

A Case of Need

Summary: A novelization of the episode "Workforce" from B'Elanna's POV.

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Author's note: I wrote this shortly before "Workforce" aired, thanks to Stacy who managed to obtain the episode's shooting script. This is a rewrite of the original story, first written in 2001 and then posted in 2003. My thanks to Stacy, Andrew, Kim, Lori, Jamelia116, Rocky and Klugtiger for their help on this story.

Chapter One

She thought if she could remember his name, that would be enough.

A name wasn't too much to ask for, was it?

She'd already given up on trying to remember anything else about him.

A name. That was all she wanted.

B'Elanna sighed as she glanced down at her PADD. Around her, colleagues moved briskly, with a sense of purpose, as if they knew where they were going and more importantly, where they had come from.

She couldn't even remember how she came to Quarra.

Kessik was a distant gray memory. She knew she had lived there, knew she had been unhappy, and probably unemployed. At some point, she had made the decision to book passage on a transport and come here.

The journey from Kessik was a blur just like everything else. She imagined the trip had been like any other transport: cramped quarters and short tempers. Her stomachs had churned – she was sure of it – as she'd never been good at space travel and with the pregnancy, nausea was never far away. Perhaps it was well that she had blocked out the memory.

She did remember arriving on Quarra though, her most distinct and clear memory. B'Elanna had disembarked from the transport carrying only the one shoulder bag containing a change of clothes, toiletries, and a few hyposprays loaded with prenatal vitamins. She'd noted the other passengers stepping off the transport, had realized no one looked like her but was unable to identify the species of any of her fellow travelers. She'd wondered then if this was the first time she'd ever left Kessik.

After leaving the transport station, B'Elanna had asked around and discovered the Power Facility was desperately in need of workers. She found her way there and met with the supervisor, who had asked

her a few perfunctory questions and then handed her a neatly packaged set of green uniforms and directed her to a workstation.

At least the job kept her occupied. They had given her mindless work - monitoring power distribution levels across the city to prevent blackouts - but B'Elanna didn't mind. It was easy enough work and she didn't really have an idea of what she would like to do instead.

Her shift began at six o'clock in the evening and she usually arrived a few minutes before she had to report in. After saying good night to Amina who worked the day shift, B'Elanna would take over the console to focus on the various blips and bleeps that showed the power levels across the city. Most of the times, she didn't look up from her screen at all, studying those power grids intensely and only taking her required break every two hours.

For her first week on the job, B'Elanna worked mostly in silence, barely aware of anyone or anything around her. And for the most part, no one noticed her, until one night when B'Elanna, hunched over her work as usual, was startled out of her quietness by a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"Excuse me. Are you new here?"

B'Elanna looked up. The speaker was female of medium height with shoulder-length brown hair and a pleasant smile. Her hazel eyes were warm with concern. The woman wore a two-piece blue uniform – indicative of those who worked with the reactor coils – with the Power Facility's three-ringed emblem embroidered on her left shoulder.

"Are you talking to me?" B'Elanna asked. She looked around just to make sure that the woman couldn't possibly be speaking to anyone else.

"Yes," the woman answered. "I'm on break and I realized we hadn't met before and thought I'd say hello."

"Hi," B'Elanna said awkwardly.

The woman sat in the chair next to B'Elanna's.

"I hope I'm not taking anyone's seat," she said pleasantly.

"No," B'Elanna responded. "Amina works the dayshift. She's already left."

"Ah. I'm Kathryn. Kathryn Janeway."

"B'Elanna Torres."

"Nice to meet you."

"Same," B'Elanna said. Her mouth felt cottony, realized she hadn't talked to anyone in days. In fact, like everything else, she didn't even know who the last person she'd talked to was.

"Have you been here for very long?" Kathryn asked.

"I don't think so," B'Elanna said cautiously. "I – maybe a week or two? It's hard to keep track."

"I know the feeling. Time seems to fly here, doesn't it?"

"If you think so," B'Elanna said. Between work and the fatigue she felt after her shift concluded, the hours did pass quickly enough. But Kathryn's phrasing seemed to imply a certain amount of *fun* and right now, that was the last thing B'Elanna Torres' life was.

"How is the work?" Kathryn asked.

"It's-" B'Elanna hesitated. What should she say? She found it terribly dull, but it was easy enough and didn't put a strain on her, which at this stage in her pregnancy was a good thing. She supposed she should be grateful; the wages, after all, were good. She finally settled on "It's useful work."

"Working here is lot better than where I used to be. A whole new experience and I'm enjoying it immensely. You'll like it too once you get used to it. I can't think of a better place to work." The enthusiasm in Kathryn's voice was hard to miss.

"Where- where were you before?" B'Elanna asked.

"Earth," Kathryn said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "But it was crowded, dirty, and not enough work for everyone so there was a lot of crime."

B'Elanna nodded. "That sounds a lot like where I came from."

Kathryn leaned forward. "It's better here on Quarra."

"I'm sure you're right."

"You don't sound convinced yet, but give it time," Kathryn said with a smile. She rose from her seat, resting her hand lightly on B'Elanna's shoulder. The unexpected gesture startled B'Elanna and she immediately flinched, but Kathryn didn't seem to notice. Instead, she asked, "Do you want to get a bite to eat?"

"No, but thanks for asking. I'm not due for a break for another ninety minutes."

"It's all right to take a break every now and then. The regulations allow for it."

"I- I really can't. I don't want to take the risk."

"The risk?" Kathryn frowned.

"Losing my job because I walked away from my station before I was scheduled to. I- I'm pregnant," B'Elanna said. "I've heard the new efficiency monitor is very strict. I came a long way to make a better life for my baby; I don't want to take any chances."

Kathryn nodded. "When is the baby due?" she asked.

"Uh," B'Elanna considered. She had been wondering the same thing herself, but "four" seemed to come immediately to mind and that number felt right. Felt right like so many other things had felt wrong. "In four months."

"You and your husband must be very excited," Kathryn said warmly. "Well, I'm going to meet some friends for a late dinner. There's a restaurant down the street where a bunch of us like to meet. It's started to get quite the habit. Feel free to join us anytime."

"Maybe next time. Thank you for the invitation."

B'Elanna watched Kathryn join a group of people by the exit. They all seemed happy to see each other - most of them were smiling. More importantly, they acted like they belonged. Belonged to and with each other. B'Elanna bit her lip hard enough that she drew blood.

Kathryn had said *husband*.

B'Elanna bent over her PADD, trying to concentrate on the fluctuating lines. After a moment, she brushed the back of her hand over her eyes.

Husband.

If she could remember his name. If only.

B'Elanna lived in the assigned housing like all the other employees at the Power Distribution Facility. The complex was only three blocks away and B'Elanna welcomed the opportunity to walk in the fresh air instead of boarding the crowded transport like she usually did. She remembered Kathryn's comment about how dirty Earth was and she figured Kessik must have been the same.

Once inside the gate, B'Elanna turned to the left and walked past the gardens blooming in bright reds and yellows, the playground and the clubhouse with its placard detailing the planned activities for the day. The facilities were certainly well equipped with a variety of amenities including a gym and a comfortable lounge, but B'Elanna still hadn't taken the time to check out everything the complex offered.

Her apartment was on the second floor of the third building and as she stared up at the two flights of stairs, B'Elanna made the decision that she would need to move once the baby came. It would be easier, she thought, than having to struggle alone carrying a baby and all the necessary supplies up and down the stairs. And lately, B'Elanna appreciated anything that would make life just a little easier.

She wondered if she'd felt this lonely on Kessik.

Her assigned apartment was small, utilitarian, and without decoration. There were two rooms - a main room furnished with a table with four chairs, a sofa, and a lamp.

The second room was just big enough for a double bed and a dresser.

Apparently, she hadn't brought any personal effects with her from Kessik, but then, B'Elanna knew with certainty, she had never been particularly interested in collecting or decorating. Still, she wished she had brought some clothes - something she could wear other than the bland green of the Facility-issued uniforms during her off-duty hours.

Something to remind her...

I must have left in a hurry, B'Elanna thought as she looked around her meager surroundings. A great hurry. Was I afraid? Was something wrong?

B'Elanna dropped her bag on the floor as she headed towards the sofa. Every muscle in her body ached and she settled herself gratefully on the couch. She closed her eyes, inhaling and exhaling deeply.

... hands, warm, tender, running the length of her legs, massaging weary limbs.

B'Elanna opened her eyes with a start.

... lying on her side as those same hands kneaded her back. Soft, gentle fingers touching her cheek, caressing her stomach...

She sat up, her hand pressed over her mouth. If only she could follow those hands up through arms, shoulders, neck and finally to the face... to finally recall the curvature of jaw, the sweep of cheek bone, the shape of the eyes and the color of hair.

But nothing.

In frustration, she got up, started pacing the length of the room. These snippets of memories intruded on her at the least opportune moment, always unexpected and always frustrating. She paused at the doorway of her room, thinking about perhaps she should get some flowers to fill the gray vase on the dresser. *Roses*. She liked roses. The revelation both comforted and startled her.

As she surveyed the room, she realized she would have to start shopping for the baby soon. Mentally she compiled a list of items, thought about the costs, and grimaced. It would take a couple more pay periods before she could save up enough money to even buy the necessities like a crib.

B'Elanna paused in front of the window. Below, children played with a colorful ball. Apparently, the goal of the game was to kick the ball between two posts. She had a distinct memory of playing a similar game in her childhood. She watched the children scurry back and forth for a few minutes before turning her thoughts to the issue of dinner.

She stood in front of the replicator, not sure of what she wanted to eat. She pondered this question before finally bringing up the list of available recipes. She selected one without thinking and a few seconds later, a grilled-cheese sandwich and tomato soup combination materialized. She stared at the food, wrinkling her nose, but then decided to choose optimism.

"Well," she said, her voice reverberating in the room. "I can always try something else if I don't like this."

B'Elanna ate at the table, glad her chair faced the windows so that she could see the city lights. The food was just ok, and she figured over time, she could actually grow to enjoy the gooey sandwich and the rather bland but creamy soup. As she sipped her soup, the baby kicked and B'Elanna moved her hand to feel the movement. B'Elanna smiled to herself; in just a few months, she wouldn't be alone.

B'Elanna passed the restaurant Kathryn had mentioned every evening on her way to work. It was always crowded, with the sounds of laughter and boisterous conversation spilling out every time the door opened or closed. During her first week on Quarra, B'Elanna had gotten no further than the vestibule. There were no empty tables and she didn't see anyone she recognized. She didn't want to be alone in a room of people. So, she turned away, swallowing the lump in her throat, and instead arrived at work more than an hour early.

But B'Elanna noticed only a few people frequented the restaurant during the day, and she figured perhaps a midafternoon meal might be better option for her. The day after she'd met Kathryn, B'Elanna stared at the replicator in her apartment, willing that piece of machinery to come up with a dish - *any dish* - that she would enjoy.

She was tired of being disappointed.

When the replicator produced a slice of cheese pizza, she grabbed her satchel and handed down the two flights of stairs and headed towards the restaurant. She was prepared to sit by herself; she had brought a PADD loaded with a copy of the latest Klingon romance, a bestseller according to the owner of the store who had specifically recommended it to her. The story retold an ancient Klingon epic about warrior women preparing to go into battle by a river flowing with the blood of their slain husbands.

The book was rather bloody and gruesome in some sections, but the story – and the characters of Rorg and M'Nea – appealed to B'Elanna on a primal level.

Armed with her novel, B'Elanna settled into the satisfying routine of eating at the restaurant directly before and after work. Even though she didn't talk to anyone while she was there, B'Elanna had to admit eating at the restaurant was preferable to her cold apartment and there were a couple of options on the menu she actually enjoyed.

One afternoon, B'Elanna settled herself at her usual table and immediately turned on the PADD, eager to begin where she had left off; M'Nea had been fevered and had just bitten Rorg on the cheek. She sipped at her coffee slowly, savoring the aroma, as she continued reading.

"Can I bring you something else?"

B'Elanna did not look up from her PADD at the sound of the male voice. She was only dimly aware of someone clad in gray and brown standing next to her table.

"No, thank you," she responded, keeping her eyes on the text. Rorg had just elicited M'Nea's anger and--

"I haven't seen you in here before."

B'Elanna bit back a sigh. Couldn't the idiot see she was reading and didn't want to be bothered? "You probably just didn't notice."

"Oh, I'd have noticed," the speaker continued in a flirtatious tone.

B'Elanna looked up in exasperation. B'Elanna had seen this waiter before and once, had heard the owner of the restaurant yelling at him for serving drinks on the house to a couple of very attractive young women. Clearly, he hadn't managed to make an impression on those three and B'Elanna was damn set on making sure he knew where he stood with her.

"Apparently, you're not as observant as you think you are," she said, hoping he would take the coldness of her tone as a hint to leave her alone.

"Oh really?" the waiter asked with a self-assurance and cockiness that annoyed B'Elanna. She knew she'd met his type before, and she wasn't impressed. The waiter's blue eyes sparkled at her as his lips curled up slightly as he sat down next to her.

B'Elanna arched her eyebrow at his audacity. "I've been coming here the same time every day for the past two weeks," she answered flatly.

"Well, that explains it. I usually work nights."

"Me too," B'Elanna replied curtly.

"At the Power Distribution Facility," the waiter said. A note of pride slipped into his voice. "See? I'm observant."

B'Elanna couldn't help but smile. His voice had a soothing quality, even mildly seductive. And she had to admit he was damn handsome. But she couldn't think of that right now. The waiter appeared charming and smooth, but for all she knew, her husband - if she had even been married - had been the same.

She couldn't fall for someone. Not now.

From the back, a voice called, "Tom! I need you for a moment."

B'Elanna looked at the waiter, who seemed noticeably annoyed by the summons. At least she knew his name now. Reluctantly, Tom got to his feet.

"I'll be right there," Tom called back and then turned to B'Elanna. He leaned towards her, his voice tinged with urgency. "Listen, you should come in when you get a night off. It's a lot more fun when it's a crowd."

"I don't really like crowds."

"Well then, maybe we could get together during the day sometime. Take a walk by the river-"

"I don't think so," B'Elanna cut him off.

Tom looked startled at her reaction and B'Elanna felt a small bit of satisfaction that she'd managed to catch him off guard.

"Why not?" he asked in surprise. "I'm really a very engaging conversationalist," Tom continued. B'Elanna rose from the table. B'Elanna looked down at her stomach and put her hand on it. She smiled slightly as she felt a kick.

You're an active baby today. But she didn't verbalize those thoughts since she was almost embarrassed by her own pride in the baby. Besides, she didn't think Tom – if he was the type of person she thought he was – would appreciate baby talk, so to speak.

"Oh," Tom said awkwardly. He shifted slightly from foot to foot.

B'Elanna nodded, relieved that she wouldn't have to worry about Tom bothering her anymore. Now that he knew the truth, Tom would leave her alone, leave her...

Just like *he* did.

"Yeah," she said softly. She noted with some bitterness the shock on Tom's face and then asked snidely, "Still want to get together?"

"Well, you're married..." Tom said, his voice drifting off.

B'Elanna considered this statement and Tom both. She decided on the spot she wasn't married, decided maybe it had been a short relationship, one so quick that nothing about the man who fathered her child remained in her memory.

"No," she said flatly.

"Oh."

"Enjoy your day," B'Elanna said. She brushed past Tom and walked out into the gray misty evening.

Chapter Two

B'Elanna realized she had the ability to fix things when, at shift change, a power surge spiked through her station. A flurry of orange-white sparks flew out of the console, causing the yellow grid lines to blank and a dark pungent smoke to waft forth. B'Elanna yelped, pulling her hand back as the station started to smolder. Her stomachs twisted and turned at the malodorous smoke emitting from the console. Instinctively, she placed a hand on her abdomen.

This is the last thing I need, B'Elanna thought as she took a step backwards. A small crowd had gathered at the periphery, and the attention made B'Elanna uncomfortable. She inspected her hand carefully; she was sure she'd experienced worse burns in her past life, and she shrugged off the pain.

"Shit," Amina said, her dark eyes round with concern. She had her jacket on, clearly eager to go, but seemed rooted in place by the technical failure occurring in front of her. "B'Elanna? Are you all right?"

B'Elanna took a shallow breath and then nodded. She didn't know how, but this wasn't the first time she'd dealt with an unexpected fire in a key system and she knew she could handle it. She quickly reached for the cannister of fire suppressant installed on her station and extinguished the flames. It would take some time to repair the now foam-covered machine, but at least she'd managed to stop the fire. *And now to figure out what caused the power surge...*

B'Elanna was deep in analysis – *how do I know all this?* – when the crisp voice of the efficiency monitor interrupted her.

"What occurred here?" the woman demanded. Her blond hair pulled back severely and dressed in a purple uniform speckled with orange, the efficiency monitor stood out for another reason; she was the only worker who wore distinct personal ornamentation. But it was specifically the curved silver object just above the monitor's right eye that fascinated B'Elanna.

... you will be assimilated. Resistance is futile.

The hairs on B'Elanna's neck stood up. *She was on a ship, bathed in green light, and surrounded by black-leather clad humanoids, their skin devoid of color, their features obscured by metal devices, and their movements hampered by hoses connecting the various electrical components on their bodies. A hand extended from the shadows, grasping at her throat--*

"B'Elanna."

B'Elanna blinked and saw both Amina and the monitor staring at her, one with worry and the other impatiently.

"Please state the cause of this disturbance," the monitor said coolly, her blue eyes taking in the damaged workstation.

B'Elanna lifted her chin with a bit of defiance. She was aware of Amina – and others – staring at her. She'd dealt with people like the efficiency monitor before and she refused to be intimidated by her.

"It's a simple power fluctuation," B'Elanna explained. "Once we open the station, we should be able to see where the malfunction occurred, but I imagine the power transfer scheduled for earlier this evening overloaded the main circuitry as additional reactor coil relays weren't released in time. The back-up systems should be compensating for the issues now and if I am correct about the cause, we should be able to make the repairs within the hour."

"An hour is an unacceptable delay. You have thirty minutes."

B'Elanna was about to protest that without an evaluation and systems analysis the demand was completely unrealistic, but then a fragment of memory caught her off-guard.

... plasma relays have blown, Captain. Looks like a fluctuation-

... can you fix it?

"If you'd leave me alone, I could get started *now*," B'Elanna said, momentarily distracted. *Captain? Who was the Captain?* "We are wasting time with this conversation."

"Your attitude cannot be tolerated, and a notation will be made in your service record regarding this incident. You should have been paying attention and this would have never occurred in the first place. Procedural violations are not acceptable practice in this facility," the efficiency monitor said in a tone of voice that implied *she* never made a mistake.

"*I was*," B'Elanna said heatedly. "It happened so suddenly - I noticed a problem in the North Sector and I was attempting to resolve that first." Next to her, Amina shuffled slightly, her gaze downcast. B'Elanna knew Amina should have been aware of the power transfer, but now wasn't the time to point fingers. "It was a cascade reaction. I'm sure it's happened before here."

At that moment, a maintenance worker arrived and quickly removed the metal plating on the front of the work station. B'Elanna squatted down, the bulk of her belly making the movement awkward. After a moment, she rose – gratefully accepting Amina's offered hand for balance – and turned to the efficiency monitor.

"I see the issues and I can resolve it as requested in thirty minutes," B'Elanna said crisply.

"Explain," the efficiency monitor ordered.

"The inverted transducer looks like it wasn't made to handle the voltage. We could replace that one with another with greater conductive properties and that way we don't have to be as concerned with a delay in opening the reactor coils. If we don't make that adjustment now, then something like this could happen again."

"You are capable of making this repair?"

B'Elanna nodded without really knowing where her confidence came from. The maintenance worker brought her a new transducer and B'Elanna carefully removed the damaged equipment. She seemed to know instinctively how to weld the new one into place, and she carefully rewired the entire station. After a quick inspection of other componentry, B'Elanna was satisfied and decided to re-connect power. After a few moments, the console lit up again and the efficiency monitor nodded.

"Efficient work," the efficiency monitor said. "I will make a note of it in your record, employee eight five eight eight."

"My *name* is B'Elanna."

The monitor regarded the half-Klingon icily and then moved on to the next station without another word. Amina came to stand next to B'Elanna.

"She gives me the chills," Amina said in a low voice. "She's everywhere, watching everything and everyone. I don't think she misses a beat."

"Do you think I offended her?" B'Elanna's earlier confidence evaporated as she watched the efficiency monitor rapidly typing some notes into her tablet.

"I think *everything* offends her."

"I really need this job," B'Elanna said pensively and then she shook her head in dismay. Hadn't someone warned her about her attitude before? "I should have been more careful. I haven't met her before, but I've heard plenty of stories about her."

"Don't worry about it, B'Elanna. I'm sure she'll find someone else less efficient than you. After all, she did pay you a compliment about your fix. How did you know what to do? Were you an engineer back on Kessik?"

B'Elanna shrugged. "I don't know." Truth be told, she didn't know *what* she'd done on Kessik, but she was sure it wasn't as satisfying as working on Quarra was. Not for the first time, she wondered *when* this fog would lift from her memory. Perhaps she should visit the hospital and request a full neurological scan.

"Then how did you know how to fix that?"

"Instinct, I suppose." B'Elanna laughed uneasily.

"I'm impressed. I wish *my* instinct was that good," Amina said. "I wouldn't worry about the efficiency monitor, B'Elanna. She's probably forgotten about you already."

B'Elanna didn't share Amina's optimism but decided it was easier to agree than to fret about the situation. "I certainly hope so," B'Elanna said.

The two women watched as the monitor made her rounds, stopping occasionally between the different workstations to make notes on her PADD. B'Elanna convinced herself that Amina was probably correct; there were plenty of others here for the monitor to focus her attention on, especially with all the new workers, many of them still struggling to learn their duties.

"There are a lot of new employees here and it's not surprise we've been having some problems lately," Amina said, as if she had been reading B'Elanna's thoughts. "You wouldn't think there is a labor shortage in the galaxy. A lot of them seem to be from Earth." Amina frowned. "Must be a terrible place for all of them to choose to come here."

"I suppose everyone heard about Quarra the way we did," B'Elanna said. "There's a lot of opportunity here for those of us who didn't have any choices back on our home worlds."

"That's a good point. Still, it's *curious*."

Concerned the efficiency monitor might come back and fault her for not working, B'Elanna quickly tapped a few keys and was satisfied all systems were working as specified and there were no concerning fluctuations in the power grid.

"Well," Amina said, catching the hint. "I'm off. Thanks for fixing the console." She paused. "Maybe you should consider moving to a more technical position. You might be happier there. The engineers are more indispensable; the management has a hard time keeping the talented people in this role. If I had your skills, I'd make the move in a heartbeat." She flashed B'Elanna a quick smile. "Have a good night and... I owe you one."

"Good night," B'Elanna said. And that night, as she watched the hypnotic rise and fall of the power waves on the screen in front of her, she contemplated Amina's suggestion.

B'Elanna settled into her usual table at the restaurant, her eyes already fixed on the PADD. In the last chapter, M'Nea's sister T'Alia, had lifted the sagging spirits of her fellow warrior women with a rousing speech and together, the women had all pledged to vanquish the evil forces of Tagoth, the false God, who had come to challenge Kahless.

But her quiet time didn't last long before Tom showed up at her table.

"Hi," Tom said. His expression was soft, kind, and maybe even caring. "Listen, I get off work in a few minutes. I thought maybe you and I could--"

B'Elanna bit her tongue. She didn't want to like Tom, didn't want to chance letting someone like him into her life. She couldn't shake the feeling that anyone she had a relationship with eventually left her. She knew she'd been involved with someone like Tom before, and clearly, he hadn't stuck around. Her annoyance at whoever that mystery person was pricked at her.

"You don't give up, do you?" B'Elanna asked sharply.

"You don't even know what I was going to say."

"Let me guess: you were going to invite me for a 'walk by the river' or maybe to your living quarters to 'admire the view'," B'Elanna said bitterly. Somehow, she knew she had heard all these lines before and she suspected that she had fallen for any number of these at least once.

"Actually, I was going to offer to introduce you to some people I met."

B'Elanna looked at him surprise, wondering what he was up to. She certainly didn't think she'd have anything in common with his friends.

"A couple expecting their first baby in a few weeks," Tom said. "I thought you might want to get to know other parents. You know, swap stories, maybe even find a playmate for your baby."

B'Elanna couldn't speak. The thought of meeting other people - people who could possibly understand her situation, who could help her...

"If it's a bad idea..." Tom appeared uncertain.

"No, it's -" B'Elanna shook her head, trying to think of the perfect word to express her sentiments. Tom looked at her pensively. Finally, B'Elanna smiled at him. "It's nice."

"I'm sorry about the other day," Tom said, relief evident in his voice.

"I'm the one who should be apologizing. I shouldn't have assumed-"

"Forget it." Tom's tone was light, casual, forgiving. B'Elanna sighed. Another time, another place, maybe... the possibility was growing more attractive.

No, she lectured herself sternly. Don't even think it, B'Elanna. Don't even dare. It's how you got into this mess in the first place.

And because Tom was still looking at her so expectantly, B'Elanna softened.

"Look, it's very rare that I admit I'm wrong, so you should probably take advantage of it while you can," she said.

He grinned at her and B'Elanna immediately warmed up to him. There was something sweet in that smile. He seemed genuinely interested in her - an intriguing, but welcome development after days of relative anonymity.

"It's been hard being alone with a baby coming. I have a habit of keeping my guard up," B'Elanna said.

"That's understandable."

"It's just a romantic relationship is out of the question for me right now, so when you started asking..." her voice drifted off.

"How about a friend?" Tom asked gently.

"What?"

"You said romance is out of the question. Could you use a friend?"

B'Elanna considered. She could say no, and he'd walk away; this she was sure of. Or she could say yes, and the result would be the same. But right now, she really did want to talk to someone, so she nodded.

"I would like that," B'Elanna said hoarsely.

"Mind if I sit down?" Tom said. He cast a look towards the back door, as if looking for his boss. "My feet hurt." He grimaced. "I don't think I'm used to standing on my feet all day."

"Please." B'Elanna turned off her PADD.

"What are you reading?"

"The Warrior Women at the River of Blood."

"A river of *blood*?"

"It's a Klingon thing."

"Must be," Tom said with a little laugh. "Sounds fascinating. You really must enjoy it. You never look up from it." His eyes twinkled as if he was revealing a secret, and B'Elanna flushed. *Had Tom been watching her?*

"I do like it a lot but it's a little predictable," she said, hoping Tom wouldn't notice the color in her cheeks.

"Predictable?"

"I seem to anticipate how every twist and turn is going to end up." She shrugged. "I'm never surprised."

"Maybe you should try something new then. Something *less* predictable," Tom said. He folded his arms on the table. "Do you mind a suggestion?"

B'Elanna looked at him warily. Now that she had agreed to have a conversation with him, was he going to proposition her again? Involuntarily, her fists clenched below the table.

"*What?*" she asked edgily.

"You know, it's okay to get up and meet people. Everyone here is really friendly." He paused for a moment, as if trying to choose the right words. "I don't think you want to be alone, otherwise you wouldn't come *here*. You could read just as well at your own place and then you wouldn't have to worry about nosy waiters bothering you." The last bit was said with a bit of self-deprecation. "I could help, if you want."

"Uh, maybe another time. Right now, I just feel a bit--"

"Off-balance?" Tom said softly. B'Elanna nodded.

"Yeah, a little. Do you ever get the feeling you don't know where you're going?"

"Sometimes, yes."

"Even worse, I don't know how I got here." The moment she said the words, B'Elanna felt better. An expression of concern crossed Tom's face.

"What are you talking about?" he asked and B'Elanna couldn't quite place his tone of voice. "What do you mean by *here*?"

"Quarra. Everyone else, they know where they came from. I don't. I mean, I think Kessik, but I'm not sure. It doesn't *feel* right but that's the only place I remember."

A moment of silence and B'Elanna was convinced that Tom thought her crazy. But his expression - it was contemplative, maybe even a little sad.

"I know what you're talking about," he said in a low voice.

"You do?"

"Yeah." Tom knitted his fingers together on the table. "I have the same feelings and I, I don't remember anything about my life before I worked at the Power Facility and you know how that turned out."

"No, I don't actually."

"I had an argument with the efficiency monitor."

B'Elanna nodded in sympathy. "I met her today when a power surge blew out my console. She arrived immediately."

"Impressive talent she has to be everywhere at once," Tom said. "Anyway, we had an argument over the quality of my work. The next minute, I was out here, looking for a job. Umali, the restaurant owner, was the only one who recognized my natural charm and took a chance on me."

"I can imagine," B'Elanna said dryly.

"But to be honest, I can't think of where I worked before the Power Facility. I probably wasn't any good at that job either. I'm starting to think I'm a vagabond, moving from place to place. You know, not letting any dust settle around my feet? To tell the truth, I think I like that. Something gets a little dull and it's time to move on and try something new."

"Starting over, you mean?" B'Elanna asked.

"Yeah. I get the feeling I've had a lot of experience 'starting over'." Tom's eyes took on a faraway, misty look.

"That's why I came here. To get a new start. I want to make sure I give my baby a good life and I don't think- I mean, I must have thought things were bad enough on Kessik to leave."

"Was it the father?"

"Who?" B'Elanna asked.

"The father. Your baby's father- I'm sorry, I'm being insensitive." Tom looked stricken.

"No, it's all right," B'Elanna said, and surprisingly, it was. "He- he left."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't." She held up her hand. The last thing she wanted was his pity. "It's all right. I'm okay. Really. Everything, everything's okay."

"If you don't mind me saying, you don't look okay," Tom said softly. B'Elanna bit her lip. Her eyes felt moist and she cursed herself for her lack of emotional control. Tom reached across the table and covered B'Elanna's hands with his. His touch was light against her cold skin, and surprised, B'Elanna realized she liked the warmth of his palm. He caressed the top of her hand gently. B'Elanna nodded, because she couldn't speak.

"Hey," Tom said softly. His fingers covered hers and without thinking, B'Elanna grasped his hand. The touch felt comfortable, as if they had done this a million times before. Tom didn't pull away and for that, she was grateful.

"I- I'm so, so sorry. My- my emotions sometimes get the better of me. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize. You don't need to. Not with me."

B'Elanna sniffed, feeling ridiculous, but appreciating Tom's kindness at the same time.

"This, this isn't like me. I don't know what's come over me."

"You're under a lot of stress; it's understandable. A new place, job, baby on the way... it's a lot."

B'Elanna pressed her lips together, trying to keep her emotions under wraps. That Tom *understood* how overwhelmed she felt was nothing short of astonishing, but also his response validated it was okay to for her to have those emotions. She looked down at their intertwined hands. A few days ago, she would have pulled away, but now, she simply enjoyed the security of another person's touch.

"I don't remember him," B'Elanna said softly.

"What?"

"The father. I don't remember him. Nothing."

B'Elanna inhaled deeply, feeling the lump in her throat growing larger. She couldn't quite make out Tom's expression and wondered if he thought she was completely crazy. After all, she reasoned, how could she possibly not know the name or face of the man who fathered her child? B'Elanna stared down at her hands, still covered by Tom's larger ones.

"You don't have to be alone," Tom said quietly. B'Elanna glanced up, almost in shock at his words.

"I don't remember a time when I wasn't," she got the words out with difficulty. Her throat hurt now, and she really did think she would cry despite her best efforts not to.

"I have a hard time believing that," Tom said softly. "A *really* hard time."

"It's true," B'Elanna said. "If it wasn't, why can't I remember anything at all? I can't even remember him..."

In the background, Umali called for Tom and he groaned.

"Go," B'Elanna said. "I understand."

"Will you be okay?"

"Yes. Fine, I mean, I'll be fine. Thanks. Really. Thanks for everything."

B'Elanna swallowed hard and then let go of Tom's hand. He reached out to gently run his fingers across her cheek; to her shock, B'Elanna didn't flinch. She rather liked feeling his caress across her skin. There was nothing seductive about the touch, nothing that implied anything but friendship and concern, a genuine warmth that B'Elanna missed desperately.

"I'd better see what Umali wants, but if you need anything ever, please don't hesitate to ask. I mean it." Tom got from his chair and then looked back down at B'Elanna wistfully. "I can't imagine anyone wanting to leave you. I just can't."

The nights were the hardest. B'Elanna would lie in bed, usually with her hand on her swollen belly, trying to find a comfortable spot on the hard mattress. She was very aware of all the sounds surrounding her, from the gentle whir of the replicator recharging to the loud utility transports just outside the apartment complex. She would hear voices at all times of day and night. Loud voices, laughing, usually, people coming home from work, going home to warm, safe places.

Sometimes, when sleep was impossible, B'Elanna would curl her body into the large wicker chair on the balcony. The prior occupant of the apartment had filled the window boxes with brightly colored flowers and other greenery. B'Elanna didn't really know how to take care of plants so she would touch the soil, make sure it was moist, and if not, get some water. She really hoped she could keep the plants alive.

She imagined sitting out on the balcony in a rocking chair, cradling her baby in the soft glow of moonlight. She thought of pleasant summer nights and warm breezes.

And she thought of Tom and his smooth voice telling her, "I can't imagine anyone wanting to leave you. I just can't."

But she knew better. She couldn't name the occurrences, of course, but she knew better.

B'Elanna woke one night in a panic, sweating, and rushed into the bathroom to splash water on her face. And when she looked up, she saw the gentle ridges across her forehead. She knew why he - whoever he was - left.

She didn't understand why Tom couldn't see it too.

Chapter Three

By the end of her third week on Quarra, B'Elanna finally felt as if she'd settled into a comfortable routine. Most of her social interactions were limited to a brief discussion with Amina at shift change, and of course, with Tom when she stopped into the restaurant. Tom usually had more time to talk to her in the afternoon, when the restaurant was less crowded, but late night, he would check in with her often, but given Umali's watchful eye, he usually didn't linger at her table long.

And if she was being honest with herself, B'Elanna preferred the afternoons; her favorite table, the one right in front of the bar, was almost always available. Tom had even stopped asking for permission to sit down at her table; he just did.

She learned he was from Earth, and his stories were the same as everyone else's: that world was crowded and riddled with crime and unemployment was high. He had two sisters, he said, and his father had been a high-ranking member of a space exploration force.

"He wanted me to follow in his footsteps," Tom said one afternoon, "but I got space-sick during my first semester of Basic Flight and had to drop out." He shrugged as he sipped his coffee. "My decision frustrated him, of course, and I don't think we've talked in a long time." He sighed. "It's probably better that way."

B'Elanna shifted in her seat. "I don't remember the last time I talked to my parents either," she said. Then she laughed self-deprecatingly. "Maybe I disappointed them too."

Tom's eyes had a faraway look in them. "I guess that's something we have in common."

He told her he used to live in the Employee Housing, but that was before his argument with the efficiency monitor. Now he lived in a one-room apartment in thirty-story concrete tower about twenty minutes away.

"I have a mattress on the floor, and I managed to find a chair and table that another tenant left on the curb. I keep meaning to get more furniture, but it's a small place and I don't need much. I'm used to living in cramped places." He acted nonchalant about the situation, but B'Elanna thought his living conditions sounded dreadful.

"It doesn't sound like a home," she said hesitantly.

Tom shrugged. "It's just a place to sleep, to be honest. And besides, I spend most of my time at the restaurant," Tom added. With a suggestive smirk, he added, "The company is better here." He nudged a plate of cheese and bread in B'Elanna's direction. "You have to eat something."

B'Elanna picked at the cheese, took a bite because she knew it would make him happy, and then put it down as her stomachs lurched. Tom's expression turned anxious.

"You don't like it," he said worriedly. "I can get you something else. What about peanut butter toast?"

B'Elanna blanched at the unappealing suggestion. "No, that's all right. I'm not really hungry."

"When was the last time you ate?"

B'Elanna considered. "When I woke up. Around ten."

"It's been hours then. You have a long shift in front of you and you have to keep your energy up."

The genuine concern in his tone caught B'Elanna's attention. Not for the first time, she wondered why Tom seemed so interested in her. Once she'd made it clear to him that she wasn't interested in a romantic relationship, she assumed he'd move on to one of the other women who frequented the restaurant. And yes, there were occasions when she saw Tom flirting while taking or delivering an order, but he always returned to her.

"I really don't feel like eating right now," B'Elanna told him, placing her hand lightly on her stomach. "I've just had a hard time keeping food down for the last day. Everything looks and tastes awful."

"You should ask your doctor—"

"I don't want to go back to that hospital," B'Elanna said with an expected burst of anger. And then she frowned in confusion. *Where the hell had that come from?* Tom watched her carefully.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I don't think I've been—I mean, I don't remember, but I have the feeling I shouldn't go there," B'Elanna said. She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. The baby had decided to place a foot right underneath her ribcage. "It's ridiculous, right?"

"I don't like being poked and prodded by doctors, so I understand where you're coming from. Plus, they seem to have such egos, don't they?" Tom's eyes narrowed at the edges, his brow furrowing in confusion. For a moment, he seemed lost in thought, and then he added, "But I- I had a short stint working in a clinic back on Earth." Tom's lips turned upwards into an uneasy smile. "I guess I wasn't any good at that job either so here I am. Quarra, a world of second chances." He caught sight of Umali giving him a warning look. He sighed and got up from his seat. "I ought to get back to work, but you're pregnant, and can't avoid doctors indefinitely. If it will make you feel better, I'll go with you."

"Thanks, but you don't have to do that," B'Elanna said. She genuinely appreciated the offer, but she also didn't want to ask more of Tom than he wanted to give. After all, he *wasn't* the father and it wasn't fair to push him into a role that wasn't his.

"I know," Tom said, smiling in a way she was rapidly finding irresistible. "But I'd *like* to." He pushed his chair in and with a side-glance in Umali's direction, he asked, "You'll be here tonight?"

"Yes."

Tom grinned. "Great. I'll see you then."

The funny thing was, B'Elanna thought, was that he probably really meant it. And if she was being perfectly honest with herself, she was looking forward to seeing him too.

The next night, when B'Elanna arrived at the restaurant after her shift, Tom surprised her by greeting her at the door. He was dressed in his usual uniform of blue-grey shirt with a tan colored vest over it.

"You're right on time," he said enthusiastically, taking her elbow and propelling her into the crowded restaurant.

"What are you *talking* about?" B'Elanna asked irritably. It had been a long night at the facility and she really wasn't in the mood for small talk. Her back and feet hurt, and her arm ached from the inoculation she'd received at the start of her shift. Her head felt foggier than usual, and she'd made a minor error at work that had earned the wrath of the omnipresent efficiency monitor. While the mistake had little impact on overall operational conditions, the monitor had said in an ominous tone, it would likely jeopardize B'Elanna's transfer to another department.

All B'Elanna wanted to do was settle down at her usual table, attempt to eat something while enjoying the last chapter of her book. And then she wanted to go home, burrow in her bed, and pretend this day had never happen.

"Joelly and Marchin are here," Tom said.

"Who?" B'Elanna pressed her palm to her forehead. She had just the slightest of headaches; a side effect of the inoculations, the nurse had warned her earlier. She'd also been reassured the injections were perfectly safe for the baby, but B'Elanna couldn't quite shake the feeling *something* wasn't right. Still, she'd watched Amina queue up calmly with the others for an injection, and after a pensive five minutes, B'Elanna had joined her colleague in the line. "I don't know who they are."

"The couple I wanted to introduce you to... the ones who are expecting a baby in a few weeks?"

"Now?" B'Elanna asked in dismay. "Tom, I'm tired and my head hurts."

"Just come say hi and I think I've got an analgesic in my bag." The pleading expression on his face was so endearing that B'Elanna allowed him to lead her to a table where a couple sat, each with glass of a purple liquid topped with a blue and white streaked cloud of foam. "Joelly, Marchin, this is B'Elanna."

Joelly, a Quarran woman approximately B'Elanna's age and dressed in the familiar blue uniform of the Power Facility, smiled a welcome while Marchin rose, pulled out a chair and gestured for B'Elanna to have a seat. She obliged and it felt good to get off her swollen feet.

"We've been looking forward to meeting you," Joelly said, leaning her weight forward on her elbows, the tips of her orange hair brushing her cheeks. "Tom told us all about you."

"Joelly and Marchin met at this restaurant a few years ago when Umali introduced them. Now they're regulars," Tom said, taking a step closer to B'Elanna. He rested his hand on the back of B'Elanna's chair,

and the tips of his fingers brushed against her shoulders. Just that hint of warmth caused B'Elanna to relax a little and she didn't mind that Tom didn't immediately move his hand.

"The place brings back a lot of good memories," Marchin said. "Plus, the food is decent and the service's not bad either." His eyes twinkled as he nodded in Tom's direction. "Speaking of which, are you planning to eat, B'Elanna? We already ordered our food, but we're happy to wait for you."

"Yes," B'Elanna said. She was about to reach for the green leather folder that held the menu, but Tom leaned down, his lips very close to her ears.

"I've got an idea," he said sotto voce. "Do you trust me?"

B'Elanna's lips curled into amusement. "That's a big question. I've only known you for a few days."

He squeezed her shoulder. "You won't be sorry," he said softly. With that, Tom swung behind the counter and disappeared into the kitchen. B'Elanna stared after him. *I already am*, she thought.

"Tom said this is your first baby." Joelly took a sip of her drink, licking away some remnants of foam from her lips. "Our baby is due in ten weeks. Tom said you had sixteen weeks left to go?"

B'Elanna nodded. "That's about right."

"Have you chosen a hospital to give birth at yet?" Joelly asked.

"A hospital?" B'Elanna couldn't help the shiver that ran down her back.

"There are four in the city. We plan to go to the Municipal hospital. It's the biggest one, plus it's nearby. If you want, I can take you there so you can look around. Of course, it helps to go to the same hospital where your doctor is."

"I don't have a doctor," B'Elanna said self-consciously. She'd had the mandatory physical given to all employees at the Power Distribution Facility, but she hadn't even thought of finding her own doctor until Tom had brought it up the other day. Suddenly, she was terribly, horribly afraid. What if something was wrong with the baby? She put her hand on her stomach and was relieved to feel the baby kick energetically in response.

"We'll help you," Joelly said quickly. "You're already doing so much alone; let us help you. If you're free tomorrow, I can introduce you to my doctor."

"That would be nice, thank you," B'Elanna said gratefully. "Tom offered to go with me, but—it seems like a lot to ask of him and I don't want to impose."

"You're not imposing. We *want* to help," Joelly said gently. Marchin nodded.

"Having a baby, it's overwhelming, we know," Marchin said. "The responsibility, wow. I'm not sure, even now, whether we're ready."

"*Marchin*," Joelly said in a warning voice.

"It's all right. I know what he means," B'Elanna said shakily. Tension tightened the muscles in her shoulders, and the dull thudding in her head growing stronger. Hadn't Tom promised her a painkiller? She twisted in her seat to look for Tom. Unsurprisingly, he was making conversation with a trio of women.

"Tom seems to really like you," Joelly said, noting the direction of B'Elanna's gaze.

"He's just being nice," B'Elanna said, pressing the heel of her hand against the center of her head, as if pushing the pain away.

"He's new to Quarra, like you, but he seems to fit in so easily," Marchin said. He finished off his drink and let out a satisfied sigh. "There are a lot of new people here lately. It used to be impossible to find enough workers to fill all the jobs and in the last few months, it's changed a lot. Now it's getting harder to find a job. Not," he said hastily, "that I'd change positions. The Power Facility is the best place to work. Don't you think so, B'Elanna?"

Since she had nothing to compare her current work situation with, B'Elanna merely nodded in agreement. For the next few minutes, the three of them made small talk, with Joelly and Marchin making recommendations on where B'Elanna could buy a crib and other such items. They also gave B'Elanna advice on how to navigate the personnel resources department at the Power Facility and how much leave she could expect to receive once the baby came. Their conversation was interrupted by Tom finally arriving with their food. He served Joelly and Marchin and then placed a plate in front of B'Elanna,

"Fried chicken and potato salad," Tom said triumphantly. B'Elanna eyed the pile of crispy and breaded chicken and the mound of yellow potatoes tossed in a creamy sauce and sprinkled with a dash of row powder with curiosity. "I've got a good feeling you're really going to like this." Tom's lips turned up into a boyish grin. "I promise."

After a moment of trepidation, B'Elanna bit into the chicken. The outer layer crunched exquisitely, and inside, the meat was moist and juicy, perfectly cooked with just the barest hint of seasoning. She took a second bite, and then third. Finally, after finishing off the first piece, she nodded.

"I like it," B'Elanna declared. Tom looked relieved.

"I'm glad to hear it," he said, "and oh, I almost forgot." In a smooth and quick gesture, pressed a hypospray against her neck. B'Elanna's headache eased almost instantaneously.

"Thanks," she said gratefully.

"Sorry it took me so long," Tom said. He made a slight gesture indicating the women whose table he'd been waiting on earlier. "My other customers had a *really* hard time deciding what to order and were taking forever. They ended up getting one of *everything*." He rolled his eyes.

"You'll earn your tips tonight," Marchin said, grinning. "I think you have a fan club, Tom."

Tom's eyes clouded, but then he cleared his throat. "Well, I could use the extra money. I've been thinking about moving to a new place," he said. He gave a meaningful look in B'Elanna's direction. "Somewhere that feels more like a home. I guess I should have thought about that before I picked a fight with the efficiency monitor after all, huh? I could have stayed in Employee Housing and—" he paused again, his blue eyes blinking in confusion.

"Is everything all right?" B'Elanna asked, alarmed. This was the second time she'd noticed Tom in a state of disorientation, and it made her nervous for him. And it occurred to her that like her, Tom didn't have anyone else to look after him on Quarra. "Should we call a doctor?"

"No, no, I'm fine," Tom said with a heavy sigh. He ran his hand through his hair, and the nervous gesture caught B'Elanna's eye. Clearly something was bothering Tom, but he didn't seem like he wanted to talk about it. In fact, he was watching people entering through the front door, almost transfixed. After a moment, he seemed to realize Joelly, Marchin and B'Elanna were all staring at him. "Oh, I just got distracted."

"'Distracted'? Is that what we call it these days?" Marchin asked with a grin.

"Marchin!" Joelly said, aiming a good-natured punch at her husband's arm. Marchin rubbed the sore spot ruefully but didn't seem to be bothered. Instead, he leaned over and placed a light kiss on his wife's cheek. Joelly's face colored prettily as she returned the gesture. B'Elanna looked away, her fingers twisting together; she hated feeling as if she was interrupting a private moment. She twisted to look up at Tom, but he still seemed to be in a daze.

"Tom," she said, placing her hand lightly on his forearm. "Do you want to sit down?"

"I would, but..." Tom gestured at two newcomers who had just come in. One man was of medium height with mottled skin and yellow tufted hair. The other was taller with black hair, his eyes set deep beneath a heavy forehead ridge. "I'll come and check on you later, okay?"

B'Elanna nodded. She watched Tom approach the two men, and they walked with him to the bar. Satisfied that Tom seemed okay for the moment, B'Elanna turned her attention back to her food.

"You must live in Employees' Housing, right?" Joelly asked, twirling her fork around some long strands of noodles.

"Yes, I'm in building 3C."

"That's on the other side of the complex from us. We're in 22D. Maybe you can move closer to us."

"As a matter of fact, I *am* thinking of moving. I'm on the second floor right now, but I'd like something on the ground floor. Or, at the very least, a building with a lift."

Joelly laughed. "I know the feeling. We're on the ground floor so we have a little yard. Once the baby's big enough, we'll probably put in a swing or maybe a small slide."

"That sounds nice," B'Elanna said wistfully. She imagined warm summer nights, pushing her baby in a swing, and then in a few years, she could see her child playing with the other children, kicking a ball through a pair of goal posts.

"Look," Marchin said, his expression turning serious. "Anytime you need anything, just ask. Tom told us a little about your situation. This isn't the time to be proud."

"Thank you. I appreciate your kindness," B'Elanna said quietly. "And don't feel sorry for me. Believe me, I spend enough time pitying myself and it's about time I stopped doing."

"Good for you," Marchin said approvingly. B'Elanna finished her potato salad and glanced up just in time to see Kathryn pass by with an attractive man. The two seemed deeply engrossed in conversation and didn't notice B'Elanna as they passed by her table.

"Do you enjoy your work?" Joelly asked.

B'Elanna shrugged. *Enjoy* was such a relative term. While she truly believed life on Quarra was better than on Kessik, she wasn't sure she *enjoyed* life more. "Well, it's much better than my last job but I submitted an application to the engineering department. I think it might be a better fit for me."

"Sounds like a good move to make if you can," Marchin said. "While we are blessed with good employers, some of the work can be extremely dull."

"We'll see. I had a run-in with the efficiency monitor today and if she has her way, I'll be scrutinizing the power grid for the rest of my life," B'Elanna said grimly.

"I know the supervisor in the engineering department," Marchin said. "I'll put in a good word for you during my next shift."

"I appreciate that." B'Elanna smiled at the couple, enjoying the way her facial muscles relaxed as her lips turned upward. She would have to thank Tom later for introducing her to the couple. But she was also very aware that despite the couple's offer of support, she really could only depend on herself.

After the meal was over, Marchin insisted on paying for B'Elanna's dinner over her protests.

"It's what friends do," Joelly said warmly.

That Joelly would consider her a *friend* was nothing short of astonishing. B'Elanna never thought of herself as someone who *had* friends. She quickly recovered her composure. "It was nice meeting you," B'Elanna said with the slightest crack in her voice.

"I'll call you tomorrow to arrange an appointment to meet my doctor," Joelly said. "Thanks for joining us." She gave B'Elanna a quick hug and then followed Marchin out the front door.

B'Elanna draped her coat over her arm and was halfway to the door when Tom called out to her.

"B'Elanna!" Tom called out to her from behind the bar. He quickened his step to close the gap between them. "I'm due for a break. I'll walk you to the transport."

As much as she appreciated the offer, B'Elanna craved some quiet to gather her thoughts and it would be impossible to concentrate with Tom beside her.

"Stop worrying. I'll be fine," she said.

"It's not *you* I'm worried about," Tom said, and she was struck by the warm timbre of his voice.

"The baby will be fine too," B'Elanna said. She contemplated telling him she would see him the next day, decided it might be presumptuous. She flashed a smile at Tom, one that she hoped was warm and showed gratitude for his consideration, before heading out into the night.

Chapter Four

B'Elanna left the restaurant deep in thought. The sidewalk to the transport station ran along the periphery of the Power Facility and given that it wasn't yet time for a shift change, there weren't a lot of people crowding the pavement. Clouds of white steam billowed out from conduits, and the cling clang of the facility's operations echoed in the night. A musty smell hung in the air

As B'Elanna entered the spot where the corridor narrowed to just a meter wide, she jammed her hands into her pockets as she walked towards the transport station. It surprised her how much she enjoyed meeting Joelly and Marchin, and combined with her growing friendship with Tom, she felt optimistic she could build a life for herself and her child on Quarra.

She stepped to the side, her shoulder grazing the concrete wall, as a Quarran couple, hand-in-hand, passed her, their heads bent close together, but their voices and laughter were lost in the whirl of a turbine coming to life. Shadows played in and out of the amber lights that punctuated the walkway every four meters or so. B'Elanna kept her gaze resolutely ahead. In about eight minutes, she would be at the transport station, and then it would be a six-minute ride along the river to the Employees Housing Complex.

Mentally she started making a list of all the things she needed to do to prepare for the baby. First priority would be finding a doctor and selecting a hospital, followed by putting in an application for a new apartment. Then would come the task of buying all the things she would need for the baby, like a crib and a stroller

She was still lost in thought when a man stepped out of the shadows and blocked her passage. In the dim light, B'Elanna could barely make out his features, and his eyes were heavily hooded beneath heavy brown ridges while a lock of dark hair curled on his right temple. She recognized him as one of the two strange men she'd seen talking to Tom in the restaurant

"Excuse me," the man said genially.

B'Elanna dismissed his pleasantry quickly with a wave of her hand. "It was my fault. I should watch where I'm going." She attempted to move around him, but the man matched her movement, thwarting her from going forward. B'Elanna bristled at the rudeness. *Couldn't he see he was in her way?* She cleared her throat, mumbled an "Excuse me", but once again, the man refused to get out of her way. *What the hell?* B'Elanna lifted her eyes to meet his. And while he was clearly invading her personal

space, it was impossible to read his expression in the amber light that illuminated this section of walkway. Her eyes darted back and forth as she evaluated her options. He was at least 15 centimeters taller than her, and of a muscular build. She clenched her hands into fists, her leg muscles tensing to take action.

"B'Elanna?"

"How do you know my name?" she asked warily, glancing furtively at her surroundings. Just minutes earlier, she'd appreciated the fact the path hadn't been crowded, but now she wished someone – *anyone* – would walk by.

The man paused and then said in a low voice, "What if I told you we were old friends?"

B'Elanna stared at him. There wasn't much she was sure of these days, but she knew without a doubt she'd never seen this man before in her life.

"That's a ridiculous story," B'Elanna said firmly.

"I know it sounds strange, but I can prove it to you. Just give me a chance," the man's voice took on a pleading tone.

B'Elanna took a step backward, keeping her gaze firmly on the stranger. The main entrance to the Power Facility was just a few dozen meters away. If she could get there, she could have the security officers escort her to the transport station.

"Look, I'm sorry but I'm late for work," B'Elanna said, hoping the man would leave her alone if he thought someone was expecting her. She brushed by him, but the man grabbed her arm, his fingers digging deep into her skin. B'Elanna tried to pull away but his grip was tight. He dragged her into a side alley. The smells emitting from the overflowing trash bins overwhelmed B'Elanna and she gagged as she struggled against the hold the man had placed on her.

"Let go of me!" she screamed as she banged her elbow painfully into the arm. The headache that had plagued her earlier in the evening threatened to reinstate itself as she swallowed down her nausea. The alley seemed to spin around her.

"I'm not going to hurt you!" the stranger insisted, his voice rising.

B'Elanna scoffed at this last comment. She managed to free her arm, swung at him and hit him in the jaw. The man released her arm as he staggered backwards against the wall. B'Elanna took the opportunity to run in the opposite direction, but then the spotted man with the tufted yellow hair, who had also been at the restaurant, obstructed her way. He grabbed her, wrapping his arms securely around her chest and clamping her arms against her body, making it impossible for B'Elanna to lash out at him.

"Security! Help!" B'Elanna screamed, the back of her throat hoarse with exertion of trying to be heard over all of noise emitting from the Power Facility. In the background, B'Elanna heard the dark-haired man say, "Chakotay to *Voyager*. We've got B'Elanna! Lock onto Neelix and transport them to Sickbay."

The hairs stood up on the back of B'Elanna's neck as adrenaline coursed through her body. Her hearts beat at a rapid rate as she fought against the man called Neelix. *Where were they transporting her to and why?* She pushed against her captor, trying to break free, but his grasp was too strong.

"Help me!" she shouted as she tried to kick at Neelix's feet.

At that moment, two security officers appeared, the beams of their powerful flashlights cutting through the dank darkness. One of the officers yelled, "Let her go!" while the other yelled "Stop!"

The temporary relief B'Elanna felt at the arrival of the security officers evaporated when she experienced the slight tingle of the transporter beam take hold. In that moment before she dematerialized, she regretted not accepting Tom's offer to escort her to the station.

They materialized in a large room, and as her eyes adjusted to the scene, B'Elanna recognized she was in a medical facility. There were three biobeds spread equidistance against the wall to her left, and to her right, she saw a glass-enclosed office. Beneath the bright glare of the overhead lights, trays of hyposprays and other equipment sat neatly on trays. A faint antiseptic odor permeated the air. The moment of shock passed as B'Elanna realized the strange yellow-haired alien was still holding on to her. She elbowed him in the stomach, and he yelped in pain, releasing her. B'Elanna darted towards the doors at the far end of the room.

"Computer, secure doors! Authorization Neelix alpha six theta!" Neelix yelled. In frustration, B'Elanna banged her fists on the door.

"B'Elanna," Neelix said in a calming voice.

"How do you know my name? Where *am* I?" she asked, pressing her back against the door.

"You're on *Voyager*. I'm Neelix." Neelix covered the distance between them in several steps. His voice was kind, and she didn't see a threat in his eyes but... *you took me from my home*. "Don't you recognize *me*, B'Elanna?" He sounded sad, maybe even a little desperate.

B'Elanna shook her head. "I've never seen you before." She tried to punch Neelix, but he anticipated her reaction and caught her fists. "Doctor!"

"Leave me alone!" she screamed.

"We're friends! We're trying to help you," Neelix said but she found this hard to believe as he grabbed her from the back and wrestled her towards a biobed. Out of the corner of her eye, B'Elanna could see someone dressed in a red-shouldered uniform advancing towards her. She made out the glint of silver in his hand, recognized it as a hypospray. *Not again...*

"No! Don't touch me!" B'Elanna yelled. She thrashed as the hypospray discharged into her neck. She felt her limbs grow heavy as drowsiness overtook her. "Please," she whispered. "I'm pregnant... don't... my..."

"Good morning, sunshine."

Chaffing against the restraints holding her onto the biobed, B'Elanna turned her head away from the cheery bald gentleman who had so recently attacked her with the hypospray. He was dressed in a red and black uniform and none of his markings indicated an association with the Power Facility.

"I want to go home," she said, pulling and testing the restraint at her ankles.

"You *are* home." The man walked around the biobed so that he was once again in B'Elanna's view. She turned her head to the other side and the man sighed. "If that's the way you're going to be... B'Elanna, it's me. The Doctor."

"I don't *have* a doctor."

"Is that what they told you?"

"Who?"

"The people who altered your engrammatic patterns. Your memory centers have been radically changed. Don't you remember anything?" the Doctor spoke calmly, but B'Elanna could detect just a hint of shock underlying his tone. "Anything at *all*?"

"Can you remove these restraints?" B'Elanna asked abruptly. "They hurt."

"Do you promise not to run away." The Doctor held a scanner near her head, his brow furrowing as he evaluated the readings on a separate hand-held device.

B'Elanna bit her lip. She'd be a fool to make such a promise; the moment opportunity presented itself, she knew she'd attempt to escape. "Am I a prisoner?" B'Elanna asked.

"No," the Doctor said. His eyes narrowed as he stared at the device in his hand. "But we went through a lot of trouble to bring you back to *Voyager*." His lips pressed into a thin line. "Your brain is registering some very interesting neural patterns... this could make a fascinating paper one day." He cocked his head to the side. "Perhaps a study on the effect of neural engrammatic sequencing on memory and reversion therapy?"

"So, I'm just some kind of *medical* lab rat for your amusement?" B'Elanna spit out the words. The restraints were digging into her skin and it was getting increasingly uncomfortable on the biobed.

The Doctor let out a sigh of exasperation. "I'm your *friend*, B'Elanna. We've known each other for a long time and I'm trying to help you. But, the alterations to your brain are extensive. I have completed the first round of neural resequencing and regeneration therapy, but I'm going to need you to cooperate if you're going to be well again."

"Then prove you're my friend. Release *me*."

The Doctor seemed to consider her request, and then with a quick look at the door, he nodded. "All right," he said. "I suppose there's nowhere for you to go."

B'Elanna bit back a smile of triumph. "You said I was on *Voyager*? That man who said we were old friends, he mentioned *Voyager*."

"The person you're referring to is indeed an old friend of yours, Chakotay," the Doctor said as he released the restraints. He held out his hand to steady her as she slid off the biobed. "And yes, you are on *Voyager*. You're currently in Sickbay."

"You're not... real," she said, marveling at the way his hand pulsed under her grip. Curiously, B'Elanna examined his hand, turning it this way and that. The man standing in front of her was nothing more than forcefields matrixed together to contain particles of light and artificial matter. She'd encountered these patterns of changing density and firmness combined with a strange tingling sensation in the past. *But when?*

"Excuse *me*?" the Doctor sounded insulted. "I'll have you know that I'm just as real as you are and—" his tone softened just a bit "—I have you to thank for it."

"You're a *hologram*," B'Elanna said dismissively. She released his arm, not bothering to wait for confirmation of her diagnosis. "You haven't told me why you've brought me here."

"This is your home, Lieutenant, and I'm your doctor."

Lieutenant?

"Why should I believe you?" she asked. "I've never been here before."

"Your recovery is certainly going to be more difficult than I anticipated."

She shrugged off his touch and walked around, running her fingers over the smooth metallic surfaces of the biobed, noted the consoles and the brightly-lit buttons. Her gaze fell upon the instrument carts located to the right of the bed, and more specifically on a particular device.

... if I remember my Klingon customs, biting someone on the face means-

... I know what it means! All right, so maybe I do feel something, some kind of instinct. What am I supposed to do about it?

B'Elanna jerked back to attention, picked up the device, examined it carefully. "This tool, I- I've used it before."

"It's a dermal regenerator," the Doctor said quietly. He approached B'Elanna slowly. "You've used it many times. You *and* Lieutenant Paris."

"Lieutenant Paris?"

"Oh right," the Doctor sighed. "You don't remember him either, do you?"

"No, and I definitely don't remember you, or any of the others who claim we are 'old friends'." B'Elanna glared in his direction. "I insist you return me to Quarra."

"That's not your home!"

B'Elanna felt the familiar signs of tension gripping her temples. Would she never be rid of this infernal headache? She leaned on the biobed, supporting all her weight on her palms as she inhaled deeply. She spoke carefully and slowly, "I don't know who you are or why you brought me here, but if you return me to Quarra, I won't press charges for kidnapping."

"Hmmm, avoid charges of kidnapping or try to get home without our chief engineer?" The Doctor tipped his head, his fingers stroking his chin thoughtfully. His very attitude infuriated B'Elanna, but something else he said caught her attention.

"Chief engineer?"

"Your position aboard this ship." The Doctor gently took the dermal regenerator from her and placed it back on the instrument tray. "You are a valued and trusted member of this crew, and while you believe Quarra is your home, you have to trust me when I tell you that that is a lie, that you belong on *Voyager*."

B'Elanna knew when someone asked her to trust them, she probably shouldn't. But she'd taken a chance on Tom, and it had worked out. She narrowed her eyes as she looked at the Doctor. She'd generally had judgment when it came to character and the hologram standing front of her seemed as sincere as his programming could possibly allow. After a moment, she said, "Let's get this straight. You *kidnapped* me, *drugged* me, and then *restrained* me. Why should I trust you on *anything*?"

"These all make excellent points," the Doctor said with maddening smugness. "Let me summon Mr. Neelix. He has offered to take you on a tour of the ship to aid in your recovery." The Doctor tapped a small gold badge on the breast of his uniform. "Doctor to Neelix. Please report to Sickbay immediately."

"Neelix is the one who attacked me on Quarra," B'Elanna said. She balled her hands into fists. "I'm not going *anywhere* with him."

The Doctor regarded her with a contemplative gaze and then he said, "I want to show you something." He stood in front of the console, his fingers dancing across the yellow, blue and white buttons. A few seconds later, a hologram of a baby with gentle ridges rippling across her forehead appeared. The baby was in fetal position, feet crossed at the ankles, and tiny arms and hands folded in front of her stomach. B'Elanna pressed the tips of her fingers to her lips.

"Who- who is this?" she asked in a very soft voice.

"That's your baby," the Doctor said. "You asked me to be her godfather."

"It's a girl?"

"Yes. Without a name, of course, but you and Mr. Paris, you'll find one you like soon enough. Everyone on *Voyager* has a suggestion for you, though you and Mr. Paris haven't seemed that enthusiastic about some of the ideas."

"Mr. Paris?" B'Elanna asked.

"Your husband."

B'Elanna looked at the Doctor curiously.

"I'm not married," she said flatly. That same hurt, the one that ached every time she thought about the man who'd fathered her child, flared up again.

"You *are*, B'Elanna."

"Then why can't I remember *him*?" B'Elanna pounded her left fist into the palm of her right hand in frustration. "Don't you *think* if I was married, I would remember my *husband*?"

"In time, but as I've told you, you've had some severe neurological damage and your memory engrams have been affected," the Doctor said gently. "Your recovery won't be easy, but I am confident the protocol I have devised will cause you to remember it all in due time."

"How I know *you're* not the one who is altering my memories?" B'Elanna asked. She held up her hand, forestalling the protest she knew was coming. "And *don't* ask me to just trust you on this."

"Because *you* know something is wrong," the Doctor said. He indicated the holimage of the baby. "And how would I have this if I *wasn't* telling you the truth?"

B'Elanna considered. It seemed ridiculous that these aliens on *Voyager* would go through the exercise of creating a holimage just to convince her this was her home. Slowly, she nodded.

"I- I have snatches of memories, but some ideas of who I was, what I did, where I came from."
B'Elanna's expression changed to one of alarm. "The only clear recollections I have are from the last three weeks. Everything else is lost in the fog."

"It is a disconcerting feeling, I'm sure," the Doctor said kindly. "You must have been very frightened."

"Frightened?" B'Elanna asked contemplatively. "No, I wasn't frightened. Confused, I think, and overwhelmed. Have you ever had that feeling before? When you don't have a sense of where you've been?"

"I'm sure - Mr. Neelix, hello!" the Doctor exclaimed. B'Elanna turned to face the man with the mottled skin and yellow hair who had brought her here. Instead of the gray outfit she remembered him wearing, this time he was wearing a gold jacket over a striped green shirt. He held a tan bag in his hands. He looked kind and harmless enough, but appearances could be deceiving.

B'Elanna backed away, nearly turning over the cart nearest to her.

"Careful, B'Elanna!" the Doctor exclaimed.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Neelix said soothingly as he closed the distance between them, stopping just shy of a meter from her. "Look, I brought you some clothes. I thought you might want to wear some of your own things." Neelix held out the bag and B'Elanna took it, her hands shaking. Inside, among other neatly packed items, she found a burgundy colored dress in a soft material. She looked at Neelix questioningly.

"Go on," Neelix said gently. "It's yours. I hope you don't mind, but I saw it in your closet, and I thought it would be more comfortable than that uniform you're wearing." He laughed awkwardly. "You were wearing it the night before you disappeared. You and Mr. Paris had dinner in the mess hall. We had just escaped the void, you were working long hours to repair the ship, but you took a break at Mr. Paris' urging."

Mr. Paris.

B'Elanna fingered the velvety material; it certainly felt better than the synthetic material of the uniform provided by the Power Distribution Facility. She nodded.

"Okay," she said finally. "I'll change."

Neelix and Doctor disappeared out into the corridor while B'Elanna changed her clothes. She rubbed her hands over the material, loving the way the dress fell smoothly over her belly. The dress certainly provided a more elegant look than the dismal green uniform she'd been wearing for the past few weeks. She looked up as Neelix and the Doctor re-entered.

"Mr. Neelix is going to take you on a tour of your life on *Voyager*," the Doctor said. "I'm confident everything will come back to you once you see the things and people you care so much about."

Both the Doctor and Neelix were observing her with such concern and care that B'Elanna felt her resolve melt. She took a deep breath.

"All right," she said. "I'll go with you." Then she pointed at the holimage of the baby one more time. "Can I come back and... see her again?" she asked.

"Of course. Any time," the Doctor said. "And don't forget about the vocalization treatment! Once you're completely yourself again, we'll begin anew."

Chapter Five

"Vocalization treatment?" B'Elanna asked, not bothering to hide her confusion, as she and Neelix stepped out into the corridor.

"Yes. During your regular check-ups, the Doctor sings to your baby. It's a way to foster a love of music while in utero." Neelix frowned. "I *think*." He shrugged. "I'm not sure it's medically required, but you go along with it because it makes him happy."

That she would have the patience for such inanity belied all common sense. B'Elanna shook her head in disbelief. "A hologram who loves singing and is also a doctor. Now I've seen *everything*."

"Yes, he's unusual, but he's exceeded his programming and you helped him do that."

"Me?"

"You're a very talented engineer, B'Elanna, but more to the point, you were able to imagine how you could augment the Doctor's personality subroutines to make him a key member of the crew." Neelix's whiskers twitched. "You'll have to forgive him. He's very excited about your baby. Surprisingly, there hasn't been a baby born on *Voyager* since Naomi Wildman five years ago."

B'Elanna considered. "Five years? How long have you been on the ship?"

"I joined *Voyager's* crew shortly after it was pulled into the Delta Quadrant by the Caretaker seven years ago," Neelix said as he led the way down a long curving corridor. "I'm the only one on board who is native to this quadrant; the rest of you call the Alpha Quadrant home, and you've been on a journey to return there. I've never been to Earth, but the crew talks very fondly of that world, even those like you who aren't from there."

B'Elanna frowned. "Earth..." she said softly. "I met some people on Quarra from there. They didn't have anything nice to say about it."

"And let me guess," Neelix said, "none of them knew anything about *Voyager* either?"

"No." B'Elanna thought for a moment. "How long will it take to return to the Alpha Quadrant?"

"Thirty years, give or take."

"Oh." The prospect of being stuck on a starship for that many years seemed distinctly unattractive to B'Elanna. She was still contemplating this revelation when the corridor branched into two directions, and Neelix veered to the right. A few steps later, Neelix paused in front of a set of double doors.

"Welcome to Engineering," he said, punching in an authorization code into a nearby touchpad. "You spend most of your time here, sometimes two shifts back to back. If you didn't have to sleep and eat, I'm sure you'd never stop working. You take your responsibilities to the ship very seriously. Without your expertise, I'm not sure the ship would have survived this long in the Delta Quadrant. It's not an easy job you have." The doors slid open and Neelix gestured with his arm for B'Elanna to proceed inside.

B'Elanna stepped into the empty room tentatively. The warp core – the centerpiece of Engineering – rose the height of the room, its liquid blue innards glowing and pulsating rhythmically. Workstations and consoles lined the walls, each with its own unique interface and diagnostic capabilities. Other than the buzz of the warp core and the distant whirr of other ship systems, the room was curiously devoid of activity. An engine room on a starship of this size should have a staff of at least a dozen personnel at any given time.

B'Elanna turned, puzzled, to Neelix. "Where is everyone?"

"On Quarra," he answered grimly. "Voyager hit a subspace mine while on its way to rendezvous with Commander Chakotay, Ensign Kim and myself. Tetryon radiation flooded the ship and the Captain ordered an evacuation and left the Doctor in charge. The intent was for you to return as soon as the radiation had been vented, but we believe your escape pods were intercepted by the Quarrans. They have a labor shortage—"

"And they found *us*," B'Elanna finished softly. She recalled how Marchin mentioned the sudden influx of workers on Quarra. Perhaps this was the explanation. As loathe as she was to admit it, Neelix's story did have a ring of truth to it.

"Yes. They kidnapped our crew and altered their memories to make them forget they were taken against their will," Neelix said grimly. "And that's why we need your help, B'Elanna, to get the others back."

B'Elanna left Neelix's side to examine the panels. Diagrams filled almost every screen, and most of them had some kind notation next to them. B'Elanna touched some of the screens lightly, knowing instinctively what some of the readings meant. One of them, frozen on a warning message, caught B'Elanna's eye.

... warp core breach imminent in thirty seconds. Shut down the reactor modules and transfer plasma flow before ejecting the core.

The message stirred a faint whisper of a memory in the back of her mind.

She was floating in space, fighting the deep desire to sleep. Her breaths came in short, shallow bursts. The space currents buffeted her body and nausea threatened. The panic over ejecting and subsequently losing the warp core had evaporated into the emptiness. There was only the space between them now. Only one clear thought remained to her, and she struggled to get the words out. "I have to tell you the truth," she whispered.

B'Elanna leaned against the console, her palms flat on the slick surface. She closed her eyes, counting her breaths to calm herself. *What is happening to me?* She blinked to clear her vision.

"B'Elanna, what's wrong?" Neelix asked in concern. She heaved another sigh, nodded and turned to face him.

"I- I ejected the core once, right?" B'Elanna pointed to the panel spitting out the readings from the most vital part of the ship.

"Yes, several years ago."

"It was-" she paused, her voice thick with emotion "-the worst day of my life." She had a dim memory of sitting in a corridor that resembled the one leading to Engineering, tipping her head back against the wall, her eyes half-closed in dismay. *Who the hell had she said those words to?*

"I think it was a pretty bad day. We found you and Mr. Paris close to death," Neelix acknowledged.

Mr. Paris. There was that name again.

"Can you remember anything else?" Neelix asked anxiously.

B'Elanna shook her head. "No, just that, and it's only a fragment."

She contemplated the diagnostic screen and the frozen warning message on the screen. Automatically, she ran her fingers across a sequence of buttons and when asked, typed in an intricate authorization code. The warning message disappeared as the screen reset itself and now the readings showed the warp core was indeed functioning within normal and acceptable parameters. B'Elanna let out a sigh of relief and looked over at Neelix. He was smiling at her, but she couldn't quite figure out why.

"Come with me." Neelix took her arm. "I have someone I want you to meet."

They walked to the left of the warp core and then took the 'lift to the second level.

"This way," Neelix said. B'Elanna followed him. They stopped in front of a console and Neelix pointed to a pair of legs extending from beneath the panel.

"You remember Harry Kim," Neelix said, his voice tinged with optimism.

A young Asian man pushed himself out from beneath the console. He wore a yellow uniform, and his black hair flopped down on his forehead. A smudge of grease stained his cheek, and he'd rolled his sleeves up. Harry put the tool down, wiped his hands on his black pants, and offered B'Elanna a broad smile.

"Hey B'Elanna," Harry said. "Glad you're here; I could use your help." His eyes crinkled with humor. "It's hell trying to put your engines back together, let me tell you."

B'Elanna shook her head as she glanced apologetically at first at Harry and then at Neelix.

"No, I'm sorry," she said. "I've never seen you before."

Harry looked crestfallen but Neelix didn't seem deterred by B'Elanna's revelation.

"Well, he's a very good friend of yours," Neelix persisted. He picked up the tool from the floor and showed it to B'Elanna. "And aside from you, there's no one better with a hyperspanner."

Harry laughed self-deprecatingly. "I'm not having a whole lot of luck today though," he said, casting a hopeful look in B'Elanna's direction.

B'Elanna took the hyperspanner from Neelix and examined it carefully. The heft of it felt comfortable in her grip and she knew exactly the best way to wield it for best results.

"What's the problem?" Neelix directed the question at Harry.

"I've got the transporters back on line, but I've I'm having no luck boosting the range and the pattern buffers. The primary relays keep shorting out. I've already replaced key components multiple times,

but I don't know what I'm overlooking." Harry sounded frustrated and B'Elanna regarded him sympathetically. She could understand that kind of desperation, had felt it before-

... can't reroute power because the cross-section capacity has decreased due to the shorts in power grid twelve A. You'll have to manually replace them otherwise the whole panel will short.

"Maybe B'Elanna could help you," Neelix said. B'Elanna's eyes widened in surprise, but Harry nodded and pointed at a section of the console that was flashing a 'system overload' warning.

"Every time I try increasing the ohmic resistance, I end up-" Harry began.

... it's in the coils. Try realigning them; that should work.

"That's your issue," B'Elanna interrupted without thinking. "You have to realign the induction coils to handle the extra power. Here, let me do it." With some difficulty, she squatted down next to Harry, and then dropped down to her knees. She squinted at the intricate web of circuitry, sensors and wires, and then found the problematic coils. Using the hyperspanner, she gently pried it loose, replaced the fuse, and then expertly welded it back into place. With an assist from Neelix, she stood up, and after a moment of scrutiny, tapped a few buttons and the warning message blinked off.

"Thanks," Harry said. He rolled his eyes. "I can't believe I didn't see that. I guess I'm more exhausted than I thought." He grinned at B'Elanna. "Good to have you back, Maquis."

Maquis?

"Sure," B'Elanna said uncertainly.

"We'd better keep going," Neelix said. "B'Elanna's memories are still affected by what the Quarrans did to her, Harry, and I'm hoping by showing her around the ship, it will trigger her recovery more quickly."

Harry nodded in acknowledgement. "Good luck, I hope it works because we don't have a lot of time before the Quarrans find us again. I'd like to get us operational again sooner rather than later," he said in a grim tone of voice before sliding back underneath the workstation.

B'Elanna's hearts quickened in anticipation. Were the Quarran authorities looking for her? She followed Neelix, quickening her pace to catch up with him.

"Without the engineering staff, Mr. Kim has been doing his best to keep the ship running on his own," Neelix said in a low voice. "I don't think he's slept in a couple of days." He coughed slightly. "And he wasn't feeling well earlier due to something he ate. So, he isn't entirely himself now, but I assure you, he is a very competent officer."

"If you say so."

Neelix guided her in the direction of the 'lift. As they made the way down to the first floor of Engineering, Neelix said in that relentlessly encouraging way of his, "I do think you're starting to

remember *something*. The ease with which you handled those repairs... You might not remember *Voyager*, but you do remember her systems. That's something, right?"

B'Elanna had to admit *Voyager's* systems did feel familiar with her, but the fact she couldn't recall *anything* about her alleged life aboard the starship still gave her pause. The fog that had been her constant companion for the last three weeks seemed to be clearing from her mind, and while she still felt off-balance, she had to concede Neelix's point; there was a familiarity about *Voyager* she couldn't deny. Uncertainty was beginning to nibble at the edges of her mind. But she hadn't forgotten what Quarra represented -- the promise of better life for her and her baby -- and she couldn't quite let that go. She rested her hand on the railing that separated the main floor from the warp core as she stared at the almost hypnotic swirls that assured her the core was working as it should.

"What is it?" Neelix asked gently.

"I don't know what's real and what's not. Your Doctor pokes me with medical instruments, you introduce me to strangers, tell me they're friends," B'Elanna said, but with less heat than when she'd made the same argument to the Doctor just an hour earlier. "For all I know, *you're* the ones trying to manipulate my memories."

"I know this is a lot for you to absorb, but-" Neelix began but B'Elanna didn't let him finish.

"You mentioned the escape pods and Quarran authorities finding us. I don't remember any of that at all. What *I* recall is stepping off a transport nearly three weeks ago, and immediately finding a job and a place to live," she said passionately. "Quarra is a great place to live. They don't *need* to kidnap people; people just *come* there." *Like I did*. The absurdity of a large group hailing from worlds more than thirty years' journey from Quarra suddenly struck her. She caught her breath and tightened her grip on the railing.

"And before that?" Neelix prodded.

"What do you mean?" B'Elanna stopped to face him.

"Before you boarded that transport. What was your *life* like?"

B'Elanna sighed. How many times had she repeated this story? Just contemplating the broad details of her past depressed her, but it had become such a part of her biography during the last three weeks that it was impossible to imagine any other narrative for herself. "I was on Kessik. Alone, pregnant, unemployed, wishing I could find a better home for myself and my baby," she recited in a monotone voice.

"You already have a home."

"*Right.*" She did a quick mental calculation. "And according to you, it's at least thirty thousand light years away."

"I'm not talking about Earth," Neelix said gently. His expression turned earnest. "I'm talking about *Voyager*. We're just getting started. Let me fill in the gaps for you, show you *what* your life looked like

before you were taken to Quarra." He tipped his head in the direction of the main Engineering doors. "Please."

B'Elanna's gaze met his. There was no guile in his yellow-brown eyes. *You have nothing to lose by going with him*, she thought. And there was a distinct possibility he was telling her the truth. She inhaled sharply.

"All right," B'Elanna said, her voice trembling. "Show me."

Neelix led the way into the corridor. Like Sickbay, the corridor lights were extremely bright, and the paneling and carpeting were in various shades of gray.

"This way," Neelix said.

B'Elanna matched her stride with his. As they walked through the corridors, B'Elanna looked around, hoping to see something or someone familiar, but nothing jolted her memory.

"Was I... was I ever on Kessik?" she asked uncertainly.

"Yes. You grew up there, but it's been many years since you've been there."

"How many years?"

Neelix considered. "I don't know precisely, but as I mentioned, *Voyager* has been in the Delta Quadrant for seven years now and you haven't talked to your mother in more than ten years. So, it's been at least a decade, if not longer, since you've set foot on that world. You- you hated Kessik."

In spite of herself, B'Elanna smiled. 'Hated' would be an understatement of the emotions she felt towards her homeworld.

"I know *that's* true," she said. "I couldn't wait to leave that place." She offered Neelix a tentative smile as they stepped into a turbolift.

"Deck nine," Neelix said. The turbolift started to move, gathering speed as it moved through the decks. B'Elanna leaned against the wall. The high-heeled boots she'd found in the bag of clothing Neelix had brought were starting to feel increasingly tight on her feet, and she could feel a wave of fatigue washing over her.

... Oh, my feet. Ow. I haven't had a chance to sit down all day.

... If you're thinking of cheering me up, don't bother.

"B'Elanna?" Neelix placed his hand gently on her forearm. "What is it?"

She jerked back to attention. "Yes, sorry. I'm—I'm tired."

"If you want to stop—"

"No," she said firmly. The technical-minded part of her brain was starting to assemble the puzzle: the holimage of a baby with Klingon features, the way she understood how to fix the problems with the transporter signal, the intrusive fragments of memory. And there was something about Neelix's presence she found oddly comforting the more time she spent with him. Somehow, she *knew* this wasn't the first time he'd tried to help her with a problem. She considered all this evidence and then asked, "Did I come to *Voyager* from Kessik?"

"No. You lived on Earth for a couple years, went to Starfleet Academy-"

"I didn't graduate, did I?" B'Elanna asked abruptly. She didn't know how she knew this detail, but it seemed right to her.

"No, you didn't," Neelix confirmed. The turbolift came to a stop and when the doors opened, Neelix indicated they needed to turn to the right. As they walked down the corridor, Neelix related more details of her life. "After you left the Academy, you spent a few years working in the engine rooms on various commercial transport ships. You met Chakotay when he saved your life – I don't know all the details, so you'll have to ask him – and then you joined the Maquis."

B'Elanna experienced a flash of recognition. Hadn't Harry Kim called her 'Maquis' just a few minutes ago? She dug deep into her memory, recalled damp and cold nights huddled in caves, the adrenaline rush after successfully raiding a camp, the reptilian grey-skinned humanoids advancing towards her position. B'Elanna said suddenly, "The enemy we fought... they were called Cardassians." She looked to Neelix for confirmation.

Neelix nodded. "Yes, they are. But it wasn't just about the Cardassians, but also about the rights of settlers in the Federation. Like many conflicts, it's a complicated situation, with many sides to the truth. Like all things, it depends on who you ask." Neelix stopped. "Well, here we are."

The door in front of them appeared exactly like every other door on *Voyager*: dark grey paneled with silver-grey metal accents. A small touchpad was just to the left of the door. There were no other indications as to what lay on the other side of the door. B'Elanna shivered.

"Where are we?" B'Elanna asked in a small voice.

"These are your quarters. You live here," Neelix answered gently.

Chapter Six

"Computer, lights," Neelix said, once he had punched in the security code authorizing them entry. The door slid open and Neelix hung back, letting B'Elanna enter first. She took a few steps inside, and paused, feeling as if she'd entered someone else's life. Like everything else on *Voyager*, the walls were gray, but possibly in a burst of pique, someone had chosen a carpet just a shade lighter than the Ocampan desert.

A round glass table with two chairs sat in the middle of the room, while a large bed covered in blue and white bedding was pushed up against the windows. Generic and non-offensive artwork decorate the walls, but B'Elanna's attention was immediately drawn to the crib settled against the foot of the bed; whoever lived here was getting ready for a baby.

"Well?" Neelix asked expectantly.

B'Elanna swallowed hard. She wasn't *sure* what she was supposed to feel, but she was pretty sure 'nothing' wasn't the answer Neelix wanted. She *wanted* to experience a rush of memory coming back at her, but none of the furnishings or decorative items sparked any kind of emotion. One thing she knew for sure; these quarters were more inviting and comfortable than the apartment she'd occupied on Quarra.

Her gaze fell upon a pair of black men's shoes lying by the side of the bed, appearing as if they'd been kicked off haphazardly. "I - those aren't mine."

"No, they're most likely your husband's."

"Husband?" B'Elanna asked, stumbling over the word as if it were in a foreign language. The Doctor had made a similar reference earlier, and she'd protested then. It was easier to rely on the story she was telling herself than open herself up to even more intense disappointment. "I- I don't think so. I- he left, there *isn't* anyone." It was difficult to keep her voice steady but somehow, she managed.

"No, there is, B'Elanna," Neelix said. "I can prove it to you." He picked up a silver framed picture that decorated the top of cabinet and handed it to her.

She took the picture in her trembling hands carefully and stared hard at it. The image showed her - sitting on the lap of... that waiter. *Tom*. His face against her cheek, and she was leaning into him, beaming, her hand pressed across her heart, a gold band prominently displayed on her ring finger.

"The waiter from the tavern?" B'Elanna asked in disbelief. She felt lightheaded as she touched the picture carefully, obscuring Tom's face with her finger, and concentrating only on her image. The B'Elanna Torres in that picture was someone she couldn't even imagine being; that B'Elanna Torres seemed blissfully caught up in a moment, unaware she could lose everything and everyone *just like that*.

"Lieutenant Tom Paris, our pilot, and B'Elanna Torres, our Chief Engineer. That picture was taken on your honeymoon," Neelix said.

B'Elanna nearly dropped the picture. *Tom* was the oft-mentioned 'Mr. Paris'? The smooth-talking waiter with the beautiful blue eyes who couldn't resist flirting with nearly every woman who came into the restaurant? Of all the ridiculous things that had been told her to since she came aboard *Voyager*, this was the most ridiculous. Tom had been kind to her, yes, but how did that translate into him being her husband? Guys like Tom didn't fall for women like her.

"It's not possible," she said firmly.

"How else would we have it?" Neelix argued back. B'Elanna barely heard him as her attention was drawn to a box with a viewscreen in the corner. She knew she should know what it was, but her mind was a blank. She glanced back at Neelix questioningly as she ran her fingertips along the smoothly finished wooden surface.

"It's an antique television. You gave it to Tom as a present," Neelix said.

... I've been working on a little surprise for you.

... Oh? Naughty, or nice?

"He watches cartoons," B'Elanna said suddenly. She looked at Neelix, startled by the revelation. "How do I *know* that?"

"Because you're starting to remember," Neelix answered proudly. B'Elanna glanced back down at the picture. This time, she didn't try to obscure Tom's face. In the image, his fingers curled against the stem of a champagne glass, his eyes closed, and a broad smile stretching across his face as he tipped his head against hers. It hit her then; the Tom Paris in that picture was lost in B'Elanna Torres.

She thought back to Quarra, how Tom always stopped to talk to her, how he'd urged to eat, offered to come to the doctor with him... and then the last time she'd seen him, he'd offered to walk her to the transport. And all those times when she'd noticed him looking in her direction when he didn't think she wouldn't notice. As if he *felt* what she didn't.

"I wondered why he was so protective of me," she said in a voice cracking with emotion and bewilderment. She clenched the picture tightly to her chest as she moved through the room, looking at everything in a new light. She observed the bat'leth on the wall, paused briefly to run her fingers over its edge and was startled to discover it wasn't sharp at all.

She was on the holodeck, looking out at a recreation of an ancient Klingon battleground. The bat'leth was heavy in her hands. Her hearts in her throat, she couldn't even take the luxury of a moment to admire Tom in his Klingon armor. "Today would be a very bad day to die," she said softly, as she handed him the ancient weapon.

When she passed the dining table, she ran her fingers over the shiny smooth toaster surface (how many slices of peanut butter toast had Tom made for her?), eyed the pottery tea pot and matching mugs, and then finally, her gaze was drawn baby's crib with a little mobile of spacecraft hanging above it. She ran her fingers over the crib gently and then looked down at the little pink blankets folded across the small mattress. Her breath caught at the back of her throat.

She glanced back at Neelix, who offered her a supportive smile. She turned back to the crib and leaned down to stroke the soft material.

... you know, this is one special kid we're having.

... you're just figuring that out?

B'Elanna blinked as the crib suddenly blurred in front of her. She tightened her hold on the crib to keep from losing her balance.

"I'll be outside if you need me," Neelix said softly. B'Elanna didn't acknowledge his departure.

B'Elanna remained kneeling by the crib for a long time, not really seeing anything at all. The revelation that she was married to the waiter from the restaurant – no, no, not really a waiter but rather *Voyager's* chief pilot – had rattled her. She couldn't deny the mounting evidence. She *did* belong on *Voyager*, she was married, but there was still so much that felt unknown to her.

After a while, she rubbed her hand roughly against her eyes, and carefully replaced the framed picture on top of the cabinet. She took a deep breath and then proceeded to inspect and explore these quarters in more detail.

A stack of PADDs occupied the surface of one of the side tables, while some roses – long dead, now dried – in a blue and porcelain vase sat on another side table. B'Elanna stared at the roses; had she and Tom fought prior to their disappearance on Quarra? It was impossible to tell now what color the flowers had been, but Tom spent precious replicator rations on a bouquet of yellow roses in the aftermath of conflict. *How do I know that?* She picked up the vase, walked into the bathroom, dumped what little bit of water remained into the sink, and threw the flowers into the recycler.

B'Elanna opened the closet. About a dozen uniforms hung side by side – with the red taking up the left side and the yellow-jacketed ones on the right. She then pushed the uniforms aside, revealing other articles of clothing. It appeared as though Tom Paris favored the color blue and had a weakness for brightly-colored and ornately decorated vests. On what she assumed was her side of the closet, B'Elanna realized her tastes ran to the pretty and romantic; among her off-duty options, she found a floral sundress, hanging next to a velvety brown sleeveless dress.

... Fresh flowers? An afternoon on the holodeck? It almost feels like we're dating again.

... The secret to a lasting marriage. Keep the romance alive.

B'Elanna shuffled through the rest of the clothes, but nothing else triggered a memory. She closed the closet and then opened the dresser drawers. The top drawer held a collection of pajamas, while there were a couple of pairs of cotton tank top and short sets, she immediately gravitated towards the silky ones with lacey adornments that slipped through her fingers as they fell back into the drawer. She knew without a doubt these pretty things belonged to her.

... I could add a steamy love scene between the Starfleet conn officer and the Maquis engineer.

... That's realistic!

Abruptly, B'Elanna slammed the drawer shut and turned to lean back against the dresser. She could see everything from here and she realized that even if she couldn't remember this life - even if she was being manipulated - she wanted to live *this* life. Desperately.

She thought of apartment 3C down on Quarra with its utter lack of personality. She recalled lying awake at night, staring up at the ceiling, wondering how she was going to cope once the baby arrived.

B'Elanna sank down on the bed, stroking the soft material of the blue comforter lightly. Which side of the bed was hers? she wondered. She liked to sleep on her side, though with her belly growing, it was getting increasingly more difficult to find a comfortable position. How did Tom like to sleep? Heat

flared up in her cheeks as she contemplated the intensely intimate question, and to distract herself, she reached for one of the PADDs on the nightstand. Most of the PADDs were engineering manuals, but one caught her attention.

"'Warrior Women at the River of Blood'," B'Elanna read out-loud. The very same tome she'd been reading at Quarra, the one that felt familiar when nothing else in her life did. The PADD clattered from her hands to the floor, but she made no move to pick it up.

Her eyes focused on the small terminal on the desk on the other side of the room. In a few paces, she was seated in the grey and blue armchair. B'Elanna inhaled deeply and tapped the power-up button. A second later a password field flashed onto the screen. B'Elanna's fingers seemed to know automatically what to type. She held her breath as the screen displayed a long list of documents.

"The personal logs of B'Elanna Torres," she read out-loud. She saw that the entries spanned almost seven complete years. The last one had been recorded three weeks previously. *About the time she had arrived on Quarra.* "Computer, play last log entry."

A second passed before B'Elanna heard her own voice echoing through the room.

"Chief Engineer's log, Stardate 54584.27. I told Captain Janeway this morning that *Voyager* needs a complete overhaul. I've asked Seven to look for a world where we can set down or a station with adequate maintenance facilities; so far, nothing. I'm doing the best I can, and my staff is working double-shifts to keep crucial systems operational. Today, all the relays in grid nineteen A blew out. I rerouted everything over to twenty and twenty-one, plus wired in the B relay, but it's a temporary measure. Icheb has run diagnostics at least a thousand times and tells me all systems are running well within specified parameters, but I asked him to plan on running the tests every morning for the next seven days, just to be sure. He told me it's not an efficient use of his time, but Icheb doesn't know *Voyager* the way I do. The ship tends to overload when you least expect it, especially since we constantly divert power and plasma flow through conduits and wiring that can't possibly support the high resistive and voltage levels. Tom tells me I need to relax. He says the stress isn't good for the baby. He's right, I know, but if something else goes wrong on this ship, it's my responsibility fix it, and one cascade failure leads to another. Damn. I hate red alert. If it isn't one thing, it's another. End log."

B'Elanna sat very still for a moment and then said, "Computer, replay last thirty seconds of the log." The computer picked up from the moment where she first mentioned Tom and played to the end. B'Elanna took a deep breath. "Computer, replay the last thirty seconds of the log." And again, there was her own voice talking about Tom. She played those thirty seconds two more times, before understanding what the klaxons in the background meant. *This was the moment when my life changed.*

That realization led to a vague recollection of running down the corridor, as smoke billowed out from Engineering, with her tricorder registering rapidly increasing radiation levels.

... evacuate, we must evacuate. Radiation levels are approaching lethal levels, Captain!

... understood, Lieutenant. Evacuate your area and set the escape pods on course for the closest M-class planet.

B'Elanna took a deep breath and then requested, "Computer, play the very first log in database."

"Personal log, stardate 48321.81. I thought I'd finally gotten away from the claustrophobia of Starfleet's rules, their regulations, and even their stupid uniforms. But here I am, wearing yellow for Engineering. Putting this uniform on means Chakotay has given up, given in. I see his point, but we are *Maquis*, they are Starfleet. How the hell is this supposed to even work? Captain Janeway was in the Badlands to take us prisoner and now she wants us to join forces? Chakotay tells me becoming one crew is the best decision, that we all need to work together to return home, even if it means accepting Starfleet again. They didn't want me the first time, why would they want me now? End log."

It was eerie to listen to her own voice recording events she didn't remember. But B'Elanna was glad she'd found the logs; it gave her more confidence she wasn't usurping someone else's life.

After listening to her logs for another two hours, B'Elanna found herself in front of Tom's television set. The remote control—which she remembered Tom objecting to now – sat on the top of the box. She pressed "Power" and the television blinked on.

... jingles. Confusing, I know, but I left them in for authenticity.

B'Elanna gripped the remote tighter.

Tom lying on the floor and waking up, shaking. I think I've had enough for tonight, he told her when she'd suggested a cartoon to chase away the nightmare. He'd turned off the television, pulled her into his arms. Told her he'd had enough for one night. She'd cradled him in her arms that night, pressing her lips against his, relishing the warmth of his skin against hers for the first time in weeks.

B'Elanna dropped the remote and went back to the terminal. The television continued to play in the background, but she didn't pay any attention.

"Computer, download personal logs of Thomas Eugene Paris, security authorization Torres Beta Nine." She didn't even question *how* she knew her security code. The computer beeped back an acknowledgement and B'Elanna picked up the PADD containing Tom's logs. She stared at the PADD for a long time, knowing that she was about to violate a confidence.

"But we're married," she reasoned out-loud. "No secrets, right?"

And B'Elanna began to read.

She started at the beginning, fast-forwarding through some of the duller logs - the ones that described in excruciating detail the things Tom had eaten for breakfast. The first couple of years' worth of personal logs recounted his pursuit of the Delaney sisters and there were some brief mentions of someone named Kes who had been involved with Neelix. And of course, there were a lot of adventures and such with Harry Kim. There were some ruminations about his father, a brief reminiscence or two about his mother, and cryptic references to an incident called Caldik Prime. As the logs entered the third year of *Voyager's* journey into the Delta Quadrant, B'Elanna started to hear her name with greater frequency.

"Stardate 50172.38, personal log." Tom Paris' voice filled the quarters. "Harry and I spent a month's worth on replicator rations on dinner tonight. Steak, potatoes, onion rings, you name it, we had it tonight. It seems indulgent, and I know I'm going to regret it in a few days when Neelix's cooking is my only option, but it felt good to celebrate our freedom. I've now been to prison twice, but New Zealand feels like a Risian resort after what the Akritirians put us through. I still feel disorientated from the clamp, but the Doctor assures me that it will pass in a few days. I was getting ready for bed when B'Elanna came by. She looked exhausted, said she'd put in a double shift in Engineering. I pointed out we were well into Gamma shift now, and I was surprised she was still standing. 'We Klingons are pretty tough,' she said with the barest hint of a smile. 'But so are you.' And then her words tumbled in a rush as she explained she'd just stopped by to check on me. I asked her if the Doctor had sent her, and she said no, and suggested we meet for breakfast in the morning. 'Harry too?' I asked. She said yes, but as it turned out, Harry skipped breakfast, but we didn't miss him."

B'Elanna rubbed her eyes. She felt increasingly weary and a bit guilty about this intrusion into Tom Paris' life, but she couldn't quite stop listening to the inner thoughts of the man who was her husband. Every now and then, he would mention a holodeck program he was working on. He'd mentioned one called Sandrine's, another that took place on Lake Como, and musing whether B'Elanna would enjoy a romantic getaway to Tahiti. But it was clear Captain Proton was his favorite program to play, but he'd poured his heart and soul into one called Fair Haven. Just reading the descriptions caused a snippet of conversation to edge back into B'Elanna's mind.

... If you ask me, that whole program is an accident waiting to happen. You've been running Fair Haven around the clock. Just yesterday, I had to replace three holo-emitters.

... I ran a full diagnostic this morning. Everything is fine.

... Whatever you say. But, when your quaint little seaside town starts to depolarize, don't come running to me.

"Doctor to Torres."

B'Elanna snapped out of her reverie. "Torres here."

"How are you feeling, Lieutenant?"

"I'm doing well," B'Elanna answered. The truth was she was exhausted, her mind still felt cloudy, and her stomachs were starting to twist in hunger.

"Are you remembering?" the Doctor sounded intensely hopeful.

"Bits and pieces, but I still have a lot of questions."

"Don't worry. It will come back to you."

"I hope so," B'Elanna answered. She stared back down at the PADD and the mustard colored letters blurred in front of her eyes. She'd left off on the log where Tom had mentioned he'd be piloting the *Delta Flyer* on a two-week mission with Chakotay, Harry and Neelix. Subsequent short entries detailed their findings, and the trials and tribulations of spending so much time in a small space with the other

three men. B'Elanna was about to hit play again when she had a sudden flash of memory: Tom lying on the sofa, remembering the anger directed at her

... I can't concentrate on sensor readings right now!

... Try!

... I can't! Stop pushing me! I don't want your help!

Frenetic energy pulsed through her body as she recalled how Tom had struggled with the aftermath of a battle that seemed so real, how he'd pushed her away when she'd come to check on him. B'Elanna rose from her chair and paced the length of the quarters, her hand resting protectively on her abdomen. Back and forth, back and forth and then pausing in front of the sofa, where she'd initially found Tom curled on the floor, shaking and bewildered. Later, when the truth had been uncovered, he'd apologized for the way he'd behaved – profusely, his voice tremulous, contrition softening his face, roses cradled in his arms – and she'd forgiven him, as before, as always.

Chapter Seven

B'Elanna finally roused herself from the sofa when she could no longer ignore the hunger pangs twisting her stomachs into knots. Neelix had tired of waiting for her outside of her quarters, but she was able to locate the Mess Hall with no problem. Once she'd arrived, she let Neelix know where she was, and settled herself at a table to continue reading Tom's logs, choosing one from 2375.

"Personal log, stardate 52439.7. For kilometers, there's nothing to see but dirt. It gets into everything. I must have dumped out at least half a kilo out of each boot after this last hunting expedition. For the record, Tom Paris zero, spiders zero, Noss three. Yum. I never thought I'd have a hankering for Neelix's cooking. If I'm being honest though, leola root isn't the only thing I miss. I've been counting days and each day feels longer and more desperate than the one before. I've been playing a game, trying to remember different things about B'Elanna. Everything from the way she parts her hair right down the center to how she reads in bed before we go to sleep. Every day, I add a new thing to the list. I'm afraid, if we're here much longer, my memory of those things that are uniquely B'Elanna will fade; I'll only remember how I feel when I'm around her. So, I've been replaying our last moments together in my mind - the way she smiled at me when I left her quarters, the faintest whiff of her perfume on my uniform and the imprint of her lips on mine. Damn. I- I didn't want to need her. Tuvok is unsympathetic. Hell, he doesn't even notice Noss and how she hangs on every word of his. It surprises me Noss could be so attracted to him, but it's even crazier that Tuvok can close himself off so completely from her. In his case, the heart knows what it doesn't want. I wish I could say the same."

Reading the logs had a very different feeling than listening to Tom's voice. B'Elanna missed the inflections of the words, the way he would sometime scoff under his breath, the lightness in his tone as he retold a funny store. Every now and then, she'd catch a hint of tension, but for the most part, the Tom Paris of the logs was as even-keeled as they came. After completing the logs detailing his time on the planet in the gravity well, B'Elanna skipped ahead about eighteen months.

"Personal log, stardate 53980.8. I'm not going to lie: I *hurt*. An EM surge is no joke. Remind me to avoid nebulas in the future; the gaseous beauties are not worth the pain. The burns cover about 50 percent of my body and the dermal regenerator is working hard to put me back together. The Doctor prescribed analgesics and a sleep aid. When I woke this morning, I saw B'Elanna curled asleep on the sofa. When had she come in? 'Hey', I said, and her eyes immediately opened. 'How do you feel?' she asked. 'You look like hell, Tom.' I tried to smile, but my skin was too new, too raw, and I said, 'Feels like I've been there too.' She dropped down to sit on the floor by the bed. 'You should have sent me a postcard,' she said with just that tiny bit of edge and humor that some might find off-putting, but I'll never tire of. She eyed me, didn't touch me, and asked if she could get me something. I asked for painkiller and she obliged. 'How long have you been here?' I asked as she pressed the cool head of the hypospray against my neck. She shrugged. 'Since I got off shift.' Which, according to the chronometer, was about eight hours ago. I struggled to my feet and she immediately reached out to steady me. 'Hey, flyboy,' she said, 'take it easy.' She hunched slightly so I could swing my arm on her shoulders and together, like a pair of drunk sailors, we stumbled into the bathroom. Very gently, she helped me undress, peeling away the layers of clothing with just the faintest and most delicate of touches. I leaned forward on the sink, resting my weight forward on my palms, as she ran the dermal regenerator across my back. I caught sight of her face in my mirror: her lips pressed together into a tight thin line, her jaw tensed, and her eyes focused intently on her task. Her movements were deliberate, careful, and thorough; I don't think an inch of my skin escaped from her intense scrutiny. I'd seen that look before, down in the engine room, and had always backed away. I realized then she was ministering to me with the same care and passion as she did for *Voyager's* engines. Lucky me."

B'Elanna paused in her reading when she heard Neelix approaching her, carrying a tray.

"Smells good," B'Elanna told him as he placed the plate in front of her. She stared at the dish in front of her with curiosity.

"Pancakes with maple syrup are your favorite breakfast," Neelix said, indicating the fluffy cakes, perfectly browned on the top. Maple syrup surrounding a pat of butter dripped down the sides of the stack. B'Elanna indicated the seat next to her and Neelix sat down. "You know, sometimes food is like 'time travel.' You inhale an aroma, take a bite of something and suddenly - BAM! - you're back at the moment you first tasted it," Neelix said with his usual cheer.

B'Elanna carefully cut a piece of pancake, spearing it with her fork. She chewed slowly, savoring the taste. She nodded.

"They're good," she said wryly. "But I'm not experiencing time travel."

Neelix sighed and then pointed at the PADD.

"What are you reading?"

"Personal logs."

"Do you remember recording any of them?"

B'Elanna shook her head. "They're not mine. They're Tom's."

"Those are supposed to be *private*."

B'Elanna shrugged her shoulders, feeling that tinge of guilt flare up again. She'd thought she would only read a few of the logs, but she'd gotten so caught up in Tom's thoughts, that she'd kept going. Every now and then, some of the anecdotes he related sparked a memory. But more importantly, she was getting to know Tom Paris intimately, and it still unnerved her to know they were married, but at least reading what he wrote made it possible to believe that reality.

"Well, he *is* my husband," she said uncertainly.

Neelix smiled. "What do they say?"

B'Elanna grinned back at him. "They're *private*," she said cheekily. She noticed Neelix was looking anxiously at her and she felt the sudden need to share a little of what she had read with him. "But the way he describes me...." Her voice drifted off as a lump formed in her throat.

"He loves you."

B'Elanna glanced back down at the PADD, trying not to react too strongly to Neelix's words. Back on Quarra, she hadn't even considered the possibility of being *in* love, had mildly contemplated a flirtation with Tom, but for the most part, she carried the vague impression of a man who had left her. A man who had *not* loved her. She had reconciled herself to that idea for the most part, but here Neelix was sitting next to her, telling her that those minor truths, the ones she had created, were, in fact, lies.

"I guess so," she said hoarsely. Thinking back to the log she'd just finished reading, she understood something else: *And I love him too*. She sucked in her breath, tightened her grip on her fork but her hand still shook.

"How do you feel?" Neelix asked with concern.

"It's still a little foggy," B'Elanna answered, doing her best to keep her voice steady.

"The 'fog' should lift as soon as the Doctor finishes your treatments."

"Yeah," B'Elanna said. She looked down at the words on the PADD in front of her. *Tom, stranded on a planet, making a list of all the little things she did*. It would be an impossible situation, she knew, to remain on *Voyager*, her memory restored, but without Tom. "But what about the guy who recorded these logs?"

Neelix reached across the table, patted her hand gently. "We won't leave without him and the rest of the crew, and the Doctor will do everything he can to restore their memories to what they were prior to your abduction by the Quarrans," Neelix responded confidently. "In fact, I was just in Sickbay, and the Doctor has some good ideas on ways he can enhance the protocols." His eyes twinkled with a bit of mischief. "You can ask him, if you'd like."

"Maybe after I finish reading," B'Elanna said, tapping the PADD. There were certain log entries she wanted to re-read and absorb into every cell of her body.

"You should finish eating," Neelix said, indicating the plate of pancakes. "Keep your energy up."

She glared at him, mildly offended at the insinuation that she *might* be tired, but then softened when she saw the kindness in his expression.

"You've been very patient with me," she said softly. Neelix patted her hand gently.

"We're glad to have you back, B'Elanna. The ship isn't the same without its crew."

B'Elanna contemplated the empty mess hall. "What's the crew complement?"

"One hundred and forty," Neelix said. He settled back comfortably in his chair, intertwining his fingers over his belly. B'Elanna narrowed her eyes in his direction; it was clear he wasn't going anywhere until she finished her meal.

With a sigh, B'Elanna pushed the PADD aside and continued eating, spearing each piece of pancake at the tip of her fork with precision and if she was being honest, a bit of violence. After she'd consumed nearly half the food, she put her fork down. "Neelix, you said we had to abandon ship because of a subspace mine."

"That's right."

B'Elanna contemplated. "Sensors never picked up the mine. I don't know how we possibly missed it and I remember thinking as we escaped in the pods that I needed to double-check that system when the radiation finally cleared up. I do remember checking Engineering, making sure everyone was out, and then getting to the pods. Tom was already there, and he decided to join me in my pod." B'Elanna pressed the tips of her fingers to her forehead. She remembered the crew's panic as they headed towards the escape pods, and the image of Janeway calmly giving instructions to the senior staff just before they boarded was extraordinarily clear. "Tom, Janeway and Seven found an M-class planet and Tom plotted the course." She grimaced. "But I don't—I don't think we ever *reached* that planet."

"No. You were captured shortly after you evacuated *Voyager*," Neelix said. "Do you recall anything else?"

Tom had bolted the hatch as B'Elanna had squeezed onto the uncomfortable bench, twisting to find a comfortable way to position herself in the cramped setting. Carey, Ayala, and Tom sat opposite her and the others, their long legs spanning the distance between the two bulkheads. The pod lurched, catapulted through space, and B'Elanna distinctly remembered vomiting. And Celes... Celes had been hurt.

"Many of the crew had radiation burns. Some of them were quite severe. Celes was in my pod, and she was in a lot of pain." B'Elanna frowned. "When the Quarrans rescued us, they immediately took us to the hospital." She flinched as fragments of memory assailed her in quick succession. *Standing close to Tom, her hand on her belly. Tom talking to the doctors. Freddie Bristow comforting Celes, her face contorted in agony. The doctors recommending an inoculation to maintain their health while they waited for Voyager to return for them. Tom asking questions about the inoculation, questioning what the Quarran doctors were concerning about. The doctors saying they'd answer his queries in the office. Tom squeezing B'Elanna's hand, telling her he'd be back shortly.*

Neelix watched her carefully. "What is it?"

"They asked Tom to come to the back office with them so they could talk in private. One of the doctors, he seemed concerned about alarming the crew and thought it would be better to brief Tom on the situation away from everyone else, medical professional to medical professional," B'Elanna said. Her hands felt cold. "And then Celes started screaming and I called for help." Her eyes narrowed as she considered what was her last coherent memory. "The doctors said they could help Tal, but they needed to give her an inoculation first. I wanted them to wait for Tom, but they said they had to treat her immediately or infection would set in and she could lose her arm. As the commanding officer, I agreed to the treatment and they took Celes into the operating room." B'Elanna brushed her hand against her eyes. "The doctors then told me they wanted to check on the baby. That's the last time I remember seeing anyone from *Voyager*."

"You mention Tom, Celes. Who else did you see?"

B'Elanna closed her eyes, picturing the large sterile waiting room with its sea-green walls, black and chrome chairs lining the periphery. Slowly she ticked off the names on her fingers as she was able to envision each crew member from her pod. "Ayala, Bristow, Vorik, Nicoletti—" she furrowed her brow in concentration "—Carey." She looked up at Neelix. "That's all I can remember right now."

"Not the Captain? Tuvok?"

B'Elanna shook her head. "No. They weren't there." Her eyes crinkled at the corners as she searched her memory. "I remember one of the doctors saying giving the size of the rescue effort, they were spreading the patients out throughout the hospital and bringing in additional personnel." She thought back to Joelly and Marchin mentioning there were four hospitals in the city. "They may have taken the others to a different facility." She scrunched her shoulders apologetically. "I'm sorry I can't be more help."

"You're doing great. It will all come back to you soon."

B'Elanna took a deep breath. "I know. I just want it all back *now*." She tapped the PADD in front of her. "I know I need to be patient but—" she shrugged apologetically "— what I *do* remember is making me realize just how much the Quarrans took from me." She was in the process of lifting her fork to her lips when the Doctor hailed her. With a sigh, B'Elanna put the fork down. "What is it, Doctor?"

"You're late. You were supposed to be here thirty minutes ago to resume your treatments."

"Sorry. I got so caught up in what I was doing, I forgot. I'm on my way. Torres out." B'Elanna regretfully turned off the PADD; she would finish reading later.

"You seem to have made great strides adjusting to your life," the Doctor said as he examined B'Elanna. His boots made no sound on the grey carpet as he shifted his position to pick up one instrument, and then another. "That's a good sign. I take it you're getting used to your surroundings."

B'Elanna looked at his tricorder with interest. Her basic first aid course at the Academy had taught her to use a tricorder for simple diagnostic purposes, so the varied peaks and valleys of the yellow and blue lines meant little to her, but the Doctor seemed thrilled with what he was seeing.

"How does that say I'm doing?" she asked.

"You are doing exceptionally well, and your neural patterns are reconstructing themselves into the proper configuration, as indicated by your previous scan. I must say, my treatment protocol seems to be a great success with some tweaks, I believe I can improve and speed up the process for the rest of the crew." The Doctor bit his lip thoughtfully. "It will be challenging to resurrect the memories of nearly 140 people, but with the correct adjustments to my innovative protocol—"

"What about the baby?" B'Elanna interrupted.

"She's doing fine also."

B'Elanna breathed a sigh of relief.

"Were you concerned about something in particular?" the Doctor asked.

"What if whatever the Quarrans did to me, what if it also affected the baby?"

"The full diagnostic I ran on you when you first returned to *Voyager* shows that the baby is fine. Don't worry."

"Easier said than done," B'Elanna said sharply as she slid off the biobed. She had the distinct feeling that until she held her baby in her arms, she would never stop agonizing. Tom's voice interjected in her thoughts: *but then a whole new set of worries begin*. B'Elanna cleared her throat, rested her hands on her rounded bump, tried to push her anxiety aside. "But to answer your question, I'm remembering more and more. Snatches of conversations or sometimes, entire scenes."

"Your reported progress matches my scans," the Doctor said, a hint of glee slipping into his voice. "Hold still." He pressed a hypospray against B'Elanna's neck. "I have to say, Lieutenant, your situation has given me great difficulty."

"I'm sure you can write it up as an academic paper when we return to the Alpha Quadrant," B'Elanna answered, pressing her hand against the spot where the Doctor had administered the medication. She watched as the Doctor pulled up three scans – one that he said was from her last check-up prior to being taken to Quarra, the one taken immediately after her return and now this most recent one. He pursed his lips together, tipping his head this way and that, before finally nodding in satisfaction.

"Well, congratulations," he said. "The regenerative took effect more quickly than I thought. It looks like your neural patterns are almost back to normal."

"That's the best news I've heard all day," B'Elanna said and realized she appreciated those words in a way she hadn't thought possible. Impulsively, she leaned over to hug the Doctor. He beamed back at her. "I- I know I didn't make it easy-" she began.

"You've *never* been an easy patient, Lieutenant."

"I know, I know." B'Elanna held up a hand. "I appreciate you keeping after me. You and Neelix both."

"You're welcome. Again."

"Um, now that I'm back to normal, Harry needed some help in Engineering-"B'Elanna paused as she slid off the biobed.

The Doctor nodded. "As long as you feel up to it."

B'Elanna looked the Doctor squarely in the eye. "We've got to rescue the others. You need my help."

The Doctor's eyes seemed unusually bright under Sickbay's lights. After a moment, he cleared his throat. "Welcome back, Lieutenant."

Chapter Eight

Back in her quarters, B'Elanna opened the closet and pulled out the first yellow-shouldered uniform she put her hand on. For a contemplative moment, B'Elanna sat on the bed, fingering the synthetic material, flashing back to that defining moment when she realized she'd have to wear a Starfleet uniform again.

*... who is she to make those decisions for us?
... she is the captain*

She dressed and then examined her appearance quickly in the mirror. The material stretched tighter over her abdomen; she would need to replicate another uniform soon. She'd also reverted from the hairstyle she'd worn on Quarra – styled with a gentle wave on the left side of her face – and resumed a more regulation look. As she closed the closet door, her gaze fell on Tom's uniforms – neatly pressed, starched, ready for him when he returned to *Voyager*. It had been more than 12 hours since Neelix had brought her home, but B'Elanna's thoughts wandered back down to Quarra. She wondered if Tom was in his dismal studio apartment, getting ready for his shift at the restaurant. Would he be looking for her at the usual time? Or would his attention move to someone else? Did he even know she was gone? B'Elanna roused herself; getting Tom and the others back required action, not contemplation.

"Computer, locate Ensign Kim," she requested.

"Ensign Kim is on the Bridge."

This was a good sign; Harry wouldn't have left Engineering if he hadn't succeeded in boosting the transporter range and expanding the size of the pattern buffers, putting them a step closer to retrieving Tom and the rest of their colleagues. She trusted Harry's work; he tended to be as detail-oriented and precise in his calculations as she was, but still he had commed her to ask questions about contacting Chakotay down on the surface, about what was required to transport the crew back to *Voyager*. B'Elanna appreciated the back and forth as it helped keep her mind from dwelling too much on what was happening down on Quarra, and more specifically to Tom.

B'Elanna stepped out into the corridor and headed for the turbolift. When she entered the Bridge, she paused briefly, noting Harry at the Helm, the Doctor – wearing the command colors of red – occupying Janeway's chair and Neelix at Ops. She ran her hand across the railing as she came down the ramp to the main section of the Bridge. The viewscreen showed a green and blue marble of a planet. She gripped the railing tightly as she took in the sight.

"B'Elanna?" Neelix asked tentatively.

"Is that Quarra?" she asked, her voice trembling. How innocuous of a world it looked from here, this world where she'd lost three weeks of her life, and it still wasn't certain she'd retrieve everything that had been taken from her. She resolutely pushed the nagging thought – *what if Tom never remembered that he loved her?* – that had been haunting her since her memory had been recovered. *First things first.* She would deal with that question later; for now, she needed to do everything she could to get Tom and the others back.

"Yes." Neelix half rose from his seat. "What are you doing here?"

B'Elanna recovered her composure, offered him a smile. "I thought you could use a hand."

Neelix didn't look convinced.

"Is it all right?" Neelix questioned the Doctor. The Doctor nodded.

"I hereby declare her medically fit for duty," the EMH announced.

Harry grinned as B'Elanna passed by him to head to the Engineering station.

"We could really use your help," Harry told her. "Your systems don't like me that much. Also, your idea of using a subspace band to contact Chakotay worked. The question is, can they call us back?" Before B'Elanna could answer back, Neelix's console beeped.

"We're being hailed," Neelix said. He pressed a few buttons before the image of Quarra was replaced with a fuzzy image of Kathryn Janeway.

"Starship *Voyager*?" Janeway asked, uncertainty in her tone. B'Elanna bit her lip. The image of the woman in the blue uniform who had been so friendly to her at the Power Facility and now seemed so hesitant was incongruous with the authoritative woman who strode across *Voyager's* bridge so commandingly.

"Captain," Neelix said.

Silence, as loud as it possibly could be, descended on the Bridge. On the viewscreen, Janeway appeared visibly uncomfortable at the title.

"Why don't you just call me Kathryn?" Janeway suggested.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry answered awkwardly. B'Elanna knew exactly how he felt. There was no universe in which she would have ever referred to the Captain by her first name. *Except that she had, on Quarra.* "Where's Commander Chakotay?"

"Hospitalized," Janeway answered flatly. B'Elanna flinched at the thought. What the hell kind of people were these Quarrans? First, they were abducted, then their memories were erased and now Chakotay was in the hospital? B'Elanna then decided she preferred the 'shoot first, ask questions' later type of hostiles; it was less painful.

"He told me you have proof of who some of us really are," Janeway continued. Harry looked at B'Elanna and she concurred in silent agreement. She came to stand behind Harry.

"We do," B'Elanna said gently.

Janeway's eyes widened in surprised recognition. "*You're* the woman who was abducted?" she asked.

B'Elanna nodded. "Chakotay was supposed to deactivate the shield grid so we could transport you and the others to safety."

"That's why he wanted to get back to the plant," Janeway said.

"If you could find a way to shut down main power, the shield grid will go down too," B'Elanna said.

"Will you help us?" Harry asked.

Janeway didn't seem convinced; B'Elanna didn't blame her. Only a few hours ago, B'Elanna had been in Janeway's shoes. The confusion and wariness under these circumstances was completely understandable. She opened her mouth to speak, but the ship shuddered and B'Elanna braced herself against the back of Harry's chair. She quickly regained her balance and hurried to her station.

"We're under attack! Three ships!" the Doctor exclaimed, rising to his feet.

"I'm re-modulating shields now!" B'Elanna cried as she summoned up the proper systems panel and calculated the required variances. In front of them, the image of Kathryn Janeway was rapidly being replaced by static.

"Please shut down the grid!" Harry exclaimed just as the picture fizzled out. "Damn! Do you think she heard us?"

"Let's hope so," B'Elanna said as she worked furiously to reroute power to compensate for the remodulation. "Otherwise, we'll have to try again later." She decided to leave unsaid the sentiment that they may not have a second chance to contact Janeway or the others. *Another thing to think about later.* She lifted her head to look at the three ships menacing *Voyager*.

"The ships are charging their weapons," the Doctor exclaimed. "B'Elanna?"

"I'm on it!" B'Elanna shot back. Adrenaline surged through her body as she ran through the proper set of protocols to make sure *Voyager* could issue a proper response.

"I'm taking evasive actions now. Maybe I can avoid them getting a firm lock on us," Harry said over his shoulder. And then with a slight sardonic chuckle he added, "but I'm not Tom."

In response to Harry's commands, *Voyager* swooped and swerved through space, sometimes jerkily. B'Elanna held tight to her station as she managed control of all the ship's systems.

"Neelix, get ready to fire on my mark!" The EMH's voice boomed out across the Bridge.

The ship jolted again, and the lights flickered. B'Elanna checked the readings on her screen. A direct hit but the shields appeared to be holding. *So far so good*. She put her hand on her belly, as if to comfort the baby who was turning cartwheels in reaction to all the activity.

"So much for avoiding their sensors," Harry said ruefully.

"The only way they could've found us is if they knew exactly where to look!" the Doctor exclaimed. B'Elanna felt a tinge of pity for the hologram; he seemed unusually flustered.

The ship rocked again, this time causing another console to spark. B'Elanna scrambled to her feet and ran a quick diagnostic.

"Transporters are off line!" she reported. *After all that hard work Harry had put in!* She calculated it would take a few hours to make the required repairs to *Voyager*, a delay that was utterly unpalatable to her.

"We're losing shields!" Neelix announced. B'Elanna checked and saw Neelix was right. She made the decision to divert power from the life support systems on deck 15; there was no one down there anyway. The momentary power transfer boosted the shields to 20 percent.

"Any 'advice' from your tactical database?" Harry asked in a cutting tone of voice which made B'Elanna wonder what she had missed.

The Doctor looked uncomfortable, almost pathetic, as he answered, "Nothing relevant."

"How many escape pods do we have left?" Harry asked.

B'Elanna checked the status logs.

"Five," she replied.

"Stand by to eject three of them," Harry said as he turned his attention back to his console. B'Elanna arched her eyebrow at the ensign's request but acquiesced as she had a good idea of what he was planning; the Maquis had once pulled a similar stunt against the Cardassians, but with mixed results as Chakotay's cell had managed to make a clean getaway, but the other Maquis ship had disintegrated in a volley of photon torpedoes. *But what other option do we have?*

"I don't think abandoning ship is the answer," the Doctor objected.

"Neither do I," Harry said. "Can you create a dampening field around the Briefing Room that'll mask our life signs?"

"I believe so. Why?"

"Watch and learn."

"What are you doing?" Neelix asked in fascination, but Harry ignored him.

"When you're ready, Harry," B'Elanna called from her station.

"Ejecting pods now," Harry said briskly. "Tell me when they're clear."

They waited until Neelix confirmed that the pods were indeed clear of *Voyager*.

"Now what?" the Doctor asked, anxiety crossing his face.

"You stay here," Harry said as he got up from his seat. "We'll be in the Briefing Room."

"You're leaving me *alone*?"

"That's the idea," Harry replied. B'Elanna caught up to her friend.

"I don't know about this, Harry," she said, casting a look back at the EMH. Yes, the Doctor had certainly exceeded his programming, but was he capable of an on-the-spot subterfuge?

"This will work," Harry grinned. "Now, Doc, all you have to do is pretend to be alone. And when you are hailed, press this button here." He pointed to a small yellow key on the Doctor's armrest.

"And what does it do?" the Doctor asked.

"Trust me," Harry said cockily. "It will be *explosive*."

Harry ushered Neelix and B'Elanna off the Bridge.

"You *really* think this will work?" Neelix asked incredulously.

"Of course," B'Elanna said with confidence she didn't feel. She wanted to be able to trust the EMH's ability to bluff, but he seemed so bewildered by the idea of command; it seemed like a harsh lesson to learn that subroutines couldn't quite take the place of intuition. And for some reason, Harry seemed to take command very easily. Maybe after all of this, a pip would be in his future.

They settled themselves into their usual seats around the Briefing Room table. Through the windows, they could see the three ships that had fired on them. The Quarran ships seemed paused in formation – as if contemplating the three escape pods in front of them. Without access to her sensors, B'Elanna couldn't tell if the Quarrans' weapons were still powered up and aimed at *Voyager*.

As if giving voice to her thoughts, Neelix said, "At least they aren't attacking us anymore."

"Thank God," B'Elanna said. She pressed her fingers to her forehead. Harry glanced at her in concern.

"Are you feeling all right, B'Elanna?"

"I'm fine. Really," she assured him. Her mind was still on the malfunctioning transporter system. Clearly locking on to the *Voyager* crew's life signs would not be an option now, and 'kidnapping' each one would take too long, and it was clear the Quarrans would stop at nothing to stop *Voyager* from retrieving its people. Her mind spun through a variety of Plan Bs, but none felt promising. "I'm thinking through our options."

Harry's expression was grim, his earlier bravado seemingly disappearing in the apprehension of waiting. "This *will* work."

Neelix and B'Elanna exchanged a look.

"And if we fend them off, then *what*? How do we get the captain and the others back?" Neelix asked.

"One step at a time," Harry said with an authority and calmness that both startled and satisfied B'Elanna. They sat in silence, with only the rapping of his fingers to betray Harry's nervousness. B'Elanna stared at the window, her eyes unable to focus on anything but the rounded frames and the endless expanse of space just beyond the thick glass.

"Doctor to Ensign Kim. I believe the plan is a success."

A broad-faced grin spread across Harry's face as he gave two thumbs up signs to B'Elanna and Neelix.

As they entered the Bridge, the Doctor turned to face them.

"Bravo, Ensign!" the Doctor exclaimed.

Harry tipped his head in acknowledgement as he turned to B'Elanna. One problem solved, another one left to go.

"B'Elanna, we need those transporters," he said urgently. B'Elanna didn't need to be told twice. She quickly set to work on her console. If she could realign the power matrices and reroute-

"The shield grid's failing!" Neelix shouted. The opening they had been waiting for was finally in front of them. It was now or never. Tension gripped every cell in B'Elanna's body as she concentrated intently on recalibrating the phase variance of the pattern buffers and then adjusting the power variance to compensate.

"B'Elanna?" Kim asked anxiously. B'Elanna's fingers flew over the console.

"Transporters coming on line-" she paused as she checked a quick reading. "Now!"

"Get them up here," the Doctor ordered. Harry nodded, relief clearly etched across his face.

"I'm picking up a mixture of human, Vulcan, and Borg life signs," he said. "Locking on to Seven of Nine now."

"I'll go to the transporter room to meet them," Neelix said. "They will be confused and will need a friendly face to explain what is happening."

"Good thinking," the Doctor said in a wistful sort of way that made B'Elanna think he wished he'd suggested it.

Within minutes, Harry reported he had transported Seven, Tuvok, Chakotay, and Janeway back to the ship.

B'Elanna continued to monitor power fluctuations, making miniscule adjustments when necessary, as Harry diligently continued to transport crew back to *Voyager*; her fix was the type Tom would refer to as "bubble gum and string," but so far it was holding, and the pattern buffers showed no sign of strain. Once the crew was on board safely, she would work on making the transporters' power flow consistent with Starfleet guidelines.

B'Elanna's concentration was momentarily broken by Chakotay's arrival on the Bridge. The Doctor ceded the center seat to the first officer, but Chakotay shook his head slightly and took his normal seat just to the left of where Janeway sat.

"It's good to see you, sir," Harry said from his station.

"I'm glad to be back," Chakotay said, a half-smile stretching across his face. "I imagine we'll all have quite the tale to tell, but—" he nodded at B'Elanna "—first things first. Let's get our people home."

When Harry confirmed the last *Voyager* crewmember had been rescued from Quarra, and a course had been laid in to the nearest nebula, B'Elanna headed to Sickbay. She knew that her future held several weeks of double-shifts while they put *Voyager* back together again, but she figured that for now, the repairs could wait.

She entered Sickbay and immediately noticed Janeway, Seven and Tuvok among the others waiting to receive treatment. Carefully, B'Elanna brushed past a few of her fellow crewmembers, greeting them by name, but very aware of the disorientation they must be feeling. Tuvok, however, seemed quite aware of who he was and where he was.

"Lieutenant," he greeted her. "It is good to see you."

"And you as well," B'Elanna said, but she was distracted by the sight of Tom sitting on a biobed, studying a tricorder intently. She paused, and the cacophony surrounding her seemed to vanish in that moment. She took in the curve of Tom's jaw, the delicate triangles of his sideburns, the straight profile of his nose, the sweep of his cheekbone and the smooth rise of his forehead. These were all features she knew by heart, but were suddenly new again. *A second chance at a first time to know you again.*

"B'Elanna!" Tom exclaimed when he saw her. "You're *here*." Tom laid slight emphasis on the word 'here.' "I was so worried about you."

B'Elanna smiled at him and then glanced over at the Doctor who shook his head slightly at her before turning his attention back to Naomi Wildman. B'Elanna sucked in her breath and approached Tom carefully. Adrenaline raced through her body and it took all her self-control not to launch herself at him.

"I'm fine," B'Elanna said softly as she stood in front of him.

"And the baby?"

"She's fine too."

Tom's eyes widened. "It's a girl?"

B'Elanna allowed herself a little smile. "Yes."

"Congratulations," Tom said sincerely.

"Thanks." B'Elanna brushed off the awkwardness of Tom not quite realizing this was *his* child. All of that would come in time. For now, it was important to let him recover slowly. "How do you feel?"

"Better, now that I see you. When they told me about your disappearance, I was frantic about what might have happened to you. I shouldn't have listened, should have walked-

"Don't worry about it," B'Elanna cut Tom off. "What matters is that you are here, that we are here."

"I heard the stories," Tom said grimly. "About what the Quarrans did to us. I'm afraid I'm having a hard time believing all of it but it's impossible to ignore the evidence I heard from the inspector, so it must be true. Right?" His voice faded into uncertainty.

"I know the feeling, but yes, it's all true," B'Elanna said softly. She resisted the urge to cup his face in her hands – she had *no* idea, after all, what he had been told of their actual relationship and remembering her own skepticism, she decided to take it easy even when it was the exact opposite of what she wanted to do. She instead settled on placing her hand on top of his and was very relieved when Tom didn't pull away. "I remember everything, and you will too. Soon."

"So, I'm really a pilot, then?" He flashed his cocky grin at her and B'Elanna felt instantly better. She could see some of her Tom radiating back at her in that smile.

"Yes."

"I guess that's why I was such a lousy waiter," Tom said, shaking his head. "Umali's patience would have run out on me soon enough, so I guess this is for the best." He bit his lip. "And I'm a Starfleet officer?"

"Yes."

Tom closed his eyes, tipped his head back slightly. After a moment, he inhaled sharply.

"Does it take very long to remember?" he asked in a tremulous voice.

B'Elanna shook her head. "No. The Doctor came up with a protocol that worked for me, and with his enhancements, you should recover your memory even more quickly." She took a deep breath. "But, when you don't remember anything and everyone insists that this is where you belong, it does feel like a long time."

"I can understand that." Tom glanced down at their intertwined hands. "I'm glad that... I'm glad you're not alone, B'Elanna. I worried."

"I know," she said soothingly. "I know."

The Doctor approached them, holding a full tray of different medical devices in front of him.

"You're next, Mr. Paris," he said brightly. "I will need your assistance to restore everyone else's memories once you've recovered your own."

"At your service," Tom answered gallantly, but he didn't take his eyes away from B'Elanna as the Doctor pressed a hypospray to his neck. Tom flinched slightly, putting his hand to the slightly reddened spot.

"The stinging sensation will only last for a moment," the Doctor said reassuringly.

"You went through this?" Tom asked B'Elanna.

She nodded. "It's disorientating, like all of your nerves and cells are unthawing," she said, "but you're among... friends." She swallowed hard. "And I'll help you."

Tom scoffed lightly under his breath, that tiny little mannerism she always found so endearing. "I'd like that."

"Kim to Torres."

B'Elanna bit back a sigh. "Go ahead, Harry."

"Can you come to Engineering? I've got something I need you to look at."

B'Elanna wanted to put Harry off, but she knew that while the nebula offered some protection from anyone who wanted to do them harm while they were short-staffed and required repairs, she couldn't neglect her duties. It was times like this that she keenly felt the pull between the personal and professional, and this time her desire to stay with Tom was nearly overwhelming her duty to the ship. She inhaled sharply. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Engineering, huh?" Tom asked.

"I guess so." Reluctantly, B'Elanna released Tom's hand. "I'll be back soon."

Tom flashed her a smile, so blindingly seductive and promising, that she felt her knees soften just a little bit.

"Don't forget about me," Tom said. "I'll be waiting."

Chapter Nine

The power relays were shot.

B'Elanna heaved a sigh as she stared at the sight in front of her. Harry looked beat, a lock of black hair flopping over his forehead.

"So, the transporters held out long enough to get everyone back and then the pattern buffer shorted out the plasma conduits which cascaded down into the relays and—" Harry held his hands out in a gesture of resignation "—now we're dead in the water."

It wouldn't be a difficult repair, just time consuming and tedious. Normally, B'Elanna would have assigned a junior engineer to take care of the task, but today, a fully staffed engine room was a luxury she didn't have. She pressed her hand to her aching back. Exhaustion caused her muscles to feel lethargic, but she forced herself to reach for her tool kit.

"Sorry," Harry said, genuine guilt crossing his face. "I wasn't really thinking about the possibility of a power surge when I was repairing the transporters earlier and I should have compensated for it."

"You were working under extenuating circumstances," B'Elanna said. In her current fatigued state coupled with the occasional bout of mental foginess, she didn't feel like lashing out at Harry for overlooking such an outcome. He'd had enough to deal with over the last few days. "Let's get going, Starfleet."

Harry's lips curled up at the corners as he heaved his own tool kit onto his shoulder. "I've missed hearing you call me that," he said. "Have I mentioned how good it is to have you back?"

B'Elanna allowed herself a small smile. "At least a dozen times but I'm not tired of hearing it." She squatted down, pulled open the door into the Jefferies tube, heaved a sigh and then crawled in. It was harder to move now with her expanding midsection, but she willed herself to get halfway down the tube where the power conduit had shorted. Harry followed close behind.

For the next three hours, they moved panel to panel, pulling out all the charred components, and welding back in new capacitors, connectors, and where needed, a junction box. Some of the wires and electrical connectors had to be replaced as well. B'Elanna's fingers ached with the effort and the copper wires bit into her skin, but she gritted her teeth and continued. Next to her, Harry seemed equally intent on the task, his breath coming in short bursts as he wrenched out damaged components.

“Remember that time we were all in stasis tubes and Seven and the Doctor were in charge of *Voyager* for a month?” Harry asked at one point. “I have a new admiration for what they must have gone through.”

“Yeah,” B’Elanna huffed. She remembered Tom coming to help her in Engineering just before the crew was to go into stasis. He’d been his usual jovial self at first, but soon enough the façade fell away, and he’d confessed his nightmarish experience of going into stasis during his time at the Academy. They’d come out on the other side of the Mutara nebula a month later, and Tom’s relief had been palpable as he’d folded B’Elanna into his arms.

“Let’s not do that again,” he’d said softly, his lips against her hair.

Remembering the post-stasis reunion caused B’Elanna to lose concentration and she shoved a connector too hard, bending a pin in the process.

“*Ghuy!*” B’Elanna pulled the connector loose and then with some irritation, she attempted to hammer the pin back into shape with the back of her hyperspanner. At one point, she missed, hit her hand and yelped. Harry watched her with some concern.

“You could just use a new connector,” he offered.

“Yeah,” B’Elanna said, holding the damaged component up to the dim overhead light. She’d managed to hammer the pin to a point where there the chance of electrical discontinuity was minimal, but Harry was probably right; it wasn’t worth taking the risk. “I don’t know where my brain was.”

“You need to take a break,” Harry said and then he inhaled sharply, as if he knew he’d made a mistake. “I mean, you’ve been through a lot, B’Elanna. You’ve got to give yourself time to recover.”

“Yeah, but in the meantime, we’re sitting here like ducks in the water,” B’Elanna said sharply. She pulled a new connector and popped it into place. “I want to put as much distance between us and the Quarrans as possible.”

“You don’t have to convince me.” Harry wrapped a coil of wire around his hand as he shimmied himself to the next spot to yank out the panel. “I wonder how many people the Quarrans took and how long has this been going on?”

It was an idle, but good question, and not one B’Elanna had much time to contemplate since her return to *Voyager*. She knew she would likely never see her apartment on Quarra again, but the memory of it was a stark reminder of how her life had been before she’d allowed Tom into it: B’Elanna Torres, alone, against the galaxy. She choked back emotion and swallowed hard. She refused to lose her composure in front of Harry. She took a deep breath as she wrenched a coil free.

“There weren’t many native Quarrans in the Power Facility,” B’Elanna said finally. “I worked with a woman named Amina. She needed the inoculations too so I assume she wasn’t there on her own free will.” B’Elanna’s mouth twisted as she considered the woman she’d worked with for three weeks. She was sure that somewhere out there, Amina’s family was looking for her. Would they ever know what happened to their loved one? “There could be thousands of people who were ripped from their lives

and depending on long they've been on Quarra—" she shrugged sadly "—would it even be possible for them to return?"

"I guess you could say the same thing about us and the Alpha Quadrant," Harry said softly.

"That's different," B'Elanna said shortly, even though she wasn't quite sure where or what home even was anymore. "We made the decision to make the journey back. We're not taking advantage of people, changing their memories, and then *forcing* them to believe they came to Quarra of their own free will."

"We didn't exactly come into the DQ by choice," Harry said.

B'Elanna knew he had a point, and for the second time in recent memory, she flashed back to the anger she'd felt when Janeway had made the decision to destroy the Caretaker's Array to protect the Ocampan. *Who is she to make those decisions for us?*

"Our encounter with the Caretaker was a freak occurrence," B'Elanna said. "The Quarrans have been deliberately and systematically ripping people away from their lives, with absolutely no thought as to how it could affect them." She gave a bitter little laugh. Did she *really* expect the Quarrans would care about anything beyond the logistics of staffing their beloved Power Facility?

"Yeah, but depending how long they've been gone and how much their neural engrams have been altered, Quarra is home *now*. Ow!" Harry winced and he stared down at his bleeding thumb. His flesh was torn from the tip of the finger to the joint. "Damn."

"You'd better go get the medkit," B'Elanna said, eyeing the wound with worry. It was pretty deep, and it wasn't like Harry to be careless with the hyperspanner; he wouldn't admit it, but B'Elanna guessed exhaustion combined with the stress of the last few days was getting the better of him. "Why don't you go get some rest?"

"There's still a lot to do here," Harry said, gesturing down the length of the tube.

B'Elanna offered him a tight smile. "I got it," she said. "Get some rest."

Harry's expression was indecisive but after taking another look at his bleeding thumb, he nodded.

"I'll be right back," he said, tossing her the wire coil. "You need a break too."

"Get some rest, Ensign. That's an *order*." B'Elanna turned her attention back to her work. It was eerily quiet once Harry left the Jefferies tube, but she was glad for it. He hadn't been wrong about her needing to rest, but the idea of returning to her quarters without Tom was anathema. She wanted to contact the Doctor, find out whether Tom had made any progress, but she knew she shouldn't interrupt the treatments. Instead, she forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand.

Four hours later, B'Elanna snapped the last connection in Section 28A into place, her weariness was intense, and she felt like she could fall asleep on the spot. She carefully replaced all her tools into the carrying case and began the long crawl to the entrance. Back in Engineering, she wiped her hand wearily against her forehead. She was sweaty and she had grease spots on her hands and uniform, as

well as a few dirty and chipped fingernails. A sonic shower would feel *really* good right about now, but that would have to wait until she completed running the diagnostic that would assure her the repair had been properly completed.

She pulled up a chair to the console, contemplated kicking off her boots, but instead, focused on the readings scrolling in front of her. Just sitting there reminded her of the Power Facility, and the long hours she spent just *staring* at the variances in a line. She pressed her hands to her face, sagging forward. She was furious at herself for this uncharacteristic weakness, but she was too tired to maintain her focus anymore. *And there's no one here to care.* All she could think about was that stupid line, a line the Quarrans thought so important that they needed to uproot and destroy lives so someone could watch it bounce between the required minimum and maximum levels. She was still thinking about that injustice when she heard a step behind her. Harry, ever true to his word, must be back.

She roused herself, took a deep breath, and rubbed the emotion out of her eyes with the back of her hand and then turned around, plastering an unnaturally bright smile across her face.

It was Tom.

She swallowed hard, pulled herself straight, and unconsciously, her hand fell lightly on her stomach.

"Hey," he said softly. He was still wearing the blue Sickbay pajamas and his feet were encased in slippers. He swayed slightly, and she wondered if the medications were affecting his balance. He put his hand down on the workstation closest to him. His face flushed as he caught his breath.

"Hey," B'Elanna said softly. "I-I thought you were Harry."

Tom's blue-eyed gaze was intense as he took a step towards her. "I hope you're not disappointed."

"Um, no. I thought- does the Doctor know you're here?"

"I was concerned you may have forgotten about me and as *Voyager's* medic, I declared a medical emergency in Engineering to check on you myself," Tom said. His lower lip trembled, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he stared at her. "You look tired."

"Three weeks without maintenance and an encounter with a space pirate or two can create a lot to catch up on," B'Elanna said self-consciously. *Why was he looking at her like that?* She reached up to tuck a strand of grimy hair behind her ear. "Let me take you back to Sickbay."

"There's no need," Tom said. His long-legged stride closed the gap between them, and his hands were on her face, tilting her head up towards him. His lips against hers were soft, warm, tentative, and as she snaked her arms around his neck, he pulled her closer. "I remember *Voyager*. I remember you. I remember *us*."

She rose up on her tiptoes, closing her eyes, and let herself melt into Tom. She inhaled that scent that was uniquely his, savored feeling his broad chest against her cheek, and the strength of the arms encircling her. It brought back the memory of another recent reunion. In a shaky voice, she said, "If this marriage is going to work, we've got to cut back on the traveling."

He chuckled softly, tightened his grip on her. "Let's go home."

Chapter Ten

She didn't know how long she had been watching him.

B'Elanna returned to their quarters after a long shift to find Tom sprawled across the sofa, eating popcorn while animated figures ran across the television screen. That he didn't notice her come in would have irritated her in the past, but today she was simply happy to see him there. For the moment, she could push all the worries and insecurities of the last three weeks away and concentrate on the man in front of her. She would never admit it to Tom, but it was a domestic tableau she would never take for granted again.

She still felt the tingle of their reunion rushing through her, eighteen hours after Tom had found her in Engineering. She'd been exhausted, and he'd been a little bit unsteady on his feet from the Doctor's treatments, but neither excuse had tempered their desire to get reacquainted. Waking up in the morning, her body curled up against his, her hand on his chest reminded B'Elanna of the first night they'd spent together after her encounter with the isomorph, Dejaren. And B'Elanna was pleased to note that whatever the Quarrans had done to Tom, it hadn't affected his bedside manner.

She bit back a smile as she listened to Tom chuckle at the action on the TV. Her time on Quarra had certainly not changed her opinion on cartoons; she still found them inane. She didn't understand why the coyote continued to chase after the roadrunner after so many failures. Tom had tried to explain it to her before but none of his justifications ever resonated with her, and eventually, he'd given up. The coyote ran off the screen and another cartoon began, this one featuring disproportionate figured animals and humans, their antics eliciting laughter from Tom and she wanted him to explain it all over again to her.

B'Elanna slipped onto the sofa, scuttling over to Tom; her husband was so very intent on the television and didn't notice when she leaned in to kiss him on the cheek. He did look at her second kiss, a gentle, longer one on his jawbone.

"What was that for?" he asked, surprised, as B'Elanna settled down next to him.

"For taking care of me even when you didn't know who I was." Tom's smile was warm with affection, but then she punched him in the arm.

"What was that for?" he asked, wincing and rubbing at the spot.

"For flirting with your customers!" B'Elanna answered playfully.

"I was a victim of mind control," Tom protested.

"Uh huh," B'Elanna said teasingly as she helped herself to some of his popcorn and snuggled closer, reveling in the feel of his cheek against hers. Tom slipped his arm around her, pulling her close.

"Smooth recovery, Lieutenant."

There was a glint of recognition in Tom's eyes. "I thought so," he said. He turned off the television as he nuzzled her ear and then asked, "How was your day? I noticed you put in more than a shift today." A note of reproach sneaked into his voice.

"We're still short-staffed since the crew is recovering at different rates, so I stayed a late to catch up," B'Elanna answered. She'd managed to get the transporters properly aligned and then in the morning, she planned to look at the inverse transducers and the warp coil buffers. She'd left reversing the polarity of the deflector dish to Vorik, who'd seemed up to the task. She shifted her position, finally settling against the opposite armrest, and Tom lifted her feet onto his lap. She closed in her eyes in contentment as he expertly massaged away the day's stresses.

"You promise to take it easy?" Tom asked.

"Vorik is good for gamma shift tonight and Joe will be back tomorrow," B'Elanna said, knowing that she couldn't possibly slow down, not now, but mentioning her second-in-command might mollify Tom's concern. She leaned her head against the back of the sofa. Tom caressed her hand, playing idly with the gold band, newly replaced on her finger. The Quarrans had finally given them back their personal possessions and for that, both Tom and B'Elanna were grateful. Before getting the rings back, Tom had offered to replicate new bands and B'Elanna had agreed, despite feeling the new rings couldn't possibly take the place of the ones taken from them. Thankfully, it hadn't been necessary. Other losses wouldn't be so easily replaced.

"I didn't see Joe today," Tom said. Since *Voyager* was still at a standstill in the nebula while undergoing repairs, Tom had taken a shift in the Mess Hall, which had been set up as an auxiliary medical bay, while a mostly recovered Pablo Baytart had manned the helm. "How is Joe doing?"

B'Elanna frowned. She'd stopped into Sickbay to check on her remaining staff and most of them had nearly recovered from the trauma inflicted upon them on Quarra. It was hard to say what the long-term effects of the engram tampering and subsequent reversal would be, not to mention the psychological effects. Samantha Wildman, for example, had been separated from Naomi Wildman, and Naomi had been adopted by another family. It had been heartbreaking for Sam to learn Naomi had developed an affection for the other family. And she knew the stories would be the same across the ship.

"You know Joe. Always calm, stiff upper lip," B'Elanna said finally. She twisted her hands together as she recalled new worry lines crinkling across Carey's forehead as they spoke. "But he did tell me he felt profoundly violated by the abduction. He was working at the Power Facility too, but in a different division." She leaned her head against the back of the sofa as she contemplated Tom. "Chell seems to be having a hard time though, and I don't know when Nicoletti will be back because her headaches are so terrible, and analgesics don't seem to be doing much to ease the pain."

Tom nodded. "There are a few like Sue who seem to be struggling with the memory recovery process. I asked the Doctor about long-term consequences about what the Quarrans did to us, about what was in those inoculations, not to mention neural resequencing," Tom said soberly. "He said we'll just have to wait and see what happens, but he's hoping given the relatively short length of our stays on Quarra that the damage is minimal, but obviously he'll be running neurological scans for some time to come."

"Great. Just what I need. More sessions with the Doctor."

Tom took a long deep breath. "I would be surprised if we came out of this incident completely unscathed. The Quarrans developed their technology without taking alien physiology into account. Different species may react different ways, which would account for why some people are having a harder time than others with their recovery." His blue eyes were sad with worry. "I guess we can count any side effects as another souvenir from the Delta Quadrant."

"Yeah," B'Elanna said softly. She hadn't even thought about the medical consequences of what had happened to them. "Imagine what happened to people who were taken years ago. Is there any hope for them?" She couldn't remember whether Amina had ever told her how long she'd been on Quarra. Now she wondered if it was even possible for Amina and the other victims to even return home.

At that, Tom sucked in his breath and his grip on B'Elanna's hands tightened just slightly.

"Thank God for Chakotay, Harry and Neelix," he said. "If it hadn't been for the fact they were on an away mission, no one would have ever known what had happened to us. We would have been on Quarra for the rest of our lives. As it was, we lost three weeks of our lives, and if it had been longer, I would have missed - I would have missed the baby."

B'Elanna looked down at their intertwined hands and shivered at the thought.

"Cold?" Tom asked and because she could feel a lump forming in her throat, B'Elanna nodded.

Tom rose from the sofa. "Let me get you a blanket," he said.

B'Elanna leaned her head against the back of the couch, watching Tom as he rummaged through the drawers. Like her, he still experienced the occasional moment of fogginess, where he couldn't quite remember even the most basic things, like where they stored their spare linens. To remember so much yet to have those moments of blankness frustrated both to no end. Finally, Tom found the blanket and held it up to show her in a gesture of mock triumph. B'Elanna smiled encouragement back at him.

"Crazy, isn't it, how difficult even the simplest things can be right now?" he asked; B'Elanna knew exactly what he meant.

"It'll get better," she told him gently, not necessarily because she believed it, but because how could it be otherwise?

Tom laid the blanket gently across her legs and then sat back down next to her.

"I have a confession," she said.

Tom arched his eyebrow. "Don't tell me - you fell for a handsome waiter on Quarra."

B'Elanna shook her head. "I read your logs, when I was trying to find out about us... *you*."

"Anything interesting?" Tom's expression remained neutral, but B'Elanna thought she detected a strained note in his tone. B'Elanna's heartbeats quickened as she plunged ahead with the explanation she hoped Tom would accept.

"I know it was an invasion of your privacy, but I- I didn't believe it when Neelix told me we were married. I thought my baby's father had left me and that's why I'd come to Quarra. And when I learned the truth, I didn't understand why someone like you who could have anyone at all would want *me*."

"Don't *ever* say that." Tom's voice took on an edge as he grabbed her hands in his. He took a deep breath and then said, "B'Elanna, I hope you found what you were looking for in my logs and that you *never* have to ask that question again."

"I won't," B'Elanna said very softly. Even if she forgot the exact words he used in his logs, she knew she would never forget how revelatory his feelings about her were. "I've never been good about letting people in, and whatever the Quarrans did to me, that part of me hadn't changed. Your logs reminded me just how far I've come, how far *we've* come."

This seemed to satisfy Tom. "The first time you came into the restaurant, I felt like I *needed* to be with you." He tipped his head back, staring up at the ceiling for a moment before turning his attention to B'Elanna. "Seeing you was always the highlight of my shift."

"And you made me feel less alone," B'Elanna told him.

At this, Tom's expression softened. "When I originally talked to you, I was convinced you were going to punch me."

B'Elanna couldn't help but smile at the memory. "I certainly thought about it. I was suspicious when you were nice to me. I certainly wasn't expecting that! But then you turned out to be the Tom Paris who always kept me off guard. The way you used to be."

"The way I *used* to be?" Tom arched his eyebrow.

"During our first year or so in the Delta Quadrant," B'Elanna said, feeling increasingly flustered. "When I doubted your motivations, you know, because you were *nice* to me. When you put up with my bad moods because no one else would. I couldn't understand because no one else cared enough to do that. You were like that on Quarra, Tom. And I had to keep reminding myself I couldn't fall for you."

"So, you *did* find me irresistible!" this time Tom's voice held a hint of humor. "Maybe in time, I would have convinced you."

"Maybe," B'Elanna said with a sly smile. "But I was pretty determined not to get involved with anyone. Though you did tempt me." She paused.

Tom was quiet for a moment, his expression pensive.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You would have been alone," he said. "I didn't think about it. Or you might have found someone else..."

"No," B'Elanna said. "I wouldn't have."

Tom got from the sofa, started to pace the length of the room, his hand running through his hair, his shoulders tight with tensions. B'Elanna watched him, not speaking. How long were these realizations of what *might* have happened going to haunt them?

After a moment, Tom paused and looked back down at B'Elanna. She held out her hand to him, he took it and she pulled him down onto the sofa with her. He pulled her close, burying his face against her shoulder, his body trembling in her embrace.

"Tom," she whispered. "What is it?"

"I'm just realizing all of the things I never considered before," he said shakily. He hugged B'Elanna close to him, so that her head rested against his chest. His arm wrapped around her body and rested on her stomach, and as if on cue, the baby aimed a well-placed kick towards his palm. "I didn't realize how much I have to lose now."

"I know," she whispered. "I know." And then his lips were on hers, and she closed her eyes as she let the moment fall away from them.

The next morning, B'Elanna woke to Tom's singing in the sonic shower. She stretched out lazily, her hands over her head as she listened to his nonsense lyrics. She could only imagine what lullabies he would come up with when their baby was born.

She turned on her side, putting her hand on the indentation in Tom's pillow where his head had been. The indentation was still warm, and she inhaled deeply, loving that his scent still clung to the bed linens. She was still curled under the covers when Tom emerged from the bathroom, dressed in his uniform and his hair neatly combed and trimmed to regulation – the epitome of a Starfleet officer; all superficial traces of his life of a waiter on Quarra had been erased.

"Hi," he said. The tenor of his voice was warm, almost caressing.

"Hi yourself," B'Elanna answered drowsily as she took in the sight of her husband. *Husband*. How good it felt to think of him in that way. He came to sit on the edge of the bed, taking a second to lean over and kiss her on the cheek.

"Sleep well?" he asked.

"Better than I have in weeks," she said sincerely, and then with a twinkle in her eyes. "You *do* have a way of making me relax." She stretched, releasing the sleep from her muscles.

He brushed a strand of hair away from her cheek. "Are you hungry? I'll make you some toast before I need to leave."

A few years ago, B'Elanna would have bristled at his offer of breakfast; the old B'Elanna was fiercely independent, didn't want or need anyone to do anything for her. Now, with a calmness that grew out of maturity and a sense of belonging, B'Elanna understood the implications better. Tom wasn't

insinuating she couldn't take care of herself, he simply liked doing things for her. And to her surprise, B'Elanna enjoyed his solicitous care.

How far we've come, she thought.

"That sounds perfect, thank you," B'Elanna said. She smiled, remembering how he'd offered on Quarra to bring her some peanut butter toast, and then on a separate occasion, the wholly satisfying meal of fried chicken and potato salad. "You always know exactly what I want, don't you?"

"It's in my best interests to keep you happy."

Lazily, B'Elanna said, "And you do a very good job of it. Thank you."

"No, thank *you*." Tom leaned in for another deep kiss and then, with some reluctance, got up. "Full day?"

"Oh yes. I'm meeting Carey and Seven at 0900 for a level one primary diagnostic. Thanks to the Quarran pirate attack, we sustained some hull damage so we'll need to plan an EVA for early next week." She frowned, thinking through the logistics. She wasn't a big fan of space walks, but without access to a space dock, there really wasn't another option for hull repair. But even before they could commit to the EVA, she also needed to know her staff was fully back to speed; a moment of mental cloudiness in the cold vacuum of space could have tragic consequences. "I'm hoping Vorik or Nicoletti, if she feels up to it by then, will be able to handle those by then, otherwise Chapman will have to step up." She twisted the blanket around her hand as she talked. It felt like an ordinary morning, ordinary conversation, but still a shadow fell across their interactions. She wondered when that feeling would pass.

"Pablo Baytart has the helm today for Alpha and Kristine Fernandez says she can take Beta shift," Tom said genially. "I'm planning to spend today with the Doctor but depending on Baytart, I may have to take Gamma at the helm." He gave her an apologetic look.

"It's all right," B'Elanna said, trying to inject a tinge of bravado she didn't quite feel into her voice. She knew she would feel his absence tonight in a way she'd never had before, but she could take comfort in the little signs that signified the life she and Tom were building together: from his toaster to his television, her bat'leths and engineering tools, and of course, the crib at the foot of the bed. She smiled brightly. "Maybe I'll stop by the Bridge then," she said. "I can always find something to do from my Engineering station there."

"I'd like that," Tom said, his expression brightening at her suggestion.

He replicated a couple of pieces of bread and then popped them into the silver toaster on their dining table. B'Elanna curled on her side to see him better. He was humming under his breath as he busied himself with finding plates and then getting out a jar of peanut butter and knife. Tom seemed like his usual self this morning and certainly, he seemed to have vanquished the dark mood which had briefly haunted him last night. Still, B'Elanna knew Tom had a habit of shutting her out when he needed her the most.

"You're feeling better today?" she asked.

Tom took a moment to respond and when he did turn to him, she could see his jaw working, the tremble in his lower lip. But when he spoke, his voice was clear, steadfast. "I wouldn't say that. Anxiety comes with the neighborhood, you know? Once you lose your sense of safety and belonging, it's hard to ever feel the same about the way things were." He turned to the replicator, his fingers running expertly over the LCARS panel. Two cups of coffee appeared, which he placed on the table. "Breakfast is served."

B'Elanna recognized the expert change of subject and chose not to push. They would deal with the scars Quarra had left them with over the coming days, weeks, months, and maybe even years. She paused in the bathroom briefly to splash some water on her face, and then joined Tom at the table. To her surprise, Tom had filled a vase with a colorful bouquet of lilies, snapdragons and roses and set it next to her plate. B'Elanna looked at him in surprise. His smile was tentative as she gently stroked a velvety red petal.

"What's this?" she asked softly.

"Before we hit the subspace mine, I'd been planning a romantic dinner for us as a surprise for you," he answered as he pulled her chair out. "I'd just replicated the flowers and I was about to check when you'd be home for dinner when the red alert sounded." His jaw tightened.

B'Elanna recalled the dead flowers she'd thrown out when she'd first returned to their quarters. She'd contemplated the mystery of their presence at the time, but in the rush of emotions that followed her reunion with Tom, she'd completely forgotten about them.

"They're beautiful," she said sincerely, inhaling the sweet fragrance deeply. He must have spent all of his rations on these. "But why now?"

Tom gazed at her earnestly. "Our lives were interrupted that day," he said, "but consider this a first step, a *promise*, that whatever it takes, we'll put ourselves back together." He knelt next to her, his hands resting lightly on her belly, his face upturned to hers. His voice cracked ever so slightly as he said, "We're not going to let them take *this* from us."

B'Elanna touched his cheek lightly, her fingers quivering as she traced the contour of his jaw. He turned his face into her palm, kissing the skin there lightly. "Never," she whispered back. "You know what you said last night about having so much to lose?"

Tom glanced towards the crib and then back to B'Elanna. "Yeah."

"I never wanted to need anyone. When I was growing up, I did my best to push everyone away. I ran away to the Academy and I didn't 'need' anyone there either and see what happened to me. I suppose if I hadn't found the Maquis, I'd still be running. Or maybe not. Who knows?" she was rambling now but didn't care. "When I came on board *Voyager*, I certainly didn't want to need anyone and especially, *you*."

"You don't have to tell me that," Tom said. "I was there, remember?" He got to his feet and picked up B'Elanna's empty plate to deposit it into the recycler. "We've come a long way from the people we

once were. There's nothing wrong with needing someone." His lips twisted into a crooked grin. "I know I do."

B'Elanna reached across the table and grabbed Tom's hand.

"I remember how you were," she whispered. "And I know how you are now." And she held on to his hand, squeezing it, as if ensuring he wasn't going anywhere. After a moment, she let go. "You'd better get going or you're going to be late and you're looking at a possible double, if not triple shift today. The 'victim of mind control' excuse isn't going to work for long with Chakotay."

He rested his gaze on her, as if memorizing her.

"What is it?" B'Elanna asked, a little taken aback by the scrutiny.

"Just anticipating when I see you next," he said softly, a bit of longing in his voice that reminded her of the early halcyon days of their relationship.

"I'll see you at lunch," she said lightly.

"Don't be late," he said, as he bent down to kiss her lips, his hand cupping her jaw for a momentary caress.

B'Elanna settled back in her chair after Tom left, her hand resting on her belly. After a few minutes, she roused herself to get ready for work.

Voyager needed her.

~ the end ~