



Episode 8-13 – Remora

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The last meal of the day had been served, and Crewman Chell was wiping down the last of the tables. He scratched the surface with his thumbnail to free up a spot of dried sauce from the day's Chicken Catch a Torres, and then gave it one final swipe. There.

He looked around the mess hall--*his* mess hall--and smiled. Seven months ago, nobody was sure Neelix's shoes *could* be filled. Sure, he hadn't taken on *all* of the Talaxian's duties--who would want to? But the mess hall--that was an assignment Chell had coveted long before Neelix left. It wasn't often a cook could give a duranium-bellied Bolian a case of indigestion, but Neelix had succeeded more than once--and he was determined never to let that happen again.

He put up the last of the chairs and returned to the kitchen. He still had work to do. They would be here soon.

There had been early concerns about letting Chell handle the meals, and not simply because his Starfleet (bah!) service record left much to be desired. No, it was simple

prejudice against the legendary Bolian constitution, and fears that those not similarly blessed would have their insides jellied within a week. He smiled remembering Dalby's exaggerated--as usual--warnings: "Count me out--Chell drinks cherry-flavored warp plasma!"

Chell grabbed the bottle of *kichim*. Dalby was half-right; it *was* cherry-flavored. But the syrupy drink he loved so well would hardly give the engines a decent impulse boost, let alone warp. *Kichim* was light nectar compared to that vile raktajino Dalby favored.

Chell had wanted this job. He was, truth be told, the only one who wanted the job. But he'd lobbied as though it were the cream of the duty roster, and Chakotay convinced the captain--and Chell had earned fans in a hurry. His creative dishes had proven to be delicious for every species on board. The most dangerous part of the menu was the awful puns Chell used to name them. It was an ongoing source of pride.

Chell added some more decanters on a serving tray along with six clean glasses, and walked them over to the table surrounded by sofas near the window. All he had to do now was wait.

Chell had never warmed to Neelix's role as *Voyager's* morale officer, but he would rise to the occasion for a special subset of the crew.

After all, it was Hudson's Day.

"To Cal Hudson--the first and the finest!" Dalby raised his glass in toast. A bit of raktajino sloshed over the side.

"Here, here!" the others said, not quite together, clinking the rims together over the now-sticky table. The cups' contents, once unique, had begun to blend together after a series of toasts.

Jaren's coffee mixed with Tabor's synthale. Dalby's raktajino swam with Chell's *kichim*. Splashes of all these, and Ayala's tequila, swirled in poor Billy Telfer's water glass like a demonic lava lamp.

"Tell us about the time Hudson took out that Galor-class vessel," Billy said eagerly.

"You mean the time he snuggled up to the belly of that sucker in a type-two shuttle and set the warp core to overload?" Dalby asked. "Hell, if it weren't for me running the transporters, it would have been his last mission."

Dalby's words were beginning to slur. There may have been some blood wine mixed in with the already-potent brew. Only Chell knew for certain, and he wasn't saying.

"Maybe we should call this Dalby's Day," Ayala noted wryly, and there were smiles all around. Dalby had been monopolizing conversation on this annual flight through the Memory Nebula; with each passing year, Dalby's role in the exploits of the legendary Commander Hudson, one of the key founders of the Maquis, had grown increasingly central.

"No way," Dalby insisted. "Although--I was there when Cal stared down Sisko, you know..."

Chell rolled his eyes, as he always did. "*We know...*"

Dalby ignored him, as he always did, honoring the tradition. "It's hard to believe those two were ever friends, the way they glared at each other." His eyes lost focus as his mind recalled the scene.

"You say he and Sisko went way back," said Billy.

"Yeah," said Dalby, taking another sip, wincing as a drop of *kichim* sizzled on his tongue. "Cal told me once about their time in New Berlin. They were like brothers."

Dalby's smile faded; he shook his head sadly. The silence caused the men to stare into their drinks, each lost in thought of brothers lost and left behind. "Until he showed up with that damned Gul Dukat, I think Cal was convinced he could bring Sisko around. After seeing all the Cardies had done to Bajor, why *wouldn't* he have fought for the rights of our own Federation citizens?"

Chell's face flushed with blue intensity. "It was bad enough that he didn't join us! Sisko destroyed us!"

Jaren frowned at this. "You saw Sveta's letter. The Dominion did that."

"It was Sisko's *war crimes* that helped them do it!" Chell bellowed. "He poisoned one of our colony worlds!"

"I'm not defending Sisko," Jaren said. "But it was Eddington who started the scorched-earth tactic against the Cardies." Scorched-earth had happened enough under the Cardassian occupation of Bajor that Jaren abhorred anyone who would use such a tactic.

"Eddington had no choice," Dalby muttered darkly.

"And Sisko *did* give the colonists time to escape," Tabor added. "Nobody died. And he stopped as soon as Eddington turned himself in."

"You ARE defending him!" Chell bellowed at the two Bajorans. "Just because he's your *Emissary*--"

Ayala rolled his eyes. *Here we go again...*

"He saved the whole Alpha Quadrant from the Dominion!" Tabor shouted.

"And from the Pah Wraiths!" Jaren added.

"Where did the *Maquis* fit into that whole?" Dalby demanded. "Besides an unmarked grave?"

"He helped Eddington rescue some of us from the Dominion--!"

"And now they're in *jail*, like *we're* gonna be if Janeway ever--"

"That's enough!" Ayala shouted. "All of you!"

It was inevitable. Maquis were fighters by nature--the meek Billy excepted--and nothing if not fractious. Every party became a brawl. Billy had brought extra dermal regenerators just in case.

They all glared at each other, ready to pounce. But Ayala was an officer, and could toss them in the brig--and, like Chakotay, had a mean right hook if they insisted on settling things the Maquis Way.

Tempers gradually cooled to a low simmer. Ayala fixed his gaze on each man until his fists unclenched. When the danger was past, he relaxed his own hands and picked up his drink. He tossed the tequila back with one gulp.

Maybe they could avoid a brawl this year.

But then Ken Dalby pulled out his phaser. He didn't point it anywhere in particular; he simply held it like a cherished trophy. "If me and my good luck charm had had just five minutes with that guy..."

Chell openly admired the hash marks on the phaser's handle. "Look at all those kills! Sisko wouldn't stand a chance." He got an idea, and ran from the table toward the nearest replicator.

The two Bajorans seethed. They were proud Maquis, but they drew the line at demonizing the Emissary. Sisko was with the Prophets now, as he deserved to be after all he'd done to preserve and revitalize Bajor.

Ayala was shocked into a recent memory. The last time he'd seen Dalby's phaser, it was a centuries-old relic in Chakotay's quarters. He had promised the Commander he would say nothing, but he had a sudden premonition...and shuddered.

"Hudson would kill you himself if you tried," Ayala said. "You know that better than any of us. Put it away, Ken."

Dalby didn't press the point. Muttering something about "the last Maquis standing," he holstered his weapon. The tension in the room lessened when the weapon was safely away.

Dalby patted it, as he always did. For luck. "As long as this baby is on my hip or in my hand, I'll live forever," Dalby vowed.

"Careful what you wish for, Ken," Ayala said. He wished he could say more.

The mood was turning morose. Each man was caught up in a solitary reverie. The party was drawing to a close.

"If only those upper-deck Starfleet pukers would give me a chance to use it again. No offense," he added hastily, smiling at Ayala. He'd been itching in vain for action for nearly eight years now. *Voyager* had seen plenty of action...but almost none of it reached him. There was precious little room for true warriors on *Voyager*.

Chell was determined to end it on a positive note. "I'll eat to that," he said, arriving with a large bowl of ice cream topped with chocolate, nuts, whipped cream, and exotic fruits. "I call it Self Destruct Sundae," he said proudly, handing out six spoons. "The first bite is yours," he said, handing the last to Dalby.

Dalby scooped up a generous dollop. He thought for a moment. "To Hudson," he said at last, raising the spoon.

The others grabbed their own spoonfuls. "To Hudson!" They each took a gooey bite.

Chell grabbed the next sugary toast. "To Eddington!"

"To Eddington!"

Ayala took the third. He paused, as if considering his words. "To fallen comrades," he said. His voice broke as he looked at Dalby.

Six spoons rose in silent tribute.

"I'll help you clean up," Billy said to Chell.

"Me too," said Tabor. The other three volunteered as well, and they helped each other off the couch and began picking up utensils.

But then an all-too-familiar sound hit them. Red alert.

"*This is the captain,*" they heard over the comm. "*All hands to battle stations. All hands--*"

Chell was already at his station. "I've got it. Go." They handed him their spoons and left the rest on the table.

As the room cleared, Chell set about securing the tables and chairs.

Captain's Log, Stardate 55350.5. Since the encounter with the Sernaix Ship Mind, Seven of Nine has been working tirelessly to unlock the data downloaded to her cortical node. Each scrap of information helps us better understand our adversary, but very little has improved our ability to defend ourselves. For all our sakes, I hope that changes soon.

"Report," Janeway said as she entered Astrometrics. Chakotay followed close behind.

"Sensor modifications are almost complete," Seven of Nine said. She finished a series of commands at one station, and then strode to the next to begin a new sequence.

"It's about time," Janeway said, with the hint of a smile.

Seven bristled. "The Sernaix data has been difficult to assimilate. Ozymandias downloaded it into my cortical node without providing the necessary context for access. I am--"

"It was a joke, Seven," Janeway said, raising a hand to halt further protest. "I know you're giving this your all."

Seven acknowledged with a tired nod. She had been living in Astrometrics the past few weeks, overseeing the sensor modifications. When she wasn't there, she was in Sickbay with the Doctor, trying to coax the information out, or in her alcove regenerating--usually under protest and doctor's orders, and on one occasion under security escort.

Seven's contact with the Sernaix Ship Mind had made her a potentially valuable resource in their struggle with the Sernaix. But only if they could get to that data in time.

"You'll like what she's uncovered so far," Harry said. "I've been running scans with the new settings. Take a look at this."

He pulled up an image on the large Astrometric screen. They were used to the view by now--empty space, disturbed by the occasional bare ripple that hinted at the presence of a Sernaix vessel.

"Oh, this is *much* better," Janeway said sourly.

Harry smiled. "This is with our *old* sensors. And this--" he tapped a few buttons on the console, "is the upgraded view. "

The screen changed dramatically. Where there had been ripples, ships now appeared. Big, fat, juicy-target ships. Janeway's mouth watered at the prospect.

Chakotay's eyes went wide. "Impressive."

Janeway let her first officer handle the praise. She skipped straight to the threat. "How many are there?"

"Twenty-seven," Harry said. "Twenty-four smaller Runabout-sized vessels, three scouts. No big ones yet." Harry entered a few more commands, and the view of the vessels gave way to a

tactical map where each was represented by a blip. "The nearest is twelve light-years away. The good news is they're all heading away from us."

Janeway frowned. "Still, we haven't seen that many ships before--and we can barely survive an encounter with one. Seven, have you come up with any new data on their defenses or weapons?"

Seven shook her head but continued to work. "Not yet."

"Keep an eye on them, Harry. Seven, get those upgrades finished as soon as you can."

Seven rose from her station and clasped her hands behind her back. "Modifications complete."

Janeway smiled. "That's what I like to hear. Good work, both of you. Seven, help Harry run another scan--maximum range and sensitivity. Call me the moment you find something. I don't want any more surprises."

Harry sent a proud smile towards Seven. "Aye, Captain."

Janeway and Chakotay left Astrometrics. Harry noticed Seven of Nine slump ever so slightly after the door closed.

"Are you *really* finished?" he asked.

"For now," Seven said wearily. Ozymandias has not made it easy to access his 'gift.'"

"Making things easy wasn't his style," Harry agreed. "Care to start the next scan? You've earned it."

Seven smiled, though it didn't quite reach her exhausted eyes. "Thank you."

A moment later, Harry's console chirped. "Something's coming up," Harry said. He worked the controls, and two large blips appeared on the Astrometrics screen. "Grid 19-J. Can you identify them?"

"Enhancing," Seven said. A moment later the grid was isolated, then zoomed. Seven switched to a non-iconic view.

Harry's shoulders sagged at the two bat-like behemoths. "Battlecruisers. TWO of them."

"I'm reading something else," Seven said. "Attempting to isolate--"

While Seven's fingers flew over the consoles, Harry touched his combadge and summoned the captain.

"What *is* it?" Janeway asked.

"It's big," Harry said. "Over 700 meters long. Wingspan over 500 meters. We're still working on refining the scan--"

"I thought you said those were complete," Janeway said, giving Seven a hard look.

"Those modifications were sufficient to discover this vessel. We require further modifications to analyze it more thoroughly."

Janeway nodded. "Fair enough. Good work. What else can you tell me about it?"

"Well, it's definitely Sernaix, and it has the same cloaking abilities," Harry said. "I have no idea what all those--spikes are for. Sensors, maybe. There are dozens of them. It's flanked by two of those big battlecruisers, so it must be important."

"Anything else?" Chakotay asked.

"Well, it's not moving. But all the smaller vessels are heading straight for it. It may be a carrier of some sort."

"Have you detected any other Sernaix?" Janeway asked.

"No ma'am. Every vessel in sensor range is converging on that spot."

"It's a Node ship," Seven said suddenly.

All eyes turned to her. "How do you know that?" Chakotay asked.

"More important, what does it *mean*?" Janeway asked.

Seven frowned in deep concentration. "The Sernaix datalink...I believe further details are available, but it is difficult to access."

Janeway nodded. "Contact the Doctor. You may be due for another nap. Give him what you can, then let him work on it while you regenerate. Harry, you'll be on your own until Icheb arrives."

Harry blinked. "Didn't you assign him to Tom?"

"Yes, but right now he's more valuable here. Icheb will have plenty of time for pilot training."

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said, grateful for the help. He gave Seven a smile, which she returned before leaving. He was almost as tired as she was, but there was no question she'd earned the break.

Reassignment, he corrected himself. Seven would work just as hard with the Doctor to get the information they needed. He only hoped Doc would make her regenerate before she collapsed.

"How long until the vessels reach the Node?"

Harry checked the console. "The first of them should arrive within forty-two minutes."

"I'll be back in forty-five. Chakotay?"

The captain and first officer left Harry to his work, then exited into the corridor. The soft blinking of the red alert beacon glowed in the darkened walkway. "Damn. We're running out of time, Chakotay."

"Another day, another crisis," Chakotay muttered wryly. "You'll get us through. You always do."

Janeway looked up at her first officer. "You saw the size of that fleet. How can we possibly beat them?"

Chakotay was silent for a moment. "I don't know yet. I just know that we will." He smiled reassuringly.

Janeway gave her first officer a long look. As often as they butted heads, she knew they wouldn't have gotten this far without him by her side. At last Janeway's smile joined his. "Who knows-- this new breed of ship may be chattier than the last one."

Chakotay laughed softly. "There's the captain I know best."

Forty minutes later, the first Scout ships slowed to a stop near the Node vessel. Harry had every recording device in Astrometrics trained on the scene, but he kept a large chunk of the main viewscreen open for a simple visual. There were times when there was no substitute for a good hard look with the human eye.

He wasn't disappointed.

"The first ship is approaching the Node," Icheb reported.

"Can you get a closer view?"

"I believe so." Icheb had arrived a half hour before, and though he and Harry had chatted about his piloting lessons with Tom, Icheb didn't seem to mind the reassignment. It gave him a chance to ask about Seven's condition. Like Harry, he was concerned for her.

A spike on the upper port end of the larger ship came into a closer view, as the small corsair inched toward it. "Talk about ugly," Harry said.

"In what way?" Icheb asked, confused.

The question brought Harry up short. "I don't know. It's just--like something out of a nightmare. Like a ghost with snakes for hair."

Icheb stared hard at the screen. "I don't see either of those. It is what it is."

Lieutenant Kim smiled; out of the mouths of babes...He had always tried to be open minded about species and their customs. *A little too open-minded at times.* He remembered Tal and that sweet but too-brief affair, followed by weeks of painful itching and irritability that lasted longer than Janeway's wrath. Just thinking of it made him scratch his chest.

Harry grinned. "Maybe you're right. When I was a kid I used to scare myself by seeing monsters in the shapes...of the...clouds--"

Harry's words drifted away as he found himself transfixed by the view. The small ship appeared to be merging with the spine. A docking maneuver, maybe?

Or maybe the bigger ship is swallowing it.

After seven months in the bubble, Harry felt confident in his conclusion that these Sernaix were one weird bunch.

"I picked up increased output in the Delta and Theta bands on contact," Icheb reported. "The Doctor may find this interesting."

Harry tried to suppress a yawn, and failed.

"Are you all right, Lieutenant?" Icheb asked.

"Just a long shift," Harry said sleepily. "Keep scanning; your eyes are fresher than mine."

Icheb nodded. "Two more vessels approaching the Node."

Each time a vessel docked, Icheb recorded a surge in the Delta and Theta bands. And each time, Harry found it more difficult to keep his eyes open.

"One of the Scout ships is docking," Icheb said. When he received no response, he looked over to find Harry fast asleep.

Just then, Janeway arrived. "Lieutenant!" she barked, but Harry did not stir. "How long has he been like this?" she asked.

"Just a moment," Icheb said.

Janeway tried to shake him awake, but all that accomplished was to send him crashing to the floor. Still, he slept.

"What happened to him?" Janeway demanded.

"I don't know," Icheb admitted. "He was alert when the ships began docking."

Janeway's irritation evaporated. "What have you seen?"

Icheb pointed to the screen. Nearly a dozen of the smaller ships were now partially merged with the spines of the Node ship, and more were arriving. "The sensors are still processing the data. I did detect increases in the extreme low frequency ranges."

"Let me see." Janeway stepped over Harry, leaving him alone for the moment, to view the results. "Those bands affect sleep, don't they?" She tapped her combadge. "Janeway to the Doctor."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Have you received any reports in the last five minutes?"

"Negative. Anything I should be aware of?"

Janeway looked down at the slumbering Harry. "Perhaps. Lock on to Lieutenant Kim and beam him to Sickbay. I want to know why he's asleep at his post."

The Indigo Dawn pack vessel had come farther than most, but had made good time.

"We're queued ahead of Auburn Tsunami and Virulent Dew," Zam, the Zvir of Indigo Dawn, reported.

Skohl, the Adimh, set down his mug of *jiopol* and turned to his Zvir. "Excellent. Is the pack ready?" he asked.

"As we'll ever be," replied Zam, his Zvir. "This had better be good."

"The Adimha wouldn't be summoning us if it weren't."

The name silenced all murmuring. Sycorax, Adimha of the Management Cadre, was a legend even among the most ambitious, thrill-seeking male. If she were the author of the Summoning, it would be good. Good indeed.

"We are in range for docking," the Ship Mind announced.

"Take us in," Skohl ordered. "All hands, prepare for uplink. The Realm awaits. If it isn't beyond your wildest dreams, I'll upload myself."

He rubbed the tattoos on his right shoulder; at a mere twenty-eight, he had a few good cycles left, even though he was fast running out of unmarked skin. If the celebrated Skohl was betting against early retirement, his crew saw, they had every reason to be enthused for what awaited them.

Sycorax, Adimha of the Management Cadre, had a good idea what motivated the males. At 120 cycles of age, she had dealt with more than her share of the young, arrogant pups.

It was her corner of the Realm that the various packs found themselves welcomed to. Flanked by winged females, each of a plumpness perfectly suited to the tastes of each young warrior, the males were carried into an arena filled with delicacies, diversions--and still more females.

Sycorax had a flair for detail that prompted some males to briefly wonder if the rigors of Realtime were as superior to the Realm as they had believed. Granted, few glimpses of the Realm compared to this.

Then again, few held such sway as Sycorax.

Skohl's men grinned widely when their uplink was complete. For the moment, the Adimh's position was quite safe.

After what seemed an eternity of amusements and indulgences, the last of the Pack vessels had docked with the Node ship, and the crews linked to the Realm, and Sycorax could begin this conference in earnest. The women and the food and the sofas disappeared, replaced by hard stone benches. The men of Realtime were also surprised to see their attire transformed from the distinctive Pack designs to a single pattern of gleaming black battle leather. Their tattoos glowed a fierce red.

It was disconcerting to have one's appearance changed so abruptly. The stripping away of visible Pack identity also took a few of them aback.

But when Sycorax appeared, all else became irrelevant.

Her bulk was breathtaking--a full quarter-ton of mass. She shone in the center of the giant arena like a small star. Her golden sofa kept her aloft. She was circled, slowly and at a respectable

distance, by nine winged females, each cherubic in figure and clothed in a different colored garment. The third closest to her was dressed in a brilliant blue; the fourth, a fiery red.

If the Arena was the universe, Sycorax was its center. All revolved around her. It was right out of their earliest myths.

"We have met the Enemy," Sycorax said. Her voice was soft and low, but each syllable resonated through the Arena and its startled audience like rolling thunder.

Voyager! I Someone from the Rolling Thunder pack began to chant. A few picked up on it and slowly the chant rose in pitch and intensity. Voyager! Voyager! Sycorax smiled. Voyager, indeed. Let the pups believe what they wanted, as long as it suited her purposes. She let the chanting continue until all joined in.

"Voyager is of the Enemy," Sycorax said. "But the heart of the Enemy is elsewhere."

The arena shifted. Sycorax and her nine attending females began to shrink. Other females began to appear--dozens, then hundreds...then billions. Each group of females represented a pattern which the males soon discerned as star systems. Suns and planets and moons. Soon the arena was filled with a galaxy of plump, perfect females, a spinning, brilliant infinite mass of femininity.

Slowly the scene shifted back. Women disappeared--by the dozen, by the star system. Soon, all that remained was Sycorax and the Nine. The female in blue was glowing brilliantly, and on her dress could be seen a mass of green and brown--continents, cities. People.

The Enemy.

"This is their home world. This is your quest! To leave the confines of the Bubble and wreak vengeance on the Enemy!"

The males were stunned into silence. Even in the Realm, their minds could process information only so quickly.

The eldest males caught on first. First the Adimhs. Then the Zvirs. Then the lowly Strups.

Battle--of a degree none had ever imagined possible. Not even the Legends had told of such glorious adventures! And to face the Enemy, to strike at its very heart!

The Arena erupted into cheers, chants, war-whoops. This was a mission to remember.

Sycorax was satisfied. The males were so predictable.

"We have a new weapon," she said next. "You will have all the battles you desire, but for taking on the Enemy in their planets, you will need more. This weapon has been based on technology too terrible to use for thousands of cycles, but the time has come. We shall rain death upon them until the Enemy is no more!"

The cheers were deafening. Sycorax smiled, and her radiance shone its approval, causing their armor and their tattoos to glow with demonic intensity.

Harry's snores had been resonating in Sickbay for nearly an hour when Janeway and Chakotay arrived. "Do you have anything?" The captain asked.

"A migraine," the Doctor said irritably.

"About Harry's condition?" Janeway asked again, her tone crisp.

Doc coughed. "Sorry. Yes, it would seem that Lieutenant Kim's condition and the activity of the Sernaix are related." He pulled up a view on the console by Harry's bed. "Icheb was correct; the increase in the Delta and Theta bands produced by those ships are significant. More to the point, I'm detecting the same levels in Lieutenant Kim's sleep patterns. I have been unable to revive him."

"Would it be dangerous to try?"

Doc shrugged. "He doesn't appear to be in any danger at the moment. If anything, the rest is doing him good. His systems were showing signs of extreme fatigue."

Janeway considered this. "Keep watching him. Inform me immediately of any change. Keep an open channel to Astrometrics; if the Sernaix activities mirror Harry's condition, I want to know about it."

Janeway considered her next question. The crew had been impacted once before by a neurogenic field that put them all to sleep. Harry had been one of the first casualties then as well. "Has anyone else been affected?" she asked.

"All hands have reported in. Those off duty shift were awakened just to be certain; aside from some burning ears, everyone's fine."

"And Seven of Nine?" Janeway asked.

"Regenerating, as ordered. I'm monitoring her from here. She exhibited some elevated Theta levels, but nothing out of the ordinary given her fatigue."

The comm system chirped. "Astrometrics to the Captain."

"Janeway here. What is it, Icheb?"

"The Sernaix vessels are starting to detach from the Node ship."

"Thank you, Icheb. Keep this line open." She looked toward the Doctor. "Watch Harry's condition."

Janeway and Chakotay stepped back to let the Doctor do his work. "I am seeing a decrease in the Delta and Theta bands," he said.

Janeway walked over to Harry and softly shook him. "Harry--can you hear me?" Harry's slumbering continued.

"Icheb, how many vessels are still docked?"

"*Fifteen.*"

She shared a look with the Doctor. "Doctor, tie into the Astrometric sensor stream. Watch Harry's biosigns. Icheb, let us know when each remaining ship disconnects."

"*Aye, Captain.*"

For several tense moments, Icheb counted down the remaining connections. At eight, Harry began to stir.

"*Seven,*" Icheb announced a moment later.

"Harry?" Janeway asked again.

Harry continued to sleep, but the peaceful expression was fading. His lip quivered, and his head began to shake, as though experiencing a nightmare.

"*Six,*" Icheb said.

"Harry!"

Lieutenant Kim's eyes opened, and he bolted upright, screaming. Janeway placed a hand on his shoulder, but Harry slapped it away, with almost frantic intensity.

"Lieutenant Kim!"

"*Five,*" Icheb said.

Harry's eyes cleared a little. "Captain?" he asked, seeing Janeway for the first time, but still not freed from whatever was haunting his dreams. The images churned in his head. *Colors too*

intense to exist in nature. Women large as planets. Sernaix warriors with glowing tattoos, teeth long as sabers. Evil plans...

Janeway breathed easier. "You're in Sickbay, Harry. You lost consciousness when the Sernaix ships began to dock. What happened?"

"Aaah!" *Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair...*

"Four."

"Captain, the Sernaix--they're going to destroy Earth!"

"What? *How?*" Janeway said.

"Three."

"I--I don't know. But I saw them! Hundreds of them! They were all together in this--"

"Two."

--this...Captain, it's slipping away--"

"Harry, try! What did you see?"

"*The last ships have just undocked, Captain,*" Icheb reported.

Harry's breathing had returned to normal. The panic had left his eyes. "I...I'm not sure, Captain. It was so real, so real...but it--it's gone now. I'm sorry, Captain."

Janeway glared up at the Doctor. "Did you get anything?"

Doc looked over the logs. His brow wrinkled. He ran his hands over the controls. After several seconds, he looked at Janeway and shook his head.

"Icheb--what are the Sernaix doing now?"

"The vessels are forming up around the two battleships. It looks defensive. "

Janeway frowned. "Harry--are you certain about the Sernaix? That they're planning to target Earth?"

"Captain, I can't back any of this up. I can't even remember the details. But...I'd bet my life on it."

You might well have a bit of Sernaix blood in you after all, Mr. Kim. You posture just like one of us.

Harry blinked.

"Do you have something to say, Lieutenant?" Chakotay asked.

Harry shrugged. "It's probably nothing. I just remembered something Ozymandias said to me. Speaking of which," he said, looking around Sickbay. "How's Seven?"

Captain's Log, Supplemental. It's not much to go on, but I have no choice but to act on Lieutenant Kim's 'dream' if the safety of Earth is at stake. Seven of Nine reported no similar experience. I know the Sernaix consider us their ancient Enemy--how can we be?--but what I don't know is how they intend to attack Earth--and if they can, how we can stop them.

The senior staff assembled in the conference room. They'd been pre-briefed; what Janeway expected was nothing less than six miracles before breakfast. All came ready to offer their thoughts, no matter how crazy.

When it came to the Sernaix, there was no such thing as too crazy.

Janeway set her empty coffee mug down on the table, then reached for the pot to refill it. The officers observed in silence, using every last second to conjure new ideas for the questions they knew were imminent.

Janeway took a sip from the fresh cup, and then leaned back in her chair. "We've been in this bubble for seven months. It's time we left. I want options."

A deafening silence followed.

"Well, we haven't tried clicking our heels together three times," Tom said. "*There's no place...like...home...*"

The other officers allowed Tom to twist in the wind. Janeway fixed him with a lethal glare until his words trailed off.

"Any other suggestions?" Janeway asked. "Or should I replicate the ruby slippers?" The edge of her mouth twitched up just enough to let Tom know he was off the hook.

"The Sernaix uplink node," Seven of Nine said. "We may be able to reproduce the Doctor's experiment, and control the exit vector."

"Any idea how?" Janeway asked.

Seven and the Doctor looked at each other. "Not yet," Doc said. "But we're hopeful that the Ozymandias data will make it possible."

Janeway considered this. "I know you're doing your best. Keep at it. But until we actually have access to the data from that shipmind, we'll need another option."

Tom broke the silence. "We could always take our chances again with the Ayrethans."

Janeway rubbed at her eyes. "They haven't been cooperative before; why would now be any different?"

Tom shrugged. "The Ayrethans want to keep everyone inside the bubble. They might have a problem with the Sernaix trying to escape. We know they know more than they're letting on; if it means stopping the Sernaix, they're likely to tell us what we need."

"But will they believe us?" Janeway pressed.

"They put a lot of stock in dreams," Tom said. "And Harry's got us covered there."

"Yeah, but why did it happen to me?" Harry asked. "Seven was linked to the Ship Mind."

"Does it matter?" Tom asked.

"It matters to *me*."

"Maybe it was just your turn," B'Elanna said.

"Perhaps I should attach cortical monitors to Harry AND Seven," the Doctor said. "In case this happens again, we may gain further information."

"With the Sernaix flying in formation, further dockings are possible, and could occur at any time," Tuvok agreed.

"Whatever caused it, we know it happened," Tom said, eyeing Janeway expectantly, "and we should be able to use that to convince the Ayrethans."

Janeway looked at the faces around the table. Tuvok had yet to weigh in. She fixed her gaze on her security chief, with the clear intent to hear his opinion.

Tuvok got the message. "Your logic is sound," Tuvok said, raising an eyebrow at Tom a moment later.

Tom smiled. "You don't have to look so *surprised*, Tuvok."

"All right," said Janeway. "The Ayrethans it is. Tom, lay in a course."

"Doctor, Seven, Harry--keep working on that Sernaix data. Focus on anything we can use to find, figure out, or fight the Sernaix, or get us out of this bubble. I want every detail you can dredge up on those vessels. Icheb can handle Astrometrics for now."

"B'Elanna, what's our repair status?"

Torres smiled proudly. "All systems optimal."

"Good. So there won't be any problems getting us out of the bubble?"

"If it can be done, we'll get it done."

Janeway smiled. "That's all I can ask. Tom, Tuvok, coordinate with B'Elanna; when we get what we need we'll have to work fast. In the meantime, B'Elanna, sift through that Sernaix debris again and see if anything could be useful." She got the expected nods from both.

"Chakotay," she said, "I want you to work with Tuvok on defenses. Study the Sernaix; see if there's a way to use their numbers against them."

Chakotay nodded. "Aye, Captain."

Janeway leaned back in her chair and took another sip of coffee. It had cooled somewhat, but the bitterness still had the needed edge.

She looked around the table. As professional as they were, they were nervous. Hell, so was she. The Sernaix were dangerous enough one ship at a time, and now they faced dozens. They'd been lucky up to now, but now the future of Earth itself could be in jeopardy.

But she thought back on all they'd been through. Kazon and Vidiians. Hirogen and Borg and Species 8472. Renegade holograms and the Q Continuum. They'd traversed the galaxy in record time, thwarted temporal terrorists, and merged Starfleet and Maquis into a functioning, cohesive unit. This crew had been to hell and back more times than any crew not serving aboard a ship named *Enterprise*.

If they couldn't save the universe--yet again!--who could?

The captain set down her mug and leaned forward, fixing her gaze on each officer.

"I know these last months have been a challenge. Seven years in the Delta Quadrant, staring down the Borg, getting within impulse range of Earth only to have it yanked away again. Our nerves have been frayed, our loyalties tested. At times, even our friendships were strained." She noted the shadow of pain that crossed each face, each telling a different story.

The captain then smiled in that gentle, motherly way that her crew would move heaven and earth to see. "But we're a team. Even more, we're a family. We've adapted to survive every challenge the universe has thrown at us. As I look around this table, I can't imagine anyone else in your place. There's nobody I'd rather have. We'll get through this--we'll get home, and we'll save home--as we always have. Together."

Then she rose. "Dismissed."

A few night-shift personnel were having dinner in the mess hall when Dalby entered, carrying a PADD with one hand and rubbing his eyes with the other. He found an open space on the sofa facing the window and flopped onto it with a groan.

Chell was at his side a moment later. "Raktajino?"

Dalby looked up with gratitude filling his bloodshot eyes. "I could kiss you."

Chell smirked and pursed his lips. "Hurry up before you start drinking that swill."

Dalby chuckled and took a mighty swig. "Maybe next time. Oh, yeah, that hit the spot."

Chell looked around; at the moment, everyone was taken care of. He took a seat beside his friend. "Long night?"

"Chakotay's beating the bushes for some 'unconventional' tactics against the Sernaix. He thinks a Maquis approach might come in handy."

"Any luck so far?"

Dalby shook his head, then took another long pull of the raktajino; he shuddered as the liquid blazed a trail to his stomach. "My battle brains are rusty. I tell you, though, I could do it in my sleep if they were the Cardies."

Chell frowned. "What's the difference?"

"For starters, they build ships out of light." Dalby suppressed a smile at Chell's blank expression. "I don't understand it either. I don't care how it's made; I just want to blow it to hell. Thing is, how do you blow up light?"

"Ummm...with dark?"

Dalby's eyes widened. *Dark matter? Now there was an idea. Insane, yes; suicidal, maybe, but--well, Chakotay did ask for unconventional.* "What the hell," he said, and wrote it down. "Got any dark matter in that kitchen of yours?" he asked.

"Just some of Neelix's leftover leola root."

Dalby winced. "I wouldn't even use that stuff against the Cardies." He took another drink and shook his head. "Well, maybe I would. But these Sernaix--"

Chell smiled warmly. "I'll never forget my first night with the Maquis. I almost packed up and went home, hearing some of the stories you and the others were telling. It seemed impossible--stories to tell the new recruits just before sending them into the shredder. But then I saw what we could accomplish. I still get chills thinking about you and Cal Hudson and that Galor-class--"

Ken Dalby blinked. "What did you say?"

"Umm...I'll never forget my first night--"

"No, no, the last part."

Chell thought. "You and Cal?"

"Yeah, that's it--" *Hudson's Day...* "Chell, you're a genius! Thanks for the drink." He slammed back the rest of his raktajino and sprinted for the door, his stride faltering only once as the drink caught up with him.

Chell shrugged. "You're welcome," he said to the closing door.

"Is this really necessary, Doc?"

"You heard the captain's orders. This information could prove crucial in our negotiations with the Ayrethans." Doc didn't have to say what they both knew--without a serious change in fortunes, they wouldn't have anything new for the captain. The data in Seven's brain remained stubbornly locked away.

Icheb's call from Astrometrics, Doc hoped, would provide that twist of luck they so desperately needed.

"But I'm not tired! It's only 1930!"

The Doctor ignored him. "Icheb, how many ships have docked?"

"Two," Icheb said from Astrometrics. "*Three more are within docking range.*"

Doc looked down at the exasperated lieutenant. "Humor me." Harry groaned and threw himself backwards onto the pillow.

The Doctor walked over to the monitoring station. "How is his cortical activity?" he asked Seven.

"Detecting minor increases in the Delta and Theta bands."

"And yours?"

Seven reviewed the monitor to the right of Harry's cortical signatures. "Identical increases."

Ten minutes later, four more ships had docked. Harry had begun to snore.

"I don't understand it," Doc said. "You and Harry are showing the same increases, but nothing is happening to you. What could be different?"

Seven arched an eyebrow. "Lieutenant Kim does not possess a cortical node."

Doc arched one of his own. "Aside from that--" he paused. "But the cortical node is no small difference, is it?" He reached for his medical tricorder and scanned Seven's head. "Seven--when Harry had his last dream, were you regenerating?"

Seven paused. "Yes."

"Were you regenerating?" he asked again, more pointedly.

"No," she admitted. "I was working. I did not require regeneration."

Doc frowned. She'd been a walking zombie. But Seven was known to work until she dropped, especially in a crisis. "We'll discuss *that* later. But for now--" he prepared a hypospray. "Lie down."

"What are you proposing?"

"A little nap." Doc waited until she complied, then pressed the hypospray to her neck. "I can handle both monitors for the moment. Pleasant dreams."

Seven's last conscious thought was a voice. "*Hello again.*"

Tom brought two mugs of coffee into Engineering, and made a beeline for B'Elanna. "Here you go--just like Mom used to replicate."

B'Elanna accepted it gratefully. She gave him a quizzical look after her first sip. "Since when did Mom include cream and sugar?"

"Oops--sorry. Here." He switched mugs. "Much better," B'Elanna said after her next sip.

"How's it coming?" Tom asked, looking over the table of debris.

"Same as before," B'Elanna said. "nothing much. I feel like a Neanderthal taking apart a phaser."

Tom smirked. "Tell me you aren't using Miral's bat'telh as a screwdriver."

Torres growled and took another sip. "Keep laughing, Flyboy, and you'll be on diaper duty for a month." That earned her a puppy-dog plea from Tom. "Actually, Chakotay passed on a suggestion from Dalby. We may be able to use the deflectors to counteract the Frozen Light effect. It could weaken the field enough for our weapons to have a chance. Tuvok's running simulations in Holodeck One."

"How about Chell's Leola Loaf torpedo plan?"

"Not even the Captain is that desperate." Husband and wife shared a quiet chuckle.

"I came from Sickbay to check on Harry; he and Seven were asleep. Doc says the Sernaix are doing another docking maneuver, and he's monitoring them. We may know more when they come out of it. Anyway, Doc mentioned something about the debris, and--"

"What?"

"Well, you're not going to like this. Doc borrowed one of the items. He's not certain, but Seven thinks it might be an uplink node."

B'Elanna stared blankly for a moment. "And we're just hearing about this now?"

"With everything else, it may have just slipped his mind."

"He's a holoprogram!"

Tom sighed. This was going well. "A holoprogram with corrupted memory buffers. He told some of this to Seven last week, but then things got a bit hectic. You may want to talk to them when she wakes up."

B'Elanna continued to seethe for a moment. "Any chance this--uplink node had something to do with our last trip outside the bubble?"

"Hey, we can always hope, right?" Tom smiled. "By the way, where's Vorik? He did a great job with the helm upgrades. I could stop on a dime! Any chance he could work the same magic on the Flyer?"

"What's a dime?" B'Elanna asked.

Tom started to respond, then thought better of it. Time for a small change of subject. "How's Miral?"

"I spoke with T'Pel an hour ago; she finally got her to sleep."

"Already? What's she using, the nerve pinch?"

B'Elanna smiled. "Something called Phalor's Journey. It's a 'tale of enlightenment in 348 verses.' T'Pel said it worked great for their kids."

"Just what we need--an enlightened seven-month-old."

"As long as she sleeps through the night, she can be anything she wants. A little Vulcan discipline could be a nice balance to all that Klingon spunk, especially when she hits her Terrible Twos."

Tom frowned. "Still, I was hoping to read Miral some *Warrior Women at the River of Blood*. If she gets hooked on Vulcan bedtime stories, where can I go with a little Klingon romance?"

B'Elanna's eyes took on a bedroom cast. "You have to ask?"

Tom smiled and gave her a discreet kiss.

This time, she didn't mind the taste of cream and sugar.

"Wake up, sleepy head," Doc purred into Seven's ear.

"How long was I asleep?" Seven asked.

"Ninety-four minutes. The ships have begun to undock; Lieutenant Kim will likely remain asleep until the remaining ships are free. So--did you get anything?"

"Yes," Seven said. Doc noted she looked a bit unsteady and helped her to a sitting position. "I did not link with the Realm, but I did make contact with Ozymandias."

"Isn't he--dead?"

"He downloaded a portion of his consciousness into my cortical node. It is active--he says our success has been limited because he 'didn't want to make it too easy.' He is a curious and frustrating individual."

"Seven! You made contact? Did he give you anything else?"

"Two things. He provided limited data on the Sernaix cloaking technology earlier, to allow us to detect them. He has provided access to the remainder of that technology. We may be able to reproduce it."

"Excellent! What's the other item?"

Seven frowned. "Ozymandias prefers to 'keep it fun.' He told me that if I had any further questions, to 'sleep on it.' I believe he wants me to speak with him in the dream state. But there is no guarantee he will provide the information we request."

Doc smirked. "I'm starting to like this Ozymandias. I'll accept any excuse to get you to regenerate more often."

"Unfortunately, my link with Ozymandias is not possible when I regenerate. I will require actual sleep for that communication."

"I'm certain we can arrange quarters for you. In the meantime, *mi sickbay es su sickbay*," the Doctor chirped.

Seven's return expression was the very antithesis of amusement. Doc's smile vanished.

"If there is nothing further, I need to speak with Lieutenant Torres."

"Of course."

A moment after Seven left Sickbay, Icheb called with word that the last of the Sernaix ships had undocked. The Doctor acknowledged, and walked over to Harry's bedside and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Lieutenant?"

Harry awoke with a start. "Water!" he shouted.

Doc was startled. "Of course, I'll get you some right away."

"Ocamp! Water! Another Ocamp!"

"Lieutenant! What is it?"

Harry finished waking up. "I--damn, it's gone. Did I say anything?"

"Only 'water' and 'Ocamp.' Do you know what it means?"

Harry racked his brains. A moment before it had been so clear, so terrible. Earth was in danger, he was certain. But what was that about Ocamp? They hadn't seen Kes in over a year. "I'm not sure. But we'd better tell the captain."

Captain's Log, Supplemental. We've arrived at Ayretha and have arranged to speak once again with Speaker Mateth. I hope this excursion into the colossal caves yields better results. We're quickly running out of options. "Welcome, Captain Janeway of Voyager. Welcome to the eternal home of the Ayrethans." Speaker Mateth offered the familiar greeting, along with the extended-palm gesture.

Janeway returned it. "Thank you for agreeing to speak with us again, Speaker. This is Lieutenant Harry Kim."

"You are always welcome to the Sacred Caves, Captain Janeway of *Voyager*. I greet you, Lieutenant Harry Kim." "Is the Council ready to speak with us?" Janeway asked.

"Of course. This way, please." Mateth led the way. It wasn't a long walk through the caves, but Janeway had a brief shudder of memory from her previous visit.

The chamber into which Speaker Mateth brought them featured two quarter-circle tables. Three Elders were seated at each. A slightly raised dais was somewhat behind the juncture of the two tables, and was presently empty. Behind each arc was a set of bench seats, where several dozen other Ayrethans sat expectantly.

To Janeway's surprise, in contrast with the wood and stone of most of the seats, the most comfortable seats in the room were reserved for herself and Harry.

"Please, be seated, and we shall begin. Would you care for any refreshments, Captain Janeway of *Voyager*? Lieutenant Kim?"

"No, thank you," Janeway said for them both.

Speaker Mateth smiled warmly. "Of course. If you have such need, do not hesitate to ask."

"Should we develop such need, won't you know already?" Janeway asked with a wry smile.

"Of course."

Speaker Mateth then took his place on the dais. "To what do we owe the pleasure of this gathering, Captain Janeway?"

"Oh, I think you know why we're here. Although you have a lovely Eternal Home, it's not one my people can share."

"There are many worlds here, Captain." "I'm referring to the Time Bubble, Speaker Mateth."

There was murmuring among the Elders, and the others. Speaker Mateth's skin changed to a slightly brighter shade of green, which soon subsided.

"Your Lieutenant Paris spoke of our meal conversation," the Speaker said.

"Of course. And with our Doctor." She leveled her gaze at Elders Ipthar and Nethma. "Their reports were most...enlightening."

"We are pleased. Enlightenment is a wondrous blessing."

"Indeed. I've brought Lieutenant Kim because he seeks enlightenment. I believe you may be able to assist him."

"How may we assist?"

Janeway looked to Harry, indicating that he should speak. Harry arose. "I've...I've been having dreams, but they stick with me only as long as I'm asleep. I understand you have something called a *dahtelnula* that might help me understand their meaning."

The chamber was lit with an eerie green glow as the shock of those present manifested itself via their skin.

"Um...Tom Paris said it means 'window to the soul.' I could really use one of those right now."

"We will consider your request," Speaker Mateth said.

"Thank you, Speaker," Janeway said. "I have another item as well, but perhaps it should wait until after your decision on Harry's request...unless you already know what I'm going to ask."

"We are aware," Elder Ipthar said. "As we told your Lieutenant Paris, what you ask is not possible. There is no way to leave the Eternal Home."

"My ship's sensors would beg to differ," Janeway said. "I can make them available if you wish."

The captain stood and walked toward the dais. She paced in a semicircle, giving each Elder a firm, knowing gaze. "I also know that you know how to leave this place. I don't know if the Sernaix know how--but I have it on good authority they are about to try. They are determined to destroy my home world--that's ten billion life forms, Elders!--because they believe we are their Enemy."

Janeway noted the color change and smiled. "I know my people aren't their Enemy. And I know *you* know it as well."

"Your knowledge is formidable, Captain," said Mateth. "Have you proof for this knowledge?"

"Your evasiveness is my proof, Speaker. When we approach the truth, you hide behind ambiguity. So I ask you directly--*do you know* that my people are *not* the Sernaix's Enemy?"

"The Sernaix...are mistaken," he said at last. Janeway acknowledged with a grateful nod. It was as close as she was going to get.

"So my question, esteemed Elders of Ayretha, is this: are you so committed to preserving your *fiction* that Nobody Leaves the Eternal Home that you would not help us prevent the murder of ten billion innocent people?"

Janeway let the question hang, then stared up at Speaker Mateth. Then she returned to her seat--and, with a flourish, draped herself on the chair as though she were once again Arachnia, Queen of the Spider People--with a gaze that never left the forehead of Speaker Mateth.

There was murmuring again, this time only among the Youngers on the back benches. Among the Elders, there was only silence.

Finally, Mateth spoke. "We will consider your request, Captain Janeway of *Voyager*."

Sokmal was assigned to escort Janeway and Harry to the surface so they could be beamed back to *Voyager*, while the Elders discussed the requests. They walked the distance in a companionable silence.

Before Janeway could call for a beam-up, however, Sokmal offered a conspiratorial whisper. "I hope the Elders will help you, Captain. It would be wrong of us not to."

"Thank you," Janeway said sincerely. "If they refuse, is there anyone else who could help us?"

"There must be," Sokmal said. "But I fear the window of opportunity may be too narrow for alternatives. Be well, Captain. Be well, Lieutenant. Whatever transpires, may you be spared the wrath of the goddess."

"I hope you're right," Janeway said. "About the Elders." She wasn't sure what to make of the 'goddess' comment.

She tapped her combadge. "Janeway to *Voyager*--two to beam up."

"We must assist them," Elder Nethma said. "It is impossible," said Elder Ipthar.

"They did escape the Bubble for a time," Mateth said. "Their logs indicate wreckage of Sernaix craft in their Alpha Quadrant.

"A fiction!" Ipthar said.

"Believe what you like, Ipthar. The Sernaix have long desired to leave here. *Voyager's* sensors indicate that they succeeded with their tests. The Sernaix were somehow stopped after their escape to spacetime. These are facts."

Ipthar refused to speak further. It was clear what his vote would be.

"We must assist them," Elder Nethma repeated. "We cannot fight their battle, but we should not prevent them from defending their home. For the sake of ten billion lives, we are obligated to let them try."

"Are there more comments, or shall we vote?" Speaker Mateth asked.

Captain's Log, Supplemental. I'll say this for the Ayrethans--they're consistent. They continue to assert that "no one leaves the Eternal Home," yet they provided surprisingly detailed information on how to do so. They warned our success in exiting the Bubble will be directly tied to that of the Sernaix. If they fail to escape, they say, so will we.

Meanwhile, the crew have been hard at work preparing for our escape--and for our confrontation with the Sernaix. The question now is not whether to take them on--but where the battle will take place.

I'm still apprehensive, but the team's breakthroughs and coordination have reconfirmed my belief that this is the finest crew I've ever been privileged to command. It never fails to amaze me how often we've risen to the challenge, no matter how daunting the odds.

"I've reviewed the Ayrethan data--We won't have any problems making the adjustments to our shields and warp harmonics," B'Elanna reported to the senior staff. "As long as the Sernaix leave this way, we'll be able to follow wherever--and whenever--they go."

"Excellent. Tom?" Janeway asked next.

"It looks straightforward enough. If all goes according to plan it shouldn't even be a bumpy ride."

"I'll hold you to that," Janeway said with a grin. "Tuvok?"

"Phasers and photon torpedoes are at full readiness. Deflectors have been modified according to Lieutenant Torres' recommendations. Simulations indicate a 78% probability of success against the Sernaix defenses. Modifications to shields and the ablative hull armor should provide greater protection against their weapons."

"I'll take it," said Janeway. "And the cloaking technology?"

"The information provided by Seven of Nine and the Doctor was most enlightening. It would be impractical to attempt to apply them to *Voyager*. However, a shuttlecraft could be adapted in approximately three hours."

"Does that include the Flyer?" Tom asked. "Perhaps."

Janeway considered this. "Assign teams to make cloak modifications to two shuttles. Adapt the Flyer's shields and sensors for engaging the Sernaix, but don't add the cloak."

Janeway turned to the wall console. "Doctor?"

The Doctor offered his update from Sickbay. Seven of Nine was with him. Behind them, Harry could be seen, asleep.

"The Sernaix are chatting again, so Lieutenant Kim can't be with us right now," Doc said wryly.

"Did he have any further thoughts on his last episode?" Chakotay asked. "Any meaning behind 'Ocampo' and 'water'?"

Doc frowned. "He isn't sure, but he believes it may have something to do with the situation that made the surface uninhabitable. Perhaps the Sernaix have the means to strike at Earth's ecosystem. Given the nature of dreams, it could simply be a representation of 'scorched earth'--the Sernaix intention to attack Earth."

"Ocampo...you think it could have had anything to do with Harry's abduction by the Caretaker?" Tom asked. He remembered that vividly; the only friend he'd managed to make on those first days aboard *Voyager*, and he'd been stolen away after the Caretaker dragged them into the Delta Quadrant.

"The Caretaker took me too," B'Elanna said, shuddering at the memory. "But I haven't been affected by the ship dockings."

Tom thought some more. "Well, it couldn't have anything to do with the Kazon."

"Tuvok?" Janeway asked. "We haven't tried a mind meld yet. Do you think it could help?"

"Perhaps."

Janeway nodded. "Give it some thought. Seven, any luck with Ozymandias?"

"Some." Seven looked uncomfortable. "It may be possible to access the Sernaix control systems through the uplink node we recovered. It will require proximity to the Node ship."

"How proximate?" "Less than a kilometer."

Tom let out a whistle. "That cloak system had better be good."

"What can we do with access to their systems?" Janeway asked. "Could we order a self-destruct?"

"Unlikely. The Sernaix ship minds are extremely sophisticated. But they are also--individuals. Ozymandias believes he can 'have fun' with the node ship. But I am not sure I trust his motives."

"If he's likely to cause problems for the Sernaix, I'm willing to take the risk," Janeway said.

"Seven, assist with the modifications to the shuttles. Thank you, Doctor. Send Harry to the bridge when he awakens."

"Now, Commander--what has your Maquis Brain Trust concocted?"

"Isn't that what Chell served for dinner last niOWW!" Tom asked, earning him a vicious kick under the table from B'Elanna and a glare from Janeway. Still, Tom thought, it was worth it.

"We have some options that can make use of those cloaked shuttles," replied Chakotay. "The closer we can get, the better our chances of disabling that node vessel. If we can access their network, we might also be able to disrupt it."

"The Sernaix aren't as dependent on intership communication," Tuvok pointed out. "A scout vessel acting alone has proven most formidable."

"We were thinking of pitting the vessels against each other. Seven, you said the Pack vessels are chiefly made up of the young, right?" Seven nodded. "The young tend to crave adventure. They think they're invincible. We don't need them to kill each other, but they might be up for a distraction."

"Exploit their urge for fun?" Seven asked. "Something like that."

"And the node ship and battleships?" Janeway asked.

"The Caretaker reference gave me an idea," continued the Commander. "A few tricobalt devices should penetrate any defenses. We still have some left over. Those devices shred subspace as well, so even if the node ship fades from realspace, it should breach their hull."

Janeway's eyes widened. "You *have* been thinking outside the box, Commander."

"The Maquis didn't have anything that sophisticated," Chakotay said, "but we have used the tactic before. A shuttle parked under the warp core of a Galor-class vessel, its warp engines set to overload. We used to call it the Remora maneuver."

"Remora?" Tom asked. "Leeches of the sea? Like those parasite fish that attached themselves to larger sea creatures like sharks, rays, whales?"

Chakotay nodded. "As long as we could avoid their detection long enough to get close, they never knew we were there until it was too late." "Didn't you lose a lot of Maquis that way?" Janeway asked. "I'm not fond of sending anyone on a suicide mission." "We had good men working the transporters."

Janeway considered this. "I'd rather not use the tricobalt devices, but I'll approve their use as a last resort. Operation Remora it is. I want our best people working the transporters; I want no

casualties on this mission." She gave Seven a particularly meaningful look; she would have to be on the lead shuttle, and Janeway wanted her to live to tell the tale. "I leave it to you to assign teams, Commander."

The meeting was interrupted by a scream in sickbay.

"Lieutenant Kim is awake," the Doctor said. "If you'll excuse me."

Icheb broke into the meeting. "Astrometrics to Captain Janeway. The Sernaix have jumped to warp. All of them."

"Dismissed!" Janeway said. "Red Alert!"

Adimha Sycorax was amused by the ease with which the young males were manipulated. The infinite possibilities of the Realm meant little to them; toss in a few words about glory and vengeance against the great hated Enemy, sprinkle the narrative liberally with eager naked women and a few mind-numbing hours of explosions and their hearts and minds were hers for the molding.

With each Summoning the task grew easier. At first, they had required seduction on a grand scale. But now, she could work in shorthand, expending far fewer resources on compelling argument, and more on simple pyrotechnics.

She had, however, pulled all the stops for the grand finale. "Behold the instrument of our vengeance! Behold your path of glory!"

The Earth loomed in the center of the arena. No female stand-in, this--this was the human homeworld in all its vibrant glory. Life teemed on, above, below the surface. And then came the Sernaix.

The smaller vessels engaged in myriad dogfights with the Enemy. Each Pack was given its moment of glory, its name spoken with pride and fanfare to the cheers of all present. The mightiest of the Enemy's starships exploded as violently and as gloriously as the smallest runabout.

The battlecruisers were tasked with taking out the planetary defenses. Even the mighty space dock, continent-sized, was reduced to an expanding cloud of plasma. Again the packs cheered. The Node ship practically sauntered into close orbit. "And now--behold the weapon of legend!" A yellow beam, encircled by brilliant red spirals, lanced out from the Node vessel, striking the vast blue oceans of the Enemy homeworld.

The seas boiled. Clouds billowed. The planet was covered utterly in mist. Then a fiery orange wave engulfed the mist covered world.

Adimha Sycorax had risked boring the packs momentarily. She noted a few virtual yawns. But then the mist cleared.

Gone were the vast blue oceans. Gone the greens and whites and golden shades of life. Gone the lights and movement indicative of a thriving planet.

Instead, there was nothing but a sickly brown. All life was gone. There were gasps.

And then the planet--swept clean of the Enemy--exploded. (She knew the actual weapon wasn't that devastating, of course--the planet would remain intact-- but the males didn't need to know that.) Pandemonium ensued. As expected.

Sycorax watched the thunderous reaction, satisfied. Males were so predictable. Particularly the young ones. That made them useful; they would now follow her into the jaws of whatever hell she commanded, convinced it would be worth the trip. As of course it would be.

The only concern Sycorax had at the moment was the presence, slight but detectable, of the One who had been Touched. The Abomination, as well, continued to exist, though its present capabilities were unknown.

Still, the benefits outweighed the risks. The time had come for the Crusade to begin.

Captain's Log, Stardate 55351.3. The Sernaix are underway, and our preparations continue. At current course and speed, we have approximately 26 hours before the Sernaix attempt to escape the bubble. I've asked Tuvok to perform a mind meld to get what information we can from Harry's experiences.

"My mind...to your mind. My thoughts...to your thoughts..." Janeway watched intently as Tuvok's deep monotone initiated the meld.

"I've never understood your eagerness to allow this," Doc said. "The mind meld is highly overrated, and often dangerous!"

"In this case, it's a risk I'm willing to take." Janeway stood with arms crossed, chewing on her right thumbnail.

"But you don't know the variables! If the Sernaix are influencing Lieutenant Kim's mind, the condition could spread to Tuvok as well, and disable them both in the middle of battle!"

"Objections noted, Doctor."

A mind meld was more dynamic to experience than to observe. The Doctor continued to monitor the lifesigns of both officers, but there was little else to do but wait.

Five minutes later, Tuvok broke the meld. "The images are less memories than impressions. Mr. Kim is correct--if these impressions are to be believed, the Sernaix intend to target Earth with their fleet, and will not stop until there is nothing left to target."

"Anything else? Specifics?"

"Each class of ships had a specific target. The Scouts and corsairs will engage any vessels they find. The battleships will target Earth's primary defenses and larger satellites. The weapon of mass destruction is found on the Node ship; it appears to target the oceans, and is designed to obliterate the ecosystem. However--" "Yes?" Janeway prompted a moment later.

"The invasion imagery was highly stylized. More like a propaganda film than a battle plan. The dreams Lieutenant Kim experienced could well have been an effort to spur the Sernaix into a battle frenzy. I was reminded, above all, of one of Mr. Paris' holoprograms."

This caught Janeway by surprise. "Thank you, Tuvok! That's more useful than I thought."

Seven of Nine had opted to spearhead the modifications on the *Odysseus*, leaving the shuttle *Archer* to Lt. Nicoletti's team. "Adjust shield harmonics 0.047 percent," she told Ensign Vorik. "Adjustment complete," Vorik said a moment later. "Re-run simulation Seven-gamma."

"How's it going?" Captain Janeway asked. She handed Seven of Nine a plate. "Cucumber sandwiches. You must be hungry." "I am busy."

"Oh, come now, Seven--you can eat and work at the same time." She popped one of the small triangles into her mouth. "Multitask. By the way--nice choice." Seven sat up a little straighter. "Given the Trojan Horse nature of the mission, the *Odysseus* seemed appropriate."

"I concur," Janeway said. Her eyes twinkled. "How are the modifications coming?"

"I anticipate completion of the frozen-light shield enhancements within the hour. The Doctor has integrated the uplink node with the comm system and has provided 10 cc of Sernaix blood to activate. Commander Tuvok has loaded two tricobalt devices into the aft compartment."

Janeway sighed. "I hate those things. Why I agreed to bring them aboard I'll never know. Well, they did come in handy to keep the Caretaker's array out of Kazon hands. But that kind of power..." "Perhaps its primary function is to deter its use--to prompt the commander to consider every alternative."

"Perhaps," Janeway said. "Be careful. Because of the nature of this, I want our best people available. I have crews in mind, but if you have a suggestion, I'm open to them."

"I must be on the *Odysseus*, of course," Seven said. "I would like the Doctor to assist me. He has sufficient knowledge of the Sernaix link node."

Janeway hesitated, then nodded. If all went according to plan, they'd be back in the Alpha Quadrant and everyone would survive. If it didn't, they were all likely dead. She hated the thought of losing the Doctor, but if he increased the mission's odds of success, so be it. "I'll speak with him. And the pilot? How about Harry?"

Seven shook her head. "No. Lieutenant Kim is needed on *Voyager*. When he and I were on the Silver Sky ship, Ozymandias mentioned that one of us is 'the One who was Touched.' The Sernaix had held back from destroying *Voyager* as long as this Touched person was onboard, but when we were away they had no such inhibitions. Keeping him on *Voyager* improves the likelihood that *Voyager* will not be targeted."

"Do you think Harry is this Touched One?" Janeway asked. "It could be you."

"Yes, it could be. Ozymandias has not told me which of us is that person. If it's me, then I will have a greater chance of completing my mission. If it's Harry, then *Voyager* will be safe."

"Seven--if this mission fails, *Voyager* won't be safe. I'll ram *Voyager* down that node ship's throat if that's what it takes." "Nevertheless--Lieutenant Kim should remain on *Voyager*."

"Okay, Harry is out. Do you have a preference?"

"Not on the *Odysseus*. But if the other shuttle is flown by Lieutenant Paris--"

Janeway smiled. "Put the best pilot behind the rescue shuttle? Makes sense. Consider it done."

"Seven--I won't say I'm not worried. But I know you'll do your best, and that's all any of us can ask. If you do that--even if the mission doesn't succeed--you won't have failed."

Seven blinked. That was exactly her concern. "Thank you, Captain."

"Don't mention it," Janeway said with a soul-melting smile, all teeth and glistening eyes. "Now--eat up," she said, holding out the plate yet again.

Seven's lips twitched upward. Then they parted, to make room for a slice of cucumber sandwich.

"Commander Chakotay?"

"Crewman Dalby. Can I help you?" Chakotay's face was impassive. But truth be told, he'd been dreading this. "I'd like to volunteer for the mission, sir." "What qualifies you for the mission, crewman?"

Dalby stiffened. "Are you using any of my ideas, sir?"

"We're using a lot of ideas. Could you execute the mission without letting your preferences get in the way?"

"Commander, I--what's the deal? You know I can do this. I was one of your best men in the Maquis. I did missions like this in my sleep."

"That was almost eight years ago, Dalby. Times have changed. We haven't used those skills in a long time."

"Believe me, sir, I'd be an asset to this mission. I want to go! I can do this; you won't be disappointed."

Chakotay was torn. He saw the phaser on Dalby's hip. He couldn't see the hash marks, but he knew they were there. He had an identical phaser butt locked in a drawer in his office, debris from a centuries-old crash site.

He sympathized with Dalby. He'd known that of all his former Maquis crew, Dalby had struggled most to adapt to their sudden transition to Starfleet protocols. Dalby was a warrior; in the Maquis that made him a hero.

On *Voyager*, it had made him a relic, because warriors in peacetime needed a fallback skill. B'Elanna was a crack engineer; Ayala had proven to be a trustworthy bridge officer. Dalby got the job done, but his heart wasn't in it most of the time.

His heart would be in a battle. But so would his phaser--and to Chakotay that meant that this mission would not end well for Dalby if he went.

Chakotay had debated whether to give this news to Dalby. In the end, he had decided not to. But he'd do his best to change the end result by other means. "I assume you'd want to pilot the *Odysseus*," Chakotay said.

"Yes, sir." Dalby's hopes rose. "Good--then you won't need your phaser." He held out his hand. "Sir?"

"Your phaser. Hand it over." "Commander, with all due respect--"

"What's the matter, crewman? It's just a phaser. You got it from the locker, right?" "Ummm...not exactly." "Explain."

"Chakotay, a lot's happened in eight years. When the order came to turn in all our Maquis equipment--"

Dalby shrugged. "I didn't trust the captain. For a while, I didn't trust you for turning us over to her. By the time I did learn to trust again, so much time had passed that I didn't think anyone would care about one little phaser." "What are you saying, Dalby?" Chakotay asked, letting Dalby twist in the wind.

Dalby withdrew his phaser. "I kept my phaser, sir. It meant a lot to me to keep it, and I don't know if I can let go of it now." "Would you let it go if keeping it meant not going on this mission?"

"Sir--why does it matter? If the plan works, we'll get beamed back before they know what hit them. If it doesn't, I want to go down fighting. I'm not looking to be a hero here; I just want to do what I do best. And this phaser--it's been my good luck charm."

Good luck charm. Chakotay wanted to shout otherwise, or show the relic he'd recovered. But he also had to admit that his biggest concern--that Dalby wanted on this mission to be a martyr--appeared unfounded.

There were so many variables. There was no guarantee that this mission would be the one that resulted in that debris field. The *Sernaix* appeared formidable enough; perhaps Captain Dalby would lead a strike years from now against the *Sernaix*.

And then there was the Temporal Prime Directive. If he didn't know about the phaser, what would he have said to Dalby's request?

It came down to that, didn't it? He wasn't Admiral Janeway; he couldn't imagine himself trying to change history for personal reasons.

"All right. Report to the shuttlebay; help Seven of Nine and the Doctor. I'm counting on you to bring everyone back safely--yourself included."

Dalby snapped to attention. He couldn't keep the grin from his face. "Aye, sir! You won't be sorry, sir!" Chakotay watched him leave, and fervently hoped that was true.

"*Dalby?* Crewman Dalby?!?" "Kathryn, I know he hasn't been one of our more cooperative crewmen," Chakotay said. "That's an understatement!"

"But I know another side to Dalby. He was one of my most trusted people in the Maquis. He saved my life repeatedly. He won't go down without a fight--and he'll stand in the way of phaser fire to get Seven of Nine and the Doctor home safe."

"So he's a hero? Chakotay, I don't want a hero on this mission--"

"He won't be. I can't promise that he'll make it back, but he won't go down with the ship unless he has to. What he will do is everything in his power to see this mission through. It's a matter of pride with him." "Why are you fighting for him, Chakotay?"

"I'm not," he said. "Frankly, I'd rather he not be the one to go. But I am convinced he's meant to go." "How do you know that?"

Chakotay sighed. He then opened a wooden box and removed a weathered phaser handle. "I picked this up in the future debris field." "Yes, I remember," Janeway said, not taking it. "I know who it belongs to."

A pause. "Dalby?" She saw him nod. "And you still want him to go?"

"It may be inevitable, Kathryn. Remember, the debris we saw was mostly Sernaix. The planet was desolate. If I had to guess, I'd say we succeed. But that there may be a casualty. If so, do we dare change even one variable that might lead to failure?"

Janeway was furious. Temporal cause and effect. She felt the throbbing in her temples. "I don't care for this, Chakotay."

"Neither do I. For all his struggles, Dalby is a friend."

"He never really fit in here," Janeway lamented. "That may be my fault; I never gave him much of a chance."

"We don't know the future, Kathryn. All we found was a phaser; don't write him off just yet."

"You're right, of course." Still, Janeway grew wistful. "You know, he was always such a hit at Neelix's talent nights! My heavens, the voice on that man!"

Chakotay looked somber. "I know why the caged bird sings," he said softly.

"Astrometrics to the Bridge. The Sernaix are slowing."

"Thank you, Icheb. All right, people, stay sharp," she told the bridge crew. "Tom, maintain distance." "Yes, ma'am."

"Tuvok-monitor all frequencies, best resolution. I want to know what happens down to the last decimal. Icheb, do the same."

"Captain, I'm noting some chroniton leakage near the Sernaix position. The time bubble seems to be weak. But it's small--less than three meters in diameter. We'd never have found this spot on our own."

"Stay on it, Harry." Janeway's mouth was a tight line. The Ayrethans knew about this place. That's how they were so certain of the Sernaix's escape plan. Well, at least they'd come through in time. She hoped. "On screen. Use the new scanners."

For most of the bridge crew, this was the first real view of a functioning Sernaix vessel. Now they were seeing thirty--a sight that left some breathless.

One of their smallest vessels had been nearly as devastating as a Species 8472 ship. They'd survived only by sheer luck and unexpected allies up to now. And now they were about to go charging in and taking on a fleet.

The Romans had a goddess of fortune, and Rome's greatest generals worshipped her best. It was rumored that James Tiberius Kirk had done the same. Hell, it couldn't hurt. *Let Fortune favor the foolish*, Janeway prayed.

"Bridge to shuttlebay. Seven, what's your status?" "All modifications complete. We're ready, captain." All they could do now was watch and wait.

They didn't wait long.

The Sernaix vessels closed to a tight formation. To Harry's relief, they didn't dock with the Node ship. Then the ships began to shimmer. "What's happening?" Janeway asked.

"Shields are being raised," Tuvok announced. "Correction--one shield, encompassing all vessels." "That's it," Janeway said. "Scanning," Tuvok said. When the shields solidified, the fleet disappeared. "They're gone, Captain," Harry reported.

Janeway rose from her seat. "Tuvok?"

Tuvok was hard at work analyzing the data. "Parameters isolated. We have what we need."

Janeway let out an audible sigh. "Good work. Tom--take us to the launch point, best speed."

"Course laid in. We'll be there in fifteen minutes."

They were there in six. Janeway bit her tongue; it had been a rough ride, but every minute counted. "B'Elanna, is everything ready?" "Yes, Captain," B'Elanna said from engineering. "Tom?" "Yes, ma'am." "Tuvok?" "Affirmative."

Janeway took her seat. She looked over at Chakotay and reached out her hand. Chakotay took it, and they shared a brief squeeze. Then Janeway stared at the screen. "Do it." "Raising shields," Tuvok said.

They had been warned, but it hadn't been enough. The Ayrethans' shield modifications included a temporal component that was disquieting, to say the least. The crew experienced a collective case of déjà vu, and felt premonitions of the future. "Wow," Tom said, speaking for them all. "Shields holding," Tuvok said a moment later. "B'Elanna?" Janeway asked.

"It's steady. The warp core is stable."

"All right. Tom, ease us forward."

"All ahead, 200kph," Tom announced. It was a relative crawl--but this had to be close to perfect. It took nearly a minute, but *Voyager* finally felt the promised bump. "We're in contact with the bubble wall," Harry said. "And the weak spot?"

"Just a little up and to port. Only six meters from dead center. Not bad for a married guy," Harry said, earning a smile from Tom. "Feeding coordinates to Tuvok now." "Tuvok, how's our harmonics?"

"Off by 0.0003. Compensating....Adjustment complete."

"Okay," Janeway said. "Harry, open a shipwide channel. This is the captain. Hang on--we're going home."

"Mr. Tuvok," Janeway said. "Fire."

A thick, low-power beam shot out from *Voyager* toward the weak spot in the temporal bubble. The ship rocked a little. "Bubble breached," Tuvok said. "Widen the rift, Mr. Tuvok."

Tuvok did so. Slowly, the juncture of the time bubble and the *Voyager* shields began to part--and *Voyager* found itself looking at the incomparably beautiful sight of the stars of Home.

"Captain, the shield bubble is shrinking. We're being forced out of the Bubble," Harry said.

"Hang on!" Janeway shouted, as she felt the bottom drop out of the artificial gravity.

Voyager passed through the widening rift, but the shields--adjusted to match the properties of the bubble wall--stayed behind. So a part of their exit was disquieting. For some, time stood still. For others, it was like a joyride at Warp Ten. Lives flashed by in an instant. Then it was over. They were out.

And that was the easy part.

"Harry--get a fix on our location. Where are we? More to the point, *when* are we?"

"According to my readouts--the stars are consistent with the late 24th-century. Location: Sector 19658." He looked up. "We did it!"

"19658," Chakotay muttered under his breath. Janeway heard it, and knew what was bothering him. This is where they found the debris field, and Dalby's phaser. The implications of the mission became that much greater, and more personal.

"Don't celebrate yet, Mr. Kim. We still have an invasion to thwart. Scan for the Sernaix."

"Scanning--got them! They're orbiting a planet three light years away." "Describe the planet," Chakotay ordered.

"Class M. No humanoid lifesigns. Maybe pre-Pleistocene era. Lots of vegetation, 60% water. Looks like a nice place for shore leave."

"Bridge to shuttle bay," Janeway said. "Status?"

"The transition to normal space was--chaotic," Seven of Nine replied, "But the shuttles are undamaged. We are ready." Janeway dismissed Lt. Paris to the shuttle bay; Ensign Culhane took over at helm.

"The *Odysseus* is off," Harry announced five minutes later. "The *Archer* is away," he added a moment later.

"Shield modifications are in place," Tuvok announced. "Deflectors are ready."

"Battlestations," Janeway ordered. The bridge darkened, and the crew became all business. There would be time to enjoy the Alpha Quadrant in a moment. Or there would be nothing worth enjoying.

"Deploying hull armor," Tuvok said. "Raising shields."

"Mr. Culhane--initiate attack pattern Dalby Omega Five." Chakotay was surprised by this. Janeway spared a look at him, and winked. It was the least she could do. "Pick your targets, Mr. Tuvok. Get their attention." "Initiating," Culhane said.

Voyager made a swooping dive toward the flank of the Sernaix convoy. Tuvok took aim at one of the three Scout vessels--ambitious, Janeway thought approvingly, but not too cocky. He fired.

The modifications made to the phasers were impressive, but insufficient. "Minor damage," Tuvok said. "Again," Janeway said.

Tuvok took aim at one corsair, then another. Each time, the upgraded phasers made an impression, but the ships remained intact. The second corsair was flying erratically, though.

That got their attention. "Ten Corsairs are changing course."

"Evasive pattern Theta," Janeway said. "Let them come after us, but don't make it too easy for them."

"Aye, captain," Culhane said nervously. He'd much rather have hit the afterburners and left rubber in subspace, but he understood the mission. "We are being scanned," Tuvok reported.

Janeway looked over her shoulder to Harry, working diligently at Ops. "Let them scan. When they're done, fly into the nearest sun--but not *too* far, Mr. Culhane. We'll want to come back out eventually."

Okay, Seven, it's your turn. Make me proud.

"Who's flying *Voyager*?" The Doctor demanded. "Ensign Culhane," Seven said.

"Hmm," Doc said, noting the unusually agile *Voyager*. It was making turns that would have turned stomachs on the Delta Flyer. "I thought perhaps Icheb was auditioning for Nova Squadron." "Focus on the mission, Doctor," Seven said.

For now, the Doctor had little to focus on. Dalby was piloting the ship toward the node vessel, and Seven was busy keeping the jury-rigged cloak in place. Doc was simply doing his duty--keeping the mood light. But so few appreciated that aspect of his skill.

"Damn--I'm going to have a chat with Ensign Culhane when we get back," Tom said as he moved into position. "Is he doing something wrong?" asked Crewman Chell.

"No--he's not. That's the problem. He may be bucking for my job." He remembered his month in *Voyager's* brig. Culhane had performed admirably as the helmsman in that month, including a set of brilliant maneuvers that had saved *Voyager* from a particularly aggressive species. Oh, Doc had enjoyed rubbing in that little report. "Well, maybe it's time I settled down to something a little less exciting."

"What, like parenthood? Piloting is tame compared to that."

Tom chuckled. "I can't argue with that. Okay--we're in position. Now we wait. You ready?"

Chell looked as nervous as Tom felt. But he nodded bravely.

"All right. If this works, this'll be one for the books. Ready to be a hero?"

Chell bristled. "The heroes are over there."

Chell pointed out the window toward what could well have been a planet and lots of empty space. Only the sensors told the real story--a score of Sernaix vessels, and one lone shuttle creeping up under the belly of the beast.

The corsairs failed to reach *Voyager* before she disappeared into the sun's corona. They had been given strict orders to not destroy the vessel; otherwise, some of the packs would have followed her in.

The Sernaix regrouped. None noticed the small addition to the convoy, nestled under the mighty Node vessel's hull.

Janeway had activated the screens on the windows to her ready room. The brilliance of the sun was simply overwhelming. Even without the view, she thought she could feel the vaporizing heat mere meters away. "Are we ready for this, Chakotay?"

"What do you mean? We've come this far."

"I mean--as far as we know, this is the entire Sernaix race. Are we prepared to commit genocide?" "It may not come to that," Chakotay said mildly.

"But it might. We had no quarrel with them, Chakotay, but they're preparing to destroy humanity on the mistaken belief that we're their enemy. I don't feel good about destroying them merely because they're mistaken."

"It's more than just being mistaken, Kathryn. If they simply chose to hate us, we could leave them alone. But they're acting on that hatred. As long as they're a threat, you're right to defend against them."

"You're right," Janeway said. "But how many times have we run into this? The Borg, Species 8472, the Hirogen--each time, we encountered them as this Ultimate Threat. And we were ready to fight back in the same way. But in most cases--even with the Borg, to an extent--we reached a sort of peace. It's like the Vaadwaur; with so few people left, every ship we destroyed to save ourselves reduced their odds of survival as a species."

"Captain, it's good that you're thinking about this. But don't let it paralyze you. Now is the time to fight. They brought the war to us--all we can do is fight it as best we can. If and when the time comes for mercy, you'll know it. You always have."

"That's cold comfort, Chakotay. 'Kill all the bad guys, make friends with who's left.' It seems we've been living by that code for eight years."

"Only eight?" Chakotay said with a sad smile. "Oh, that's right--you weren't a Maquis."

Janeway needn't have worried about genocide. There were more Sernaix around than those now in the Alpha Quadrant. Many more.

The variance in spacetime between the convoy's current location and the Time Bubble wasn't much of a barrier, either. Sycorax was keeping tabs on the fleet from within the safety of the Realm.

The Adimha was aware, vaguely, of *Voyager's* plans. That was exhilarating--an unexpected variable. If Sycorax had a flaw, it was the extent of her knowledge and power. It was a rare treat to be subject to the novelty of an unpredictable outcome.

For this reason, Sycorax sent a decree to those in the Management Cadre. The invasion fleet is on its own. Their combined might should have little trouble with one small starship. But if that one small starship could take out the fleet--what an entertainment! The wagering began. Just to add to the novelty, the Cadre pored over the Federation database they acquired from a scan of

Voyager's systems. "Four hundred quatloos against the newcomer," said Sycorax, opening the bidding.

"Just like old times," Dalby said, staring up at the hull of the Node ship. Well, not entirely; Cardie ships were never this color.

"I'm ready, Doctor," Seven said. She held out her exoskeletal hand. "keep your distance; the uplink node did not agree with you the last time." "That's an understatement," Doc said, handing her the vial of Sernaix blood. Seven assimilated the uplink node while the Doctor monitored her cortical activity. "I have access."

Doc watched intently for any sign that Seven was in jeopardy of losing control. But so far, she seemed to remain herself. "I have access to the node vessel's uplink codes." "Already?"

"It is an interesting sensation. The uplink to the Realm is vast, but not unlike Unimatrix Zero. I was able to pinpoint our current location in realspace, and determined the identity of the vessel to which we are attached." "But--how can you cope with all that?" Doc asked, remembering--rather, not remembering--his own attempt.

"Space and time, for the Sernaix, are irrelevant. Their technology is impressive. But this uplink node is limited, more of a communications device than a full pathway to the Realm."

Seven concentrated for a moment. "Accessing ship's capabilities. Node class, standard Sernaix weaponry, multiple banks. Chief purpose is to connect smaller vessels to the Realm. However...there is a device...this may be the weapon Lieutenant Kim saw." "How do you know?" "It is under heavy guard." "Makes sense to me," Dalby said.

"Do you know what it does?" Doc says.

"Attempting to access...it would appear that the device destroys all nucleogenic particles in a planetary ecosystem, followed by vaporization of organic material. The result would be a system-wide dehydration." "What would happen if that were used on a planet such as, say, Earth?" Doc asked, suspecting he already knew the answer.

"Genocide." Seven's matter-of-fact tone was disquieting even to the EMH.

"Can you disable it?" Doc asks. "No. But I can detonate it."

"What would that do to the Sernaix?" Doc asks.

"All Sernaix caught in the anti-nucleogenic field would be dehydrated. They would die." "Would it take out the battlecruisers?" Dalby asked. "Not from here. But if the vessels were in lower orbit, the impact of the field could disable or destroy the vessels."

"That's genocide!" Doc said.

"Your point, Doctor? If we succeed, a thousand Sernaix will die. If we fail, Earth and ten billion inhabitants will perish." "It's not a numbers game, Seven!" Doc shouts.

"I beg to differ. Our intent from the beginning was to destroy the Sernaix before they reach Earth. We will simply be using their own device against them."

"I've got to side with Seven," Dalby said. "They brought the fight to us; we're just defending ourselves."

Doc was not happy about it. "Doctor--your primary programming is to heal. I understand your misgivings. But this must be done," Seven said. Reluctantly, the Doctor agreed.

"I think I might have an idea about how to bring the fleet closer together," Dalby said. "Can you communicate with the other ships?" "Yes." "The Sernaix like to fight, right?" "That is correct," Seven said. "Then--how about we suggest they do a little planetary wargaming?"

The Management Cadre watched with interest. They were well aware of Seven of Nine's trampling through the Realm, but did not make their presence known. This was far, far too entertaining. "She's good." "And our pups are utterly oblivious." "Too caught up in the hunt, I suspect." "A regular Helen of Troy, that one." "She's found our fleet's Achilles' Heel." "We shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth." "What's a horse?"

"Check the Federation database. Look under classical literature. The Aeniad. Cross-reference with English idiom."

"Accessing . . . aaaaahhh. This is really quite entertaining." "I must point out--the humans could actually defeat our armada." "And your point is...?" "Two hundred quatloos *for* the newcomer."

"Incoming message from the Node vessel," the ship mind of Indigo Dawn announced. "Play it," said Skohl, the Adimh.

ATTENTION SERNAIX WARRIORS -- BEFORE YOUR ASSAULT ON THE ANCIENT ENEMY, YOU MUST HONE YOUR SKILLS IN THIS NEW REALM. CONDUCT WAR EXERCISES IN LOW ORBIT OF THE PLANET IN THIS SYSTEM. TAKE YOUR TIME; THE ENEMY WILL WAIT.

Zam's features brightened. "With whom shall we exercise?" he asked expectantly.

Skohl thought. "I've always wanted to sharpen my skills against Auburn Tsunami." "As have I," Zam said. "Let us begin."

Similar conversations were detected on every Corsair vessel. Two of the scouts joined in. The other held back with the battleships and the Node. "It's working," Seven said. "The big ships are still in too high orbit," Dalby said. "Give it time," said Seven.

The wargames started slowly, but as the teams selected themselves, they picked up the pace.

The planet soon became the Sernaix' playground. The corsairs got a feel for flying in variable gravity, and were soon doing power-dives, suicide spins, tight formations, starbursts. The maneuvers became increasingly complex and acrobatic.

"Damn," said Dalby. "Those guys are good. And they're pounding the hell out of each other."

"As long as their hulls are intact, they can do no damage to each other. They play hard, but their drills are, as the Romans would say, bloodless battles." Seven sensed the reaction of the Realm. "Those observing are increasing in curiosity and amusement."

"Boys will be boys," Doc said. He would be amused, if he didn't know that their slaughter was imminent.

"Wow--and I thought I was a hotshot pilot," Tom said. The *Archer* was a safe distance away from the action, performing an admirable impression of a stationary hole in space.

"Come on, guys--give me a sign..." Tom said. "Chell, how's our transporter lock?" "Holding steady."

"Good. The sooner we're back with *Voyager*, the better. I feel like a sitting duck--okay, the big ships are moving into lower orbit. Can you compensate?"

Chell checked. "We'll need to get closer."

The Auburn Tsunami tagged the Indigo Dawn's hull more aggressively than expected, altering its course.

"Get her under control!" shouted Skohl.

It took a moment, but soon the course was smooth enough to venture back into the fray. "Orders, Adimh?"

Skohl thought. "How about a high-orbit dive?"

As the vessel climbed toward space, Skohl spared a glance at the mighty Node ship that would fuel their vengeance against the Enemy. It was an ugly thing, too overrun with Female influence. Even so--he had to admire the power of it.

He was surprised to see the outline of the ship wasn't quite right. "Zvir--scan the Node ship. Look for any anomalies." "I'm detecting something on the underside. Shall we notify the Node?"

Skohl was surprised. "No, I think we'll take this one ourselves."

Seven saw through the Realm link the actions of the one corsair.

"We have been detected. I'm detonating the device. Dalby--take us out!"

"They're still too high--"

"Engage!"

Dalby complied.

The *Odysseus* broke free from the Node ship and headed on a trajectory away from the planet.

The anti-nucleogenic field generator had not been properly targeted. Because of this, there was no coherent outlet for the targeting beams. Instead, the field continued to build toward an overload condition.

It took several seconds to reach critical levels. Seconds which the denizens of the Node ship--the guards, the ship mind, the females--did not use efficiently, being too engrossed in the mock battles being carried out below.

When the field escaped its containment field, it flash-dehydrated every water-bearing item within the Node vessel. This included every living thing.

It also included the thin skin of frozen light. With a blue-white flash, the node ship popped like an overinflated balloon.

The field continued to expand. The battlecruisers were too close to avoid the blast, and they too were evaporated. The scout that had held back to watch the battles from orbit escaped the field, but its systems were damaged by the explosions of the larger ships.

And still the field expanded, down, down into the atmosphere, extending the chain reaction down into the ecosphere.

Eighteen of the corsair vessels and the two low-flying scouts, and their crews, were reduced to dust. Six more were severely damaged but managed to crash land on the far side of the planet. The field continued to dry up the planet, but it appeared that the damage was not complete; the planet retained some of its nucleogenic capacity, but its potential had been vastly reduced. The once-green world was now a pallid shade of brown.

The planet's condition resembled the Sernaix. In less than a minute, the mighty invasion fleet had been hoist on its own petard, and reduced to three corsairs and a hobbled scout.

But even that reduced fleet could cause considerable damage.

They intended to.

Indigo Dawn led the way.

"Oh, hell," Tom said. He hadn't seen anything like this since the archive tapes of Wolf 359, and the Genesis Incident in the Kirk era.

That was all the time he allowed himself. He locked onto the escaping *Odysseus*. "Chell! Get ready! I'm going in!"

Even the time spent on a single oath was almost too much.

"Seven!"

Seven of Nine had gone slack and slumped to the floor.

"Dalby, do you see the *Archer*?"

"No. And we've got company. Taking evasive maneuvers..."

It was a rough ride.

"Seven!"

"Sernaix vessel closing in--brace for impact!"

The corsair latched onto the *Odysseus*. Zvir and Skohl appeared a moment later.

Dalby was up instantly, firing. It made no impact on the personal shielding of the Sernaix.

Skohl slapped the weapon away, then back-handed Dalby across the chest. He went flying, and his combadge skittered across the shuttle floor.

"Crewman!" Doc shouted. But the words faded as the EMH and Seven of Nine were beamed away.

Dalby watched them go--and looked in horror as his combadge also disappeared from view.

"Got 'em!" Chell howled.

"Where's Dalby?" Doc demanded.

"I got his signal--his comm badge!"

"Retarget, Chell--lock onto the human biosign on the shuttle."

Dalby pushed himself back to his feet. The two Sernaix laughed at their puny target; they would enjoy this.

Dalby lunged--backwards, into the pilot's panel. Before they could stop him, Dalby pressed the Panic Button.

The shuttle's warp core exploded. The cabin section was propelled like a bullet toward the planet's surface, along with the bulk of the Indigo Dawn vessel.

The last thing to go through Skohl's mind was the forearm of his trusted Zvir, at a velocity approaching one-quarter the speed of light.

"Locking on again--"

"Chell--it's over," Tom said softly. He was busy making a series of evasive maneuvers; there were still two Sernaix vessels, and they were closing in.

"No! He's counting on me!"

"Mr. Chell!" Doc shouted. "It wasn't your fault. You couldn't know he would lose his comm badge. You followed procedure; it all happened too quickly to compensate."

"He's got to be down there!"

"If I can't shake these guys, we'll know soon enough." Tom had his own Panic Button just in case. He was streaking toward the sun, but there was no guarantee *Voyager* would emerge in time. He was broadcasting on all frequencies just in case.

"Chell, I need you to man the sensors. Chell! We need you. Dalby bought us the time we needed to escape; he did what he had to for his crewmates. You owe it to him to help us survive this!"

That did the trick. Chell manned the station. "They're still closing--two hundred kilometers. One eighty. One-seventy! One-six---"

The crew of the *Archer* found themselves in Transporter room one. "Bridge--I've got them," Billy Telfer said.

"Mr. Tuvok--target the nearest corsair," Janeway ordered.

Tuvok lit up the vessel with the deflectors. The shimmering hull stopped shimmering in the area he highlighted.

When the phasers carved into that portion of the hull, it rippled in a new way--like melted butter. Or frozen light that had just gone to slush. Two seconds later, the corsair exploded like an incandescent bulb.

"Again," Janeway said.

The remaining corsair took even less time.

"Go after the scout." Janeway was grim-faced. There was no satisfaction in this.

It simply had to be done.

The scout ship put up a fight. But it was damaged from the explosion of the battleships. And without the planet-killing vessel, its heart didn't seem to be in the fight anymore. It went down after a few volleys, the last so dispirited that Tuvok finally put it out of its misery.

"Scan the planet," Janeway said. "Search for survivors."

"None," Harry reported a moment later.

Tom Paris appeared on the bridge a moment later. "Doc and Seven are in Sickbay. She's still unconscious."

"And Dalby?" Chakotay asked.

"He went down fighting. Doc says Dalby distracted them long enough for us to beam them out. If the Sernaix hadn't knocked off his comm badge, he would have made it too. I'm sorry."

"All this--and one casualty," Janeway said. "One was too many."

Harry's console beeped. "Captain, we're being hailed."

"Source?"

"It's fuzzy--extreme range. But I think it's--"

Harry then smiled, and put the incoming message on the overhead speaker.

"This is Captain Yvette Marson of the Federation starship *Solstice*. If you are who you appear to be, it is my pleasure to say, on behalf of the United Federation of Planets...welcome home."

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