



### Episode 9-07 - Increments

By: LauraJo (laura@laurajo.net)

"B'Elanna, report!"

Through the chaos on the bridge, the replying voice of Voyager's Chief Engineer could be heard by everyone over the ship's comm system.

"We're taking quite a beating, as I'm sure you can tell. If the ablative armour takes much more damage the repair work will be extensive. Transporters are down, along with some minor secondary systems. Any chance this is going to be over soon?"

"Sorry, B'Elanna," Janeway replied, "things aren't looking so good. Just keep doing the best you can to hold us together, we'll do the best we can to end this." Closing the link to engineering, the captain turned to Tuvok at tactical and asked, "So, is our best going to be good enough?"

"We have survived altercations with Sernaix vessels before, Captain. I see no reason to think we have any less chance of survival on this occasion."

Kathryn had to smile at her Vulcan friend's reply. Such a long answer when a simple yes, no, or even a maybe would have sufficed.

"Well Tuvok, I'll trust your judgment on this one. Fire any and all weapons at will." Janeway redirected her attention to the conn. "Tom, keep us one step ahead of their weapons fire."

"Aye, Captain," he replied, "commencing evasive pattern gamma two."

"Captain?" Harry attracted her attention. "We just lost transwarp. More damage reports are flying in from all over the ship, but no other major systems in that batch."

"Tuvok?"

"Captain, I believe I have found a potential weakness. Firing now."

Everyone on the bridge witnessed as the viewscreen filled with the image of the rogue Sernaix node ship, separated from its pack for reasons that would remain a mystery to Voyager's crew, exploding. The shock wave rocked Voyager as it dissipated, but caused no further damage -- unquestionably, a very good thing. Once the ship stopped shaking, Janeway once again addressed Tom at the helm.

"Lieutenant, what's our propulsion status?"

"As Harry said, we've lost transwarp. But I still have the normal warp engines, and the Sernaix system."

"Good. Janeway to Engineering."

"Torres here," came the reply.

"How long would you estimate repairs are going to take?"

"It's hard to say before I have all the damage reports reviewed, but we're looking at days rather than hours."

"I was under that impression, yes. I want you to concentrate on repairing the ablative armour and transwarp drives. Transporters and the other less crucial systems can wait until we're looking a bit healthier."

"Yes, Captain. Torres out."

Janeway turned her attention back to Tom.

"Let's set a course for a spot most of us should remember, though not necessarily fondly. Head for the Void. We'll stay there to conduct repairs, we should find relative peace and quiet in that region of space."

"Course laid in, Captain," came Tom's reply.

"Engage."

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B'Elanna sighed as another relay blew. It seemed that as fast as she got one problem fixed, another annoyance threw itself in front of her. Voyager was making things hard for her this time, though sometimes she had to wonder if that was just the normal state of affairs. Easy repairs had never been B'Elanna's specialty, through no choice of her own.

"You know, that could have gone smoother."

Oz's overloud voice made B'Elanna jump, causing her to hit her head and undo the work she had most recently done in the process.

"Damn it, Oz, you can't just start talking to people like that. One of these days you'll cause someone a serious injury."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"And what precisely could have gone smoother? Because I think a lot of things fall under that category at the moment."

"The attack, the attack could have gone smoother."

"No kidding. Did you have something specific in mind, or is this a general observation?"

"I've been thinking over what happened, and if we'd only had two ships in the battle instead of one we could have won a lot more easily. Maybe that's something to consider next time."

"You want to send the Flyer out in the middle of a battle?" B'Elanna wasn't quite sure she believed what she was hearing, but was interested enough to hear what Oz had to say to put her tools down and turn her full attention to the conversation. "It's been kinda nice having a part of the old Voyager out here with us, I don't think we're ready to destroy her again just yet."

"I'm not talking about the Delta Flyer," Oz clarified, "I'm talking about the separation feature."

"That's not feasible. The separation process is just too slow to complete in the middle of a battle. It would leave us vulnerable."

"It's not like you to dismiss something so quickly, B'Elanna. I'm disappointed."

"You don't know me well enough to know what's 'like me'."

"Not in every sense, no, but in this case I'm right and you know it."

"Okay, okay. Maybe you have a point."

"So, I was thinking, maybe we should look into finding a way to make the separation work? There must be a way to speed up the process a little, and some kind of method to compensate for any remaining vulnerabilities exposed while it's being carried out."

B'Elanna thought for a moment before replying, "You know, you might have a point. I'm sure we've worked our way through more complicated problems in the past. I'll speak to the captain about it, we can't do anything until we have her go ahead."

"That's all I wanted for now, thank you. With my help, I'm sure you can make it work."

"I'm sure you are..." B'Elanna replied, before picking her tools back up and returning to her damaged relays.

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Voyager's corridors were quiet, with only those on the early shift making bleary-eyed tracks for their duty posts. Among them was Tom Paris, reluctantly leaving his wife and child in bed on his way to the bridge. B'Elanna had returned characteristically late the previous night, having worked hours past the end of her shift on the repairs that were needed all over the ship. Tom had no doubt that Voyager would be running at peak efficiency once more in no time thanks to his wife, but he often wished she would slow down a little.

Such was Tom's preoccupation that at first the door opening along the hallway didn't even register in his mind. It wasn't until a familiar figure emerged from that door that he started to take notice, and recognised Chakotay heading towards him, his uniform wrinkled and the sleep not quite out of his eyes. Chakotay obviously didn't look ready to be out of bed, and Tom knew he didn't have the early shift, making him wonder what he was doing roaming the ship looking like he'd gone nine rounds with a grizzly bear and lost.

His confusion disappeared when he realised whose quarters the door Chakotay had emerged from belonged to. Kathryn Janeway. That certainly explained what Tom was seeing, and he found himself battling to keep a grin from spreading across his face. He managed to keep it to a knowing smile, but this was enough to catch the commander's attention as he drew level with Tom and had to side step to get out of his path. Neither of them said a word, but the expression on Chakotay's face was more than enough to make Tom a little uncomfortable. His features showed weariness, a lack of amusement at the situation, and more than a little irritation at being forced to sneak through the corridors in the early hours, and being caught to boot.

In the wake of the commander's expression, Tom lost his smile with ease, and continued on his way. Something told him he shouldn't mention this incident to anyone, not least the commander himself. Then again, he had to tell B'Elanna. Harry too, he was his best friend after all. But then that meant Seven would probably find out, and by extension the Doctor, and...

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Engineering was buzzing with activity by the time B'Elanna arrived for her shift, and it was a sight that she loved to see. Before heading to her main station to run over the previous night's reports, she decided to walk through the department and check the status of everyone's work. As she approached each member of her staff they automatically gave her a brief rundown of the status of their work, and finally satisfied that things were running as smoothly as they appeared she stopped and started sorting through her own tasks.

That was, until Oz's friendly greeting attracted her attention instead.

"Good morning, Lieutenant. How are you today?"

Slightly perplexed by his almost cheerful greeting, B'Elanna automatically replied, "Fine thanks, how are you?"

"I'm doing well, and I've been quite busy. I've been spending some time looking through the Federation databases. I never knew there was so much information stored in here, and so fascinating too. The sheer number of member worlds is astonishing. Quite an achievement really, to have formed such an alliance with so many different people."

Realising she wasn't going to get any work done until Oz had had his share of conversation, and enjoying the subject despite herself, B'Elanna lowered herself into a chair and went with it.

"I guess I never really thought about it too much. But you're right, it is amazing. In all our travels through the Delta Quadrant, we never found anything quite like our own Federation."

"Do you ever think that if you had, you might have considered joining them instead of continuing your journey home?"

"We might have thought about it, but only briefly. I don't really believe anything would have stopped us wanting to make it back home."

"Home means a lot to you."

"It does. Though home isn't so much the place, as the people. For me, Voyager was home, and wherever her crew was was where I wanted to be. If we'd had to stop somewhere, had to put down roots and give up our journey, I think I could have been happy. But then, I didn't have the family back home that so many of the others did."

"I really find this fascinating," Oz commented. "Things are so different for the Sernaix. Learning about your culture is proving to be quite an eye-opener."

"It's nice to see you making the effort," B'Elanna commented.

"If I want to fit in here, I have to. I need to understand where you all come from, and what motivates you."

"That's quite an insight. Mind if I ask what prompted all this?"

"Oh, nothing in particular," the shipmind replied. "This and that."

"Well, let me know if you discover anything particularly interesting in those databases. I'm sure there's some real gems in there somewhere."

"I will," Oz assured her. "There is something I'd like to ask you while I have your attention."

"Shoot."

"Did you mention the idea for an accelerated saucer separation to the captain yet?"

B'Elanna sighed. "I'd planned to do that sometime today, though I haven't had time to prepare a proper report for her yet."

"Actually, that's why I was asking. I've been putting some thought to the matter, and prepared a report myself. You should find it in your computer files."

B'Elanna turned to her terminal and checked through her directory, and sure enough a file had been placed there by Oz the previous evening.

"Thank you," B'Elanna replied, her voice tinged with a hint of surprise. "I'll give that a read. You may well have just saved me some time."

"I was hoping I would. There's one more thing you could do for me though. Call it a return favour."

"That all depends on what it is," B'Elanna cautiously replied.

"I was wondering if you could ask Captain Janeway if I could expand throughout the ship. I believe I could be of more help to everyone that way."

"That's an interesting idea, but I'm not sure the captain will be quite ready for that. I'll look into it for you, but that's the best I can promise to do."

"Then that's good enough. Thank you, and I'll let you get on now."

To B'Elanna's surprise, and satisfaction, he did.

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Sickbay was quiet, as the first patient of the day had yet to arrive. The Doctor was taking advantage of the lull to look over Miral's most recent test results, and compare them with Harry's. There was a link there, there had to be, but he had yet to find it. So far he had two theories: either Miral had somehow come into contact with something to do with the Sernaix, or the effect had been passed on from her mother. With this in mind, he ordered the computer to run a search for any events involving the Sernaix and any possible exposure on Miral's part. If he came up negative on that, he would have to assume the latter of the two options held the answers he sought.

The computer search had barely begun when the doors to sickbay opened to admit the first patient of the day. The Doctor sighed as one of the junior science officers walked in with Janeway's dog in her arms. It was obvious that it was the dog that was the patient, not the young woman. How many times did he have to tell these people - he was a doctor, not a vet!

"Doctor," the officer began, "I think there's something wrong with the captain's dog. I found her lying in the corridor, sprawled right across the centre of the walkway. She wasn't moving when anyone approached, and when I looked more closely I just thought something wasn't quite right."

"So you brought her here."

"I didn't know where else to go."

Mumbling something incomprehensible under his breath, the Doctor lifted Amelia out of her saviour's arms and carried her over to one of the biobeds. Grabbing the nearest medical tricorder, he proceeded to run scans of the small dog.

"What have you been up to then?" he spoke as he ran the scans. "Getting into things you shouldn't, no doubt."

Behind him, the young officer tried her best not to giggle at the Doctor's attitude to the dog. No matter how much he complained, she had her suspicions that he liked the animal, and actually didn't mind having to treat her. Not much time passed before he interrupted her thoughts with a diagnosis.

"Well, it seems Amelia here has been a bad little dog. I suspect her symptoms are the consequence of eating a large amount of chocolate, something that has never been a good thing for a dog to do. As I know the captain has had a dog for years, I doubt this is something she purposely gave Amelia. The chances are Amelia's been chewing on something she shouldn't in the captain's quarters. She'll be fine if she stays away from the chocolate, though I want to give her regular check-ups for the next week or so to make sure there's no serious damage. Do you want to tell the captain or shall I?"

"If you don't mind, Doctor, I think I'd like you to tell her," replied the woman. "I really haven't had much contact with the captain yet."

"Well, she won't bite, but if you take that dog back where she came from now I'll be sure to inform the captain of what happened."

"Thank you, Doctor," the scientist replied, before picking Amelia up and heading back out of sickbay, leaving the doctor waiting for his next, and hopefully humanoid, patient.

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The door to Janeway's ready room chimed just as she was retrieving a cup of coffee from the replicator, and she took a moment to savour the aroma before calling for her visitors to enter. Harry and B'Elanna walked through the doors as she made her way to her desk, and waited for her to settle behind it before they spoke.

"Captain, we'd like to talk to you about an idea Oz had," B'Elanna explained.

"Go on," the captain encouraged.

"It was something he spoke to me about after that last fight with the Sernaix node ship. He suggested we would have more of a chance if we had two ships, and one way to achieve this could be the separation sequence."

"I thought that process was too slow to be completed in a combat situation."

"It is, as it stands," B'Elanna confirmed, "but Oz suggested we look into ways to cut down the time it takes to complete."

"Sounds like an interesting idea."

"That's what we thought," Harry interjected. "B'Elanna explained it all to me, and I think we might be able to come up with something between all of us."

"This PADD contains a report Oz wrote himself on the matter," B'Elanna explained as she handed the item to Janeway. "I've read it through, and I think it covers everything we've talked about."

"Very well. Since you're here, I assume you would recommend we proceed."

"Yes, Captain. We have nothing to lose by trying."

"Very well, go ahead."

"Thank you, Captain. I think you should be aware though; this could take a while to prepare. There's every likelihood it'll take weeks to come up with something."

"Treat it as a pet project," Janeway ordered. "I don't want it getting in the way of your normal duties, but I'm interested enough to let you spend some time on it. I trust you to deem how much time is appropriate."

"Thanks."

"Was there anything else?" Janeway enquired.

"Actually, there was one thing. Something else Oz mentioned to me. He suggested that if we gave him more access to the ship, he would be able to give us more of a hand with repairs and such. His current restrictions are limiting what he can do to help, and from what I've seen he really does want to help. If we allow him extra access, he'll be far more help looking into the separation procedures as well."

The captain was quiet for a moment as she gave this some consideration, and presently set her mug on the desk and rested her chin on her hands. "Give it a try, for one week. After that time I'll review the situation, and get back to you all on a more permanent decision."

"I'll let you know when the appropriate systems adjustments have been made," Harry commented.

"Thank you. Dismissed."

As Harry and B'Elanna turned to leave, Kathryn picked her coffee up and sat back in her chair. Her officers had brought in some interesting ideas, and she looked forward to seeing how they worked out.

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Harry walked into Engineering, not quite sure why he had gone there in particular to talk to Oz. He knew Oz had access to other places, but this still seemed the place to find him. No doubt Tuvok would fail to find the logic in such a thing, but then, that wasn't Harry's concern. Trying to brush his wandering thoughts aside, he found a quiet corner and addressed the Sernaix.

"Oz? You around here somewhere?"

"Harry!" came the, as usual, slightly overloud reply. "You came to see me?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. I was wondering how things are going with your 'trial run'?"

"You mean what's it like having more freedom? Wonderful, nothing short of wonderful. It's given me the opportunity to see much more of what happens on this ship, which brings me to something else. You and Seven seem to be spending a lot of time together. So, how's it going with the two of you?"

"Me and Seven?"

"Yes, you and Seven. Do you want me to spell it out?"

"No!" Harry replied rather quickly. "In fact, that's not a subject I want to talk about at all right now."

"Fine, have it your way. We'll have time to talk about that later."

"So," Harry continued, but he managed to get no more out before he was interrupted by Oz changing the subject to another he was interested in.

"You seem to be getting on quite well with B'Elanna's child, too."

"Miral? Of course I am, she's my best friend's daughter."

"But you seem to have grown quite an attachment to her, more than I would expect given your relationship."

"She likes me. And she's the only child on the ship, it's natural we'd all form an attachment to her. The same thing happened with Naomi."

"That's not all it is with you though, Harry." Oz was relentless, and this time Harry decided to keep quiet and see where the shipmind was going. "Miral is touched as well, you see. The touch both you and B'Elanna carry was passed down to her baby, and it's this shared touch that is the basis of the special bond you and Miral share."

"But how could that be the case? Miral wasn't even thought of when..."

"You and B'Elanna shared something long ago," Oz interrupted again, "this you know. You know the experience that touched you, and now B'Elanna has passed on this gift to her child, it transferred from mother to daughter."

"But how is that even possible?" Harry asked.

"That I can't tell you. Now, I must get back to what I was doing. Talk to you later, Harry."

"Yeah, later," Harry replied distractedly, as he headed slowly out of Engineering.

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"Good girl! That was wonderful, Miral. Now get me that hairbrush."

B'Elanna sat on the floor of her family's quarters, watching her daughter retrieve one item after another and place it in front of her. The young child's intelligence was amazing to her mother. As for the powers she seemed to possess, they were just hard to deal with, and difficult to get used to. They were managing though, she and Tom. And each time Miral did something new it was getting easier to believe it.

Of course, it would have been nicer if she could have been around to see more of her baby's achievements. With all of the time she had to spend in Engineering, especially with the repairs that were currently being carried out, B'Elanna was finding it difficult being able to spend so little time around her daughter.



The saucer separation project could only make matters worse. The captain had encouraged her to look on it as a 'pet project', and to B'Elanna's mind that implied that she should limit the amount of duty-time devoted to it. That could only mean one thing -- if it was going to get anywhere, she had to spend some of her off-duty time working on it as well, which in turn gave it the potential to infringe on her relationship with Miral. It was a hard thing to come to terms with, and B'Elanna still wasn't used to putting anything above her job, despite the years she had now been with Tom.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Oz, taking advantage of his newfound freedom to check in on her.

"So, how has your day been, B'Elanna?"

The lieutenant found herself smiling despite herself, and when Miral came near she pulled the child into her arms and leaned back against a chair.

"Not too bad, actually. Thanks again for your help with that report, it really saved me some time."

"You're welcome, it was nothing. Besides, since the work benefited me in the end, you can hardly call it a selfless act."

"All the same, thanks."

"Actually, I was wondering if you wanted some help with Miral? It must be difficult dealing with the powers she possesses, there must be something I could do to help you."

B'Elanna sighed. "I appreciate the offer, but it's been far too long since I've been able to spend some time alone with my daughter. I don't really want to give up what little time I have."

"You shouldn't worry so much about being away from her, and just be proud of what she has achieved."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that being away from her isn't so bad, for you or her."

"Are you trying to say I *should* be spending time away from her, away from my baby?"

"No, no! I didn't mean it that way at all! You're a good mother, I would never suggest you should stay away from your child."

As Oz finished his sentence Tom walked through the door quarters, and didn't miss the look of annoyance on his wife's face.

"I have to go now," Oz spoke again. "I'll talk to you tomorrow, B'Elanna."

Tom looked on confused, as B'Elanna barely acknowledged Oz's departure or his own entrance. "Is there something wrong?" he asked her.

"I don't want to talk about it, Tom."

B'Elanna didn't spare him another glance, but turned her attention back to the child in her arms. She picked up the toy panda Miral had retrieved earlier, and proceeded to walk the toy up her daughter's legs - much to the young girl's delight. Tom was left only to watch and wonder, before moving to the bedroom to change out of his uniform, hoping Oz hadn't done anything too serious to upset his family.

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"Coffee, black," Janeway ordered, and waited for the replicator to produce the specified beverage. When the mug materialised in front of her she picked it up and took a sip, her face screwing up in disgust as the hot liquid hit her taste buds.

Decaf.

Again.

She placed the mug on her desk, neatly lined up with the five others that were already sitting, unceremoniously abandoned thanks only to their lack of one vital ingredient.

Caffeine.

She was just turning back to the malfunctioning replicator to try again when the door to her ready room chimed, and she was forced to give the machine a reprieve for the time being.

"Captain," Tuvok greeted as he entered, "I have a report on Oz's progress over the past day. By all accounts, things appear to be going well so far."

"That's the impression I've had too. B'Elanna seemed pleased with the report he compiled for her about the separation sequence, and Harry came to see me to say how well things had gone when he worked with Oz earlier this afternoon. I think his addition to the crew will move forward well."

"I concur." Tuvok paused for a moment, eyeing the mugs lined up on Janeway's desk with some curiosity. "Captain..."

"The replicator's malfunctioning, it won't give me anything but decaffeinated coffee. I've tried all sorts of things; I've had the panel off twice. I even tried ordering decaf to see if it would give me the opposite of what I asked for, but it seems it understood that order just fine. It's driving me mad! But I'm determined to beat it, I \*will\* have my coffee."

"Perhaps Oz might be able to help you with that," Tuvok suggested.

"I'll put in my order later in the week. For now, this is personal."

"As you wish. I should inform you while I'm here that I plan on doing a check on the brigs for possible escape techniques tomorrow, so if you need me for anything I will not be manning the bridge."

"Very well, good luck with that. Dismissed."

Kathryn watched as Tuvok walked back out the door, and then moved back towards her replicator. If that jumped-up toaster thought it could get away with this, it had another think coming.

\* \* \*

Tom had the early shift again, and once more found himself walking down the corridor which housed his captain's quarters. It wasn't a conscious decision. In fact, he didn't even realise he'd gone that way until he heard the tell-tale swoosh of a door opening up ahead, and into the corridor stepped Chakotay.

This time Tom came to a complete stop in front of his commander, somehow finding his legs unable to function normally. Chakotay too stood stock-still. 'Caught like a deer in headlights' was

the expression that came to Tom's mind, and he idly wondered if it was an expression Chakotay himself would be familiar with.

After an awkward moment Tom regained enough control to sidestep the commander and continue his journey to the bridge, leaving Chakotay to carry on in the opposite direction. Tom was glad he didn't have to wait long for the turbolift, and almost as soon as he had stepped inside he let himself sag against the wall.

"Those two should stop sneaking around and just let the crew know what's going on. It would make life a whole lot easier for everyone." Oz's unexpected voice made Tom jump, and look around to see who was with him before he even realised what he was doing.

"Oz! You gotta stop doing that!"

"Doing what? All I did was make a comment about the captain and commander."

"Well don't, I don't want to hear it."

"You're saying I don't speak the truth?"

"No, I'm saying I'm not in the mood to hear it." Tom pulled himself into an upright position, hoping if he looked like he meant business the shipmind might just leave him alone. He didn't get a chance to find out if it worked, as the turbolift reached its destination and Tom exited and made his way onto the bridge, irritation seeping from every pore.

To Oz, Tom's irritation seemed out of proportion with the incident he had just witnessed, so he filed it away for future reference. Who knew when he would find out what had caused it?

\* \* \*

"I think you'll find that's incorrect, if you decrease the power input by 0.4% instead of 0.5% it should work perfectly."

Seven said nothing, but tried Oz's suggestion anyway. To her surprise, his suggestion worked, and the unit in front of her hummed into life.

"Thank you Oz, working with you is proving most efficient."

"I'm only glad I can help, I like to think it's what I'm here for. I was wondering, how's the saucer separation project coming along?"

"Have you not spoken to B'Elanna about it?"

"Last time I spoke to her we didn't really mention it," admitted Oz.

"Well," Seven explained, "I got the impression she had managed to find a reasonable amount of time to spend on the project already. It seems to have 'peaked her interest'. She even mentioned the possibility of running the first test soon."

"Really? I'm glad that's the case, but..."

Oz hesitated, not sure he should carry on, but Seven immediately pressed him to continue.

"But what?"

"I'm just surprised. It hasn't been long since Captain Janeway gave the go-ahead on this project. I'm surprised B'Elanna managed to find time to look at the separation sequence so quickly, I know she's been feeling that she's not able to spend enough time with Miral at the moment."

"It is natural she should feel that way, parents do feel a need to spend a lot of time around their children. Though, I respect that she is not letting such feelings interfere with her work."

"You do?"

"Yes. Though that doesn't stop me wishing there was a way for B'Elanna to spend more time with her daughter."

"Maybe we should remember that Miral has shown telepathic abilities. She can be with her parents at any time, whether they are physically in the same room as her or not."

"That may be so, but her parents do not share those abilities," Seven reminded Oz. "Miral may be able to be 'with' them, but the same cannot be said for the reverse; Tom and B'Elanna cannot be 'with' her."

"I hadn't considered that," Oz sadly admitted. "I just wish there was something I could do to make life easier for them."

"They will adapt," Seven assured him. "B'Elanna has proven herself more than able to find the solution to many a problem, I am sure something this important to her will not prove the exception."

"I hope you're right," Oz replied, before returning his attention to their work.

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Ayala tried not to appear too bored as he waited for Tuvok to complete his initial inspection of the brig. For the life of him, he had no idea what his superior was actually doing. To all outward appearances he was turning a slow circle in the middle of one of the brig's cubicles, stopping every thirty degrees and appearing to stare straight ahead of him. Whilst Ayala had no doubt there was a logical reason for such an intense study of the cell, he couldn't help but think that that amount of detail was taking things a little too far.

It was a full ten minutes before Tuvok turned his attention to the panel on the wall that contained the cell's controls; everything from the atmospheric monitoring equipment to the forcefield generators could be accessed from this one location, so it was to be a key part of their full inspection. Just as Tuvok was about to reach out and activate the panel, an urgent voice made itself heard over the comm system.

"Don't you think you should run a basic diagnostic before touching that panel?" Oz's voice practically screamed all around them. Ayala thought he must have jumped fully six inches into the air, but Tuvok merely raised one eyebrow as he replied.

"That is not standard operating procedure in this case Mr. Oz, and I see no reason for such conduct."

"I believe it would be in your interests to do it this once," Oz encouraged.

"Do you have a particular reason to suggest this?"

"Only a concern for your well-being."

Tuvok seemed to consider this for a moment, but then turned back to the panel. He was just reaching out once more when Oz interrupted again.

"Are you really, really sure you don't want to run that diagnostic?"

Ayala had to stifle a laugh as he saw Tuvok's irritation grow. The attempts the Vulcan made to try and conceal his unease just made the situation more amusing, though they did cause the younger man to hope that, for once, his powers of concealment were the greater. Realising that Tuvok was neither answering him, nor moving back to touch the panel, Oz attempted to push his point home.

"I am merely looking out for your safety, Tuvok, I do not wish you to suffer the pain of an electrocution."

Almost sighing, Tuvok turned back to the panel, but this time he did not touch it. Instead he requested the suggested diagnostic from the computer, and waited for it to return what he expected to be a normal systems check. He also made a mental note to himself:

When this security inspection is finished, have a word with the captain about untimely interruptions by the Sernaix shipmind.

\* \* \*

There were some days when Kathryn Janeway thought that starship captains should have a private route from their ready room to their quarters. One that didn't require inappropriate use of the transporters, which still weren't operational anyway. It was such a short distance, yet on this occasion she had been approached by no less than ten members of her crew, each asking questions that could easily have been directed to their direct superiors. Even if those officers did then have to bring the matter to the captain, it wouldn't have been yet, and it wouldn't have been in the corridor at the end of a disproportionately tiring day.

What she saw when her door opened in front of her did nothing to improve her mood. Her quarters were a mess. And what's more, they hadn't been that way when she had left them at lunchtime. It didn't take much detective work to figure out what had happened, especially when the culprit was sitting in the middle of the floor, trying to affect the most innocent expression a dog had ever portrayed.

It wasn't working.

Unfortunately, dogs being dogs, Kathryn knew the clearing up was down to her. Trying not to glare too strongly in Amelia's direction, she bent down to pick up the nearest item -- a shirt. Or rather, an ex-shirt. The material had been torn to shreds, and if it wasn't for the colour and the one surviving sleeve it might have taken Kathryn a little longer to figure out what the scrap had once been. Sighing to herself, she moved to recycle the offending item.

As she moved back to pick up the next piece of recycle-fodder, Kathryn's mood was worsened by the chime of her door. It crossed her mind that whoever it was had better have a strong constitution, and a very good reason for turning up at her door.

The door opened to reveal Chakotay. It figured. He was ultimately responsible for this mess, after all.

"What do you want?" Kathryn demanded.

"Well, that's not quite the warm welcome I was expecting," Chakotay commented, as he walked past her without waiting for an invitation to enter. "I see there's been a little bit of a mishap in

here." He tried not to laugh, but couldn't stop the grin from appearing on his face. The sight of that grin and his dimples only served to darken Kathryn's mood further.

"Is that what you call it?" she asked, as she returned to the task of tidying her living space. "I suppose you would find this funny. And I expect you don't feel even the slightest bit sorry that this happened."

"What have I got to be sorry about?" Chakotay's voice held a tinge of confusion.

"This. This mess."

"I didn't do this to your quarters, Kathryn, I would have thought that much was obvious to someone of your intelligence."

"You weren't directly responsible, no," Kathryn admitted. "But without you this still wouldn't have happened. You did, after all, give me that damned dog."

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," he quietly replied.

Calming a little, Kathryn stopped her tidying long enough to look up at him. "It was, Chakotay, really. There's just times I wonder if a starship is really the best place for a dog. Anyway, you didn't come here to talk about my quarters, so what is it?"

"Well actually, I did come here to talk about your quarters."

In her distracted state, Kathryn didn't immediately see what was coming, and instead just replied, "What?"

"I wanted to talk about our living arrangements. Or maybe our sleeping arrangements."

"Is this really the time? And what about them anyway?"

"Kathryn, will you stop what you're doing and listen to me?"

Kathryn stilled her movements, but did not rise from her position crouched on the floor.

"Do you have any idea how I feel sneaking back to my own quarters at some ridiculous time in the morning? I've been seen by more than one person, and it's not as if people don't know about us already."

"I really don't want to hear this right now, Chakotay. Can't we talk about this when I don't have so much else on my mind?"

Taking another survey of the space around him, Chakotay realised that maybe now wasn't the time to bring this up. In the state they were in at the moment, Kathryn's quarters didn't look like they had room to house another person.

"Okay, we'll leave it for now. But promise me we'll talk about this later."

"I promise, Chakotay. Now, how about helping me with the mess that dog made on your behalf?"

Deciding it was best not to argue, Chakotay walked to the opposite end of the room and started to pick up Kathryn's things. The place really was a mess, but with his help there was a chance they could get the place fixed before dinner. Despite his annoyance at the timing of the episode, he could help throwing a grin at Amelia as he crossed the room. It hadn't escaped his notice that

there had been no mention of a punishment for the dog, not even one threat of violence had been uttered. No matter what else she may say, Kathryn loved that animal.

\* \* \*

Tom Paris walked back into his quarters to find B'Elanna once more sitting on the floor, with Miral cuddled in her lap. His wife looked exhausted.

"Hey B'Elanna," he greeted her softly, "how's our baby?"

"She's fine." If the exhaustion hadn't been evident in B'Elanna's posture, her voice would have given it away. There was no energy there, no spark. "I'm glad you're back, I've got to head back to work."

"Have you thought that maybe you're taking on too much with this new project?" Tom asked. "There have to be times you let your staff get on with something, and let yourself get some rest."

"I know that," B'Elanna answered him. "Really, I do. But not this time."

"Why not?"

"I don't really have time to explain it right now, the work just has to be done. Can't you just take my word for it?"

Paris sighed. "I guess so. I don't have to like it though."

"I know. I don't like it either," B'Elanna admitted. "But this time this is just the way it has to be. I hate being away from Miral, and I don't think she likes it much either."

B'Elanna had a small smile on her face as she said this, and Tom guessed there was more to that statement than B'Elanna had so far let on. He didn't have to wait long for her to elaborate.

"Just this morning, she kept the door closed on me when I was trying to leave for work. It was quite cute, really." The ghost of a smile on B'Elanna's face was the only sign of her pride over her daughter's achievements.

"Our girl certainly has a sense of humour," Tom joked. However, his comment was met by a change back to worry in his wife.

"Have you ever wondered if one day she'll try to do something a little more dangerous than keeping a door closed?"

"Of course I have," Tom admitted, "but I hope she realises what she really shouldn't interfere with. She's already shown an amazing intelligence, I think we just have to trust that she will know where to draw the line."

"No matter what she can do, she's still only a year old," B'Elanna pointed out.

"I know that, really, I do. I just believe that she'll be okay. I have to. Don't worry about her while you're working tonight. I'll be here with her."

"I know you will."

B'Elanna turned towards the door, only to find that once more it wouldn't open for her. She felt a pain deep inside her as she turned back to look at her daughter, but was interrupted from her thoughts by a voice over the comm.

"Apologies, B'Elanna. That was not the work of your daughter, but of me. I believe Tom wants to spend some quality time with his daughter, so I shall let you out shortly so you may get to work. I just wanted to let you know I'm looking forward to the first tests on the adaptations to the separation sequence."

"Thanks for that," B'Elanna replied, frustrated by his actions. "But would you let me out now?"

As the doors opened in front of her B'Elanna didn't even stop long enough to utter her thanks, or even a goodbye to her family. Behind her, Tom glanced down at Miral, who was starting to doze off in his arms. He tried not to let B'Elanna see it too much, but he too was worried. More than he wanted to admit even to himself.

\* \* \*

"Okay, people," B'Elanna announced. "In this simulation were going to use the saucer's thrusters to enable it to quickly move away from the rest of the ship. Let's give this a go."

B'Elanna, Harry, and Seven moved to their respective positions in the holographic simulation of Engineering that would serve as their work post for this first simulation. No one spoke a word as the test run progressed, all their attention focused on the instruments in front of them. To an outside observer it might appear that all was running like clockwork, until the silence was broken by a single word.

"Dammit!"

"B'Elanna?" asked Harry.

"It's still not fast enough," the Chief Engineer explained. "If we want to separate in the middle of a battle we still have to shave at least another five seconds off the sequence's completion time."

"Could we re-route some extra power to the saucer's thrusters?"

"There's no safe place to re-route power from. We're going to have to rethink our approach."

"I am positive we will come up with something, B'Elanna, it is just going to take time and patience."

"Thanks for that astute observation, Seven," B'Elanna snapped. Any possible reply from the ex-Borg was cut off by the arrival of the captain.

"How's it going?" Janeway asked.

"There were no problems using the thrusters to aid the separation," B'Elanna reported, "to that end things went just as we predicted."

"But?"

"But it still wasn't fast enough. We'll have to go away and think of something else before we can run another simulation."

"Understood. How long after a successful simulation will we be able to implement the new protocol on Voyager herself?"

"It should be simple enough to install the necessary equipment once the simulations are successful," B'Elanna assured. "The hard work is going to be done in simulations. Once we



successfully reduce the time in here, transferring the method into reality shouldn't prove to be a problem."

"Barring unforeseen difficulties, of course," Janeway added wryly.

"Of course, Captain. I'll continue trying to figure out how to pull this off. I just wish this had worked." The engineer's frustration was obvious to her captain, but she refrained from commenting on it.

"I'm sure you'll find the solution, B'Elanna. I have every faith in you."

With that, she turned and left them in the holodeck to think over the continuing puzzle.

\* \* \*

Tom looked from the child in his arms to the eggs in his frying pan, and back again, before sparing a glance back towards the bedroom where he thought B'Elanna was still sleeping. Once he was sure there were still no signs of movement from his wife he spoke to his daughter in an exaggerated whisper.

"Go on, Miral. Flip the eggs. We've worked on this, you almost had it last time. I know you can do it."

He then turned his attention to the eggs in question and waited. Then, as he looked on, they flipped perfectly and landed in one piece. She had done it!

"Well, who's a good girl? Who's Daddy's favourite little girl?"

"What's she done now?" B'Elanna's questioning voice startled Tom and made him loosen his grip on the small girl in his arms for just a moment, though not long enough to let her fall to the floor.

"Umm..."

As B'Elanna drew closer she could see the eggs in the pan, and thought maybe it was best not to ask what was going on. Tom would tell her when he was ready, and anyway, she was too tired to push him. Despite her lack of energy, she held her arms out for Miral and Tom unquestioningly handed her over.

"B'Elanna, maybe you should take a few hours off? You look shattered."

"I may be tired but I'm still fit enough for duty," she snapped in reply. Tom understood that it wasn't only her tiredness that was causing her poor mood.

"There's no need to take that attitude. I know you want to spend more time with Miral, I do too, but I'm not the one running double shifts to find the time to work on the latest pet project."

"That's hardly fair. If we're going to fare better next time we come up against a Sernaix ship, these modifications are the best hope we've come up with. It's important to get them done quickly."

Despite his worry about her, Tom knew that B'Elanna had a point. What she was doing was important. Unsure of what else he could say to her, he decided to let the subject drop. Well, after one more try.

"The eggs here are for you. Enjoy them. The babysitter's on their way. I'm not sure who has the pleasure today, but I'm sure they'd appreciate the day off. You still have time to change your mind about working."

He didn't hang around long enough to find out what she decided, figuring maybe there was more chance of her taking some time away from work if it was her own decision. Behind him, B'Elanna decided maybe she could take an hour or so to be with her daughter, and waited to tell whoever turned up that they could take not the whole day, but an hour at least, to have some time for themselves.

\* \* \*

Tom had barely made his way out of the door before he ploughed straight into Chakotay, who had something furry in his arms. As he moved backwards, he realised the small furry bundle was the captain's dog.

"Morning, Chakotay," he greeted his superior, "where are you going with Amelia?"

"Sickbay," Chakotay replied. "The little terror ransacked the captain's quarters last night, and she asked me to make sure Amelia didn't manage to eat anything that could harm her in the process."

"Ah," Tom replied, nodding his head. "A kind of damage control."

"Yes," Chakotay answered, nodding his own head in turn. They both stood still, looking between the dog and each other, before Tom broke the silence.

"Well, I have to get to the bridge."

Chakotay nodded his head once more and walked off in the opposite direction to Voyager's pilot.

Tom closed his eyes as the turbolift doors closed in front of him, taking a moment for himself before his shift began. Only, once more, his solitary thoughts were interrupted by the seemingly ever-present Oz.

"They really need to sort themselves out. They both want the same thing but either one or both of them is too stubborn to admit it."

Sighing, Tom agreed. "At least they are together now. It took years for that to happen."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, far too long. But I think Chakotay needs to speak up about their living arrangements soon, for my sake if no one else's. I'm not sure I want to go through too many more early morning meetings in the corridor."

"Maybe I should talk to the commander about it," Oz suggested.

"Why not?" was Tom's reply as he left the turbolift. After all, anything was worth a try. Silently, he wished the shipmind the best of luck.

\* \* \*

"Coffee, black."

The order was followed by the gentle humming of the replicator, and the appearance of a glass of prune juice. Not exactly what Kathryn had had in mind.

"Computer, recycle. Let's try that again. Coffee, black."

Once more the replicator hummed into life, and once more not a drop of coffee could be seen. This time, a steaming cup of Earl Grey tea took its place. Kathryn tried not to scream in frustration, while wondering to herself whether it was possible for replicators to have evil tendencies. There must be a report on such matters somewhere, there was one for virtually everything else. With growing frustration, she recycled that mug as well and tried again. More forcefully, this time, as if the replicator might understand her irritation and stop playing with her mind.

"Coffee. Black. I want a hot, black, coffee."

She resisted the urge to cross her fingers, and stared straight at the materialising mug. It was roughly the right colour, that much was true. But the smell was far from her craved caffeine-containing heaven.

In front of her was a mug of gravy.

"When I get my hands on whoever did this..." Janeway spoke out loud. She was somewhat surprised when she received a reply over the comm system.

"You called?" Oz's voice was unmistakable. Unfortunately.

"This is your doing." It was more of a statement than a question. The reply was simple.

"Yes."

"Fix it. Now"

"Captain, you really should cut down on your coffee intake, it isn't a good habit to have. I've just been offering you some alternatives, in the hope you might find something you never realised you liked."

"You think I'd like to drink \*gravy\*?" Kathryn asked, incredulous.

"Well, maybe that one was more of a joke," Oz guiltily admitted.

"I don't want any alternatives, I want coffee. Black coffee. Now."

"Okay, okay, if you insist. Have it your way."

In front of her a perfect mug of black coffee finally materialised, and Kathryn took a private moment to absorb the taste and aroma. Too short a moment, as Oz interrupted her once more.

"Your First Officer has a point about you drinking so much coffee, it really isn't good for you."

"Chakotay is protective of me, probably overly so. It's my choice what I drink, and I like coffee."

"You know, this coffee thing isn't the only thing the big guy is right about. He's really struggling with the discussions you've been having about your...ummm...sleeping arrangements."

Kathryn frowned. "That's none of your business."

"If you were members of the Sernaix Realm, you..."

"Stop right there!" Kathryn interrupted. "I really don't want to know what would happen if we were Sernaix. We're not. Deal with it."

"The point I was trying to make is that you should listen to me, and to Chakotay. It might work out for the best."

Oz left those words hanging in the room, and left Janeway with her coffee. He was sure that if he left her alone, she would find she had a lot to think about.

\* \* \*

The Doctor glared at the animal in front of him, but Amelia just stared straight back. If he didn't know better, he would have sworn the dog had been taking lessons from her owner. Her glare was near perfect, and her desire not to be examined certainly rivaled that of the captain. The Doctor had tried to examine the dog, but there was just no cooperation; she refused to move an inch. She did nothing but sit, and stare.

So now, the Doctor found himself staring straight back. Both of them had been in that position for some time, and neither moved as Tuvok entered the room cradling his left arm, nursing a burn he had received during his inspection of the brig the day before. It had gotten worse overnight, and finally the Vulcan had decided his arm needed attention.

However, Tuvok found the pain in his arm lessened as he became intrigued by the scene before him. He stopped still for a moment to observe, and neither of the subjects before him moved an inch. A staring match, for want of a better word, between a dog and a hologram. Curious.

Upon deciding that neither was going to move without intervention, Tuvok decided it was his duty to intervene.

"Maybe you are giving the animal too much attention," he suggested to the Doctor.

"That's ridiculous. I'm sure this dog knows how irritating her behaviour is, yet she refuses to comply with my requests! It's quite frustrating, I do have other patients!"

"I suggest you calm down, Doctor."

Without warning, a third voice added itself to the conversation.

"I've been teaching Amelia some new tricks."

Oz.

Neither the Doctor nor Tuvok appeared approving of this statement. The Doctor's stare morphed into a frown, and Tuvok took on the air of a Vulcan severely disturbed. Which was to say, he raised one eyebrow.

Amelia on the other hand sprung into life at the sound of Oz's voice. She broke off her gaze at the Doctor, and hopped off the biobed to the floor below. She then broke off at a fast pace in the direction of the doors, scratching at them when they didn't open at her approach. It took a moment before either Tuvok or the Doctor was able to react.

"Perhaps I should take Amelia back to her owner," Tuvok suggested.

Scowling, the Doctor replied, "Please do." He felt tricked. Not only did he never get to examine the animal, but she appeared to have nothing wrong with her in the first place. The whole last

half hour had been a complete waste of his extremely valuable time. Something told him the blame for the incident rested entirely with Oz. He would have to talk to the captain.

\* \* \*

Chakotay was somewhat distracted as he boarded the turbolift and requested the bridge. He'd tried talking to Kathryn again about their living arrangements that morning, but she had brushed him off once more, saying that she had to get ready for duty and asking him to take care of Amelia. The dog had seemed rather subdued since her actions of the previous night, so he had found himself with no choice but to carry out Kathryn's request.

As though he had been reading Chakotay's mind, Oz's voice came over the comm and said, "I think it's time you put that woman in her place."

Chakotay let out a strangled laugh, but his verbal reply was more restrained.

"Oz, whatever you have to say on the subject, I don't want to hear a word of it." "But Chakotay, you and I both know that it would make life far simpler for both of you if you just moved into her quarters. It's not as if there isn't enough room in there, and..."

"Computer, mute the audio on the comm system in this 'lift."

For a moment there was silence, and Chakotay felt nothing but relief as the turbolift doors opened and he stepped out onto the bridge. But then, to his horror, Oz's voice started to filter through his comm badge.

"...I know Amelia likes you so that wouldn't be an issue. After all, you did give the dog to the captain in the first place..."

As Oz continued to talk specifically about Chakotay's relationship with Kathryn, with the occasional sideline about Sernaix relationships, every eye on the bridge followed the First Officer's path as he moved silently towards tactical, reaching below to pull something out of the small storage locker beneath the console. As he stood again, it was clear that he now held a phaser in his hand.

Chakotay then moved towards the centre of the bridge, Oz's voice continually spouting from his comm badge as he moved. Then slowly but deliberately, Chakotay removed his comm badge and tossed it to the floor. Much to everyone's amusement he lifted his phaser arm, took aim, and fired, hitting his target first time. The bridge fell into silence, waiting to see what would happen next, until a subdued voice came over the main comm system.

"I guess that means I should keep quiet now."

Chakotay gave no answer, and no one else felt it was their place to speak. Instead, the First Officer placed the phaser down on the console between his chair and the captain's, and turned his attention towards Tom.

"Mr. Paris, do you know if the captain is in her ready room?"

Still speechless after what he had just witnessed, Tom was only able to nod his head in answer, and watch with interest as Chakotay strode towards the ready room doors, in a manner that spoke of grim determination.

\* \* \*

"I just can't believe she would do that!" complained Oz, not for the first time. His audience was sympathetic, but not overly surprised at the most recent turn of events. B'Elanna, with Harry beside her for back up, had just had the pleasure of informing Oz that his ship wide access had been revoked until further notice.

"I'm sorry if I've caused any trouble," Oz continued, "but I was only trying to help! I thought I was doing some good."

"You were, Oz," assured B'Elanna, "and you still will. It's just that some people have to work out their own problems. Not everyone was appreciating your constant advice."

"But surely, this crew could benefit from having me around." Oz sounded genuinely confused and even a little hurt, which was doing a lot to help B'Elanna maintain her patience.

"Okay," the engineer started, "take my situation as an example. I'm finding it hard doing the job I have to do and looking after Miral, but it's getting easier. And whilst you may feel you could try to help me get through this, a lot of the solution has to come from me. I have to work out for myself where to set the balance, and it's really only through trial and error that I'm going to learn."

"I guess I can understand that," Oz conceded.

"And anyway, it's not as if you've lost your chance to help us all. You still have access throughout the engineering department, and your help with the ongoing separation project could prove invaluable."

"But how can I move beyond that?"

"Small steps, Oz."

"B'Elanna?"

"She means you have to build your way up to gaining more of the captain's trust," Harry spoke up. "You're still learning what it's like to be a member of a Starfleet crew. Maybe once you get the hang of human interaction better, Captain Janeway will give you another try."

"Small steps, you say?"

"Yes, Oz."

"I should work my way up more gradually?"

"Yes, you may even find it more fun that way."

Oz considered this for a moment before replying. "You know, I think I might get to like that idea."

Satisfied that for now they may have done their jobs, B'Elanna and Harry went back to work, leaving Oz to consider his newfound hope.

\* \* \*

Tom couldn't believe his luck when, once again, he collided with something as he walked down the corridor. Looking down he found that he'd walked into a packing box that was lying on the floor in front of him. It appeared someone was 'moving house'.

Looking up, he saw Chakotay approaching his position carrying another box, similar in size and design to the one that had so rudely drawn his attention.

"Taking up 'boxing' again, I see," Tom said as his commander approached, earning him a pointed glare for his bad pun. "Wow, there's no need to look at me like that, it was just a joke."

"Well, save comments like that for a more appropriate time," Chakotay suggested.

Deciding a quick change of subject was in order, Tom spoke again. "I'm glad you've finally sorted things out with the captain. I assume that's what all this is for."

"Yes," Chakotay admitted. "It does seem that way."

"I could help, if you like," Tom offered. "Carry a box or something."

"Thanks, Tom."

Chakotay handed Tom the box in his hands before bending down to pick up the one from his feet, and together the pair headed along the hallway to the captain's quarters. It seemed that someone, at least, was taking the right steps forward.

\* \* \*

The Doctor walked into Engineering taking a good look around as he went. It wasn't often he got to make the trip to that part of the ship in the old Voyager, and he certainly hadn't had many opportunities to visit on this new incarnation of the faithful vessel.

The object of his trip this time was Oz. The Doctor knew from experience what it felt like to be confined to one small area of a starship, and felt that maybe he had something to offer the Sernaix shipmind that would make this time more bearable.

"Oz," he called, "are you here?"

"Of course I am," came the reply, "it's not as if I can go anywhere else, remember?"

"Of course I do, it's just...never mind. I was just wondering how you were feeling."

"Hemmed in," Oz answered honestly. "I only meant good by everything I did, and now I've ended up confined to this one area of the ship again. I'm finding it quite hard to deal with."

"Believe it or not, I think I know some of what you might be feeling, and I thought I might be able to help. I did, after all, spend a considerable amount of time confined to sickbay on this ship's predecessor." Oz was a little unsure how to take the Doctor's apparent concern. On the one hand, some of what he was saying made sense. He could well be one of the few who could truly understand his feelings on this matter. But on the other hand, the Doctor had never shown any great concern for him in the past. So, instead of carrying on that topic of conversation, Oz effected a slight shift.

"Doctor, I should apologise for what I did with Amelia. Having her staring at you for that long really wasn't necessary, and would have been sure to annoy almost anyone."

"Apology accepted. Although I did waste an inordinate amount of time that day."

"Actually, if you really were serious about wanting to help me, there is one thing you could do."

"What's that?" The Doctor's curiosity was peaked.

"Talk to the captain about getting the rest of the holo-emitters online."

"I'm not sure that's even possible, given our current situation," the Doctor replied.

"Neither am I," Oz sadly admitted, "But I'd be grateful to you all if we could try.

"I'll look into it for you, and present the idea to the captain when I have a chance. Does that suit you?"

"Very much Doctor. Thank you, it means a lot."

Without another word the Doctor left Oz and walked out of Engineering, leaving behind him a being with a lot to think about. Small steps, B'Elanna had said. The question on Oz's mind was simple:

Just how small were they going to have to be?

FIN

With thanks to Thinky, whose summary this episode was based on. I hope I did it justice.