinating world that is the enhanced cybernetic physiology of a Borg drone. Drones have been created by assimilation of well over a hundred humanoid species, as well as some notable non-humanoid ones as well. As such, drone physiology is not an uncomplicated topic. As my primary subject of study was born human, human drones will be used as the default species in this discussion. Please see Appendix C for further information on Vulcan drones, Klingon drones, Sakari drones, Caatati drones—”

There was a quiet knock at her bedroom door, and Kathryn paused her PADD’s playback. “Come in.”

Susan cracked open the door just wide enough to poke her head in. “Sorry to interrupt, but you wanted me to let you know when it was an hour before the ceremony.”

Kathryn smiled. Even after two weeks, her roommate still wasn’t entirely at ease with her. “Thank you, Susan.” She waved the PADD. “I could use a break from this anyway.”

She put the PADD she’d borrowed from Tom back on her dresser. Once Seven had told her what was going on with her deteriorating implants, Kathryn had found a new purpose. Physiology wasn’t her area of expertise, no, but she had once been a damn good science officer. At the Academy, she’d learned everything there was to know about interstellar phenomenon; on New Earth she’d become an amateur entomologist and virologist. She could learn this, too.

The day after the beacon launch, she’d approached Tom in the Sacajawea. “I don’t want to step on your toes,” she’d said. “I know you’re CMO, so if—”

He’d practically thrown a pile of PADDs at her. “Step away! I’ve been spinning my wheels on this for weeks!”

She looked askance at the PADDs. “That’s a lot of reading.”

“Try listening to the audio,” Tom had suggested. “I promise — you can’t understand it any less than I do.”

It had been a good idea — although Kathryn had to admit she wished the Doctor hadn’t chosen to record the whole thing in his own voice. It wasn’t quick work, but she was getting there. Using a gel-pack to power Seven’s alcove had spared her implants more damage, even if it hadn’t reversed the damage that had already been done. They didn’t have a lot of time, but they had some. Kathryn had to hope that it was going to be enough.
But she had another important obligation to attend to first. Today, Tom and B’Elanna were getting married, and she was doing the honors. Kathryn pulled open the small drawer of her nightstand and pulled out her personal PADD. As she sat down on the edge of the bed and began to brush out and braid the hair that hadn’t been cut since the crash, she slowly read and re-read the words on the little screen. She wanted to know them by heart.

Susan came to get her with ten minutes to spare, as they’d agreed. It was a warmish day, almost ten degrees, which is why they’d picked it. But the temps were still cold enough that Kathryn took the time to don her thermal jacket and warm knitted hat. “I’m going with Kashi,” Susan told her. “I’ll meet you up there.”

Kathryn frowned at her. “But I thought…”

Susan gave her a sheepish smile in return. “Yeah, me, too. Neither one of us can quite let go. Hell, maybe you can marry us next.”

If even half the gossip Tom had shared with her was true, Kathryn didn’t think she’d need to clear her schedule any time soon. “I’d be honored,” she said.

It was a pleasant walk up to the central square. It would be generous to describe the sun as ‘shining,’ but the sky was more of a pale dove rather than its typical ominous slate, and the breeze was gentle. Garbose gave her a friendly wave, and Ayala offered to walk with her, but she waved him on. “I don’t want to slow you down,” she said. “And I don’t want to try to keep up with you. I’d rather just take my time. Enjoy the view. But, thank you.”

Most of Hoth was already gathered by the time Kathryn made it to her destination. Although it was still an hour until sunset, Dalby and some of the others had lit an impressive bonfire in the pit that marked the center of the square. “Nice work, Ken,” she said, clapping the tall man on the shoulder. “It’ll be downright toasty for the ceremony.”

“Yeah,” he said, wiping some sweat off his brow and leaving a faint trail of ash in its wake. “We might have gone a bit overboard, but Tem and I figured they won’t have much of a honeymoon if the groom develops hypothermia during the wedding.”

Seven arrived a few minutes later. “Kathryn. I have done what you asked. I required assistance from Golwat, as she has some experience in jewelry making, but I informed her that if she were to share this information with anyone, the consequences would be severe.” She opened her palm to reveal two simple rings, one a solid band and the other more delicate, made from a scrap of duranium from Voyager.

“They’re beautiful, Seven,” Kathryn said, taking them from her. “Tom and B’Elanna will love them. And,” she added with a slight scold to her voice, “maybe thank Golwat instead of trying to scare her into compliance. Most people are happy to keep good surprises secret.”

Seven raised an eyebrow, but gave Kathryn a short nod.

Everyone short of the happy couple had arrived within another five minutes. Kathryn sent Naomi off to Tom and B’Elanna’s shelter to let them know it was time. They weren’t doing anything fancy, or long. It might have been above freezing, but that didn’t mean anyone wanted to stand around in the cold for a formal ceremony. Tom and B’Elanna, in fact, hadn’t wanted to do anything at all.

“There’s a Klingon ceremony,” B’Elanna had told her and Seven as they’d studied the beacon’s initial readouts together. “It’s called the tlhingh ‘Ip. Marriage by mutual consent. It’s a little…"
vigorous, so we’re going to wait for a day Tom’s back isn’t too bad, and just go for it.”

Seven only nodded, apparently uninterested, but Kathryn was having none of it. “B’Elanna,” she said. “I want to support your desire to honor Klingon traditions—”

B’Elanna snorted. “I’m not honoring anything. It’s just easy. Tom and I don’t need to make a big deal out of it.”

Kathryn pulled her away from the monitor. “But it’s not just about you and Tom. Not entirely. This isn’t a thousand years ago, when marriage was an exchange of property or titles. We all know the two of you love each other. So if you’re choosing to marry each other, here and now, it means something. It means you’re looking forward.”

B’Elanna opened her mouth, Kathryn suspected to protest, but then she closed it again. “You’re not wrong,” she said, smiling a little. “But an actual wedding?” She gestured at their surroundings. “It seems a little extravagant, given… Well, given everything.”

Kathryn took her hand. “We’ll keep it simple. But Hoth needs this, ‘Lanna. Doing this — getting married to each other, in front of everyone. It shows you believe in your future. In our future. Please say yes.”

B’Elanna had relented, and Tom, to no one’s surprise, had been an easy sell. “I’d love a party,” he’d said. “Even if there’s no food, or drinks, or music.” He’d frowned then. “And it’s going to be cold as hell out. How is this going to work, exactly?”

“I’ll take care of the details,” Kathryn had told him. “Consider it a wedding gift.”

She’d had plenty of helpers. Everyone’s mood had been buoyant with the successful launch of the beacon; even before she’d rallied the troops, Hoth had had something of a celebratory air about it. Naomi had insisted on being in charge of decor (with plenty of help from her mother), and Kyoto said she would round up a few singers to accompany her on the guitar. Chell showed remarkable resourcefulness in coming up with a recipe for a sort of honey cake. He also had a stash of his fermented berry juice on hand.

“B’Elanna told me to stop making it months ago,” Chell had said. “Not a good use of resources, supposedly. I bet she’ll be thrilled I ignored her now!” His cheeks had then flushed purple as Kathryn stared at him. “I mean, not that I should ignore… It isn’t the best use of resources, really. She’s completely right. That will be the last batch, Captain, I swear.”

For once, Kathryn hadn’t corrected the use of her old rank.

There wasn’t anyone who didn’t help. Harren put aside several eggs for the cake; even Rollins and Whicher, who mostly kept to themselves these days, had been spotted arranging pine boughs and winter berries on Naomi’s direction. They’d pulled together one hell of a party. Certainly not what Kathryn would have imagined or hoped for them if anyone had asked her a year ago. But it was a heartfelt effort, and it was another way for everyone to come together before that became too difficult. The weather, of course, but also because this hopeful, happy mood wouldn’t last long. They had no way to know if their distress call would make it back to the Alpha Quadrant; even if it did, who knew if Starfleet had any resources left to help them? For all they knew, the Federation could still be at war with the Dominion. Best case scenario, it would surely be months before any sort of aid might arrive. Months in which anything could happen. Kathryn glanced at Seven, rubbing absentely at the ocular implant that was causing her sporadic migraines. She looked at Tom, who had just emerged from his shelter, leaning on the walking stick he was using almost constantly now.
Yes, definitely a good idea to celebrate while they still could.

Kathryn signaled Kyoto to start the music, then gave Naomi a nod and a smile. The little girl beamed back, and began to make her way through the crowd, proudly clutching the mixed-materials bouquet she’d made out of dried flowers and… Kathryn squinted. Self-sealing stem bolts? Tom and B’Elanna followed behind, walking arm and arm, both smiling and blushing as the residents of Hoth murmured their good wishes and clapped them on the back. They reached a cleared area in front of the bonfire, where two of Carey’s best chairs had been given a place of honor, and sat across from each other. B’Elanna reached forward to take Tom’s hands, and Kathryn began.

“If it were up to Tom and B’Elanna, we wouldn’t be here today. They were planning on sneaking off to elope until I set them straight.”

A murmur of laughter ran through the crowd.

“And if it weren’t for Tom and B’Elanna, none of us would be here today. I am so grateful to and for this couple sitting before me. I think of who they were, when we met so long ago, and of how far they’ve come. Some might say they could have never imagined how these two individuals would rise to all the challenges they’ve faced. But I think that’s doing them a disservice. I won’t take any credit for the work they’ve done here, for how well they’ve kept us all going. But I will say I’m very proud of both of them.”

She looked at them both in turn. Tom was trying to discreetly wipe a tear off his cheek, B’Elanna smiled and reached out to do it for him. Neither had any eyes for Kathryn.

“They’ve chosen to exchange their own vows, in the Klingon fashion, later and in private. As Tom so eloquently put it when he told me, ‘Nobody needs to see that.’” Another laugh. “But, I am still choosing to retain one privilege that came with my captain’s pips, and that is to give my blessing to this union. To that end, I want to share some words of a poem with you. It’s one Tom showed me, many months ago, and it made me angry the first time I heard it.”

Tom looked up at that, his expression puzzled and mildly concerned. Kathryn gave him a reassuring smile.

“But what I didn’t know at the time, was that he wanted me to focus on the end. ‘We must risk delight. We must admit there will be music despite everything. We must have the stubbornness to accept our gladness in the ruthless furnace of this world.’” Kathryn paused, grateful for the mood stabilizer she’d given herself just that morning. She wasn’t sure she’d made it through this otherwise. “I’m not sure I know any two people quite as stubborn as Tom and B’Elanna, and I want to thank them for reminding us that there is still music. I also want to wish them every bit of gladness they can find. Seven, can I have the rings?”

Tom and B’Elanna’s confusion soon turned to expressions of delighted surprise, and they each placed a ring on the other’s hand. Kathryn placed a hand on each of their shoulders. “Now,” she said, looking around the crowd, “who thinks it’s time for the bride and groom to kiss?”

Clapping hands and a boisterous cheer answered her question, and the happy couple was more than willing to oblige. There was no recessional, no tossing of the bouquet (especially given it was half made of metal); just a simple gathering of friends, offering their congratulations and best wishes to the newlyweds. Sam and Joe both offered short toasts, and Chell made sure Tom and B’Elanna shared the biggest slice of cake. Perhaps an hour passed before B’Elanna broke free of the crowd and joined Kathryn where she stood a little apart from the festivities.
“Thank you,” the younger woman said. “You were right, of course. This was good for everyone.”

“It was,” Kathryn agreed, wrapping an arm around B’Elanna’s shoulders. “But I hope it was especially good for you two. That was all I wanted.”

“How long do you think it will last?” B’Elanna asked. At Kathryn’s questioning frown, she laughed. “Not our marriage. I’m hoping there isn’t an expiration date on that. I meant this,” she said, gesturing at the crowd. “There won’t be another beacon launch. Maybe another marriage or two, but…” She sighed and stared into the fire. “No holidays, or birthday parties, or… or new babies. You know as well as I do — that beacon may have been our best hope, but it’s still a pretty slim one.”

Kathryn leaned her head into B’Elanna’s. She wouldn’t have chosen any of this — the crash, her head injury, Megan’s death, Tom’s and Seven’s health — but she had to admit there was one small benefit. It had been very, very lonely at times, being the only Starfleet captain in seventy-thousand light years. She was glad B’Elanna had chosen a different path of leadership. “It will last longer than you think, and not nearly long enough. But we’ll find more moments like this, B’Elanna. Because we won’t stop looking.”

“Music despite everything, huh?”

“Despite everything,” Kathryn confirmed.

They stood together for a while, supporting each other, as they gazed into the fire and listened to the laughter and singing. As the daylight faded into night, B’Elanna straightened and looked around. “It’s getting late,” she said. “If I want my husband to have any energy left for the private part of the ceremony, I better get him out of here.”

“I’ll run interference for you.” Kathryn led the way to the chairs where Tom was still holding court. “And remember — no one wants to hear a peep from either of you for the next two days. Chell’s made sure you’ve got plenty to eat in your stasis drawer. Sam can handle most medical issues, and between myself, Mike, and Seven, we’ll manage the rest.”

She hoped it was dark enough that B’Elanna didn’t see the tears that sprang to her eyes when they hugged. She stood a bit apart from the crowd when B’Elanna hauled Tom out of his chair and they said their final good-byes and thank you’s. She thought about leaving, but a pile of seeds was pressed into her hands — at Susan’s behest, Vorik had provided a bag of what he had left after his last planting. The happy couple was showered with them on the short walk back to their shelter.

“This was a nice thing you did,” Mike Ayala said from just over her shoulder, after their door was shut and the crowd began to thin.

Kathryn glanced up at him. “I didn’t do much. Certainly not what they should have had. It doesn’t really touch what I owe them, either.”

Mike shrugged, favoring her with one of his rare smiles. “Pretty good start, though. Have a good night, Kathryn.”

“Good night, Mike.”

She could head back to her own shelter, but the fire was still blazing, and the night wasn’t as cold as many. Susan and Kashimuro might like a little time to themselves, besides — she’d seen them sneak off down the path a half-hour ago. Kathryn drifted amongst the others that weren’t ready to end the night, sharing memories of other, happy times and long-lost comrades. She ended up
staying until the bitter end — when the only others left were Dalby and Gerron, tending the last few embers of the smoldering fire. “Have a good night, gentlemen,” she called to them, waving Tem off when he offered to walk her to her shelter.

At the top of the path, she paused. The skies had cleared some since sundown, and there was rarely seen moonlight bathing the mountaintop that was Voyager’s final resting place. It still gave her a pang, seeing the ship that had carried them so far, stripped and ruined. But that chronic sorrow was tempered by the faint light Kathryn saw high in the skies above Hoth.

The beacon. It was just a coincidence — that the wedding had taken place the same night their final hope of salvation was passing overhead. But even rational, science-minded Kathryn couldn’t help but take it as a portent of hope. Its message was transmitting, its orbit stable. The Borg-inspired shielding would deflect any rogue space debris, and the hull’s solar cells meant it would be self-powered for a decade or more. B’Elanna was right — their chances of rescue were slim. Odds were they’d likely end their days on this desolate, lonely planet.

But Kathryn had never really been one for worrying about the odds, had she? She’d forgotten that, for a time. Had become fixated on all the wrong choices she’d made versus the right ones. Like the ones that asked a bitter convict in Auckland to join Voyager’s first mission, or made an angry but brilliant young woman chief engineer, or accepted a liberated drone into her fold. She had to believe, as she watched that faint, distant light shine high above her, that maybe they could beat the odds one more time.

Chapter End Notes

Kathryn is reading excerpts from the poem she started waaaaayyy back in Chapter 18, A Brief for the Defense by Jack Gilbert. (I did take a liberty with the line order because it worked better for Tom and B’Elanna that way.) I don't really 'get' much poetry, but I love this one. You can find it free on the internet -- do yourself a favor and give it a try.
Chapter Notes

This is it! This is not a drill! We're at the end!

I'm posting the last two chapters (and a third chapter of bonus post-story head canons) all together because they are best read that way. Enjoy!

Watching the assimilation filled B’Elanna with disgust, but she had to admit to a certain amount of fascination, too. It was so clean and fast. Seven would surely say efficient. She straightened from the microscope. “It’s certainly, uh… ingenious,” she said. “But how many more nanoprobe would you have to give up? That can’t be good for you.”

Seven ran a hand through her short, spiky hair. She’d cut it a few weeks back, claiming the longer style was impractical, but B’Elanna suspected it was an unsuccessful attempt to hide how much she’d lost. Despite spending eight hours in her alcove every night, Seven’s health had continued a slow decline in the four months since the beacon launch. “I used less than one percent of my current nanoprobe complement,” Seven said. “I would not need to provide any more. The assimilated bacteria are now sufficiently equipped to produce their own.”

It was her latest attempt at finding a sustainable energy source. They’d continued to refine the solar cells, and Joe and Nicoletti were hard at work on a hydroelectric generator, but the bulk of the dilithium would be gone inside a month, and they still had no way to power the replicators or the thermal generator once it was fully depleted. Seven was hoping a Borg collective of anaerobic bacteria might be the answer.

“But what if we lose containment?” B’Elanna asked. “Couldn’t these bacteria assimilate every microorganism on the planet?”

“Once again, your irrational fears stand in the way of solving our problems!” Seven barked, rising shakily to her feet. “If you don’t care to hear my ideas, then…” She raised a hand to her ocular implant. “Then…”

B’Elanna gently pushed Seven back into her chair. Along with her implant deterioration came dramatic mood swings. Even Naomi was used to it by now. “Of course I want to hear your ideas, Seven,” B’Elanna said, her voice calm. “But if I don’t challenge them, I’m not exactly doing my job, am I?”

Seven rested her forehead against her hand. “I am sorry, B’Elanna. I didn’t intend to shout at you.”

B’Elanna popped her head into Sam and Naomi’s bedroom, where the tiny family was tucked into bed, reading. “Hey, Sam. I think it’s that time.”

Sam nodded and left Naomi with the PADD and a quick peck on the top of her head. She crossed the shelter to Seven’s alcove to power it up, while B’Elanna knelt at Seven’s side. “I think it’s a really interesting idea, and I want to hear more about it — including how you’re going to make sure we don’t assimilate the planet’s entire biomass — but it’s late. I’m tired, I’m hungry, and I want to go home to my husband. We’ll take it up again tomorrow, OK?”
Seven nodded and allowed B’Elanna to help her to her feet. She did not complain as she was guided towards her alcove, nor when Sam helped her make the step in. “I am also tired,” she confessed.

“I had a feeling,” B’Elanna grunted, when Seven lurched forward into her. “Stand up, Seven.”

It only took a few seconds for Sam to activate the alcove, and for Seven’s face to ease. “You think she’s getting worse?” B’Elanna asked.

Sam shrugged. “Hard to say. She has good days and bad. Until just now, I would have said today was a good one. Kathryn said she has some new ideas she’s working on, though.”

B’Elanna said her good nights to both Sam and her daughter, then donned her winter gear for the quick jog across Hoth. It had snowed again yesterday, but Rollins had been leading work crews on keeping the paths clear. She entered her shelter as efficiently possible — pulling aside the windshield and opening the door just enough to squeeze through, then slamming it shut before too much of the cold air got in. The living area was dark, but there was a light on in the bedroom, as well as the sound of coughing. Nothing out of the ordinary — B’Elanna had become an expert in Tom’s various wheezes and coughs, and this was the same one he’d had most nights since the beginning of winter. “I’m assuming you ate?” she called to him, pulling a rock bunny leg and some kind of root vegetable mash out of the stasis drawer.

She didn’t expect an answer — Tom didn’t really have the lung power for shouting anymore. She’d give him the food if he needed it. Before joining him in the bedroom, she paused to check the monitor that now dominated their kitchen table. There was a similar unit in the Tereshkova, both of them linked to the beacon that was orbiting high above them. The steady blue light indicated all was functioning as it should be — if anyone ever bothered to call them, they’d be sure to hear it.

Tom was propped up in their bed, still wearing his knit cap, with a steaming mug of tea and a pile of PADDs. “Hi,” he said, smiling. “And yes, I ate. Kathryn nagged me about it, as I suspect you order her to.”

B’Elanna sat at the edge of the bed, balancing the plate on her knees. “Hey, she nags you all on her own. I don’t need to order her to do anything.” She took a few bites of the leg. “I was just with Seven.”

“How she’s doing? I haven’t been able to make it over there for a few days.”

B’Elanna shrugged. “OK, I guess. Sam said she was having a pretty good day up until the end.”

Tom sighed, and gestured with the PADD in his hand. “Kathryn’s latest data is pretty promising, but it’s still in the early stages. I just don’t know what kind of time we have left.”

B’Elanna reached over to give his leg a comforting squeeze. This wasn’t a new conversation. “Actually, the reason I was over there was because Seven had a new idea for a sustainable energy source.” She waited until Tom looked up, then continued. “She’s used her nanoprobes to assimilate some anaerobic bacteria. She says that we can use the gases they produce to power the thermal generator, and maybe the replicators, too.”

“Assimilated bacteria?”

B’Elanna nodded, taking another bite of bunny.

Tom continued to stare at her. “That sounds like a terrible idea.”
B’Elanna started to chuckle. “It really does. I didn’t know how to break it to her, though. She was so excited to tell me. But can you imagine? A teeny, tiny Borg collective, assimilating the planet from literally the ground up.”

“Antibiotic resistance is futile,” Tom intoned in a robotic voice, before breaking and laughing along with her. “Oh man,” he wheezed, before sobering. “Seriously, B’Elanna, you can’t let her do that. It could go wrong in a million different ways.”

B’Elanna shook her head, her own laugh fading. “I know, I know. I’ll tell her when she’s better rested.” She sighed and poked at the mash on her plate. “We’ll just have to keep looking.”

She finished her dinner, her stomachs still feeling far from satisfied as usual. She stood to return her plate to the kitchen and reached for Tom’s now empty mug. “Is this a new one?” she asked. Vorik had taken to brewing a series of medicinal teas, focusing on ingredients that were supposed to help with pain and inflammation. In addition to CMO, Tom was now also Chief Guinea Pig.

“Hmm.” Tom nodded as he returned his attention to his PADD. “Taste is decent, at least.”

Which meant it had done little to mitigate his need for replicated analgesics, or his bronchodilator. They’d just have to keep looking there, too.

B’Elanna cleaned and put away the dishes before returning to the bedroom. She stripped off her outer layers and socks, looking to see if Tom had noticed. She then crawled up onto the bed and slipped under the covers next to him, jamming her ice-cold feet under his legs. “Shit, B’Elanna!” he yelped, then started hacking. “Why can’t you just wear socks to bed?”

“That’s a ridiculous suggestion,” she said, feeling a bit bad she’d made him cough. She rubbed circles across his chest until his breathing calmed. “Who wears socks to bed?”

“Me!” he insisted, returning his PADD to the nightstand and flipping off the light. “Every night! Because that’s a normal response to having cold feet!”

“But then they get too hot.” B’Elanna snuggled up against him, tucking her face into his neck. “How’s your back?” she murmured. It had been a couple weeks since he’d been up for anything beyond some rather chaste kissing. He’d had a bad fall on the ice.

“Pretty good, actually,” he whispered back, reaching up to stroke her hair. “Wouldn’t be hard to make me feel better, though.”

That was all the encouragement B’Elanna needed. She slid her leg across to straddle him, careful to rest the bulk of her weight on her own legs instead of Tom’s. They had to do things much differently than they used to, but B’Elanna didn’t mind. Given their meager diet, she didn’t have the energy for more Klingon-style love-making, either. She leaned forward to adjust the pillows behind his head, and Tom pressed his advantage, hungrily working his mouth against her collarbone, then pulling open the neck of her shirt. His mouth moved down towards what was left of her breasts.

B’Elanna sighed, both in pleasure and resignation. “Remember when I used to have tits?” she gasped, as Tom lapped at her nipple with his tongue.

“Don’t care,” he said, pulling her closer. “Always been more of a leg man.”

They both missed it — being able to press their naked bodies against each other — but, like with everything these days, they made do. Tom wouldn’t open her shirt the whole way, but instead yanked it upwards, always making sure any exposed skin was covered by blankets. B’Elanna
pulled Tom’s pants down just enough for her mouth to get where it needed to, knowing what a hassle it would be for him to try to re-dress later when he’d likely be too tired to stand. What once was ardent was now more tender. Where they used to be passionate, they now settled for loving. It wasn’t so bad, though. It was far better than what many had.

Afterwards, they lay entwined, sated, and in Tom’s case, sleepy. There had been something that B’Elanna had been wanting to ask him, though, and she thought she might finally have the nerve. “Tom?” she said, hoping he was not too drowsy yet.

“Yeah?” he said, but his eyes stayed closed.

“Back when…” She paused and lay her head against his chest. It was easier if she didn’t look at him. “Back when I was pregnant, did you ever…?”

“What, B’Elanna?” His body tensed, and his voice became alert.

“I know I told you not to, but…” She was being stupid. Just ask him!

“Did you ever find out what the baby was going to be? Or maybe you had Sam…?”

“A girl,” Tom murmured, kissing the top of her head. “She would have been a girl.”

Did that make it better, or worse? Being able to picture the child that would never exist, knowing what their baby — their daughter — might have been. “My grandmother,” B’Elanna said. “She died when I was young. Before my father left. But we were so close. She called me Belleza. ‘Beauty’ in Spanish. I always thought that someday, if I had a daughter, I might name her after her.”

Tom’s hands — still strong and sure — rubbed long strokes up and down her back. “What was her name?”

“Isela,” B’Elanna told him, wondering how many years it had been since she’d said the name aloud.

“It’s beautiful.”

B’Elanna pressed her face into his chest, and he hugged her tightly. It wasn’t fair — how much they had lost. How much they could have had if things had gone just a little differently. She tried to not to dwell on it, to only look forward — but no one could do that all the time, could they? It was OK to sometimes imagine what might have been: if they’d gotten back to Earth, or never made this crazy attempt to get home in the first place. B’Elanna allowed a tear or two to trail down her cheek and soak into Tom’s shirt, but she wouldn’t waste too much energy on crying. Tomorrow was another day, and so was the day after that. She needed to fight for the future they still had, not mourn what would never be. “I love you, Tom.”

“I love you, too,” were the last words she heard as she closed her eyes and allowed herself to rest.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“B’Elanna. B’Elanna, wake up.”

Even though he’s rousing me from a dead sleep, I hear Tom’s urgency. I blink my eyes open and take in the darkened room. There’s a noise. An alarm. Red alert? No such thing on Hoth.

“Tom?” I mumble, putting a hand to his chest. “Are you sick? What’s wrong?”

“That,” he says, struggling to get free of the blankets and waving towards the living area. “Can’t you hear it? It’s the comm!”

The comm? Fantastic, some kind of camp emergency, and it’s the middle of the night. But then, finally, my brain finishes waking up, and I bolt upright. It’s not the camp comm system. It’s the one from the beacon.

Now I’m the one struggling with the blankets. Being far more agile than my husband, I get free first. The second my bare feet hit the floor, I yelp in shock at the cold.

“See?” he remarks smugly, finally sitting up himself. “That’s another reason you should wear socks to bed.”

I take enough time to glare at him before jamming my feet in the closest slippers — his, at least five sizes too big — and shuffle and trip my way towards the comm monitor. Tom’s moving faster than he has in months, and reaches it only a few beats behind me.

My hands are shaking so much, I can’t quite get the damn thing powered up. Tom finally reaches past with a huff of impatience and does it for me. He’s got those steady pilot’s hands, after all.

“…of the Federation Starship Anthony, calling for any Voyager crew. Come in, Voyager crew.”

I let out something between a sob and a laugh. Tom murmurs: “It’s Harry. That’s Harry’s voice,” and I activate the outgoing signal.

“Anthony, this is B’Elanna Torres responding. Please give us your location.”

A long, staticky pause. Please tell me we didn’t lose the signal.

“…B’Elanna? Is that you?”

“No, Harry,” I call out, laughing and completely giving up on protocol. Protocol’s a bunch of bullshit anyway. “It’s a different B’Elanna Torres. Where the hell are you?”

I can hear him laughing, too. “We’re about ten minutes from entering orbit, then we’ll transport to your location.”

“I’m sending you some coordinates,” I say, tapping some numbers into the console. “We’ll meet you there in fifteen.”

“Acknowledged, B’Elanna. Anthony out.”
The shelter falls quiet, the only sound that of Tom’s rasping breath. We stare at each other for a moment. “Did that just happen?” I ask him.

He grins. “I sure as hell hope so.”*

Then we’re all activity — me, kicking his slippers to the side so I can get something on my feet that fit, Tom hobbling after me to grab his heaviest sweater and vest. I throw my hair back into a quick, messy bun and look around for my gloves. I’m mostly dressed when I notice Tom has dropped one of his own gloves to the floor. He winces as he bends for it.

“I’ll get it,” I say. I bite my lip before the next part. He hates it, but sometimes he needs a reminder to take care of himself, and it can’t be more than negative ten out. “Maybe you should wait here,” I suggest. “The cold’s going to be hell on your lungs.”

Tom looks at me, his face solemn. “You know how I feel about you, right?”

I take a moment to cup his cheek. “Of course I do.”

“Then know it’s coming from a place of deep love when I say: You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me! Like hell I’m waiting here!”

I laugh, then he breaks and laughs, too. “Now go get my boots, wife!” he says, wiggling a foot at me. “We’ve got company on the way!”

It’s biting cold outside in the square — no wind, at least, but the kind of blood-chilling temps that make you feel like each breath is freezing you from the inside out. Tom, at least, has put on the respirator he’s taken to wearing outdoors. It protects him from the worst of it, but I see he’s already struggling.

“Come on, Harry,” I mutter, keeping a tight hold of Tom’s arm. Wouldn’t it be just our luck if he collapses just as the cavalry arrives?

We don’t have long to wait. Not a minute after we make it outside, two figures begin to materialize before us. They’re dressed in standard ‘Fleet thermal gear — they must’ve checked a weather report before beaming down. The hoods make it hard to tell who they are as the transporter’s lights still swirl around them, but the one on the left is Harry. I know it’s Harry. The other is a little taller, a little bulkier. Oh my god. It’s Chakotay.

I hear Tom try to pass a choked sob off as a cough, but I can’t deal with that yet. I’m not going to let him make me cry, for god’s sake. Not now. Instead, I push my own hood back off my face and step forward with a grin, speaking the words I’ve been waiting and hoping to say for the last four hundred and thirty-one days.

“Hey, Starfleet. What the hell took you so long?”

Chapter End Notes

*If you are so inclined, at this point you can start playing the Zombies’ ‘This Will Be Our Year (https://youtu.be/FmuswTEGF-U) to play over the remainder of the chapter.

Wow. We made it! I have to say: I’m actually quite sad this is over and am really going to miss those of you that have taken the time to comment, and ask questions, and
occasionally yell at me. : ) I have much gratitude to share, but before I do that -- check out the bonus chapter! I'm putting some post-Ruined Sky head canons there for those of you that are interested.

First of all, a HUGE thanks to Sareki and Photogirl1890 for all their help getting this story into its final form. You cannot even know what a crappy (and typo-laden) writer I would be without these two. If you enjoy my stories, you owe them thanks, too!

Another big thanks to those that took the time to leave comments and kudos, and particularly those of you that commented on most, if not ALL the chapters. It makes my sharing my work SO MUCH BETTER to know that people enjoy it! I appreciate every last one of you!

And lastly, a thank you to those that read and enjoyed my story but were too shy or busy or overwhelmed to comment or leave kudos. I lurked and read for a very long time before I felt comfortable commenting, and I know that my failure to comment did not reflect on my enjoyment of the fics I was reading. Even though I don't know who you are, I'm glad you took this journey with me!
Starting about an hour after the end of chapter 39, and progressing from there:

Harren gets into a fight with the Anthony’s chief petty officer over whether or not Elizabeth and the rest of the flock will be boarding the ship. B’Elanna finds herself in the unexpected position of fighting for Harren and his birds, ultimately roping in the ship’s science officer because the chickens’ thermoregulatory systems are one of the most unique and efficient ones ever seen by a Federation biologist. The chickens are assigned their own small cargo bay, and B’Elanna tells Harren if he doesn’t keep it clean, she’ll space them herself.

The Doctor’s main priority once he’s been activated and made aware of their rescue is to get Seven fixed. He basically takes over the Anthony’s sickbay and two of the science labs before the day is out. The Anthony’s CMO is a bit taken aback at first, but she studied briefly with Dr. Zimmerman during her fellowship, and she’s actually impressed by the Doctor’s level of empathy and compassion, given what the EMH mark one prototypes were like. Plus, she likes a dry sense of humor. Together, they get Seven’s implants stabilized within five days of leaving orbit.

A week after their rescue, Sam reunites with her husband, Gregrendtregk on Deep Space Twelve. Naomi finally gets to meet her father! Gres committed to waiting for her the minute he’d heard Voyager was not destroyed but rather lost in the Delta Quadrant. The first favor Sam asks Gres after their reunion is if Seven can live with them for a bit once her implants are fully repaired. “She doesn’t have any memory of her human family,” she explains. “And Naomi’s already been through so much upheaval. It’ll be good for both of them.” Gres, barely able to speak through his joy at finally being reunited with his family, agrees.

During Seven’s time with the Wildmans (Ktarians take their wives’ last names) Seven fulfills all the requirements for admission to Starfleet Academy. She briefly considers command track, but B’Elanna not-so-gently suggests she stick with Sciences: “Your crew would mutiny within a week.” “Given your own experiences with triggering mutinous behavior,” Seven replies, “I shall defer to your judgement.” Then they gossip about Rollins over dessert.

Poor Rollins returns to Earth only to discover that his wife has moved on with the brother that was permanently disabled at Wolf 359. He does get the job he wanted in the Oversight office, though, and his ex offers to set him up with her second cousin.

Chakotay’s heart starts beating again once Tom and B’Elanna confirm that Kathryn is still alive and mostly well. He tries to play it cool, but Tom finally says that she’ll be pretty happy to see
him, too, if he wants to directions on where to find her. He nearly busts down the door in his excitement, scaring an underwear-clad Nozawa half to death. (He was making tea for Susan). B’Elanna had already commed Kathryn to warn her what was coming, and she’s waiting for him. Once she stops laughing at poor Kashi, the hug she and Chakotay shares goes on for a very long time. Things progress slowly between them — Kathryn is not the same person she was before the slipstream drive, and she needs to learn that as much as Chakotay does. She moves back into her mother’s house in Indiana once they reach Earth, and has weeks of medical procedures and therapy to get through. Chakotay comes to visit her every weekend. He only re-accepted his commission so he could keep looking for her (for all of them) and resigns it in favor of a teaching position at the Academy instead. Four months after their return to Earth, he takes her to Angkor Wat, just like they talked about. They’re celebrating her finally being cleared for duty, and also her promotion to Vice Admiral in charge of the Sciences division. He asks her to move in with him. She says yes.

Tom has to endure a solid six months of surgeries and physical therapy before he’s close to the person he was before the crash. He doesn’t have the stamina he used to, but he can do most of what he needs and wants to do. (Yes, including the sexy stuff, much to his AND B’Elanna’s relief.) He has, however, discovered that he’s lost his taste for thrill-seeking. About two months into his recovery, the first day he really feels like he’s getting better, he stops by Starfleet Academy and asks to use the flight simulators. The ensign running it cautions him against trying such an advanced scenario right off the bat, then ends up calling over the rest of his department to “come watch this guy fly.” But when Tom exits, he realizes the spark is gone. It was about as satisfying to him as being able to put on his own shoes again or eating a cheeseburger — great in the moment, but something he knows will become mundane before long. He’s a bit at sea (B’Elanna asks him what’s wrong about every five minutes) until his next check-up with the Doctor. “I’ve been waiting for you to figure it out, Mr. Paris. You should go to medical school.”

After two weeks of debriefs at HQ, B’Elanna is ready to tell Starfleet to take a flying leap. She has to fight an urge to punch the Admiral that offers her a commission: “Ensign, to start. Although we can perhaps speed up the usual promotion schedule in your case. You have some required Academy courses you have to take. And you’ll need to pass the qualifying exams.” She manages to get out a reasonably polite: “I’ll have to give that some thought,” then literally runs across campus to the closest transporters, goes to Indiana, and runs another ten kilometers to Gretchen Janeway’s house. “Is your daughter home?” she asks the mildly alarmed elder Janeway. Kathryn and B’Elanna have a long talk about what B’Elanna wants, what Tom wants, and what that could look like. Between Tom’s father and Kathryn, they have enough pull to get B’Elanna a civilian consulting job in the Engineering Corps.

Tom and B’Elanna are content, for a time. Tom gets through medical school, B’Elanna finds her work mostly satisfying, they have their first child (Ma’Leth, named for B’Elanna’s beloved grandfather). But man, Earth is CROWDED. And San Francisco isn’t warm enough for either of them anymore. Then one day B’Elanna’s mother visits. She’s a terraformer, and tells them of a Federation outer colony she’s helped to start. It could use another doctor, and definitely more engineers. “It’s quite warm,” MiraKathryn assures them. “And it’s on the ocean. Only about 800 residents at the moment.” They start packing their bags that night. The moment they step off the shuttle, they know they have made the right choice. They have their second child there, and, a few years after that, their third. A few of their fellow Hoth survivors move there to join them before long, and it’s often where Seven takes her leaves. Chakotay and Kathryn come to visit at least once a year.
And maybe, someday, I'll tell you what happens next…

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again to everyone that commented and left kudos and even just read to the end!

EDIT: I can't believe I forgot to say this, but the name Ma'Leth comes from my lovely friend Sareki's story, The Lament of the Daughter. It's possibly the best B'Elanna backstory I've ever read, and y'all should go read it now if you haven't.

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