

Evenfall

By Seema (seemag1@yahoo.com)

B'Elanna Torres leaned against the hacienda's stucco wall, her hand curled around the stem of a wide-mouth glass filled with yellow liquid swirled with red, and topped with a brightly decorated paper umbrella.

"Glad the plasma leak didn't slow you down too much, Chief," Ken Dalby said, as he passed by. "I was afraid you'd wouldn't make the party when you offered to repair it."

B'Elanna managed a tight smile. "Well, here I am."

Dalby joined Ayala and Chell by the grill. Tabor and Jor were hovering nearby, and Ann Smithee, her blond hair piled high on her head, swayed to the music playing in the background. And surprisingly, T'Varia – the Vulcan-Romulan hybrid who normally kept to herself – had come too and was in deep conversation with Ral Gerron.

Swaying palm trees provided much needed shade over a kidney-shaped pool in the center of the cobblestone patio, while red, purple and pink bougainvillea cascaded down the wooden trellises. Holographic waiters roamed the grounds, carrying trays of food and drink. But the cake – a two-tiered pink frosted concoction decorated with fruit and flowers – took center stage when it came to the décor. Curved blue writing on the base layer said, "Happy Birthday, Jor."

B'Elanna was so engrossed in observation that she barely registered Chakotay's presence next to her until he cleared his throat.

"You're here," she said, not bothering to hide her surprise.

"It's Jor's birthday," he said matter-of-factly, as if that was the only explanation needed. Chakotay had dressed for the occasion in khaki shorts, a red and yellow flowered shirt, with a garland of beads and flowers around his neck. "I wouldn't miss it."

B'Elanna bit back the impulse to remind Chakotay that he'd missed plenty of Maquis-only events like this in the past. From the day the Maquis came aboard *Voyager*, Chakotay had made it clear that they were one crew, a *Starfleet* crew. And as first officer, he had been scrupulous about avoiding any signs of favoritism, even though the Starfleet personnel outnumbered the Maquis by 1 to 4. During that first volatile year in the Delta Quadrant, he'd reminded B'Elanna frequently that as a member of the senior staff member, she had to set an example for the others and so she too maintained her distance.

"I guess that makes two of us then," B'Elanna said.

"It was nice for you to give Tabor your holodeck reservation. I know he was worried he wouldn't be able to reserve enough time," Chakotay said, nodding towards Tabor. Tabor had his arm around Jor, his lips nuzzling her neck. Scott Doyle and John Fitzpatrick were engrossed in a conversation near the bar, while Mike Ayala's hearty laugh boomed across the holodeck. Chell bent over with laughter at something Rafe Yosa told him, while Ral Gerron and T'Varia had joined Mariah Henley in the pool.

B'Elanna shrugged her shoulders nonchalantly. She had felt so lethargic lately, her muscles stiff and unresponsive and so she'd thought about revisiting one of the Klingon exercise programs she had created with Tom the previous year. After she'd booked the time, she'd invited Tom to join her, but he'd already had committed to a Captain Proton scenario with Harry and the Delaney twins. Feeling slightly put off – for *once*, there were no distractions for thousands of light years and he *still* couldn't make time for her? – B'Elanna had gladly donated her one-hour block to Tabor when he'd asked.

“I wasn't the only one,” B'Elanna answered matter-of-factly. She knew Chell had given up his time, as had Gerron and Ann, so that Tabor could have a block of five hours in total for the party; the first couple of hours, Tabor had planned for the twenty-six former Maquis crew, and then he'd invited everyone else to attend starting at 1900 hours. “Besides, it's a good distraction from all of this... *nothingness*.”

Since they'd entered the Void the previous month, the crew had served regulation-length shifts, running diagnostics they should have been running all along, and every now and then, the schedule was punctuated by one of Tuvok's mandatory security drills. It seemed as if this would be the routine for a long time; Seven had seen nothing on the long-range scanners that would indicate they'd have anything worse than boredom to deal with for at least the next two years.

Chakotay nodded. “It's only going to be a matter of time before the emptiness gets to us all. Have you observed any signs of discontent among your staff?”

“No.” She sipped at her drink, barely registering the sticky sweet concoction. Jor was particularly fond of pineapple, and according to Tom, Tabor had spent the last three months stockpiling extra rations so he could replicate the perfect refreshments for Jor's milestone birthday. Tabor had even eaten every meal in the Mess Hall and gambled for high stakes to secure enough. Surveying the vast quantities of food, Tabor must have had quite a lucky streak. “I thought you had the Bridge for beta shift today. Did you swap with the Captain?”

“Actually, Harry is taking my place,” Chakotay said evenly.

B'Elanna's eyes widened. Harry was supposed to be on Holodeck Two with Tom. “Really?”

“It's about time he had a shot at sitting in the big chair, don't you think?”

“If you say so.” She didn't bother to hide her irritation that Tom hadn't communicated to her about the change of plans. She still would have stopped by Jor's party, but then would have excused herself after staying for an hour or so to spend time with him. Clearly Tom didn't feel the same. “I'm glad you're giving Harry the opportunity; I know he's eager to prove himself.”

“Well, this is his chance,” Chakotay said. He sipped his drink. “I'm surprised to see you here, to be honest.” He scrutinized her carefully. “Are you having a good time?”

B'Elanna shrugged as she grabbed another drink off a passing hologram's holographic tray. She wasn't a fan of the sticky sweet drink, but she did enjoy the heady rush that swarmed through her body. Tabor had opted for the real stuff, not synthehol, a decision B'Elanna heartily approved of.

“Sure,” she said.

“That’s not very convincing.” Chakotay’s dark eyes narrowed. “You look like you’ve got something on your mind. Something you want to tell me?”

She wanted to tell him she wished the captain had ordered her to pull out the stasis tubes again so they could sleep through these next two years of nothing. It had only been thirty-some odd days into the Void, with at least another 700 to go, and already her nerves were shot. *Voyager* was in the middle of nowhere, with a view toward nothing, and on a course to the Alpha Quadrant, which with each passing day, felt less and less like home. But B’Elanna pushed that thought away, decided to focus on something more tangible.

“I was just thinking about how we can use this opportunity to optimize our systems,” B’Elanna said, injecting a note of brisk energy into her voice. “Plus, there are a few nagging issues remaining from the Hirogen takeover that we weren’t able to get to before, and now we have all the time in the galaxy.” She knew she should be grateful for the respite from hopscotching from one disaster to another; she’d had her fill of reptilian hunters, body-switching aliens, classified molecules, thermionically radiated planets and revenge-seeking bringers of hope. But she’d fallen out of practice of standing still, without her muscles automatically tensing with anticipation of the next red alert, or steeling herself for the long, grueling hours of putting *Voyager* back together after every encounter with a hostile race.

Chakotay arched his eyebrow. “Your last report said all ship’s systems are running well within normal parameters.” His expression remained quizzical as he looked at her. “Is there something you didn’t mention?”

“No, but I’m concerned about the possible effects all of this theta radiation could have on our systems, including the sensors,” B’Elanna said. Just before coming to the party, she’d contemplated several ways they could prevent theta radiation from occluding the sensors but put the project on hold when Dalby notified her of a small leak in the plasma coolant system. Normally, she would have assigned the task to someone on her staff, but she’d chosen to crawl into the Jefferies tube herself. But after hours of running a level five diagnostics, she craved actual action; replacing gaskets wasn’t particularly exciting, but it was *something* to do. “Obviously, from a security perspective, the inability to see beyond our nose is a major concern.”

“Between you and Seven, I’m sure you can come up with a solution,” Chakotay said easily.

B’Elanna bristled at the mention of the former drone. As far as she was concerned, Seven had a unique knack of making bad situations worse.

“You have a lot of faith in her,” she said, her bad mood returning. She gulped the rest of her drink and slammed the empty glass down on the highboy table directly to her right.

Chakotay’s look was sharp. “Are you having a problem with Seven?”

“Not yet,” B’Elanna said.

“I just ask that you try to get along with her,” Chakotay said. “She’s doing her best and we have to do all we can do is support her.”

“As long as she stays out of my way, we’ll be fine,” B’Elanna answered coolly.

“It wasn’t that long ago when you asked me to take Seven to find Tom and Harry on the declassified planet,” Chakotay said, a small smile playing on his lips. “So, you owe her one.”

“I’ll talk to her in the morning about the sensors,” B’Elanna said, knowing this was one argument she wouldn’t win, and somehow, she didn’t care. Instead, she gazed at the cobble stone steps that led down to the sea’s edge. The deep blue waters, sparkling in the sunlight, flowed towards the horizon, with the occasional white cap marring the otherwise serene surface.

As if reading her mind, Chakotay said, “Tabor did an excellent job programming this scenario; it’s extremely realistic.” His smile disappeared as he surveyed the crowd. “Atara would have loved this. You remember how she always talked about how she wanted to live by the ocean one day?”

B’Elanna froze at the mention of her former Maquis colleague, who was among those confirmed dead when they’d received the letters from home several months ago. Swallowing hard, she nodded.

“We had a lot of plans back then, didn’t we?”

“We still have a chance at them,” Chakotay said, his voice cracking slightly. “But our friends, they don’t.” Chakotay blinked, rubbed the back of his hand against his eyes, and then cupped B’Elanna’s elbow. “Let’s go join the others,” he said gently.

She reluctantly followed him across the sunshine-dappled pavement to where Jor and Tabor stood. Jor’s yellow and green sundress matched nicely with the sunflowers dancing across Tabor’s shirt. Jor smiled warmly at B’Elanna.

“Dalby said something came up in Engineering so I was afraid you wouldn’t come,” she said, squeezing B’Elanna’s hand with affection, and then pulling her in closer for a hug. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“A plasma leak wouldn’t have kept me away,” B’Elanna said, dismissing all the times an engineering repair *had* kept her away. She envied just how relaxed and genuine Jor appeared, how she seemed to fit so perfectly into the crook of Tabor’s arms, and the playful camaraderie they shared. *Could it be so easy?*

Jor’s gaze drifted towards the birthday cake. “There were times when I didn’t think I’d see twenty-five, let alone thirty.” She inhaled sharply, her hand shaking as she placed her drink down on the table. “Remember the time when we were in the caves at Yalta and the Cardies were closing in on us?”

B’Elanna did. Huddled together in the dark, pressing back into a shallow alcove, listening to the roar of Cardassian weapons just meters away, and then the cascade of rocks thundering and rolling towards them as the mouth of the cave exploded in a fury of orange and red flames. She remembered covering her head with her arms, curling herself against the others, waiting for the rocks to bury them alive. Miraculously, the alcove had provided them enough protection to avoid the brunt of the rockslide. With careful rationing of the water in their canteens, they were able to survive two days of digging out before they’d emerged from the cave, dirty, exhausted, hungry and dehydrated, but still alive.

“Yes,” B’Elanna said, remembering how they’d waited for nightfall to make the tiring hike to another camp, ten kilometers to the east. Anxious over the presence of the Cardassians, they’d made it to the relative safety of the other camp and during those dark hours, the feeling of camaraderie had been strong. “I thought we were going to die that night.”

“Me too,” Jor said. She picked up her drink, took a long swallow. “You saved my life when you knocked me out of the way during the rock fall. So, I guess you’re the one I need to thank for today.”

“No need,” B’Elanna said, a bit brusquely. She hadn’t thought of that incident in years and the unnerving confrontations as a Maquis were now replaced by new and frightening encounters in the DQ. Inadvertently, the memory of Tom – possessed by the alien Steth – flashed in her memory. A shiver ran down her back. “If you’ll excuse me, I need another drink.”

B’Elanna’s sandals flip-flopped as she crossed the patio, desiring to put as much distance she could between herself and any unexpected specters from the past. She was aware of people around her, but their words were lost in the light wind that was picking up. She grabbed a drink off a passing waiter’s tray and within a minute, found herself on the narrow strip of white sand separating the resort from the sparkling blue waters. It looked so inviting, and the sun was hot on her skin. She kicked off her flimsy high-heeled sandals, as she made her way to the water’s edge. The waves gently caressed her shins as she waded in.

B’Elanna’s fingers tightened even more tightly on the stem of her glass as she turned to face the resort. More than ever, her crewmates seemed like distant figures. She saw T’Varia and Ayala laughing with Gerron, Henley putting a wrap on over her swimsuit as she emerged from the pool, Chell regaling Dalby and Yosa with some story. She saw Ann Smithee embracing John Fitzpatrick in a way that spoke of something stronger than friendship. Those two had flirted off and on during their Maquis days; B’Elanna didn’t know why she was surprised their relationship had evolved into something more. After all, life went on, didn’t it?

Except when it didn’t.

B’Elanna downed the rest of her drink as she stared at the point where the sea met the sky. The sun hung low in the sky now, and warm hues of orange and violet were starting to streak across the late afternoon blue sky. The sea’s surface was seductive, tantalizing, and begging her to break through. What would it be like to drift away from the constant strain and worry of wondering who or what would be lost to her next? The water soaked her dress as she moved deeper. The glass slipped from her fingers, but she made no effort to retrieve it as the water closed over her shoulders. Just a few steps more and she would be weightless and unable to reach the ground.

“B’Elanna! Hey, B’Elanna!” She jerked at the sound of Dalby’s voice. He was standing on the beach, waving frantically at her. “Jor’s cutting the cake,” he yelled, cupping his hands around his mouth. “Come on!”

B’Elanna treaded water for a moment, and then with a regretful look behind her, she swam a few strokes to the beach, and then when she was in the shallow again, she put her feet down. Her dress was now a sodden mess wrapped around her legs, so B’Elanna waded back with some difficulty.

“What the hell were you doing?” Dalby asked curiously as she reached him.

The sand was gritty between her toes. She bent down to retrieve her sandals, choosing not to meet his concerned gaze. “I just wanted to cool off.”

“Well, you were pretty far out,” Dalby said. He handed her his drink. “You look like you could use a Saurian Sunrise. It’s got quite a kick to it and much better than getting in over your head.”

He grinned lopsidedly. “Though Tabor’s got the holodeck safeties on, so it’s not like a rip current is going to pull you under.”

B’Elanna didn’t answer as she followed him back to the patio. Tabor had everyone assembled around the cake table to watch Jor slice the cake.

“Glad you could join us,” Scott Doyle said as B’Elanna came to stand between him and Chakotay. Doyle’s face flushed red, and he teetered unsteadily on his feet, the red liquid in his glass swirling with his jerky movements. “I’m happy it’s just us Maquis tonight. Always feel like I have to be on my best behavior around the uptight Starfleet types who take the fun out of everything.” He elbowed B’Elanna sharply in her side. “Though some of us have forgotten where we came from, right, Chief?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” B’Elanna said, genuinely confused. She glanced at Chakotay, wondering what she’d missed, but he shrugged.

“You, of all people, should know *exactly* what I’m talking about,” Doyle said, his nostrils flaring as he edged closer to B’Elanna. She recoiled at the smell of alcohol on his breath. “When it comes to changing loyalties, no one has done that better than you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” B’Elanna said.

Doyle now towered over her, but B’Elanna refused to be intimidated. He wagged his finger in her face as he said, “You spend more time with the Starfleet jackasses than with us. Do you even *remember* what it was like to be Maquis? Instead you fraternize with the enemy instead of sticking with those whom you owe your very life to!”

“Oh please,” B’Elanna said, not bothering to hide her exasperation. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Jor had stopped slicing the cake. “And let’s not keep score of who saved whose life right now. You, of all people, should know *exactly* what I’m talking about.”

“Are you insinuating something?” Doyle balled his fists at his sides, his voice raising a couple of octaves.

“Not at all,” B’Elanna said. *Let him take a swing at me*, B’Elanna thought irritably; Doyle had always been the weakest of them all, only managing to contribute to the fight when fortified with alcohol. And as drunk as he currently was, B’Elanna knew she could take him out with a well-placed left hook. “You started this and I’m just pointing out maybe you’re making a claim you shouldn’t be. After all, weren’t you the one who alerted the Cardassians to our location on Yalta?”

Doyle’s face reddened even more. “How was I to know they could intercept our communications frequency?”

“For fuck’s sake, Scott. It’s basic. You forgot to use the right encryption, and in the process—” B’Elanna glanced in Jor’s direction “— you nearly got us all *killed*.”

“Hey!” Tabor interceded. “That was more than five years ago. Can we put it to the side?” He looked imploringly at B’Elanna and Doyle. “It’s *Jor’s* birthday and I want her to enjoy this day with her closest friends. Don’t you understand? You’re all the family we have left now.”

“You say that, but not all of us still see it that way,” Yosa said, his eyes narrowing at B’Elanna. “We Maquis, we stick together, and we put each other first.”

“What exactly are you accusing me of?” B’Elanna demanded. “I won’t apologize for prioritizing the safety of this ship above all else!”

“Our friends were murdered by the Cardassians and Starfleet did nothing to save them, even though they were Federation prisoners. In fact, they threw anyone who survived into prison,” Doyle said, his breath coming out in short breaths, and slurring as his words tumbled out at a quicker pace. “And then you, you share your bed with the fucked-up son of a Starfleet admiral?” Doyle’s lip curled into a sneer. “You’re a traitor, B’Elanna Torres.”

B’Elanna felt the heat rise in her cheeks. It had been a long time since she’d taken a swing at someone and she inwardly dared Doyle to keep provoking her. Only a glance at Jor’s pale face kept her from lashing out with her fists. “Careful, Scott,” she said with a calm she didn’t quite feel.

Doyle lurched towards her, but Ayala’s firm grip kept him a good meter away from B’Elanna. “We should be *honored* you chose to grace us with your presence,” Doyle said. “Or is that too *Klingon* for you?”

“*petaQ!*” B’Elanna snarled, but Chakotay grabbed her arm, pulled her back, and inserting himself between her and Doyle.

“Hey, take it easy,” Chakotay said harshly. “We’re *one* crew now, Doyle, and we sure as hell are going to *behave* as one. I won’t tolerate anything less and the next person to ignore my order will find themselves in the brig.” He released B’Elanna’s arm. “Our only mission right now is to get home.”

“Home? What does that even mean?” Yosa asked bitterly. “The Alpha Quadrant isn’t *home*. We know what kind of reception is waiting for us when we get back.” He scoffed. “What’s the point?”

“And there are so few of us left now,” Gerron said, a little bit sadly. “We knew what we were fighting for before, but now...” his voice drifted off.

Silence fell over the group. Jor looked down at her feet. Tabor took a swig of his drink. Ayala looked off into the distance. Always gregarious Ann looked shocked, while T’Varia shifted uneasily. Gerron stabbed at the cake on his plate. Chakotay took a deep breath.

“I know the last few months have been hard, especially when the Hirogen took over the ship,” Chakotay said. “We’ve dealt with a lot over the last five years, but we need to stay focused on who our true enemies are. And if you haven’t figured that out by now, then *Voyager* isn’t the place for you. If that’s the case, speak now.” He sternly surveyed the group. “Any of you want out of this crew? If so, once we’re out of the Void, we’ll look for the first M-class planet and drop you off.”

Doyle shuffled his feet side to side, and Yosa looked away. Fitzpatrick and Dalby looked discomfited by Chakotay’s offer, while Jor looked close to tears. Tabor draped his arm around Jor’s shoulder, pulling her close, and lifting her fingers to his lips. Chakotay nodded in grim satisfaction.

“Good,” he said. “If you change your mind, you know where to find me.” His lip curled slightly. “I know some of you have concerns about our reception when we finally do return to the Alpha Quadrant, based on what happened to our friends. We can talk about that. But for now, there’s a

whole lot of nothing in front of us for a long time to come and now isn't the time to lose our nerve." Chakotay took a deep breath as he looked around.

"More the reason to mark the occasion of Jor's thirtieth voyage around the sun," Chell said brightly. B'Elanna looked at the Bolian gratefully. "Shall we make a toast?" Chell glanced questioningly in Chakotay's direction.

"I believe the honor should go to our host, Tabor," Chakotay said. He didn't look at B'Elanna or Doyle but remained standing resolutely between them.

It took Tabor a moment to react to Chakotay's statement and then he raised his glass. "To Jor, happy birthday!" He smiled at Jor before kissing her on the lips. As if on cue, someone turned the music back on. The tension evaporated on the breeze as Tabor swirled Jor away, their feet moving across the pavement in a syncopated pattern, in and away, together and apart. Jor's head was thrown back, a broad smile across her face, as Tabor wrapped his arms around her. Moments later, Mariah, Gerron, Ann and Fitzpatrick joined them. Chakotay stood off to the side, talking to Ayala. Doyle was with Yosa, both with a drink in hand.

Alone in her uncomfortable shoes and wet dress, B'Elanna chose not to join any those she'd once considered the closest thing she had to family. Jor's laughter followed her as she fled the holodeck.

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