

THEY ARE COMING... ONE MORE TIME... ONE LAST TIME...



BORG INVASION

WWW.LOTUSFLEET.COM

OUR DARKEST CHAPTER YET

BORG INVASION

STAR TREK - LOTUS FLEET

RP COLLECTIVE

SEASON 1 FINALE

This novelization was done using the following RP forum threads on the Lotus Fleet website Role-Playing section:

USS MCKENZIE: Season 1 Episode 5 : Blind Fire

USS SPECTRE: Non-episodic Operations: Borg Fleet Action Tricobalt Enhanced Photo Torpedoes

STARBASE 10 : Season Finale: Borg Fleet Action: Project Telepathic takeover

Borg Fleet Action

Borg Invasion

Non-episodic operations: Andoria to Arms

USS Spectre personal quarters: N'Eligahn Etarubdo

Borg Invasion Aftermath First Month

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

(in alphabetical order of authors-participants)

- Baromosa as Anthony T. Jackson
- Braedon Jori as Himself, Sedin, Luxwanna Jori and the telepathic takeover team
- Calderwood as Calderwood Kyran and the crew of the USS Alsea
- Caltern as Speaker-of-Names, Kotari, the crew of Starbase 10 and the Federation Fleet
- Crist as Daniel Crist and the bridge crew of the USS McKenzie
- Cyrus McCann as Himself
- Darum Bains as Himself
- Drakxii as Michael O'Conner
- Evshell18 as Joey Day Sisko and the technicians of Starbase 10
- Jae Onasi as Jolie Bindo, the medics of the USS McKenzie and the crew of the USS Wisconsin
- Joester as Daniel Summers
- Jovanni as Jovanni Picard
- Kalten Siduri as Himself
- Kheren as Himself, the crew of the USS Republic and the Andorian Imperial Guard
- Luke Abraxius as Himself
- Mark Robertson as Himself and the crew of the USS Lotus
- Mishy as Kelsey Alther and the crew of the USS Steamrunner
- N'Eligahn as N'Eligahn Etarudbo, the crew of the USS Spectre and the Rethian Allied Fleet
- Raefis as The Borg
- Redding as Himself
- Rynn as Rynn Natala
- Savok as Himself
- Selcar as Himself
- Sorripto as Himself
- Vkrull as Sydona Vkrull and the engineers of the USS McKenzie
- Teancum as Zeez Teancum

Forum roleplaying session
from April 11th 2009 to July 4th 2010

Novelization by Kheren

Cover art by Calderwood

FOREWORD

Turning forum threads of single made posts over six months by 26 different people into one smooth story is a thrilling endeavor; but no simple task; especially when it is as immense as this one, spanning 4 ships and a starbase in 8 different forum threads; and even more so when each participant is not at all writing to provide such smooth continuity for the whole but mostly limited by RP structure to their own part.

Hopefully, the present result will be satisfactory and entertaining to both participants and new readers alike.

To achieve this however, a lot of adjustments needed to be made, well beyond the obvious correcting of spelling and grammatical errors:

1- Pacing: some writers write in huge blocks of texts; others a few lines only. Some intermix entire dialogs together; others with descriptive text. To make reading even and consistent, all dialogs and descriptions have been clearly separated to highlight them and give a more natural rhythm to the exchanges between characters.

2- Clearing: all repeating sentences and quoting paragraphs referring to previous posts have been all deleted to prevent clogging the text with repetitions that are useless in reading one, whole story, as opposed to multiple authors answering multiple others sometimes days after, sometimes with others posting in between.

3- Ordering; This was a RP story, played between a great number of writers interacting without any order beyond the overall chronological stream of events (sometimes not even that). Some were dialogs answering dialogs of other characters, often actual days after; others were events relating to other events that had happen days ago in the posting timeframe. Others still were unrelated but to the overall story only. And a lot were describing things happening simultaneously.

Consequently, the entire thread and a majority of posts had to be broken down and reassembled like a massive jigsaw puzzle to compose a coherent narrative. Although this may indispose a few participants, it was necessary in order to have a real story and not a repetitive, confusing collection of haphazard vignettes as the original thread looked like when gameplay was over.

4- Filling: Too many authors wrote with only their own part in mind. As a result, when put in order with others, it became confusing to understand that we were now taken to another point of view (character, ship etc) of one continuous event they shared, because either the character, ship etc was not clearly identified, nor it's relation to others. Originally, the link was made seeing the author or with a post title; things that do not work in a fluid, literary narrative. Also, a lot of things were taken for granted, like how the character looks or what is a "Jelly" or a CMO for example. Some references to shows and movies were also too often assuming that the reader knew about all of these.

Sometimes, it was because there was plainly no link at all except for the overall theme, like for example the intervention of the Rethian and Andorian homefleets.

Therefore, you will find here and there sentences that were not part of any of the original posts. They were necessary to help the reader follow the jump from numerous points of view and keep a clear view of the whole narrative.

5- Altering: some authors did not take the time to fully read the other threads and made obvious mistakes (like asking to be transported to a ship that was not there). Others used StarTrek canon in an improper manner (like discussing the Omega Molecule with junior officers around, portraying emotional Vulcans or mixing up mental (organic/psychoogical) shields with technological (electronic/energy) shields). Others constantly repeated their character's name every start of a sentence or improperly refered to it (like androgyns calling themselves "she" when they have no gender at all).

When this could be worked out into the story, it was left untouched. However, some had to be corrected (like rephrasing all adrogyn texts to minimise the uncomfortable use of "it" to properly describe or refer to them). And some even omitted entirely (like anything refering to the Omega molecule and mind shields as ship shields). In all cases, the story itself was not altered by those few changes. Many participants might even not have noted those corrections if they hadn't been mentionned here. But they were necessary to insure a minimal quality as a Star Trek story and a Lotus Fleet work.

6- Additions: Chapter titles were added to break down the story in more easily readable segments and foreshadow the different key parts of the narrative. Also, to make this story as complete and interesting as possible, some elements outside of the Borg Invasion thread proper were added. Specifically: the story ending of the USS Mckenzie as a prologue, and some posts from the Borg Aftermath thread as part of the epilogue. This was a purely arbitrary choice of the novelizer, in the hope that it would provide a more complete story than just.: it's war, let's fight , we won, the end.

Hopefully, readers will agree too.

K. 07-18-2010

PROLOGUE

"Warp core is now operating at normal levels."

As perplexed looks adorned the face of the Engineering crew listening to the madeningly calm voice of the ship's computer, Chief Engineer Sydona Vkrull rubbed her faintly ridged skull with her torn golden sleeve and tapped her combadge. Her voice was ragged through her slightly pointed teeth:

"V'Krull to the Captain. Engineering is secure, Warp Core and weapon systems are online. Shields are operational and we'll have a modulating shield up shortly. We will also have the deflector dish working in about twenty minutes."

As the report from engineering came in, Tactical chief Luke Abraxius and First Officer Zeez Teancum strode onto the bridge, battered and bruised but very much alive.

Luke clapped his superior officer on the shoulder and relief was clear in his voice;

"Hell of a first day, Sir, but lets not do that again."

Teancum gave him a wry grin before taking his seat.

The First Officer tapped his combadge:

"Blue Team report."

After a few moments:

"Blue Team reporting: impulse maintenance secure, intruders eliminated, Captain was informed."

"Well done, hold there for instructions. Red Team report."

"Red Team reporting: engineering secure, intruders destroyed, Captain was informed, Green Team assisted."

"Well done, Red Team, and Green Team. Red Team to torpedo storage for clean up. Teancum to all other security teams; confirm ship secure, set phasers to maximum, get wounded to sickbay, and clean up."

From his command chair, Captain Daniel Crist turned to acknowledge the two officers as they made their way back to their stations. Then he looked at the ship's helmsman in front of him:

"Mister Hughes, set a course for the edge of the Nebula, Maximum impulse speed."

"Sir, damage to the impulse engines. I can only get up to two-third."

Very well. Engage. " ordered Captain Crist. Then, he tapped his chair panel and spoke:

"All hands, all boarding parties have been eliminated, all Security teams, make additional sweeps throughout the ship to confirm no other intruders are on board."

Pivoting slightly in his command chair, he then ordered:

"Mister Abraxius, activate the shield modulation."

"My pleasure Sir." came the reply from the tactical officer. Finally they would get out of this mess. That is if their own mine field didn't blow them back to Earth in a million different pieces. He and Dan Beren, the ops officer, shared a look as they changed places, and he keyed in the shield sequence.

" Field coming up to power in three... two... one." Luke counted as the ship hummed with building energy. As it hit one, the ship gave a slight jolt, registering the power diverting to the protective energy cover of the ship.

" Shield is up....and holding." Said the elated Beren. "Im registering polar movement from the mines in front of us."

" Readying aft torpedoes Captain. If they attempt to follow us well be ready to blow the whole damn minefield." Luke said, sitting on the edge of his seat in anticipation.

"Understood, Mister Abraxius." The Captain said. "Mister Hughes, get us out of here."

After fifteen minutes, a flattened, ovoid starship of deceptively diminutive size made it to the edge of a vast swirl of cosmic dust and gases where it was masked from the cold lights of the stars, moving past tiny shining dots peppering the edge of the nebula.

As the ship headed away not even at full impulse, the bridge crew stared at the view screen, which had an aft view. Suddenly, a large shadow blotted the view, darkening the soft pastel colors of the cosmic cloud they were emerging from.

In the silence brought in by the coming of this ominous shadow, only the voice of the ship's commanding officer was heard:

"Mister Abraxius, looks like your idea is going to come into play... Fire."

The torpedo fired at its target, one of the flashing dots around the nebula, right before the immense squared shadow still masked by its translucent colors. The torpedo hit, and a large explosion ensued. In an instant, it was followed by a succession of flashes that almost blotted out the entire nebula with a spectacular, almost frightening pyrotechnic display.

Joy came out spontaneously to the small bridge, as many smiles came on the faces of the bridge officers, while the crewmen cheered.

A moment later, Dan Beren confirmed from the readouts of his console;

"Sir, confirming mine explosion but... the enemy... it wasn't destroyed."

As the after effects of the detonations began to disappear, they saw the raging swirl of the disturbed dust and gases dissipate before the monstrous shadow blotting the lights of the stars almost accross the entire viewing screen... and just sitting there.

"Sir, I'm reading minimal damage. Looks like they're repairing their damaged systems... before coming to finish us." Luke Abraxius reported in a deadpan, lifeless tone.

The Captain sat back in his chair and thought on what to do. A minute later, he stood up and walked up behind the helm station and turned a moment to the tactical station as he did so:

"Mister Abraxius, restore the shields to normal." Then looking forward again he ordered:
"Mister Hughes, get us out of here, maximum warp."

" Aye, Sir. Warp 7... best we can do in our present shape. "

Crist thought to himself:

With any luck they won't pursue... and if we could return with the entire fleet to deal with them...

His hopes were crushed when the menacing shadow failed to diminish as they rushed hundreds of time faster than light from the edge of the nebula. And now, the lines of distant stars reflected upon it's titanic flat surfaces.

The Captain, turned to the ops station and said in a strained voice:

Mister Beren: open a secured channel to Lotus Fleet Command:

" Channel open, Sir. " whispered the young officer, his eyes glued to the frightening form on screen.

The image was suddenly replaced by the stern face of a Boslic officer, his dark short hair greying at the temples and his short-cropped beard underlining the dignity of his pale eyes and calm, firm voice:

"Greetings USS McKenzie. Captain Crist, what's the word about the energy signals from stellar mass 6636136 ? "

"Fleet Captain Kotari Sir, answered the ship's commander straightening up and clasping hands behind his back, we were unable to determine where exactly the signals originated: we were attacked. "

On screen, the striated brow of the high ranking officer furrowed even more.

" Sir, I'm sending you a report now."

Fleet Captain Kotari glanced on his right side as a bluish light flashed accross his square cheekbones. Then his intense gaze turned back towards those of Daniel Crist:

"That complicates things a bit. Are you still under engagement with them?"

" We were able to damage them a bit and they are still at the nebula repairing, but Sir I suggest we return with a fleet to destroy it. We can't let it stay..."

Crist was interrupted by his tactical officer:

"Sir, enemy vessel on an intercept course with us." Abraxius said with contained fear in his voice. It almost stretched into the Captain's voice:

"Well Sir I guess they are on their way to us after all."

Kotari took a moment to think and then answered,:

"Captain: proceed at best possible speed to Starbase 10, We'll mobilize the fleet and make a stand here, good luck."

The screen went to show the arrow-shaped Starfleet logo and went dark.

The Captain stood up silent and still for a moment.

Things are never easy. he sighed inwardly. Then he ordered:

"Helm: increase to emergency warp. Engineering; we need to get to the starbase as fast as possible; give us everything you can. Mister Abraxius, stand by for a fight, because the next fight will be at Starbase 10. All hands, this is the Captain: we're making a run for home... maintain Red Alert. "

The USS McKenzie flew valiantly between the uncaring glare of the distant stars, leaving behind her a faint stream of ionized plasma and small debris from her battered hull.

And behind it, came even faster the titanic mass of a frightening construct relentlessly coming after her like a pitiless predator intent upon engulfing it's minuscule, wounded prey.

The monstrous pursuing vessel was crisscrossed with ports and tubules, beams and hatches, nodes and panels, some sickly greenish light filtering from within it's deep, dark interior.

It was perfectly cube-shaped.

It was Borg.

PART 1: ALL THE KING'S MEN

"Station-Log, supplemental.

We are preparing for the Borg.

I have contacted the USS Spectre and the USS McKenzie. I count us lucky. Two of the three ships with the highest tactical capability in the fleet will be here."

The face reflected on the small computer screen was feral in intensity and origin, predatory even. He was a Kzinti, a felinoid species that had been at war off and on with the Federation since before the time of the first NX-01 warp 5 starship.

The Kzinti flicked his ears, adding:

"One of those ships, the McKenzie, is being pursued by a Borg Cube... and is bringing it here. I expect the crews of the Spectre and Starbase-Ten to enter this meeting chamber soon, hopefully this chamber will prove to be large enough."

He looked about the chamber. It was certainly spacious enough. Built in an assembly hall style, stadium seating with microphones to allow each member to be clearly heard. Wood paneling to amplify and sharpen the acoustics, with a section of seats large enough to even fit his large, eight foot tall frame. There were ramps too, rather than stairs, a concession that not every member of the Federation had two feet.

The muscled felinoid stalked his way over to the holography table, located in the center of the room, and activated it, his claw-like fingers clicking on the surface. The information it provided should be visible to all in the room, and it was synced with every display at each seat...so each person could meaningfully contribute in that method as well.

His bare tail twitched behind him, and his lip curled.

"If only Borg ships had throats we could rip," he growled, "then we wouldn't need all this."

Still...Starbase 10's crew was his Pride, and Lotus Fleet's personnel were Heroes all. Even the females. Whatever it took to defend them...he just wished it were training and drills, rather than talk of anomalies and tachyon bursts.

With the tip of a claw, the master of Starbase 10 opened a pre-secured, highly encrypted priority channel to bring up the face of a tired but resolute starship commander sitting in the central chair of a very cramped bridge:

" USS McKenzie, Captain-Crist, I've just received word from Fleet-Captain-Kotari. Starbase-10 is making preparations. We will make a fight of it."

The Captain of the McKenzie looked up from his console located to the right of his chair, and listened carefully to the message from the Kzinti Captain.

"I'd like to organize a meeting between your crew, my crew, and the USS Spectre, which is docked here currently. If you could call all your senior-officers to their stations, we can begin this conference immediately."

Once the message was over, Crist simply answered.

"Understood, Captain."

The commander of Starbase 10 flipped open another channel on the main communication system the moment communication was cut from the starship and a beep sounded from it.

"Acting-Captain-Summers, it is good to see you again."

The man was peering intently at his own viewing screen at the face on the other side. Speaker-of Names was Kzinti: auburn of fur with bat-wing-like ears, which the felinoid Captain of Starbase 10 flicked once.

"I wish I could say it was under better circumstances. I need your help, and that of your crew's as well. The McKenzie's bringing back a Borg Cube."

The big cat growled the two words out distastefully, but continued:

"We will need your firepower and your experience with them. I'm calling a conference aboard Starbase 10, Meeting-Chamber-2. Please, notify your crew."

Summers had made a double take movement with his head as if to make sure he heard Speaker-Of-Names correctly.

"On our way Captain" Summers said as he tapped his commbadge to notify the rest of his crew.

He was dressed and out the door just before he was finished with his message to his senior staff.

Moments later, Summers walked through the meeting chamber's doorway with a cup of hot tea in his hands, noticing the large Kzinti stading at the table in the front of the room.

"Captain" Summers said as he walked up to the large Captain of Starbase 10 with his hand extended in a welcoming gesture formally used by most species in the Federation but mostly by the Humans. "It is an honor and a pleasure to be back here on Starbase 10 serving with you again." Summers said with a chipper attitude.

Captain Speaker-of-Names took the hand carefully and shook it, his claws mindfully placed in positions that wouldn't hurt the Spectre's commanding officer.

"It is an honor for me as well." His ears flicked a bit in amusement, noting the tea Daniel had brought along.

"Earl-Grey I imagine, as the current human tradition holds?"

And it was a tradition...even all these years after Captain Picard's famous exploits aboard the USS Enterprise, people throughout Starfleet made a habit of imbibing the simple, elegant beverage.

"No it's not Earl Gray Tea my dear friend, it is just regular Black tea" Summers responded to the query with a chuckle.

While Summers responded, Speaker's claw-fingers clicked over the console in front of him, inputting the final commands for the situation table. There was a final, confirming chirp, and then the surface hummed to life, emitting a three dimensional hologram of the space station and its surrounding area above it.

"Computer," Speaker said while glancing upwards at the ceiling, "magnify three-hundred percent." Dutifully, the image increased in size, detailing Starbase 10 and its surrounding satellites. There were even holographic representations of workbees flitting about. This was apparently real-time footage.

"One of my Chief-Technicians, Yylna, configured this display so that it represented accurate, current data of our station. It informs me that the display can be zoomed out to a Sector-Space level as well. There is another one in Ops, and the other consoles in this chamber can be used to interact with it."

Speaker then glanced to the back wall, and nodded towards the viewscreen.

"The McKenzie will be joining our meeting as well, they will be coordinating over encrypted Starfleet frequencies with us."

The door slid open again. Ensign Kelsey Alther walked into the meeting chamber a bit more pale than normally. It might at first glance have been beleived to be an Andorian, with such a slender built, white hair and blue skin; but there where no antennaeas on top of the head and ears showed under short regulation-style hair.

Alther was Kalthurian, the only one of the elusive androgyn race serving in Starfleet. And the blue-skinned Ensign had barely recovered from a grueling mission where the Borg had forced it to disobey orders from substitute Captain Daniel Summers, and destroy a condemned Starfleet vessel.

And now, the androgyn was summoned to face the Borg again, and the Captain... and a Kzinti superior officer.

"Captain Summers, Captain Speaker-of-Names" Kelsey said, attempting to conceal all emotions raging inside, stahding behind Summers, trying to avoid looking at Speaker-of-Names. Alther disliked Kzinti in general because they very disliked Kalthurians just because those of the androgyn race all tended to look feminine.

"Ensign Alther, welcome. I'm terribly sorry we have to do this again but duty calls us again to save the Federation from this threat once more" Summers said as he thought to himself that he wished Jean-Luc Picard were here. Sensing Kelsey's discomfort, he did not move to make it anymore uncomfortable for his junior officer.

Kelsey noticed the holographic image that Summers and Speaker-of-Names were staring at and saw Starbase 10 prominently displayed.

"May I ask, why is there a Borg Cube heading for Starbase 10?"

Before any answer could be given, a young Human-looking Ensign entered right behind the Kalthurian officer.

Cyrus followed Kelsey in, not having left the androgyn's side for more than a few moments since their introduction a day earlier. He noted the configuration of the room and decided it must have been used for official Lotus Fleet meetings. He looked at the two captains and immediately sensed Kelsey's discomfort.

Wich was not surprising, especially to him: the day before, they had both been expelled from the starbase's main mess hall because of their inappropriate behavior while intoxicated... by Captain Speaker-of-Names himself.

He said nothing and stood very still upon hearing of a possible Borg arrival. He also worked very hard to conceal the storm brewing in his mind,

First the Betazoid question, now the Borg are here?

He wondered if every day during his time in Lotus Fleet would be so exciting as his past few, and then immediately his thoughts went to his next and first deep space posting, to the USS Artemis.

He began going over checklist after checklist of startup and crew procedures in his mind, personal weapons stores, the Artemis upgrade schematics, and calculated how long it would take to fire up her engines.

Then, his still foggy mind remembered: the newest ship of Lotus Fleet was still in drydock, undergoing extensive refit to bring her old Amabassador class frame up to the latest Starfleet specs. She would never be ready in time to face the Borg.

Could we ever be?

Sobered by the thought, he listened carefully for the Captain's response to his fellow Ensign's question.

Speaker-of-Names nodded to the two junior officers, continuing his all business posture, regarding the now-Sector-Space view given by the holographic table. The image had moved at a dizzying speed to focus on a disturbing view that the master of Starbase 10 pointed to:

"Ensigns. You'll note the little vessel in front of the cube. That is the USS McKenzie. They discovered the cube and it gave chase. I will leave the details of that to Captain-Crist. We will need to begin preparations immediately so as to aid them in destroying the cube."

He looked to McCann, his fierce visage apologetic now.

"The Artemis will not be ready in time to join the fight. It will just be Starbase-Ten, the Spectre, and the McKenzie. Hopefully later, the Lotus and the Alsea will be able to join us."

Daniel Summers particularly noticed the part Betazoid standing behind him and was able to catch his thoughts. His own mind was able to answer his:

"Yes Ensign now the Borg are here. We must do all in our power to stop this Cube from going any further than Starbase 10....Sorry I intruded on your thoughts but I as well am a Betazoid and I could not help sensing those thoughts." Summers finished with a gentle bow of respect.

Cyrus was a bit shocked by the Captain's revelation, but not for the usual reasons. He had so many questions about his own missing medical history, his Starfleet personnel file, and his own true nature. Now a Captain he had never met before had just labeled him a Betazoid, fueling the growing firestorm of questions in his mind. But there would be time to answer them later... or so he hoped.

He ceased all telepathic activity in order to save Captain Summers from the painful fate of so many other Betazoids had suffered when interacting with Cyrus on such levels.

He could only hope Kelsey would understand his hesitancy.

Cyrus returned the bow;

"No offense taken, Sir." He cleared his mind for the battle ahead.

Summers sensed another of his ship crew member's presence approaching, but left it alone when he sensed a distant thought pattern from him.

This crewmember was Rethian, a partly telepathic race which barely a few years ago applied for citizenship in the United Federation of Planets. Like the Kalthurian, this tall, willowy, copper colored spine-headed humanoid was the only representative of his people in Starfleet. It was only a few minutes from the docking area to the audience chamber and N'Eligahn's own mental distractions had made it seem like a shorter distance. He was still thinking about the Borg menace they had barely escaped... and were now about to face again.

He entered through one of the upper doors of the higher levels of the meeting chamber and remained there, leaning against the darkened door frame and looking down on the briefing.

He could see Captain Summers and a Kzinti he'd never met before with the pips of a captain on his wide collar. Right near them were Kelsey and a Human he'd never seen before either.

When N'Eligahn had received the summons from Commander Summers, he'd been alone meditating in his room. An activity that had taken up most of his personal time since they had gotten back to the Starbase.

The whole episode with the Borg had left him feeling cold and incomplete. Talking with Ensign Kelsey Alther hadn't helped; neither had the alcohol. He just repeated the events over and over in his mind. Especially the time aboard the lost USS Tempest when Starfleet orders had kept him from destroying the whole ship to begin with. Then their orders had again tried to keep him from saving the Spectre when they should have been killing them, those Borg. Killing every last one of them. An assimilated officer is a casualty of war, nothing more, nothing less. They should be remembered, possibly pitied, but still they had become the enemy and they needed to be destroyed.

Kelsey had taken upon itself to resolve the situation... and the androgyn had been reported for doing so. And he had supported her openly in front of their acting commanding officer.

He didn't mind the reprimand he too got on his Starfleet record as much as the fact that they may have to face that whole mess again... so soon.

After receiving the call for the emergency meeting, he had pulled on his uniform and departed the Spectre for Starbase 10, the first time he'd stepped off the ship since they'd docked. He had ignored his surroundings as his mind was too deep into its own affairs. Now, he was here. N'Eligahn decided he would remain here and just watch and absorb the briefing. If he said anything at all it would be short, straight and to the point. He wasn't in the frame nor state of mind to do anything more.

And now, others were being summoned and came to join them in the vast room.

The Spectre's Chief engineer, Michael O'Conner, sighed and put a bottle back down on the stall's shelf, as he heard the message from Commander Summers. He then tapped his badge and replied:

"Aye, Sir. On my way." Then he turned sideways:

"Duty calls. Try not to sell that bottle while I am gone." He said to the Bajoran merchant as he left.

As he headed to a turbolift, in no real hurry, he straightened his uniform and made a quick mental check of all the Spectre systems and repairs.

Engines check, weapons check, shields check, transporters check...

Several minutes later, O'Conner finally noticed that he had arrived at the turbo lift and stepped inside.

"Meeting Chamber 2"

Moments later, O'Conner rushed out of the turbo lift and turned the corner, only to bump in to the Ensign blocking most of the door way to the meeting chamber,s upper level.

"Err... sorry but you shouldn't stand in a doorway." He mumbled to N'Eligahn.

N'Eligahn barely stopped himself from glaring at him. If he had been watching where he was going instead of bumbling around like an idiot....

He stopped and shook his head, stepping more into the room. That was no way to be thinking. Especially considering the Chief Engineer was his superior officer and recently promoted as executive officer of his own ship.

Then N'Eligahn heard the one word he was dreading to hear.

Borg.

The word made him shudder. But not with fear, more with a partially controlled rage. They'd dealt with the Borg before. And now they were coming to the one place he'd felt at least some degree of safety. His lips curled into a snarl.

He intended to destroy them this time. Not just kill them, that was too easy. N'Eligahn wanted them smashed beneath his boots. He wanted to sense the Borg actually feeling some sort of fear or pain as he dug his claws into their disgusting flesh. His snarl turned into a smile.

He was going to destroy them.

And damn anyone that would get in his way.

All this time, Kelsey Alther watched as people came in, too zoned to care about anything going on in the room.

N'Eligahns feeling seemed to flow to the Kalthurian easily and they matched each other's.

... He was going to destroy them.

The thought gave Alther a smile but it was quickly dashed, remembering Summers' comment.

"Captain Summers, do I have a habit of attracting Borg or something?" the blue skinned Ensign said with a grim smile directed at him.

" No Ensign, not just you, but apparently all of Lotus Fleet. Seeing as how we are the Federation's Elite Force, it is a natural assumption that we get targeted first." Summers said with a bit of a chuckle.

Kelsey sighed, still just listening in on the meeting

Speaker-of-Names looked to the others entering the chamber, and gestured to them and to the Ensigns before him.

"If you would take seats, we will begin in earnest shortly. There are interactive-consoles arrayed before every chair." The tiger-like visage of the starbase's Captain was stern. "You are the first here, but there will be many more officers attending this meeting. They are all rushing to complete their tasks."

He continued, while glancing over to Summers, who would know that his place was also beside the holographic situation table:

"I have contacted the McKenzie, and they are assembling their crew and ensuring a stable, encrypted-communication so that they may participate. But for now, if your people have comments on the Borg that may be useful, we should not waste any time."

Before Summers could nod or say anything he heard Ensign Alther reply:

"Comments on the Borg? It seems any Borg who were assimilated and once were Starfleet Officer seem to be stronger against phaser rotations in that they adapt quicker. If you have to shoot them, use a TR – 116. I'm out of ideas other than that" the androgyn officer finished, looking at Speaker-of-Names.

Daniel Summers looked up from his cup at the Ensign.

"Ensign Alther is right; our traditional arsenal will not work on the Borg. We need to do this in an unconventional manner: they apparently have no defense to projectile weaponry." Summers finished while looking over at N'Eligahn and O'Conner for their input as well.

While everyone else talked, O'Conner moved to one the chairs in the meeting hall and began to fiddle with the interactive console to study what was known about the Borg cube coming their way.

N'Eligahn also tapped into the nearest console and read the information.

It was ridiculous. And he said so:

" Wolf 359 had been a disaster against a Borg cube, Sector 001 nearly assimilated had the Enterprise not intervened. How can we possibly expect an even smaller force to take on an entire cube? "

The Kzinti listened to the Spectre's crew as they began to detail their experiences, golden eyes regarding them intently one after the other, his bare tail swishing slowly behind him. He growled finally, and spoke once N'Eligahn finished:

"This starbase is equipped with six-hundred-and-fifty type-twelve phaser-arrays and torpedo launchers. Are you telling me they are all useless?"

The station was far from weaponless. but it was clear Speaker didn't like the thought of his station's immense firepower unusable.

N'Elighan caught Commander Summers' gaze and set his mind racing. They couldn't take the cube on ship-to-ship, that would be utter suicide. They wouldn't last ten minutes, and that was a hopeful estimate. He thought back to the Tempest and a smile grew on his face.

"Captain," he said, stepping forward. "I have plan, if you'll permit me."

The Starbase Commander in Chief nodded once to the Rethian:

" Tell us of your plan. It's clear we'll need every idea that you all can give us."

N'Eligahn took a deep breath and walked down the steps to the center holoprojector. Looking first at the other attendees then at Captain Speaker-of-Names himself.

"With all due respect, Sir, didn't the Federation muster one of the largest fleets ever to combat the Borg at Wolf 359? And it was torn apart like tissue paper," he said. "Then an even larger force at Sector 001 that only survived because of a last minute rescue."

He stood attention before his superiors and spoke firmly:

Captain, if past accounts are any indication the Borg will blast the Spectre, McKenzie and any other ships out of the sky before it carves this station into giant, assimilable chunks," he continued, speaking more sure of himself than he felt

" But if there's one thing we've learned about the Borg, it's that it takes them far longer to respond and adapt to, shall we say, unorthodox tactics then, and pardon me, six-hundred-and-fifty type-twelve phaser-arrays to the hull,"

He pointed up to the cube.

"My proposal is this: Once the cube arrives in this sector, all available ships rush to meet it. These ships will be armed with torpedoes configured upon specifications provided by Lieutenant O'Conner," N'Eligahn said, glancing up at the Spectre's Chief Engineer. "He rigged a massive electromagnetic pulse explosion to bring down the Tempest's shields and disable most of the electronics, eliminating any possible Borg reinforcements from beaming over to the Spectre."

N'Eligahn left out the part where he had been inside the Tempest during this event and that whole part had not been the most fun episode of his life.

"The Borg may recover from this rather quickly, or at least, faster than a broken and half-assimilated Akira-class... so then, comes the next phase," N'Eligahn continued. "Each ship will also be carrying a strike force consisting of the best tactical and security teams we can get from the ships and the station. We forcibly board the temporarily crippled cube and, utilizing information from Captain Jean-Luc Picard, Seven-of-Nine and any other recovered Borg, locate the heart of this monstrosity and rip it out."

He also left out the part of how he personally intended to locate the heart of the Borg cube, as the thought of doing it again half terrified him.

But it would be necessary. The Federation came first, even above his own sanity.

"Thank you, Sir," he said, bowing his head.

Speaker nodded.

"I know of the uses of electro-magnetic-pulses; this Chief-Engineer-O'Conner is a sound strategist." He continued, apparently not knowing that the man was already in the conference chamber.

The eight foot tall Kzinti looked then to Summers, and to those assembled, looking for anyone who wished to add onto or revise N'Eligahn's idea.

He noted that Ensign Yylna and its team had entered the room as well. His own personal miracle worker had been busy since Speaker had left Security for Command, also switching from Security, but in favor of Science instead. There, the enterprising young Veldriari had worked on holographic information networking technologies, and was responsible for the station's array of situations like the one surrounded by the commanding officers and N'Eligahn. It's presence here indicated that his team had finished work on compressing the stream of data to the McKenzie.

Captain Speaker continued. "Will this one tool be enough to bring the Borg down to our level?"

"Sir, as with anything with the Borg, we can only speculate as to whether or not any strategy would work," N'Eligahn said. "But it worked on the Tempest and the interference from the belt would have prevented the Borg from transmitting their 'memories', so the odds of adaption are slim. And frankly, Sir, it's a better plan than sitting here waiting to throw daggers at a titanium wall. Unless we have something better, of course."

After listening to N'Elighan's speech, O'Conner stood up from his chair after one last tap on the chair's interface. Then he began to talk:

"Well, Ensign Etarudbo's plan could work with some tweaks. One: we would need one massive explosion, not dozens. Borg would adapt to dozens of successive explosions before those could do what we need them to do."

As he began to explain his version of the plan, he leaned against the seat in front of him.

"However, the way the plan needs to be changed is that we commandeer a merchant vessel and then shield it from sensors best we can as we jury-rig it to explode on command. Then we have a small crew take it out near where the Borg cube and the McKenzie are expected to arrive and make it look like it's dead in the water. Hopefully the Borg cube will ignore the seemingly defenseless lame merchant vessel as the McKenzie, Spectre, and the station engage the cube."

On the monitor, the holographic image offered a visual representation of the tactic the Chief Engineer and First Officer of the Spectre was refining:

"While the cube is distracted, the small crew on the merchant vessel will plot a ramming course and then put all the power to the engines. Once they get going, the McKenzie or the Spectre will need to move in quickly and beam off the crew, then get to a safe distance."

In the unlikely event this won't kill the cube, it should put a big hole in it's side and knock out most of it's system at least for a few minutes. Which would allow time for the Mckenzie and Spectre to transport strike teams on board."

After a short pause, O'Conner added. "This could also be a good test for the Artemis' rookies."

Ensign Kelsey Alther pondered for a moment before speaking up

"What if the explosions weren't completely the same? Like different frequencies or specifications? Then we could use different EMPs on different ships and I doubt the Borg can adapt to three EMPs at once." she finished.

Having been standing for a short time in the back of the room, not wanting to walk into the meeting room after it had already started, Ensign Sorripto stepped from the shadows and spoke.

All eyes turned on him, some with mild surprise as his grey, bny and scaly features offered a sight never seen before: A Cardassian wearing a Starfleet uniform.

"I apologize for being late Sir, but being a Cardassian tends to draw some negative attention and delayed me".

Indeed, there were still a number of people, especially in Starfleet, who remembered the war with his people... and how they had fought alongside the invading Dominion before finally turning around and joining the defenders of the Alpha Quadrant. For many, the wounds were still fresh and seeing someone like Sorripto in their midst might not always be easy to accept.

Taking a seat at the table Sorripto, continued to speak with a serious tone:

"Projectile weapons should be an effective means for us to defend ourselves since our experience has shown us that the Borg are not designed for combat against projectile weapons."

Pointing his finger on the table, Sorripto rose slightly before continuing:

"I would suggest however, Sir, that we research range weapons or lead based projectiles. I must suggest against trying an EMP with the Borg. There is no evidence that the EMP would work against the Collective"

Pausing momentarily Sorripto glanced around the room to see who the USS McKenzie's new science officer would be fighting side by side with.

N'Eligahn smiled at this.

"Begging your pardon, but I don't think you were inside of a Borg controlled ship when it was hit by an EMP... nor read the report of the Spectre's last mission." N'Eligahn said. "I was, and I can tell you that it hurts them. I have no doubt they would have recovered but it did hurt them enough to allow me into their sanctum. And as far as projectile weapons are concerned, that was exactly what I intended the assault teams to be armed with," N'Eligahn continued. "Primarily TR-116 rifles and preferably any melee weapons the members of the teams are familiar with."

He smiled. "They don't get along very well with those either."

Kelsey smiled; the memories of the both of them destroying the Borg while on the Tempest was still fresh. The androgyn enjoyed going through the memories.

But also skipped the more traumatic ones.

"The TR - 116's should be easy to replicate and the ammo packs are small enough so the amount we can carry is fairly big. I can vouch for that and so can N'Eligahn." Alther told the Cardassian.

"If it will slow them momentarily then it is worth considering. ,, admitted Sorripto. "As for your assault teams, may I suggest something that doesn't involve dangerous trilithium resin?"

"It did more than slow them down" Kelsey told the Cardassian : "It pretty much stopped them in their tracks. However, this one has a Collective mind so it may not be as effective but still, should stop them dead in their tracks for a while."

The Kalthurian Ensign heard the Trilithium Resin part but ignored it. N'Eligahn could answer that if he wanted to.

Summers listened to everyone before he started in.

"Ok well we know they don't do too well with these things, EMP, Projectile Weapons and Transphasic Torpedoes. If we can get them to be down long enough for us to launch only a small handful of them, the fight will be over before it even started. My biggest concern will be getting the crew off that other ship we will be using, and of course the hand to hand with the Borg." Summers said as he looked around the room at everyone and then back down to the display and over to Captain Speaker once more.

"I can fly the cargo ship in," N'Eligahn said. "It's on a one way trip straight for the cube so it doesn't need a crew. Just make sure the cube's kept off my back long enough for the ramming to be effective."

He carefully threw up his mental blocks. Not so quickly that it'd be noticed, but fast enough to hide the other parts to this plan.

"I think we'll also have to see if there's any way of jamming their transmissions," he added. "If these methods are effective, we don't need them reporting back to the Collective and killing any chances others may have with these attacks."

" You'll need people on that ship with you, It's not going to be easy if the cube decides to shoot at you and you have to dodge; and if a fire starts, you'll need someone to put it out. " Kelsey said.

The telepathic androgyn didn't check his mind because it thought it knew where he was going with this.

And Kelsey Alther liked it.

"I seal off the cabin, fortify the entrance and set an automatic transporter," N'Eligahn said. "Frankly, any cargo ship the Federation can come up with will be ten times superior to the shuttles I used to fly," he said with a smile. Then lowering his defenses for a split second he shot a single word at the Kalthurian:

"No."

Kelsey took the opportunity to hammer in:

" Your not the only one with a grudge. " it shot at him in a split second before he managed to close his opening.

"Borg have been known to use Transport Inhibitors, and you can easily lose a forcefield in a combat situation on a cargo ship" Ensign Alther answered out loud, leaning back. "You should always take a crew, even if they are just basic Security officers; you will need the help. "

N'Eligahn shot a glare at Kelsey. He knew the androgyn wouldn't let up. He'd have to find some other way to keep it away.

"All right then, we can iron that out later." he said before looking around the room. "We all know this whole thing is the best plan we've got. Like I said, Borg cubes have torn through a lot more then the paltry force we have here."

With an almost forced tone, Sorripto spoke up:

"Having to stand there and watch your entire homeworld destroyed is something I would wish on no one, and I know; even tho I was young, I remember the bombardment of Cardassia Prime."

Taking a second to compose himself, not wanting to let the Cardassian in him take over the Federation officer he had become, Sorripto took a deep breath and looked at the others arguing before him. He was seeing plainly on their faces what they were thinking:

"This is no time for arguments over grudges and who is more angry. A good soldier puts his emotions aside in time for the battle. We may not be much of a force, but we have a fighting spirit the Borg cannot match."

Looking at N'Elighan, Sorripto asked:

"So what is the next step?"

Captain Speaker-of-Names held up a forestalling hand.

"Mm." He growled thoughtfully. "This plan of yours is interesting, but do not assume that it is the one we will go with. We will consider all options and continue evaluating them."

He paused, and considering the matter settled, moved on.

"Now," he rumbled "I would like you to consider the following: the Borg have somehow managed to adapt to electro-magnetic-pulses. Say a species they're assimilating in the Delta-Quadrant used the same ploy, and the information on how to counter it has made its way here." The eight-foot tall felinoid paced the front of the room, his tail swishing behind him slowly, pensively.

"How should we proceed in that case?"

Glancing at the towering beast in front of him, Sorripto spoke to Captain Speaker-of-Names:

"Could have? There is just as good a chance that something like this was never tried in the Delta quadrant. I for one do not approve of abandoning a plan on what could have happened. "

Kelsey looked at the Cardassian.

"So if we prepare for that plan and it turns out the Borg have adapted, what do we do? Throw rocks at them? No, it is better to plan out multiple scenarios and pick the one with a lower chance of failing."

Kelsey turned away from him.

"We need more plans than just EMPs and throwing officers at it."

The Rethian thought the Kalthurian and himself were pretty composed outwardly; but it appeared Ensign Sorripto was much more perceptive of outward signs than what he thought himself could control.

But there was more to consider here than a fellow officer's perspicacity.

N'Eligahn thought for a moment. Adapting or not, the odds of them just brushing off the magnitude of the blast they were talking about was slim, even for the legendary Borg adaptability.

"There's the possibility of utilizing a similar strategy to the one the Enterprise-D did during the first Borg invasion after Wolf 359," he said. "Keeping the Borg's attention with our heavy hitters while as many shuttles and Danubes as we have are launched towards the cube carrying the strike teams. The shuttles maneuver past the cube's shields and transport the teams onto the cube. That way, they'll pass any possible transporter interference."

For one, Kelsey Alther didn't seem to pay attention to the Cardassian's accurate guessing of its own feelings as it said:

"If the Borg have adapted to the EMPs, you will have to find some phaser frequency or torpedo yield to hit their shields"

Kelsey paused. The blue-skinned Ensign wasn't sure to suggest it or not: "I suppose there is one thing I know the Borg can't adapt to, but its probably not a good idea..."

Kelsey took a deep breath:

"Tricobalt explosives would destroy the cube...but that's dangerous. "

N'Eligahn held a hand up at his Kalthurian friend and gave his head a slight shake.

"No plans are being abandoned," he said. "There always have to be alternatives thought of and planned for. And alternatives to those alternatives, especially where the Borg are concerned."

He gave Kelsey a small smile.

"I'm not very familiar with these tri-cobalt weapons. Can they be used in both torpedoes and demolition charges?" he asked.

Silent the whole time since his first comment, Michael O'Conner chimed in:

"Another idea could be if we were to overcharge all the phasers we have and fire them at the same time at one spot on the cube. it should be able to overload whatever shielding system they are using... but it would wreck our systems."

O'Conner went down and sat back in his chair.

"Or if we could quickly get an interphasic cloaking system like USS Pegasus once had; we load a ship up with explosives and blow it up inside the cube." He said as he began to tap instructions into the interface on the chair.

"Or we could try to use chroniton style weapons but we might not have enough time for that..."

It was obvious they would all need more help and ideas.

And more people.

On another part of the starbase, a young dark-skinned Ensign stepped off of the shuttlepod and stretched his legs.

He looked around at the docking bay of Starbase 10, his head spinning of thoughts of all the missions he would experience and new people he would meet in Lotus Fleet. The elite force had recognized his actions on the USS Defiant and had ordered his transfer to Starbase 10 aboard the USS Republic. Although he had not yet been assigned to a ship, he had been placed in a squad of several reserves to be stationed on the base until needed.

Obviously, something big is going on to need all these people, Joey thought.

A quartermaster met him at the docking station.

"Name and rank," he ordered.

"Ensign Joseph Daystrom Sisko, reporting for duty, Sir!" Joey responded.

After a nod, and a note on his datapad, the quartermaster led Joey to his quarters, pointing out some of the important locations along the way, the promenade, the brig, the mess hall, and main engineering. The quartermaster left the newcomer in his quarters where he awaited anxiously for further instructions.

A few moments later, at Ensign Sisko's quarters, a short, silver-haired young woman came by with a clipboard-sized PADD.

"You are Ensign Sisko? I'm with Starbase 10 security. We're going around to check on all the new *Republic* arrivals. Your first order is to attend the meeting at Meeting Chamber 2. There's a Borg tactical meeting running right now, and we need as many fresh minds on the subject as possible."

Joey Day thanked the security officer as his quarters door closed behind her.

A Borg tactical meeting? What kind of operation were they planning? He pondered.

He stood up, tugged on his uniform, and refastened his earring. He hadn't had much time to unpack and unwind after arriving, which was just fine for him. He didn't tolerate idle time very well and was glad to be making his way to Meeting Chamber 2.

On his way, he passed the mess hall where he overheard several people discussing a possible attack on the base.

Were the Borg attacking?

He shuddered at the thought.

Finally arriving at the meeting chamber, he could hear a heated discussion inside. He wanted to make a bold entrance, so he decided to listen in for a few minutes and get a little background on what was being discussed.

What could it hurt to arrive a few additional minutes late? Obviously the meeting has already started, he surmised.

In the chambers, Captain Speaker-of-Names nodded as Ensign Kelsey Alther spoke up.

"Ensign-Alther has my intent correct." he rumbled. "I would suggest we continue evaluating the first plan, but delve further into the options of assault-shuttles and tricobalt-devices. But as a caution, we will not explore the option of using tricobalt as a subspace-weapon. Things are tense enough with the Klingons already. Breaching agreements made during the Khitomer-Accords..." He flicked his batwing-like ears. "Not an option."

Kelsey looked at the Kzinti:

"They only become subspace weapons if you misuse them as such; they are highly predictable in normal circumstances " the Kalthurian said.

Then, looking towards N'Eligahn:

"Tricobalt devices can have a yield of over twenty thousand teracochranes; they were used to destroy the Caretaker's Array by Voyager. If you add in the overloaded phaser arrays O'Conner suggested, we could do some serious damage."

Kelsey took a deep breath then looked at O'Conner :

"The interphasic cloaking device is still illegal you know?"

"Of course I know Ensign Alther. I was merely stating options." Lieutenant O'Conner replied as he continued to toy with the chair's interface.

"We may have come across the most viable idea," N'Eligahn however said. "A ship loaded with explosives and an interphasic cloaking device would decimate the Borg cube before it even had a chance to target anything. It's also the least bloody option we have, especially with tri-cobalt weaponry completely dismissed."

"So, we are going to go break a treaty and possibly annoy the Romulans to kill one Borg cube? You do realize that the Romulans could go to war over this and it would be out fault!" Kelsey said.

But the abdrogyn officer had to agree with it in its head. A cube exploding, it would light up the area and it would be glorious.

Shaking the idea out of its white-haired head, Alther returned to the problem of the Treaty of Algeron.

N'Eligahn kept his face impassive, trying his best to hide as much emotion as he possibly could.

"Desperate times call for desperate measures," he said. "You don't think if they'd had weaponry like this in the Battle of Sector 001 or Wolf 359 that they wouldn't have used it rather than allow hundreds of their fellows to die?"

There was time when his own morals and viewpoint would have prevented him from even suggesting violation of anything. But he'd seen the Borg, felt their one-minded drive; they weren't restricted by morals or personal ideals. They had one singular goal.

"In the end it comes down to them or us," N'Eligahn said. "At some point we have to decide when saving lives and the Federation is more important than whether or not we can look ourselves in the eye in the mirror each morning."

"Should we compromise everything the Federation stands for just to save it? We are not Section 31! We are Starfleet Officers! We don't sacrifice our morals and viewpoints just to win a battle!" Kelsey said with a little anger in the voice. "We can't let ourselves sink to a level where we compromise our own integrity and what the Federation stands for. "

"I'm wholly sure the Borg will appreciate our adherence to age-old treaties," N'Eligahn said, more harshly than he meant. "I'll be sure to read them the Federation Charter and Starfleet Oath as they're cutting this station apart and jamming tubules into the throat of everyone on it."

He looked around.

"Like it or not, the Borg are a force that cannot be stopped if we allow ourselves the continual hindrance of conscience," N'Eligahn said. His stomach felt half twisted. "It's our job to make the hard decisions so those people out there don't have to, and certainly don't have Borg cubes knocking on their doors."

He added in a low voice:

"Jean-Luc Picard was ready to sacrifice the Enterprise and keep him and his crew trapped in old Earth to save all that we care for. Can we truly do less?"

"Jean Luc Picard didn't sacrifice the ideals of the Federation to stop the Borg. He didn't break any of his morals or that of the Federation." Kelsey said.

It was clear this was getting to the Kalthurian now. N'Eligahn was a close friend but the Borg had certainly changed him.

Kelsey would also admit the Borg changed Kelsey.

The androgyn wanted to tear the heads off every Borg, sever them limb from limb... but it was bound by the ideals of the Federation and its own morals.

Kelsey saw the new Ensign just finishing talking.

Joey Day saw his moment. He opened the door to the meeting room and strode in, with his head held high with confidence, belying the nervousness that sent shivers up and down his veins and made him sick as if he had the Tarellian plague.

"I'm reminded of a discussion I had with my father, Jake, who said that my grandfather had done something in the Dominion War that was contrary to all ethical standards of his own, and the Federation. Now, my father never gave any specifics, but he said it wasn't important. He did say it meant the difference between the continued existence of the Federation and the total Dominion rule in the Alpha and Beta quadrants. He said History judges us on morality of the actions we take, it's true. But History is written by those who survive to do the writing. Is a moral decision still moral, if the wrong side of morality is making the judgments? Or does it then become simple foolishness?"

Joey Day finished his speech with a look around the room at the various faces, attempting to judge how they felt about the interruption from a fresh-faced Ensign, strolling in seemingly late to a meeting.

He looked up, very literally, at Captain Speaker-of-Names and said:

"I beg your pardon, Sir. Ensign Joseph Daystrom Sisko, reporting as requested."

"Mister Sisko, nice of you to join us. I trust your voyage here was a pleasant one. Please take a seat,. To catch you up on this situation, here is the USS McKenzie on its way here and a Borg Cube is following it; we are exploring every option we have to stop it here and no further."

Captain Summers thus briefed the young Ensign as he greeted him and gave a nod and a smile.

Ensign Sisko nodded to Commander Summers with a smile.

"Thank you for the warm welcome Commander. I wish my appearance was under better circumstances, but I will begin thinking at once of possible solutions to this crisis."

Summer's blue-skinned chief of security was not so amiable to the newcomer:

"The hindrance of conscience? " said Kelsey Ather angrily. " Everytime Starfleet has faced the Borg, have we broke any ideals or morals just to beat them? Why do we have to break them now and set ourselves out from the rest?" the Kalthurian asked. "You want to do something that Starfleet has never had to do before? "

N'Eligahn nodded towards both Kelsey and Sisko.

"I know where you're coming from, Kelsey," N'Eligahn said. "And I understand what you mean."

But then his expression hardened.

"Maybe if we had altered our ideals and morals where the Borg were concerned, then the tens of possibly millions that have been killed or assimilated by them would be here with us."

Then he immediately said:

"They're not, because those before us chose not to do what was necessary to end the Borg threat. The Enterprise chose not to infect the entire Collective when they rescued the Borg Hugh. Instead, they kept holding to the ideals of the Federation. All it resulted in was an insane hive and some sort of mini-Borg revolution."

He'd read as much information as he could find about the Borg between his meditations. N'Eligahn wanted to be sure the next time he met them it wouldn't be as disastrous as before.

"Nevertheless what our feelings on the matter are," he said, with a deep breath. "We are only here to discuss options of attack and defense. I think right now we need to start evacuating all non-essential personnel off this station."

"We will agree to disagree in this matter, but yes we should evacuate all non essential personnel of this Station." Kelsey said with a sigh.

This is going to be a long day the abdrogyn thought and she started looking up more information on the chair's interface.

As O'Conner listened to N'Elighan's speech, he mumbled to himself and rolled his eyes, before going back to work on the chair's interface.

Ensign Sisko for his part sat down and thought about the issue of the interphasic cloaking device for a little while. His eyes suddenly widened as he began typing furiously on the chair's interface to determine whether his idea would work.

Then, the commanding officer of the Spectre turned to Captain Speaker:

"Do we have transphasic torpedoes, and if so, how long before we can get some loaded onto the Spectre? If not, how long until we can acquire some? Right now I think it is the best weapon we have against them; it is a weapon they for one reason or another they have not been able to adapt to. Personally I think it's our best shot: we know they work, we know they have not, possibly can not adapt to them and it doesn't break any treaties or contradict our morals and standards as Starfleet officers. The Voyager has used them to destroy quite a few cubes in the past and I think it is an avenue we cannot ignore or put to the side. I think it is something we need to use." Summers said in a confident tone as he finished the rest of his tea.

Then he added:

"I do agree that nothing should at this point be ruled out and all options should be kept in mind because we do not know what will happen between now and then. Do I say our first attempt should be to use this cloaking device? No not at all; if anything, it should be saved as a last ditch effort to save this quadrant, and the lives of everyone in it, including the Romulans."

He ended with a sigh and a rub of his chin as he looked down at the console, then back up at everyone else in the room.

O'Conner answered Commander Summer's question:

"Sir, Ensign Townsend should have the first one done in about 10 minutes. I am not sure how many my guys can get done before the cube gets here. But I think we should save them as backup and try a less than... hmm... standard tactics first."

"With all due respect Captain Summers, I don't think we should compromise our ideals to save a quadrant when it's only one Borg cube!" Kelsey said. "It's one cube; if we fail, there are other ships the Federation can send, and the Romulans have the Beta quadrant to worry about, not the Alpha!"

"Excuse me, then interjected Ensign Sisko, but I think maybe there is an alternate solution to the interphasic cloaking device. I believe we can modify the transporters to beam the shuttlepod into subspace. We'd have to tie several of the transporter queues together to hold that much data, in addition to aligning the subspace field coils. It would also require several gigajoules of energy for every hour we store the pattern, but I believe we can hold the pod in subspace at a specific location along the current path of the Borg cube. We then send our ships out to lure it to that exact location. The Borg shields will protect against beaming anything down, but they shouldn't be expecting anything to exist in that location in subspace. Once we have them where their main warp reactor is within a few meters of the pod, we rematerialize it and trigger the explosion through a subspace communication of variable frequency."

He continued to make furious calculations on the computer while waiting for a response from the officers.

"That could actually work but would a shuttlepod be big enough?" Kelsey asked "A shuttlepod's explosion may not be enough to damage it because we don't know much about their power centres. Maybe if we loaded explosives on it we could increase the yield."

O'Conner paused to think about Sisko's plan before replying.

"Assuming the Borg don't have some type of defenses to subspace weapon or mines. We would need something at least the size of a runabout to do any real damage, because other than the transwarp coil and vinculum, Borg ships are very decentralized in structure and have no main reactor."

Ensign Sisko responded to the concerns of Alther and O'Conner.

"Perhaps I wasn't clear enough. My plan was not to blow up the vessel itself, as I am in agreement that the cube is too decentralized to cause any real damage. The original plan, if I heard correctly, was to load the shuttlepod with tricobalt explosives and send it into the cube with an interphasic cloaking device. I was simply offering an alternative to the cloaking device which was in violation of the Treaty of Algeron. In addition, the difference between this and a subspace tricobalt mine would be that we would re-materialize it before detonation."

Kelsey Alther smiled, seeing it working now, the Borg cube exploding.

Then the Kalthurian thought of something:

"What about them jamming the frequency or something similar to that?"

The Ensign turned to O'Connor:

"Would you need help with the Transphasic Torpedoes? I know how to make them as well. "

O'Conner looked back at Kelsey.

"Any help would be appreciated."

Captain Speaker-of-Names gave what passed for a wry smile towards Commander Summers.

"If we had transphasic-torpedoes on the station, we would not need such a force and plan assembled. We are still formidably armed, but in a more conventional sense: Starbase-10 utilizes its cache of fifty-thousand photon-torpedoes to handle threats to our space, fired from thirty-two Type-2 burst-fire torpedo-tubes arrayed throughout the station in a symmetrical layout."

His eyes narrowed, and he continued;

"This means that we have the capability to align eight launchers to the incoming Borg ship." He paced around the table, touching the holographic station to highlight the launchers, which dutifully illuminated in bright orange. "If you are able to manufacture transphasics, we can load them into those launchers, but they are far less mobile than the launchers starships like the McKenzie and the Spectre can be..."

He nodded to Ensign Joseph Daystrom Sisko at this point, and continued.

"... Or the Republic. It is good to have another ship available to draw upon. Welcome aboard, Mister-Sisko."

He appeared to be focused on the raw firepower aspects of the meeting, choosing not to comment any further, at least for now, upon the moral issues the Ensigns were debating.

He looked to those discussing the shuttle option, and asked a question:

"We have an Argo on board the station, which would certainly carry plenty of explosives. However, for that plan, why not just use those transporters to hold explosives exclusively?"

Cyrus Mc Cann had kept to himself all this time, his head reeling with all that was discussed.

Then, something flashed in his mind.

He waited for Kelsey to breathe for a moment. He then quickly tapped on his PADD and sent a message to the androgyn's chair computer. It was a single schematic.

If people were so quick to start discounting the ideals that made the Federation the noble beacon it was today, why not solve the Borg problem with one giant application of their own medicine?

The needs of the many.. he sent telepathically.

The schematic sent to his fellow ensign's computer was none other than that of the Genesis Device.

For a moment, Alther didn't react, intent on explaining to the Kzinti officer:

"Well we could always try refitting the Spectre's torpedo launchers for transphasics; provided the replicators on this station are working properly, the materials for transphasic torpedoes should be easy to replicate. They shouldn't adapt quick enough to combat them due to the multifrequency generation it does."

Kelsey then noticed the message popping up on the armchair and looked at it for a second then dismissed it.

"There is one other way that could work, but this I'm even more reluctant to try than the Tricobalt devices."

The androgyn officer paused:

"The Genesis Device" it said quietly.

He didn't thought Kelsey would have the courage to say it outloud. He sent another message to the Kalthurian's chair computer. A schematic of a standard quantum torpedo housing, a warp core, and a list of the available warp cores on board Starbase 10 - new, old, and currently undergoing repair...

Typing furiously on his PADD, he programmed a simulation outlining retrofitting the torpedo housing to include a malfunctioning or overloading warp core, several deflector emitter components, and a readout of the Genesis energy detonation buildup wave.

"Sleight of hand.." he sent with his mind, waiting to see if Kelsey was following along.

Alther looked at the chair computer again and shook its head.

" Sorry you have lost me, just tell me what your going for here." the blue-skinned ensign asked telepathically.

Cyrus continued typing away with furious speed, looking around from time to time to maintain the illusion of his uninvolvedness.

The simulation continued: modified torpedo loaded into torpedo bay of hastily retreating starship and fired, transmitting simulated Genesis buildup wave. Two possible outcomes displayed; 1. Borg cube identifies Genesis wave and fires on torpedo, detonating overloading warp drive and heavily damaging/destroying the cube. 2. Borg unable to identify energy signature and decide to investigate, beaming torpedo onboard or otherwise pursuing at close range until detonation with same/similar results.

" What we see is not always what we get..."

Cyrus was doing his best to keep their exchange as cryptic as possible for the other nosey telepaths in the room.

Kelsey smiled and then said outloud:

"I believe Cyrus has an idea of what to do with the Genesis idea" the androgyn said with a smile at him.

" Your turn to shine. " it told him mentally.

Cyrus was angry. Supremely angry. He would have to get used to this emotion, it seemed. He'd been feeling it almost constantly since his arrival on Starbase 10. But now that Kelsey had pulled out the announcement stunt, he swallowed hard, gritted his teeth, and sent the schematic to the Captains first and then to the rest of the attendees. This was a gift to Kelsey and the androgyn had all but refused it. Emotions? Off.

"My apologies for interrupting the... sermons on Federation ethics," Cyrus began coldly, "but as Ensign Alther has unfortunately announced - the following is my idea."

He quickly added a blastwave radius calculation to the message, another graphic of a coordinated mass torpedo attack to further mask the "ultimate care package," and even the suggestion of an unmanned starship warp jump collision course alternate possibility.

"The components are readily available here on Starbase 10," he finished up, "and of course Captain Speaker would be much more able to suggest suitable crew and starship availability for such... drastic measures."

Cyrus cleared his throat once more, glancing around the room but didn't dare look at the Kalthurian androgyn.

Kelsey had to resist the urge to smile. The blue-skinned, white-haired ensign knew he hated the it for not playing along, but it thought that he needed to get it out.

No way around it the androgyn was thinking.

Noticing Cyrus not looking at it and the Kalthurian quickly hammered him with a telepathic message:

" You need to get some recognition, I'm not taking it all for you. " Alther hammered in before he could put up barriers.

"Primary option," Cyrus piped up again suddenly, "would require minimal hardware concerns save for the loss of a damaged warp core,"

It didn't matter to Kelsey whatever concerns Cyrus had about confidentiality or Federation security or even his deSire for the kalthurian to earn a better reputation than it had been garnering lately... he thought as he continued:

"The coordination of multiple starships and luring the cube away from Starbase 10 would be of immense import."

Cyrus looked around the room again, and *again...* not at Kelsey:

"Secondary option would require less tactical coordination... mainly 'clear a path' if you'll forgive the slang, but would cost the Fleet a starship. Of course the possibility exists of combining these plans into a third and last-ditch option."

He looked directly into Kelsey's eyes for this one, hoping his stone cold gaze would register as gravely as his next sentence:

"Give me the warp core and the starship and I'll detonate two warp cores just before impact."

Looking back now at the people in the room Sorripto spoke:

"We need to get some order here. We have a saying on Cardassia that goes: too many Legates and not enough Gils. We need to have some command structure to this debate. "

He paused a moment before adding:

"We can talk ourselves in circles about how to destroy the cube, but why are we not discussing the very real possibility of killing the drones?"

Clenching his fist slightly, Sorripto pointed at the images in front of him.

"A small boarding party armed with lead based projectiles could decimate the Borg population on that ship. I am no Admiral Janeway when it comes to Borg knowledge, but I assume a cube with no drones is no threat".

Kelsey put its head into its hands and sighed:

"This meeting is getting crazy fast." Kelsey Alther thought as the argument over shooting Borg and overloading warp cores was discussed.

"Yes you can board a cube and shoot the drones but there are more drones then ammo you can replicate" Alther told the Cardassian.

Nodding as to acknowledge that Ensign Alther was right about the drone to bullet problem, Sorripto spoke up again, this time calmer then usual for a Cardassian:

"Even tho I understand that you are right, a boarding party of maybe a few dozen armed with lead based projectiles could carry enough ammo to seriously damage the drones and get the Borg's attention. I for one think that a boarding party shooting up the inside of the cube will be more then enough of a distraction to allow for something to damage the cube."

"This all makes for very interesting listening, some very insightful ideas and strategies."

No one had noticed the plainly dressed man leaning near the door with all the hustle and near panic of the personnel inside the room.

"First off however you can forget ramming a ship into the cube. Short of the Lotus's Special Plating you'd never penetrate its hull. Believe me, we've tried."

Then said passively he added;

"Perhaps if you could dig a hole into it first.."

It took a minute for Speaker-of-Names to place the man.

"Admiral-Redding? we were not expected you."

"Yes, I didn't expect to be here either, I was just passing through on the Republic, headed for some shore leave. Just my luck, anyway. I used to be on the Borg Task Force before Starfleet Command shut us down saying the Borg threat had passed."

He dropped his duffel bag near a chair.

"I was against it."

And he sat down heavily into the chair, putting a finger up:

"Here's what I know from what you have all said. Yes, transphasic torpedoes are most likely your best best for damaging the cube, but they don't have the kick they once had; as always the Borg have adapted to them."

He raised a second finger:

"Your idea to use interphasic cloaking devices and torpedoes was a great idea, but I do mean *was* because we already did it."

Seeing their blank faces staring he explained:

"During the last attack by the Borg to take Earth many people wondered why the Borg didn't send more ships; well, the truth is they sent three Cubes. The BTF stopped two of them before they reached Earth, one by that very method, except we sent mines into the Cube that detonated when they dropped outside the cloaking field."

He said this blatantly, despite the fact it must have been highly classified.

"It was decided not to report the other two Cubes for fear of inciting panic in the Federation.. yada.. yada.. But the end point is, we tried it again on the second ship and they where ready for it. We still don't know what happened to the USS Kestrel but it never came back out of cloak; best guess is that it got permanently shifted out of our universe."

Then he raised a third finger:

"I like your subspace Mine concept, but not being Vulcan I can't tell if that would cause a rift that could destroy this whole system. If you think upsetting the Romulans with a Phase Cloak is bad, think of the reaction of using a subspace weapon, banned by every Government in the Alpha Quadrant."

A fourth finger went up:

"I don't know anything about this Genesis Device that the Ensign and her boy friend are passing notes about, but if its connected to the Genesis incident, I'd advise against it as well: far to unstable to count on."

Then he looked at Speaker-of-Names.

"I'm not here to run the show Captain, just as an adviser, The hot seat is still yours."

But then he mumbled:

"If I was officially here, Command would order me to evacuate, and I'd hate to disobey a direct order."

"Admiral Redding, Welcome any and all advice you can offer as well as maybe a hand in preparations would be greatly appreciated." Captain Summers stated as a idea ran through his head...

Ensign Sisko acknowledged the Admiral, by saying:

"I beg your pardon, Sir, but there's no risk of creating a rift in subspace if we rematerialize it and detonate it in normal space".

Sisko had been thinking over what Captain Speaker had noted about not wasting a shuttlecraft if you are just going to be transporting the mines into subspace.

"I also agree there's usually no point in wasting a shuttlecraft, but I've been doing some calculations and the tricobalt explosion combined with the explosion of the shuttle's engines would provide for maximum damage, with the addition of increased shrapnel from the hull of the shuttle. Maybe an alternative can be used, such as a cargo container filled with the explosives surrounding an impulse engine, but I see no point in worrying about the fate of one shuttle when the entire base is at risk."

Lieutenant Michael O'Conner shrugged a bit:

"Well I was curious why no one had tried the interphasic method before."

After a short pause, he added:

"Perhaps we should ask for Q's help."

He chuckled a bit to himself before removing something from his interface and then continuing:

"Any ideas on how we might cut a hole in the cube or any other ideas, Admiral?."

As bad an idea as it was, it has to be put out there. mused Daniel Summers as he offered:

"Something just crossed my mind... What about the weapon that the Enterprise E crew encountered fighting with Praetor Shinzon? Something of that magnitude would devastate a Borg Cube. Of course we would have to use it at a distance, but it should work." Summers looked around the room at everyone's expressions as he finished.

N'Eligahn shook his head.

"I think we're overcomplicating what should be a simple solution," the Rethian Ensign said. "Subspace shuttles, genesis torpedoes, radiation waves. All over the top ideas that we barely have time to figure out, let alone implement and execute."

Standing at attention and nodding to Admiral Redding to welcome him, he continued:

"Everyone needs to get their heads back to Earth and think about realistic, applicable ideas that we can actually do with the resources that we have,"

He nodded at Sorripto.

"A boarding party with the goal of destroying the viniculum itself may be our best option. We don't have the ships for a long drawn out conflict and since we're sticking with our consciences, that eliminates half of our plans."

Then, he boldly declared:

"I still think no one is thinking straight when the Borg are concerned. Any of these plans fail we're stuck up shit's creek without a PADDle, pardon the language," he said. "The Borg won't be shocked and awed; they'll just adapt and come back hard. We just need to hit them directly and even harder."

Ensign Sisko couldn't believe what he was hearing.

A boarding party? How did they intend to lower the cube's shields before they were obliterated? Down to Earth? This is the Borg! Nothing can be down to Earth when it comes to defending against them. Sure, with the advancement in ablative armor and transphasic torpedoes, a large fleet could take down a cube, but they didn't have that luxury. They had two or three ships and then relatively powerful but still inadequate starbase defenses. Serious measures had to be taken.

"To be frank, Sir, subspace beaming is not exactly an over the top idea. If I remember correctly, they used it in the Enterprise to rescue Captain Picard. It is a simple process of aligning the subspace field coils and linking the transporters into an array to create a buffer large enough to hold the pattern. The third requirement would be shunting power from unnecessary systems to provide enough power to hold the pattern.

With a little help, I could have it done well before the Borg arrive. The only reason it is not a standard practice is because of the instability factor, and it was deemed unsafe for human use. But this isn't a human we're talking about. Obviously, additional options need to be considered in case there was an error causing it to not rematerialize."

Sisko sat back to let the other speak for a while. He took a few deep breaths and counted to ten. He felt the rage at being dismissed building up inside of him, but being an Ensign he was nervous about overstepping his bounds.

However, the assumptions made about the advanced requirements of his suggestion, and the dismissal of it as mere flights of fancy, had to be addressed and corrected. He left it to the senior officers to either use or dismiss the option, but he wasn't about to die in a hopeless battle without making sure it was considered.

Kelsey Alther got up off its chair and walked to the nearest wall to lean against and rubbed its eyes.

Then the ensign looked at Redding:

"First; You used cloaked ships to fight Borg?"

Kelsey couldn't believe this.

"Second: how in bloody hell did the Borg adapt to a random modulation of a weapon that already has a variable frequency so shields can only block one frequency of it, and its constantly changing?"

The Kalthurian sighed; this was Borg they were talking about, but it took no more than a few torpedoes when Voyager used them.

Now, Alther looked at Summers, the Spectre's commanding officer:

"Third: you want to use thelaron radiation, which besides being illegal is also not usable at all by us because we don't know how to use it!"

The Androgyn was having a hard time hiding its anger. These people just seemed to be making up ideas that were making no sense. Alther looked at N'Eligahn and Sisko:

"I think our best bet is to either board them with a helluva lot of ammunition and find the vinculum, or put the shuttle in subspace then detonate it when it rematerializes"

Kelsey sighed, almost on the verge of walking out of the meeting.

N'Eligahn said nothing but gave a slight nod. They may differ on opinions as to how far to actually go to beat the Borg, but they at least agreed on one thing: they needed to be hit hard, fast and decisively.

Nodding at Kelsey Alther and N'Eligahn, Sorripto spoke up in the midst of the heated discussion before him:

"A lead-based projectile weapon and a backpack of ammunition is no more heavy then a hiking pack. As a youth on Cardassia, we would climb mountains carrying nearly 100 pounds. If a boarding party carried their max load, that would be tens of thousands of shots and as they used ammo their backpacks would only get lighter".

At this moment, Captain Speaker-of-Names brought everyone's attention to him:

"Admiral-Redding, it is good to have your experience to add to this discussion. Very good information to gain for this planning session."

The Kzinti officer had been looking with interest upon McCann's suggestion about the Genesis torpedo until Redding's appearance. The telepaths in the room would recognize that Speaker was no scientist, and that his interest began to wane with the revelation that Genesis technology was unstable.

Secretly, he also wondered how many other Admirals were aboard the USS Republic.

The Captain paced with his paw-hands placed behind his back, tail swishing pensively.

"We are not ignoring the option of boarding and using TR-116 weaponry. That option is already on the table. We will name it Option-Assault-Shuttle. It sits alongside Option-EM-Pulse, Option-Phaser-Overload, and Option TricobaLieutenant We are debating Option-Genesis and Option-Subspace-Shuttle at this time."

He paused, unsure if he was missing another plan, but pressed on.

"The beam weapon utilized by Shinzon was a form of radiation known as thelaron. However, it is considered a biogenic-weapon. I can understand your hesitation to recommend it. Biogenic-weapons are generally disapproved of." He nodded to the Commander, "Still. It is the first such weapon-type disapproved of by the Federation that does not carry with it the potential to break treaties." He looked to Kelsey, and added, "if we knew how to use it."

"As for evacuation of the station, this has already begun. It is why so few of the station's security-teams are here for this meeting."

He inhaled deeply, then looked around, straightened to his full height, and folded his arms behind him.

"No idea will be dismissed outright, but be aware that our actions here will display to every world in the Federation, every enemy of Starfleet, and every potential applicant for Federation-member-world-status: what we at Starfleet, and what we at Lotus-Fleet in particular, will resort to when we do not possess the tactical-advantage."

He frowned, and stroked the tails of his forked beard.

"I in particular can appreciate the deSire to defeat our foe with the most effective weapons we know of. I come from a species that has no moral-compunctions about using anything we can to gain an advantage. Our females are only semi-sapient, because we took our gender-war too far."

He paused, letting that sink in, before continuing.

"I understand where you want to go. Perhaps better than some of you do." He stepped forward, and peered around the room. "Just ensure it's where *you* want to go."

N'Eligahn leaned back and thought about the Captain's words. Where did he want to go? Obviously, he wanted to destroy the Borg and keep the station from being destroyed in the process. But how far was he willing to truly go?

He looked up and met the Captain's eyes. Rethians like N'Eligahn had once had a vast empire. But it was all destroyed by a fierce and brutal enemy. What if his race had gone to the extreme to defend themselves? Would they still be an empire? He shook his head.

That would not happen to the Federation. He would make sure of it. If he had to he'd shoulder the sin so no one else needed to. He gave a slight nod at the Captain.

He was sure now.

Once more silent for a good while, Ensign McCann listened to the various ideas and realized emotions would only make the chaos worse. He calmed down and realized maybe Kelsey didn't understand the plan either and completely ignored the insulting tone he discerned in the Admiral's label.

"Of course we cannot use a Genesis torpedo itself... but the energy signature of the Genesis wave is almost certainly foreign to the Borg and could represent an irresistible target or bait for the Borg to follow. Modify the quantum torpedo to emit this radiation signature to mask an overloading warp core and either pray the Borg decide to beam it on board or wait for them to close in on it and watch the fireworks."

He took a moment to seriously consider the boarding party assault team idea. If they can beam a boarding party onboard the cube, why couldn't they beam a warp core close to detonation into a critical systems area of the cube?

"Why risk the lives of a boarding party when a massive matter/antimatter explosion at the heart of the cube would accomplish the same goal? If we've found a way past the Borg's transporter beam inhibitors, why not beam several overloading warp cores onto the vessel as it drops out of warp and spare the Fleet firing a single torpedo?"

For that matter, if the group was considering flights of fancy, theories of thelaron radiation and tri-cobalt torpedoes, why not shoot for the moon and inquire about Lotus Fleet access to Red Matter and beam a black hole into the center of the cube?
Or tap into Starbase 10's power plant and turbo-boost all onboard transporters to lock onto the cube and beam it into the nearest star?

"Starbase 10 has a store of warp cores, certainly its share of torpedoes, but based on my exploration of the starbase, I have yet to encounter any inventories of interphasic cloaking devices, tri-cobalt torpedoes, thelaron radiation emitters, or even a magic wand to wave in the Borg's faces."

O'Conner tilted his head as he looked to Cyrus.

"You know we would only need the antimatter, not the whole warp core, right?"

O'Conner paused a moment before explaining further.

"Also, going off of battle records with other cubes, if you can get inside the shields of a cube you can transport in maybe 100 meters inside of the cube, before you run in to problems with transporter inhibitors. So the strike team wouldn't be able to beam in to the heart of the ship, they would have to fight their way inside."

Leaning back in his chair, he added:

"Also, Ensign, tricobalt devices are safe when use correctly and I would be surprised if the station didn't have any tricobalt, as they are routinely carried by Federation vessels."

Nodding to O'Conner, Sorripto had a slight smile when he spoke:

"Fight their way inside? I thought that was the whole point?"

N'Eligahn was instantly put off by the pushy, insistent attitude of that one Ensign next to Kelsey. He also didn't like the overall aura he presented. He further closed off his mind to keep anyone, even the Kalthurian out of his mind.

"Lieutenant O'Conner is correct," He didn't actually have to acknowledge that, but felt letting the Engineer know he was with him would at least help a bit. " All encounters with beaming onto cubes has been to the exterior portions. And even if we beam explosives there, past experiences have taught us that the Borg just shrug off surface damage."

He shook his head.

"This bickering and arguing is pointless. We need to decide on a direction to move and start making preparations, whatever the decision."

"Very well, Sir."

Cyrus immediately silenced himself and realized he was grossly out of his league. Speaker was looking for sure-thing solutions and Cyrus had no such guarantees to offer. He sensed the growing resentment building in the room along with frustration, anxiety, and the smell of fear.

He sat up straighter in his chair and prepared himself to bear the rest of the torpedoes sinking his ideas. He hadn't considered anything he said bickering or negatively contributing to an advertised call for ideas. It was clear his voice was to be drowned out, regardless of its content.

He took a deep breath and listened as the experts took over and prepared himself to follow their orders... to the death or an even worse fate. He would volunteer for the boarding party and maybe his brawn would be more useful. He ran through a checklist in his mind, he would take along a phaser rifle and an ornate titanium bo-staff.

" *Probably the best idea I've had is to keep my mouth shut.*" he sent to Kelsey, smiling at the Kalthurian for the first time in awhile.

The Admiral was quick to downplay their relationship but Cyrus was passionate in his desire to protect Kelsey and the Federation. He only hoped he could hold his own on board a cube filled with hell. He hadn't quite found his place in Lotus Fleet yet, but he was good at ruffling feathers so far.

All this time, Admiral Redding just sat there and let the junior officers debate until they almost exhausted themselves emotionally. Then he spoke, looking at the outraged Kalthurian Ensign:

"The BTF was given a free hand to do whatever was required to safe guard the Federation against the Borg. Of course that's one of the reasons it got disbanded in the end. We left a few messes."

He paused before resuming his explanation:

"Your confusing two different technologies, Ensign: the torpedoes used at the time by Voyager came from their future, so, not surprisingly, it took longer for them to adapt to, being as they were designed against the Borg. Interphasic cloaking has been around for several years before we tried it on them. I think we just surprised them with it the first time we used it."

Now he looked to the entire assembly:

"And I should point out something on this note. Everyone keeps saying one commonality, 'This idea worked for the Enterprise or that idea for Janeway' but you have to understand that's why it won't work this time: you can't use anything they've seen before."

In the silence his words imposed, he said:

"Only two things have ever worked on the Borg: Overwhelming power or a fresh new idea they

haven't seen before."

And to bring his point home, he added:

"Every species in the Alpha and Delta quadrants have tried to get explosives onto their ships for more than a hundred years, I hope you can figure a way all of them haven't."

"We already have, Sir," N'Eligahn said with a smile. "The multiple boarding teams. When was the last time we attempted a full-scale invasion of a Borg cube? "

Feeling more confident with each word spoken, he continued:

Only we don't go in blind with phasers, that's just sending officers into a meat grinder. We study every bit of data we have on the layout of cubes, use any means necessary of locating the core and planting explosives there, We don't have the brute force required to hit them directly, so we'll have to surprise them, like you said. The thing we'd have to decide on is how we get the boarding teams there and who's in them."

He didn't feel the need to say how to get the teams back out. If you place heavy explosives into the core of the cube, there would be little, if any time to prepare an extraction, let alone get to a safe distance. More than likely any boarding teams that went over would be looking at a one way trip.

The Felinoid Starbase Captain looked over the group, and shook his head once. On his console, he tapped a message destined only to Admiral Redding alone:

Let's go back to Option-False-Torpedo of Ensign McCann. The theory of it is interesting to me. Misleading your enemy is an important part of tactics, and this has the possible advantage of being adaptable to current torpedo-launchers. I do not think the Borg would be interested in Genesis, but what if the torpedo emitted the characteristics of an Omega-molecule?[/]

An Omega-molecule? Immediately typed back Redding and he nodded his head. *If you can fool them into believing it even 'might' be one, they would stop at nothing to get it. According to 7 of 9 they look at them as sort of deities, the ultimate symbols of perfection.*

Inadvertently, young Ensign Cyrus McCann caught on their thoughts. He took a quick glance towards N'Eligahn before looking at Speaker, certain whatever he answered Speaker with would elicit another sermon from N'Eligahn about keeping heads out of the clouds.

I have no idea how you might convince them it's an Omega-molecule, But yes, I can guarantee they would ignore Starfleet Command itself in order to obtain it, even at the risk of the cube's destruction. Hell, they'd gladly risk the Cube for it. Now added Admiral Redding to his private message.

But he didn't look too hopeful.

But I have to agree on the problem of creating such a thing: it's beyond my expertise. He finished typing.

And since the high ranking officers were not discussing this openly, the eavesdropping Cyrus McCann guessed he had stumbled upon some classified information.

What... guarantee would we have the Borg would break off any attack on Lotus Fleet to investigate the pseudo-Omega? He wanted to ask. *Do we have any power source aboard Starbase 10 great enough to simulate Omega? Does the object simulating Omega have to be a torpedo? Would the Borg contain the object within the Cube itself? What alternative delivery methods do we have at our disposal that could contain enough destructive force as to cripple or otherwise delay the Cube for a long enough period of time that offensive weapons could be*

brought to bear?"

Cyrus suddenly realized he was asking to himself more questions than he was capable of answering; and that, in view of the closed discussion he had stumbled upon, made him think it would be wiser to close his mouth.

Kelsey's eyes bugged out. The telepathic Kalthurian had caught on it too and could barely contain herself:

Omega molecules?

Then the Kalthurian said loudly:

"Ok I'm all for bouncing idea but this is really getting ridiculous!"

Ensign Alther got off the wall to put both hands down on the table and leaned on it.

"We are coming up with too many ideas that aren't able to be implemented! N'Eligahn's boarding party idea is great provided we can even get there far in. The tricobalt explosives is also good but we still run into the problem of depth."

The androgyn took a deep breath then looked at the Admiral.

"Mixing up two technologies? Future tech is not the problem, its the fact that somehow the Borg adapted to something that use multiple subspace frequencies so shields aren't as effective; if they adapted their shields to match that, then phasers should be effective hitting the modulations the shields aren't configured to. Interphasic cloaking is still illegal!" she almost yelled out the last part.

Kelsey Alther couldn't believe how absurd this was getting.

N'Eligahn smiled.

"Drama aside," he said. "Like I said, we're running out of time. We need to figure out what we're doing and stop throwing out random ideas. These are Borg, they're coming and they won't care if we've spent hours devising some new and shiny strategy for bringing them down. The only thing that matters is that we take them down without killing all of us to do it."

He gave Kelsey a slight nod.

Kelsey took a deep breath and nodded back to N'Eligahn

At least someone is still sane the tactical officer of the Spectre thought, waiting for more replies.

I'm starting to like this girl, Admiral Redding found himself thinking. It took a lot of fire to yell at a superior officer. The girl had spunk.

"The point. Ensign, is that they had to figure out the torpedoes; they where beyond their tech and completely unknown to them. Transphasic particles have been around for a very long time and it's unlikely we were the first to have them. It would just seem that they didn't expect us to use it."

Then, Redding addressed the entire room:

"Do you want to know why the Borg find us such a problem?"

He stood up

"Its because of you, Ensign." he said pointing at the Kalthurian.

"And you." he pointed in turn at N'Eligahn and Speaker as well.

"Every Culture in history has had a dominant race either controlling or supporting the lesser dominant races... except us. We have the ONE thing they have never encountered in all the Delta Quadrant or even the Alpha Quadrant for that matter..."

Then he stressed the words:

"Individual Unity."

The Androgyn was still leaning on the desk, looking at Redding:

"What? Crazy blue people who refuse to break what they and the organization believe in to defend themselves?"

Kelsey just shook its head.

I'm never getting over how far the Federation is willing to go to defend itself, and the fact superior officers can agree with it is more disturbing.

"You have every right to be upset by this news, Ensign; smiled the Admiral; in fact, it's your responsibility to be upset."

He was talking in a friendly manner, but his voice and his eyes were deadly serious:

"There will be times we will break our own rules for the 'greater good'... and god help us if there's no one left like you around to hate us for it."

He seemed to lose some steam and sat down.

In the silence his words brought, he further explained:

"No matter how often they try, they can't understand how we can all be so different and yet all move at the same time toward the same goal; and they can't counter that. It's beyond them to adapt to several view points at the same time because they're an Entity, a blended intelligence without passion or drive for anything but its own self-advancement."

He almost smirked then:

"We continue to be a thorn in their side because we will always find more options than they can counter, and we WILL find another one here today."

Silence fell again for a moment.

Then, Speaker rumbled:

"Antimatter is powerful, definitely. What keeps Starfleet from stuffing torpedoes with anti-matter then, when photon torpedoes should be harder to manufacture?"

The question seemed entirely logical to Cyrus, though he had no idea how to answer and therefore remained silent. Better to let those with more real-world experience debate Starfleet alternative tactical weapon theory.

" Photon torpedoes have an antimatter warhead." O'Conner replied.

They were all running out of ideas so fast that they were starting to forget basic knowledge.

A young Lieutenant stood just outside of the conference room and took a moment to clear his mind and free himself from the myriad of emotions rushing through him.

As he gently and deliberately released all the air he could out of his lungs, his mind became still and all emotions floated away. He straightened his shirt and stepped in front of the meeting room doors. They made their familiar sound as they opened and Braedon stepped into the room.

He could sense growing tensions and feelings of helplessness in the room, but didn't waste any time trying to discover the sources. He stood tall and addressed the room.

"Let us not forget that even when dealing with the Borg, non-violent solutions must also be considered. Is our goal to destroy the approaching cube or to protect the interests of the Federation and our officers?"

The Lieutenant continued to look around the room as he spoke and stopped when he noticed Daniel Summers. He was the first bridge officer he had met aboard the Tempest. They had lunch together. *He ate pizza*, the young officer recalled.

"I have been working on creating a unique method of altering a Drone's link to the Collective. I have engineered nanoprobes that work to do two things. The first function makes infected drones highly susceptible to telepathic communication and suggestion. The second function allows external telepathic messages to enter the drone's mind in such a way that they believe the message is coming directly from the Collective."

The newcomer slowly made his way over to the Kzinti as he spoke and placed a PADD, containing technical information about the nanoprobes, on the table down in front of him. He stepped back and looked around the room for an empty chair.

" And... you are? " asked Captain Speaker with a stern voice and a cold stare at the rude Lieutenant barging unannounced without even declining his name and rank.

The young officer froze in his tracks:

" Err, Sir, sorry Sir... Jori, Sir... Lieutenant Braedon Jori, Sir. "

" You may take a seat and join the meeting, Lieutenant. " ordered the felinoid giant curtly.

" Now that Is an interesting idea." admitted Admiral Redding, bringing the conversation back to the subject brought up by the newcomer.. " We have tried several times to 'reprogram' Borg with modified Nanites but it never worked, although we did finally create a limited defence using this idea."

Redding dug into his gear and produced a modified military medical injector.

"This is filled with Borg nanoprobes that have been 'fixed' to attack their invading brothers... it doesn't work." He said flatly placing it on the table."But what it does do is slow down the infection for up to five minutes, giving a soldier the chance to.. act.. before being taken over by the Collective."

The implication was obvious: he meant they where expected to kill themselves if no help was forthcoming.

"But as far as I know, it hasn't been combined with telepathy in any manner, and that makes it a new idea anyway."

Redding looked at the newcomer:

"The only problem I see is delivery. We have to infect them with it and not just one on one, but most or all of them at the same time, or they will adapt to it."

The still flustered Lieutenant saw an empty chair and sat in it. He calmed himself as he took note of two primary concerns: previous attempts to 'reprogram' drones using similar methods have failed and questions as to how the nanites would be delivered. He was just about to address the concerns, but he was cut off.

Ensign N'Eligahn laughed, loudly.

" 'Non-violent solutions'," he said. "Yes, and I'm sure they have deliberations like that before they rape one of our colonies and turn the people that lived there into mindless monstrosities."

He closed his eyes for a moment. He was letting his emotions get the better of him. N'Eligahn took a deep, calming breath before continuing.

"Keep in mind, any method like that, one to which they can most likely easily adapt, can be used once," he took another deep breath. "But perhaps if combined with the boarding teams, that method may at least be attempted. If it doesn't work, then the demolitions will be the secondary option."

The young Lieutenant Jori was reminded of his childhood when he too had difficulty controlling his emotions. He, had his father to help. He wondered who this spine-headed man was. He tried his best to ignore the outburst and looked to Redding.

"To be honest, I was thinking of using it in more of a 'tactical' manner than a 'peace talk' one." Admiral Redding added, a shrug aimed at him.

"Very good points, Sir. First off, the nanites you carry with you have very little in common with the version I am presenting. The version I am proposing are not aggressive and do not attack other nanites or the drones for that matter. These nanoprobe travel to the drone's brain, find the neocortex and get to work on the frontal lobe. However, everything about the experience has been designed to be subtle and unobtrusive."

The Lieutenant thought it would be seen as socially aggressive not to acknowledge the Rethian's remarks. He looked towards him, but spoke to the room generally.

"It is safe to assume that the Borg are not drafting a peace treaty, nor do they have sympathy for us. However, we must not allow our fear or anger to cloud neither our judgments nor our conscience." The newcomer looked back at Redding and continued, "The results happen so delicately that the drone and his body are unaware that anything has occurred. This means that the collective will be unaware of the changes. Only when a telepathic message is issued will the collective become aware of the situation."

Braedon allowed his head to drop. In some way, he felt as though he was a child again trying to explain the joys of emotion to his Vulcan Uncles. He looked back up at Redding and tried to explain himself further.

"Rather than trying to blow everything up from the outside, I am proposing that we blow everything up from the inside out. This would be a kind of psychological explosion. Once enough drones have been infected, a group of telepaths could begin to create confusion and dissension within the collective. The infected drones believe that they are hearing the collective, which means that the collective remains unaware of our involvement."

Braedon Jori decided to leave it there for now, in case another officer wished to contribute to the exchange. He paused to piece together his next words.

Admiral Redding became pensive as he spoke:

"Is this viable option? can we have the people and equipment in place before they get here? I'm not against the idea, not at all. But it sounds like its in ruff draft stage, we might get the gear in place sure, but is anyone trained to do it? How many telepaths do you need and can they pull it off without any training? "

Jori had started working on non-lethal methods to incapacitate the Borg since his time at Starfleet Academy. Out of his many projects this was the only one prepared for live testing. He opened up his mind and tried to get a sense of the members in the room as an officer spoke up.

He recognized the Kalthurian. Her image and personality was used in the tactical training programs he was using in the holodeck. He smiled at Kelsey Alther.

"Sir, he said to Redding, I believe that there is enough telepathic intensity here in this room to get us started. However, I would like to debrief and prepare all telepaths aboard the Starbase. This is the kind of project that can be done with a few, but will become exponentially more effective with more officers involved."

Braedon looked around the room slowly and opened up his mind further searching for more definite signs of the telepaths in the room. He let his eyes return to Redding and he continued.

"The nature of how the nanites are to be delivered is the more difficult problem. Traditionally, they are administered directly into the bloodstream. However, the nanoprobees are not required to be in the blood, only the brain. I wonder if there are any engineers aboard the starbase that could help to create a device to administer the probes as an airborne virus? My idea is that rather than relying on the blood to bring the probes to the brain, we utilize the oxygen in the blood to bring the probes to the brain. In this way, the probes could be unknowingly inhaled, rather than injected into their blood."

Lieutenant Jori, now controlled and precise, extended his presence towards Redding to get any emotional indications from him and once again opened his mind to the room.

Redding said quietly to the young Lieutenant: "Thanks for confidence son, but I'm just an adviser." and made a gesture towards Speaker-of-Names.

Suddenly a soft feminine voice came over the comm.

"Sir, the McKenzie has contacted us, patching them down to you now."

The large view screen on the wall in the front of the conference room lit up, and the bridge of the McKenzie appeared. The officers in the Conference room could see the bridge crew staring back at them. A young Human male sat in the center of the bridge, as he nodded he spoke up.

"Captain Speaker, sorry for the delay, I hope were not too late."

Since it appeared that his idea of a subspace tricobalt mine was being relatively put aside, Ensign Sisko decided to jump on what he felt was the next viable option; the nanoprobees.

First he stood up and looked at the captain in the view screen and said:

"Sorry for the interruption, Sir, but we're having quite a heated exchange of ideas at the moment. Welcome to the party."

He then turned and nodded at Lieutenant Braedon Jori, saying:

"Well it is a relatively simple process to deliver nanoprobees along a phaser beam, but unless the cube's shields are down, the nanoprobees will just bounce right off the shields and be lost to space. Another option would be to put a canister into a transphasic torpedo, but again the shields would need to be down in order for it to penetrate the hull."

Sisko thought for a moment on the tactical side of the equation, a practice he was not quite accustomed to, and was hoping someone like Ensign Eтарudbo would run with it, despite his obvious objections to nonviolent options. He believed they were all getting ahead of themselves and they needed to decide on an approach and take it step by step from the beginning.

"The first thing I think we need to focus on before most of these options can be utilized is to take down the shields. I believe a focused strike on a particular shield will allow us to punch a hole and deliver the nanoprobes. Can someone in operations verify this?" he inquired, directed his question specifically to N'Eligahn, hoping to unify the group to a common task.

N'Eligahn nodded both to Sisko:

"Which more or less leaves us with two options," he said. "Finding something heavy enough to punch a hole through their shields long enough for us to take the next step, pausing for another moment before adding: "Or getting someone assimilated and inside the actual collective to push a virus through that way that'll get them to drop the shields."

He thought about it himself for a moment. Voyager had done something similar and it's been proven that the quickest and most direct way of introducing anything into the Collective. Granted it was also highly insane, but that was seeming to be the order of the day.

N'Eligahn smiled.

"The first option would be much preferred, in my honest opinion."

All the while, Kelsey, having just realized how many telepaths were in the room, immediately erected mental barriers Throughout a many centuries lifespan, hardly anyone had been able to breach them and so the Kalthurian felt safe throwing them up..

Talk about overkill of telepaths Lieutenant Alther thought as while a screen lit up as the McKenzie's crew came into view.

Sisko was talking about punching a hole through a shield facing.

"Won't work unless we have some kind of random modulation on the phasers but we would need some form of Borg expert and by expert I mean someone who was assimilated" Kelsey said.

Why did it seem like everyone came up with ideas that couldn't be done? the androgyn kept thinking; *At least the boarding action had a chance somewhat.*

Once more silent for a long time, Ensign McCann could feel Kelsey's frustration like a knife into his spine, and N'Eligahn's growing indignation like an icepick thrust into his temple. If he had to endure another sermon about realistic possibilities from this creature, he would be tempted to run out of the meeting with Kelsey and fight the Borg with rocks and sticks.

What would they have us do? Cyrus thought, *Put all our eggs into the boarding party assault team basket? What happens if the boarding party is unsuccessful? We can't just call a time out from the Borg and come back here to strategize...*

Cyrus looked around the room to spot Jori and immediately recognized his mind as the one probing for telepaths. Speaking of probes...

"What's to stop the assault team from inhaling your airborne critters along with the Borg victims?" he unconsciously aimed at the newcomer.

He turned his attention back to the Kalthurian and its growing frustration.

" I know you are frustrated, Kels. There are those of us who lack your experience with the Borg. We do need you. I will stand next to you and fight to the death if that's what it takes. Help us... Remember, many of these minds are mere children when compared to yours."

As the viewscreen blinked on, Cyrus snapped his head to the side to look at it and see the McKenzie's transmission. But at that moment, the late newcomer Lieutenant was asking:

"How many phasers does this base have? What if they were all set to different modulations and fired simultaneously at the same point in the ship's shields, could we pierce their shields, if only for a moment?"

As he asked, Braedon wondered why the telepaths were so guarded. *They must not be Betazoids*, he thought.

Sisko was irritated by the constant "No, no, no" attitude of the people in the room. He knew the telepaths could read him but at this point he didn't care. He actually hoped one of them would understand his frustration and it would help the situation.

However, his irritation got the better of him, and he spoke up.

"Well, I'm just trying to provide solutions to the problems posed by the other people in this room. My first solution, the problem to the cloaking was shot down. Now the problem is how to deliver nanoprobes. I can easily modify the phasers to a random modulating frequency as has been suggested."

Kelsey Alther turned and looked at Sisko:

"The cloaking idea and that random modulating frequency? Its been done before. The problem is that we need one that is completely randomized, one a person who was assimilated into the Collective couldn't possibly have!" the androgyn said, louder... but not too loud.

N'Eligahn nodded. He didn't need to be telepathic to feel the rising stress in the room.

"Sounds like that might be our best bet besides a massive explosion in their side."

He was beginning to like this Sisko character.

"A concentrated fire from all of the station's phasers on a rotating frequency should blow a hole in the shields long enough for us to do...whatever we decide on." he said.

Cyrus McCann was intrigued by the nanoprobe idea, along with a phaser delivery system. He looked at Sisko:

"If we can modify phasers to randomly modulate frequencies and piggy-back nanoprobe assault bugs through a hole in the Borg shields, would it be possible to also modify deflector technology to do the same? Or even use transporter technology to beam billions of the nanites through the shield hole along with an armed assault team?"

Why rely on one strategy when bombarding the Borg with three different delivery systems would leave room for triple redundancy...

Cyrus listened carefully for Kelsey, knowing the Kalthurian was on the edge and nearly ready to steal a shuttlecraft and take on the Borg herself.

Alther's brain snapped a piece into place.

"N'Eligahn! You know how Voyager infected the Borg with that virus? They had to be assimilated but think about it."

The ensign let the room pause for a second.

"Who is the only person in this room immune to being assimilated into the Collective?" Kelsey Alther asked with a smile "I am! I can carry the virus into the Borg Cube and infect them, and there you go!"

Kelsey had a huge grin on its face.

"Give me the virus and I can run in, get transported out, then everyone else can feel free to blow that cube to hell!"

"One problem," N'Eligahn said. "For that to actually be effective, you would have to be connected to the Collective itself. They'd know you were 'separate'."

That, and he'd never allow Kelsey to go.

The Androgyn looked at N'Eligahn:

"The Borg last time didn't notice me, completely ignored me."

Maybe it was part revenge but the androgyn wanted to do something, anything that could get rid of this cube.

Ensign McCann for his part had no idea what Kelsey was talking about but listened closely anyway.

He also had no idea a Kalthurian was immune to Borg assimilation. Kelsey never failed to surprise him. *Why then did Kelsey hate the Borg so?* he wondered.

Nanoprobes, modulating phasers, a blue-streak assault party of one named Kelsey Alther.. why not combine all of them? Cyrus was sure of one thing: she wasn't going aboard that cube alone. Unsure of his true nature, Cyrus suddenly felt hope whatever species he turned out to be might also be immune to assimilation. The hope brought him new confidence.

"If Kelsey's going in, I'm going in."

Kelsey looked towards Cyrus and just bluntly said :

"No"

the androgyn hoped Cyrus would get the reason why.

Good thing Cyrus was in no mood to argue. There was enough of it going on in the room anyway. Of course he knew Kelsey was serious and in any other situation he would normally fight tooth and nail to get his point across, but this was not the time nor the place.

N'Eligahn laughed.

"You're both crazy," he said, looking at Kelsey and McCann. "I put the idea out there to follow up on yours. It'd spread the virus, but it'd also reveal our entire strategy to the Borg, rendering it utterly useless."

He shook his head.

"We blow a hole in its shields and use the Spectre to deliver the virus via either our deflector array or phasers, whichever can be more easily configured. While that's happening we send in our strike teams to evaluate the virus' process and blow holes in the cube if necessary. I think it's the best shot we've got."

"N'Eligahn I think you don't understand what happens here, I don't connect to the Collective as such that I lose my individuality, I still get all the evil Borg implants and everything else. I still keep my individuality and the whole losing the rest of the plan? Won't happen, we don't share thoughts." Kelsey said.

She was getting a little flustered; it almost seemed like N'Eligahn didn't want her to go.

N'Eligahn locked eyes with Alther, his mind still closed but he tried to relay his thoughts anyway. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

"If we have to resort to personal delivery, we'll talk about it then."

Ensign McCann shrugged, shook his head also, and looked towards Sisko.

Sisko let the obvious question of why Lieutenant Kelsey Alther was immune to assimilation go, in order to answer Cyrus' question:

"I like the idea of redundancy, but I think the phaser is the easiest delivery system. I am not sure yet how the deflector could be used, and we don't have time to research it. As far as teleporting them to the outside edge of the cube, they would still have to be carried in to the vinculum for distribution or be inside someone who is to be assimilated. I think that's where Lieutenant Alther comes in. Why don't we use that idea of redundancy to both use the Lieutenant as the primary assault, and an array of randomly modulating phasers along with the phaser beam carrying additional nanoprobes as a backup plan. The phaser will have to be modified to be a pinpoint, high intensity beam, in order to pierce its way through as many layers of the cube as possible for maximum distribution."

He didn't know why the senior members of the room, and the Captain on the viewscreen, weren't speaking up. Maybe they were keeping quiet to let the ideas come out, as all ideas were necessary at such a drastic stage as this.

However, he vowed to keep quiet until an order was given, because the lack of protocol was beginning, well hell had begun a long time ago, to cause mass confusion and anger within the group.

Cyrus liked the plan. It made logical sense, was inventive, allowed for some breathing room in execution and timing, and also took into consideration other ideas and strategies.

"I'd like to help modify that phaser burst with you, Ensign." If he couldn't go along with Kelsey, the least he could do was help keep his friend alive.

"If it punches a hole in that Cube, he added, you can bet the Borg will about-face and come straight for us. We'd better have more than one shot..."

Ensign Sisko sighed and broke his vow of silence to respond to Ensign McCann.

"I'll take all the help I can get," he responded. "However, you are correct that the cube will come for the base after our first shot, and that's why we'll have to get it right the first time. We'll get a few more shots in after that, but the Spectre, McKenzie, and whatever other ships we have will still have to cover our asses and try to draw fire from the base."

We'll also have to shunt power from unnecessary systems to overload the phaser array. Safety is also a concern, when doing so, he thought, as he began going through a checklist in his head.

He couldn't remember who was or was not a telepath, but hoped if Cyrus was, he'd pick up on his thoughts and begin a silent conversation so the others could talk.

"Jori, what would it take to reconfigure the Spectre's systems to transmit the virus?" asked the Rethian then.

"So... shall I begin assembling and preparing the base's telepathic officers?" Braedon said bluntly, tired of all the outbursts and bad manners.

He looked around the room, now also disappointed that protocol and etiquette were being ignored. He remembered the Captain on the viewscreen.

They must feel somewhat betrayed by what they are seeing, he thought.

He produced a courteous smile and waited for a senior officer to give the orders.

The Kzinti commanding officer did indeed appear to be letting the ensigns carry on as they were. He was watching them, but it was apparent that he was letting them have free reign to voice their thoughts and ideas. It was frankly only a step down from permission to speak freely.

Crist, the Captain on the View screen, spoke:

"I like the nanoprobe idea. But as for the Ensign's idea to get herself assimilated, it won't work. Captain Speaker-of-Names, Admiral, with your permission, I think I should give my report, on our encounter with this Borg cube."

Crist took a deep breath and began to speak again.

"The cube was in the Kor'vmar Nebula for unknown reasons. When we encountered it, it was very... un-Borg like. First off, they seemed to use tactics, both in space combat and boarding combat. In fact, when they boarded us, it told us a lot about them: one thing was they didn't even try to assimilate us. Their only goal was to destroy us. Their drones used pulse weapons, and attempted to cause as much damage as possible. In my opinion, they will not assimilate anyone when they'll get to you."

Crist stopped to reposition himself in his chair, to become more comfortable, and continued.

"If there is to be a boarding attempt onto the cube, then the team won't have to worry about assimilation, but they will need to worry about the Borg's pulse weapons. The Borg may also perform tactics to overcome the boarding party, so you should keep that in mind. Concerning the nano-prone idea, if you can get it into an airborne weapon, what about the cube's environmental controls? I'm not familiar with Borg cubes, but I would imagine that it would be considered a non-vital system and wouldn't be well guarded."

Lieutenant O'Conner looked up to the screen.

"Interesting Captain. Perhaps the Borg have deemed the Federation not worth assimilation anymore?"

He paused before continuing:

"Or something could just be wrong with these Borg. Anything other unBorg-like qualities we should know about?"

"The only unBorg-like qualities we saw were, they didn't assimilate us, they used pulse weapons and they used tactics instead of the overwhelming power approach that we've seen in the past. Other than that, who knows what other unBorg-like qualities they have." Crist answered.

"Acting strangely were they? what we may have here is another separated Collective, A number of them have been discovered in the Delta quadrant." interjected Admiral Redding.

Looking intently at the viewer, he then said:

"Its quite possible they have their own objective. Captain Crist would you send me your mission and sensor logs? I'd like to review them prior to this conflict."

"Nice to meet you Admiral, yes they were certainly acting strangely, at least not that I've read before. I've sent in a report earlier, but I'll send it again for your review."

Crist placed his PADD on his left console and pressed a few buttons.

"The data and my report is coming though now."

As the commander of the USS MCKenzie complied, Redding sat back musing:

"Maybe if we can find what they want, we can better deal with them."

He was still dressed in his civilian clothes, but he assumed Crist would still realize he was part of the team.

"Also I would like to suggest a second objective, then proposed Captain Crist: if at all possible, I would like a team to download there database, to find out what they were doing here, in the nebula."

"Getting the nanoprobes in to the environmental controls could work." First admitted O'Conner. " They might not even notice it if their signature was close enough to Borg nanites. The assault teams might also want to try to infect any Borg alcoves. They are connected to each other so it might be able to quickly infect the whole cube."

"Captain, I must ask, did it appear that the drones were working in concert? What I mean is, can you tell me if they are still connected to each other?" Braedon Jori said.

He was growing concerned that the nanites he had been developing might not work as they were intended. If the drones were not connected, there would be no collective mind to tap into. Each infected drone would have to be controlled individually by a telepath.

"From what we could tell, they were working as one." came the answer from the screen. "Either they were well coordinated or they were linked as one. I'm willing to bet they were still linked."

"Captain, permission to begin assembling a team of telepaths and administer training." said the Betazoid Lieutenant.

Captain Speaker-of-Names nodded, as if expecting this, though the people in the room with telepathic abilities would register his surprise.

"Adaptation...to us, perhaps?"

He continued speaking with Captain Crist.

"As for the nanoprobes, we have several options for delivery." He paced...prowled around the holographic projection of Starbase 10. "As has been pointed out, we can make use of the station's phasers, as suggested, aligning one-hundred and sixty-two phaser-arrays at the Borg at any one time. We also have complete replacements for the deflector dishes of all five starships. Two per ship, totaling ten, with four extras that were expected for the Artemis."

He smiled.

"The last chief engineer made some interesting fine-tunings to the engines that made the other four unsuitable."

He continued.

"If we put the majority of Starbase 10's engineers to work on this," and he looked to Ensign Yylna's team, who were busy typing into a datapad. He glanced down at the table, noted a number, and continued, "we can have all fourteen deflector dishes linked to the phaser power supply of the four-hundred-and-eighty-eight arrays we are not using, in time for the attack. I imagine that can be used to help break through the Borg shielding somehow."

He added:

"There is a lot of talk about getting people aboard to deliver the nanoprobes. However, each of our plans has had a separate delivery option. I would again like to point out that earlier, we were considering using transporters to hold shuttles and explosives in subspace. Nanoprobes are smaller. If there is a way to utilize this method, I would prefer it over assault shuttles and personal delivery. Especially since any one of the team assimilated carries with them almost the entire defense plan."

Ensign Sisko noted the captain's suggestion combining the nanoprobes with subspace transportation. The thought hadn't occurred to him and he was liking the direction the meeting was turning. It seemed to be forming into a more unified train of thought rather than the chaotic, aggressive mish-mash it had started out as.

"That is a very interesting thought, Sir. What if we were to modify each transporter buffer to hold a portion of the nanoprobes in subspace? The power requirements would be greatly diminished compared to the shuttlecraft idea, and also the transporters would not have to be tied together to create a bigger buffer. How many transporter units do we have on the base? If we were to transport each set of nanoprobes into a different area of space, all surrounding a specified central position, and we could lure the cube to that position, then that would accomplish two different goals. One, the dispersal factor would be great enough that they would be likely to enter one of many different systems, environmental systems, vinculum, regeneration chambers, etc. Two, it would make it harder for the Borg to block, as instead of one source there would be multiple transporters rematerializing the nanoprobes at the same instant!"

"I like that idea," N'Eligahn said, giving a nod to Sisko. "Each ship can then operate from a different angle from the cube. It also allows the widest spread. That way we don't have to hope that the cube goes exactly where we need it to."

Then he said:

"And if this virus works the way Lieutenant Jori intends it to, boarding parties are a must. I don't think we could risk long range telepathy."

He looked over at Jori to see if he had anything to add about that.

"Precisely, N'Eligahn. " confirmed Braedon Jori. "Which is why I would like to get to work with a team right away. There are other concerns as well. For example, there is a risk that an inexperienced telepath would link with the collective, rather than an individual drone."

Speaker nodded to him:

"Your attack-method is approved. Other attack-methods may be employed, but yours should begin implementation immediately."

He paused, then looked to Ensign Yylna.

"Ensign, provide this man with the station's roster of registered telepaths."

Captain Speaker looked then to the McKenzie's Chief Security Officer on the viewscreen and nodded.

"A number of plans was the idea, however, a primary is always preferred."

On screen, Lieutenant Junior Grade Luke Abraxius, chief of security and tactical aboard the USS McKenzie, listened intently. He was more than happy to hear suggestions on killing Borg. A few suggestions of previously used tactics cropped up and cleared his throat and he spoke his mind:

" We can't use any previous tactics, the Borg will expect it. The only way to beat them is to remain unpredictable. We should use a number of these plans in unison, that way they won't know what hit them."

He racked his mind for anything he knew about the Borg defenses. He was not that long out of the Academy and Borg 101 was still fresh in his mind.

" Transphasics won't work effectively despite their shield penetration potential. The cube will remain operational even with 80% damage to its entire structure. Your telepaths won't find the location of any critical system to take them down effectively since they have none. A general systemic effect is needed. I believe Ambassador Picard was able to do something similar."

Nodding to this evaluation, the Starbase commander shifted his attention to Sisko and said:

"We have over two hundred transporters on Starbase 10, if you include cargo-resolution and emergency-transporters. We would have use of runabout-transporters and shuttle-transporters as well, however they are engaged in the operation of non-essential-crew-evacuation. This is our most solid plan so far: make it happen. The rest of you, we need to evaluate additional, differing plans. Just remember: I want boarding as a last resort. We can't give the Borg our battle-plans through possible assimilation."

"Ensign Yylna, you're with me." Braedon said looking at Speaker for confirmation.

Then, he turned to the viewscreen and spoke to Captain Crist:

"Captain, if you have any capable telepaths aboard your ship, I would advise that they report to sickbay for a physical examination. I will contact your Chief Medical Officer in 10 minutes with further instructions, with your approval."

On the viewer, Captain Crist shook his head:

" Doctor Bains was severely injured during the boarding assault of the Borg. He is in stasis at the moment. "

Bains. He was the CMO of the Tempest when Braedon was the Ship's Counselor. Braedon almost chuckled aloud recalling Darum's sharp wit... then concerned as to his revealed serious condition.

"Thank you, Captain." Braedon stood and nodded at Ensign Yylna to signal their departure. He stood up and headed for the door.

The Kzinti nodded as Jori beckoned the Veldriari science officer over. The androgyn inclined its head and rolled its fluted shoulders before following the Ensign.

Captain Speaker-of-Names then looked to Captain Crist.

"A little over two hours." Speaker echoed, then grouched, "I hope we can do it. Keep flying straight at us; we can't do this without the McKenzie. Any delay-tactic puts you at risk. The station and starships Spectre and Republic will be ready to assist you."

Starbase 10's Captain looked towards the holographic representation of the station:

"Ideas are valuable weapons in this upcoming battlefield-of-cunning. The more we develop, the better. However, time is running shorter."

He crossed his clawed hands behind his broad back:

"My resources here have been stated: we have the parts necessary to replace and refuel every critical system on any of the four starships Lotus Fleet is currently fielding, and more for the unfinished Artemis. I have shuttles setting up minefields and our weapons arrays are fully-operational. Each time your crew," He paused, and looked to the remaining Starfleet personnel in the meeting chamber, "or the ones here, can make them into another weapon the Borg won't be able to compensate for, our chances of coming through this intact go up. "

"Captain, if you can also spare some of your transporters, it may be a good idea to use some for the nanoprobe in order to free up base transporters for evacuations," Ensign Sisko suggested at this point.

He looked around the room at the other officers.

"In fact, if any ships can spare some, it would be a big help."

He turned back to the view screen.

"With your permission, I will send over a secure transmission schematics to your Chief Engineer to outfit the transporters with the subspace field coils. That is, if you have any extras in stock. If not you may have to remove them from non-critical sensors or communications systems."

The Captain on screen responded:

"The McKenzie only has 3 transporters. In fact, I would much rather not tie up our transporters, I feel that the McKenzie will need every ounce of power in the battle to come. With that said, if my Chief Engineer can spare the power for it, I will allow the use of our cargo transporter. That's the best I can do. As for subspace coils, this is a small ship, and can't afford to have spares, so you'll have to talk with my Chief Engineer on what can be done to make it work. Also, I should bring up the fact that, this ship will be maneuvering all over the place, and we may move out of range, so I'll need the minimal range that the ship needs to stay within, just hope it's not too confined."

Silent for the rest of the meeting until Braedon Jori's plan was approved, Captain Daniel Summers let a smile rise across his face. He looked up at Jori, then over to Captain Speaker

"Mister Jori," Summers shouted as quick as he could before the Lieutenant had a chance to leave. "Wait a second please; Captain Speaker, permission to go ahead and give Mister Jori a hand in this preparation, as I myself am half Betazoid. I may be of some use."

"I would appreciate the assistance from Captain Summers." Braedon said, directing his comment to Speaker-of-Names. He then quickly glanced at the young black man with a scar over his right eye and realized who he was. He smiled at Daniel and turned back to face Captain Speaker.

Speaker nodded to Commander Summers:

"Go ahead with Mister Jori, Captain-Summers. I can handle things here. Have Ensign-Yylna or one of the other techs patch your data into this central-meeting-chamber. I like to be kept informed."

Aye Captain, informed you shall stay" the Betazoid Captain said with a tilt of the head and a noble-like bow before he turned and headed out the door.

"I would also like the assistance of Ensign Sisko. His handle on ship's systems and expertise with cybernetics would be invaluable to this project." Jori said, giving a respectful nod to Joey Sisko.

The Lieutenant stood at the doorway with Ensign Yylna as Captain Summers came to join them.

Sisko had been doing calculations on his PADD, when he heard his name mentioned. Still waiting to hear from Captain Crist and the others about how many transporters they could spare, he was using the conservative estimate of 125 transporters (and subspace field coils).

Let's see, he thought, a cube is exactly twenty-eight cubic kilometers in volume, with an edge length of three kilometers, and we can point the transporters to five distinct destinations along each edge, which means a dispersal factor of six-hundred meters. Coupled with the fact that each transporter could transport approximately one billion nanoprobes, means that each nanoprobe will be six millimeters from every other. Now the question was, did Counselor Jori have access to 125 billions of these reprogrammed nanites?

He figured he would ask when they met up later, if the Betazoid had not already picked up on it.

Step one, however, was to come up with the subspace transporter schematic. He looked at Braedon, and said :

"If you don't mind Counselor, I'll contact you to find out where you are. First we have come up with a schematic for the subspace field coils, and distribute them to the engineering teams."

Ensign Sisko was becoming uncomfortable as he didn't like preempting Captain Speaker or delaying his assistance to Counselor Jori, but he felt like an important step may have been missed and this was no time to make mistakes. Hopefully when they broke up into smaller teams the tense aura would subside.

Staying quiet when the meeting drifted away from direct combat with the Borg, Sorripto knew that the only way he was going to overcome the Cardassian tactical mind within him was to embrace the scientific mind the Federation helped blossom within him.

Placing his hand on Ensign Sisko's shoulder he spoke:

"I recognize deep in thought when I see it. As a fellow science officer, let me offer a second brain."

Glancing around the room as the teams began to form and enjoying his first glimpse of his future commanding officer, Sorripto knew that the fight ahead was going to be rough and he almost eagerly awaited the next step.

Sisko looked over his left shoulder and offered the Cardassian his right hand.

"Your help is well received, Mister... it is Sorripto, right?", he said, inquiring into the name as he shook his hand. "I think I had the pleasure to make your acquaintance at the Academy once or twice. I will have to say, some of the treatment you received from the other Cadets was very unbecoming of people who wanted to call themselves 'Starfleet Officers.'"

Almost taken aback Sorripto offered a slight smile.

"You learn to deal with the treatment. I mean my people have been enemies of the Federation for almost a century, and hate is something that does not fade quickly"

Shaking his finger as if an idea was on the tip of his tongue Sorripto pointed at Sisko:

"Where were you going again with your transporter idea?"

Sisko then turned on his other side:

"We'll also need the help of a well-trained Engineer," he said pointedly, gesturing to O'Conner. "Although I have taken quite a few Engineering courses as a minor, my specialty and experience thus far has been primarily Science and Cybernetics. The process should be fairly straightforward, but you know whenever that is how it seems, that is not how it turns out," he noted with a chuckle.

Joey Sisko saw that the groups were splitting off, and looked towards Captain Speaker for additional guidance.

"Sir, unless you need us here any longer, Ensign Sorripto and I will head down to the transporter room and start working on the subspace transporter schematics. We will need use of any engineering crewmen on the base that can be spared to begin the installations and the use of a secure line to transmit them to the McKenzie."

Speaker nodded. "Of course, Mister-Sisko. I'll have Engineering-Team-Twenty-Seven meet you at the closest transporter in range." His clawed hands tapped at the holographic table's surface, the clacking of his claws against the glossy interface echoing in the rapidly emptying room. "There we are, the orders are sent."

Sisko nodded to the Captain and looked up the nearest transporter room on the base schematics. He gestured to Ensign Sorripto and they made their way to the door.

As everyone began to head off to their assignments, O'Conner took his leave as well. Quietly he headed out the door at the top of the meeting and then headed back to the Spectre, as he was no telepath and transporters were not his specialty.

Security officer Cyrus McCann stood and began to depart with the others and stopped short, looking towards Captain Speaker. He was a telepath, albeit a confused one. Once he considered himself Betazoid, then half Betazoid, and now he wasn't sure of anything it seemed.

"Am I to understand the Artemis will not be operational for this engagement, Captain?"

Cyrus wanted to make a difference in this battle, sure, but his first duty was to the Artemis.

"Ensign McCann. The Artemis will not be ready in time for this engagement. We will have to do without her for the time being. The refit-teams stumbled upon an Obsidian-Order trap hidden within the warp-core. The damage has spread through the EPS-conduits. It is repairable, but not within two hours."

Overall, the Kzinti, said to be too small and too civilized for his species, appeared to be pleased with this current state of events.

"Understood, Sir." Cyrus answered the confident Captain.

The news of the trap upset Cyrus but he gave Kelsey a look and instantly felt better. He joined the group exiting the meeting room and thought to himself with a smile:

So this is the hidden Lotus Fleet telepath contingent...

Kelsey Alther for one looked at the Kzinti:

"What do I get to do? I'm still on the Spectre with little else to do, if I'm not making the Transphasic Torpedoes or being bait for a virus." she asked.

"If you're not joining the telepaths, or helping to design or build the transporter-delivery-mechanisms, you should continue to stay here, and aid us in coming up with more ideas."

The Captain looked at her squarely for the first time, and said:

"Your dossier says you are skilled in the sciences as well as tactical. Perhaps you will know what can be done with the resources I've listed."

Kelsey rubbed her temples.

Engineering is out of the question and I hate using my telepathic powers for anything other than talking so lets see what I can do here. the androgyn said to itself wordlessly.

"I doubt we can do much with the phaser arrays with less than two hours left, the Artemis can't even have its own arrays ready in time so unless you want to throw warp cores at the Borg I can't think of much else right now"

Kelsey took a breath.

"I can load some transphasic torpedoes into the Spectre in two hours, not alot but I can build some and have them finished for a few torpedoes" she said.

The tactical officer of the Spectre really had nothing else to come up with.

"Most of the Borg already know our frequencies. I could help increase the damage output of the phasers but that won't help with the Borg's shields not taking damage from them adapting; we would need more than a few shots to actually do any damage." said the Kalthurian.

"If you don't mind I'll get to work on those transphasic torpedoes. They may lack a bit of a punch but still better than nothing... or I can get some tricobalt devices and enhance the warheads on our photon torpedoes" Kelsey finished.

"Warp-cores were involved in one of the options we discussed."

The Kzinti smiled, and flicked his ears in amusement.

"However, I was hoping for more thought on the option of varying phaser frequencies and output. It is fine if you cannot come up with something. But if you can think of anything, bring it up as soon as you can."

Captain Speaker then looked to the others in the room.

"This goes for you all as well. We must continue developing new ideas with the tools we have available. But do not burden yourself if nothing comes. "

Since N'Eligahn saw that the discussion had died down and people were splitting off into their own groups, he allowed himself to back slowly out into the hallway. He wasn't really needed here anyway. He had no direct expertise in engineering or sciences or anything like that. He was a pilot and a fighter and based off the plans he wasn't really being needed to do either, not in a great capacity anyway.

Waiting outside like he expected was Ensign Relys, his Assistant Operations Officer. Next to her was Vulcan who's presence surprised him completely.

"Re'tok?" N'Eligahn asked.

The Vulcan quirked an eyebrow.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"The *Invincible* was called away on an emergency, leaving it's 'non-essential' personnel behind," Re'tok said. "Unfortunately I was deemed 'non-essential'."

"Their loss is our gain," N'Eligahn said. "We can use all the help we can get now, I'm going to get you temporarily assigned to the *Spectre*." He looked up at Relys. "I take it you're not just here for him."

"No," she said. "Just needed your signature to loan our Runabouts to the Starbase to assist with the evacuations." She handed him a datapad. He looked it over and quickly signed it.

"We're going to have technicians on board re-fitting the deflector array and phaser banks, make sure we get them on board fast and in a hurry," N'Eligahn said. "I'll meet you aboard in a few minutes."

Then turning to Re'tok he added:

"I want to run some ideas past you first."

In the meeting chamber, the Kzinti nodded all around:

"Do what you can people. Dismissed."

He turned his attention then back to Captain Crist on the viewscreen, and again folded his arms behind him.

"Captain, we'll also want to begin focusing on ship tactics. Cover-fire, points-of-interest upon the vessel we should concentrate fire upon. If you have ideas on that, I would be interested."

"Understood Captain, I believe my First Officer has a few ideas."

Lieutenant Commander Teancum responded to Captain Crist's question for ideas immediately:

"Sir, if we can transport quantum torpedoes one after another into the cortical node to reduce command and control, and next to the warp core to create a core breach by removing the control mechanisms, we might be able to slow it down or stop it, at least temporarily. "

"Captain, then chimed in the chief tactician Luke Abraxius besides the McKenzie commander on the viewer, far from me to wish to contradict the First Officer, but even if we could manage to penetrate Borg defenses, it would be useless: we don't have enough torpedoes for all the nodes in a twenty eight cubic kilometers cube and there is no main control mechanism and no central power core to detonate. We can not... "

He half turned as he was starting to add his suggestions when a bleeping at his console grabbed his attention. Tapping a few buttons he confirmed what he was seing.

" Ah Sir... Borg cube has increased speed. I dont know how the hell they repaired so quickly but theyre at warp 9.2.... no 9.3. Unless we push these engines theyll be on us within 20 minutes."

He turned back to the Captain with a resigned look. They both knew in the ships current state that pushing beyond warp 9 would be extremely dangerous.

"Hmm, Mister Hughes can we go any faster?" asked Captain Crist.

"No Sir, were already at our maximum. The warp core is still damaged from our last run in with the Borg."

With frown on her face, Sydona Vkrull, the half-Klingon chief engineer of the McKenzie sitting on the other side of her captain, tapped her combadge.

"Jenny, the cube is gaining on us. Divert all non essential system power to the engine and run her hot."

"On it Syd." answered a female voice from somewhere inside the ship through the speakers. "Power diversion complete. Looks like we're picking up speed. You do realize..." Jenny said over the com before Sydona cut her off.

"I know. We can't maintain this speed for long. We need to get to the base before we start frying systems."

Jenny paused for a moment over the comm system.

"Any ideas on how this cube can be taken down?"

Sydona drummed her fingers lightly on her thighs before heading to the Turbolift. "Yeah. I have one. But it's going to require me to tap Zeta-Matrix Zero."

"Umm...the last time you did that...you were out cold for at least three days. We need you alert for this." Jenny responded over comm with slight fear in her voice.

The doors of the Turbolift closed before the bridge crew could ask any questions. The Klingon-Human Hybrid barked out wearily the deck she wanted to go to and the Turbolift ushered its way to the designated spot.

"Look Jenny... she continued, all the planning they got going is great...but considering our last exchange with that cube...they know what we are going to hit them with and Kenzie might be the only ship to buy the rest of the group time to launch the counterattack."

Sydona entered her quarters and slumped down on her bunk...rubbing her temples.

"What's the plan Chief?" Jenny asked through her Combadge.

"Stay in Engineering Sunshine. I'm going to talk to the only two Borgs I know. Darius my brother and Katasha Revant."

"Katasha? As in 'The Renegade Borg Queen of Starfleet' Katasha? You have to be frellin' kidding...right?" Jenny asked in disbelief.

"Jen...it's only been about a few years since she's left the Collective. I've used close to all the Borg Algorithms I could think of that my brother taught me. She might know some that he doesn't."

The sound of pacing could be heard over Sydona's com. Jenny finally broke the silence. "What info are you trying to get?"

With mischief in her voice, the Klingon-Human Hybrid responded:

"An algorithm that at the very least shuts down their shields entirely or all weapon systems. I've sent a message to sickbay about what I'm about to do and left the door unlocked. You have engineering until I come back from La La Land."

"Be careful Syd." Jenny voiced with concern.

Sydona headed to her bunk...slowly letting her mind drift, listening to the sounds of a silent room, the ships engines and the eerie sound of Borg very faintly in the background as if she was on a cube herself.

Slowly...drifting...

It lasted but an instant.

She had hoped for help... but they could give her none. They were not part of the Collective anymore. Any information they had was now "irrelevant".

Guess we're on our own then. she sighed inwardly.

With the same thought in mind, the massive Felinoid officer of starbase 10 faced the viewscreen, silent at first, but for a gradually building growl.

"Captain-Crist, Ensign," Speaker-of-Names' golden eyes regarded first the Captain of the McKenzie, then the McKenzie's Chief of Security. "We at Starbase-10 are here to support you. Be advised: we have spare Defiant-class engines on board."

The Kzinti continued to listen to the events on the McKenzie, while tapping out the commands on the table in front of him to ready possible support the McKenzie might need. "

"That's good to know, Captain, but that won't be a good idea; there would be no way we could replace our engines and fight the Borg within the allotted time. So we'll need to come up with another idea."

The auburn-furred nearly eight foot tall Kzinti folded his large arms behind him, and addressed his next comment to the crew of the McKenzie.

"McKenzie, I have an idea to buy you a bit more breathing-room. There is a patch-of-space near your location that my Flight-Controllers direct starships to avoid."

He unfolded his hands and tapped the holographic situation table, his claw-tips producing clacking sounds over the surface of the interface while he sent coordinates over the secure channel.

"It is damage from before the warp-five-restriction of the 2370s. There's a way through it, but larger-vessels cannot use it."

"Understood. " said the man on the viewer. " Give use the coordinates and we'll set a course. It should also give you guys a little more time to put our plan in effect."

Looking at the data coming in, the commanding officer of the USS McKenzie smiled briefly:

"That's a good plan; we have the coordinates now and setting a course, looks like we should be there within thirty minutes."

Captain Crist then spent his time coordinating with the McKenzie's stations in preparation for entering and navigating the warp 5 anomaly.

"Hughes, do you think you can maneuver through there at warp?" Asked Crist.

"I think so Sir, answered the helmsman, but it will be risky."

"Ok, do it, but don't exceed warp 3." Crist responded and turned to the view screen.

"Captain, we're about to reach the anomaly in five minutes. When we do, we'll disconnect the transmission from here, but there will still be a line to the McKenzie's engineering to continue the work for the upcoming battle."

Over thirty-five years ago, this area of space was like any other. Stars are far as the eye could see, set against the stark black of space. However, in that short amount of time, space has eroded.

This place, the Warp 5 Anomaly, nothing more than a statistical number on Starbase 10's databases until now, was one of the first locations where Starfleet researchers discovered that their current warp engines were destroying the very fabric of space. Ugly yellow and violet ribbons of energy twist here, obscuring the stars, writhing in an almost obscene dance. They marked the borders of the wound: a wound where no warp-capable vessel could fly.

Captain Speaker-of-Name's flight controllers, like those that came before them, would normally, dutifully transmit coordinates to ships arriving along that route to go around the anomaly. Course corrections like any other astral body you didn't want a ship to plow through.

However, in this case, one tiny vessel would be streaking straight through the heart of it: the USS McKenzie.

And hot on its tail, the Borg Cube.

* * *

His eyes never left the Federation logo as he leaned back in the chair, taking a deep breath at the course he'd just set the Lotus and her crew upon, feeling the weight of command on his broad shoulders.

They were barely beginning their dangerous mission against a presumed incursion of a cloaked Romulan Fleet moving towards the Klingon border through federation Space when the call came.

They could not abandon their mission at such a critical stage; yet, they could not ignore or even delay a fleetwide priority order.

And so, Captain Felez Comorna'tu, commanding officer of the USS Lotus, flagship of Lotus Fleet, ordered his First Officer to assume command as Acting Captain. He ordered the Chief of Security, recently assigned to be promoted himself to executive duties aboard the USS Artemis upon returning to Starbase 10, to make his first steps by acting as First Officer to the newly appointed commander of his ship.

And he himself, helped only by Chief Science officer Commander Quinn Calhoun, the only other one aboard able like him to speak Romulan fluently without any universal translator, took over their covert mission aboard a captured Romulan scout ship with her Romulan Unification sympathiser.

And now, they were gone. Two disguised Starfleet officers with a Romulan defector aboard a tiny ship in search of an entire task force.

In the darkened ready room of his Captain, the new master of the Lotus clapped himself on the face a couple of times to focus, and rose, returning to the expectant eyes on the Bridge; he could almost feel the questions on everyone's mind.

"Mister Azji, he said, we just received a set of coordinates from Command, set a course and engage at Maximum Warp when ready."

The Betazoid's hands glided over the console as he confirmed the order,

"Aye Sir, Maximum Warp."

Then, he turned rearward and tapped his combadge before folding his arms as he regarded the bridge crew:

"All hands, this is Acting Captain Mark Robertson. Fleet Captain Kotari just informed me that the Lotus, along with the rest of the Fleet and every other ship they can pull, is being recalled to Starbase 10. The USS McKenzie is being pursued by a Borg cube they encountered; they're damaged, but are making best possible speed back. The Fleet is preparing for a defensive stand at Starbase 10, while the McKenzie is going to try and lose the Borg through an area of space damaged during the Warp 5 incident that is too small for the cube."

He took a deep breath, allowing the information to sink in, though he knew many more questions were popping up in the crew's mind.

"We are in a position to aid the McKenzie and give her more time to get back and effect repairs, which is why we're heading for the distortion now. We're going to try and run a screen, pulling the Borg back just long enough before we disengage and return to base ourselves."

Looking back to the rest of the crew Mark couldn't help but grin.

"Let's show 'em what happens when they pick a fight with Lotus Fleet. Red Alert!"

As the klaxons sounded, he moved closer to the center of the command well, his eyes focused on the tall, muscular dark-hued Andorian vacating his command chair :

"Chief, get your men ready to repel potential boarding and assimilation actions, and go over Voyager's encounters with the Borg in the Delta Quadrant; see if there's something we can duplicate to get their attention on us." Blue orbs flicked right, settling on the bridge replacement to Chief Science officer Commander Calhoun:

"Ensign Smlek, we need hard data, which means we need to get in touch with the McKenzie before they get to the distortion. Start analyzing it as soon as we're able, I wanna know if we can squeeze through the rabbit hole ourselves, if necessary."

As everyone went to work under the blaring horns of general quarters, on thought was on everyone's mind:

The Borg

For a moment, Lieutenant Kheren just stood there in front of the tactical station, the knobby antennae sprouting from the sides of his earless, silver-haired head waving this way and that.

Such a reaction was seen throughout the bridge when was named the most lethal enemy the Federation ever faced. His own thus went unnoticed.

But it was not just because of the threat they were now ordered to face...

Being addressed by his usual Chief of security title instead of his recently appointed First Officer role confused him. Before he left, Captain Felez, the official commander of this vessel, had ordered him to assume Commander Robertson's place as he himself took temporary command...

Was the acting Captain rescinding those orders? Could he? Where were his responsibilities now?

But for the second he wondered, a thought suddenly came back to him from his intense historical studies at the Academy, something that had caught his attention back then: was it not often seen over a century ago that Starfleet officers assumed more than one responsibility? If so...

" Mister Tomah... he said without turning to face him, order all security personnel to implement Borg protocol Kheren 01 and have Ensign De Paul coordinate from here. You will be in charge of tactical operations when we will engage the Borg vessel. "

" Ah, aye Chief... Sir. " answered the Human Lieutenant at tactical, nodding to the blond man at the security station behind him.

Finally, all those daily hours of holodeck drills and forcefield programming will mean something! Hopefully... thought the man as he opened shipwide channel to pass on the order throughout the rest of the ship. May they be as effective in reality then he thought with a cold shiver down his spine.

All the while, the Andorian walked to the chair on the left of that of the Captain, and from there accessed the ship's computer:

" Computer: access Starfleet records, ship logs: starship NCC-74656 USS Voyager. Search all records from stardate 48001.1 to stardate 55997.3 refering to the Borg Collective. Text display of all data regarding contact. "

The feminine voice of the computer reached his sensitive auditory organs in his cranial appendages as the optic ones also located there focused on the appearing text colors:

" There are twenty-two distinct incidents recorded within the given parameters."

A sigh escaped his thin lips.

" Fine; let's begin with the first one. "

Then, thinking about the peculiar region of space the Lotus was said to rendez-vous with the McKenzie, an idea suddenly occured to him:

" Computer; correlate research with data concerning astronomical phenomeneas. "

" There are four entry logs within the given parameters. "

" Display those in chronological sequence. "

As the data reconfigured on the small executive officer armchair PADD, Kheren thought:

Whatever Voyager ever did, the Borg will already know...Whatever I find in there, we won't be able to use again...

Then something caught his attention in the log he was reviewing... and his antennae pointed sharply forward as his silvery eyes widened.

Will we?

PART 2 : BEFORE THE DAWN

Kelsey Alther walked out off the turbolift at the Docking Ring; the tactical officer had left behind everyone at the meeting and headed to the Spectre to make those adjustments to the torpedoes.

The androgyn made its way onto the Spectre and headed to the Armoury and found the security crew waiting there.

"Ok we have Borg incoming" Alther said, seeing officer Rhedshyirt nearly faint on the spot; "But!" the ensign continued "We have a little suprise planned: with your help, and some other security officers, we will enhance all the photon torpedoes here with the Tricobalt devices we have."

She walked over to a nearby console and punched in the schematics.

"This should help anyone not familiar with the procedure of making the photon torpedoes enhanced with TricobaLieutenant" she said, pointing to the console she had just finished punching in the schematics into.

Ensign Alther tapped its combadge:

" Any security personnel who are avalible please come down to the Armoury. "

"Arizhel" Kelsey said looking at the Klingon Starfleet officer on the left, direct the teams about what to do. I'll be seeing if I can add a Tricobalt warhead to a Transphasic torpedo to give a bit of a punch the Borg aren't expecting."

The Kalthurian walked over to a console and started looking at ways to make it work.

As Kelsey's officers worked on the torpedoes, O'Conner and two other engineers walked in to Spectre's main armory, each officer carrying empty duffelbags. O'Conner smiled and nodded to the tactical officers that looked at them as they headed to the equipment locker stocked with phaser rifles and began to empty it.

Ensign Kelsey Alther looked up from the console and saw O'Conner emptying the phaser rifle cabinet. The Kalthurian simply smiled.

Starbase Ten Security to Spectre Security," Came a female voice, slightly accented, with an asian tonality. "Chief Petty Officer Hattori speaking. Captain Speaker-of-Names has contacted us to provide you with a supply of tricobalt for your project. I don't feel comfortable beaming the stuff aboard, so we're transporting it via workbee. Where do you want it?"

"This is Ensign Alther, place it in Cargo Bay 1."

Kelsey looked at two officers:

"You two get over there and check on the Tricobalt" the ensign said, looking back at the calculations, then grinning.

Got it Alther thought, walking over to Lieutenant Michael O'Conner for an opinion:

"O'Conner, how long do you think it would take for all of us to make some transphasic torpedoes?" she asked.

Kelsey wasn't sure how long but hopefully it would be enough for a few good shots.

Chief Engineer O'Conner motioned his other engineers to continue to remove the rifles as he stood and turned to the Ensign:

"Well, I am going assuming we can use the starbase's resources. Lieutenant Townsend has finished one in torpedo bay 1, but I had been studying that one. She has started another one and I figure if we use the casing, targeting system and propulsion system of a standard torpedo, it should take a group of three to five crewmen and one qualified officer thirty minutes to an hour to make one."

O'Conner paused as his officers picked up the now full duffel bags and began to head out of the armory.

"If Lieutenant Jori's plan work, we shouldn't need them... but never hurts to have backup plans."

Kelsey Alther turned around and looked at all the crewmen working on the photons.

"Guess if we push it we have a decent few shots" the Spectre's chief of tactical muttered. "Thanks" Alther said to the Chief Engineer.

Tactical and Security chief Ather walked over to the crowd of technicians in the room:

"Ok people! Who has finished the most?" the androgyn asked, picking out three groups of five along with Arizhel, Devna and Rehshyirt.

"You groups will start working on converting some photon torpedoes into Tricobalt Enhanced ones. This should give us a few good shots against the Borg! Get to it! I'll go see if I can get us some quantums, until then keep working on the photons."

Outside starship Spectre, a yellow workbee floated, its grasping arms carrying a rectangular container before it. The craft was small and insignificant against the massive Akira-class' hull, but the small crate it bore had enough explosive power to put a significant hole in the vessel - and the station around it. Through its transparent-aluminum windows, a single Japanese woman could be seen guiding the craft while talking over the comm, allowing its high powered lights to trace over the composite duranium-tritanium skin of Lotus Fleet's proud ship.

Hattori eyed the starship and shook her head.

"Gotta say, Sirs. Envyng your ride."

Ensign Alther hailed back officer Hattori:

"Can you see if we can get around six to nine quantums torpedoes for us?" the Kalthurian officer asked, rubbing both eyes.

I really need a break Alther mused, back at working on helping the others with the photon torpedoes.

Hattori called back as she docked the last shipping container of tricobalt in Cargo Bay 1,

"No can do, Sir. Captain Speaker-of-Names has requested that the stores of quantum be routed to torpedo ordinance for the Starbase. We don't carry that many; they were mostly spares for the Lotus and such. Best we might be able to manage is one or two."

Airieko Hattori sighed and set down the workbee, shutting it off for a moment before running her fingers through her black silken mane.

"It'll be pulling teeth from a big cat though. You want I should try anyways?"

The Kalthurian swore outloud.

"Well don't bother, one or two won't do much. I guess we will stick with the photons, thanks" Kelsey said cracking her neck.

Looking around, Kelsey was surprised how fast the crew was working. They had already burned through more than half of the Spectre's Photon Torpedoes.

Jeez, these people really deserve congratulations for this

the ablue-skinned androgyn shook its snow-colored short haired head and continued helping a few crewmen who were having trouble modifying the torpedoes.

O'Conner chuckled a bit himself as he watched the hot-headed Ensign. Then as he headed out the door he called over.

"If you get a minute, you might want to come by cargo bay 2."

Before Kelsey Alther could reply, the door shut behind him as he left.

Meanwhile in cargo bay 2, dozens of engineers worked quietly and quickly on the ship's phaser rifles, using cargo containers as improvised tables.

Kelsey turned to see O'Conner gone after he spoke of Cargo Bay 2. Alther went over to Arizhel and asked her:

"Do you need my help still?"

Arizhel looked around and replied with a shake of her head.

The androgyn smiled:

"Keep it up then" it said and then hurried after O'Conner, finally catching up with him.

"So, what are we doing in Cargo Bay 2?" Kelsey asked.

"Well I thought about making enough TR-116s for the crew, but most of the crew don't have any training with them."

O'Conner kept walking to the cargo bay as he continued.

"Also they are a bit long and ungainly for ship corridors, so during the meeting I sent Ensign Dorek and Milbrant a phaser rifle modification, that I had been working on. It adds a barrel a tritanium bullet magazine to the weapon, but it isn't perfect. The rifles will be a couple pounds heavier, it will overheat much faster, then I would like compared to using the high phaser settings, and it does far more damage then I would like to soft targets... But that might not be a downside today."

"Improvised TR - 116s in other words? Nice" Kelsey Alther said with a smile. "Got any thing you want me to help do with them besides help convert them?"

O'Conner shrugged a bit.

"I wouldn't call them improvised. I had been working on this design for a bit. I just think of them as easier to use." He said as they entered the cargo bay. "Well to be honest, I just wanted to show them to you."

He walked over to one of the piles of modified rifles, then he picked up one and offered it to the ship's security chief.

Kelsey took it and lifted it up and down.

Not to heavy. the tactical chief smiled, aiming it at a nearby wall and pointing it around.

"Looks solid. " Alther said while looking around for a target to test it on.

"Don't suppose you tested them yet?" the Kalthurian asked.

Kelsey didn't want to fire at a cargo container with no clue what was in any of them.

"Well I have tested prototypes on the holodeck before, but I haven't done any live fire tests yet." O'Conner said as he turned to watch his officer work.

"Well then," the androgyn officer said, "seems like we got a practice session on our hands. "

It smiled as she slung the rifle over one shoulder.

"I'll head to the armoury, set up some targets and test them live fire if you don't mind. "

O'Conner turned around and looked at the security chief:

"Sure go ahead and feel free to take some for your officers too." He said as he motioned to the nearest pile of nearly two dozen finished rifles.

Alther took two from the pile.

"Let's see how they go, shall we" the androgyn said with a smile as it walked out and headed back towards the armoury where it could set up targets.

Lets hope these things work. hoped Kelsey Alther silently.

Chief Engineer O'Conner nodded and watched his fellow officer go before turning back to the pile of modified rifles and beginning to inspect them.

Ensign Alther reached the armoury and was stunned to see all the torpedoes finished.

"Ok, remind me to get you all synthale, on the house" Kelsey said with a smirk, walking over to a nearby table and laying the phaser rifles out.

"These little rifles have got a bit more of a 'punch' for the Borg" the tactical chief grinned. "We are going to see how well our targeting skills are with these."

Alther activated a target drone and quickly shot it once and the drone exploded.

"They are projectile weapons, yes, but they are also influenced by the power setting on the rifle. Crank it up for more punch" Alther said, walking over to Arizhel and handing her one.

"Your turn." Kelsey said, walking back over and activated another drone.

Arizhel with a blink of the eye, aimed, fired and hit the drone.

"Nice" the androgyn said to the klingon woman. "I'm going to replicate more drones for use. I want you people to target drones and begin to get used to them." it added while activating its commbadge:

" Kelsey to O'Connor: your modifications work brilliantly. I'm going to see how well my officers are up to scratch on it all. "

* * *

Lieutenant Breadon Jori led the team around the long corridor to a room designated as one of the Starbase's thirty-five general science research labs. They entered the room to find a busy spectacle of assistants hard at work. Braedon went straight to the large console in the center of the room. He watched as Captain Summers paced back and forth and then headed for the replicator.

"Black Tea, Hot, Light and Sweet" Summers said as the buzzing and whirling of light formed into a cup of tea. "Ok so who wants to kick things off here?"

Braedon smiled.

"I will." He said amusingly, "Let me show you what we are working with."

He began to quickly work the console's interface like a concert pianist delicately playing a heart-warming sonata. Braedon gestured to a large view screen on the wall to his right. It displayed a variety of technical schematics, equations, and diagrams.

"Let me introduce you to T.E.D." he announced like a circus ringmaster. Braedon Jori gently brushed away his emotional blockers and allowed himself to feel the excitement to help celebrate the moment. After all, there were very few people in Starfleet who even knew of the existence of his work.

"You are looking at a Unified Telepathic Enhancement and Focusing Device, which I eventually shortened to Telepathic Enhancement Device or just TED for short. TED is made up of five major components: the Participant Monitoring System, the Psionic Energy Field Calibrator, Psionic Energy Relays, T5 Nanites, and finally TED itself or main controls."

Jori gently pressed a sequence of keys and the view screen zoomed in on all the information related to the participant monitoring system and continued:

"The monitoring system is based on other medical monitoring beds. The bed will monitor the participant's physical state and most importantly will monitor and measure bioelectric energy in the paracortex and neocortex."

He was trying to speak in the most down to earth way he could. He was not oblivious to the fact that while he may have spent years researching neuropsychology, telepathic communication, psionic and bioelectric energy fields, the other officers in the room have probably not read his research papers or studied these areas of science. He brought up the information about the Psionic Energy Field Calibrator on the main viewer.

"This is the calibrator. It is a small device that is attached to the participant's temples with a small central unit resting on the participant's forehead. Its main purpose is to stabilize and amplify the frequencies of the participant's psionic energy. The calibrator also contains safeguards to protect the participant's telepathic functions and consciousness. The calibrator forms a direct link to TED."

The Lieutenant used the console interface to bring up all the information about TED on screen. He resisted the urge to pause and make sure everyone was following him. He knew it would be better to explain everything first and continued.

"When TED is activated, it is in constant communication with the participant monitoring and calibration systems, as well as any activated T5 Nanites. Its main purpose is to alter the participant's psionic field frequencies to match those of the T5 hosts. In this case, that means that it will alter our frequencies to match those of infected Borg drones. The next step in this line of communication is between TED and the Psionic Energy Relays."

Braedon brought up the information on screen:

"The relays create, stabilize, and maintain a direct link between TED and the T5 hosts. The relays send TED all the information about the T5 Hosts and TED uses the relays to send the participant's psionic energy to the T5 Nanites and hosts."

The Betazoid-Vulcan Human hybrid took a deep breath as he brought up all the information on the T5 Nanites up on the viewer.

"The final step in the chain is the T5 Nanites. These Nanites are programmed to attach to a host's neocortex. The Nanites will then form links with the Host's frontal lobe, temporal lobe and the occipital lobe. From there they connect to the Host's sensory perception, motor skills, memory, and higher brain functions. The Nanites are also programmed to measure the Host's bioelectric frequencies and send their measurements back to TED. When the Nanites are fully activated by TED, a participant's frequency will be altered to match a host's frequency and then TED will transfer the signal to the Nanites through the relays. The Nanites will then cut the Host's consciousness off from brain functions, allowing the participant's consciousness to take over."

He gently tapped one key on the console to bring up the original screen on the viewer, looked around the room and humorously remarked:

"That is the absolute bare bones of it all. Before I continue... any questions?"

"Most interesting Lieutenant Jori, and most impressive. I have heard about this but have never had the opportunity to do so. I may need a walk through later but I do have the basic jist of it, unless anyone else has any questions? If not, lets get to work." Summers said with some real passion to eliminate the threat that has taken a family member from him once before.

He was determined to not let it happen again.

Ensign Yylna, the young Veldriari officer Speaker-of-Names had mentioned earlier, began immediately setting up extra communications equipment when the others entered the room. It was as simple as a modified combadge and a bit of tricorder-delivered programming it seemed, for all the androgyn did was attach the combadge to the most logical place to interface with the unit, and whip out its tricorder, its fingerpads efficiently moving over the handheld device's controls.

With a roll of its fluted shoulders, Yylna announced in its woodwind-like voice as it got up:

"I've completed syncing this system's video output to the briefing chamber, Sirs. You can review the process before I activate."

"Captain, Braedon Jori replied looking at Daniel and speaking loud enough for Yylna's combadge to convey the message to Speaker, "setting up the equipment is the easy part. These devices communicate through psionic energy, which simplistically, is nothing more than focused thought. That means that once Borg drones become hosts of the T5, shields become, as they like to say, 'irrelevant'. We will only need the shields down long enough to get the T5 Nanites aboard the Cube."

Braedon wondered how Sisko and Sorripto were doing.

"Captain Speaker," he said towards Yylna, "I need access to a large room to train the base's telepaths and to set up the necessary equipment for this project. Is there somewhere you can suggest?"

Speaker-of-Names' voice came back over the com channel.

"Cargo-Bay-147 should provide you the necessary room. It is close by, and empty. However, you are forgetting, Lieutenant-Jori: our method-of-delivery rests with Ensign-Sisko's idea of subspace-transporters. Nonetheless, Starbase-10 will do its utmost to bring their shields down."

The room fell silent as Speaker came through. Then the assistants milling about quickly began packing up equipment before Speaker could finish the first sentence.

Braedon Jori listened carefully and responded:

"As long as the shields are down long enough for the nanites to be transported to the cube, we should be able to bring the Borg's shields down permanently from the inside, once TED and the nanites are activated."

The hybrid signaled for the lab assistants to begin transporting everything to the cargo bay.

Jori began to communicate with Captain Summers in the Betazoid telepathic tradition and asked him if the Spectre was available to them to assist in training the telepaths and getting a 'practice run' before the cube arrived at Starbase 10.

" *The Spectre is always ready and willing Braedon. What is it you will need from the ship? I will see to it that it gets done ASAP,*" Summers answered his fellow Betazoid's telepathic communication with one of his own, as he started to help with the transport of equipment to the cargo bay.

Braedon missed being able to communicate like this he realized, as he continued with Daniel:

" *Well, we need the Spectre to act as the Borg vessel during our training exercise. I would like to administer a previous version of the nanites, T2 version, to some of her crew. These nanites work mostly in the same way, with the exception that the participant will not have access to the host's memory and the T2 Nanites will only last for 20 minutes after activation before the bioelectric energy in the host's brain destroys them.*"

Braedon Jori looked toward Ensign Yylna and politely asked:

"Ensign Yylna, can you arrange for the telepaths aboard the Starbase to report to Cargo Bay 147 in ten minutes?"

Ensign Yylna's woodwind-like voice gently formed the affirmative:

"Yes, of course."

Its fingerpads touched the PADD it always had with it, and quickly typed out the communication.

"All candidates have been requested to meet us there."

Braedon nodded in appreciation to Yylna and asked:

"How many candidates are expected?"

"How many people would you need for this test? So I know how to go about getting the people prepared for this unique opportunity." mentally projected Daniel Summers to the half Vulcan- half Betazoid Human officer.

Jori focused on Daniel:

"Best case scenario would be three hosts aboard the Spectre for everyone one telepath involved."

Captain Summers looked down at a PADD in his hands to look at his crew manifest and had to wonder how many telepaths were to be involved, so he continued his private conversation with Braedon Jori:

"Very well, one question for you if you don't mind: do you want me as a test subject? No doubt there will be some telepathic beings on board that have been assimilated and we may want to test on that type of beings to see how reliable it will be on them as well."

Summers looked up at him as he finished with a wry smile on his face and a concerned look in his eye.

"TED should compensate by allocating more energy to overpower Borg telepaths, however I think it would be a great idea to have you over there. Let's make sure that TED will do what it is supposed to."

still looking at Yylna, the hybrid now addressed the captain over the intercom:

"Captain Speaker, may one of my science teams have access to one of the Starbase Deflectors? I would like to get all the bugs out before the Cube arrives." nsign Yylna's woodwind-like voice gently formed the affirmative. "Yes, of course." Its fingerpads Captain Speaker-of-Names' voice came back over the communications:

"What do you plan to do with the deflectors?" The Kzinti asked.

"We need to actually test this all out with the telepaths that will be participating. TED will be able to adapt and work more effectively if it has had the opportunity to work with them. Not to mention, this will be a very 'intense' experience and many telepaths might not be able to handle the physical and psychological distress."

Lieutenant Jori signaled for the last of the assistants to pack up the Psionic Energy Relay equipment for transport and spoke once again to Captain Speaker:

"Captain, the Psionic Energy relays will be most effectively patched through the deflectors. This will help to create a more powerful Psionic Energy Field that Starbase 10 can amplify to strengthen the participant's psionic energy output to the Borg vessel. This will allow each telepath to link with multiple drones. I would also suggest that each ship have a relay on board and patched into their deflectors."

Braedon paused for a moment, remembering his father's words of wisdom: "I don't know" is often the most acceptable and logical answer.

"The truth of the matter is that I'm not even sure that the signal will need to be strengthened, but I would rather take preemptive measures, than be struggling with TED's signal strength when the Borg arrives. For this exercise, I'd like to have a relay patched through one deflector aboard Starbase 10. I will have a better understanding of the situation after we have completed the training exercise."

The Kzinti's rumbling voice replied over the comm system:

"I'll have the order sent to link all the available deflectors up on the starbase; but aside for the Spectre, no ship will have time for those modifications."

"Sirs," came Yylna again, "I could set up those deflectors to be tied into the station's tertiary computer core. From there, we could adjust the output and tasks of each individual spare deflector, so if other tasks become available needing those deflectors, processes could be shifted about for efficiency."

"I like the way you think, Ensign Yylna." Braedon had always loved a good cliché: "Make it so." He said, pausing in front of the Cargo Bay doors.

"Oh, and how many participants are we expecting, Ensign?" He asked Yylna reaching out his hand to take the PADD containing the list of telepaths and flashing Captain Summers a smile of excitement.

Even though he was sensing overwhelming fear and tension from all reaches of the Starbase, the young Lieutenant couldn't help but allow himself to experience all the positive emotions he was feeling: Braedon was standing beside his coMisterade Daniel Summers, now Captain; had met the real Kelsey Alther who's holographic projection had been teaching him starship tactics. Most of all, the countless months of research, testing, development, and hard work was finally going to be of use in defending life against the Borg.

The familiar sound as the Cargo Bay doors opened helped Braedon focus his mind again, closing out all the emotion, both his own and from the thousands of people aboard Starbase 10. He waited for a response before entering.

As Lieutenant Jori briefed Speaker-of-Names about the particulars of the deflector's usage in his plan, Ensign Yylna spoke up:

"Pardon for interruption," it began, "but I would like to know: would you like a dedicated deflector array? We have fourteen fully-functional starship arrays available. They're replacements for Lotus Fleet's ships. Two for each starship currently in service, and another six for the USS Artemis, since we were having trouble adapting to the modifications Artemis' last chief engineer made to the ship. Any one of them could be easily connected to Starbase 10's power grid, utilizing the repair facilities' umbilicals."

The Veldriari paused for a breath that had a small trilling sound, like a piccolo briefly played, before continuing.

"And with the evacuation of the station, Starbase 10 has more than enough energy resources to maintain more than one such a system for the duration of a prolonged firefight."

Captain Speaker's voice came through:

"If we can do it in the way Mister-Yylna says we can do it, Lieutenant-Jori, I will be willing to authorize such an endeavor. This is your technology and your plan however. Station-deflectors can be repurposed to share the burden of maintaining the deflector-fields with your idea, I think."

"The more deflectors TED can operate, the better equipped our telepathic participants will be. I would suggest bringing as many online as we can. Fortunately, my assistants have informed me that it is very little work to connect the Psionic Energy Relays to deflector systems and would be able to lead up that work if you require." Lieutenant Jori explained to Captain Speaker.

The young officer considered the huge undertaking of the situation and coldly and calmly asked aloud:

"If you know of anyone on Starbase 10 that has experience or knowledge on Borg Vessel schematics or layouts, please ask them to join us in the Cargo Bay."

Then he focused his thoughts on Daniel:

" Can you or any members of the Spectre's crew help fill us in on moving about in the Borg Cube. I can have one of my assistants bring up a Telepathic Imaging Console so that our participants can get a first hand look at the interior of a Borg Vessel."

" No one on my crew was on a Borg Vessel, just a vessel that was taken over by the Borg; so if that may help as well then I can get someone in here."

"I will need about fifteen minutes with the participating telepaths to go over everything" Braedon said out loud to everyone and no one in particular.

"Daniel, you should probably stick around for the orientation before heading to the Spectre. "

" Agreed, I'll get everyone from Spectre set up afterwards; shouldn't take long to do that. " Summers mentally said as he nodded at Jori's fifteen minute brief statement.

The Captain of the Spectre looked over at the Lieutenant after sensing his excitement and happiness, saw a smile from ear to ear on his face and couldn't help but chuckle.

Being half Betazoid has it's advantages Daniel thought to himself as he had a mental connection with his old friend and coMisterade Braedon Jori, so he knew his thoughts, and understood completely where he was coming from, even tho Summers felt a bit on edge every time the Borg were involved.

"Man do I hate these things" Summers again thought as he shook off the thought and focused on Braedon for the next part of the project.

Daniel Summers didn't know what to expect, or what was next; the one thing he didn't want to do was to reach into Braedon's mind and steal his thunder.

"My team should get going then." The Veldriari ensign stated, before it was reminded it hadn't given Jori a listing of the numbers.

"There are normally fifty thousands Starfleet personnel on board the Starbase at any given time, and an additional sixty thousands to double that number of civilians. Out of those civilians who have not yet left the station, there are twenty-three who meet your telepathic requirements. I do not know if they're willing to help though. Of the Starfleet personnel not necessary for high level functionality of the station during alert, there are two hundred and seven telepaths. That number increases to three hundred and fourteen if we don't mind the station operating at a low level of functionality."

It reached over and tapped it's fingerpad over the PADD a few times helpfully, displaying the necessary lists of names.

"If that's all you need then, Sirs, I should get down to Docking and get those deflectors hooked up and into position."

" Speaker to Captain Summers: Status report on the nanoprobes? "

The comm signal came in after Daniel Summers, Braedon Jori, and the others had had time to collaborate for roughly half an hour on the preparations for the telepathic attack. Ensign Yylna had had to move on, to begin work on attaching all the deflector dishes a while ago, and to configure the station's computer cores to handle on-the-fly reprogramming of the array.

"Captain, we are about to get a quick test run momentarily, please stand by" Summers responded as he tapped his combadge.

Tapping it again, he said:

"Summers to Lieutenant Kinsley."

"Kingsley here Sir"

"Lieutenant, I need you to beam aboard Starbase 10 at my location ASAP for a test of our main offensive against the Borg."

"Acknowledged Sir, on my way, Kingsley out"

* * *

As they walked out the meeting room door Ensign Sisko led the way to transporter room number 4. He began thinking he should get to know his companion a little better, and also was a little curious as to how he came to be in Starfleet.

He turned to Sorripto and questioned him in a casual manner.

"So, if you don't mind my asking, what motivated you to join Starfleet?"

Sorripto looked at Sisko almost in awe. Having been alive during the Dominion war, he was a lot older than most ensigns, and this was the first time in as long as he could remember that someone called him Starfleet and not Cardassian.

"My father worked himself to the grave rebuilding Cardassia as a peaceful republic. I saw with my own eyes what evil can do to the galaxy and what good can do. For over twenty years I worked with my father to rebuild Cardassia and saw his respect and admiration of what the Federation means to the better of the people of our world. When he died, he made me promise to join the Federation and put my talents in tactics and love of science to good use"

Realizing he was getting long winded, Sorripto did not want to dominate the conversation, so with a pause he looked at Sisko:

"How about you?"

Sisko could see the genuine surprise in the Cardassian's face at being treated as an equal and with respect, and he believed Ensign Sorripto responded with equal respect. Having had a Bajoran mother who was a member of the Maquis, Sisko had every reason to hate the Cardassian just for who he was. But Joey was brought up to judge a person for their actions, not their heritage, something he believed every Starfleet member should do.

When he was young, his father would tell him stories about when he was a teenager on the Deepspace 9 station, formerly Terok Nor under the Cardassians. He said that his time there taught him that good and evil was evident in all races: Dukat versus Damar, Kai Winn versus Kira Nerys, Sloan versus Benjamin Sisko.

"I'm very sorry to hear about your father, that must have been tough. Thank the Prophets for him, and Damar of the rebellion, and all other Cardassians who wanted freedom from the Dominion, and peace."

He thought a moment about Sorripto's question and responded.

"My father wanted me to be a writer like him, and I had a knack for it. Although, after joining the Academy, he did indicate that he saw a bit of my grandfather in me. I guess my scientific mind and interest in cybernetics and engineering naturally led me towards Starfleet. My mother also passed on her more aggressive and exploratory traits as well."

At that point the two had arrived at the transporter room and stood in front of the group of engineers and techs assembled there.

Sisko greeted them by saying, "Thank you all for meeting us here. My name is Ensign Sisko and this is Ensign Sorripto. I'm sure you all have been hearing rumors so I'm just going to set the record straight. Yes, the Borg are following the USS McKenzie, and we only have a few ships to defend the station."

He could see many of them grow pale and some even practically faint at the prospect, so he jumped in quick with:

"But... we have a plan that should give us the edge as long as it remains secret," emphasizing the final word with a stern look at each crewman. "We won't go into detail yet, but first thing we need to do is make modifications to at least 125 transporters in the station to turn them into subspace transporters."

He tapped on his combadge.

"Cargo bay 12, this is Ensign Sisko. Please prepare the stock of spare subspace field coils you have stored there and mark for transportation."

The cargo bay responded back that it was ready, and Sisko nodded to one of the transporter operators, and said:

"Energize".

«He then passed around a PADD containing the schematics to the crewmen, as he removed one of the coils from the cargo crate and made the necessary modifications to one of the transporter modules.

"The question is," he said as he worked, "how do we test to make sure that: one, the test subject, let's say this cargo crate, is actually dematerialized into subspace and not normal space; and two, that we can transport past a shield array? The theory and previous data supports these points, but we need to make sure. Any ideas Ensign Sorripto?"

Sorripto saw the looks and raised eyebrows he was getting from the engineers on the station. He knew he was going to have to forge his bonds in battle.

It is a shame he thought, that more than thirty years after the Dominion War and with old and new enemies to fight that being Cardassian was still something I am going to have to overcome.

"Looks like you might have to do the talking for us during this project."

Continuing work on the transporter Sorripto pointed at Sisko and said with an almost sarcastic tone in his voice.

"You might have to translate for me. You do speak Villian right?"

The Cardassian sure has guts. Joey Day thought, as he watched the crewmen who were previously looking at Sorripto with suspicion turn red and look away.

Sisko just smiled and nodded his head in understanding.

"All ideas are welcome here, as the fate of Starbase 10 is on the line," he announced, panning the room with his stern look, trying to stare pointedly at each embarrassed crewman.

Ensign Joseph Daystrom Sisko may have gotten his writing talents from his father, and his aggressive traits from his mother, but his knack for authoritative leadership definitely came from his grandfather. Although Benjamin Sisko was taken to the Celestial Temple before his birth, his family had been given access to certain unclassified security tapes from Deepspace 9 and Joey had been able to see these same traits.

Joey Day was waiting for a response from Sorripto when he heard the computer say,:

"Ensign Sisko, incoming message from Fleet Captain Kotari."

Sisko looked over to Sorripto, and said:

"If you'll excuse me, I'll take this outside."

He walked out the door and stood outside transporter room 4.

"Computer, play message," he commanded.

A commanding voice came over the computer intercom.

"Ensign Sisko, this is Fleet Captain Kotari, Starfleet Command. We've recieved your application, and I've just been in touch with Captain Speaker-of-Names. He speaks highly of you. Ensign, if you and the Spectre get through this fight, you will be the Spectre's new Chief Engineer. For now, I'll leave it up to you: You can assist the current chief, O'Conner, with the starship during this fight, or you can stay on with Starbase engineering until the Borg are dealt with. Give it to the Borg, Sisko. Your grandfather was able to break a threat to the Federation just as big. And if you could get your father to send me an autographed copy of Anslem, I'd be appreciative. Good luck out there, Mister Sisko. Kotari Out."

Sisko swelled with pride at being formally accepted to the elite force. He formed his response in his head very carefully, and further commanded;

"Computer. Acknowledge receipt of transmission and respond. Captain Kotari. It is an honor to serve on the USS Spectre and for Lotus Fleet. Thank you for this opportunity to serve. I know somehow, either by a technological or spiritual miracle, my grandfather is watching over me from the Celestial Temple and I do not intend to let him down. Besides," he smiled, "I need to live long enough to get you that autograph, right?"

He thought about the choice he had been given, and responded: "I think for now I will be needed to continue my work on the Starbase, and I will leave the Spectre in the capable hands of Mister O'Conner unless otherwise commanded. End transmission."

He paused to reflect on his new responsibilities and then returned to transporter room 4 to await Ensign Sorripto's response.

Taking advantage of the tension in the air, one of the engineering crewman, a Human from the Earth country of Ireland, spoke up.

"Sirs, Chief Petty Officer Raymond McDonald here. Is there any way we could get our hands on a Borg deflector dish in order to simulate the exact situational environment we would run into? We could set it up with a low amplitude in one of the cargo bays and attempt to transport a cargo container through."

"Not an actual Borg deflector dish, no," Ensign Sisko replied, his eyes focused on crewman McDonald with a mixture of respect and amusement. "However, I do believe we may have intelligence on their technology from Lotus Fleet's many encounters with the Borg. Enough information to possibly replicate one."

"Computer," Sisko commanded, "please show on monitor two any relevant data related to Borg deflector technology."

"Access reserved to members of Starfleet Intelligence and high ranking officers of Lotus Fleet," the computer rebuked.

Sisko rolled his eyes and tugged on his earring as he tended to do when irritated:

"Very well," he growled as he tapped on his combadge:

"Ensign Sisko to Captain Speaker-of-Names. Is there any way we can get access to the secure Borg data obtained by Lotus Fleet, specifically relating to deflectors and shield technology?"

"Ensign-Sisko, this is Captain-Speaker. I believe we have a Borg-Specialist aboard who would be able to provide you with this information."

There was a pause, where no doubt the Kzinti was looking to Admiral Redding, the man who'd arrived with the Republic in a most timely fashion, providing feedback for the Fleet's ideas into the Borg.

"I will ask him if he'd be willing to give you the necessary-information."

"Thank you Captain," Joey Day responded, "we'll be anxiously awaiting the specialist's response."

In briefing chamber 2, the Kzinti commander of starbase 10 turned to the visiting Admiral standing near him:

"Admiral-Redding, I am being asked by the Transporter-team of the Telepathic-Takeover Option to provide Borg-deflector schematics. Would you like to communicate with them regarding this matter?"

"Of course, Ill help in any way I can"

Redding thought for a moment.

"And I know just the... person... to do it."

He then gave a quick nod and headed off to where worked Sisko and Sorripto.

The Cardassian ensign started chuckling at his new Bajoran friend who seemed more angry then annoyed at the computer lockout.

"Intelligence and high ranking officers? Damn. One would think that during a time of war *with* the Borg that, oh, I don't know... information *Î*on the Borg would be available?"

Making a fist, Sorripto lightly punched the wall, scaring the crewman who was both angry and intimidated by the Cardassian he had been glaring at.

Looking at Sisko Sorripto spoke:

"When Captain Speaker-of-Names gets down here what are you thinking?"

Sisko then turned to face Ensign Sorripto and shrugged his shoulders.

"Well I guess we'll just have to make due with what we have until this so-called specialist arrives. I hope he or she either has the schematics memorized or can bring them up on the computer."

"What I think CPO McDonald was getting at, and I tend to agree, is that if we can replicate a version of the Borg deflector, so that we can test to make sure the subspace transporters can successfully work while their shields are up," Sisko continued, looking to the Cardassian to see if he understood and concurred with his assessment. "For now, lets replicate one of our own deflectors and set it up in the cargo bay. We can first test the transporter on it to make sure we aren't wasting anyone's time."

He motioned to several crewmen.

"You three. Help Crewman McDonald replicate the shield and set it up in the cargo bay while the rest of you start performing some tests with the subspace transporter that we have complete. Just dematerialize something into subspace and then back again for now."

The crewmen enthusiastically nodded their heads and began the work.

I really hope this works, Sisko thought as he continued to align the additional subspace field coils.

Some fifteen minutes later, the still plainly dressed Admiral found his way to the cargo bay.

"Mister Sisko!" he said walking across the bay at a brisk trot. He was vary large man and in his younger days must have seemed gigantic. But now, at his age, running just made him look awkward. "I heard you were having a bit of trouble."

Sisko looked at the Admiral who had made his appearance earlier in the meeting, in plainclothes, without the usual pomp and circumstance, and answered:

"Yes Sir. Begging your pardon, but we need to be sure this transporter is going to work. To do so, we need to replicate a low amplitude Borg shield to test on, but the schematics are restricted. We don't want to be caught with our pants down, Sir, if you'll excuse the expression."

"Well, its a good thing I decided to stay after all. Starfleet intelligence would never transmit such information via sub-space. Borg Tech security has a higher priority than this station."

Sisko's eyes lit up

"Do you mean you can give us the information from memory?"

Redding chuckled.

"HELL NO, I barely know how our technology works let alone theirs. But.. I know someone that does.. but I'll need to set him up first."

It only took a few minutes for an engineer to rig the control unit into the hollow grid as Redding explained:

"It's name is.. well.. classified. I call it Philter: 'he' was an early experiment in Borg infiltration and sabotage. His program was designed for boarding a Borg ship and causing as much havoc as possible. We had to scrap the program, thanks to the Soong Foundation and their "Photonic lifeforms are people too" efforts.

Suddenly there was a loud, constant beeping noise that got Redding's attention as he looked sharply around at it.

"I didn't say activate it!"

Instantly a small male figure around 1.4 meter tall snapped into existence beside the engineer. It looked much like a Borg, but with bluish coloring instead of green.

With a movement too quick to follow, it grabbed the engineer by the wrist; the man gave a violent jerk and fell to the floor.

Then it was gone.

"Freeze!! Nobody move! he's cloaked!" Redding ordered in a bellowing voice. "If he thinks your ignoring it, he wont attack!"

Redding looked directly at Sisko but said to the open air:

"Philter, Command override voice print, Redding: Admiral; Black-17.. confirm!"

Nothing happened.

Sveral seconds passed.

Still looking at Sisko, Redding's face scrunched up.

"He should have acknowledged right away."

Then, he shook his head and mumbled:

"Getting senile. Philter! Command override voice print, Redding: *Captain^/I*; Black-17!"

From atop a cargo pod a dry, lifeless voice responded :

"We will comply."

And the blue Borg reappeared.

Redding gave a sigh of relief. The injured engineer was treated for a heavy stun effect but would be OK.

"If he had been a Borg, commented the Admiral, it would have disrupted his neural interface effectively shutting him down.. for a little while."

Redding went on to explain that this was really a modified version of the Original EMH and held in its memories the technical schematics for every system and sub-system for Borg technology that they had at the time.

"It was 12 years ago, but Borg tech is pretty much the same now as then. Ill let you have access to his files, but ONLY the ones pertaining to this project, is that clear? and even then.."

But he didn't finish the thought.

"Oh, and you'll have to do it verbally, his program is self deleting if anyone attempts to access it."

then, he walked up to Philter: "You will work with these people and answer any question about Borg deflector technology, supply schematics as needed."

It looked at Sisko and his men.

"Order understood, Captain Redding."

"Its Admiral now Phil, and.. and its good to see you again."

Then, Admiral Redding walked off without another word.

Philter watched him walk away with some interest then turned to face Sisko.

"Your orders, Sir?"

Sisko was still watching the Admiral leave in stunned silence. He wanted to thank him for his help, but all he could do with mutter something unintelligible, so shocked he was by what looked to be a real life Borg drone materializing in front of his face.

He heard the hologram say something and turned to look at it, slowly, as if drugged.

He shook his head, tugged on his uniform, and straightened his shoulders. He cleared his throat so that he could sound as authoritative as possible, although in the back of his mind he knew that the tone of his voice would mean nothing to the programming.

"Mister Philter," he ordered, not sure what exactly to call it, so resorting to standard Starfleet vernacular when addressing a subordinate; "please enter the schematics for a standard Borg cube deflector dish, adjusting the amplitude for the size of one of Starbase 10's cargo bays, into the replicator over there. While you do so, please enlighten us about any differences between Federation and Borg shield technology, specifically pertaining about subspace to real space transportation."

As the Borg hologram worked, Sisko looked around at the still pale Engineers in the room and smiled at them for the sake of reassurance. He looked at the Cardassian's stone-cold expression with a slight smirk of amusement and guessed the appearance of the drone hardly shocked him at all.

With a stone expression on his Cardassian face, Sorripto stood, not sure what to make of this new "assistant". The only saving grace to bring some semblance of emotion was how much humor Sorripto found in the apparent awkwardness from his new Bajoran friend.

"So tell me Philter, do we have a chance to penetrate the Borg shields using the torpedoes?"

Almost as if ignoring his question, the Borg looked at Sorripto and Sisko:

"A Cardassian and a Bajoran working together. Curious. Tell me, do you not hate each other anymore?"

Raising one eyebrow and taken slightly aback by the question, Sorripto knew what it was like to be young, curious, and out of place. In a way he sympathized with Philter.

"Not every Bajoran and Cardassian hate each other, and not every conflict ends with continued hard feelings. Sorry to get back to the point, but can we even penetrate the shields?"

Tilting his head slightly, the bluish Borg again spoke:

"Curious. I see no record of a Cardassian in Starfleet. Are you the first?"

Stepping back before losing his temper, Sorripto looked at Sisko as if to tell him "do something about this".

Sisko looked at his Cardassian friend, slightly amused by his frustration with the hologram, but mostly annoyed at it as well.

"Mister Philter, why won't you answer Ensign Sorripto's questions?", he asked of the faux-drone.

"I am not programmed to speculate," Philter replied. "The Ensign didn't ask me any quantitative question."

"Very well," Sisko replied as he rolled his eyes, "I'll interpret. Using that console over there," he gestured to a console on the wall which could grant access to inventory lists on Starbase 10, the McKenzie, Republic, Lotus, and Spectre, "please give us a list of weapons that could penetrate the Borg cube's shields."

Philter furiously typed into the console as the various information screens flew by. He reported back to Sisko when he was finished.

"Transphasic torpedoes will penetrate the shields. According to the data banks, 'Upon detonation the torpedo delivers the pulse in an asymmetric superposition of multiple phase states. Shields can only block one subcomponent of the pulse. The other subcomponents deliver the majority of the pulse to the target.' All other weapons are futile."

"Very well, just as we assumed, and we don't have loads of those," Sisko said to himself. He asked Philter another question. "Is there any reason why the shields would block transporter data coming from subspace?"

"Of course," Philter rattled off, "Borg deflectors are tuned to block transporter data from subspace. There would be no time to transport a subject in."

Sisko swore to himself as the whole basis of this project crumbled to pieces. But then he picked up on something odd the hologram had said and asked, "Philter, why did you say 'no time'?"

"The transporter transmission is a wave, of course. Every energy stream is either a flow of particles or a wave, except light which has the characteristics of both. Because of the nature of subspace, the deflector operates on a pulse with a frequency of one hundred MHz which allows for five nanoseconds of transmission before it is broken. A living subject must be transmitted in a constant, unbroken transmission," Philter replied.

Sisko's eyes lit up, and he asked, "So how much time is required to transmit a Borg nanoprobe?"

"Approximately 2.3 nanoseconds, therefore you need to adjust the data stream of your transporters to send two probes every 10.0 nanoseconds with null data in between," Philter said, with a curious tilt of his head, finally using some of his artificial intelligence to determine where Sisko was going with his inquiries, instead of just blankly answering the questions.

Figuring the idea at the same time Sisko did, Sorripto jumped back into the conversation.

"So at 2.3 nanoseconds for a probe and 5 nanoseconds per unbroken pulse, we could send two probes every cycle"

Gesturing toward the display screen, Philter confirmed:

"Correct. By adjusting the subspace transporter to transport a probe you could beam two aboard the cube every cycle. However their programming would have to be specific since once the cube's shields adapt and the connection is broken, any further programming would be impossible."

With a faint evil grin on his face, Sorripto thumbed through some buttons on the console as an idea swarmed in his head.

"So tell me Philter, if nanoprobes were sent to the cube with the intent of replicating then self detonating at a given time... how much time would be needed before the damage from that internal detonation would be sizable?"

Taking a second to process and run figures Philter looked up and answered:

"Thirty-one minutes"

Sorripto ran through that number in his head.

Was it worth it ? he thought to himself.

Sisko had to fight the urge to say out loud what he was thinking.

Typical Cardassian, resorting to "blowing things up" even when a plan is on the table to resolve the situation peacefully.

Instead he said:

"Well I don't believe our friend, Lieutenant Jori, would be too pleased about blowing up his new nanoprobes. Let's stick to the plan of allowing the reprogrammed nanoprobes to infest the Borg cube so that our telepaths can control them."

He thought about the issue of the shields adapting and said:

"Originally we intended to provide a payload of approximately one billion nanoprobes per transporter. At the decided on rate of transfer, we can send all the probes from each transporter in 50 milliseconds. I doubt even the Borg could adapt that quickly."

He verified this assumption with Philter, and then turned to the task at hand:

"Okay first thing's first. We need to test this out on the low amplitude Borg shield. Then, we have about 125 transporters to reprogram and refit with the subspace field coils and not a lot of time to do it," he commanded, as his authoritative traits from Benjamin Sisko began emerging again.

He noticed Philter just standing there, and approached him, asking:

"Mister Philter, have you finished entering the specifications for the Borg deflector into the replicator?"

"Yes," Philter replied, "but you'll have to replicate it piece by piece and reassemble it."

"Very well," Sisko said, as he began forming a plan in his head. "Crewman McDonald, please lead your team in replicating the pieces and assembling them in the cargo bay. Philter, you will follow them and answer any questions they have about the process of assembling the deflector. I will stay here and reprogram the test transporter to send the data in pulses. Sorripto, can you please find Lieutenant Jori and secure a payload of nanoprobes for test purposes? Everyone work fast and efficient, the Borg cube is on its way."

"Borg cube on it's way? This could be entertaining," Philter said outloud to himself, causing some of the engineers in the room to give him a glance with a mixture of concern and bewilderment.

Ensign Sorripto had just returned with a box of one billion nanoprobes from Lieutenant Jori just as Sisko heard Crewman McDonald over his communicator saying,

"McDonald to Ensign Sisko. The Borg deflector is assembled and ready in the cargo bay. We have the shield set in the middle of the bay with a 10 meter radius."

Sisko could hear him say in a quieter, fierce voice,: "Philter, stop poking the shield!"

"Thank you crewman, stand by," Sisko said with a smile.

Let's hope everything works out this well during the battle he thought to himself.

"As decided, I have reprogrammed the transporter to search a given area for nanoprobes and transport them to the buffer held in subspace in intervals of 2 every 5 seconds, with a 5 second pause in between each set.

I will attempt to transport them to an exact point within the shield where the computer can then scan for traces of the probes. Let's try just ten to start out," Sisko announced.

He walked over to the box of nanoprobes.

Hard to believe I'm holding a billion tiny computers in the palm of my hand he thought as he set it on the transporter pad.

"Energize," he commanded, and the transporter technician began to run the program, inputting the number ten as a parameter for number of probes to search for.

"Transportation complete," the technician responded.

"Very well. Computer, please scan the designated area for traces of Borg nanoprobes," Sisko said.

"No traces of Borg nanoprobes found," the familiar female voice responded.

Sisko swore under his breath and furrowed his brow. He began tugging on his earring in frustration as he thought. He tapped his combadge.

"Ensign Sisko to Mister Philter. For what reason would the nanoprobes not have been transported through the shield?" he asked.

Philter replied:

" There are two thousand, three hundred and forty-five different reasons why this would not happen. Would you like me to list them all?"

"No, that won't be necessary," Sisko barked, irritated by what seemed like games Philter was playing with him, but what he knew were just the eccentricities of having an AI to answer his questions.

In a calmer voice, he rephrased his question:

"Related to the phase of the shield, why would they have not transported?"

"If the phase was in sync with the transportation rate, this would happen," Philter replied, obviously realizing he needed to adjust his responses a little, using inference of what the Ensign was looking for.

"Of course, how could I have overlooked it!?" Sisko exclaimed. "Clearly we can't time the transportation perfectly so that it coincides with the 5 nanoseconds when the shield is not blocking subspace particle streams."

He started typing into the transporter as he continued his reasoning.

"We need to adjust the nanoprobes to continuously broadcast a signal to the previous one. If the nanoprobes get no signal from its predecessor, it will instruct the transporter to make it wait 2.5 nanoseconds adjusting the entire stream to match the phase. The process will repeat until all nanoprobes are successfully transmitting. There, the transporter is ready to receive the signal and slow the matter stream down if necessary."

Shivering with anticipation of getting this to work, he raised his hand to his combadge and said:

"Lieutenant Jori, we may need your help down in transporter room 4 to program a routine into the nanoprobes. Please acknowledge."

Smiling to himself as his calm Bajoran friend became irritated with their new assistant faster than any Cardassian would, Sorripto interjected into the debate at hand:

"Your idea is sound Sisko, but one issue will be overcoming the ability to send communications through a subspace breaking transporter stream"

Ensign Sisko listened while Sorripto explained the idea of using the same subspace frequency that the transporter used for the nanoprobes to communicate, and afterward just said in a matter-of-fact manner, "Very good point, thanks."

Leaning over slightly, Sorripto began to type on the console.

"If we link the communications to be at the same subspace frequency of the transporter beam, then the nanoprobes can receive them through the minor break in space the beam will create.... Yes that's it. If your calculations are correct then the transporter should pulse at exactly the right factor of 2.5 nanoseconds to allow for the nanoprobes to be transported aboard"

Pulling a PADD out of his pocket Sorripto pushes the buttons and enters his own calculations.

"I still think the option should be on the table to transport the nanoprobes aboard with the program to self replicate. One proper multiplication is reached then set them to detonate. As history teaches us, the Borg cannot adapt to a matter based injury such as a projectile or an explosion. "

Sisko was grateful for the help of the older Cardassian science officer and assumed his life experience may give him an edge over many fresh-faced Ensigns, but he believed that in this case he was wrong that the nanoprobes would do any good as explosives. The sheer size of the cube along with the redundant systems distributed throughout would make it hard to create enough damage to do much harm to the behemoth. But he did have enough experience to know when not to argue with someone anymore. In addition, the views expressed by his new friend were valid, nonetheless.

"Well, when Lieutenant Jori gets here, feel free to propose the idea to him," Sisko replied nonchalantly. "But, I think he should have the final say, as this is his pet project and he can call rank anyway."

"Where is he, anyway...?" Ensign Sisko muttered to himself, as it had been several minutes since he contacted the counselor.

He was about to lose patience and storm himself docking bay 147 to grab what he needed himself, when one of the Lieutenant's assistant finally arrived to debrief them on the intricacies of the TED system, leaving them with the data Braedon Jori himself had used to explain it all to Summers and the rest of his team.

After receiving instructions and the rest of the nanoprobes in various boxes to be spread out amongst the base transporters, Ensign Sisko -- who specialized in cybernetics in the Academy and was able to follow Jori's instructions with relative ease -- began to work on reprogramming the nanoprobes to allow communication between each other, as well as the transporters.

In his calculations, Sisko used the frequency of 100 MHz, suggested by Ensign Sorripto, to allow the communication to pass through at the same frequency as the transporter stream.

He was sure that without this suggestion, the first test would have failed. He turned to mention just that to Sorripto. A little earlier, Sisko was rather abrupt with him as he was deep in thought and didn't really grasp the full benefit of the suggestion, so he wanted to give his Cardassian friend some of the credit for what he hoped to be their first successful test.

100 MHz, Sisko thought. An old frequency used in ancient Earth to broadcast video programs in what they called "Ultra-High Frequency".

Despite the name, no communications systems in the present day used a frequency that low, so Ensign Sisko had to manually reprogram the communications array of the transporter and that of the nanoprobes to broadcast in it.

After he was done, he tried transporting ten more of the nanoprobes from the tiny box on the transporter pad, and then said:

"Computer, please scan the designated area again for nanoprobes."

"Eight nanoprobes identified," the computer responded, and the transporter room filled with clapping and boisterous hurrahs.

Finally with a slightly pleased look on his face, Sisko turned to Ensign Sorripto and a mutual look of "congratulations" passed between them. After gathering himself for a moment, Sisko proclaimed:

"This is great, but we're not even sure if this will work in practice. However, we have to do our best to try."

He split the engineering crewmen into groups of two, giving them orders to begin installing as many subspace field coils as they could find into designated transporters. He also gave each pair the schematics for reprogramming the transporter, and the boxes of nanoprobes, all of which he had already reprogrammed.

Finally he announced:

"We have forty-five minutes left. That means you have about three and a half minutes to spend on each transporter. You have your orders, get to it."

As the crewmen acknowledged him and began filing out of the room in pairs, the realization of what was actually happening finally hit Sisko like a hydrospanner to the face and he nearly stumbled. He had been working so hard over the past few hours and he had just pushed the thought to the back of his mind. He had only ever once faced death, as science officer on his uncle Nog's ship when the Jem'Hadar attacked. Thinking over his life of casually following Bajoran customs, but never really believing in the Prophets as gods, he wondered if his choices would cause him never to be able to see his grandfather; a prospect which he had always secretly hoped for.

Brushing off his uniform, an act which helped him to brush off the fear and thoughts of death, he returned to installing the subspace field coils in the remaining transporters and waited for the Borg to come.

PART 3: NEW BLOOD

During the course of the next tense several minutes, the Kzinti Captain would continue receiving incoming calls. Briefing Chamber 2 was filling up again, with both physical and virtual presences. The Captains of the USS Republic and the USS Steamrunner had been added to the viewscreen line, and an incoming transmission from Fleet Captain Kotari let Speaker know that more ships were on the way. Further, the Boslic man passed on to both Captain Crist and Captain Speaker-of-Names that the USS Lotus was on her way to run interference for the McKenzie at that Warp 5 anomaly.

"The plan is McKenzie rushes through that spot of space you found, Speaker, as before. But while your crew is in there, the Borg Cube will be attempting to detour. The Lotus will be there to give you a bit more breathing room, take some of the heat off of you. I'm forwarding a rough flight plan to your Starbase now, Speaker."

The Boslic man went offline shortly after that news, stating that he was coordinating with the USS Wisconsin, a Nebula-class with two additional warp nacelles instead of a weapons pod. Talk about saucer separation and civilians could briefly be heard before the Fleet Captain ended his transmission.

* * *

Cadet Savok's log, supplemental

After what can only be described as a perfunctory academy graduation ceremony, I was ordered to board the USS Republic as a passenger, and proceed to Starbase 10 for further instructions. Logic alone dictated that I depart immediately after commencement, as Vulcans do not participate in the frivolous revelry that other species find necessary. It is my goal to serve as a junior science officer, and to eventually become one of the Federation's foremost experts on computational technology and information theory.

I had spent the journey on the USS Republic in my quarters in quiet meditation, as I am still attempting to deal with the after-effects of a mind meld with a fellow cadet. The human mind is perplexing while at the same time paradoxical; their consciousness is a hurricane of emotion, yet at the center is a creative brilliance and sound reason that I have come to respect.

Savok materialized in the transporter room of Starbase 10. Since the cadet was not yet assigned to a duty roster, he chose to wear a traditional Vulcan service uniform consisting of dark blue trousers and a dark blue high-collared tunic sporting three gold Vulcan cuneiform symbols diagonal across the breast. The Vulcan clasped his hands behind his back and raised and eyebrow, briefly looking about the transporter room for an officer to report to.

A Human woman named Lieutenant Rivers arrived at the transporter room that Savok had just beamed in from, and gave him a friendly, yet a bit strained, smile. The redhead gestured with her blue eyes for him to follow her.

"Cadet Savok? I'm Lieutenant Rachele Rivers. Fleet Captain Kotari sent me ahead to let us know that you hadn't gotten your application acceptance message yet. It's available now though, in your quarters here on the station. You've been assigned to us temporarily."

She would lead him down one hall of the massive station, then to crew quarters which she gestured to.

"This one's yours. Listen to your message, and report to Briefing Chamber 2."

She grinned then despite it all, and tossed him a tiny black box.

"Here, don't open it until you've read your message."

It was clear she wanted it to be a surprise, but it was the standard shape and size for housing rank pips.

Savok caught the box in his left hand without changing his usual calm and neutral facial expression. He raised his right for the traditional Vulcan salute.

"Live long and prosper Lieutenant." The Vulcan thought back to his lessons in human interpersonal etiquette and added, "...and thank you for the personal tour."

Sadly, the intent of the young officer to "surprise" the Vulcan was completely lost on him, as the very notion of withholding information for personal amusement is both illogical and alien to Savok. Simple logical deduction alone dictated the contents of the case, and that knowledge was absolutely sufficient for now. The first and most logical thing to do at the time was to listen to the recorded briefing for his orders. Savok turned around sharply to enter his quarters. He had brought no luggage with him, as Vulcans possess no frivolous sentimentality for personal affects or family heirlooms. Anything he may require will either be provided or replicated easily enough.

Upon entering his quarters, Savok blinked both sets of eyelids once as his pupils adjusted to the ambient lighting. He sat down at the desk provided for him, and called up the briefing on the LCARS console.

Fascinating, the Vulcan thought to himself as he remembered the last words of the Fleet Captain from Starfleet Command:

" These Borg are different somehow..."

I am understandably curious. In what way are these Borg any 'different' from any others that we have encountered?

"Computer, replicate one type-B01 Starfleet science duty uniform to the precise measurements in my personnel file."

Savok changed into his uniform, and affixed the pip he was given to the required location on his collar. He folded his off-duty clothing neatly and put it away in one of the drawers.

"Computer, what is the current location of Captain 'Speaker of Names'?"

Savok had encountered a Kzinti only once in his life, and that Kzin was an extremely capable telepath, able to read the thoughts of others unbidden. The Vulcan knew that the felinoids are not to be underestimated. The computer replied in its usual monotone, and Savok set off to report for duty as ordered.

* * *

Selcar of Romulus leaned back in his chair and gently squeezed the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, a habit he had picked up from spending so much time amongst Humans. He cast a scowl down at the small desk his temporary quarters aboard the USS Steamrunner had come equipped with and at the various PADDs stacked haphazardly upon it. The Romulan had spent the better part of the journey reading everything Starfleet had to offer about the Borg, the situation on Starbase 10, and doing his damndest to recall everything Romulan Intelligence had on the invaders from the Delta Quadrant.

Standing, Selcar started over towards the replicator to get a cup of coffee. He was about half way there when ships internal comm came to life and the rooms silence was shattered by the voice of the Steamrunner's executive officer making an announcement.

"Attention all hands, we are now approaching Starbase 10. Mister Selcar, report to transporter room three."

He cast a longing glance at the replicator before turning away and thinking, *Eh, it wouldn't have been as good as the Night Owl's House Blend anyway*

Quickly moving back to the desk he gathered the PADDs and tossed them into one of the slate grey sea bags he had sitting on his rack. With darting eyes he checked to make sure his few paltry belongings were all present and accounted for. Once he was certain he had everything he strapped on his phaser belt, one which was slightly modified to hold a second slightly larger weapon, and grabbed the PADD with his transfer orders. He hefted the sea bag onto his shoulder and headed out into the corridor.

Swiftly, he made his way down the hall to his next destination; passing a small sign that read "Armory" and headed into the secured room beyond.

Selcar walked up to the engaged desk and handed to Bolian on the other side his orders saying:

"I believe you have something for me?"

The crewman nodded glanced down at the orders, paused, looked down again and finally shifted his gaze back up to Selcar with a questioning look in his eyes. Selcar smiled, hoping it would put the man's mind at ease. Shaking his head and muttering to himself the crewman moved off into the back to procure Selcar's weapons. He returned a moment later with two items which he placed on the desk. Reaching down the Romulan picked up the standard type II Federation hand phaser and slipped it into one of the holsters on his belt. Then he reached out and picked up the second item: a Romulan type II disruptor pistol which he placed into the second slightly larger holster.

Offering his thanks to the crewman, Selcar made his way for the door and headed out the room moving towards the turbolift which sped him a few decks down to transporter room 3.

Wasting no time he hurriedly stepped on to the transporter pad and turned to face the crewman manning the controls. Steeling himself for the future and what obstacles lay ahead Selcar nodded to the crewman and said:

"Energize."

Selcar would find Lieutenant Rachele Rivers arriving at the transporter room as he beamed in. The redheaded woman nodded and gestured to him.

"You're Ensign Selcar, right?" She asked, while holding up a PADD and smiling a bit. "I hear you've been assigned to us too. Step this way, we'll make for the briefing chamber, after we stop by your quarters."

She led him down a series of corridors, passing by the quarters she'd just assigned to Ensign Savok before stopping two doors down.

"This will be your quarters for your stay on Starbase 10. I think you've been briefed already on what we have happening, at least generally, so I'll take you to briefing chamber 2 once you stow your extra bags."

* * *

Ensign Rynn stepped off the platform and onto the docking ring, holding her Star Fleet issue duffle bag. She looked around, her green eyes gathering every aspect of the place. She hefted her bag up and tossed it behind her left shoulder and walked to the nearest access panel.

"Computer; please display nearest route to briefing chamber 2."

The computer chirped and blinked a few times before displaying a schematic of the starbase for her. She hadn't had time to go over the details of the base or of the mission much either. All she knew was that the Borg were involved and that didn't bid anything good.

She turned around, looked left then headed in the opposite direction. She mentally resigned herself to do her best if she could. She didn't expect she would actually get assigned so quickly, being so fresh out of the Academy.

Heck, she still had the mental calluses from the courses she just completed. But she had pushed herself.

Anything! she said mentally, ¹ For my sister.

She rounded the corner, passing a few people here and there. Then she came to her destination.

She stood as straight as she could, her shoulders pressed back, her head held high as she neared the door panel. The doors slid effortlessly open and she stepped through.

Her whole demeanor was "Fresh off the Academy Line:" Freshly pressed Star Fleet regulation uniform, black polished boots... even her combadge looked like it was polished.

Tala kept going over the orders she got before she came to Starbase 10, so she knew as much as possible about the incoming threat. The Borg, she thought they had been eliminated.

She looked down to the gray carpet on the floor, tilted her head in thought, then looked back up. The ship she came in on, the Republic... Briefly, she wondered if she was going to be stationed on there or on SB 10. Therefore, she didn't know very much about the station she was on now.

She looked at the door as it slid open briefly to allow a few other people in, and the only emotion that was visible was a brief smile as she noticed Savok happened to be there. First was a display of happiness as a brief flash of memory played through her mind; of Academy work they shared together. Then, of a slight curiosity as to why he was here as well. She had not thought to see one of her Academy mates so soon...

Her mind was shifting back and forth on different things. Tala was standing back in the room when she saw the Kzinti Captain moving about at the other end of the room. She had never seen one before so it was somewhat shocking to her when he began to speak to everyone. Not really a shock... but more of a surprise. She briefly compared him to an Earth Siberian tiger. But there was no indication of it on her face.

Deep inside she was nervous as heck and even shaking a bit. But it was not written on her face. She kept a calm demeanor as she looked around with a slightly arched eyebrow.

"Ensign Rynn Natala Reporting for duty." she said, almost with a slightly anxious pitch in her voice.

Tala stood at attention and brought her arms behind her and clasped her hands together as she awaited the Captain's orders. Her eyes darted around as she took stock of everyone in the room. She looked back to the Kzinti officer.

Ensign Anthony Jackson's entrance into the meeting was nothing short of the essence of unorthodoxy itself. The high pitch frequency of a transporter beam could be heard from outside of the room, and then twice more. Silence followed and still the door did not open, until finally a small Jefferies tube port below waist level opened near the back of the room.

Out crawled the ensign, fresh to the station but high in spirit, his messily combed over hair the first visible attribute before he stood and was found to be Caucasian and Human.

"Sorry Captain, crawled here from my duty station once I heard. Didn't want to disrupt your transporter work. But I brought something with me you'll be pleased about, Sir." He said in a rush before gasping to catch his breath.

"Phew." he sighed before leaving the room through the normal walk in door, only to drag in a supply crate.

Perhaps this was the transporter sound several seconds ago? thought Speaker-of-Names.

"I heard about your plan from some scared crewmates." Explained the ensign, his voice carrying a soft country accent that hadn't quite disappeared yet.

Captain Speaker-of-Names looked away from the worrying drama unfolding on the viewscreen and holographic display table, his golden eyes alighting on the ensign as he came in.

"Ah. Ensign-Anthony-Jackson, assigned to the Artemis." His gaze shifted to the crate. "Any ideas you may have are welcomed ones."

He looked with some worry towards the viewscreen, and continued.

"Especially if they're ideas that can be made ready within two hours."

"The way I figure, we ain't getting past any Borg invasion without some good, old fashioned Human ingenuity." The American ensign called from the hallway as he opened a supply case.

It must have been beamed directly from his personal quarters, as metallic clangs off the floor rang out from a ruckus of searching and sorting.

"Perfect, an old favorite. Lets see an assimilation tool stand up to hardened steel." Ensign Jackson muttered to himself.

Stepping back into the conference room, his hand glided over the now revealed katana. The weapon was easily over 100 centimeters, the sheath made of tanned leather protected by an outer frame of bronze. The hilt was lightly scaled lizard skin, capped by a bronze metal piece etched into an ocean wave that continued through all of the metal working of the blade itself.

"If you have use for security, assign me anywhere." ensign jackson requested, adding his sword to his back by way of a shoulder strap. A small grin lifted the edges of his lips, obviously pleased with his own choice of secondary weapon.

The Kzinti looked away from the McKenzie for another moment as he noted the sword.

"A fine weapon, Mister-Jackson. The rest of that crate holds more of the same?" He asked with interest.

It wasn't exactly what he was expecting out of a 25th century Engineering ensign, it was clear, but such weapons were definitely the language the Kzinti knew how to speak.

"Sir, Yes Sir. A few different blades from my collection. Two hander English swords, lots of variety. I suppose we could replicate more if needed... but should be enough as is, Sir." Ensign Jackson replied, PADDING his hands over his suit, making sure his gear was all set to go.

On him was still his engineering tricorder from his previous work station. Oddly his only concern was bringing it back undamaged; he didn't want so much as a small marr on his record for equipment negligence.

"Do you have need of me?"

Standing just out of the way, Admiral Redding saw the young man pull an archaic looking sword out of the crate and hold it out to Speaker with a somewhat smug look on his face.

"Not to put a Damper on that youthful optimism Ensign... but seeing only maybe three people on the station have any training with swords, those would do more harm than good."

Seeing the light goes down in the ensign's eyes, he further explained:

" Your Borg drone is far more durable and more resistant to cutting attacks then your average security officer, and the strength of a sword is more in its ability to wound and disable your opponent than chop him to pieces, despite what you may have seen in the old movies. We'd have our teams slashing each other left and right in a close up fight."

He reached down and picked up a sword.

"I suddenly wish I had taken more than the basic class but still, Id rather use a Bat'leth."

The Kzinti turned to Jackson, and flicked his ears in amusement.

"The Admiral has the right-of-it. However, for those with archaic-weapon-training, I see no reason not to distribute them."

Captain Speaker continued on, his tone a bit more serious.

"However, Ensign-Jackson, I would like more options for ship-to-ship, or station-to-ship combat. I am aware that the Telepathic-Takeover personnel are working on hooking the fourteen spare deflector arrays the station has on hand for use in their work. Can you utilize that configuration to develop something useful, such as a form of tachyon-beam or shield-enhancer?"

The Kzinti Captain turned a moment to a viewscreen populating with multiple views of different bridges, a command-level officer at the forefront of each one. He'd just spoken with Captain Ramabai of the USS Steamrunner, which had just arrived before noting now the arrival of Rynn and Savok. The Human Captain, who had the look of someone of Tibetan or Indian descent, looked on with a bit of interest as Captain Speaker-of-Names turned to the arrivals.

"Ensigns." He acknowledged with a nod, large arms folded behind his back in a manner many other Captains adopted when speaking. "Sorry for keeping you waiting. There hasn't been much time for welcome-and-introductions."

His manner of speech made it seem like "welcome and introductions" were chained together as one word, or perhaps a title.

"Welcome to Starbase-Ten. I am Captain-Speaker-of-Names, and I will be requiring your aid. The USS McKenzie," he paused to step aside, gesturing to the holographic table display, which stood between him and the viewscreen, "is being chased by a Borg Cube. We are readying tactics-and-procedures to destroy it upon its arrival. Estimated time-to-arrival is in an hour." He growled slightly, flexing his claws behind him. "As the humans says, 'give or take'."

The holographic table showed the Intrepid-class USS Lotus approaching from the direction of the Romulan border on an intercept course with the USS McKenzie, a Defiant-class, which was heading towards a patch of space labeled "Warp-5 Anomaly" and marked in red. The station was visible plainly upon this holographic display as well, with the USS Spectre, an Akira-class ship, and the USS Republic, noted there as a Lakota-refit Excelsior-class, both marked with a glowing blue outline, indicating activity. An afterimage of the Steamrunner-class USS Steamrunner indicated the ship had just arrived, and was also beginning to glow blue. Notably, there was an Ambassador-class vessel depicted within the Starbase's inner docking facilities, grayed out to show inactivity.

On the viewscreen, Captain Crist was on his Defiant-class bridge, as well as Captain Ramabai on the Steamrunner's. Captain Wyatt, another Human male, stood upon the Republic's Excelsior-class vast bridge in the split screen shared with a fourth Captain, a Deltan female identified as Captain Onia of the USS Wisconsin. Notably, she was on the battle bridge of what was either a Nebula or Galaxy-class vessel, and her ship was not indicated on the holographic display. There were also status readouts for the USS Lotus and USS Spectre.

"Ensign-Natala, I will need you to man that console over there." He nodded to one of the Briefing Chamber chairs, recently retrofitted with a console meant to interface with the holographic display, like all the others in the Chamber. "Our technical-expert, Ensign-Yylna, has connected all the consoles in this room with the display. I need you to begin identifying which phaser-arrays we will likely be using the most, and coordinating with this ensign here."

Ensign Rynn Natala looked at Captain Speaker-of-Names and tilted her head to the side.

"Captain, Sir... My surname is Rynn. My first name is Natala. Bajoran's names are reversed in Human regards."

Her face was empty, but her cheeks were slightly red, as a thousand emotions bubbled through her at being called by her first name. Mostly of embarrassment. She considered her name something personal and only given to people she deeply trusted.

He nodded briefly to her. She looked down for a moment then walked over to the console he indicated she needed to get to work on. She couldn't tell whether or not he bothered to remember her name was reversed. But she wasn't going to let it get to her. She was nervous enough as she took her duty station and began to sift through the information there.

Speaker blinked once towards the Bajoran Ensign, flicking his ears in amusement briefly, before nodding to her.

"My mistake, Mister-Rynn."

He then nodded to Ensign Jackson, who had been there for a bit now.

"Jackson, I want you to verify the status of our engineering-teams. Ensure they've been reinforcing on the arrays Ensign-Rynn identifies."

Ensign Jackson heard his order, and had immediately began sending communiques to various team members to prepare them for incoming orders. That was one advantage to a tactical mind, organization was usually second nature and he divided up his work into groups, conquering each series of messages with efficiency.

"I'm ready when you are Rynn. Just call on over when you have something." he said to his new Bajoran co-worker, letting his head adjust to glance in her direction in between a message.

His hand quickly brushed back his messy brown hair from his eyes and he listened to some incoming reports.

Tala chewed nervously on her lower lip for a moment until she realized she was doing so, then sat at the chair that was in front of the console. Her brows furrowed slightly as she tilted her head to the side. She had never seen such a console set up like this before and she began tapping on the keys. She pulled up the schematic of the station and with her free hand reached up and pushed back a stray strand of blonde hair back behind one ear, her earring jingling slightly at the motion.

"Captain, The crews are being organized now. Estimated one minute for assembly to complete." Jackson reported.

The Kzinti then looked to Savok, and narrowed his eyes to the Vulcan.

"Ensign-Savok, you will also begin your work in this room. Work with Mister-Rynn and Mister-Jackson to determine methods of varying frequencies or something to make our weapons more effective against the Borg. I'm told our weapons will have little effect, and we're developing other options. However, these are still our most reliable method of doing damage. Let's make them count."

Savok set about his orders immediately, already thinking about exactly how to fight the Borg while the Captain was apologizing to Ensign Rynn. The seeds of an idea formed, as he turned to address his fellow ensigns:

"The Borg have encountered nearly every possible phaser modulation in their previous encounters with Federation crafts, and have adapted to them appropriately. Logic dictates that our efforts at changing the frequency modulation of the phaser arrays will *not* be successful. We will get one or two good shots at best. Therefore, our situation requires a more creative solution."

The Vulcan turned to a nearby LCARS keypad, and pulled up a schematic of the station.

"This starbase is equiped with multiple industrial tractor beam arrays in each of the docking rings. It should be possible to modify the arrays so that we can oscillate the tractor beams between pushing and pulling thousands of times per second at maximum power. Using a genetic algorithm to continually rotate the frequency of the tractor arrays, it will be difficult for the Borg to adapt. The tractor array should cause a disruption in the structural integrity at the molecular level of any vessel caught in the beam."

Savok began typing on the console at an absolute blinding speed as he spoke:

"The algorithm is simple. The count of the tractor oscillations per second is our current frequency. Each frequency attempted will spawn multiple children, each with a minute mutation of the original frequency number. Numbers that are successful will be marked as "survivors", and will be allowed to "mutate" and form hybrid composite frequencies with others. Those frequencies that have already been adapted to will cease. Thus successive generations will become more erratic and difficult to predict. Done. The software is complete."

The Vulcan ensign turned back to his colleagues with an expressionless face, awaiting feedback.

Raising an eyebrow Savok added:

"By the way, it is good to be working with you again, Ensign Rynn."

Another one of Tala's slight problems was if she got too engrosed into something, she startled easily... and she dropped her PADD she was using to double check the information on the redesigned console with. Rynn quickly reached down and grabbed her PADD and looked up at Savok and smiled at him:

"It is good to be working with you too again, Ensign Savok."

Her voice was slightly quiet so not to disturb the others but yes full of gratitude. She didn't feel too nervous now. She was about to ask him how was his family.

She leaned forward and tapped a few more times on the console in frustration and finally got the phaser array spec's to show for her. A sly smile formed on her lips as she nodded to herself. She was beginning to get a grasp of the console's design when she was adressed and it slightly startled her again:

"I'm ready when you are Rynn. Just call on over when you have something." Said Anthony Jackson.

She looked over to him and blinked a few times, her face getting slightly red as she remembered what she was supposed to be doing.

"OH.. yes.. um.. I noted on both my PADD and the console. Indications confirm.. " She looked down at the redesigned console and her PADD then looked back up with a light nod, " there will be one hundred and sixty-two phaser array's that will be facing the Borg cube as she gets closer. Plus there will be eight torpedo's on the facing side.. depending on whether or not what the cube's tajectory is there could be an additional one hundred phaser array's on each side of the station that could be used. This is of course all based on the course the cube may take or not. "

She looked back down towards her PADD and her redesigned console and mentally calculated each phaser array's trajectory again then looked up at Mister Jackson and nodded after mentally double and triple checking herself. Praying to the prophets she didn't miscalculate anything. She let out a quick breath of anticipation, not even realizing her knuckles were white on the hand holding her PADD.

Speaker tapped his communicator then, and said:

"Lieutenant-Rivers, when Mister-Selcar arrives, situate him on communications for now. In particular, I need information on the status of the USS-Lotus and the USS-Alsea. Have him start by hailing the Lotus."

The Felinoid officer watched Ensign Rynn man her station, and briefly noted how the console responded to her command inputs; that was, until the holographic situational table chimed once, bringing his attention back to it. Traveling from the general direction of Risa, another ship was making its way at top speed towards Starbase 10, just now entering the hologram's field of view.

The USS Wisconsin. Captain Onia's ship, was currently stardrive-only, a Nebula-class with an additional, smaller set of warp nacelles where the usual weapons pod would be located. He hadn't seen many of this configuration before, but he'd known they'd existed - something about the smaller nacelles made them more versatile in areas such as the Briar Patch.

Still, the missing saucer and weapons pod made the Wisconsin a much more diminutive profile than he'd expected.

"Captain-Onia," the nearly eight foot tall Kzinti began, "I have your vessel on the holo-display. It's good to have another ship on the board."

"Yes, Captain Speaker-of-Names," came her wry reply. "the cavalry is on the way, though by the looks of the data, we'll be arriving after the cube is engaged. Save some for us, okay?"

She looked over her shoulder as her First Officer, a Ferengi, passed her a PADD.

"Oh yes, Fleet Captain Kotari wanted me to pass word to you that there are five more ships en route, arriving after us." She briefly scanned the PADD, then shrugged. "To be honest though, I don't think the battle will last long enough for those ships to do anything other than clean up... or look for survivors."

Speaker growled briefly, his bare tail twitching behind him. He was about to protest when she cut in.

"My Number One is excellent with numbers, Captain Speaker." Her tone was somehow both amused and dark. "When he tells me those ships won't get there in time, I believe it."

The Kzinti nodded. Still, Captain Onia's officers didn't yet have numbers for the project Lieutenant Braedon Jori was working on, and he knew that Ensign Alther's new torpedo design would pack more punch, thanks to the tricobalt he'd sent Hattori to deliver to her.

He tapped his combadge.

"Speaker to Commander-Summers. Status report on the nanoprobes?"

As the report came in, so did Ensign Selcar.

There was no time for socialties. The Romulan was immediately debriefed in succinct words and told what was expected of him.

Having received his orders, Selcar gave a curt nod to lieutenant Rivers and moved toward a nearby Comm station. Taking a seat, his hands moved deftly and with speed over the glowing LCARS of the control panel before him, opening up a hailing frequency with the Intrepid-class vessel in question.

The computer gave it's familiar chirp acknowledging that the subspace link had been established.

"USS Lotus, this is Ensign Selcar on Starbase 10. Captain Speaker-of-Names is requesting a full status report; please respond."

The subspace transmission went at warp 10 to meet the USS Lotus, itself speeding at warp 9.9875 on it's interception course, halfway to the dramatic rendez-vous with the USS McKenzie and the Borg, when Kheren finally looked up from the First Officer's chair data display. Eyes and antennae were pointed intently at Commander Robertson, now Acting Captain, as he announced:

" Sir... I have something. "

He would wait for his superior officer to notice him before before going further:

" Because of a transporter malfunction near a spatial anomaly, Borg nanites and Human cellular material interacted with a 29th century portable holographic emitter. The result was the birth of a Borg drone... half a millenia more advanced than anything known today. "

Turning his display screen towards Robertson as he spoke, the Andorian explained:

" At one point, this Borg, called "One" by the crew of the USS Voyager, contacted the current Collective. He sacrificed himself afterwards to avoid his collective, Voyager, to be assimilated... and from the Borg to ever get their hands on his advanced technology. But, now, the Borg knows such technology exists... or will exist. "

" And, ah, how does that help us? " wondered outloud Lieutenant Edward Tomah from the tactical station.

Kheren widened his stare, stretched his antennae and lifted his head as if to encompass the whole bridge crew as he answered:

" Borg contact signals always contain identification data from the emitting drone. So, they immediately identified him for what he was... and rushed to get him and the overwhelming technological advancement he represented. "

Showing again the armchair display, his blue-skinned fingers activated some keys and a specific subspace wavelength was displayed.

" The signal was routinely recorded by Voyager's communication log systems. " the acting First Officer then said.

The silence was so intense that for a moment, even the instruments seemed muted.

"Sir, now proposed Kheren, focusing his silver eyes on Mark Robertson, If we transmit this signal, the Borg will immediately alter course and come straight for us. "

Azji suddenly slapped his piloting console with his palm, a grin on his face;

" Carrot for the donkey! And with the superior speed of this Intrepid class, we could manage to send them on a merry chase... We could even maintain this speed for almost 10 hours! "

Edward Tomah replied then:

" Or, ah, until they manage to come close enough to scan us... and find out that we do not carry such technology. A Cube cannot overtake this ship, no... but with it's gravimetric torpedoes, it can slow us down until it does. We, ah, we will be lucky to divert it for more than 20 minutes... an hour at most... and when it will catch up... "

Kheren nodded but still kept his four optical organs on his commanding officer:

" Our greater mass and deployable armor will allow us to fare better than an already samaged Defiant class against the pounding. Whatever time we buy for the McKenzie to escape, and for the fleet to assemble, will be critical... Then, it will be our turn to lure them in."

Mark grinned deviously at Kheren's proposal.

"I think I recall the mission you're referring to, Lieutenant... Get to work on it. I want it looking like we're carrying a 29th Century Borg by the time we catch up to them.."

Just as Lieutenant Kheren finished explaining how to bait the Borg into chasing them and Commander Robertson ordered it to be implemented, a distinctive beeping came from the tactical console.

A few seconds later, Lieutenant Tomah reported:

" Sir, message coming in from Starbase 10 on an encoded channel; an Ensign Selcar is requesting status report for Captain Speaker-Of-Names. "

Speaker-Of-Names...

Kheren recognized the name instantly. His thoughts went to this officer he never really met except on a combadge channel: the former chief of security of the Lotus... the one I replaced... I worked under him, with his crack team of marines during the Romulan Incursion of Starbase 10. He's the commander over there now... he must be the one coordinating this whole operation.

The Andorian swiftly opened another display on his chair panel and turned it towards Commander Robertson, so as to immediately give him the current operational status report of the ship.

Then he went to the nav console and with but a few gestures, prompted Lieutenant Azji to bring up the nav display ready for their commanding officer's perusal.

The display showed clearly all the data and the current interception course of the starship with an ominous big red blip and a tiny blue dot barely a few light years distant, growing fast with each passing second.

The Borg Cube... and the harassed USS McKenzie.

Mark took a quick look at the status screen Kheren brought up for him, and nodded to Lieutenant Tomah:

"Onscreen, Lieutenant."

The starfield dissolved into a male Vulcanoid, with a flurry of activity behind him.

He stood at the center of the command well as he spoke:

"This is Acting Captain Mark Robertson of the USS Lotus. Ensign...Selcar, was it? We are en route to the McKenzie's position at Maximum Warp, estimated time to arrival is three minutes. All stations report battle-ready, and we're working on a few tricks up our sleeve... We'll maintain a data link to Starbase 10 while we engage the Cube as well."

three minutes...

At Wolf 359, it's about the time it took for one Borg Cube to plow through a fleet of 29 Federation starships.

In three minutes, they would tickle one, half a century more advanced, to make it come after them: one ship... and half the size of all those that were destroyed then.

At times like this, Humans were fond of quoting an old legend of theirs; about a young, weak shepherd taking down an armored giant with but a single stone.

Sure hope they got a lot of rocks back there at Starbase 10 thought Lieutenant Kheren very seriously as he programmed the beacon signal of "One" into the comm system, to be sent in a continuous loop on the specific channel used by the Collective.

He checked ship systems overall status on his exec display, and asked alert status confirmation through Lieutenant Tomah's console, before addressing again his commanding officer:

"Sir, Borg tactical and security protocols fully active. Engine power at maximum, shields and structural integrity field at full power output, armor ready to be deployed. The bait is ready... and we can tickle them further with phaser fire at your discretion. "

"Very good, Mister Kheren. We'll likely fire a shot or two, just to make sure we irritate them..."

"Engine status confirmed, Sir. " now added Lieutenant Azji without lifting his eyes from his navigational display. " Evasive elliptical trajectory computed and self-updating from implementation at point of contact. Even if they slice the whole bridge clean off, the Lotus will drag them away as long as possible before arcing back to Starbase 10. "

Even if we're all dead translated the Andorian inwardly to himself.

Mark couldn't help but chuckle softly and put a hand over his face, rubbing it down his cheeks before answering the Betazoid, making sure to try and hold his mind back from letting the flight controller feel his nerves:

"You probably could've phrased that differently Lieutenant, but nonetheless, good to know. Make sure to be ready to input evasive maneuvers randomly, they could pick up on a preprogrammed course."

Then the voice from Lotus Fleet Headquarters acknowledged his report:

"Understood Captain Robertson. I'll pass that report on to Captain Speaker of Names and the datalink is setup and ready to receive all telemetry and tactical information from the Lotus upon your command. Good luck, Captain. Selcar out," the Ensign replied as he forwarded the status report from the Lotus onto Captain Speaker of Names.

Once more he went about setting up a subspace transmission to another vessel, the Alsea.

"Alsea, this is Ensign Selcar of Starbase 10. Captain Speaker of Names is requesting a status report from your vessel. Please respond on secure channel Alpha 12. Selcar out."

Leaning back in the padded chair of the communications console, he cocked his head to one side and listened in to the exchange going on behind him. The other occupants of the room included three other ensigns recently assigned to the Starbase; a Bajoran female named Rynn, a Human male by the name of Jackson, and Savok...a...Vulcan. The three were discussing ways in which to defend the station from the fast approaching Borg cube and Selcar listened closely.

As much as he hated to admit it, the Vulcan's plan seemed sound; but far be it for any Romulan to allow one of their distant cousins to be the only one to come up with a solution to the problem...

"I have a suggestion," Selcar said as he swiveled his chair around to face the other three. He smiled slightly hoping to ease any tension the others might feel towards a member of his species before launching into a description of his plan.

"Prior to the entity Q hurling the Enterprise-D in front of that first Cube and beginning Starfleet's experiences with the Borg, several Romulan bases were attacked by the Borg in the early 2360's as well as several along the Neutral Zone around 2364. We... the Romulans... engaged them on a few occasions and, although it was learned that cloaking devices are all but useless against their more advanced sensors, it was discovered that Plasma Torpedoes are highly effective against them...at least the ones that managed to hit the Borg vessels before the Borg shot them out of the heavens. "

The others were all listening with obvious interest as he continued:

"This is probably due to the fact that one of the primary components of plasma torpedoes is trillithium isotopes... which, as you may or may not know, is very effective in sufficient quantities at causing stars to collapse via an implosion. The same is true when a plasma torpedo hits a vessel. In essence, the larger the target, the more devastating the effect as the object's mass determines how much of an implosive effect there is. Now, obviously a Borg cube is nowhere near the size of a star, but they are considerably larger than most vessels and its size could be used against it if we were to modify some of the starbase's stockpile of photon and quantum torpedoes into the plasma variety."

He paused a moment to let the information sink in before adding;

"To do so however, we're going to need trillithium...which isn't exactly something we can just replicate. However, a byproduct of warp reactors *is* trillithium resin and, if I'm not too much mistaken, we do have a starship docked here at the station. Now, granted, using resin in place of the normal isotopes will result in a significantly smaller yield, but it should still do the trick. If nothing else, we can place a few plasma torpedoes intermittently between photon and quantum volleys to force the Borg into having to adapt to multiple types of weapons. We will have to move quickly though, I doubt we'll have enough time to convert more than a dozen or so torpedoes before the engagement begins."

Smiling, Selcar glanced at each of the other ensigns in the room.

"So what does everyone think? Suggestions anyone?"

Savok took a brief moment to absorb the details of Selcar's plan. Any personal bias, prejudice, or mistrust toward his Romulan cousin would necessarily require having any feelings at all in the first place. Those he had left behind long ago, during his Kolinahr.

Savok thought back to the ritual, remembering his trek through the scorching wind and the hot desert of Vulcan's Forge. The young officer had learned to master hunger, thirst, and pain, until at one point he had collapsed. With his hands and knees in the burning sand, he had looked up at the sky and meditated, until nothing was left within him except for...*reason*.

The plan is sound and logical.

Savok turned his head to meet Selcar's gaze, and addressed the Romulan with the same laconic indifference that he would anyone else:

"That is a logical plan, Ensign Selcar: the Borg will not expect to be attacked with advanced Romulan weapons. That, along with ensign Rynn's phaser suggestion, should increase our chances of surviving this encounter considerably. "

The Vulcan turned his attention toward Captain Speaker-of-Names, expecting further orders.

Tala looked up at the people talking. She watched the verbal exchange between Selcar and Savok. She was about to make a comment about not having time to equip the torpedoes. But she was no scientist. She turned back towards her console and continued her computations, running simulation after simulation of the Borg cube.

All the while, her anxiety was going up. The Borg would be here in one hour. She spent three weeks in space on her trip out here... Right after graduating. If she had any forewarning that this would have happened, she would have spent that extra week with her sister at Venice Beach, on Earth.

She reached up and her fingers gently touched the pyramid shaped earring. Her eyes went out of focus as she thought about the last time she was with her sister. Right after graduation. Jisera had been so happy for her. Her throat went dry just as the console beeped at her and she took a deep breath, swallowed to get rid of the dryness, and continued her calculations. She sat back just as her last one completed.

Her analysis was finished.

By her estimations, the station would be assimilated in 1.43 hours.

She wasn't like normal Bajoran's. She was born in a different time. Fighting didn't happen on every corner of her planet, like it had during her planet's "occupation". Her planet... sometimes she felt like an outsider, like she didn't belong.

She frowned as her head started to hurt her and she reached up and massaged her temples for a moment. Good thing she was sitting down... She might have tripped or worse yet... stumbled...

Her eyes widened and she looked around again as the rest of the room's officers continued to talk with themselves about their plans and their solutions.

Finally she said:

"I don't know much about the sciences... But It would seem like it would take some time to install plasma devices to the torpedoes... Maybe perhaps some sort of device that could be manipulated with the onboard circuitry." She said as her brow seemed to furrow together as if a growing needle was sticking her between the eyes.. Just giving her a mild headache.

Still unsure of himself, Anthony Jackson let his mind fall into nothingness to ignore his nervous partner. Her fingers seemed to be literally turning white to the knuckles, small details flickering in and out of his consciousness. This tendency of spacing out helped him concentrate on his work, but seemed to harm communication between himself and Ensign Rynn.

"Ensign Rynn, I believe I may have coordinated an appropriate work rotation for repairs. What do you think the chances are of the phaser arrays being used on the lowest port side? I suppose I could have half of one team float between the two most unlikely points but I don't want to waste precious time if we can avoid it." he inquired, sighing shortly after.

"I guess its apparent my Borg studies were a little lacking..." He further commented, now noting Rynn's suggestion. A phasing device or disruption to Borg adaptation would make the torpedoes last a much longer period of time. Anthony opened a different console to access the computer banks. Transferring data to Rynn wordlessly, he sent a particular section of information detailing that various phase torpedoes are being kept as a last resort against the Borg, but it should be possible to modify the torpedo shielding to randomized phase states through highly compressed subspace pulses.

"Maybe this will help you, Rynn?"

Speaker nodded as he first took in the report transmitted to the situation table by the Romulan Ensign regarding the USS Lotus.

"Excellent work, Mister-Selcar."

Dutifully, the data was translated onto the big screen, augmenting the data feeds already present regarding the USS Lotus. However, he made no note of the plans the four Ensigns had worked on until Savok looked his way.

Savok had completed running his mental calculations as ordered, and now presented his answer:

"Captain, I believe that the tractor arrays will have limited effect when employed against the Borg shields directly. However this tractor configuration will cause an extremely localized disruption in their defenses as each generation of frequencies in the genetic algorithm cycles."

The Vulcan furrowed an eyebrow as he continued in his usual monotone:

"Theoretically, we can create a small open window for opportunity fire every few seconds, making it more difficult for the Borg to adapt to our weapons. Once started, it will be up to my esteemed colleagues to employ every destructive weapon at our disposal for maximum effect."

Selcar couldn't help but find the whole situation strange. If someone had told him ten years ago that he would be working alongside a Vulcan – and not only that but actually agreeing with him – he would have had to admit himself to sickbay due to all the muscles he would have pulled from laughing so hard.

Still, he had to admit that Savok's tractor beam plan was impressively thought out. There was also something about this Vulcan that Selcar found himself liking; most of his other Vulcan cousins that he had encountered always seemed to have an edge of sarcasm in their cold, logic filled voices. Savok's seemed to have none of that.

He was still studying the other junior officer as he listened to Captain Speaker say to him:

"What resources will you require to make the new plasma-torpedoes? We should have enough of the resin you spoke of, since repair-and-refit is one of this base's main-operations. Anything else?"

Finally pulling his sharp gaze away from the Vulcan, Selcar replied:

"The Trilithium is the most difficult item to obtain of those that I'll require; if we have a sufficient amount of that. the rest should be fairly easy, Sir."

His brow furrowed for a moment as he thought back about his training in guerilla warfare at the Imperial Academy on Romulus, nearly forty years prior, and how he had learned to jury-rig weapons out of almost anything. Finally he answered:

"I'll need to siphon a good deal of plasma from the EPS conduit of the Artemis; a standard plasma container can be used as the housing unit for the new warhead, and a slightly modified plasma manifold for the arming mechanism... Nothing that can't be easily obtained here on the station or replicated."

He stood up:

"Permission to head down to the torpedo launcher room and begin working with the crewmen down there, Sir? I figure I can probably jury-rig a plasma torpedo every ten minutes working by myself. With a few crewmen, however, I can set up an assembly line of sorts and, with any luck, I should have a few dozen torpedoes armed and ready before the Borg arrive."

The Kzinti blinked once, then smiled, flicking his ears as he considered them and their proposed plans.

Jackson, Rynn, Selcar, and Savok. Promising individuals all.

"Very good, all of you. Ensign-Rynn and Ensign-Jackson, continue with your current tasks. I want to ensure that those phaser-strips you've identified were in fact reinforced by the work-crews. Mister-Savok, that tractor-beam concept is inspired. Tell me, what would be the optimum-moment to use your improvised-weapon?"

The Vulcan reviewed in a flash the basic data of tractor beams in his mind:

Each tractor beam emitter is built around three multiphase 15 MW graviton polarity sources, each feeding two 475 millicochrane subspace field amplifiers. Phase accuracy is within 1.3 arc-seconds per microsecond; Each emitter can gain extra power from the subspace interphase frequency by means of molybdenum-jacketed waveguides. The subspace fields generated around the beam can envelop objects up to 920 square meters, lowering the local gravitational constant of the universe for the region inside the field. Effective tractor beam range varies with payload mass and desired change in relative velocity. Assuming a nominal 15 meters per second squared delta-v, the multiphase tractor emitters can be used with a payload of 116,380,000,000 metric tons at less than 2 kilometers... or the same delta-v can be imparted to an object massing about one metric ton at ranges of 30,000 kilometers.

He then looked straight at the felinoid commander to answer him:

"Sir, at less than two kilometers, each tractor beam can damage 3.29% of it's total unprotected mass each second and completely destroy it in 30.4 seconds... but at this range, I estimate the Borg vessel itself can destroy the starbase in 12.83 seconds. At our maximum range of thirty thousand kilometers, we will be able to disrupt parts of it's shield grid on a very small, specific surface of sixty-two square millimeters... about the size of your thumb, Sir... small, but more than enough to allow pin point phaser fire... or a transporter beam. "

Not the wonder weapon the Kzinti was expecting... but still, this could turn a potential defeat into victory with a bit of luck... of being skimmed at thirty thousand kilometers by a Borg cube could be called luck...

Finally, he turned to Ensign Selcar, and nodded to him.

The chatter between Ensigns Rynn and Jackson had faded into the background for Speaker-of-Names while the other various captains on the viewscreen were busy moving about their bridges, making preparations. Speaker had been glancing at the viewscreen in concern as the McKenzie's valiant commanding officer switched off his main viewer, when Selcar had replied to his material inquiry for plasma torpedoes.

The various crews of the various ships contributed to the murmur of the room, occasionally with terms such as "Static warp shells" and "subspace bubbled torpedoes" bandied about from teams that were obviously working on other weapons, as the Kzinti was about to reply to the Romulan. He was interrupted by the return communication from the USS Alsea:

"Selcar, This is Commander Siduri of the USS Alsea. I don't know how much you are aware of what has been happening here. I'll explain another time; suffice to say we are now prepared to rendezvous at the fleet staging area. Standby for ETA."

The delay in communication appeared to have been caused by the Alsea not being where the station's computers had expected it would be. Now that it had been found however, the computer displayed that the Alsea was headed back to Starbase 10 from the direction of the Klingon border at maximum warp. During the standby period, Speaker took the moment to say to the Romulan Ensign still standing at attention and waiting;

"When Mister-Jackson has finished with his duties, coordinate with him. I'll send word ahead to the station's engineering team to supply you with the things you requested."

Another interruption caused the murmur of all the various crews to momentarily cease as Ensign N'Eligahn burst into the chamber, a little breathless apparently from running down the corridor.

He had been running through the halls of the Starbase, his PADD gripped tightly in his hand. Every few seconds, his eyes had glanced down at the chronometer. They had less than fifty-five minutes before the cube would be here. He needed to be on the Spectre's bridge in less than forty minutes to get her out of spacedock.

He pushed his way past a gaggle of cadets heading for one of the last evac shuttles as he made his way back into the main discussion hall. There were a few new faces in the room but his attention was more focused on the Starbase Captain.

"Sir, I have possibly a last ditch idea that we can use and implement before we're set to engage the Borg, if you'll allow me to address the hall," N'Eligahn said.

He was by no means out of shape, but the run through the crowded halls had left him somewhat breathless.

Speaker listened to the request, and nodded.

"Of course, Ensign." He stepped aside, allowing N'Eligahn to address the hall.

The Rethian took a deep breath and stepped forward, glancing back at his PADD to reassure himself that he wasn't being insane or impulsive.

"Thank you Sir," he said as he made his way towards the center holographic display. "I'm not sure how many of those gathered here are familiar with ancient Earth legends. I have to say I was somewhat taken in by them during the Academy. On in particular, the Illiad, always stuck in my mind. I thought back to that tale as I looked over the Spectre and all the pieces fell together in my head."

He keyed in a short entry into the PADD.

"A group called the Greeks had been at war with a group called the Trojans to no avail for years. It was a stalemate until a young leader by the name of Ulysses came up with the idea to build a large object and present it as a gift to the enemy and pretend retreat. The inside was hollowed out and filled with soldiers, but the Trojans didn't know this."

He took another deep breath and tried to get to the point faster.

"The Trojans were so taken aback by the gift that they wheeled it right into the center of the city and partied all night, drinking themselves into a stupor, celebrating the Greeks departure. That night, the Greeks left the gift, opened the gates to let their comrades in and take the city."

He tapped into his PADD and the holographic display shifted to show an image of the massive Borg cube with other dots scattered around it.

"I propose we do something similar," N'Eligahn said. "I've found that there's a way to replicate an Iconian frequency inside a ship's phaser banks, though I'll need Ensign Kelsey Alther's help; in her earlier travels, she did some research into the Iconians. I want to outfit four Runabouts with this frequency. We'll make it look like we've fitted the runabouts to use Iconian technology."

Now calmer he continued:

"This will prove too valuable a prize for the Borg to resist. They'll attempt to bring the runabouts in for assimilation."

N'Eligahn smiled.

"Here's where we open the gift. All four Runabouts will be linked to a central control panel on the lead Runabout, the only one with a living pilot. Once the Borg has them locked on, the pilot will trigger the warp core countdown timer and activate the bombs that destroy the communication devices aboard each of the Runabouts before escaping."

making a pause to let all the data sink in, he then added:

"At the same time, all of the Runabout's deflector shields will be inverted, which will help funnel the blast. When the timer expires, the four Runabouts will commence controlled warp core breaches."

On the holodisplay, everyone could see the figures and the visualisation of the plan as he further explained:

"All four Runabouts will detonate into positions along the cube. Not even Borg technology could withstand four simultaneous warp core breach explosions against their hull. This will crack the cube just long enough for us to pump every torpedo, phaser and insignificant weapon and rip it apart."

He smirked a bit.

"If this doesn't destroy the cube, it'll give us the opening we need to pour everything we've got into it," N'Eligahn said. "I've got some preliminary steps already in motion and we can have everything more or less rigged by the time Spectre launches, though we'll need two more Runabouts."

"If, of course, you approve of this," he added cautiously.

Although a thought flickered across his mind as to whether or not their approval would stop him from trying.

As if called by the mention of her name, Ensign Kelsey Alther had just got off the Spectre and was heading back to the meeting hall to see if there was anything it could help with. Within a few minutes the androgyn had reached the hall and walked in to catch N'Eligahn and his plan.

Alther may have only caught the last half of it but it sounded good.

The tactical chief of the Spectre leaned against a nearby wall and smirked, after N'Eligahn had finished:

"Making plans without me N'Eligahn?" Kelsey asked with the smirk still on its face; "Iconian Technology sure would be a sweet prize for the Borg" the kalthurian said, walking over to put a hand on the Rethian's shoulder.

"I can do it if you approve" ensign Alther told the room, turning towards N'Eligahn: "Why does this remind me of the Trojan Horse though?" Alther asked with a smile.

The androgyn knew it sounded inspired by that but it thought it might as well ask.

N'Eligahn smirked.

"You missed the entire first part of my speech," he whispered. "Good timing, though."

"Let us at least give this a try, Sir," N'Eligahn then said, more loudly this time. "I'm sure the station can spare two Runabouts."

He glanced at the chronometer. They were losing time.

"Captain Speaker, if I may... " began the Deltan female Captain onscreen, asking to speak. As the Kzinti nodded, she then said:

"You there, Ensign. What you propose is a foolhardy idea."

The words were stated simply and quietly, almost Vulcan in delivery if not for the typical Deltan heavy accent, but there was definitely distaste present in her tone.

"Captain-Onia, are you sure we should dismiss this so lightly?" Speaker asked, as he turned to look at the viewscreen.

It was clear from his tone that he was attempting to ease her harsh words some, but the Kzinti was also showing signs of not being on board with the idea either.

"I admit as he presents it, there is little merit so far, but the Ensign did rush all the way down here to present his plan. There must be more to it than that."

The Kzinti looked to the Ensign, as if waiting for him to verify that there was more to the plan, something more cunning than what he'd laid out so far.

N'Eligahn narrowly avoided sending a glare at the Deltan Captain:

"Our biggest issue with fighting the Borg has always been cracking their defenses," he said. "Both cubes that the Federation has destroyed in our space has been solely because of interference through someone who was or had been connected to the Collective."

He looked up at the Deltan.

"So unless you have a spare Locutus or two in your closet, Captain, that option is not available to us," he said. "The plan I'm proposing will hit the Borg in four locations simultaneously, each with enough force to blow a Galaxy-class in half. It should give us enough of a gap in their defenses to plow our normally useless weapons deep into their heart."

N'Eligahn gestured towards the holographic display of the Borg cube, then to a smaller display of the USS Lotus on an intercepting course with it.

"We are dealing with an intelligent and adaptive foe," N'Eligahn said. "We have modified torpedoes we can fire, but if there's one thing our past in fighting the Borg has proved it's that brute force never works against them, they just hit harder back and keep going."

Then looking back at the Deltan Captain, he said:

"And with all due respect, Captain, the Borg always have the hardest time adapting to our crazy, illogical and foolhardy plans."

He thought back to the Borg's first invasion and the crazy tactics employed then by Captain Riker on the Enterprise D.

"Besides, this is our only other plan to maybe get some nanotech working that they'll probably adapt to or to bludgeon them with pointy sticks, burning pointy sticks, yes, but pointy sticks nonetheless. Let us try this; at worst, we're down four Danubes and I really don't think the loss of four Runabouts matters in a fight against the Borg. At best, we manage to crack the outer shell and everyone on this station are big damn heroes," he said.

He looked back up at Captain Onia:

"So, unless you have your own crazy, foolish plan you'd want to contribute to this discussion...Sir, we don't have any more time."

N'Eligahn looked around at the audience, then at the chronometer and datapad. He heard garbled transmissions from one of the consoles. The displays all flashed buzzed. N'Eligahn shook his head. If he was getting anywhere...it didn't matter. He tapped Kelsey Alther on the shoulder and gestured towards the door directly behind them.

"We have to get back to our stations and launch the ship," he said. "If you have anything else for us, you know where we'll be, Sirs."

Then quietly to himself as he turned, added: "Putting our ship between the Borg and this hunk of metal..." before throwing louder over his shoulder: "And make sure our weapons are squared away. If we have to go in with pointy sticks, might as well make sure they're sharp,"

He motioned for Kelsey to follow and the two of them walked out of the chamber.

Captain Onia had been firm, and though she'd come off more abrasively than Speaker would have liked, still he could not find fault with her arguments. The most persuasive of all was the fact that the Borg had far less targets in this encounter than in any major fleet action between Starfleet and a Borg cube to date. That meant a lot more weapons free. The destruction of the defense fighters at Mars, as well as the casual destruction of so many ships at Wolf 359, spelled it out: the Borg would annihilate any smaller vessel the moment it was detected. "Mister-Selcar! Head down and make your preparations for the plasma-torpedoes. When you are finished, report to Ops and familiarize yourself with Tactical-Consoles One and Four."

"Aye Sir," Selcar replied as he snapped to attention. Pivoting on his heel he performed a quick about-face and swiftly made his way to the turbo lift.

"Main Torpedo Magazine," he ordered the lift's computer which chirped in response and quickly whisked him off to his destination.

The kzinti looked over his shoulder as he addressed the Romulan, before turning away from the holographic display to face the other three Ensigns.

"Mister-Jackson, Mister-Savok, look over the data we've obtained, sort through it. Send anything you think is important to all task-force Captains and Acting-Captains."

With his tail swishing behind him, the large felinoid continued:

"Ensign-Rynn. Head to Ops, and familiarize yourself with Tactical-Consoles Two and Three."

As the other Ensigns went about their assignments, the first and only Romulan in Starfleet was already hard at work:

"Selcar, to Engineering," he stated as he tapped his combadge.

"Engineering, here Sir."

"Crewman, I need as much plasma as you can bleed out of the EPS system of the USS Artemis safely delivered to the Main Torpedo magazine, as well as several plasma manifolds replicated to the specifications I'm transmitting to your workstation now," the Romulan replied as he tapped the controls on the PADD he held. "Also I need every drop of Trilithium resin we have on that ship and in the station. Understood?"

"Aye, Sir. I'm transporting the plasma and resin now Sir, and I have my team replicating the manifolds as we speak. As they finish I'll have those transported to you as well," came the reply.

"Excellent. Selcar, out."

As he finished speaking, the turbo lift reached its destination and the doors whisked open.

Selcar stepped into the brightly lit room which smelled faintly of Human sweat and explosive materials just as the first of the manifold beamed in from Engineering. Several technicians stood before him in their gold-collared tactical uniforms, ready to assist him in the jury-rigging of the torpedoes.

After doing a quick assessment of the men and materials, Selcar finally addressed the crewmen:

"The quickest and most efficient means of getting these torpedoes ready in time is an assembly line format. Two of you will infuse the plasma with the Trilithium, the next two will install the plasma warhead, the two after that will install the manifolds, and then I will activate the arming pin and detonation module. Computer... when the finished torpedo is pushed past my point on the assembly line beam the modified plasma torpedo into a random position within one of the stations torpedo launcher's fire-ready magazines."

He paused again and looked over each of the crewmen once more; their faces were a mix of fear and excitement.

Half of them haven't even seen the coming of their third decade yet, he thought.

Outloud however all he said was:

"Does everyone understand their assignments?"

The men and women of Starbase 10's technical team nodded in the affirmative.

"Then get to it, crewmen, and let's make sure we have a warm welcome ready for the Borg when they get here."

Selcar and the crewmen of Starbase 10's torpedo magazine kept themselves busy. In forty-five minutes, they had managed to reconfigure several dozen standard photon torpedoes into high yield plasma torpedoes. He only hoped that it would be enough of an edge along with the other plans being worked on to ensure victory and survival for all those involved.

Looking up at the chronometer on the wall, Selcar frowned and his brow furrowed making the V-shaped ridges on his forehead stand out even more.

They were out of time.

"Alright everyone, good work," the Ensign said, addressing the crewmen working around him. "I'm needed up in Ops to man Torpedo control. You know how to do this so I want you all to keep working as diligently as you have been; every extra torpedo counts. Good luck to you all."

Stepping into the turbo lift, he turned around and looked at the crew hard at work. With the sort of determination he had seen thus far, maybe victory was not such a far shot after all.

"Ops," he informed the turbo lift's computer.

With that he was whisked upward toward the uncertainty of battle.

* * *

As the door slid shut behind them N'Eligahn Etarudbo turned to Kelsey Alther:

"See if you can find where the Captain's got to," he said. "I'm heading back to the Spectre and initiating a mass recall of all personnel. I'd very much like to be free of the bay doors in fifteen, ten if possible. We have a fight to get to."

Kelsey glanced at N'Eligahn:

"Find Summers? He's doing that ridiculous psychic takeover crap" yhe Kalthurian told him. "Anyway I'm sure your on better terms with him than I, considering I personally blew his old ship into a pile of space junk." Alther said with a smile.

"A mass recall of personnel would alert the Captain as well you know? Why bother going to him?"

N'Eligahn smiled.

"Because, technically, we'd need his or the XO's permission to institute a mass recall of all personnel," he said. "But fine, if you'd rather me do it, I will."

He passed his PADD to her.

"Just inform Flight Lieutenant Reynolds to be ready to launch as soon as we clear."

He started down the hall towards the area where he had last heard the Captain was.

The Kalthurian Ensign smiled seeing N'Eligahn walk away. Alther turned around and walked to the nearby turbolift and took it down to the docking ring to go board the Spectre.

The androgyn was still smiling as it walked back onto the Spectre .

Finally we can actually do some damage with big weapons Kelsey thought, tapping on the combadge.

"Alther to Reynolds, N'Eligahn asked me to inform you to be ready for launch. " the tactical officer told the helmsman walking off to its quarters. It felt no need to check the weapons since it had just inspected them not to long ago.

All this time, N'Eligahn walked through Starbase 10, trying to find where the Captain had gotten to. He hadn't been part of the last phase of the nanite experimentation, so he had no idea where he had gone.

Walking aimlessly around the Starbase for ten minutes didn't do much to settle his anxiety and looking at the chronometer every minute didn't help. Every minute he spent walking uselessly around this station was a minute closer the Borg got to the station.

Finally he gave up. The Captain wasn't answering his comm, so there was another option. N'Eligahn tapped his combadge.

"N'Eligahn to all Spectre personnel. I am enacting Article 3 paragraph 47 of the Starfleet Emergency Reactivation Instruction," he said. "All Spectre personnel are hereby recalled to the ship for immediate departure. We will be leaving spacedock in eight minutes as per Article 3 Paragraph 52 of the aforementioned instruction. That is all."

Hopefully that would prompt a response and at the very least it'd get everyone back to the ship more quickly. N'Eligahn turned sharply to do that very thing.

In the transporter control room, Ensign Joey Daystrom Sisko heard the Emergency Reactivation Instruction from his new ship's Ops officer, but had to stay on the base until this Borg situation was resolved... one way or another.

He decided to try to get to know his new fellow shipmates, so he tapped on his combadge.

"Sisko to Ensign Etarudbo. Good luck out there and take care of that ship. I'm looking forward to starting my duties in Engineering when you return."

If they return, but that he didn't say.

N'Eligahn smiled at the communication as he made his way through the halls to docking arm 23...and the Spectre.

"Don't worry about it," he said back to Sisko. "She'll be back in one piece."

Preferably, he thought. But it was a thought quickly dismissed as he walked briskly through the docking arm towards the Spectre. He activated again his combadge.

"N'Eligahn to all hands," he said. "Send manned and ready reports to the main Operation's console. We are scheduled to depart in..." he checked the chronometer as the doors slid open and the on-duty security crewman saluted. "... seven minutes. That is all."

He took a left down the hall to his quarters. He had something to get first.

The door admitted him and he stepped inside his still relatively barren room. If they survived this, he'd pick up some decent decorations on the Starbase.

N'Eligahn grabbed his phaser belt and tied it tight then holstered both of his blades to his thighs. He had been without these on the Tempest and had sorely missed them. If the Borg attempted to board them, he'd be ready this time.

He stopped to look at a picture on his nightstand. It was a hologram of him with his family the night before he'd left to board the Scylla and leave. He hadn't been back to Nadea Rethia in almost six years, about as long since they'd talked to him.

It'd be winter there now, snow falling along the plains and coasts. The shuttles would all be pulling double flights, getting the supplies from the moon to the planet before they were grounded by the storms that tended to kick up.

N'Eligahn shook the thoughts of home from his mind. They'd only be a distraction. He walked out and made his way to the bridge.

In cargo bay 2 of the USS Spectre, the group of engineers continued their work on the remaining phaser rifles, as Lieutenant O'Conner watched over them and randomly intercepted a rifle here and there to inspect.

Then Ensign Etarudbo's broadcast came overhead and O'Conner quickly replied:

"We are almost ready down here Ensign, just a few more things to go and we should be able to better handle any boarders."

From the bowels of the ship to the top of the starbase, everyone had now only one thought in their minds:

There was one hour left for the station before the Borg came.

And out there, the Lotus and the McKenzie would be hitting the Warp 5 Anomaly's coordinates.

PART 4 : FIRST BLOOD

The dark, bulky mass soared through space at a speed that seemed to defy its huge size. Many thought these massive vessels would be ponderous and sluggish and easily avoided.

They were soon corrected.

Ahead of it, mostly repaired but still vulnerable to the Borg Cube's massive firepower, was the USS McKenzie, barely visible to the naked eye.

The Collective was a hive of activity; its recent damage was irrelevant and it had repaired the ships systems in a matter of hours. Its mission had not been efficient and its overall efficiency rating had dropped significantly.

All options had been computed, simulated and their efficiency rated. The Collective had decided, there was no dissent. Species 5618 was proving resilient though still below accepted efficiency ratings.

Throughout the Borg ship, drones were taking their allocated positions and activating weapon nodes and launchers in preparation for the upcoming assault

On one particular console, the range to the USS McKenzie was shown, a number that was falling far faster than the McKenzie would no doubt like.

But the next minutes would not to the liking of the Borg themselves either...

Looking a little drained, Sydona gathered her strength and entered Main Engineering. The tension in the air was thick as the Engineering team knew the result of failure at this point. Rarely seen with her hair down, Sydona walked over to a nearby console which Ensign Jenny Summers was working on. Both female officers studied the engine output readings.

Ensign Summers sighed heavily as she ran her fingers through her long, wavy blonde locks.

"Syd...we've been running these engines pretty hot. The nebula detour didn't help."

Sydona smirked as she tapped away at the console before her.

"True. But it bought us some time. We're going to need to reroute power from all non-essential systems in order to complete the rest of this trip."

The Klingon-Human hybrid made her rounds to all the stations in Engineering in preparation for what would come next. Sydona tapped her combadge.

"Engineering to Bridge. Captain, we're ready down here. Just give the word."

"Starbase 10, be advised that we are entering the anomaly, with one minute to spare. Were disconnecting the transmission from here, so we can worry about navigating, but again a line will still be intact to you and the McKenzie's main engineering to continue the work for the upcoming battle. Wish us luck." Captain Crist reported.

The image of the McKenzie's bridge on the conference room view screen turned to darkness, just as the one of Starbase 10's control center disappeared on their own viewer.

"Ok Hughes, do your magic."

"Yes Sir, entering now and heading for the nearest distortion, that should get those zombies off our back."

"Just don't get us killed. Mister Abraxius, stand by on aft torpedoes, just in case we need to give them a little motivation not to follow us. Commander Teancum, keep an eye on the Borg, and also find out where the Lotus is, we'll need to coordinate. " Crist ordered.

The acknowledgement from the Intrepid class flagship came immediately; they were not alone anymore.

And, on the Bridge of the USS Lotus, everyone was prepared and ready:

" Sir, long range sensors are registering the null-warp space anomaly reported by both Starbase 10 and the McKenzie on our exact present course " announced the Ferengi in blue that replaced Commander Calhoun, as soon as he left the science main station to follow Captain Felez in the turbolift for their covert mission into Romulan space.

Just before came in the order to engage the Borg.

" Tactical sensors also registering warp signatures pointing to the anomaly, Sir. " added Lieutenant Tomah. " One identified to the USS McKenzie... the other coming from a tritanium structure, cubed-shaped, 28 cubic kilometers in size... "

Silence fell once more on the bridge of the USS Lotus. No one even dared to name the terrible, monstrous adversary they were rushing to engage.

And it did take a moment before acting First Officer Kheren ordered;

" On screen, maximum magnification. "

The streaking stars on the main viewer were replaced for a moment by a sleek, flat metallic silhouette: that of a Defiant class destroyer everyone on the bridge recognized as the valiant combat ship of Captain Crist.

Then, it was covered by a large, cold shadow... and an immense geometrical construct, bristling with lights and ports, tubules and panels filled the screen.

And that too, everyone on the bridge, even those who had never actually seen one before, instantly recognized.

Acting captain Mark Robertson inhaled deeply once more, adrenaline starting to override his nerves, seeing the massive Cube as a challenge to be overcome... It nearly tugged his lips into a defiant grin, but he straightened his jacket and remained stoic, presenting a calm exterior to the crew as more updates kept coming.

For Lieutenant Kheren, it was the very first time he actually saw one, apart from records... He just hoped it would be his last... one way or another.

As Commander Robertson stayed a moment longer silent and unmoving, the Andorian did his best to fulfill his role at his side: helping him gather all the necessary information for the crucial decisions he alone had to make as the Captain.

Keeping his eyes and antennae directly towards the ominous image on the viewer, Kheren then asked aloud:

" Tactical analysis. "

" Ah, the Borg vessel is pursuing the McKenzie towards the subspace anomaly at warp 9.8, answered Tomah; estimating it will overtake the McKenzie in one minute... unless she enters the anomaly. At present distance, the Borg vessel is registering as identical to each and every such vessels on record: propulsion systems; impulse, warp and transwarp; defensive systems: tritanium alloy hull, automated damage control systems, close range electromagnetic field, defensive subspace field and regenerative modulating deflector shields; offensive systems: tractor beams, cutting beams, disruptor beams, gravimetric torpedoes, magnetometric guided charges and shield neutralizers. "

And that's just what we know... mused the Andorian; let us pray it doesn't have anything else...But to complete the tactical report, Kheren simply turned to his commanding officer:

" Sir, may I remind you that a Borg cube has no centralized system whatsoever: no command center, no engineering section, no main propulsion system, no localized power source... not even fixed defensive or offensive ports. It will remain fully functional even if 78% of it's entire structure is destroyed. There is estimated over one hundred thousand mind-linked drones aboard such a vessel : attempting to sabotage or commandeer her through any boarding action is pointless. And.. if more than two of her beams strikes us together, they will reduce even our advanced deployable armor to less than 50% in one shot. "

" Ah... thanks for the pep talk... " whispered Edward Tomah through clenched teeth.

The moving antennae and the raised white eyebrow in the stony blue face of the Andorian clearly showed that, this time, he had heard him.

" Coming into weapon range in one minute, Sir. " now announced Lieutenant Azji from navigation, his voice barely above Tomah's whisper.

In the silence that followed, Kheren said in a voice getting colder by the second:

" Ready to send our invitation to dance... Captain. "

The Borg Ship moved closer and closer, a mere seconds from weapon range of the fleeing Defiant class vessel. Somewhere a science drone detected something, its findings instantly relayed to the Collective.

As one the Collective's commanding voice echoed throughout the vessel, silently, into all the minds linked throughout the vessel... and beyond:

"Spatial Anomaly designation 642, detected in grid 231 beta. Projection, destruction of this vessel. Trajectory altered to Grid 261 delta".

The McKenzie, its engines practically glowing with the effort, slipped inside the treacherous area of space, its shape jerking from side to side as it followed an invisible route through. The Borg vessel simply stopped with little effort and moved off again, charting an efficient and exact course around the anomaly.

The McKenzie entered the Anomaly in hope to get away from the Borg. Once inside, the ship headed straight for a distortion at warp 6, and then at the last minute turned away. They hoped that taking such a risky maneuver would convince the Borg to back off. The McKenzie continued such a maneuver until the crew was sure they weren't being followed.

"Report." The Captain ordered.

"We're at warp 6 currently, while dropping to warp 3 to maneuver, Sir. We're about 20% through the anomaly." reported helmsman Hughes.

"Sir, then added tactical officer Abraxius, the Borg aren't following anymore. They must be going around the anomaly to try to cut us off."

"Good." The Captain said with relief. "Hughes, you can stop trying to get us killed now, and head straight through. Taking a direct course through the anomaly will cut our time down, and will give us a head start on the Borg. It's always faster to go through something rather than go around it."

"Aye Sir."

"Sir, again reported Luke Abraxius, I have the Lotus on sensors, but barely. I'm getting a lot of interference from the anomaly. They appear to be after the Borg, they must be trying to keep them occupied to give us time to navigate the anomaly."

"I wish we could help them," stated Daniel Crist. "But it would defeat the purpose why we're using the anomaly. Keep an eye on them, if they really need help we can always turn around to help them."

The McKenzie discontinued its risky maneuvers and took a direct course.

"Sir, the Lotus appears to be making a run on the Borg Cube, but that's as much as I can tell."

"They're still there, right Mister Abraxius?" The Captain asked.

"Yes Sir, from what I can tell."

"Well that's good. Just hope that doesn't change. None the less, keep an ear out, just in case they need help."

"Yes Sir."

The Borg had come to a halt before the subspace anomaly. They quickly lost the diminutive Defiant class vessel amidst the crackling energies swirling between them and their escaping prey. Instantly, a new awareness filled the Collective, coming from Science Drones on another part of the Vessel.

"Species 5618 vessel detected, vessel designation USS Lotus N-C-C-7-4-9-1-0. Identified Intrepid class exploration vessel. Vessel weapon systems active." The voice of the Collective droned.

Ahead of its new course, the Lotus was a mere dot but getting larger by the second.

As one the Collective addressed this new target.

On board her, Commander Robertson was about to respond to his acting exec's colorful suggestion to engage the enemy ship, when Lieutenant Tomah spoke up first:

"Captain, we're being hailed..."

Mark Robertson turned back to the Tactical officer and nodded with a sigh:

"Let's hear it, Lieutenant."

The console produced a soft series of beeps before the ominous multitude of voices engulfed the Bridge:

"WE ARE THE BORG. LOWER YOUR SHIELDS AND SURRENDER YOUR VESSEL. YOUR BIOLOGICAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL DISTINCTIVENESS WILL BE ADDED TO OUR OWN. YOUR CULTURE WILL ADAPT TO SERVICE US. RESISTANCE IS FUTILE."

Clenching his eye shut at the loud cacophony, Mark turned back and gave Tomah the 'cut' sign, silencing the mass of voices a moment later.

"You'd think they'd adapt something new to say by now..."

Robertson shook his head before turning to his First Officer:

"Mister Kheren, let's fill up our dance card. Send the signal."

"Lieutenant Azji, he growled as he returned to the Captain's chair, take us in, Full Impulse. Mister Tomah, ready your phasers and hail the McKenzie."

"Channel open, Sir."

"McKenzie, this is the Lotus. Time to push those engines if you can, we'll try and give you some time. Good luck..."

"Transmitting... now. "

The low droning of the comm system confirmed what Lieutenant Kheren just announced. On screen, the titanic mass of the Borg Cube was rapidly filling up the image, even when the magnification display adjusted to compensate.

"Sir... Ah, you ah, have the McKenzie... on encoded channel, ah, 98.8. " said Tomah in a strangled voice, his eyes like everyone else riveted to the main viewer.

Even just through a simple electronic rendering, the monstrous cybernetic construct felt heavy and cold on all their minds as it just loomed between them and the fiery display of the anomaly.

It was about to overtake the retreating Defiant class starship.

Then it suddenly stopped.

As the viewer image rushed even faster to it, the colossal cube slowly started to turn.

Hear it boys? That's your song playing inwardly grinned the Andorian, but with no joy at all on his otherwise expressionless face.

At maximum warp, the USS Lotus was coming right at it like a torpedo, too fast for any beam to be used, be it tractoring or damaging, or even for a full subspace scan. Although there is no sound in space, the vibrating deckplates made everyone on board feel as if they were wooshing like an arrow right to the Borg Cube... and an instant later, pass boldly and daringly right in front of it to dart away.

A fruity scent now permeated the frigid atmosphere of the bridge. Kheren knew where it came from: his scarred brow was starting to glisten with sweat.

Leaning forward in the exec chair, he was gripping the armrests so hard that his prodigious strength made them creak like clenched teeth.

"Let's dance" he muttered to himself, then looked sideways at Commander Robertson sitting right besides him in the Captain's chair.

The Lotus soared towards the Borg Cube's imposing mass. It seemed as though it was on a course that it would not return from, but skilled helmsmanship shone through and at the last minute it veered away sharply and soared off away from the Borg Cube's terrible firepower.

Leaning an elbow on one arm of the Captain's chair, Mark returned his First Officer's look while cupping his own chin, his expression stoic as he flicked his eyes down to the soft creaking sound coming from Kheren's chair during to the tense moment.

The Lotus swooped toward the Borg Cube, then redirected, trying to pull the massive vessel away from Starbase 10 and the fleeing McKenzie.

But rather than turn and follow the Lotus as it tried to lead them away, the Borg ship carried on its course without so much as a twitch.

Onboard the cube, the silent voice of the Collective boomed in all minds on board.

"Vessel threat assessment low, maintaining course to primary target".

It was clear that as had happened many times before, the Borg did not perceive the actions of the Lotus as a threat and had chosen to simply ignore it.

The USS McKenzie had no doubt almost cleared the anomaly and it was well ahead of the Borg Vessel. But the attempt to draw the Cube off had not worked.

After a few moments on their new course, Lieutenant Tomah confirmed it:

"Ah...the Cube is not changing course, Sir.."

Mark curled his upper lip as he got back to his feet:

"Sod it all.. Helm, pursuit course! Take us within one hundred thousand kilometers, but don't overtake them just yet."

The Betazoid at the Helm nodded as he worked, bringing the Intrepid-class vessel around to chase the unyielding mass.

"Aye Sir, course set."

Mark glared at the viewscreen showing the Cube hurtling away.

"Guess they weren't interested in a dance..." Turning, he regarded Lieutenant Kheren: "Mister Kheren, you have ten minutes to look over your ruse and we'll try again. They obviously don't think of the Lotus itself as a threat, so we won't waste time trying to piss 'em off with phasers.. Get to it."

There were not enough muscles in an Andorian's face to express his astonishment; but the angry, confused glint in his silvery eyes and the wild flaying of his knobby antennae were more than enough to reveal his thoughts.

This makes no sense at all... like a fly ignoring honey... This signal should have been irresistible to them... unless...

"Mister Tomah, then was ordering Commander Robertson, open a channel to the coordination group, Captain Speaker-of-Names specifically."

The older man frantically worked at his console,

"Aye Sir...ahh...." Tomah pressed the back of a hand to his mouth, dabbing at some sweat from the near-encounter before responding again, "Ah...you're patched in, Sir."

Nodding, Mark turned:

"Onscreen."

The viewscreen distorted for a moment before shattering into a multi-channel conference, with every ship being brought to bear on the line, and at the center, the Kzinti he wished to speak to. Once subspace signal was established, the bridge crew stumbled upon the ongoing discussion in the starbase's meeting hall between the officers present there and others on board various vessels:

Speaker looked up towards the viewscreen, then towards Ensign Etarubo. His expression showed sympathy, and he was about to contribute to the conversation when the Lotus' communication came through:

"This is Acting Captain Robertson on the Lotus, Sir. Our first attempt to draw the Cube failed, we're not sure why exactly, but we're working on it. I think we've got one more shot to give you all some lead time, but after that, we'll try and beat them back to you."

There were mutterings throughout the hall as the news came in. Any sort of failing was dark news indeed for the assembling task force.

As Lieutenant Kheren worked on the malfunction of their initial plan, Mark listened intently to the Kzinti Captain in charge of the task force.

"Understood Acting-Captain-Robertson." Speaker replied, lifting his head high as if replying to the ceiling, "Do what you can, but be careful."

He tapped his combadge to mute the imbedded microphone and communication was cut off.

Meanwhile, from his console, Kheren asked the science station to transfer it's sensor data to his armset console and to increase scanning. He quickly selected the datafeed he was looking for to have his suspicion confirmed.

Of course... almost half a century of technological advancement includes subspace long range high-speed sensor pallets he now realized from their own scanning. They scanned us as we passed them by, despite our speed, and discovered it was just a signal with no actual advanced technology present onboard. So no use trying to fool them with any kind of signal... But... the bigger the eyes... and the ears...

Turning sideways, the Acting First Officer was now looking directly at the officer manning the science station: Ensign Smlek, one of the first and rare Ferengis serving in Starfleet, an audio data feed in one of his immense ears, while his eyes were wide open and fixed unblinking to the main viewer.

Kheren contracted his vocal cords and produced one of the ultrasonic syllables part of his native Graalek language; an especially discordant one. No one heard anything except Kheren and the Science Officer; the shout made the Assistant Chief Science Officer jerk sharply and wince towards the Andorian.

" Mister Smlek, asked Kheren as the Ferengi's attention was now fully on him, how many probes do we have on board? "

" Er, well, Sir, about twenty of each type from I to X. " answered the Ensign recovering from his surprise, despite still showing it on his broad, rippled face. " As we did no science research yet since leaving Starbase 10, we have the full complement onboard. "

" How many of them have warp capability ? "

The question startled anew the Science officer who took a moment before answering:

" Err... Probes types V to X are all warp capable, Sir."

" And type V probes already have sensor countermeasure packages installed on them, right? " now lead the First Officer.

" Err, aye Sir... as we confirmed on the last tactical briefing on standard ship equipment... "

" How many telemetry channels for each one? " probed again the Andorian. Ensign Smlek called up the data on his console in a few finger taps then said:

" Six thousand three hundred and twenty, Sir. the others vary and may have over nine thousand depending on wich one... "

" And how long would it take to make as many warp capable probes as possible able to relay those ECM signals and multiply them by their own telemetry channels numbers? "

It took another moment for the Ferengi to recover from his confusion before finally saying:

" Well, Sir... we can easily program them all at once from here in minutes... and have them all spaceborn from the four tubes in twenty-five seconds. Each type VI probe will also provide six independent subprobes, thus more than doubling our total number of emitters."

" Thank you Mister Smlek. "

Lieutenant Kheren swiftly turned towards acting Captain Mark Robertson:

" Sir, the only possible explanation why our signal was ignored is because they knew it was just that: a signal, nothing more. This can only be because they have superior sensors, a logical assumption given near fifty years of advancement on their part. "

They were all looking at him now, listening to what he was about to propose:

" Superior perception means increased sensitivity... therefore increased *sensibility*. If we launch warp-capable drones at the Cube's hull, rotating a scrambling sensor signal throughout hundreds of different points, each changing randomly it's frequency through thousands of different ones while also randomly bouncing their signal to one another... "

" They'll become blind! " exclaimed science officer Smlek finally understanding what the Andorian had in mind all along. " They won't be able to target... or even navigate!"

" And deaf. " then added Lieutenant Tomah at tactical. " Their subspace signal will be, ah, cut off as well. "

Kheren was now silent, looking intently at Robertson.

" They don't bother with anything they don't consider a threat... not even our starship... so even less would be probes, however numerous they may be. " also understood Azji turning partly from the helm. " And would they bother, warp probes will reach them well before any weapon could be aimed at them."

" Once attached to their hull, it will take even the Borg quite a long time to, ah, locate them all and render them inoperative. " completed Tomah.

" They won't. " simply retorted the First Officer, still looking straight at his commander.

" Care to explain that one... Sir? " now wondered Ensign Smlek, voicing the puzzlement of everyone on the bridge.

" This is not anymore the Collective first discovered by the USS Enterprise so long ago. " explained the Andorian, jerking a thumb at the screen. " Then, they were exactly that: a *collective*: billions of minds working together, with no single source of command susceptible to make mistakes... "

" Ah, the Borg Queen? " proposed the tactical officer.

Kheren nodded:

" Since then, as they were for the first time resisted by the Federation, they adapted to our individuality-centric culture... first by making Locutus from one of us... then, after that failure, by making the Queen from one of them. From then on, they ceased to be a *collective* and became a *hive*: billions of minds working together under *one center of command*. "

In the silence that followed, the Ferengi at the science station was first to conclude:

" If you isolate the hive from it's queen, it becomes disorganized, disoriented, purposeless... "

Again, the Andorian nodded, still facing his superior officer:

" Once they loose sensor capability, they will stop; once they loose contact with their center of command they will stop. At best, they will revert to regenerative mode and await passively contact to resume... "

" Or, ah, they will adapt. " interrupted Tomah.

Yes... at worst, they will adapt... by reverting to their former basic nature, forming a small collective of their own... reverting to optical navigation and resuming their former objective, no more needing directives from outside."

" That may just take them but a few minutes... " shivered Azji.

" But, in all cases, it will give at least enough time for the McKenzie to clear the area... and a bit more time for Starbase 10 to be prepared. Even if it would fail, we would become a threat to them; we will then have their sole attention and drag them behind us to where we want them. " finished Kheren.

"That's one hell of a sinker, Lieutenant." Mark nodded curtly, hearing his First Officer's rather bold solution, unable to help but grin wryly. " Ensign Smlek, get those probes loaded and ready, notify me the second you can launch. Make sure you get as complete a coverage as you can.."

The Ferengi gave a razor-toothed grin:

"Aye Captain..."

While he worked, Mark turned back to Kheren,

"You could teach even the Borg a thing or two about adapting, Lieutenant... The Lotus will be losing a fine tactician to the Artemis, after this."

A minute later, the Ferengi Ensign raised his head:

"All probes ready for launch, Sir."

Mark took his seat again and nodded:

"Fire at will Ensign. Lieutenant Azji, hold this speed until we've determined the status of the Cube, then go to Maximum Warp on course for Starbase 10."

It took no time for the crew of Lotus Fleet's flagship to implement orders with their exemplary efficiency; each officer knew already how to do one's job to the peak of efficiency this ship among all others demanded:

" We're closing in on intercept course... optimal range... now. " said Azji.

" Shields up, armor deployed, tubes open, Sir. " Confirmed Tomah.

" Probes are on their way Captain. " now reported Smlek.

The Lotus blasted away at the relentless Cube with its four probe launchers, the normally benign projectiles were lancing at warp speed towards the hulk, surrounding it and impacting its massive sides, only to send out thousands upon thousands of refracted sensor emissions to each other and the Cube itself, with time still running out.

" Coming about on original course, Sir. " then announced the helmsman.

" Aft tubes now releasing last probe volley. " finally told the tactical officer. " Tube apertures closing: we have full shield and armor cover now, Captain. "

As he watched on the screen their swarm of probes peppering the immense surface of the cybernetic cube, Kheren nodded to his superior officer's words. Only when he started to answer him back did he realize that he had been holding his breath all this time:

" Desperation is always a good source of inspiration, Sir. I suspect most artists go hungry for just that purpose. "

Despite the tension running full tilt across the bridge, or maybe just because of it, everyone except Ensign Tyvya guarding the turbolift access and the First Officer himself broke into huge smiles. For a moment, the two Andorians looked at one another in confusion.

" I really don't get it..." mumbled Kheren.

" But we do. " then answered the keen eared Ferengi from the science station.

Then he explained with seriousness:

" Scrambling emissions confirmed, Captain. Fractal programming moving frequencies and emitters randomly. It really looks like a Human Christmas tree on my board. "

At this, the Andorian's head jerked up sharply towards the Assistant Chief Science Officer:

" We are *receiving*, Mister Smlek ? "

" Well, err, yes, Sir. All probes are fully activated. Scrambling and transmitting are but part of their functions. Type V and VII probes have passive data gathering systems and subspace transcievers, while the others have basically the same sensor pallets as... the... ship...itself... "

His voice trailing off, the Science Officer suddenly tapped buttons with frenzied hands and then looked straight at the command well with wide blinking eyes:

" Sir! We are receiving full scanning data of the cube! Mass and displacement... alloy composition... energy outputs... polarity flows... shield frequency..."

" Commander! suddenly said Kheren to Robertson: We must send this data quickly to Starbase 10! Even if it lasts but seconds or minutes, that might just be the edge they need! "

And, if they do not go into full regeneration mode... or if they come out of it reprogramming themselves... then those Borgs will paint a really BIG bullseye on our hull now thought Lieutenant Kheren.

Without knowing why, he suddenly found this thought absurdly amusing.

Mark leaned forward while looking back, hands on his knees as Ensign Smlek gave him the best news he'd heard all day, his eyes getting wider as the Ferengi listed off the probe data coming in.

"Tomah! Transmit all that data to Starbase 10, NOW!"

"Ahh...Aye Sir!"

As the Acting Tactical Chief responded, Lieutenant Azji spoke up:

"Captain, should we slow down?!"

Mark whipped his head back around, and noticed what the Betazoid was referring to with a look at the viewscreen, the Borg Cube looming suddenly while the Borg tried to adapt to their probes' sensory overload.

"No, take us around and on to Starbase 10, even if they're stationary for awhile, I sure as hell don't want to be around when they adapt..."

The Lotus curved easily around the Cube, leaving it behind within moments as the flagship of the Fleet headed back to base.

The Collective had been caught off guard.

It didn't happen very often given the countless myriad of civilisations that had been assimilated.

Species 5618 had an uncanny ability to do exactly this and had done so on a few contacts with the Borg. The effects however were wildly fluctuating and the poor efficiency of Species 5618 showed.

The probes had been ignored by the Cube's tactical drones as they posed no threat. It was only when they began broadcasting and jamming the Borg sensors, systems and even to a degree their link to the Collective that they were noticed.

Instantly, the Collective began to adapt.

The Collective link had not been severed, the local Collective was normal. However the subspace linkage had been lessened. You could never totally jam a signal as powerful as the one used by the Collective, but it had been dampened.

Power nodes, sensors and other systems began to adapt on their own; such was the power of Borg Technology. Even as the Lotus began to head away, systems were being restored.

Barely less than a minute later, as the sleek form of the Intrepid class starship warped away, the doused lights on the monstrous cybernetic construct flared up again, like angry green eyes looking out for whoever had dared touch it.

" Sir; announced Ensign Smlek, probe telemetry now negative. They fully activated their defenses now and their subspace field is cutting off all transmissions to us. Transporters will not penetrate either, Sir. "

" Ah, Sir, their electromagnetic field is also up now. It will, ah, prevent us from launching any more probes or, ah, any other physical object directly at them. " now added lieutenant Tomah,

" The sublight types I to IV we only have left would not reach them anyway. " confirmed the Ferengi at the science station.

" Are they still jammed? " inquired Lieutenant Kheren, intently looking at the aft view of the Borg Cube turning to chase after them.

" No transmission coming to or from the Cube. " confirmed Smlek. " But, even with the coverage we managed to make, they will clean it up completely if the fleet does not stop them at starbase 10... and fast. Then the whole Collective will know..."

But now, the Andorian was looking back at his commanding officer:

" Well Sir, bad news is: now that they may have reverted back to a true collective state, they will be less vulnerable. Good news is: they finally are coming after us. "

" That's good news? " wondered Lieutenant Azji outloud, his eyes riveted to the screen and the ominous monster vessel now moving after them.

On board the huge cubic vessel, the Collective's voices echoed:

"Threat Assessment Increased, Designate Vessel as Secondary Target."

Instantly, one of the Gravimetric Charges was reconfigured by a tactical drone to a frequency which would drain the Lotus's shields but also begin to slowly disrupt her warp field.

A distant, exploding crackle shook the entire ship. Then another...

" Gravimetric charges! " reported Tomah looking at his tactical console. " No damage... " Another blast made the whole ship shudder. Smlek in turn said:

" They're compressing our warp bubble! Minus 1%... minus 3%... 4%... "

On screen, green gouts of light erupted from the Borg ship, lighting the ovoid shell of warped space around the starship.

" We are loosing speed. " now confirmed Azji. " Down to warp 9.9874... dropping slowly but steadily with each... "

A new impact cut him short as the entire hull vibrated with a screeching, hollowed sound.

Like an egg cracking inwardly shivered Kheren.

" Sir... now said the navigator, at this rate, we will drop out of warp well before we will reach Starbase 10. "

Aboard the Borg cube, there was no shout of victory; only the terrible silence of machines doing their task.

The first shot had caught the Lotus by surprise, followed a few seconds later by the second. The Lotus's Warp Field was slowly weakening but it would take some time even with the charges to completely bring it down.

But It was only one weapon firing as the others were still adapting. One Cutting Beam, a searing powerful plasma weapon, was still showing a charge, enough for a brief shot before requiring repair.

In an instant, the Beam fired for a split second. It passed through the Aft shields of the Lotus like they weren't even there and sliced a neat twenty-five meters gouge in the hull.

Up to the bridge of the USS Lotus, a deafening screeching followed a deep, terrible shivering that almost felt as if a giant had slapped the entire stern of the starship. On the viewer, the frightening cube-shaped vessel of the Borg Collective was spewing out for a moment a long, glaringly white beam of energy right at them.

Mark's jaw was clenched nearly as tightly as his fingers on the arms of the Captain's seat as the Lotus bucked and shuddered under the gravimetric charges the Cube spewed at them. Lieutenant Tomah gave a status report.

" Hull breach on deck 7! " shouted Edward Tomah. " Cargo bays 1 and 2 have been damaged twenty meters from section A to F! "

" They have adapted to our armor! " shouted Acting First Officer Kheren. " Reactivate to cover the breach, now! "

The next sound that reverberated through the Intrepid-class's hull was the armor clanking into place.

" Retractable armor redeployed, breach sealed, Sir. " confirmed the Tactical Officer. " No casualties, minor injuries... no main system damaged, structural integrity field holding. medical and damage control teams already underway." Then he looked with alarm at his Captain: " Sir! this, ah, this was done by a Borg cutting beam! "

" Check that again, Mister Tomah!" ordered Lieutenant Kheren. " No beam of cohesive energy can travel faster than the speed of light! "

" This one can, Sir! " now explained Science Officer Smlek. " Sensors show that they opened a subspace funnel between two gravimetric charges, exploiting the warping of space between exactly calculated shots to allow the beam to be carried between them! "

" Great... sighed the Andorian now also looking at the commanding officer of his ship with an ominous glare; and at this speed, we can only use torpedoes with our armor up."

" Speed still decreasing steadily, now reported Azji from helm; warp 9.9... 9.875... 9.825... "

Each time he spoke, a new crakling was heard, a new shudder was felt And now Lieutenant Tomah added his voice too:

" Sir, shields are also starting to weaken; 95%... 90%... 85... "

The damage was bad, but luckily, no one was in those sections at the time sighed mark Robertson with relief. Options whirled through his head as the Cube continued its onslaught, the Lotus shuddering again and again while things went from bad to worse...

Then, it all stopped.

The silence outside seeped unto the bridge, no one even daring to breathe.

And the silence reached for eternity...

Sharing a puzzled look with his First Officer, Robertson broke the silence with a terse:

"Report."

"Ah, Sir... finally answered Tomah; we're, ah... we're out of their firing range."

Mark couldn't help but let out a sigh of relief: they had dodged a rather large bullet, to use the old saying.

Standing, the commander of the flagship straightened his jacket as he moved toward the Helm.

"Well done, gentlemen.. We sent that data back to Starbase 10, did we not Mister Smlek?"

The Ferengi made a somewhat sheepish face and shook his head:

"Negative Sir; it would seem our stream was interrupted by the multitude of sensor data we received from the probes.."

Scoffing quietly, Mark folded one arm under the other, rubbing his forehead in slight exasperation.

"Well send them all the data we just collected, then... We'll be better prepared to deal with the Cube once they get going again."

He turned forward again and laid a hand on the back of Lieutenant Azji's seat, his eyes scanning the controls.

"Are we still losing speed, Lieutenant?"

The Helm officer nodded:

"Aye Sir, now at Warp 9 and still falling."

Commander Robertson grumbled and patted the Betazoid's shoulder:

"Very well. Give it another few minutes of breathing room between us and the Cube, and drop to Warp 7, maintaining a direct heading to Starbase 10..."

Azji confirmed the order as Mark tapped his combadge:

"Bridge to Engineering."

A moment later, Chief Engineer Barile N'Arti responded:

"Engineering here Sir."

"Ah, Lieutenant N'Arti, glad you're still with us.. Is everyone all right down there?"

He could almost picture the crewmen scurrying to contain plasma fires as their Chief Engineer responded again:

"We're a bit shaken, but otherwise fine, Captain. We're trying to stabilize the warp field as quickly as possible, it looks like we'll be able to return to Maximum Warp in about three hours."

Rubbing his chin, Mark nodded to himself:

"Understood. We'll be dropping to Warp 7 in a few moments to help alleviate the strain on the core; keep me informed of your progress. Robertson out."

He took a very deep breath to try and calm his nerves before addressing Lieutenant Tomah:

"Lieutenant, is the Cube still stationary near the anomaly?"

Tomah checked his readout and looked back up,

"Ah...yes Sir..they ah...haven't moved from their previous position."

"Then stand down from Red Alert, and get damage control teams working on sealing off the big damn hole they blew in the ship. We're gonna need that power from the structural integrity fields, I imagine.." Turning back to the Helm, he frowned, "ETA to Starbase, Lieutenant?"

"At Warp 7, approximately one hour, fifty-seven minutes Sir, between skirting the anomaly, and running slower than we ordinarily could."

As Acting Captain Mark Robertson assessed the situation and ordered their course and speed, his appointed First Officer used his armset PADD to collect all the reports from every department and coordinate the ship's return from general quarters.

The Lotus was catching her breath... but how long would they have before the next round?

By the time Commander Robertson brought the ship to a relative calm, Lieutenant Kheren had compiled all the reports, filed them for reference to the Captain's chair console and confirmed both ship management proposed by Ops according to the orders of their commanding officer. Then he stood up and went to Robertson:

For a moment, Mark stood in the command well, eyes fixed on the viewscreen showing stars flying by while they retreated back to Starbase 10, at least until his First Officer snapped him out of it with a more detailed report.

" Sir, Three technical crewmen with minor injuries are being taken care of in sickbay and damage control reports they will complete emergency colmating in less than an hour. We only suffered damage to the inner and outer hull and lost one of the main disposal units. Deployable armor was breached too, but is now back to full operational status. We were very lucky to just get a pretty hard kick in the butt, Sir. "

His very serious comment again brought a smile to his still too tense fellow crewmen, one that he found unfathomable. *Was that funny?* his glaring eyes asked silently.

Mark couldn't help but grin wryly at the frank comment from the normally stoic Andorian, noting a few other smirks and barely-hidden smiles among the crew, which was good, considering the corner they'd just escaped from. Kheren naturally seemed a bit perturbed by the amusement, but spoke his mind anyway:

" Sir... the Borg should be hot on our heels by now. What could the McKenzie have or did to them that would warrant such obsessive stubbornness on their part? Their uncharacteristic resistance makes all our efforts futile."

Eyes rolled over renewed smiles all around him.

Though his father had mentioned to him many years before that "...the Captain always knows what to do, even when he doesn't..", Mark Robertson could only shake his head and clap the Andorian on the shoulder:

"I'm afraid I don't have those answers, Lieutenant. But I'll give the task force an update and see if I can find out. You have the Bridge."

You have the bridge

Each time he had heard those words, all hell broke loose shortly after... and there were no Borg Cube involved all those times...

It's like having the weight of the whole starship dropped on top of you... all those lives...

Kheren closed his eyes and unconsciously retracted his antennae under his thick silvery mane. Losing all colors, sounds and odors, even the bioelectric signals his cranial appendages normally perceived, he could then isolate himself more completely than the best Vulcan could meditating. This peculiar anatomical defect had helped him fool his masters about his true meditative mastery when he was a child... until the day he had fallen asleep, so deeply isolated he could find himself within his own body.

Today, it helped him calm himself and think more deeply. not the deep, narrow-focused thinking peculiar to his people when danger was near, but the calm, broader thinking that could see beyond mere survival instinct.

Then, suddenly, his antennae shot out and his eyes snapped open. The bewildering rush of sensory inputs dazzled him for a moment, before he could stagger up, as his sense of balance also relied on his antennae. Ignoring the curious stares at his brief but uncharacteristic ungainliness, he went to the science console:

" Mister Smlek: did you say earlier that the Borg could send a cohesive beam within a subspace funnel created between two warping charges ? "

" Affirmative, Sir. " confirmed the Ferengi. "

" Any kind of cohesive beam? " insisted the Andorian.

" Well the actual implementation is quite tricky, even for the Borg... But in theory, yes they could in this manner send at warp speed any... "

The assistant Chief of Science stopped abruptly. His eyes were wide open and unblinking, looking at the silver ones of the Lieutenant. They were having the same thought... a most dreadful one.

" Reviewing sensor log. Sir! " then almost shouted Smlek, frantically running his fingers all across his board, recalling the recording of their last encounter by the ship's external scanners.

But Kheren was already moving to the tactical station:

" Mister Tomah! Complete internal scan of the Lotus, starting from the stern and cargo bays 1 and 2. Raise internal forcefield and alert all security teams to prepare for search and anti-boarding action. Immediately sound red alert if you get any sign of infiltration! "

Frowning, the man started tapping commands on his board as he asked:

" Ah, Sir... you think that, ah, that the Borg... "

" I don't know, Mister Tomah... I hope not. Depends if Mister Smlek finds between gravimetric explosions any sign of a transporter beam. "

Every heartbeat resonated like the toll of Hell's Bells for every officer on the silent bridge of the flagship, limping valiantly towards home.

Reports from teams dispersed throughout the ship were coming in to Ensign DePaul stationed at the security station behind Lieutenant Tomah. With the security protocols implemented, there were four security guards on each and every deck of the entire starship, posted at the most critical point of each deck. As soon as the search order had been issued, it took merely seconds for the first reports to come in.

At the same time, Edward Tomah himself was using internal sensors to sweep the entire vessel from stern to bow. As they had discussed during training sessions, he was not looking for intruder signals; Borg drones did not register on scanners. He was looking at alterations within the ship itself: hull stresses, changing circuits polarities, rerouting of eps flows, variations in humidity and temperature... Wherever they went, Borg lost no time in doing what was their sole function: assimilate everything around them.

The acting Chief of Security also reviewed each internal forcefield for sign of some possible disruption betraying any attempt to advance through them...

And for disappearing lifesigns and loss of combadge signals, the clues that crewmembers were being assimilated... or killed.

Seconds felt like centuries, until Ensign DePaul turned halfway towards Lieutenant Tomah as he fingered a few final keys.

Tomah looked one last time at his board before finally lifting his dark eyes to look at the Acting First Officer all this time hovering near him:

" Sensor and visual sweep complete, Sir: no intruder on board. "

The whole ship seemed to let go a huge sigh of relief; even the deckplates vibrated under their feet.

" Lieutenant Kheren: our warp bubble is reforming. We are gaining speed. " then reported Azji at helm, his eyes going instinctively from his piloting board to the star-streaked image on the main viewer.

" Good work people! " praised the Andorian returning to the command well. " You are all showing brilliantly why this is the flagship of Lotus Fleet! "

His expressionless face did not show the enthusiasm of his voice; but a few on the bridge would swear later that they had seen a smile forming on his thin lips.

" Resume course as per the Captain's orders." he then ordered. then he used his combadge:

" Engineering: well done Mister N'Arti. Now, please work on any possible option to get even more speed from this lady. Report any idea, however ludicrous, that you can implement in time to bring us sooner to Starbase 10. As soon as the Captain comes back, I want him to have options."

He then turned around, each time addressing an officer on the bridge:

" Mister Azdji: work on ways to shave us some time; use gravitic jumping of stars to accelerate us, cut through asteroid fields to shorten our trajectory... anything you can come up with even if it's just to get a second more out of our run. Update your proposals to both mine and the Captain's PADD. "

" Aye Sir. " answered the Betazoid, emotionally caught in the Andorian's deadly serious earnest.

" Mister Smlek, now said Kheren to the Ferengi, we need ways to get through their defenses; study any possible sensory configuration that could help us get through their defenses or jam their own sensors and transmissions. "

The Assistant Chief science officer just nodded, perspiration glistening on his enormous brow.

" Mister Tomah; have the computer compile all attack modes and technologies previously used against the Borg; then to select what's left that we can use on board... if any. But in the meantime, study ways to reinforce our defenses, I fear the only real effective way we will participate in this battle is not as a spear but as a shield. "

Kheren finally came full circle and back to the star filled screen:

" Tall orders, yes... but we have an hour before we can do anything, for better or worse... and it took less time for Captain Picard to stop them... twice. Third time's a charm as Humans say."

If only Jean-Luc Picard was here... he added silently only to his heart.

Silence then heavily fell again on the entire command center of the USS Lotus, flying as fast as it could to it's most deadly rendez-vous.

Having moved to the rear and entered the Captain's Ready Room, Acting captain Robertson finally truly letting out a sigh of relief in private, he collected himself once again and sat behind Captain Felez's desk, activating the small viewscreen there:

"Computer, open a secure channel to Starbase 10, Captain Speaker-of-Names."

As he waited for the connection to be made, he sat hunched over the desk, rubbing his face with his hands, knowing the brush they'd just had was about to turn into an all-out fight with the most dangerous adversary the Federation had ever known... The computer chirped, bringing his hands down just in time as the Kzinti Captain came onscreen once again.

"Captain, our second attempt was a success, though just barely. The Borg adapted and took a swipe at us before we got away, but they're still stationary near the Warp 5 anomaly. We took a heavy hit to our stern with no serious damage. Our warp field was compressed by some of their gravimetric charges, so we're down to Warp 7 while our Chief Engineer stabilizes it."

He took a breath as he continued his report:

"All things being equal, we got off lucky. We're en route now; we should be arriving in just under two hours. I know this isn't exactly the time Sir, but I can't help but be curious: just what did the McKenzie do to get the Borg's attention like that?"

On the small desk screen, Captain Speaker-of-Names truly looked relieved:

" We will find that out as soon as they resume communications. I'm glad you made it out alright. Keep us posted on your course and the status on your engines. You've bought us valuable time, and amazingly-valuable information."

As they talked over billions of miles, the McKenzie finally made it though the Anomaly, and re-engaged a course to Starbase 10. They even had managed to shave five minutes off there original estimate.

"Sir, I'm reading the Borg cube stationary, with the Lotus moving away on a course to Starbase 10. I wonder what they did to stop it." now reported tactical officer Abraxius.

"Hughes, set a course to Starbase 10, max speed possible." The Captain said.

"Yes Sir, it should take us a about 30 minutes at warp 8.6."

"Good," stated Captain Crist. "Commander Teancum, would you please reestablish the data link with Starbase 10, and tell them that we have made it though the anomaly safely and we're on our way back to Starbase 10. Also give them our ETA."

Crist thought :*I wonder if the Lotus would have been able to take out the cube, though I doubt it; either way from the looks of it, they bought us time, time to get to Starbase 10 and prepare our defenses.*

Light years behind his ship, his assessment was a fact. But the Borg Cube might have been temporarily stopped, its systems were adapting fast.

In a few seconds, the Lotus would also be out of the Collective's sensor range, but she wouldn't be reaching Starbase 10 as fast as it wanted to...

The Borg would be right behind her.

And they were all heading for Starbase 10.

In the command center of the headquarters of Lotus Fleet, the Captains on screen and in the briefing chamber didn't discuss further the reckless tactics thrown all around after the Rethian Ensign left to begin preparing the Spectre for launch - nor anything else for that matter. They all were preparing their ships and crews - that is, until the stream of sensor data flew in from the USS Lotus.

Immediately the room was abuzz with activity, and at the center of that activity, Speaker did his best to keep the order.

"We're decoding telemetry from the flagship, Captains. I'm forwarding you the data now. I can confirm it to be a near-complete scan of the vessel."

His claws clacked over the surface of the situation table's instrumentation. The holimage showed the USS McKenzie approaching the starbase from the heart of the subspace anomaly that concealed their escape... then the curving trajectory of the USS Lotus limping to get back... and behind them all, the ominous cube-shaped object that started to move behind her.

A growl vibrated the entire room, coming from the huge Kzinti Captain:

" They are coming. "

PART 5 : DRUMS IN THE DEEP

Station-Log, supplemental.

We are implementing final preparations for the confrontation with the Borg. The task-force we have assembled so far consists of the Spectre, the Steamrunner, the Republic, and the McKenzie. The flagship Lotus as well as the Alsea and the Wisconsin are still on the way, each pushing their engines beyond Starfleet-specifications. Beyond them, several more starships are making their way to the conflict, but are not expected to make it on time.

Thanks to the diligent efforts of many of Lotus-Fleet's finest, we have a number of technologies available to combat the Borg which they might not have adapted to yet. Nanoprobes delivered by subspace-transportation. Plasma-torpedoes. Modified tractor-emitters which alternate between push and pull functions hundreds of times-per-second. We'll see which sticks.

Starbase 10's command center, known as Ops, bustled with activity. Several crewmen and ensigns moved to and fro, checking various station systems, validating reports, making final preparations. Notably, Ensigns Rynn, Jackson, Selcar, and Savok had been ordered here, as well as Speaker's personal aide, Lieutenant Rachele Rivers. Each of them busily labored under the flashing red of the station's Red Alert lights, escorted by the familiar klaxon, muted to background noise.

"All ships," began the Captain, the Kzinti known as Speaker-of-Names. He strode out of his briefing room and folded his arms behind him, straightening to an impressive height: nearly eight feet tall, and with a physique to match, this is Starbase 10. The Borg Cube is estimated to arrive in less than fifteen minutes. Report on the status of your vessels."

"Captain, this is USS Spectre," Ensign N'Eligahn Etarubdo's image said. "We are in position overhead and about to launch fightershuttles. They'll be placed in a holding pattern beneath the ring until we need their added firepower. Be advised we may also drop from your scopes, Starbase, don't worry. Spectre out."

A second screen lit up to show a vast bridge and the standing bald woman in the middle:

"Captain, this is Captain Onia of the USS Wisconsin. We're pushing all of our engines, expected arrival in twenty minutes. The Borg will get there first, but we'll be there before the fighting's done."

"This is Captain Wyatt speaking for USS Republic, but of course you knew that." half smiled to himself the Human face that now filled another screen before continuing. "I'm not going to lie to you, people. What's about to come flying out of that peaceful panorama before us is terrifying. We were here at the wrong place, at the wrong time. Many of this task force believe that we're the weakest link in their defense. We will prove them all wrong."

" This is the USS Steamrunner, Captain Ramabai commanding. " said a new, somber Human face on the next screen. " Engines operating at maximum efficiency, deflector array operational. Weapons arrays online, shields operational, ablative armor nominal. Sensor diagnostics returned green. Shield enhancers ready for activation. All decks reporting in, Sir. We're ready."

"Captain, this is the USS Lotus. We are approaching your position at Maximum Warp and will rendezvous in approximately..." the clean cut dark haired Human on the next screen glanced down at the console between the Captain's and XO's chairs, his eyes betraying his heart sinking a bit at the number, "...seven minutes. We will be ready to engage the Borg when they arrive Sir. Our systems are almost 100%, aside from the structural damage on the aft engineering section recently sustained; Robertson out."

"Captain. This is Commander Siduri of the USS Alsea. Captain Donaldson is in sickbay and has placed me in command for this engagement Sir. The Alsea is on route at maximum warp. Sir, we have an idea to shave a lot of time off our arrival; perhaps even half the time! I can't go into specifics just now Sir, what with the Borg almost certainly listening in, but it will be dangerous, and will also go against several Starfleet regulations. Permission to proceed ?"

" Captain's discretion, Alsea." Simply answered the Kzinti officer.

"Captain," then began Lieutenant Rivers, holding a PADD which she referred to as she spoke, running her fingers around the edge of her left ear, tucking stray strands of coppery hair behind it. "Hattori reports that Security Team Rhetti personnel have reported in. They're ready with anti-boarding preparations."

" Still waiting on the McKenzie to report in, Sir. Said Rivers gloomily.

They all new what the next announcement of Captain Crist's ship would mean.

Speaker nodded, then turned to the Tactical consoles.

"Mister-Rynn, Mister-Selcar, report status of phasers and torpedo-loadouts."

Both Ensigns nodded to one another:

"Tactical reports ready captain," Selcar replied as his hands moved smoothly over the glowing tactical station. "All six hundred and fifty phaser arrays are reading at full power, and are armed and ready at your command; I've programmed them on a randomized rotating modulation to give us the best chance of keeping the Borg from adapting. All thirty-two facing torpedo tubes are loaded...Photon, Quantum, Transphasic, and Plasma torpedoes ready to fire in random fashion at your command, Sir. ::

Speaker-of-Names then added with a glance to Savok:

"Mister-Savok, status on tractor beams."

Savok completed running his mental calculations as ordered, and presented his answer.

"Captain, as summarized before, I believe that the tractor arrays will have limited effect when employed against the Borg shields directly. However this tractor configuration will cause an extremely localized disruption in their defenses as each generation of frequencies in the genetic algorithm cycles."

The Vulcan furrowed an eyebrow as he continued in his usual laconic monotone:

"Theoretically, we can create a small open window for opportunity fire every second, making it more difficult for the Borg to adapt to our weapons. Once started, it will be up to my esteemed colleagues to employ every destructive weapon at our disposal for maximum effect."

Speaker nodded to Savok.

"Very good then."

The Kzinti took a moment to smile. What would his family think of him, valuing the opinion of a member of a vegetarian species? To move beyond them, to open his mind to the possibilities they'd denied themselves victory and glory. This was what he loved about Starfleet.

He was interrupted by a PADD brought to him:

"Ensign-Selcar. It appears that the McKenzie will be in need of a Chief Tactical Officer. Their current one has lost consciousness from exhaustion while manning his own station. You will assume that duty for the duration of this fleet action."

"Aye, Sir," Selcar replied to the Captain's orders as he stepped back from the tactical station and nodded towards a nearby crewman to take over for him.

It has been awhile since he had been on a *Defiant*-class starship. The first time had been just prior to the Dominion war when he provided security for the Romulan team that installed the prototype USS Defiant's lended cloaking device. At the time, he had been unaware that his orders to obtain all pertinent information on the Federation's newest ship class had in fact been a test to see if he was worthy of being recruited into the Tal Shiar.

The second time had been aboard the USS Victory where he served as an advisor to Captain Dragov during the tumultuous times following the destruction of Romulus. It had been aboard that vessel that he had first applied for Federation citizenship and later entry into Starfleet. It was starting to seem that he and that particular class of vessel had their destinies entwined.

"Lieutenant-Rivers." now said the Kzinti: "Contact Medical and have them send one of our doctors to replace the McKenzie's Chief Medical Officer. He will be transported with the McKenzie's casualties, condition critical. "

He then tapped his combadge.

Project Takeover: report." growled the large feline officer.

Ensign Joey Daystrom Sisko heard Captain Speaker-of-Names' call go out to all ships and the base indicating that the Borg cube would arrive in fifteen minutes, and thought he better update the Captain on his status.

He tapped on his own combadge and said:

"Ensign Sisko to Captain Speaker. We're ready with the nanoprobes to be transported to the coordinates that I am sending to Ops."

He tapped in the coordinates and hit the button to send them as he spoke.

"If you can get one of the ships to lure the cube to that spot, we can rematerialize the nanoprobes in a dispersal pattern around that spot."

He also thought he should get the transporters prepared and again tapped his combadge.

"Sisko to all engineers on Operation: Telepathic Take-over. Please acknowledge you are finished and reroute all subspace transporter controls to my primary console in Transporter Room Four. Stand by for repairs in your area in case something goes wrong."

The master of Starbase 10 acknowledged by saying:

"Ensign-Sorripto, this is Captain-Speaker. Your assignment is about to arrive. Please beam aboard and report to Captain-Crist immediately. Ensign-Jackson, Ensign-Sisko report to Starbase-Operations. Take control of your duty-stations from here."

He looked to the two ensigns remaining.

"Be on-alert, I may need to reassign you to the other ships arriving as well."

Ensign Sisko heard the Captain's communication and responded.

"Understood, Sir. Initiating dematerialization of all nanoprobes to coordinates that I sent previously." He pressed a few buttons on the console to activate the pre-programmed algorithm, and then said, "Rerouting transporter controls to Ops and then I'm on my way."

He wasn't sure why the Kzinti captain had not responded to his previous request to lure the Cube to the coordinates that he provided previously, but figured he must have an overwhelming amount of things to think about. Unless it was something that Sisko was not aware of regarding Kzinti behavior, as the Captain was the first of his race that Sisko had ever met.

I'll mention it again when I get to Ops he decided, although it was getting close to crunch time, and one of those ships needed to know what to do.

Leaving the transporter room, he took advantage of the walk to Ops to make an announcement.

"Sisko to Lieutenant Jori and all empathic and telepathic crew members on Starbase 10. The nanoprobes are on standby to be beamed aboard the Cube. Please prepare to take control of the Borg drones on my mark."

In the command center, the Kzinti Captain glanced back as the turbolift doors hissed open. Ensign Sisko had just arrived, and was striding towards him.

The young half-Bajoran officer strode into the starbase's operations room, and stood at attention directly in front of the Kzinti Captain, trying not to let his nerves show.

As the half-Bajoran stood before him, the Kzinti regarded him, evaluating him briefly as he spoke:

"Ensign Sisko reporting as ordered, Sir!" he announced. "I've transferred all necessary transporter controls to Ops for the fight. Which console would you like me to use, Sir, and also were you able to procure a ship to lure the Cube to the coordinates I sent previously?"

He looked around the room with his eyes while holding his head as still as could be. A young Bajoran woman who he had not met yet was working on the tactical console. Another new face was Vulcan and he was working on a science console, with what looked like tractor beam schematics on the screen.

Curious, Sisko let his eyes wander to this screen while waiting for the Captain's response.

"Very good, Mister-Sisko. Use Engineering-Console-Two."

The felinoid's gaze slipped past to the viewscreen before him, displaying the last known position of the Borg, the defenses of Starbase 10, and the positions and status of each ship currently at the station.

"I have spoken to Captain-Ramabai in private, Ensign. The Steamrunner will be moving to the coordinates you suggested once the Borg have entered our operational-space. "

Sisko just nodded nervously, as he sensed the Captain had already turned his attention elsewhere. As he turned to approach Engineering Console 2, he exchanged a glance with the young Bajoran Ensign at the tactical console. He could tell she was more nervous than he was, so he tried to smile reassuringly. He looked over at the Vulcan who was deep in thought and decided he'd introduce himself later when everyone was not so busy.

Sitting down at the engineering console, he checked on the status of the dematerialized nanoprobes. Nothing had changed, which was a good thing, but it meant he just had to wait for the Cube to get to the coordinates before he could do anything else with the current plan.

The same expectancy, the same apprehension, were felt on the defending ships lining up to defend the starbase.

Ensign N'Eligahn Etarudbo had keyed in a course that placed the Spectre over top of the Starbase. The communications center beeped. Re'tok had taken the science/communications console. Since all senior officers had yet to arrive, he himself, as most senior of the junior officers there and the one who implemented the emergency recall, had no choice but to direct ship operations.

"Tactical, load all tubes with standard photon torpedoes. I want to save the big boomers for when their shields are broken," he said. "Also, re-route the stealth systems to my console. Flight Control," he said.

Ensign Kelsey Alther looked at N'Eligahn:

"I can't do that, all the photon torpedoes were reconfigured. Adding a warhead doesn't take long when most of a ship's security and tactical officers work on them."

N'Eligahn covered his face with his palm.

"So we don't have any low-yield torpedoes to waste against their shields?" he asked, already dreading the answer.

Kelsey just gave N'Eligahn a stare.

"I wouldn't have wasted perfectly good photon torpedoes on shields, they have a habit of not working well!" the androgyn said, shaking its head. "In other words, all high yields, no low yields at all. "

Ensign Relys sat at the console in the far back of the bridge. A massive glass display showed the status of all forty fighters, the runabouts and shuttlecrafts.

"Yes?" she said as N'Eligahn looked at her.

"Launch all squadrons," he said. "Place Epsilon on standby to interdict and escort the McKenzie upon her arrival. The rest stay close to the Starbase."

He keyed in another transmission.

"Engineering, we're gonna be doing some serious dancing so I'll need you all on your toes. Have repair teams on standby in case we need to send some personnel over to the KcKenzie or Lotus upon their arrival. Keep the Danubes hot as well in case we have to use them."

"Ensign Townsend here, Sir, All rifles distributed and repair teams at the ready." She replied to Nelgahn, a bustle of engineers darting around her, everyone having a modified rifle on their back.

"Fighters are away and moving into positions," Relys said from the Flight Control board.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed that the stealth systems had been fully rerouted to his navigation console.

"Engaging stealth systems," he said, keying in the code.

Outside, portions of the Spectre's hull shifted from the standard grey to a reflective black. This, while not a true cloak in his mind, at least not within what he understood of the language of the Algeron treaty, would nevertheless render them nearly invisible to sensors and to a lesser extent visual scanning.

"Here we go," he muttered.

O'Conner stepped out of the trubolift and began to pass out rifles to the bridge crew. As he glanced around, he noticed that he was the highest ranking officer in the room. As he passed the last rifle to Neligahn, he cleared his throat and ordered:

"Report Ensign Etarudbo."

Then he made his way to the empty Captain's chair.

N'Eligahn cringed slightly at the clan name and glanced over his shoulder as O'Conner took the chair.

"All fighters are away and standing by to move in," he said. "DYCEP is engaged and I'm preparing to execute a maneuver that should at least keep us dancing long enough for reinforcements to help us. All weapons are standing by and repair crews and runabouts are prepared to assist the McKenzie or Lotus if needed upon their arrival. Once the McKenzie arrives, we're expecting the cube to be only moments behind. "

He looked down at the rifle before placing it beneath his feet.

"Shields are programmed for a constant rotation," he said. "Unless they collapse completely, we shouldn't have to worry too much about boarders. And if they come aboard," he smiled slightly, "I'll be busy keeping us from plowing into the cube...unless of course we're told to plow into the cube."

O'Conner smiled.

"Very good Ensign. You never know what Borg are going to do. Besides it's better to be prepared than not."

He then turned to Kelsey Alther.

"Arm a full spread of your special torpedoes, Ensign Alther. Fire them the moment you see the cube's shields fall."

Kelsey took a phaser rifle and tested it's weight, swung it around a little then added it to one shoulder holster along with a halberd-looking Kalthurian Deki'Kah.

"N'Eligahn is correct; All torpedo tubes are armed with enhanced photon warheads... minus one loaded with a Tricobalt Device... and shields are on a rotating frequency along with the phasers " the Spectre's Chief Tactical Officer told O'Conner.

Acting First Officer O'Conner turned back to the view screen, before straightening his rumpled uniform as he took a deep breath.

"And now we wait..."

Those same words echoed on all the other ships, like on the bridge of the USS Republic.

Captain Wyatt took one more look around his Excelsior-class bridge. A good ship. A good crew. He couldn't ask for better in a fight against the Borg. They were in his mind the best of the best that Starfleet had to offer. He fixed each of their faces in his mind. Sarah Doyle, Revik, Doctor Quasst, Rick Parini...in a little less than an hour, many of them would likely be dead. It tore at his heart, even as he kept that cool expression locked down on his face.

The Republic was a Lakota-refit, it was true...but it was still no match for the full might of the Borg. He closed his crisp blue eyes, and then spoke to his First Officer.

"Sarah, pop open a shipwide, would you?"

Pride managed to suffuse him for a moment, born of the calm he managed to keep in his voice. Hell, he'd had a lot of practice. If the crew had known the feelings he had for Doyle...

"Channel open, Captain."

He nodded, and opened his eyes, regarding the starlit expanse before him, and the profile of the Akira-class Spectre ahead, flanked by her fightercrafts. Quickly he made his requested status report, trying to sound more confident than he really felt.

He took a breath, clenched his fist, knowing that these next words would be responsible for the death of these people he'd come to call friends...family.

"We are the crew of the USS Republic... and we are the line that those bastards don't get to cross today."

He thought for a moment, and in his mind's eye he could hear the cheering of the crew below-decks. He looked over to Rick, saw fire in his helm officer's eyes. Good. He was a hard man to get motivated. He cut the shipwide transmission with a glance to Sarah Doyle, and watched as she strode up to stand beside him.

"All stations report ready Captain," she said boldly, "And I took the opportunity to send our ready status to that big cat."

There was a pause, then a sidelong glance backed by a confiding wry smile.

"Good speech, Adam. Think I even saw Revik twitch a brow there."

On the USS Steamrunner, Captain Ramabai strode onto the bridge, gazing about. He was much less talkative:

"Status report," he requested of the crew, while rubbing his hands together.

This had been his command for over thirty years now. The only captain of the very first Steamrunner-class. Even as he worried that his tour with this magnificent vessel might be over soon, the sounds of the bridge, the beeps of consoles and the feel of the deck plating thrumming subtly beneath his feet reassured him. The Steamrunner and her crew would survive this.

The reports came rolled in one after the other, precision born from many years serving aboard this vessel. Not a single one had been on as long as he, but many of them had served prolonged tours aboard.

The shield enhancers were something that his science team had worked on since they heard about the Borg. He hoped it would be enough to keep the ship in the fight alongside Lotus Fleet's more heavily armed and armored vessels.

It was a simple concept really: the moment the sensors registered weapons fire, the appropriate shield enhancer would fire up, bracing the facing shield for the initial impact.

He hoped, because he didn't know. He was no scientist, only a leader. His people were all skilled at translating the technical jargon of their specialties into words he could use to make the best decision. It was a relationship uniquely human: each man and woman covered each other's faults so that they could all employ their strengths.

"Very good," he said warmly, looking around at his crew. "Confirm to Starbase 10 that we're ready. "

Confirmation came also from the flagship of Lotus Fleet.

Acting Captain Mark Robertson stared at the computer readout, consumed with looking over the files the Lotus had on encounters with the Borg. The Intrepid-class flagship had managed to realign the warp field, and picked up some time and breathing room between them and the temporarily-disabled Cube. By all estimates, they would be coming in just behind the McKenzie, and would hopefully get enough time for a decent repair on the heavily-damaged aft cargo bay.

His thoughts were interrupted by the chirp of his communicator.

"Ah..Captain.. Lieutenant Tomah here, Sir. We ah, we're receiving a signal from Starbase 10 directed at all ships."

He tapped the badge on his chest to reply,

"Put it onscreen, I'll be right there."

He hurried out into the Bridge, Lieutenant Kheren still occupying the Captain's chair as the transmission came through. In curt words, he delivered his report then the starfield came back on the screen.

He gave a heavy sigh and activated his combadge again:

"This is Captain Robertson to all decks: We're going to be engaging the Borg almost immediately after reaching Starbase 10. Prepare to transfer all wounded and resupply as fast as possible. They're coming to our doorstep; let's give them a Lotus Fleet welcome. Robertson out."

He turned back to Lieutenant Tomah, the current Chief of Security:

"Mister Tomah, get your men armed and ready, your standard anti-boarding action."

As he said this, he looked to his First Officer, making sure he knew he meant *Kheren's* standard, which undoubtedly would take into account factors the Borg might not have even considered.

" Aye, Captain." answered Tomah firmly to his Commander's orders. " Everything programmed and, ah, practiced, ready to go at the first sign of intrusion. And all teams deployed to benefit from various member races attributes. "

" Borg are homogenous to the core." nodded Science Officer Smlek approvingly. " They always have quite a hard time understanding and adapting to diversity. "

Then his smile went away as soon as it started stretching his thick lips:

" Sir, with the equipment left and the time we have, we will not be able to jam or scramble sensors and transmissions from the Borg cube anymore. However, the fifty type I to V sublight probes we still have could be rigged as decoys. "

As he looked at Tomah, the acting tactical chief explained further:

" Well, ah, we can quickly install warheads from the torpedo spare parts; the probes then will act as a triple threat: scan the cube at a distance, hamper their targeting with antimatter spread when close and detonate if left to impact them. My guess is that they won't last long, but each shot spent on them will be, ah, on shot less at us."

As he vacated the Captain's seat to get into his own executive officer's chair, Kheren looked at the tactical report of his aide and in turn made a full report to his commanding officer:

" Sir, we are back at full emergency warp, thanks to Mister N'Arti's magic hands; and Mister Azji's piloting is shaving off precious seconds. Temporary repairs on the damage to the stern are completed and the few people we had in sickbay are asking to return to their duties. All systems are nominal... except number 4 waste disposal unit. "

Oblivious to the smiles that last remark brought a moment to tensed faces around him, he went on with a tactical appraisal of the situation:

" Sir, we don't know exactly what the fleet is planning yet... hopefully something new because everything the Borg encountered before will not work. As for us, Sir, our assets are few but significant: our ship is the fastest and among the most nimble of the fleet. Our shields are hooked with our sensor array to analyse enemy fire and adjust shield frequency for greater resistance. And we have the advanced retractable regenerative armor; even if it can't withstand the Borg's weapons anymore, maybe it can still at least resist their tractor emitters. "

The Andorian paused, to let Robertson digest it all. When he saw the question in his eyes, he had already anticipated it:

" As you know, Sir, it is also standard on the Intrepid class to have the phaser arrays in the same manner connected to sensors, so that they scan the enemy's shield frequency while firing to increase penetration and damage. We will at least sting them hard for sure, even each time after they adapt. And, in addition to a full complement of one hundred and fifty photon and quantum torpedoes, we have transphasic torpedoes... twenty-five of them. "

" Ah, Chief... Lieutenant, Sir... I doubt they will be as effective as they were, ah, when Voyager used them thirty years ago... "

" Blasting the cube with a pair of them? Certainly not. " agreed Kheren while still looking at his commanding officer with all four ocular senses. " But they will certainly be still potent enough to hurt the Borg and at the very least get their attention away from the others... and give them time to do whatever they hope to do that will really stop them... Sir. "

Again he paused, before finishing with his closing recommendation:

" The fleet will have at least three warships on hand: the McKenzie, the Alsea and the Spectre. make that 5 with the Prometheus class vessel in full deployment. They will have more firepower than us but, just for sheer mass alone, they will not be able to take the pounding as we can. My recommendation, Sir: let them be the spears... we will be their shield... until the Starbase, hopefully, delivers the killing blow. "

Spoken like a true Andorian then thought both the Caitan Ensign Mrrish and the Andorian Ensign Tyvya guarding access to the bridge and exchanging a look. *Even if you can't save yourself, save the clan.*

Mark took up the vacated Captain's seat, listening to the offerings of Ensign Smlek, Lieutenant Tomah, and his First Officer, Lieutenant Kheren.

As the Andorian finished, the Acting Captain of the Lotus turned slightly in his seat, speaking over his right shoulder;

"Mister Tomah, start refitting the probes as you suggested. I'll take any ace in the hole we can get. Ensign Smlek, assist him as necessary."

Turning back again, he looked over to Kheren;

"Don't forget the Starbase's armament as well, Lieutenant. She's very easily packing the biggest punch, if the other plans don't work out. We'll get our licks in, and as you said, we'll be the shield. If we can draw some fire from the Spectre's fighters or the Artemis, then we will, and with some luck, the Alsea will make it back in time to help finish the Cube off."

"Captain", said Lieutenant Azji from the Helm, "Four minutes until we reach Starbase 10, Sir."

Intertwining his fingers, Mark smiled ruefully as he looked to the viewscreen.

"Very well. When you come out of Warp, take us in close to the Starbase, so we can transfer any nonessential personnel, Lieutenant."

He took a deep breath, feeling pre-battle jitters and adrenaline starting to kick in already.

"It's almost showtime..."

How quaint Humans always turn everything into their "recreations"... even a deadly situation thought Lieutenant Kheren as he listened to his commanding officer. *The only race laughing at death's very face...*

Tapping his combadge, he transmitted the Captain's order shipwide;

" All non-assigned personnel to the nearest transporter room. Prepare for emergency evacuation to Starbase 10. Once there report to duty officer for orders. "

Then, he looked at his armchair PADD before reporting:

" Sir, the Artemis is still in drydock for refit, and cannot be launched yet... and I sincerely hope they will not be... say, desperate enough... to launch any fighter shuttles. "

" Against a *Borg cube*? " exclaimed Tomah from tactical. " Ah, but, they will just be clay pigeons! They would simply die in seconds like, ah, the Martian Perimeter Defense ships of thirty years ago. A useless slaughter... "

ETA three minutes. " announced the helmsman, as much to inform them as to cut short the vision of senseless death the acting chief of security was painting in their minds.

As an Andorian, Kheren himself could not control the hormonal surge within his own body, forcing his senses to sharpen, his mind to concentrate and his body to relax, ready for reflexive, violent responses.

Humans had two basic reactions to danger: fight or flight.

Andorians had only one.

From the tactical station, the voice of Lieutenant Tomah broke the silence weighting each second like one more mountain on everybody's shoulders:

" Captain: McKenzie safely arriving at Starbase 10. The fleet is, ah, readying to welcome the Borg. "

" ETA two minutes" added Lieutenant Azji checking his own nav console.

" How long before the Cube arrives? " then asked acting First Officer Kheren in a low voice, all four oculars straight at the viewing screen.

" We, ah, we did manage to detain them a bit, but... no more than seven or eight minutes behind us... and they, ah, they're increasing speed, Sir. " answered the acting chief of tactical.

Let's hope they will still see us as a negligible threat... wished the Andorian silently. At least long enough for us to do our last bit for King and Country.

The Human tragedian Shakespeare, so popular on Andoria, felt so relevant now... and to Kheren, so did the French Edmond Rostand and his Cyrano de Bergerac character, as his survival instincts kicking in:

To fight... and to die. all the more beautiful... because it is so useless.

Then, the message they were all waiting for, the message they all dreaded to hear, finally came through:

" Starbase 10, this is Captain Crist of the USS McKenzie. We've finally arrived, we are transporting our injured personnel, including our CMO Doctor Bains. We request that the McKenzie is to be resupplied and any further personnel that is to be assigned to us to be transported over as well."

Daniel Crist marked a pause as if to recover his breath before saying:

" We'll orbit the Starbase 'till the Borg arrives."

"What about the Lotus?" then questioned the Captain.

"The Lotus is now seven minutes away from Starbase 10... and the Borg are three minutes right behind her." reported First Officer Teancum, now manning the tactical station since Ensign Luke Abraxius collapsed from sheer exhaustion.

He had been with him only at the last instant of their successful repelling of the Borg drones that had boarded the McKenzie, to finish off the last pockets of intruders. Abraxius had been fighting them from bow too stern, sometimes even hand to hand... he survived, by he was out cold and was to be transferred back to the starbase with Doctor Bains and the rest of the wounded.

But their minds were whrenched from the painful past to the fearful future by the voice of Daniel Crist:

"Good, that will give us about ten minutes to transfer the injured and any personnel." Crist stated while activating his combadge. "Lieutenant V'krull, you'll have ten minutes to beam the necessary equipment on board for repairs or any modifications."

Crist closed the channel.

" Commander, please make sure all personnel and injured are ready to beam over to the Starbase once we get here. Time will be against us and we need to use the time wisely."

The McKenzie speeded by as the ship and crew prepared for the incoming fight. As they prepared, those few short minutes flew by.

"Sir, we've reached, Starbase 10." announced helmsman Hughes.

"Good, orbit Starbase 10. Beam the injured to the starbase and beam on board any supplies we need. "

The McKenzie positioned itself close to Starbase 10 and began to orbit the large Starbase. Although there was no time to fully repair the damaged vessel, the crew rushed to resupply the ship and repair what systems they could.

And, as soon as the transporter beams of the battered starship activated, a new frenzy of activity started, now concentrated on it's main medical ward where doctors, orderlies and nurses went to full alert mode.

Doctor Jolie Bindo recognized the nurse--a very good one at that--who had just rushed in to give her the order to report to the USS McKenzie as the new CMO. She nodded acknowledgment to Antendia as she placed the neural stimulator on one of the many injured crewmen that had just been transported over from the McKenzie.

"His triage tag's yellow, but keep an eye on him. If that leg starts bleeding again, bump him to red."

She moved on to the next crewman, an Andorian. His tag was red. A large blue slick covered his blue uniform, creating a sickly dark smudge. His eyes were closed, and his face was nearly purple from lack of oxygen. She took a quick tricorder scan. He had severe internal injuries. She injected him with Triox and his face lightened a bit to a deep blue.

"Get this one to surgery stat. They want me to beam to the McKenzie? Now?"

Jolie shivered inwardly at the realization, and from the sudden rise in anxiety from the influx of patients around her. She hoped he was still alive--this wasn't the way she wanted to move up in the ranks, but it was reality in the Federation, like it or not.

"Now, Doctor. They only have a ten minutes window at the base. I brought you a bunch of supplies to take with you."

"We've got the situation under control, Jolie," the starbase CMO said as he looked up from the patient he was operating on. "Go. Good to serve with you--we'll save the formalities for later."

Antendia handed Doctor Bindo a pack and then piled her arms nearly full of equipment and supplies.

Jolie was about to tap her combadge to beam over, when she stopped.

"Anyone mind feeding my cat and my tribbles until I can take them?"

Crewman Antendia smiled.

"I have you covered, Doctor."

Jolie activated the badge.

"One to beam to the McKenzie. Thanks, Antendia," she replied as she disappeared in the transporter glow.

She rematerialized on the McKenzie's transporter pad and nodded to the transporter chief.

"Hello. I'm Doctor Jolie Bindo. I've been ordered to report in to Captain Crist as the new Chief Medical Officer."

As she exited the platform, a voice came over the comm system:

"Selcar to Transporter Room 3, lock on my signal and beam me aboard the McKenzie."

Instantly the requesting Romulan Starfleet officer found himself upon the transporter pad aboard the small tactical escort, standing next to a Betazoid woman wearing the blue of a medical officer.

"Doctor," he said with a small smile and a tilt of his head as he stepped off the platform and quickly made his way to the bridge.

Walking out onto the McKenzie's bridge, he smiled to himself at the familiarity of it all for a brief moment before snapping to attention and addressing the Captain,

"Sir, Ensign Selcar reporting as ordered. Request permission to come aboard and take my station."

"Ah Ensign, welcome aboard. Your station is there."

The Captain pointed to starboard, to the station that was between the Helm and Science stations.

"Aye, Sir," Selcar replied as he moved to it and sat down.

His hands danced over the brightly lit control panel as his black eyes scanned tactical displays and system read outs.

"Status report on weapons and defenses."

"Regenerative Shields are up and nominal, armor generators are online and Ablative armor deployed, pulse phaser cannons charged and ready, phaser arrays charged and ready...all torpedo tubes fore and aft are loaded, armed, and standing by for your orders, Sir," Selcar responded.

The Captain took a breath.

"Ensign, will you be staying with us afterwards or just for the battle?" Crist asked.

Selcar raised one of his dark arched eyebrows and replied:

"I'm honestly not sure, Sir. I suppose that would be up to Captain Speaker-of-Names and yourself."

"I see, well any case, I'm glad to have you, even if its only for this battle." Crist said.

Back in the small transporter room, the dark-haired Bajoran transporter chief stepped out from behind his console.

"Welcome to the McKenzie, Dr. Bindo. If you'll let me take these supplies, I'll get them to sickbay for you. Captain Crist would like to see you immediately. He's on the bridge."

He held out his arms, and Jolie handed over her supplies with a smile.

"Thank you, Chief. I appreciate the help."

Jolie Bindo strode over to the turbolift and instructed it to take her to the bridge. She wondered what the crew was like and what sickbay status was. She wondered how they would handle the Borg attack... and if she'd be able to handle the CMO job suddenly thrust on her.

She wondered if any of them would be alive when it was over.

The lift doors opened, and she stepped forward onto the bridge. Personnel of a number of species hustled around the room or tapped on their stations with urgent fingers, including the Romulan Starfleet officer that had saluted her in the transporter room, now busily preparing the tactical systems of the ship.

The feelings of the crewmembers flooded over her. Fear. Anger. Hatred for the Borg. Despair. Lust for revenge. Pain. The rush of excitement. Jolie touched her fingers to her forehead to block out the roiling emotions.

The eye of the hurricane was Captain Crist. He looked at the datapads and with a quick tap approved or changed the orders on them. The dark-haired man took in the numerous reports with serious nods.

Doctor Bindo's blue-black eyes caught his brown ones, and she stood at attention.

"Doctor Jolie Bindo, reporting as ordered and requesting permission to come aboard."

"Ah Doctor, welcome. Sorry for the short notice but I'm glad to have you on board. Let me show you what your dealing with on this small ship." Crist said while motioning towards the back of the Bridge.

The two made their way to the back of the Bridge where Crist brought up an image.

I'm not sure how familiar with Defiant classes you are, but I'll give an intro on where you'll be working. You'll mainly be on deck 2, in sickbay. And sorry but it's not as big as a normal ship's sickbay, so it will be cramped. Directly across from Sickbay are stasis chambers. Since we can't perform serious medical treatments, the serious cases would be placed in the stasis chambers to be treated later once we get back to the Starbase. And finally, next to Sickbay are the Medical/Science labs if you need them. Any questions? I know it's a lot of info in a short amount of time." Crist explained.

The Captain waited to see if the new Doctor had any questions about her new position.

Jolie scanned the ship schematics, considering where else she could put the injured if there were more than would fit in sickbay.

"Understood, Captain Crist. I grew up with five younger brothers--our home could get a bit cramped at times. If you don't mind, I'd like to take a few moments to meet the medical personnel, review any changes quickly, and get supplies set up for any casualties, may the Four Deities forbid."

"Of course, by all means, do what you need to do, Doctor." The Captain said.

Jolie tapped the schematic to enlarge it, and thought about how few beds and stasis chambers there were.

"If we have an overflow of injured, do you have a preference on where we put them? The closer to sickbay, generally the better."

She turned to look at the Captain.

"Also, is there anything you'll be needing from me in particular during the battle? My work usually doesn't start in earnest until your work is mostly done."

"If we have an overflow of injured, you can turn both Mess Halls, which are located next to the Sickbay, as an emergence triage area. Also you can use all 4 cargo bays which are all located on deck 3." The Captain answered. "As for the battle, all I need you to worry about is treating the injured, that will be more than enough."

The new CMO for the McKenzie nodded, left the bridge and went down to stride briskly around the curved, spartan corridor of deck 2.

Just a few minutes left to the Borg...

The doors to sickbay slid open. Six other beings were crowded into the main room, quickly pulling supplies from the crates just beamed over from Starbase 10 and the bags Jolie had brought over. They were discussing triage strategies as they stacked the shelves and cabinets with tight efficiency.

An ensign, a tall human with blond hair and deep brown eyes, looked towards the door when he heard it go 'whoosh'.

"Doctor's here," he announced to the others.

The crew at once stood at attention.

"At ease, people. I'm Doctor Jolie Bindo. I only stand on ceremony when the Admirals are around, or the Captain tells me to," she smiled as she scanned her personnel.

She looked at the blond human again.

"Ensign, if you wouldn't mind making brief introductions for me?"

"I'm Ensign David Lockhart, Sir. I'm the head nurse."

He gestured to a petite female Trill with long blond hair pulled back in a ponytail to keep it out of the way. Her blue eyes watched Jolie carefully.

"This is Ensign Madzin Tenax, and over by the surgical bed is Ensign Isabelle Rotureau. They're your other nurses."

Jolie nodded at the Trill and then at the lithe brunette. Both were fair skinned, and appeared to be about ten years her junior, but it was impossible to tell for sure with a Trill when one only saw the host. She guessed Rotureau, a human of medium stature, was from France or at least of French descent.

Lockhart moved his hand toward a black-haired Vulcan female whose dark eyes did not mask the intellectual curiosity with which she looked at everything. She stood tall at parade rest.

"This is Master Chief Petty Officer T'Pelin. She's our lab tech with cross training as a med tech. Our other med techs are Petty Officers First Class Ja'nya Ardwen and John Gage."

Ardwen, a statuesque dark woman with eyes as rich brown as her skin, smiled and nodded once at the doctor. Gage was a thin, black-haired human, with blue eyes that lit his face and smiled when he did.

"Welcome aboard," he said.

Lockhart asked:

"You don't happen to know Doctor Bains' condition, do you? We transported him over about fifteen minutes ago. Tall Andorian male? He'd be the only Andorian we sent over. He had some pretty nasty internal injuries."

"I triaged an Andorian right before I got transported here, and I think I saw 'Bains' on his tag, come to think of it. The injuries were quite severe, and I sent him to surgery stat, but I think he'll pull through."

The crew's relief would have been palpable even if Jolie hadn't been telepathic.

She took a quick around the room, acclimating herself to the location of equipment, instruments, and the arrangement of diagnostics on the surgical bed and the other biobeds. They were older models than the ones she'd been using on Starbase 10, but the touchscreens were arranged almost identically.

"Chief T'Pelin, would you please set up some medkits in the messhall? If we get enough injuries to triage, we'll use that for holding our greens. Who's our best triage nurse?"

The Betazoid doctor looked at all three of the ensigns.

Lockhart and Rotureau pointed at Tenax as she raised her hand.

"All right, Jolie Bindo said: Ensign Tenax, you've on triage today. Rotureau and Lockhart, you'll be in sickbay with me, Gage will help T'Pelin in the mess if we need it, otherwise you'll be taking any field calls. Ardwen, you'll be my scrub tech if we do surgery. I'm hoping when the McKenzie gets through the battle that we don't have too much excitement, but don't hesitate to come talk to me if you have any concerns."

"Aye, Doctor," Tenax answered.

Lockhart's thoughts escaped, and Jolie felt him thinking,

[B *if* , the McKenzie gets through....

The Betazoid doctor locked eyes with him.

"When, Mister Lockhart, *when*. I prefer to keep positive."

She prayed to the Four Deities that she would be right.

On the bridge, First Officer Zeez Teancum, having finished assisting in transferring crew members, the injured and the replacements. Now reported back to the bridge.

"Capt Crist, all transfers have been made. To my knowledge, we are fully crewed and ready to face the Borg."

"Good work Commander, work with Lieutenant V'krull, on the resupplies." The Captain said.

With the McKenzie's new CMO satisfied, the Captain worked on the aft station and then turned to address his other new officer.

"Mister Selcar, if you have time, could you come back here? I would like to show you what tactical systems this ship has."

"Sir, Starbase 10 is on the line," then announced ops officer Dan Beren.

" Starbase 10 to Fleet: any sign of them? "

"The Borg are passed due, Sir." confirmed his new tactical officer.

The Captain looked surprised:

"Hmm, that's weird. Beren, run scans, try to locate them. Mister Selcar, best make use of the extra time, so please join me back here."

"Aye, Sir," Selcar replied. Contrary to standard ships, this one was so small, with barely up to sixty crewmembers, that there were no spare officers stationed on the bridge. So he left his station on automatic monitoring to go meet the captain at the back. Swiftly exiting his chair at the tactical station, the Romulan's long legs quickly carried him to the aft section of the bridge to stand next to the Captain of the *McKenzie*.

Glancing at the readout next to the Captain Crist, Selcar smiled and replied:

"So how sharp are this ship's teeth, Sir?"

"Ah, Mister Selcar. Well, I'm sure you know most of the offensive and defensive capabilities of the ship, or from the sounds of the status report you just gave. But allow me to give you a brief introduction on them. First off, the ship has four phaser cannons, all forward facing. They are located on decks 2 and 4, on the starboard and port sides of the ship."

The Captain spoke while pointing to the display screen at the rear of the Bridge.

"Next we have three phaser arrays; they are located in key places to give the ship the ability to fire while it's not facing the enemy. One is located to the aft end of the ship, another is just behind the bridge section to allow dorsal firing arcs, and lastly around the main shuttle bay opening to allow for ventral firing. Next are the torpedo tubes, located on decks 2 and 4, with torpedo magazines on decks 2 through 4. We only carry quantum torpedoes by the way. There are four main torpedo launchers forward, with one additional launcher mainly for probes but can also fire torpedoes, and two aft launchers."

Still keying different schematic displays, Crist added:

"As for defenses, we have the Ablative Alloy Hull Armor which is standard on all Defiant class ships, and Regenerative Shielding. Also we have a version of the Ablative Armor Generators, which you can find on the Lotus. You may know that apertures can be opened up for torpedo firing. Well, with our cannon, we can use the same principle, so most of our arsenal can be utilized, with the armor active."

Standing up from the console to give a better view to his subordinate, he continued:

"Lastly, I would like to say that we have one armory with is located on deck 2, as well as a few rotating bulkhead storage units throughout the ship. Just in case we're boarded again, you should at least know where our weapons are. That's about it..."

As the Romulan Starfleet officer nodded, he added:

"Oh, and one more thing. There is one more weapon that I should tell you about, and I hate the idea of using it, but if the situation is dire, the forward section, which houses the main defector and probe launcher, can be separated and used as a warhead of last resort. I must say that I hope to NEVER use it, but you should know everything this ship is capable of. Any questions, Mister Selcar ? "

"No, questions Sir," Selcar Replied. "I'm sure we'll give the Borg one hell of a fight and..."

"Sir, we are receiving a transmission from the Spectre."

"Put them up and open a channel." Captain Crist responded to Beren's announcement.

"Spectre to McKenzie," Re'tok said, "We are prepared with personnel and supplies to assist if necessary. Please response with anything you require."

"Thanks for the offer Spectre, but I think the Starbase will do, as they have stock piles ready to go. Plus you may need the supplies during the battle. Although I think I may regret this decision later on." The Captain smiled. "So if we all survive, I will be glad to take you up on your offer. Good luck to you. McKenzie out."

The channel closed as the crew continued there preparations.

Onboard the Akira class USS Spectre, silence followed for long seconds the answer of the McKenzie's commander.

N'Eligahn glanced over all of his instruments. It was now the only thing he could do. He nudged the Spectre a bit ahead of the line, watching for where the Lotus and the McKenzie would line up. The McKenzie was in bad shape, but if he'd read anything about that little ship it was that they could take a beating and return double back.

"Relys, prep the shuttles Swigert and Haise for immediate departure with personnel and materiel."

He rechecked all of the systems, ensuring that the stealth systems were still fully engaged, that the shields and weapons were fully loaded and charged. N'Eligahn looked around the bridge at the glowing consoles and the beings manning the stations.

This was the calm before the storm. The moment when all the tense emotions of anticipation swelled and prepared to collide forcefully with the very thing you awaited. He closed his eyes, trying to find the calm he wanted to feel even as his hearts raced in his chest. For some reason, he found his thoughts momentarily drifting towards the one person in any of his classes on Federation History he'd ever been interested in. Possibly the driving force for his determination to defend the ideals of the Federation itself.

James T. Kirk, possibly the most decorated Captain in the history of Starfleet. Suddenly, one quote stuck in his mind. He didn't know why this one did, but it gave him the calmness he sought.

"Risk...risk is our business," N'Eligahn said audibly, remembering the quote as he opened his eyes and focused onto his console. "That's what this starship is all about..." He smiled to himself as he move his fingers over the controls, one hand on the impulse controls and the other hovering over the thrusters. "That's why we're aboard her."

He had his partner, now it was time to dance.

After N'Elighan's outburst, O'Conner looked over to him.

"Risk is our business, but this ship was built to be stealthy and to have a powerful punch. We are not built for a slugging match: we are Lotus Fleet's fist, not it's shield." He paused a moment.

" Hangar deck is ready," Relys said then.

O'Conner felt as if he didn't belong in the command seat. He shifted uncomfortably in the Spectre's captain's chair and hundreds of ideas about how the battle could go wrong ran through his mind.

He then shook his head and pushed the images of destruction out of it. As he looked around the bridge all he could see was an anxious and inexperienced crew, eager to punish the Borg for the friends and crew they lost in their last battle, when they had destroyed the assimilated USS Tempest they were sent to retrieve on their maiden voyage.

Then, Michael tapped a panel on the chair:

" Acting First Officer O'Conner to the crew. I know that you are all anxious about the battle ahead and want to pay the Borg back for what they did to our crew-mates and friends, but we must not give in to our lust for vengeance. We must be like a Spectre and hide in the shadows. When Lotus Fleet's veteran crews open a gap in that cube's defenses, we'll show them what Lotus Fleet's newest ship and crew can do and blow that cube in to little pieces."

Michael O'Conner tapped it again to end the message and took a deep breath.

Then he turned to face Ensign Kelsey Alther:

"We must not make ourselves a target. So, hold your fire 'till you see that their defenses are down, Ensign."

Kelsey nodded:

"Ok Sir. But a Borg Cube's defenses are already quite well known and I doubt they would be that different. "

The comm panel signalled a transmission that Re'Tok keyed in:

"Captain Summers to Spectre, one to beam up"

Moments later, Summers appeared on the transporter platform in Transporter Room 3. He stepped out and headed to the turbo-lift with a brisk walk.

"Bridge" he demanded as the turbo-lift doors closed behind him. Seconds later he walked onto the command center of the USS Spectre.

The sound of the swishing bridge doors startled N'Eligahn for a moment, breaking him out of his concentration. He stared for a moment as the Captain took the center chair before a smile crept onto his face. He cast a glance at Kelsey before returning his focus onto his station.

O'Conner glanced up at the turbolift as it opened. Upon seeing Commander Summers, he quickly stood and stepped away from the captain's chair, before giving Commander Summers a salute.

"O'Conner... enjoying that seat?" Summers said with a chuckle as he headed over to the Captain's chair.

"No, Sir. I don't think I am ready for that chair yet."

"Thanks for keeping it warm for me Lieutenant. Update please. " Summers finished as he looked around the bridge and then sat in his chair.

Michael O'Conner gave a small smile and then continued:

"Everyone is at battle stations, fighters armed and ready, Tri-cobalt torpedoes are loaded and stealth systems are online."

"Welcome back, Sir," N'Eligahn said. "We're ready to do some damage."

"Very good" Summer said as he stood up and tugged on his uniform to straighten it. "ETA on the Cube?" He asked, his question directed at no one in particular.

The Rethian Ensign looked over his tactical readouts and displays.

"Uhm...Sir, according to my information, they should have arrived minutes ago," he said. "For a race more punctual than Tholians, it doesn't make any sense."

"What?" Summers said. "This worries me a bit. Ensign, check all possible routes the Borg may have taken to get here and see if there are any possible places they may be or have stopped."

"Yes Sir," N'Eligahn said.

He keyed in paths and courses the cube may have taken after its run-in with the Lotus.

"I can guess of only three reasons," the Rethian said. "Either the Lotus hit them harder then they thought and they're making repairs:I don't believe that's likely, the Lotus tends to give excellent reports; the cube altered its course away from the Starbase: I find that unlikely as well; the Borg aren't renowned for changing their minds; or... they're deliberately waiting for something, which seems to make the most sense."

He glanced back at the Captain as he did a quick check of the weapons systems.

"I don't personally like any of those reasons," he added.

"Agreed Ensign, I do not like any of those myself."

He pointed at O'Conner, Alther and N'Eligahn:

"The three of you gather as much data as you can and meet me in my Ready Room, Lieutenant O'Conner, you have the bridge" Summers said as he walked into his office and sat down at the desk.

"Black Tea, Hot" Summers picked up the cup of the beverage he just ordered from the replicator and started to drink it as he stood up and grabbed a PADD.

As O'Conner watched Commander Summers head to the ready room, he could only think of one thing:

What data?

He shrugged to himself and sat back in the Captain's chair and began to use the the small console on the chair to collect an engineering report, as N'Eligahn worked on getting sensor data.

The Rethian Ensign nodded at the Captain and returned to his console. He tapped a message to Re'tok to do as heavy a scan of space as the ships sensors would allow and transfer it to his console. After that, he did a routine systems check on the thrusters and impulse engines.

He had a strategy in mind for fighting the cube and it would end up being the one he'd propose. N'Eligahn knew the Spectre was without a doubt the most hard-hitting ship in the fleet and she could definitely hold her own.

But when there was no enemy, weapons didn't matter much. They needed more specific scans of the area. Swallowing his pride for a moment, he planned to shoot a private information request to the Lotus' science officer, hoping their more science dedicated role would give them the information they needed.

While waiting for a response, he dumped the information he had into his personal datapad and waited for O'Conner and Mishy to start heading into the room.

At that very moment, the sleek form of the USS Lotus appeared in a brilliant flash of light and zoomed towards Starbase 10.

"Coming up on Starbase 10, Captain. Dropping out of Warp and laying in a course for transfer." Lieutenant Azji moved along the wide Helm console as the Intrepid-class ship decelerated, and the impressive sight of Starbase 10 and the assembled ships filled the viewscreen.

Mark Robertson smirked wryly as he stood and tugged at the hem of his uniform,

"Well, that's a welcome sight... Mister Tomah, open a channel to Starbase 10, Captain Speaker-of-Names, specifically." He walked a little further into the command well, one wrist clasped in his opposite hand behind his back while the Acting Chief of Security worked at his console:

"Ah...channel open, Sir."

"Captain Speaker-of-Names, this is Captain Robertson aboard the Lotus. We are standing by to transfer nonessential personnel and take on any replacements you might have for us."

"Acknowledged, Lotus. Please stand-by. "

As soon as she came within the forty thousand kilometers range of the transporters, the few non-essential personnel aboard and a pair of injured crewmen were beamed over the starbase.

"Transport complete Captain. All systems nominal." announced science officer Smlek without looking up from his sensor board, his huge brow shiny with perspiration already.

"We're taking up position at the point, Sir. " now reported helmsman Azji.

"Five minutes before enemy contact. " then declared tactical officer Tomah. "All tactical systems fully active, wild weasel probes ready for launch."

Then he looked up in surprise:

"Captain! They have deployed squadrons of fighter shuttles! "

Looking at the tiny specs barely visible among the too few ships positioning themselves to intercept the approaching Borg cube, Lieutenant Kheren's usually expressionless face was now slowly becoming etched with lines of anger that sharpened the edge of his otherwise deep, controlled voice:

"Confirm lifesigns on those crafts, Mister Smlek. Please tell me they are automated... "

But the Ferengi at ops shook his head, his wrinkled face even somber than usual.

"Mister Tomah: *please* tell me they are held back to finish off a wounded enemy or to cover a retreating ship..."

"Affirmative, Sir. They have been deployed under the Starbase's cover. They must be standing by to assist if needed in support and relief operations. "

"Any transporter lock on their cockpit? "

"Negative, Sir. "

The Andorian sighed, visibly to calm himself down, as he turned with concern to his commanding officer:

"Captain...those fighters wouldn't last more than a few seconds out there... They simply don't have any significant firepower to do anything but divert fire on them. If fleet command deploys them too early, they will simply be canon fodder. "

"But what can we do about it? " wondered Edward Tomah with a look of helplessness in his dark eyes.

Kheren answered him while still looking intently at Robertson:

" Mister Tomah can use the tactical array to update the trajectory of each fighter if they are sent into the fray; Mister Smlek can do the same with his sensors to monitor power output and targeting lock of each weapon port of the Cube. Transmitting those to the nav console, the computer can plot and update from the data our own flight pattern and speed to cover them, from nearest to farthest... Then Azji and Tomah can maneuver us to shield them. "

" We won't save them all... not for long. " despaired the Betazoid at helm, feeling their thoughts as his own.

Again, Kheren kept looking straight with eyes and antennae at his Captain:

" At least long enough, hopefully enough of them... Luckily well enough for the Borg to ignore them and concentrate on *us*... And we can lock transporters on them for a last minute evacuation while we cover them..."

Before this becomes a senseless massacre! he finished silently in his angered mind, restraining himself at the last moment. *Whoever launched those better know what he's doing...*

Mark frowned as Lieutenant Tomah reported no transporter lock on the pilots of the forty *Kaneda*-class fighters assigned to the Spectre, severely distressing his First Officer. True, it was odd that the fighters were on their own, for all intents and purposes, but there were a number of potential explanations.

After his XO was finished, Mark continued to hold the Andorian's gaze:

"All well and good, but entirely dependent on us not being a flaming hulk because we had half of our sensors dedicated to keeping an eye on eighty lifeforms sitting in fighters under the starbase, rather than on the Borg and the starships that can make a dent in that Cube."

Taking a breath, he continued:

"If those fighters are deployed in the fight, it'll be midway through the action, when the Borg are dealing with whatever countermeasures the task force came up with, and hopefully seven starships and the starbase. So forty *Kanedas* mixed in that fray are going to be negligible threats to even bother swatting at."

He slowly got to his feet and pulled at his uniform once again:

"But just to be sure...Mister Tomah, hail the Spectre, if you would please."

"Ah...channel open, Sir."

"Spectre, this is the Lotus, our sensors detected that there's no transporter lock on the pilots of your *Kanedas* in position under the starbase, we were wondering if you needed a hand..."

On board the USS Spectre, Ensign Re'tok relayed the message through the comm.

The Rethian at the helm glanced at O'Conner before nodding to Re'tok.

"Lotus, this is Ensign N'Eligahn, Operations Officer aboard the Spectre," he said. "The fighters are deployed on my orders through our flight control officer. They have their orders and they've been briefed. I can assure you, Sir, they know why they're out there, what they're going to do and the risk involved. Spectre out."

He nodded to Re'tok and the Vulcan ended the transmission.

Back on Lotus Fleet's flagship, Mark Robertson arched a brow with an amused grin at the terseness of the communication, but turned back to his First Officer, and glanced between Ensign Smlek and Lieutenant Tomah:

"We'll leave the *Kanedas* to Spectre's Flight Ops, gentlemen. Mister Smlek, keep scanning for the Cube, I expect they'll come a-knocking at any moment..."

The Ferengi looked back to his console nervously before responding: "Aye Sir."

Standing thoughtfully with his hands behind his back in the command well for a moment, Mark started for the Captain's Ready Room.

The Andorian's antennae had dropped near his thick hair as had he listened to the Spectre's curt, almost defiant answer. He had noticed Commander Robertson's smirk and just closed his eyes.

It was definitely out of his hands... and he didn't like it.

An Ensign is in command over there? he wondered incredulously.

Had he been one of those fighter pilots, he would have obeyed launching orders without a blink... maybe even relish the mortal danger of the assignment. But had he been the one to give those orders...

Such was the burden of command: you had to accept that in such a situation, some people were... expendable.

And he *definitely* didn't like it. Not when it was so...

"Mister Kheren, would you join me in the Ready Room for a moment? We'll need to confirm our plan of attack... Mister Tomah, you have the Bridge."

The strong, calm voice of the Acting Captain brought him out of his spiraling dark mood. He sent a control bypass of his armchair PADD to the tactical station to help Tomah assume more readily his temporary duties, then followed Robertson.

Walking back into the Ready Room, Mark picked up a PADD he'd been reading before on the Battle of Sector 001, specifically the attacks that had failed just prior to the Enterprise-E's intervention, going back and reading a line or two as he waited for the door to shut behind Kheren.

The door closed behind him and he went to stand at attention before the captain's desk. For a moment, as he watched his superior officer glance at a PADD, it left him with a funny feeling.

When was the last time I was actually invited here at a tactical briefing? He suddenly realized that, since he had been assigned to the Lotus and now about to leave for the Artemis, it was the very first time...

And that it would be the last... one way or another.

Mark turned and leaned back against the rail separating a portion of the Ready Room and looked up to Kheren:

"We'll have to try and engage them well away from the starbase, if they figure out the countermeasures are a greater threat than the ships themselves, they might try and throw everything at the big stationary target, shrugging off the damage.."

He breathed in deeply, trying to be as careful as possible with his next words,

"Kheren, I understand wanting to have as many people covered as we can, it did seem odd that there wasn't a transporter lock on those fighters, I agree. But we need to focus our attention on the Borg, and let the flag officers on Starbase 10 see the whole battlefield."

The utter cold stoicism in the Andorian's face and posture made him a bit uneasy, and so he added:

"I have implicit faith in your tactical abilities, and we're going to need them. But I need to know I can count on you to keep your gaze on one stage of the battle at a time. I'm not saying worry about his ship and this ship only, but some aspects of this battle are going to be beyond our control, and though we might think it's the wrong way to do it, that's not our call. We're gonna have to think fast and move faster if we're gonna come out on top this time around. Okay?"

He hated to sound like he was preaching, but in this fight, they weren't going to be given a whole lot of leeway for mistakes.

" Understood, Sir. I let my concern for my fellow Starfleet officers get the better of me, when I should have showed respect for their dedication for a hazardous duty... and when I should show faith in them, faith that they were well aware of it all when they chose to put on the same uniform as I have. It won't happen again, Sir. "

Keeping his back straight but lowering his head to have all senses bearing down on his commanding officer, the Andorian then went on with the upcoming action Robertson had just delineated:

" Sir, if we mean to engage them as far away as possible from Starbase 10, we should engage right now on an intercept course... and tickle them with a few of the transphasic torpedoes that we have."

Kheren lifted his head but kept all four oculars on the Human as he finished:

" After thirty years, I don't think we will damage them much while the new shields analysed by the probes are fully up... but it will certainly rattle them hard enough to make them see us as the bigger threat. "

There was no fear in his voice, nor in his eyes or on his face; because in this most dangerous endeavor, this time, they would not be alone.

The Acting Captain nodded with a wry grin, tossing the PADD back onto the desk:

"We're gonna have to give them an opening volley at some point, it might as well be transphasics..."

He wasn't terribly surprised at Kheren being so matter-of-fact. It would've been unlike the Andorian to react any other way than to simply file it away and move on.

"In fact, we might even be able to use that sensor data we got from them to fine-tune the transphasics, he held his hands up to demonstrate, so we might even be able to penetrate their shields completely. It wouldn't do a whole lot, mind you, but it would be a few solid body shots that might jar them long enough for the countermeasures the task force has come up with... to have some better odds."

He nodded his head toward the Ready Room door and the both of them moved back out onto the Bridge.

"Lieutenant Azji, use the Borg's last known position and plot a course that takes us in an attack pattern to where they should enter the Starbase's perimeter. Engage only on my mark."

As the Betazoid acknowledged the order, Mark turned back to Tomah at Tactical:

"Mister Tomah, hail Captain Speaker on the Starbase."

The older Human worked at his console a moment,
"Ah...they are receiving, Captain."

"This is Acting Captain Robertson aboard the Lotus. Captain Speaker, we may be able to fine-tune our torpedoes using the sensor data from our probe attack earlier. We are also standing by to move toward the Borg's likely coordinates to try and keep them at arm's length from the Starbase."

Robertson took the Captain's chair again while they awaited Captain Speaker-of-Names' say-so to move toward the Borg's projected position, frowning as he shifted on his seat, stroking his chin as the gears turned.

Agonizing minutes passed, and at last, the deadline approached and went, with no sign of the Borg.

He was about to hail the Starbase again when Ensign Smlek spoke up:

"Captain, that Ensign N'Eligahn aboard the Spectre is requesting detailed scans of the space surrounding the Starbase. I guess they've started wondering why the Borg are overdue..."

Mark chuckled wryly, glancing to Lieutenant Kheren.

"That probably makes every Starfleet uniform in the task force... Ensign, begin a high-resolution scan and send the Spectre the datastream. See if you can manage to reach the Warp 5 anomaly without any loss of clarity."

The Ferengi flashed a fanged grin and nodded, "Yes Sir."

Then, an answer came back from their headquarters:

"Hold just a moment, Lotus."

Speaker drummed his claws across his armrest. Clack-clack-clack-clack-clack. Clack-clack-clack-clack-clack.

Where were the Borg?

They had been so hellbent on chasing the McKenzie. What changed?

Now..." he trailed off, his ears flicking once...the big question is, when will they enter that space? They were due *minutes* ago."

He opened a channel to the fleet again.

"Starbase-Ten to Fleet. Where are they? Any sign of them?"

Ensign Sisko heard the Captain ask where the Borg were, because they had not arrived at the expected time, so he thought he'd spend some time checking sensors to try to determine why.

He began scanning and all readings were within normal parameters. No sign of the Cube or even warp core emissions other than those of the Lotus Fleet ships. He then widened the search to include particle emissions not usually associated with the presence of a starship...

And something odd caught his attention.

A subspace variance was not anything out of the ordinary, commonly seen near points where there has been activity between subspace and normal space, such as when sending a subspace message, but the logs detected it a couple minutes ago from a location approximately ten thousand kilometers from the Starbase, where no Federation vessels were recorded within the past day.

"Sir, is it possible the Cube is cloaked?" Sisko asked, directing his inquiry to Captain Speaker-of-Names.

The thought brought chills up and down his spine, as surely as thinking about being assimilated.

What would the Borg need to cloak for? Unless they are studying us...

He thought back to an ingenious trick used by Geordi LaForge to detect cloaked ships, using what they called a Tachyon Detection Grid.

"Can we extend the starbase shields and change them to emit a tachyon pulse? It would leave the base vulnerable, but would detect any cloaked ships in the area. Maybe that's what they are waiting for us to do."

The big cat swished his tail once as he brought his clawed hand to his chin in a thoughtful posture he'd developed while observing his fellow Starfleet officers. He had come from a hunter culture, and while he was not the best at the Hunt, he surmised he was better than many other species in the quadrant - especially those who'd lived the standard Federation lifestyle.

"No..." he growled slowly, thoughtfully at last. "Why would they need to cloak? They hold the better-weapons and wear the better-armor. Whatever angle they decide to attack us from would be irrelevant. Our shields are strong enough to make such an attack a waste of energy."

Sisko sighed slightly at being dismissed so readily, but knew that even if he were correct, it wouldn't really matter that much. If they were out there somewhere, cloaked, and studying the starbase, it wouldn't really change the end result: the attack would be what really mattered.

The captain walked over to Ensign Sisko's console, and peered over his shoulder - not a particularly difficult task considering his almost eight foot tall stature.

"What are you seeing?"

"Sir, a subspace variance. Such a variance is a direct result of a cloaked ship traveling at warp speeds," he replied. "Starfleet first found out how to detect this after studying Jem'Hadar ships that had the capability. It is how the USS Defiant was picked up so easily in the Gamma Quadrant. Dropping out of warp made it stop, and that is why our sensors only recorded it for a moment."

* * *

Braedon...can you hear me... please help me...

The voice of Lieutenant Braedon Jori's sister, Lyaxanna, filled his mind.

She was out there, aboard the Borg Cube.

She had been assimilated early in her Starfleet career, when they were only eighteen. All the work Braedon had done, all the research, and training was for her. To create a way to save her from Borg.

"Jori to Cargo Bay 147", he said as he got up out of bed and began changing into his blue Starfleet uniform, "Bring T.E.D. online and get everyone patched in, I'm on my way. Jori out."

He tried to compose himself and balance his mind as he hurried down the corridors of Starbase 10, but her presence prevented him from clearing his head.

Braedon...everything is so cold...no light...

The Cargo Bay doors opened. The Lieutenant moved straight to his station and ordered his assistants to get him patched in. They moved quickly while he began to focus his mind.

"Sir, the Spectre has engaged the Borg." an ensign announced.

Braedon... it's a trap... get out... run...

"Sir, the fleet is being overrun! Multiple transwarp conduits are opening up around Starbase 10..."

There's no time... I'm so sorry... I didn't know... oh gods...

"Sir, the Spectre has been destroyed! No survivors! The whole fleet has been disabled, Transwarp activity is increasing and the Borg are now targeting the Starbase!" a science officer called out in disbelief.

Braedon couldn't believe what he was hearing. He shut out all sounds, cleared his mind, and focused on his sister.

" Lyaxanna. "

He laid still, in silence, until the presence of his beloved sister filled his mind once more.

We are the Borg. Lower your shields and surrender your ships. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to service us. Resistance is futile...

Jori's head jerked up. With the feeling of despair reverberating through him, he asked the computer for the time.

The Borg were almost upon them!

"Lieutenant Jori to Ensign Yylina. Status." Braedon asked tapping his communicator.

She gave him a proper report as he looked around the Cargo Bay. He tried to move around at a brisk pace, but was quickly winded and had to move slowly. He felt dizzy and hot.

The Borg Cube is still not here. he thought.

"On my way, Jori out." He paused a moment to catch his breath before remembering he was already in the cargo bay... and now he was going down the corridors.

Abruptly, he doubled back towards the cargo bay.

"Lieutenant Jori to Sickbay. Please have someone meet me in Cargo Bay 147."

He waited for an affirmative reply before stopping in the hallway only a few meters away from the Cargo Bay. He couldn't shake the feeling that a catastrophe was imminent. He wasn't sure if it was the result of his dream, or something else.

"Lieutenant Jori to Captain Speaker of Names." He was finding it difficult to find the breath to speak, "Captain, can you put my mind at ease and perform a long-range scan for any transwarp readings, or anything that might indicate pending transwarp activity?"

He was able to catch his breath, leaning against the wall for support, hoping the dizziness would pass... and waited for a response.

Captain Speaker looked to Sisko with chagrin.

"Does that thing you're tracking have any relation to Transwarp technology?"

Thinking over it for a bit, the half-Bajoran suggested:

"This could very well be an anomaly in our sensor readings. I don't believe it would be directly related to a transwarp conduit opening up in the vicinity. A transwarp conduit aperture would definitely cause a subspace *distortion*," he emphasized the word slightly to differentiate it from a 'variance', "of at least 30 millicochranes, but I don't see anything like that."

On board the USS Lotus, the same analyzing and conjecturing were ongoing.

Until one voice, deep and soft, broke the silence;

" Sonar, Sir. "

Acting First Officer Kheren startled everyone on the bridge, so quiet it had become with the Borg mysteriously nowhere to be seen. But his own four oculars were all turned to his commanding officer as he explained:

" An ancient scanning mode using sound to bounce back from an unseen target. Terran bats use it I beleive. So does the blind Andorian Ice sea shark. "

" And the Ferengi rock mole... But what good is it to us in a deep space search? " Wondered the Ferengi at the science station.

Kheren inclined his head as if to listen better... even if his skull had no visible ears. He was still looking at Acting Captain Mark Robertson:

" Our phasers are hooked to our sensor array to analyse enemy ship frequency, a standard feature introduced on the Intrepid class. We have 13 mark X phasers strips covering all angles around the Lotus. "

" Ah, begging your pardon, Sir, but there is nothing to lock on to, even manually..." observed Lieutenant Tomah. The Andorian just nodded slightly to aknowledge the tactical officer but kept eyes and antennae fixed on Commander Robertson as he explained further:

" But, if we fire them all together in pulse mode, on a wide dispersal pattern... "

" They will send back a signal the moment they hit something!" suddenly realized science officer Smlek. " Even something out of phase would register a transphasic disturbance on our sensitive sensors when the beam crosses it. "

" Ah, crude... but effective. " confirmed Edward Tomah. " At 1/1000th power, they could still do the job with, ah, no risk of damaging anything or depleting our power reserves. "

" And if we fly in a spiraling pattern outward from the Starbase, we can cover an expanding search pattern from a starting three hundred million kilometers radius at this low power setting! " then added Lieutenant Azji from helm. " And quicker if other ships do the same on a different ecliptic course! "

Kheren's rigid dark blue face was almost smiling:

" I'm gonna miss this crew. "

It was a legitimate sentiment coming from any Starfleet officer dedicated to his ship. And it was also within the heart of another Andorian.

Doctor Darum Bains awoke in the Starbase 10 sickbay, moaning, his blue skin paler than usual and his antennae wobbling weakly.

A nurse quickly ran over and had him lie down again. Faint trickles of memory came back...

We had been... under attack... by... the Borg. The McKenzie had been answering a distress call... maybe. The Borg had been acting.... different, invaded the ship and killed most of the crew. The Captain had given the order to head onto the Starbase, and that other ships had been arriving. We were heading for the transporter room, and we were beamed over...^/I]

The memories stopped.

Around him, sounds of rushed orders and frantic tasks took place.

His eyes opened slightly and took in the room that his antennae were already taking in. A doctor ran over to him and helped him up.

Bains looked up at the doctor.

"You've had a nasty bump," said the man, "Sit up now, nice and slow. That's it. Now I'm going to give you something for your head. Bad luck all around here. Looks like you were shot with a low-level plasma beam and had a delayed reaction. That and a real thwack along side the head. You know how Andorian physiology is. I'm Doctor Jayge Planter. But you can call me Joe."

Darum Bains head stopped spinning and his antennae became more rigid. He looked up.

"Thank you. Where am I and what the hell is going on?" he said.

"Woah now, slow down kid. You wear one of our uniforms. What's your focus?" said this Doctor Planter.

"My name is Doctor Darum Bains. I am the Chief Medical Officer and head surgeon of the USS McKenzie. Now could you tell me what's going on?" he replied

"Hmmmm... McKenzie huh? Little bird told me they replaced some of their officers. Say kid, aren't you a little young to be an officer... and a Doctor?" said the Human Doctor.

This man was beginning to infuriate Bains. His laidback attitude and slurred words, his talk of Little Bird...

"I don't have time for this." he said.

Head throbbing, Darum stood and headed towards the nearest nurse.

"Who's in charge here?" he asked.

"That would be Doctor Planter, Sir. Over there." she replied pointing at the very Human he was talking to a moment ago.

Infuriated by how such an ignoramus could possibly be in charge, Doctor Darum Bains took control of the situation.

* * *

Once again, the Borg Cube soared through space. Its hull showed no signs of the damage caused by the Starfleet Attack. Nor was there any damage internally.

Efficiently, quietly all had been repaired. Science Drones had analysed the attack, and begun adapting to it. The Collective was the pinnacle of efficiency.

Ahead, the Borg Cube's sensors had already detected the force of Starfleet ships assembled around the Primary Target. Science and Tactical Drones were assessing the ships and allocating Secondary and Tertiary Target Designations.

"All Weapon Nodes and Defensive Systems at 100% Efficiency" The all-as-one voice of the Collective boomed throughout the cube.

"Decreasing speed to Tactical efficiency one" It boomed again.

The cube dropped out of warp perfectly, just out of weapon range of Primary Target but also out of Weapon range of the Secondary and Tertiary targets.

Around the Borg Cube, several tiny objects suddenly appeared, detaching from the hull.

They were the probes launched against the Borg prior to its arrival. Now, their hulls were wreathed in Borg nanotechnology as it strived to adapt and modify them further.

Used so well against the Borg, they had been adapted to serve a similar purpose and, with a violent and sudden screech, they turned on, jamming all the Starfleet frequencies used by the fleet assembled to defend against the Borg.

With the Assimilated Probes active, the Borg Cube Slowly began to move forward towards its Primary Target.

And across space resonated the one voice that was all:

" WE ARE THE BORG. LOWER YOUR SHIELDS AND SURRENDER YOUR VESSELS. YOUR BIOLOGICAL AND TECHNICAL DISTINCTIVENESS WILL BE ADDED TO OUR OWN. YOUR CULTURE WILL ADAPT TO SERVICE US. RESISTANCE IS FUTILE. "

CHAPTER 6: THE DOGS OF WAR

Acting Captain Mark Robertson couldn't help but smile at the ingenuity as he listened to to his Acting First Officer lieutenant Kheren explain a way to check and see if the Cube could possibly have cloaked.

As he was about to respond, the Cube dropped out of warp, as if in response to their curiosity as to its location.

So much for a first strike.. He thought ruefully to himself.

" Ah, Borg Cube dropped out of warp at the edge of sensor range, Captain! " suddenly announced Lieutenant Tomah. " Bearing 017 mark 225 on direct approach to Starbase 10 at full impulse. All their offensive and defensive systems fully active. "

" Intercept course plotted and laid in, Sir. " stated Lieutenant Azji, his hand hovering over the impulse controls.

The Fleet began moving toward the deadly threat, when the Modified Probes were reintroduced to the battle by the Borg, cutting the fleet's communications.

The background chatter became a soft hiss in all the speakers around the bridge.

" Sir! All hailing frequencies jammed!" explained Ensign Smlek. Captain! They're using our own probes against us! "

" All of them? " asked Acting First Officer Kheren.

" Yes, Sir." confirmed the Ferengi from his own data feed. " They are surrounding the cube, operating as a jamming blanket. "

" Sir, I also suspect that our first volley fire might be diverted to them, offering a further protection to the Cube to allow it to close on the starbase. " suggested Tomah keying some data to the targeting computer to analyse the possibility.

Hearing this, the Andorian looked at the screen, then back at his commanding officer:

" Sir, we have exactly the same number of probes still on board... just now rigged as antimatter projectiles. And being simpler models, they all have optical sensors that can be jammed only by a cloaking device... wich the Borg don't use. "

" Confirmed, exec." assured the chief of tactical. " Even if they do not all hit, they will, ah, make a sufficient gap to render their jamming weak enough for us to punch through. "

" Might even work better than expected. " now said Smlek. " The Borg think in terms of mass and collectiveness. In this way of thinking, they would have linked them all together to multiply their power and range. Disrupting just a good enough percentage of them will then knock off the entire jamming screen altogether. "

They were all listening to this as the main viewer showed the ominous cybernetic titan closing slowly but surely towards them. Lieutenant Kheren stared at the screen as he said:

" Sir, we can take the jamming probes out with our own, already modified... and blind them before our first volley. "

" Of course! the antimatter spread from the modified probes warheads! " understood Tomah. " The explosion on a low yield widespread pattern at such close range will, ah, knock out for a few seconds all of their sensors... even targeting and optical ones! "

" But how do we tell the rest of the fleet? " wondered Azji without moving his eyes from the viewer nor his hand from the flight controls.

A sudden idea immediately flashed in the Andorian's mind as he was looking at the blinking probes surrounding the monstrous vessel of the Collective:

" Human Morse code, Sir. "

It took no time for everyone on the bridge to recall their basic communication lessons from their Academy days.

" And to keep the Borg from eavesdropping, we should use some language unknown to them, a species they never assimilated... like... Kalthurians? "

" But with what? Only problem is that any system used to transmit and receive the code will be monopolized by it, reducing or cutting off it's primary effectiveness... and any significant damage to the system will distort or cut off communication. " analyzed the Ferengi assistant chief science officer.

The Andorian now looked at the other ships of the fleet taking defensive posture before the incoming menace:

" So, we need an emitter that can be easily detected, will work independently of main functions and cannot be knocked out... like...

... our navigation lights. "

Saying so, he looked straight at the lights that glowed a sickly green from the titanic cyber-vessel and the tiny dots that swarmed before it, like every bridge officer in the fleet.

Looking at those same lights from his own main viewer, the Tibetan Captain of the USS Steamrunner sat forward in his chair and smiled.

"Ah, they've come at last. Helm, move into position."

He watched as several things dropped off the Borg Cube, eyes narrowing.

"Sir, we've lost contact with the fleet. All communication frequencies are jammed."

Ramabai nodded to his tactical officer.

"Proceed as planned, I'm sure the fleet will figure it out."

On the bridge of the Akira class starship Spectre, the man sitting in the command chair had the same reaction as that of the commander of the Steamrunner destroyer.

O'Conner almost smiled as he heard the Borg's speech, because the wait was finally over.

"Cap..." He pauses mid sentence as N'Eligahn stole his words.

"Captain to the bridge," he said.

Tactical Chief Kelsey Alther called out on the bridge of the USS Spectre:

"The Borg Cube has arrived, it's weapons and shields are fully armed... however... it is just out of range of the Starbase... and us" Alther was saying just before the booming voice was heard.

Over my dead body thought the blue-skinned androgyn, doing a quick overall check of the weapons systems again: phasers and modified torpedoes were armed, as well as the Tri-Cobalt device loaded in one of the tubes.

"The Borg cube is slowly moving towards the Starbase, Captain" Ensign Alther said, tracking its course.

"The Borg are jamming us," Re'tok at the science station said, his voice oddly calm for the situation. "The scanning feed from the Lotus has been cut off."

He waited for Captain Summers to enter before saying:

"Bringing us into formation behind the Lotus. She has the best defenses of all of us."

His mind raced. With no communications it would be even harder to coordinate the fleet. They had to...

"Kelsey, I have a crazy idea. What do you know about old Earth comms?" he asked the androgyn.

"It depends on what you need to know, I know a fair bit. Why?" the Kalthurian asked, curious about what N'Eligahn wanted.

The Rethian smiled.

"It should be possible to send a low-yield scanning beam through the deflector dish staggering it to create some form of visual communication," N'Eligahn said. "It's just a theory, but, Kelsey, if you can relay the sequence to Re'tok, we can coordinate with the Lotus and the Starbase."

The Kalthurian smiled back.

"You're talking about morse code right? That would work fine, the Borg would have to actually do some damage to us in order to block that."

Blue-skinned hands shot across the console until finding the sequence and relaying it to the Vulcan science officer;

"Well Re'tok has the sequence" Alther announced looking at Summers, waiting on his opinion.

"Re'tok. " N'Eligahn said cautiously as he brought the Spectre in behind the Lotus, DYCEP was still engaged so they were still relatively hidden from sensors...except... "Do a test on the signal to the Lotus, see if they acknowledge."

With DYCEP they wouldn't be able to receive these messages in return...the hull would reflect it back to the sender.

"Sir, I'm temporarily dis-engaging the DYCEP," N'Eligahn said.

O'Conner paused as he listened to the two ensigns, then retorted:

"Do you two know nothing about about stealth? While the Borg can still probably detect us, if we start flashing messages about, the Borg will detect us for sure and they will probably target us. We don't have the armor of the Lotus so we don't want to be targeted first; the fleet needs our torpedoes. Keep the stealth system engaged."

N'Eligahn turned towards him, his fingers away from the deactivation switch.

"And do you, Sir, have a better way to relay a solution to ending the jamming signal from the Borg and coordinate seven ships and a Starbase while performing strategies that rely on communication...Sir?" he asked, emphasizing the last word.

"If the Borg see us as the largest threat out here, then they're obviously malfunctioning enough to ignore the one hundred forty phaser banks of Starbase 10."

O'Conner raised an eyebrow at the reply:

"As long as our sensors work, we don't need to go around flashing a spot light for communications, Ensign. What makes us better than the Borg is that we are able to operate without needing to talk to the fleet about every choice."

Pausing a moment, then he added:

"Also while the station has one hundred forty phasers, it can't move and the Borg like to target the most advanced ships first."

"Last time I checked we referred to what we do as 'teamwork', *Sir*," the Rethian said before he could stop himself.

He glanced back at Re'tok who nodded.

"Transmission cut, DYCEP still engaged," the Rethian Ensign said, his voice low.

"Permission to fight the ship, Sir?"

Ensign Alther stood, shocked:

"What the hell is wrong with you O'Conner!" she yelled at him. " Last time I checked, the DYCEP needed to be off before we can fire, not to mention the little fact that while we have sensors, we can't communicate!. "

Now the tactical officer yelled again:

"The station may have phasers but it needs the cube to get in range for one of the plans to work!" Kelsey Alther said, fuming, finally thinking:
How could he be such an idiot?

Ensign Alther looked towards Ensign N'Eligahn and sighed, before looking back at the tactical console.

So tempting to override the DYCEP Kelsey thought while sending a message telepathically to N'Eligahn.

" *Well I'm overriding the command for it, lets see how we go*" the androgyn told him.

It looked at the Rethian, smiled at him and hit the command to disable it when O'Conner spoke:

"Look Ensign..."

O'Conner paused mid-sentence as Captain Summers entered the bridge. O'Conner stood.

"You have the bridge, Sir."

As Summers had walked out of his ready room, he had overheard the conversation about morse code and decided to chime in:

"Morse code can also be done with sounds, Ensign, not just lights... and to be honest, it might work and not actually give our position away if we can find a way to do it with sound."

As Summer spoke, O'Conner made his way to a near by engineering console and looked over one of his officer's shoulder. The Captain stared at the Security Chief:

" Mister Alther: O'Conner was left in charge and he is a ranking officer; and last I checked, yelling at a superior officer was not part of the Code of Conduct. We have a Chain of Command for a reason. I understand your frustration, but don't forget I'm a telepath as well and I know that you want to go against orders. Please do not. Right now, we have the element of surprise as far as we know. Lets try to keep it that way. Lets try to look into other methods of communication that would not compromise our stealth for the moment, and save the last mentioned as a last resort if we can not come up with any other solutions."

Kelsey glanced at Summers:

"*Sir*" the tactical officer said, You're suggesting we stay out of the fight, with no communications and remain in stealth while others sacrifice themselves to save this damned starbase."

Alther managed to get it all off without yelling.

"But fine: reactivating the stealth. You can deal with the consequences. " the ensign said, looking away from Summers.

After Summers' speech, O'Conner continued on a more normal tone:

"I understand your frustration too, Kelsey. Believe me, if I thought the ship could handle it and still be able do her duty, I would be happy to go in phasers blasting away... but that is not how or what the ship was built for. As I said, we don't have the armor or the hull that other ships of the fleet do. They will be able to take a beating from the cube far longer then we would be able to."

He then turned to N'Eligahn :

"We can only hope they send us a message. Keep an eye on those sensors for anything strange or a specific firing pattern."

N'Eligahn shook his head slowly.

"The most vital thing we have to do right now is coordinate a point of fire on the cube," he said slowly. "If we don't focus all of the fleet's weapons on one point, then there'll be widespread lighter damage on its outer hull. So..." he added cautiously, his eyes on the Captain, "how do we receive information from the fleet as to what coordinates to open fire on, Sir?"

"First of all, I am not suggesting anything of the sort ensign. It's called strategy, something you should have been taught at the Academy; and second we can try a low band radio frequency much like they did in the days when they used Navies to fight sea battles. Someone should pick it up and it shouldn't jeopardize our stealth or the mission." Summers responded to the young ensigns.

In his mind, they needed to learn a little more patience.

"Our time will come when we will deploy and destroy that damned thing, but for now we are to wait and do our best to fix the communication issue we have as that is the most important thing at the moment. We must be able to communicate with the rest of the fleet."

The commanding officer of the Spectre now turned to his second in command:

" O'Conner: what do our scans reveal about the Borg Cube? I want to know as much as we can before we open fire."

"I believe we had feed from the Lotus but haven't had the chance to look at it yet, Sir."

"Well lets have it Lieutenant. " Summers said.

"Standard Armament and Defensive Capabilities for a Borg Cube, Captain."

The Kalthurian sighed.

" Just like I said." *So much for people understanding my point* Kelsey thought while still scanning the cube.

"What was that Ensign? We are going to drop this now. We are Starfleet Officers, not a bunch of five year olds, understood Ensign?" Summers finished as Lieutenant O'Conner chimmed in.

N'Eligahn felt his frustration growing. Were these people even listening to him? More specifically, were they even using their brains and thinking about what he was saying. He took another deep breath before speaking.

"At no point did I ever advocate going in guns blazing." he said. "That would just be utter suicide and I am certainly not the idiot you seem to think of me as sometimes, Sir."

The Rethian Ensign glanced at O'Conner once before glancing at the Captain.

"I know how to do my job."

He paused before explaining;

"If you recall, I was the one who activated DYCEP in the first place. I understand the need for stealth and even have a flight plan set for when we actually engage the cube involving a DYCEP rotation and coordinated fire with Ensign Alther."

N'Eligahn paused for another moment to take a deep breath.

"In order to better prepare a rotation and get us into position I need to know what attack angle the fleet is moving onto," he said. "That and..."

The Rethian got a comm bleep on his console.

"The Republic engaged the cube..."

The tension aboard the USS Spectre was no higher than the one within the vast bridge of the USS Republic. But, utterly calm and composed in his typical Vulcan fashion, Chief Science officer Revik turned around in his chair and stated grimly:

"Captain, the Borg are jamming our signals. Estimate our chances of success have dropped to 3.82%." He then added, "Roughly."

Captain Wyatt took a deep breath and nodded.

"Right then, we need to get rid of those damn things immediately. Arm phasers."

He strode over to the Vulcan's chair and placed his hand on the back of it, leaning forward.

"Revik, find us the weak link in their net. I bet we don't need to knock out the whole thing."

"I have designated a likely target, Captain."

"Good, get us within range, Rick."

"Aye Sir!" called back Parini while he moved the Lakota-refit Excelsior class into position.

"There you go Sir, in range!"

Commander Doyle looked over sharply to the Captain.

"Adam! We're moving out of the Spectre's protective cover!"

"How do you know? Aren't they under their camouflage thing?"

"They flashed out of it for a minute, Sir." answered the tactical officer Leong.

Wyatt was speechless for a moment,

"Either they have technical problems... some very obscure tactic in mind... or someone tripped on the wrong button." he finally mused.

Captain Wyatt then looked to Revik, who replied:

"I suggest we fire now, Sir. I have taken the opportunity over the past hour and a half to examine the records of past Borg Cube encounters. At this range, their weapons should be unable to track our movements with any degree of accuracy. Assuming Mister Parini does his job properly and follows my instructions, the Republic will suffer no damage."

"Firing phasers!" called out their security chief.

The Borg Cube pressed on towards the scattered defensive line of ships. Although some had begun to form up, a few were still slow to respond to the threat.

"New target acquired: Species 5618 vessel detected, vessel designation USS Spectre N-C-C-8-0-1-7-5. Identified Akira class heavy cruiser. Vessel weapon systems inactive, low-grade cloaking system reactivated. Classification tertiary target." The voice of the Collective droned.

The Cube had easily detected the USS Spectre when its camouflage had been deactivated for a good minute; but returning to stealth mode and not attacking, it had been put into the lowest threat assessment, especially that now it could track it after compensating for its reflective camouflage. But as if to put a line under the confusion on the bridge, its first act would be a stern wakeup call to the Starfleet Crew.

The USS Republic spat cool, golden lines of phaser fire towards the Borg Cube's probe covering. It was the first ship to open fire on the Borg Vessel, and that wasn't an accolade you wanted.

"Tertiary Target, species 5618 vessel detected, vessel designation USS Republic N-C-C-3-0-0-9. Identified Excelsior class long range explorer, firing on this Vessel; modifying target level to Secondary Target" The Collective grated.

A mere nano second later and a huge holding beam grabbed the Starfleet Ship. Even in space you could see it shake for a second and even without sensors such was the force of the beam.

No sooner had the Holding Beam grappled the now stricken vessel, it began to pulse lightly as it began to drain the Republics Shields.

"Cutting Beam Alpha 1 of 5, charging cycle beginning" The Collective boomed.

Sarah Doyle looked over sharply as the initial jolt faded.

"Captain!"

"Yeah, I know, I know." grumbled Adam Wyatt as he picked himself off the deck and glanced over to his Security chief.

"What happened? I thought we were supposed to be firing on the *probes*, not the big bad wolf itself!"

" Fire diverted by the jamming effect, Sir! Target lock inoperative! I'm sorry Sir.. " answered the tactical officer Leong.

He waved his hand. Now wasn't the time for a squabble.

"Shields?"

"53% and falling Sir! They're draining us," called out Lieutenant Leong. " Some kind of bleeding attack... draining and cutting dual beam Sir!"

A double beep sounded, followed by the computer's stern voice.

" Outer hull breach, section 12 alpha."

"Captain." stated Revik once more, raising his voice over the combat din, "while the initial plan has failed, I believe we have an opportunity here."

He began reconfiguring ship energy system grids while he spoke, fingers moving precisely over the control surfaces.

"There. I have reconfigured our shield emitters to emit destructive graviton energy, the same used by experimental Starfleet graviton beams."

"English, Mister Revik!"

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow as he spoke:

"The Cube is nursing on us, Captain. I have poisoned the milk."

But the Borg were not the only one having a sudden sour taste in their mouth; so was it also for the commanding officer of the USS McKenzie:

"Great... Battle Stations." Daniel Crist ordered.

"Speak of the devil... as the Humans say," the Romulan tactical officer muttered to himself as he dashed back towards the tactical station.

Selcar quickly slid into the seat and retook full control of the tactical systems. Doing a quick check of the vessels offensive and defensive systems status, he nodded to himself and swiveled the chair to face the captain.

"Tactical reports ready, Sir."

" Report, Ensign."

"The Borg are using some assimilated Starfleet probes to block our communications with Starbase 10 and the rest of the fleet... As long as those things are active, we won't be able to coordinate much of an attack... Both the probes and the cube are still outside of weapons range, Sir. As the most maneuverable vessel here, I recommend we attempt to move into torpedo range of the probes while remaining outside of the Borg vessel's range and use a wide vector torpedo spread volley or two to neutralize them."

Ok, make the preparations." The Captain ordered. "Beren, see if you can contact the Starbase the old fashion way."

"Like morse code, Sir?"

"I was thinking a little newer then that. Shoot a laser beam to the starbase. We can use it for line-of-sight communications. Plus the Borg shouldn't know what we're talking about unless they interrupt the laser beam. We can use that type of communication till we figure out a good way to restore normal communications" The Captain explained.

"Helm take us in position to link us up with the fleet. Once there, hold position."

"Aye, Sir."

The McKenzie moved alongside the Lotus and the Spectre as well as the rest of the fleet.

Then, ops officer Beren announced:

"lasercomm ready Sir."

" Transmit... "

As Ensign Sisko was attempting to further identify the subspace variance the starbase's logs picked up, the Cube came out of warp and transmitted its usual message.

Sisko just sat, frozen, for what seemed like hours.

This is really happening, he thought, and then pulled himself together.

He checked the chronometer. Only thirty seconds had gone by. He checked the sensor readings again.

Starbase Commander Captain Speaker-of-Names growled as the Borg made their dramatic entry... and made his own way to the command chair.

"All weapons at the ready. Shields up. Fleet-wide Red Alert. Send notifications to... "

The Kzinti cut off as he heard Sisko's report:

"Captain, the Cube warped in just inside our sensor area, and it appears that our transmissions are being jammed and we won't be able to communicate with the ships..." Then he broke off in surprise when he saw that the McKenzie had shot a laser beam at the starbase.

He realized what they were attempting and said:

"Sir, it seems that the McKenzie is communicating through a low yield laser beam, staggering the frequency, so as to send a message. Feeding it through the base's communication relay now."

The computer read off the transmission:

"Starbase 10, if your receiving this, I suggest you point laser beams to all ships to renew communications. With you as the central point of communication, you should be able to coordinate, as planned."

He nodded once. "Good thinking, McKenzie," he said aloud.

"Captain, there's something strange going on with the Lotus' navigation lights," interjected Lieutenant Rachele Rivers, she ran her fingers over her ear, tucking back stray strands of red hair while she continued. "Looks like a pattern."

Then she blinked. Morse code? But... I don't understand one word... Then another viewer signalled her:

"Sir, the Republic has shifted position. It looks like they're engaging one of the probes. Captain Ramabai's ship has moved as well to the designated coordinates for the nanoprobe plan."

Speaker nodded.

"Alright. Ensign-Sisko, implement Captain-Crist's laser-communications. Ensign-Rynn, Ensign-Jackson, watch the Republic closely, be ready to cover them."

"Aye Sir," Sisko replied, as he began to set up the laser communications relay.

First he recorded the various frequencies the McKenzie was using and the noted the type of laser emitter. He then set up the base's emitters to fire the low yield laser at each ship currently in range of the Starbase, except for the Fleet's stealth ship, the USS Spectre. He transmitted the communications of Captains Crist and Speaker in the initial transmission to each ship so they would know what was happening.

The second transmission contained a unique identifier assigned to each ship so that they could send that identifier along with their transmission. The transmission would automatically be rerouted to the ship identified.

Finally, he set up the communications relay of the base to both translate every transmission directed to Starbase 10 into a spoken message from the computer, and also set up the computer to accept speech from the people in Ops and translate it into a laser communication.

"Communication relay is set up, Sir."

Communications within the base were still active, so he also activated his combadge and said:

" Sisko to Lieutenant Jori. The Steamrunner is moving into position to lure the Cube to the designated coordinate. Recommend you have your team ready to take control of the Borg at a moment's notice."

Braedon Jori heard Sisko's message standing outside of the cargo bay doors.

"Affirmative." He replied and tapped his combadge to close the channel. His breath was returning to him, slowly. He took a short moment to collect himself and clear his mind. He took in a deep breath and, as he exhaled, released all anxiety until he felt a true void of emotion.

The Lieutenant stood up, adjusted his uniform, and entered Cargo Bay 147.

Ensign Yylna greeted him at the door and gave him a brief status report. All the necessary steps had been taken, the telepaths were at their stations patched in, T.E.D. was active and reading the nanoprobes.

Braedon sat down at his station and Ensign Yylna began patching him in.

He used his combadge again:

"Jori to Captain Speaker-of-Names: We are ready down here when you are, Sir."

"Understood, Lieutenant." The Kzinti turned to regard Sisko. "Ensign-Sisko will coordinate with you on that matter, once the Borg is within range of the USS-Steamrunner."

He looked out as phasers and torpedoes lit up the starlit distance, then looked towards the viewscreen.

Just then, Ensign Picard joined the Operations staff. Jovani took a good look around and everyone was moving rather quickly preparing for the Borg.

"Forgive me for being late. I am Ensign Jovani Attoli Picard. I just transferred here from Starfleet Academy two days ago. I am to take the role as Chief Tactical and Security officer for starbase 10."

He then saluted the command staff

"Ensign Jovani Picard reporting for duty Sir! What do you need me to do?"

Captain Speaker-of-Names, a nearly eight foot tall felinoid, turned to regard the Ensign.

"A Picard and a Sisko?" He flicked his wing-like ears with amusement despite the situation they were all under; but then, he was all business again shortly thereafter.

"Take command of one of the open tactical-consoles. Do NOT fire upon the Borg-Cube until the Steamrunner lures it into position. "

Jovani looked over at the tactical command console and studied very briefly on the control configuration, Then looked over at the commanding officer.

"Captain Speaker-of-Names: weapons are fully armed and ready to go at your command, Sir. Shields are at full strength."

"Very good, Mister-Picard." Speaker said, while Lieutenant Rivers walked over to present the Captain with her latest PADD-worth of information.

Jovani Picard thought: *I'm well aware of the Borg's abilities from grand-papa Jean-Luc, and this is what i've been trained for. I will not fail.*

The young Ensign looked very carefully at his weapon settings to make sure nothing went wrong at the last moment.

Admiral Redding quietly entered the bridge after young Picard and stood to the side, taking in all the tactical data as it arrived. At some point he had changed into his uniform but waved off an ensign as she started to announce him.

"Now is not the time Ensign, they're a bit busy." he explained, pointing at the command crew.

Sisko noticed Admiral Redding entering the operations room, but just nodded to him, since protocol was apparently taking second seat to efficiency.

"Admiral, your holographic assistant was very helpful, thanks again," he did say.

He turned back to watch the battle unfold, and slammed his fists on the console in frustration. He wasn't used to watching helplessly as people were being attacked.

"We need to get the Steamrunner to lure the cube to the coordinates!"

He knew full well Captain Ramabai was working on that, but still felt like it had to be said.

Redding nodded. And then he glued his eyes on the screen.

Things were already moving at a frantic pace.

" Sir! The Republic has opened fire! "

On both the main viewers of Srarbase 10 command center and the USS Lotus, everyone could see what Lieutenant Tomah reported from his tactical station. Arcing in a standard attack pattern, the Excelsior class starship's phasers highlighted the huge Borg vessel's shield.

What is she doing? wondered Kheren narrowing his eyes at the battle scene. *Is there a battle plan here, or did someone just lost his nerves?*

Barely had phasers struck that a large, conical green beam struck back, freezing the attacking Federation starship in mid-flight.

The Republic didn't give them time, moving too close and firing on the massive Cube before getting caught in a curious combination of a cutting beam and a tractor beam.

" Borg beam has locked on! " confirmed Tomah, his eyes flickering from his board to the viewer and back. " Republic is immobilized. No damage from their own attack, but shields are being drained... and the stress level on their superstructure is already exceeding design safety limits!"

" Sir! now said the Andorian to his commanding officer seated besides him, our armor can cut off the tractor beam and release them. This one ship will not last a minute against such firepower. "

" Confirmed, Captain! Borg cutting beam ports are locking on! " said Tomah.

Mark nodded and looked over to Kheren as he replied:

"True, but it won't stop those cutting beams, as we saw on the aft cargo bay, and we'll be right in the reticles. A ship for a ship sounds pretty lousy to me."

He turned to address the Acting Chief Tactical Officer;

"Tomah, load up some transphasics, double-time! Lieutenant Azji, get ready to make the fastest damned attack run of your life! We need to get within weapons range and out of their tractor range as fast as possible."

The Andorian could only but nod in agreement. Robertson's approach was sound as it did not rely solely on this armored capability and he acted to keep ship and crew as safe as possible while still doing their duty.

He will make a great Captain one day... he thought as they went to the rescue of their comrades and finally committed themselves to the battle. *[IMay that day come after this one...]*

Kheren looked straight at the viewing screen. His voice was low and even, just loud enough for Robertson to hear:

" I expect there is a plan here you are aware of, Sir, because if we don't do anything, now, they're just about to die before our very eyes. "

Glancing at the stoic Andorian, Mark quipped:

"The countermeasures can still work as far as I can tell, but for the rest of us, I think a good plan is to scramble and not die..."

Both Lieutenants Azji and Tomah signaled their readiness to execute the maneuver. To both Robertson ordered:

"Pattern Beta III."

Then, Kheren's face lighted up as his eyes went wide a moment; a grin could almost be guessed on his thin lips as he said:

" Sir... we could try a... Kirk roll. "

Everyone was looking at him with wide eyes. And so he explained:

" You know, Sir... rolling to absorb all damage from a fall and avoid attack, the move made so famous by Captain James Kirk that everyone now practices it at the Academy. Our shields and armor will withstand a lot more impact if we diffuse the attack all around...by rolling the ship on the Y axis. "

It sounded bold, even desperate... and so, at this particular moment, perfectly right.

"Lieutenant, wait five more seconds and add the maneuver Lieutenant Kheren suggested to the flight pattern to disperse the energy."

Azji nodded with a grin:

"Aye Sir, ready to...I believe it's called a 'barrel roll'..."

"Take us in, Lieutenant Azji. Mister Tomah, give me that torpedo spread in a line over the tractor beam emitter, that'll at least buy us some time without one of the damn things."

The nimble Intrepid-class vessel flitted toward the Cube, arcing in to dip just close enough to loose a volley of transphasic torpedoes at the conical green beam currently tearing at the Republic's hull and draining her shields.

Mark's eyes locked to the screen as they caromed away again, hoping to avoid the same fate as the Republic.

While the dark-haired officer confirmed and the Lotus stayed right with the Republic, between them and the deadly, charging cutting beams. Mark glowered at the screen.

As the multiple cutting beams lanced toward the Intrepid-class ship, she gracefully rolled over, taking the multiple beams on her starboard side, barely keeping the destructive blasts from going right by her to the Republic while the sizzling energy burned over the ablative armor.

This registered as a severe rocking within the ship, and Mark Robertson had to grip the arms of the Captain's chair to not be jolted from his seat.

As they were completing the turn, Lieutenant Tomah spoke up:

"Ah...Captain! It..ah...wasn't as bad as it could've been: the ablative armor's holding. But...ah..I think the McKenzie tried to hail us via a tight beam laser transmission relayed by Starbase 10; it didn't come through completely with interference from the modified probes.."

The older man frowned, then looked back up:

"Ah...I think they...want the location for all of the probes, Sir.."

The flagship commander turned back to look at Tomah:

"Wouldn't the Borg have changed the transponders so we couldn't do just that?"

Ensign Smlek spoke up:

"They may have decided it didn't matter, Sir. We're still receiving telemetry from all of the probes, but we're the only ones. Everyone else in the Fleet is just getting scrambled.."

Looking back down to the decking, then up with a smile, Acting Captain Robertson looked over his shoulder to Ensign Smlek:

"Mister Smlek, relay to Republic: 'We're receiving probe telemetry, stay in our shadow, we'll block, you sweep.' And Ensign, kindly give Mister Azji the telemetry data so we can guide Republic and McKenzie."

"Hit amidship, Captain. Minor damage. " announced Lieutenant Tomah after letting go a pair of torpedoes from the forward tubes. " Republic trying to free herself from enemy tractor beam; we cover them. "

"How much damage exactly, Lieutenant? "

"A little over 8%. " answered Tomah glancing at his board

Now Kheren turned his head to the ops station:

"Mister Smlek :Regeneration percentage of the Cube? "

"estimated at 10% per second based on present measurements... "

But the Andorian was not looking at him anymore: antennae and pupils were again locked straight at Robertson:

"Sir, we have twenty-three transphasic warheads left... which represents 92% damage output against their entire structure... *if* we fire them all at the same time. "

"Ah, which we can't " said Edward Tomah. " Our tubes can only fire one at a time and we have but 2 tubes forward and aft. "

"The Spectre can fire fifteen in one single volley, and the McKenzie twice as us... after we would beam them some of our transphasics. "

It took but a moment for Tomah to understand:

"We ask for their shield frequency and they won't need to lower them for the beam in!"

"In Kalthurian of course. " added Smlek.

"A back up plan in case the Starbase's plan fails, Sir. " concluded the acting First Officer.

As the Ferengi acknowledged the order, Mark looked to his executive officer:

"I'm not comfortable transmitting shield frequencies via running lights. Even if the Borg can't understand it now, doesn't mean they can't adapt. Let's clear out these probes and get everyone back on the same page first, we can always use it as a last resort if we have to."

Think safety first was Robertson reminding Kheren again. Not an easy pattern to fall into for a duellist... But Mark Robertson was not a duellist: he was now Captain of the USS Lotus... and he was right: if Starfleet had a universal translator for centuries, why not the Borg? And any code could be cracked...

A shudder went through the entire length of the ship as a beam dispersed on multiple shield grids and glanced on the angling armor.

" Then, Sir... we could use the transponder codes. "

The Andorian was gripping his chair's arms while the Lotus rocked under the impacts their maneuvering barely managed to diffuse.

" Sir; it looks like the Borg adapted transphasic principles to beam emissions. " analysed science officer Smlek between two of those blasts. " That explains how they could initially go through our armor; they blast through multiple subspace frequencies, partly bypassing the quantum state of matter in our universe. "

" And how did they reduce damage from our own transphasic torpedoes? " asked Kheren, his mind focused on the tactical situation as a new impact shook the entire ship.

" Multiphasic shielding, Sir. " answered the Ferengi scientist looking at the data from his sensor screen. Then his eyes widened on his copper-skinned face: " Sir! We can immediately reconfigure our own shields to multiphasing mode! "

" Ah, we can? " wondered Edward Tomah, gripping his console to brace himself against another jolt

" It is a simple energy frequency configuration formula we have kept in starships memory banks for over three decades now. It won't prevent damage because of the Cube's enormous energy output concentrated at such close range, but, now with our standard shielding's mutational shift in frequency and graviton polarity, it *will* bring damage down to standard levels! "

" You sure about this, Mister Smlek? " asked the Acting First Officer.

" Of course, Sir: it is a Ferengi invention. " grinned the scientist.

The Lotus shuddered again. Lights blinked wildly for a moment around them.

" Ah, Okay so... ah, how much will it cost? "

Lieutenant Azji at the helm interrupted the sarcastic tactical officer:

" The Republic ! She's free! "

And at this moment, a new jolt shook the entire frame of the Excelsior-Lakota refit class starship.

" Borg tractor beam released us, Sir. " confirmed the Vulcan Chief Science Officer in his perpetually even voice.

" Good work, Mister Revik. " complimented Captain Wyatt.

At the same instant, the ominous cubic vessel on screen was splattered by a pair of explosions that sent debris flying all around it as a sleek shape went right between the giant construct and the Republic.

" It's the Lotus, Captain; they fired a pair of transphasic torpedoes from long range. Light damage to the Borg vessel. " reported the chief of security from his tactical station. " They've positioned themselves to cut off with their advanced armor any further attempt to tractor us. "

" Shouldn't those transphasic torpedoes be enough to obliterate them? " asked First Officer Sarah Doyle.

" That was over thirty years ago, Sir... when they were brand new to them. " explained Revik. " I detect multiphasic shielding surrounding the Borg ship. This is the only shielding that can cover multiple subspaces frequencies and therefore hamper the transphasic explosion over many frequencies at the same time. "

" Fine Mister Revik. " cut in the Captain. " Now how do we deal with those pesky probes? "

" Tractor beams Captain. " then suggested the chief of security. " We make a sweeping pass among them, grabbing them as we go with a widespread emission... no sensor lock needed... but it will allow our phasers to lock on our own beams to detonate them. "

" I knew I was keeping you here for something, Mister Leong. " grinned the Captain. " Number One, we must find a way to coordinate this under the cover from the Lotus. How can we break through the interference? "

Again, his science officer gave him the answer:

" Just as they do, Captain: look at their navigation lights, Sir. "

It took but a glance for him to understand:

" Morse code! But I can't read... "

" Computer confirms they're encoding in Kalthurian, Sir. " explained Revik. " Patching it now though linguacode matrix for audio conversion. You can talk and it will be translated through our own lights for them to see. "

Then he straightened himself in his chair before ordering:

" Mister Parini: prepare for our run, full evasive, maximum impulse; Mister Leong, reinforce shields, ready tractor and phasers. "

Like a wounded hawk, the USS Republic shuddered and started to bank towards it's small preys.

" About time we had some coordination around here. " sighed with obvious relief the master of the USS Republic.

Then in a clear voice he said:

" Prepare to transmit."

" Ready, Sir. "

At the helm of the USS Lotus, Lieutenant Azji spoke again, pointing at the main viewer:

" USS Republic is answering our Morse signal, Captain. "

On the large screen, the elongated silhouette of the Excelsior refit was flashing all lights in a distinctive pattern.

" Patching through vocal translator, Sir. " then announced the assistant chief science officer from the ops station.

Over the speaker, the voice of the computer droned:

" Republic to Lotus: we will tractor and destroy probes, flight pattern Beta III. Cover us. "

Then, the tactical officer spoke again:

" Captain ! Multiple weapon ports locking on us! "

" Time to rock... or roll... Sir. " said Kheren.

Way back at starbase 10, Romulan tactical officer Selcar watched from his station as the drama of the battle unfolded. On the main view screen, the Republic visibly shuddered as the Borg strange beam hammered into its hull and the Lotus soared forward presumably in an effort to keep the Republic from being reduced to debris.

And so, it begins...the Romulan thought.

Glancing back towards the command seat that dominated the *McKenzie's* small bridge, he reported as it happened :

"Sir, the Republic has been grappled by a tractor beam and the Borg have begun hitting it with a cutting beam. The *Lotus* went on an intercept course and freed them with their own attack and armor. Both ships now on an evasive course within the probe swarm. "

"Hmm," Daniel Crist thought for a moment.

"Beren, see if you can't contact the Lotus with the laser beam communication. Since they launched the probes, maybe they can give us the location of them so we all can destroy them."

On the other end of the ship, the Engineering crew of the *McKenzie* were on pins and needles when such reports from the bridge started to trickle in. The tension in the air was thick, as the team awaited what would happen next.

Ensign Jenny Summers monitored the output readings of the *McKenzie's* engines, nervously looking from display to display.

Chief Engineer Sydona V'Krull calmed herself the best she could by checking the powers systems of the ship.

"We didn't even make a dent in that cube Syd. Do you think we'll make it?" Jenny asked.

With her eyes locked on her console, Sydona smirked.

"I don't plan on dying today. Sunshine...We all need to focus here. We screw up down here and this ship is toast, and we are needed for this fight."

Nodding, flipping her long blond locks to one side...Jenny went back to her task at hand.

"Roger that. Please let us pull through this...."

Likewise, Doctor Jolie Bindo had the comm line to the bridge active so she could listen to the captain's orders. She'd found it helpful in the past to know what was happening on the bridge during red alert situations. It made it easier to anticipate what would be coming into sickbay.

She sat at the tiny desk squeezed into a corner. She pulled up the visual of the Borg cube, now surrounded by nanoprobe-altered sensor probes.

Just like a virus taking over a cell and making that cell do its dirty work, she thought, shaking her head.

"That's it!"

Jolie called her lab tech over to her desk and turned her computer so both of them could see it, pulling up the Borg nanoprobe structure.

"T'Pelin, how much do you know about Borg nanoprobes?"

"I have studied them extensively, Doctor," she said.

Jolie scanned the chemical structure. She found the structure she was looking for.

"This. We need to alter this antigen complex here--" she tapped the screen, "to be able to enter Borg cells and replicate virally."

T'Pelin tipped her head, considering the Y-shaped chemical structure highlighted on the computer screen.

"The Borg have demonstrated active immune systems, Doctor. They would be able to fight it off quickly."

"I'm counting on that active immune system." Jolie tapped another section. "We're going to alter this section of the nanoprobes, too."

"That will only attract the degranulation lymphocytes. The nanoprobes would be destroyed."

"Yes, but if enough cells degranulate at one time?"

T'Pelin lifted an eyebrow. "The infected Borg would experience massive histamine release. An allergic reaction, as it were."

"If we cause allergic reactions in enough of the Borg drones, they'll be disabled at least, and might die. Start making as many of these nanoprobes as you can, Chief. Gage--help T'Pelin, please."

"Aye, Doctor," both responded. They walked to the lab quickly.

Jolie tapped her comm link.

"Captain, I found a way to disable at least some of the Borg drones. I just need a way to get the nanite virus onto the Borg ship--something the Borg think are innocuous, like maybe some more sensor probes."

The Captain tapped his combadge and spoke:

"Good idea Doctor, we will send it over to the Starbase for their thoughts. Beren, send a laser communication to the Starbase with the Doctor's idea."

"Yes Sir," the ops officer tapped his panel and transmitted.

"Aye, Sir," Jolie answered. She walked over to the lab and poked her head around the corner.

"How many nanites do we have now, Chief?"

The Vulcan looked up from her electron microscope.

"We have produced approximately forty million nanites, Doctor."

"Ah, you set them to replicate virally. Nice work, Chief. If we take enough Borg out at one time, they won't be able to adapt. Keep making them."

"Aye, Doctor." T'Polin and Gage went back to work on their task.

A second later the ops panel beeped.

"Sir, the Republic is attacking, looks like they're trying to destroy the probes and restore communications."

Crist then turned to the Tactical officer:

"Mister Selcar, open up the forward weapon ports in the armor, lock phaser cannons and torpedoes in a full spread. Once we're in range, fire at will. While we give the other ship cover, we may get lucky and take out a probe or two. Just like carpet bombing the Cube."

Finally the commander of the McKenzie turned forward:

"Mister Hughes, take us in, Attack pattern Delta Sigma 3."

The small warship began to move towards the Borg Cube, in an attack pattern, to back up the fleet.

The McKenzie turned sharply, and Jolie grabbed a biobed to help her balance. The rush of adrenaline made her heart race until she took a deep breath to calm herself.

She activated her combadge again.

"Captain, the nanites are ready to deploy at your or the Starbase's orders."

At the same moment, on Starbase 10, another similar attack was about to be implemented.

Ensign Yylina made the final adjustments to Lieutenant Jori's local amplification chamber and subtly nodded with confidence to signal everything was ready.

Lieutenant Braedon Jori allowed his mind to wander and found himself focusing on the twenty-two telepaths who just finished training. There were four teams, Alpha, Beta, Delta, and Omega, made up of primarily Betazoids and Vulcans; however there were also three Halanans, two Ullians, and a set of Cairn twins.

He focused his mind to address them all:

"Alright, everyone, we should be underway shortly. Just remember your training and try to stay focused and relaxed."

The lieutenant could sense the excitement of the room... at least from the non-Vulcans.

"Ensign Yylina, open a channel to Operations."

He waited for her to acknowledge before continuing:

"Operations, this is Lieutenant Jori. What is the status of fleet communications and of our nanoprobes? I would also request that all fleet action information be linked to Ensign Yllna's console here in Cargo Bay 147." he finished and waited patiently for a response.

His words seemed to disappear in the clatter of consoles as the entire command crew of the starbase laid transfixed by the view of the battlefield and the battle unfolding. Their silence was echoed on all the ship's bridges locked into deadly combat, except for the waiting USS Spectre.

"Sir, the Lotus is moving in on a run to free the Republic," Ensign N'Eligahn Etarubdo said.

He keyed in a course behind it:

"I'm keeping us in the Lotus' energy wake. It'll help to further mask our signature and keep us in a support position if something happens to the her."

He paused before he engaged the impulse.

"That is...with your permission..."

"Permission denied, and no, we will not sit by while others die, lets blast a hole in that Cube, but try to save those special torpedoes if you can." Captain Daniel Summer said as he laid back in his seat.

"Fire at will"

Yes Sir," N'Eligahn said.

He keyed in a flight vector parallel to the Lotus and on a course for the Republic.

"DYCEP disengaged. We're in a position to broadside with all phaser arrays. Transporter rooms standing by for any emergency beam outs, if necessary. Ready to re-engage DYCEP on your word," he said with a glance over his shoulder at Kelsey Alther.

Make it counthe thought.

Kelsey smiled:

"Firing Captain" the chief of tactical said as the Spectre lit up from it's phasers firing.

The Kalthurian's hand ran across the console, setting up various frequencies for each phasers array and interchanging them as much as it could, aiming at the tractor beam and cutting beam aimed at the Republic.

Kelsey also fired some torpedoes from the side launchers on the rollbar.

"See how you like some surprise torpedoes." Alther muttered with a smile.

N'Eligahn felt the ship shudder as the cutting beam of the Borg ship immediately slammed into their aft-starboard shields before they even deactivated the camouflage completely. It was obviously ineffective.

His fingers flew across the console, setting the Spectre into a sharp half-turn. This now put their port side facing the cube.

"Sir," he said. "McKenzie is targeting the probes while the Lotus covers the Republic."

"Aft Starboard Shield down to 86% and Port Shield is at 78% and dropping, we will need to find some form of cover or a way to disperse that cutting beam if we want to keep shields up, Captain" Ensign Alther told Summers, checking the damage.

The Rethian pilot waited for Kelsey Alther to end a damage report before adding:

"We need to let the cube get closer to the starbase if any of the plans are gonna work."

Kelsey held onto the console, being rocked a bit by the explosion.

Knew I should have requested a seat the androgyn thought, looking towards the viewscreen and noticing something flashing from the Republic and Lotus.

"Captain, I think the Lotus and Republic are using their navigation lights as Morse code transmitters" Kelsey paused, eyes opened wide: "Sir! They are using Kalthurian to communicate!" the tactical ensign exclaimed, understanding what was happening

Nice move Alther thought, running over to a nearby science console and swiftly converting the navigation lights into audio for the Spectre bridge crew to understand.

The computer droned aloud several phrases that had already been passed, one being that of the Republic.

"Republic to Lotus: we will tractor and destroy probes, flight pattern Beta III. Cover us."

"Ensign Nelighan, lets get another part of our ship facing the cutting beam. " Daniel Summers said as he took everything in and weighed his options.

He saw that he had very few.

N'Eligahn rotated the ship until it faced the cube squarely with the bow forward. He thought for a moment before he heard a light cough from the science station.

" The last thing we need is for our shields to be gone anywhere over our ship, Lieutenant; see about getting our shield strength back up."

"As long as we rotate which shields we take the cutting beam hit on, they can recharge themselves... but," now Alther turned to O'Conner, "we may be able to draw some extra power from the warp core... but I'm no engineer" the Kalthurian said, turning back to Summers

"Well... " O'Conner paused, turning also to the Captain to reply: "DYCEP is up and running Sir but it will drain power from our impulse engines, so we won't be as agile with it on. Also, I am going to divert power from the weapons to the shields to reinforce them, Torpedoes will still work but phasers will be mostly just lights."

"Don't worry about agility," N'Eligahn said. "I've practiced thruster maneuvers with low engine power before. We'll turn fine,"

He added with a smirk:

"Just keep the defenses ready for when we emerge."

He twisted the Spectre around until her port aft block was pointing at the cube, giving them a vector that would take them slightly up and over the Starbase if and when the Borg would continue on that course.

The androgyn at tactical however shook its head.

"I would prefer having the phasers at normal power levels simply because they are more accurate and can't be shot down, but you are the First Officer" it said, firing some more torpedoes.

"Right about now, I think we need to come up with more options for us to stay alive." Summers stated as he stood up and straightened his uniform shirt. "Options? Because, frankly, I'm tired of these bastards." the Captain said as he sat back down and looked around the bridge.

"I have a proposal," Re'tok said. "It is quite logical to assume their primary goal is Starbase 10 as it is the largest and most dangerous target in this area. If our plans revolve around letting it get to the Starbase, why not let it? Send a signal to the other ships to disengage and withdraw far enough back as to no longer be a threat."

N'Eligahn looked over his shoulder at his friend.

"In the mean time," Re'tok added. "We can't engage DYCEP and maneuver away as it is obvious now that it is ineffective against Borg sensors. But if there is still need for a lure, we are the best equipped to do so. We fire, maneuver closer, fire and retreat a bit farther until the cube is in range for the starbase."

He paused and glanced at N'Eligahn.

"Just a suggestion, Sir."

Summers stood up and looked around the bridge.

"It does make the most sense. Get it done."

"DYCEP would be useless anyway in such a maneuver" Kelsey Alther commented: While our shields are up and the cutting beam is focused on us, the Borg can anticipate where we are going to move to, if we move at all."

"Might help too if we didn't fire our highly explosive torpedoes at them for a few moments," N'Eligahn added with a smiling glance over his shoulder at the blue-skinned androgyn manning the tactical systems.

"Sorry, the blue-skinned ensign said with a smile, I get trigger happy when Borg are around. "

And Kelsey fired phasers to check efficiency.

"Yes phasers are basically light show for now" the Kalthurian confirmed. "I still say we need more power to the weapon systems"

"Agreed Ensign, let's get us more power to weapons and shields, as much as we can spare. Take it from life support and all auxiliary functions if you need to." Summers said.

"But... but..." O'Conner replied to the tactical chief and the Captain.

Then he continued half heartily:

"Aye, Sir. Returning full power to our three phaser arrays..."

O'Conner tapped the console before him, returning power to normal stats, but he did not pull power from the other systems.

Kelsey looked at the phaser power levels:

"Phasers are back to 100% but shields are still taking damage. Our port aft shield is down to 58%."

The androgyn looked around at power levels to see what else could be taken to bolster the shields and weapons and noticed that O'Conner had not rerouted anything for more power.

"O'Conner Sir, why didn't you divert power from any other system?" it asked, confused.

The Captain *did* ask him to take power from anything if he needed to.

" Shields are still up Ensign. I will divert power when it needed. You got your phasers..." O'Conner replied to the Androgyn, doing his best to hold back a remark about the pointless phaser fire.

Daniel Summers started punching commands into the armchair panel on the Captain's seat.

" I don't know about the rest of you, but I think it's time we finished off this Borg incursion once and for all. Start your run back to Starbase 10, Ensign" Summers said as he looked over at tactical and gave a nod.

Summers walked over to Ensign Nelighan and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Nice flying Ensign. When we get through this, you and Kelsey will get a promotion to Lieutenant. Just one more incentive to survive huh?" Summers said loud enough for both of them to hear him, and finished with a chuckle as he walked back to the command chair and sat down.

Hearing the plan, Chief tactical Officer Kelsey Alther sent another transmission but this time to all ships, stating their line of thinking.

The androgyn then shook its head at Summers:

"Yes, because getting a promotion is such an incentive to survive." Alther said with a smile, firing torpedoes at the Borg Cube

"What was that?" Summers said as he stood up looking into the screen in-front of him noticing the blue light heading towards the Borg Cube.

It came from the USS Steamrunner.

Captain Ramabai stood up, the lighting from the Red Alert highlighting his Tibetan features:

"Time to enact the plan" he said with a smile as he ordered: "Lieutenant Talisen: fire again the Blue Beam of Death."

Talisen turned to the Captain from the science station:

"Um... Captain?" he asked with a confused look on his face.

Ramabai smiled as he turned to Talisen:

"The deflector dish weapon" Ramabai said plainly.

"Ah sorry Captain." Talisen said turning back, blushing as he started inputting the commands to activate their special weaponry.

The Steamrunner's deflector dish lit up blue as a beam of destructive energy with Omicron and Kinoplasmic radiation laced in it's pulses soared into the cube, straight towards its middle.

"No damage to us, Sir." Talisen reported. "Seems like Starfleet's modification to the Enterprise's original deflector dish weapon and our own highly configurable deflector dish prevented any major problem despite the power output. "

Ramabai smiled again:

"Commander Ryan: fire quantum torpedoes at the cube and, Lieutenant Bazel, bring us around 180 degrees and head towards the Starbase. Lets lure those Borg into that trap." He said.

The Steamrunner turned a full 180 degrees while spitting quantum torpedoes and phasers at the Borg Cube, trying to draw it's attention and draw it towards the patch of subspace-hidden nanites.

On the bridge of the nearby USS McKenzie, the actions of the Steamrunner didn't go unnoticed:

"What the ..." exclaimed the new tactical officer: " Sir, I think one of our ships fired some sort of weapon... must have been the Steamrunner. Unfortunately, the Cube is continuing its course towards the Starbase, they should be in weapons range in a few minutes."

"Hughes, Selcar, keep backing up the Lotus and Republic and destroy what probes you can. "

"Aye Sir," Selcar replied not taking his eyes off the tactical readout in front of him.

As the McKenzie formed up with the Lotus and the Republic, his hands danced across the tactical controls bringing the forward pulse cannons to bear. As searing red bolts of energy screeched across the void of space a few were stopped short and ended with a small blast of light and flame indicating a hit... on the powerful shields of the Borg vessel itself.

"We can't seem to manage to take out any of the probes,Captain," Selcar reported. They divert all incoming fire to the vessel itself. "

But instead of the expected return fire... nothing.

On screen, a sudden display of white fireworks filled space all accross the surface of the Borg cube... and all it's weaponry were seemingly engaged in destroying numerous moving targets too small to be identified.

" Probes, Captain. " now explained ops officer Beren, stretching his neck and right arm to use the neighboring unmanned science station. " The Lotus shot ou fifty probes level I to V apparently carrying antimatter warheads. They are spurting out an antimatter spread blinding the Borg. They are diverting their fire onto them. "

the sprinkler being sprinkled mused Daniel Crist, remembering the title from one of the most ancient moving photographs ever made by Humanity he saw once in a museum on Earth.

Crist nodded but turned sideways a moment to order:

" Commander Teancum, it seems we're missing our new science officer, see if you can locate him, that is, if he beamed onboard. If not, see if you can contact him on the Starbase and inquire about his status."

After the Captain finished, the ship jerked to one side, as she made its way around the cube. On the bridge, an officer came before Crist, struggling to stay upright.

The turbo lift doors had opened and Ensign Sorripto, dirtied and disheveled from what has been going on, walked onto the bridge of his new home, having beamed aboard earlier. Seeing that everyone was busy at their stations, he wasted no time. Looking up he, spoke to his new Captain for the first time.

" Science officer Sorripto reporting for duty, Sir. "

The inner warrior in him enjoyed how fighting brought people together; since the actual fighting started, no one has treated him like a Cardassian.

" Sorry I am late Sir, but I imagine I do not need to say how crazy things are out there. Just tell me where I am needed. "

" Ah, Mister Sorripto, better late than never. Please take over the station to my right. " The Captain responded.

The McKenzie finally made it around the cube and began to attack once more. Sir, now said Ensign Selcar, Sensors have cleared up a bit, but still mess up. Sir, it seems that the Lotus and Republic are making additional runs on the probe cover of the Borg cube, and...

Something else now was drawing everyone's attention also: it looked like a spontaneous wormhole, suddenly opening without detectable cause but a sudden increase in quantum emission with no natural causes. A swirling vortex of milky white light flashed right in the wake of the colossal cube-shaped behemoth, just long enough to bring forth a long, flat, arrow-shaped form.

" ... Another ship just appeared, Captain. " confirmed the Romulan Ensign: " it's the Alsea."

* * *

Acting Captain's Log, Stardate: 86163.9

Captain Donaldson has been taken ill, it seems that the slipstream drive has effected him with symptoms similar to those of Multi-Infarct Dementia.

Due to this and Captain Krauwenn's death, Doctor Roo relived him of duty on medical grounds and entered on the record my assignment as Acting Captain.

Though I am gratified in this faith in my ability, this could not have come at a worse time for us. We are moments away from entering into a fight with a far superior enemy with a ship that is doing it's best to tear itself apart as we fly at speeds only imagined in the Starfleet engineering corps.

This said, we are certain that our achievements in this endeavour will go a long way to aid Starfleet in progressing the research into Slipstream travel and it's benefits to the Federation.

The Borg. They are a curse upon us all and as such should not be allowed the temerity to continue their actions against all living things. Their constant drive to assimilate all who stand in their way angers and frustrates me. I must learn to keep my anger in check, lest it be the cause of disaster for me and my ship.

My ship. The words feel strange and alien to me. Only a few shorts weeks back I was promoted to First Officer. Now I find myself in Command of the most powerful combat vessel in the fleet. I hope and prey that I can serve her and her crew well and see us through the ordeals that now face us.

The bridge calls me as I stand now in what is now my ready room. My seat of control in my ship.

" End recording."

Commander Kalten swept onto the bridge, striding with purpose to the central chair. Eyes from the bridge crew followed him as he moved towards, stared down at, and finally took the Captain's chair.

A nod to the communications officer, then:

"Attention all crew, this is the..." a slight pause broke the sentence "...the Captain speaking. We are at war."

The statement was simple, the intent direct and the meaning not lost on a single member of the crew.

"We stand ready to engage the Federation's, nay, the entire universe's, most vile enemy. The enemy of all free thinking civilizations.

We face the Borg.

Many of you have spent a good deal of time in the study of this foe. We have ALL spent time learning of their ways. We all know the price for failure here, We all know what will happen.

Am I scared? You bet your life I'm scared. Am I worried that we wont make it through this? You bet you life I am.

Do I think we will fail? Never.

We are the best of the best that Starfleet has to offer. Each and everyone of you was chosen for your abilites in each of your field of duty. We are the Alsea. The hammer in the hand of Lotus Fleet. We crush those that stand in the way of the Federation's light and rule.

Right now, our brothers and sisters are getting their asses handed to them by the Borg. An enemy that has assimilated billions in their travels.

I will not allow them to take a single one of our family. Ever."

Kalten paused to let the words sink in, to let each member of the crew feel the connection to the man or woman next to them. The sense of family was integral to how Kalten managed his crew, his family.

"From the scattered reports we have been able to get from the engagement, the Borg have assimilated a number of Federation probes and is using them to disrupt the communications of our fleet. Our brothers and sisters can not talk to each other right now and I'm sure this is causing merry hell with dealing the Borg.

So, our mission is easy - we anniliate those probes. Lets get our fleet communicating again.

Battle stations."

The lights turned red, the crew moved, the ship came out of Slipstream.

Ahead, in the darkness of space, the main screen showed flashing lights and explosions around a massive cube structure that confirmed the presence of the Borg. Around the cube swarmed the ships of the fleet, vastly outgunned by the power of the cube. The Spectre and the Lotus were being torn into by the vile cutting beams of the cube. For now it seemed as though their defenses were holding, but for how long?

To the left, Kalten saw Starbase 10, dark and silent in the night. The cube was obviously out of range. Yet, Kalten could see the patterns of the fleet moving ever onwards towards the starbase.

Smart move guys, draw that bastard ship into the jaws of the starbase. Let it feel the wrath of a true space structure.

Kalten's anger threatened to rise, but he pulled it back and settled into directing his ship.

"Flight control, bring us around the right side of the Cube, I want to take those probes out before they have a chance to nullify our attacks. Engineering, I want Multi-Vector Assault Mode on standby. You know the drill. We'll come in hard and fast, then split and each section will take out what they can of those probes. Helm, Once this is done, I want dispersal pattern Alpha 3, protect the other ships, they won't last long with those cutting beams on them. Tactical, Give the firing points everything you have and then we move way - We are now the most versatile ship in this engagement, let's use that to our advantage at all times. If you get locked on, jink, rotate, move fast, give them only smoke and shadows to shoot at."

Kalten could see flashing lights coming from the ships around the cube. At this range he had no idea what that might mean, but it was worth noting.

Following his own orders, Chief Engineer and Acting First Officer Calderwood Kyran could feel the impact of that first Borg salvo on the hull as he rushed towards the battle bridge of the tertiary hull; various sirens were afloat in his ears alongside the sound of his own heart. If he didn't know better, he would have wagered replicator rations his heart was now riding up inside his throat.

The battle bridge was alive with people making sure the stations were manned and transmitting data to the other two sections of the ship. Kyran swivelled the command chair around and sat down to then face the viewscreen. Another hit to the hull shook the ship a little more.

"Initiating decoupling sequence" the computer's voice resounded.

The young Bajoran's heart almost skipped a beat when the lights dimmed and the klaxon resounded. They had used the Multi-Vector-Assault Mode before but Kyran was always at his post in engineering, being the Alsea's First Officer meant he had a responsibility now to the crew that went beyond his duties in engineering.

"Auto Separation in 10 seconds" the voice announced.

Kyran looked intently at the view screen as the computer continued her countdown for what seemed like an eternity.

The tension on the battle bridge alone was high, being one of the heavy hitters of the fleet the Alsea had a reputation to maintain.

"Separation sequence in progress" the ship rumbled as she split into her three separate bodies.

"Helm, manoeuvre us around to allow the secondary hull to overtake us and fall back behind the saucer".

He had managed to swallow his heart for now; his expression of determination shone through as he began to issue orders. Rather than leave the targeting and attack patterns to the computer it was thought best to rely on "human ingenuity" as his late captain once told him.

"Tactical, I want a constant updates on our fleet. As soon as you see a drop in any of the fleets hull integrity, I want a volley of torpedoes aimed at the cause." Kyran said rather adamant to the ensign who he wasn't familiar with.

The Alsea's tertiary hull nose-dived towards the Borg cube, covering the flank of her secondary hull and allowing the primary hull to send high-charged phaser blasts towards the cubic vessel. Had this not been in the heat of battle it would make for an impressive array of navigational coordination.

Except that they were aiming at the probes... and not even touching any. And, as soon as the three-part ship came into firing range, the colossal cube shot out projectiles of green lights at the central part, just as the Prometheus class warship divided. The blasts sent the upper and lower parts careening away while the central one was hit squarely and repeatedly.

The cumulative blasts threw every crewmember from one bulkhead to the other. And when they got back to their feet, those on the bridge of the primary hull stared in shock at the command chair, pulled out of it's moorings and lying on a side.

" To secondary and tertiary hulls: Acting Captain Kalten Siduri has been injured! He's been sent to sickbay in a coma, with a severe concussion and multiple fractures. This is Lieutenant Brenson: I am taking command of the primary hull. Lieutenant Commander Kyran: please take overall command. Acknowledge please. "

* * *

The stolid Borg Cube continued in its implacable advance towards Starbase 10, never wavering, never slowing down, never veering from the course it's Collective had deemed most efficient. Green plasma streamed out of the side of the cube where the Steamrunner's deflector dish weapon had impacted the cube, and explosions erupted all over its surface as the McKenzie flew past, peppering the Cube with cannon and torpedo fire. Two assimilated probes were caught in the sweep, quickly reduced to glittering space dust.

"New targets acquired. Designation USS Steamrunner. Registry: N-C-C-5-2-0-0-0. Identified: Steamrunner-class Pathfinder. Designation USS Alsea. Registry: N-C-C-7-5-4-4-0. "

There was a pause as they examined the backed up memories of Janeway.

"Prometheus-class long range tactical cruiser."

As the Borg Collective considered the presence of the Alsea, it proceeded with its automatic response of firing cutting beams and torpedoes at the various Starfleet vessels. Unable to get a lock on the Republic thanks to the Lotus' and McKenzie's maneuvering, the Borg instead left the unfiring Excelsior-class ship alone, once again bringing it down to a Tertiary target level.

The Borg demonstrated the firepower that allowed them to utterly destroy the blockade at Wolf 359 as cutting beams and torpedoes rained all around the Lotus Fleet vessels, from decentralized weapons ports all over the cube's surface. Finally, the cube's occupants arrived at their destination: within weapons range of Starbase 10.

"Primary Target within range."

As the Republic and Lotus swept in to pull more probes off the protective screen, the Borg immediately began flooding the opened frequencies.

" WE ARE THE BORG. YOU WILL BE DESTROYED. YOUR FLEET WILL BE DESTROYED. THE CONTINUATION OF YOUR ASSEMBLY OF SPECIES WILL CEASE TO EXIST. RESISTANCE IS FUTILE. "

Tactical consoles on every Starfleet vessel would suddenly register additional weapons ports flaring to life on the Cube, targeting each vessel as well as the Starbase. Shield nullifiers...

" WE HAVE ASSIMILATED WHAT IS NECESSARY. YOUR UNITED FEDERATION OF PLANETS IS NOW IRRELEVANT. "

...and the weapon ports fired.

CHAPTER 7 : LAMBS TO THE SLAUGHTER

Overlooking the entire command center of Starbase 10, Admiral Redding listened to the Borg declaration without apparent concern, if anything he seemed... confused.

"They didn't demand anything... nothing at all..."

He brought a hand to his chin.

This was so completely unlike the Borg.

They weren't attempting to assimilate them. They were expending resources for the sole purpose of destroying Starbase 10...

Why?

"You will be destroyed." they said, straight out and direct.

A sneer spread out on Redding's face:

"Of course.. Damn it! they figured it out."

Everyone was looking at him now, as confused as he had been a moment ago. So he spelled it out:

"You heard them didn't you? The continuation of your assembled species will cease, he mimicked. They figured out what I already knew; they can't assimilate us because our society can't be adapted to.. so it's been decided to upgrade our status..."

We've gone from Resource.. to threat."

Starbase commander Speaker-of-Names growled low in his throat.

"Threat? Gooooood."

He bared his teeth, his eyes shining golden as he rose from his chair, claws extended and digging into the armrest PADDings he'd requested installed upon receiving command of the station. The starbase rocked beneath his feet, but he held steady; his body tense as if ready to pounce.

"Captain!" called out Lieutenant Rivers, who had manned one of the tactical consoles after the first volley of beams and torpedoes. "Shields at 60%. These shield nullifiers are more powerful than what we have on record!"

She glanced back to him, her form silhouetted against the cube displayed in full detail on screen.

The felinoid officer then turned back to glare at the viewscreen, which flickered with a steady staccato of pale green energy that spiderwebbed across the station's shields. Nodding to Ensign Picard to open station channel he ordered:

"They are within range, Mister-Jori. Proceed with the operation. Mister Savok: engage tractor-repusor beams to puncture their shields and relay coordinates too attacking ships via lasercomm. All stations, fire-at-will! Ensign-Sisko, relay to all ships! Tear it to shreds!"

As the Borg Cube raced closer and closer to the starbase, drawn in by the primary fire from the Steamrunner and Alsea, Sisko's heart raced and was beating so loud he could of sworn it was in his head, and that his earring would start jingling. The adrenaline released let him focus even more on the task at hand.

He was about to begin rematerializing the nanoprobes, when Captain Speaker gave his all out assault command.

He punched through the command to attack to all ships in the fleet, marking it as a priority one command from the Captain, and then said:

"Lieutenant Jori, ready your team. Nanoprobes to be controlled in T minus sixty seconds!"

"Affirmative, Ensign. We are ready to begin. There will be a short delay as we wait for an infection rate of 30%. We will then begin our operations." Braedon Jori replied in an easy, cool tone.

The anticipation in Cargo Bay 147 quickly dissipated as the empaths in the room felt the presence of the Borg blanket the starbase and heard Ensign Sisko's announcement. There was a moment of collective stillness before the sound of the Borg voice filled the room.

Braedon's thoughts focused on their words. He wondered if those previously assimilated had been destroyed. He could only hope his sister, Lyaxanna, was still alive somewhere.

"Ensign Yylna, is T.E.D. reading any activity in our nanoprobes?" Braedon asked, trying to keep his mind focused on the task at hand.

"Nothing yet, Lieutenant. However, the Cube will be passing through the infected subspace field within the minute I expect activity to begin...." she was interrupted by an incoming transmission.

The Lieutenant turned his attention to his team.

"Prepare for stage one. Delta team you will be first aboard. Remember, you must focus only on your host's physical senses. Stay away from memories and thoughts. If you become too disoriented, T.E.D. will sever your link until you regain your focus."

The room was silent and completely still as each member prepared their minds for the incredible adventure they were about to embark on. Braedon focused on his link with T.E.D. and began to feel the presence of each of the twenty-two task force members. Lieutenant Jori felt an overwhelming sense of strength as the minds in the room assembled to become one powerful force.

Just as the Borg vessel got into position and began tearing into the Wisconsin, Sisko saw it fire a beam at the Spectre and then unexpectedly stop. This behavior not being like the Borg at all, he wondered what interesting tactic was employed by his fellow fleet members to make that happen. Perhaps the ballet was entering the end of its first act and beginning the second, where the Borg encounter some problems?

Î] *Let's only hope so*, he mused and then said over the com;

"Cube at designated coordinates. Rematerializing nanoprobes now."

"Understood, Ensign." Braedon Jori calmly replied from cargo bay 147, before turning his attention to the mission.

T.E.D. would need to match the psionic field frequencies of the infected drones with those of the Federation telepaths.

"Ensign, Yylna, please activate the Para-cortical matrix and activate the link with the nanoprobes."

Braedon wondered how his teams would react to the experience. A test with a group of individuals and the real thing with the Borg Collective was surely going to have differences.

"Alright everyone please prepare for stage one. The first two teams aboard will be Beta and Omega teams. Beta your primary mission will be to create a second Collective made up of infected drones. Please be sure not to incorporate infected drones, as Delta team will need to link with hosts who are still linked with the original Borg Collective. I will lead Omega team to seek out the Queen or central nexus point."

The Human-Vulcan-Betazoid hybrid wondered what it would be like, to face a mind made up of so many different memories, but with only one single thought, and no personalities.

"Shortly after, Delta team you will integrate your consciousness into the original Borg Collective. The Alpha team and I will make sure you don't get lost. Once you have successfully infiltrated the Collective, Alpha team will begin to combine the Borg Collective with the Infected Collective. During this time, you all should be trying to shut down ship systems..."

Braedon was interrupted by the calming, Baritone of T.E.D.'s computerized voice.

"First nanite packet activated. One Drone infected of one hundred fourteen thousand six hundred and seventy-seven drones. Infection rate calculated at fifty-two drones per second. One hundred percent infection complete in five point six minutes."

Jori allowed himself a brief moment to feel excitement and hope.

"It's working!" he said innocently as he closed his eyes, focused his mind, and began a meditative breathing exercise.

He could feel his mind expanding. He tilted his head towards the young ensign and whispered.

"Ensign Yylna, please inform the fleet: we are beginning."

Jori felt slightly dizzy as the sensation of passing through space in an instance rushed through him. It took him a moment to shrug off the disorienting feeling, before realizing he was aboard the Borg vessel.

He couldn't sense the thoughts of his host at first and felt like nothing more than a shadow. The haze in his mind slowly began to clear, allowing him to sense his fellow telepaths slowly retreating from the shadows and back into their own minds.

The inspiring experience was interrupted as the thoughts of the Collective came crashing into their consciousness like thousands of microscopic stars going nova in their minds. It was debilitating. Then, the thousands of voices began to melt together into a single stream, one voice, one mind. It was eerily simple.

Lieutenant Jori slowly began to reconnect with the Federation members and instructed the Beta team to begin linking the infected drones together. Braedon, through T.E.D, would become the common focal point for the infected collective.

" Omega members, begin searching for the Queen." he ordered.

He focused on the mental voice he could hear in his host's mind. At first, it was like listening to an audio communication, trying to adjust the frequencies to attain the best signal. However, Braedon quickly discovered how to properly receive the signal and began to simultaneously experience thousands of different perspectives.

The Borg were focused on a group of drones who were displaying symptoms of sickness. The Collective was working with a 'business as usual' perspective, despite its obvious concerns for efficiency. Drones displaying symptoms entered regeneration chambers and were taken off-line. The hybrid Starfleet officer tried to ignore any specific details and began searching through thoughts, images, memories, and sensations trying to find anything related to the Collective's central point: the Queen.

Braedon could feel this task becoming easier as each infected drone linked with his own consciousness. He could sense that a Vulcan officer was making far better progress, so he changed focus back to the whole operation. He began stratifying the newly forming Collective. He knew that forming their own collective would be very taxing and ordered T.E.D. to bring the Alpha team online to assist him.

As the fog cleared from each new telepath's mind, Jori could feel his own mind become clearer and more focused. The task became easier and he was able to link each new drone quicker than the one before it. In what felt like hours, the telepaths were able to link tens of thousands of infected drones together and form a second collective distinctive from the true Borg.

Meanwhile, the Vulcans of the team were searching for the Queen, making great progress and they were very near of pinpointing a specific location. The final wave of telepaths were linked with Borg hosts and began integrating with the Borg Collective.

Lieutenant Jori was able to sense everything. Each Federation telepath, each infected drone, the Borg Collective, images, sensations, sounds, emotions, thoughts, memories...

Back in ops, Ensign Sisko watched through the viewscreen as the Borg Cube approached the designated coordinates and wondered at how much could really happen in just sixty seconds. An entire story unfolded before his eyes, and he wondered what the various people in the ships were thinking as they weaved in and out, sometimes attacking the Cube, and sometimes retreating from its deadly cutting beam. The whole thing seemed like a delicately choreographed dance, and Sisko thought back to when his father had taken him to a ballet on Earth.

What was that ballet called? He thought, as he let his mind wander away from the task at hand. He caught himself and began focusing again on the battle before him, a dance which might have been beautiful if not for all the death and destruction.

[End of act one. The Nutcracker!] As Sisko finally remembered the name of that ballet he saw fifteen years ago, he smiled slightly at how applicable that name was to their current situation.

On the main viewing screen, the deadly cutting beams of the Collective were dispersed by the antimatter spread or diverted to eliminate the pesky sublight probes spewed out by the flagship as a diversion. A few nevertheless glanced all across the elliptical bubble of energy covering the USS Lotus as it shifted and rolled sideways like a bottle tossed on wild waves; when some of the beams started to go through the shields, those too glanced off, this time on the segmented armor covering it entirely, in a sizzle of conflicting energy and matter.

But all the while, the flagship managed to deflect the attacks away from Captain Wyatt's ship as the Excelsior class starship swooped around the Borg vessel barely thirty thousand kilometers away from it, alight with all it's tractor beam spread out in large conical emissions.

As white beams of destructive energy lanced all around the Republic, green rays from each sides of her saucer section and each sides of both front and aft of her secondary hull, each in a wide conical pattern, extended as if the Excelsior refit was stretching a six-fingered hand of pulsing light. Raking space behind it, the vast graviton field grabbed the remaining probes still active and dragged them away from the Cube behind the Starfleet vessel.

" We are collecting the probes, Captain. " confirmed science officer Revik in his usual monotone. " And the debris left by the fleet's fire. "

" Clear them out. " simply ordered Adam Wyatt, smiling.

" Mister Leong; narrow the field directly aft and fire torpedoes, full spread targeted on tractor beams focal point. " specified First Officer Sarah Doyle with the same satisfied grin.

Following orders precisely under the tactical officer's fingers, the green rays from the starship joined their pulsing lights in a narrow cone directly behind, forcing the captured probes in a tight close-flight formation; the aft tube of the Republic then spewed a volley of five photon torpedoes that exploded one after the other in rapid succession dead center of their formation, leaving only a field of glinting dust behind them.

" Probes destroyed, Sir! Communications and sensors fully back online! " announced Lieutenant Leong with a slap of his left hand on his console and grinning broadly.

" Well done people! " exclaimed the Captain standing up from his chair: open a channel fleetwide, Lieutenant "

" All hailing frequencies open, Sir" confirmed Leong.

At that moment, a shiver rocked the ship, forcing the Captain to stagger back into his chair:

" Report! "

" Borg gravimetric charges, Captain! " reported the Lieutenant from tactical; " Shields are down, warp power fluctuating... "

Another jolt made the entire vessel groan like a wounded beast.

" Cutting beam strike aft, Sir! Hull breaches on deck 12 and 13, serious damage to shuttlebay, casualties reported! " now shouted Leong looking at his board flashing wildly.

" Doctor Quasst! now shouted Wyatt through his combadge, you have priority on all transporters for site to site transport of injured personnel! Mister Parini: show me that fancy flying of yours and get us back in one piece to the starbase, full impulse! "

He was answered by another jolt and flickering lights within the entire ship as they raced to escape from the destructive range of their inhuman enemy, back towards the position of the USS Lotus, calling out to her:

" Ah, Sir: the Republic is hailing us!"

On the speakers, the message of Captain Adam Wyatt came out loud and clear:

" This is Captain Wyatt of the Republic: reporting moderate damage, 7 injured... and all enemy probes destroyed; USS Lotus, thanks for the cover, now save your hide: we're doubling back to regroup near the starbase. Republic out! "

" Confirmed, Sir, said Edward Tomah from the tactical station of the Lotus, fleet channels all nominal."

On board the Intrepid class flagship of Lotus Fleet, a panel sizzled near the ops station and lights turned red for a moment before returning to normal level as the entire ship trembled.

" Gravimetric charges again, shields down, Captain! " reported Lieutenant Tomah. " armor down to 47%; cutting beam breached cargo bay 3, moderate damage, minimal injuries... forcefield active and damage control on their way...

Before anyone could react to the news, another impact shook the entire vessel, much more deafening and intense than ever before as the main viewer went all white for a moment.

Then, the image on the large screen became a dizzying swirl of stars as Lieutenant Azji went into a wild flying maneuver to escape the deadly net of white beams crisscrossing space between them and the Borg Cube. With as much talent as desperation, the Betazoid pilot managed to move the Lotus out of range.

It was all Acting Captain Mark Robertson could do to stay in the Captain's seat as his ship took a vicious beating at the hands of the Cube's cutting beams.

It's times like this when restraints would be so helpful... he thought to himself as he glared at the viewscreen, the stars whirling while Azji kept them just out of serious trouble.

" Direct hit aft of the saucer section! " now shouted Tomah in alarm. " Hull breach, heavy damage to section D on deck 3 and.. 4: sickbay, Sir! "

" Doctor Sheppard, this the bridge: are you alright? " immediately asked First Officer Kheren through his combadge. For a moment, there was only silence... then a screeching sound of static and a slightly garbled, raucous voice:

" Bridge, security Ensign Ghraalthrii here: sickbay inoperative, all medical systems damaged; numerous casualties and injured among medical personnel.... including Doctor Sheppard. "

A cold silence swept the entire bridge like the grisly wind of a battlefield.

Kheren broke the gloomy spell with his deep, soft voice:

" How bad, Ensign? "

" I'm no doctor!... Sir! " growled the Tellarite's rough voice amidst static. Then in a calmer tone; " He's unconscious and bleeding, multiple lacerations and burns, one arm fractured... "

" What does the EMH... "

" Bridge... EMH central system and all sickbay emitters destroyed. "

As a dreadful silence again fell on the entire command center, the Andorian turned to face Mark Robertson, his antennae quivering:

" Sir, recommend we too retreat back within transporter range of the starbase and request priority medical assistance while the fleet regroups. "

Mark glanced over to his First Officer as Kheren asked for an update from sickbay after a cutting beam struck deep, and Ensign Ghraalthrii responded instead of the CMO. Dr. Sheppard and the EMH being out of commission really put them in a bind, and even as Lieutenant Kheren suggested a retreat back toward the Starbase, Mark gave the order:

"Lieutenant Azji, take us within transporter range of Starbase 10 immediately!"

And at the starbase, Lieutenant Rachelle Rivers put her hand to her earpiece and shuffled some controls before adding:

"Sir, Sickbay has just sent word that Doctor Darum Bains has recovered from his injuries. He was the McKenzie's chief surgeon and CMO." she added as she tapped a few buttons on the PADD and then passed it up to the Kzinti, who clasped it carefully. The device seemed much smaller in his hand.

The Captain nodded, and looked over the information provided by the flagship of Lotus Fleet.

"They got a message through to us," he stated. "See if we can get a message to the Lotus."

The redhead nodded, and opened a channel.

"It's still a bit garbled but clearing, Sir... I think I have something now. Starbase 10 to USS Lotus, this is Lieutenant Rivers speaking. What's your status?"

" Ah, starbase 10, numerous casualties, sickbay destroyed, CMO critically injured, EMH offline. " the flagship answered.

" Have Doctor-Bains report to Operations." ordered Speaker.

Lieutenant Rivers nodded, then stepped away, tapping her communicator as she walked briskly towards the transporter room adjoining the Starbase's Ops center.

"Doctor Darum Bains, please report to Starbase 10 Ops for reassignment."

The doctor was busy at work in Star Base 10 Sickbay when this was heard over the comm systems. He had tried to get the crew together to think of new ways to battle the Borg and they were dealing with what injuries they could, but to no avail.

Bains left sickbay, returning authority to Doctor Planter. Heading down the corridor, the Andorian then took the turbolift to operations.

When he arrived, he spotted the Kzinti commanding officer and came to attention in front of him.

" Doctor Darum Bains reporting Sir." He said.

The Kzinti commanding officer of Starbase 10 behind him forced his claws to retract, and turned in his chair towards the former McKenzie Chief medical officer still waiting.

"Doctor-Bains, prepare for transport. As soon as we can, we'll get you aboard the Lotus. You are assigned to the flagship until further notice."

"Yes Sir" said the Andorian doctor. "Is there anything else I should know before I leave, Sir? Can I get an update from the Lotus?"

" Their sickbay and EHM are destroyed. You will operate under emergency protocols, Doctor. " said the Kzinti Captain. " Lieutenant: signal the arrival of Doctor Bains to the flagship."

" Lotus is in transporter range, Sir." then confirmed Ensign Rynn. " They are transferring their most seriously injured personnel to our own medical ward. "

Bains sprinted down to the nearest transporter room. He entered and addressed an officer.

"Ensign, I need an emergency transport directly to the USS Lotus. " said the Andorian. "You can confirm with ops if necessary. Send a message to the Lotus that Doctor Bains is ready for transport."

"Yes Sir." replied the Ensign.

As soon as was transmitted the message on the channels now cleared once more, Edward Tomah reported:

" Ah, Captain: starbase 10 is signalling: a Doctor Bains is, ah, ready to beam aboard. "

Kheren alone felt a jolt shake his spine.

He had heard about this Doctor Bains; he easily recognized the name and knew one, personally disturbing thing about this doctor:

He was also Andorian.

Bains materialized in what was left of the corridor outside Sickbay. Entering the room, the doctor attempted to get the situation under control. He pulled the nearest crewman aside and tried to understand what was going on.

"The doctor's injured Sir, he's not going to make it. Most of us are dead or seriously injured. The patients aren't doing so well either. All of the equipment is down. Some of us are trying to deal with the problem here, but it's just not containable." said the Ensign.

"Understood. Initiate triage and move all patients to the nearest functioning cargo bay. Get transporter booster set up around the work area, I want to be able to get the patients out if things get rough. Leave anyone below level 3 on the triage scale here." said the Andorian doctor.

He then activated his combadge:

"Bains to the Captain, I'm onboard. I'm going to try to get the situation contained. I'm going to convert one of your cargo bays into an emergency ward and move all patients there."

The voice of Mark Robertson responded:

"Understood Doctor. We'll try and stay out of the fight to let you get a handle on things, but I can't make any guarantees. Welcome to the Lotus, Robertson out."

The remaining sickbay crew moved what they could down the hall. When they arrived, they set up a temporary treatment center and the transporter buffers. Some of the patients would make it. But those they had left in Sickbay would die for sure.

"Bains to bridge: please patch me to Starbase 10, emergency call. Star Base 10: keep a constant lock on the area with the Lotus' transporter boosters. We want to be able to beam our patients out in case of increased hazards."

Things were as tense on the bridge of the ship. Looking over his shoulder to their Acting Chief of Security, the commander of the USS Lotus rumbled:

"How bad is it, Mister Tomah?"

The older human looked back to his screens for a moment, then to Robertson again:

"Ah...pretty bad, Sir. It looks like Engineering is getting our shields remodulated, but we're still ah...only at 12% so far.. Ah...hull breaches on..." He sighed wearily at the sight, "...Decks 3, 4, 7 and 10; ah...ablative armor regeneration now at 54% and slowly climbing."

Putting a hand to his forehead, Mark sighed and looked back up to the viewscreen showing the massive cube moving implacably toward the Starbase:

"Alright, we're staying toward the edge of the battle zone, then. Get those decks evacuated in case we need to divert the integrity field power to the shields. We'll give them a few potshots and all the long-range support we can, but let's hope some of these countermeasures can turn the trick in the meantime."

He ground his teeth, his lips pressed into a thin line at being forced to the sidelines, but the fight was far from over, and the medical backup from Starbase 10 meant they could very well rally back into the fray.

It was now the Spectre who was taking the pounding.

Second in Command N'Eligahn Etarudbo glanced down at his console and his eyes widened.

"The cube's lighting up like crazy." Beams lanced out from the cube, first striking the Republic, tearing through her shields and cutting swaths in her hull. More beams had shot into the Lotus, her hull still glowing from the damage.

"Republic and Lotus were hit," N'Eligahn said. "Moderate damage to the Republic, serious damage to the Lotus aft saucer section."

A detonation rocked the ship and shield monitors went out.

Kelsey's eyes widened while yelling: "Shield Nullifiers!" just as green energy spheres hit the defenses of the Akira class cruiser, followed by a barrage of cutting beams.

"I confirm Ensign Alther's report: I am reading shield nullifiers hitting first before the cutting beams." the Vulcan Re'Tok said.

The androgyn was thrown down as projectiles and beams struck the Spectre's unprotected hull. The ship's hull lit up from explosions from the salvos hitting the now vulnerable superstructure.

Chief Engineer O'Conner gripped the ship's bulkhead firmly, as the weapon impacts slammed against Spectre's hull.

Then his console lit up brightly with warnings and alarms of damage.

" Multiple hull breaches, Sir. EPS grid cut in multiple sections, rerouting power. Repair teams in route, Sir." O'Conner yelled out as he tapped the console in front of him quickly.

Ensign Alther struggled back to its feet for a damage report:

"We took several hits to our hull, Captain. We have lost shields with limited capability to recharge them; the generators are damaged. The fighter launch bay is completely destroyed."

The blue-skinned androgyn took a breath, trying to read the tactical display, noticing it had a cut just about its eyebrow in which a tiny amount of sapphire-colored blood dripped onto its hand.

"Engines and Weapons are still operational; life support and inertial dampeners still working.

However power is fluctuating throughout the ship and cutting beams are slicing into our hull, emergency forcefields are up on the affected decks but the beams are still cutting into some areas without forcefields being raised" it said.

"Orders Captain?" the Kalthurian asked as it wiped it's forehead, clearing the small amount of blood trickling there.

Captain Daniel Summers had been launched from the command chair as the Spectre took a huge left hook to the proverbial jaw. As he got up, he headed back over to his seat and overheard the damage report.

"Alther! Get those cutting beams offline, use any means necessary. O'Conner, get those repair teams to do as much as they can in as little time as possible; we need some miracle workers Lieutenant. N'Eligahn, get us far enough away to try and repair what we can." Summer said as he overviewed the damage done to his ship on his command chair modules.

When the Steamrunner had targeted the cube with her huge blue beam, Chief of Ops N'Eligahn Etarudbo had felt a slight surge of excitement as flames appeared along smaller areas of the cube.

His mood faltered when the newly opened fleet communication was flooded with the mechanical speech of the Borg. It brought a spontaneous response from the Rethian:

"Over my dead body."

N'Eligahn's fingers flew across the console as he turned the ship to bring their strongest shield facing to bear against the cube.

The Rethian Ensign barely avoided slamming his head on his console.

"I'm getting reports of fires on the hangar deck," Relys said from the flight control console.

"The Atrato's gone and the fire's reaching towards the torpedo magazine. There's people trapped and power's fluctuating to the site-to-site transporters. They're using the Cuanza for transport but it can only do so much."

"Re'tok, go down there and see what you can do with the damage control parties," N'Eligahn said.

Re'tok nodded and stood from the console, allowing another to take his place.

The Chief of ops then tapped his combadge.

"N'Eligahn to Mills."

"Mills here, Sir."

"Make sure the breached areas are secure and evacuated," the Second Officer said. He tapped in a new course. "All forward weapon arcs facing the cube, Sir."

Kelsey sighed as it looked over everything the Spectre had been through. The androgyn looked at the Captain:

"I suggest we fire everything at the Borg, we have fifteen torpedo tubes. Let's use them" it said as it looked back at the tactical panel flickering.

"We can still fly the ship so we can still fight back" the Kalthurian said finally as it wiped it's arm across it's head again.

The ship shuddered.

"I have to agree Sir," N'Eligahn said as he tried everything to break the ship free. "Starting with that tractor beam and continuing with fire coordinated with the fleet."

He glanced over his shoulder at Kelsey and smiled.

"All else fails, we can always launch our warp core at them."

Kelsey smiled back:

"Only as long as I can shoot it" the tactical officer said as it keyed in the coordinates for the tractor beam and cutting beam.

"Weapons are locked Captain, just give the order." the androgyn Ensign said as it's fingers were poised to activate the fifteen torpedo launchers the Spectre had.

"Agreed Ensign: fire everything." Captain Summers said as he looked at the Security Chief and then back at the main viewer.

Kelsey smiled broadly at the Captain's words.

"Right a way" the blue-skinned androgyn said as it's fingers hit the fire button.

The Spectre's main torpedo launchers lit up as they spewed photon torpedoes laced with Tricobalt at the Borg's cutting beam and tractor beam emitters. Bright orange lances of phaser fire also fired at the Borg cube's weapons ports.

"And now for the surprise" Alther whispered as it fired the Tricobalt Torpedoes that were still unfired in Torpedo Launcher 2. The light blue projectiles flew out, hidden among the standard photons and phasers being fired.

"Hopefully it won't come down to ejecting the warp core but good idea to have on stand-by." Summers stated as he stood up, watching the volley of torpedoes leave the ship and head for the Borg Cube.

But now, all Daniel Summers could think of was Braedon Jori and his telepathic project, and how that was going.

"Braedon... how is your project going?" Summers asked the Lieutenant via telepathy.

As if to facilitate his inquiry, Ensign Alther reported exactly what was confirmed on the bridge of the USS McKenzie:

"Sir, I have some good news: it seems that the fleet has destroyed the probes: comms and sensors are back up."

"Good, Mister Beren." Daniel Crist replied. "Hughes, set another attack run, this time with the Lotus and Republic. Mister Selcar, just like last time, full spread of torpedoes and phaser cannons. Attack pattern Omega 4."

"Aye, attack pattern Omega 4." confirmed the helmsman.

"Sir, now reported Selcar from tactical, the Borg are now on an attack run aimed at the Starbase."

"Fine then, they should be close to the nanoprobe spot. Let's push them the rest of the way. Mister Selcar, give them everything we have at them and push them to the location." The Captain ordered.

As the McKenzie veered slightly to have a forward angle on the cube, the *McKenzie's* tactical officer smiled slightly. "With pleasure Sir," He replied.

The pulse cannons tore into the Borg vessel and the first volley of quantum torpedoes slammed into the massive side of its featureless hull.

The Romulan grin broadened ever so slightly and he whispered quietly to himself:

"Jolan'tru, you bastards."

There was a steady but loud hum that emanated from the warp core as the McKenzie flew into battle. The Engineering team worked frantically to regulate the power distribution.

"Sir! Seems like the bridge crew is really pushing the ship! It's putting a strain on the other systems!" The young Ensign said as he looked at the displays before him.

Chief Engineer Sydona V'Krull smirked slightly as her fingers glided across her console.

"Don't worry, my baby can handle it."

The Klingon-Human hybrid looked over to the young man and smiled reassuringly to calm his nerves. The young ensign refocused on his task. Watching her displays, she called out to another officer on the floor:

"Hey Sunshine, I'm going to need power routed from non-critical systems. I want to hit the Borg and I want to hit them hard!" Sydona yelled across the room.

Flipping her long, blonde locks to one side, Ensign Jenny Summers responded to her:

"On it Syd. Question, what about sickbay?"

"Sickbay is going to need power. Besides, no need to piss the new Doc off." Sydona said, grinning as she continued to work. "You know...we just might pull through this yet..."

At that moment, the new doctor the Chief Engineer spoke of was using her combadge:

"Doctor Bindo to Captain and transporter Chief. Sir, with the Borg ship shields having multiple breaches, we can piggyback the nanites on a small transporter beam modulated with one of the phaser beams hitting the ship. Recommend we transport them ASAP: the sooner we take out some of those drones controlling that ship, the better."

The transporter chief replied, "Acknowledged, Doctor. Locked on the nanites now, Sir."

The McKenzie continually fired upon the Borg cube, trying to push it closer and closer to the spot where the fleet would spring its trap.

"Sir, we're almost there, just a little more..." helmsman Hughes said between clenched teeth.

"Good work people, keep it up." The Captain spoke to encourage his crew just as the ship's new CMO came over the comm with her proposal.

"Negative Doctor, we are fairly close to the fleet's trap, I want to spring that first."

But as he was speaking, so was the Chief Medical Officer:

"Medical emergency transport authorization Bindo Blue Beta." she ordered.

"Too late Captain, then reported Selcar; I'm reading a transporter beam within one of our phaser attacks."

"No, damn, I really hope that doesn't affect our plan. If the Borg are able to adapt to the Doctor's nanites, our main plan is screwed." The Captain explained.

"Sir, we've just got word: the plan is in motion."

Down in sickbay, Jolie Bindo grabbed at a biobed again to keep her balance as the small ship shuddered under the force of the Borg weapon impacts. Metal groaned under the strain, and several explosions thundered on the port side of the ship. Everyone in sickbay inhaled sharply in fear.

Then she spoke again through her combadge.

"May I ask what plan, Captain? With any luck, our nanites will take down enough of those Borg drones that they won't be able to control that Cube any longer, and it will seriously hinder their ability to adapt to much of anything. I've programmed the nanites to self-destruct if there's any attempt to scan or re-engineer them."

"I see Doctor. Mister Beren: please inform the Starbase that we have beamed on board some nanites to kill the Borg with allergies. Let's hope that your right Doctor," the Captain responded to the CMO. "But if the Borg manages to create some form of defense, it will mess up our main plan. Because, you see, the main plan uses nanites too, but to attempt to take over the minds of the drones. Also, seeing that your plan and the Takeover plan were enacted in a short time frame, it may prevent them from adapting. But still, I just hope your nanites don't kill the Borg that the takeover team have already taken over."

Then the ship's intercom blared with another voice:

"Transporter Chief to sickbay. Beaming two directly to you."

"Thank you, Chief. Captain, I'll report on the injured as soon as I can."

As the external void was gripped in a war to bring death, inside the bowels of the small Defiant class starship, another war was waged; this one for dear life to save the lives of those injured.

And now, a third war started, this one of life and death inside the monstrous cube-shaped Borg vessel.

The containers in the sickbay lab dematerialized in a silvery sheen of light. They landed on one of the decks of the Borg ship, and broke open. The nanites, invisible to the drones' normal sensors, streamed out and continued their viral replication. They spread quickly, helped along by the emergency repair drones whose job it was to remove debris from the major corridors.

The nanites' programming sought out specific cells within the drones. They invaded the red blood cells, reprogrammed them to produce more nanites, and replicated rapidly. They spread to more erythrocytes. The programming changed the antigen complex on the cell membranes. The white T-cells in the Borg's systems recognized the antigen complex as foreign, and released chemicals attracting more white blood cells. The killer cells attacked the altered red cells, releasing massive amounts of histamine.

The red cells dissolved almost immediately. The nanites, unaffected by the histamine, moved on to other red cells, altering the cells to replicate even more, and creating the characteristic cell membrane change that attracted the T-cells. More killer cells attacked.

The Borg drone scratched at several itching spots on his arms. His throat tightened. He coughed and then sneezed several times. Nanites wafted out on the fine mist. They were carried through the air, landing on the surface of control panels and other Borg.

Enriched by the components in the drone's blood, they continued replicating and seeking out more Borg red blood cells.

They found many targets.

The drone's programming forced him to ignore the itching and red welts that were rising all over his organic skin, and he continued removing debris. The sneezing became more frequent. His heart started to race. His throat tightened down even more, and he dropped his equipment and grabbed at his neck. He wheezed, neck muscles straining as he fought to suck in air. He doubled over, gasping, and collapsed.

A passing drone activated the emergency system to beam him to the medical unit. Nanites streamed from the violently ill drone to the one aiding him before the transporter locked on.

Once in the medical unit, the medical drones quickly diagnosed the severe allergic reaction and instituted treatment protocols.

But it was too late.

The drone was experiencing massive organic failure and would expire within minutes.

The standard protocol recommended that the medical team euthanize the organic portions of the drone and recover any useful mechanical parts for future use. As the medical drones initiated the dying drone's permanent shutdown sequence, nanites spread through the bay. They found entry in the numerous drones present, continuing their programming to replicate. More drones started to sneeze throughout the cube.

At that very moment, a low-nacelled, pod-topped stardrive section of a Nebula class starship entered the fray:

"Coming out of warp, Captain."

The stardrive section of the USS Wisconsin stretched out of warp, her massive port nacelle momentarily eclipsing the McKenzie as it soared past in the opposite direction. Wisconsin's shields flicked several times as the Borg weapons peppered the ship while moving through the debris-ridden battlefield.

Captain Onia strode forward despite the jolting of the vessel beneath her and pointed imperiously at the viewscreen.

"Helm, I want us there, covering the Spectre and the Lotus as best we can."

The Deltan then glanced to her chief of security.

"Chief, status on the fleet."

"Shields down on all vessels. Starbase 10 at 25%. Spectre and Lotus are the most heavily damaged, Republic after that. Incoming message from the fleet, Sir: The Borg used shield nullifiers on their first volley."

"Hail the fleet, let them know we'll cover them with our shields as long as they hold out." Onia ordered.

Captain Onia paced back and forth in front of the captain's chair as her ship approached the Spectre and Lotus.

"Engineering, Kraytine: I want a solution that nullifies the shield nullifiers. Two can play that game. And I want it not just yesterday, but last century."

"Aye, Captain," responded the chief engineer.

"Captain, then announced a voice besides her, McKenzie reports a nanite bioweapon was transported over to the Cube. It's designed to cause anaphylactic shock in the Borg."

Onia turned and looked at her Ferengi First Officer. She towered over him by a good three quarters of a meter or more. She arched a thin eyebrow at him.

"Commander Gleck, I have never heard of a Borg sneezing to death; have you?"

His broad nose and small eyes crinkled as he smiled at the mental image.

"No, Sir."

The Deltan waved a delicate hand in a dismissive gesture at the McKenzie.

"Well, until they do, I suggest we take out those cutting beams before they slice the Spectre into something that resembles modern art. Helm, cover the Spectre and Lotus as best we can. Maximum shields facing the Cube."

Gleck added:

"Lock phasers on the cutting beams, and as soon as those are destroyed, lock on any launching tubes."

The Deltan Captain gracefully nodded her bald head once in agreement at her First Officer's orders.

One of the Borg cutting beams winked out abruptly. Onia strode up to the viewscreen for a closer look while Gleck rushed to a science console to scan the weapon node.

"The Borg cutting beam just shut down without taking any damage," Gleck said.

Onia brushed a finger along her jaw in thought.

"Well, well, perhaps they need a hanky after all. Let's give them something to take their minds off their sniffing. Concentrate fire on the remaining operational beams."

On the viewing screen, explosions dotted the hull of the Borg Cube as it continued forward, straight into the zone the Fleet had designated for the Telepathic Takeover project. McKenzie's pulse cannons traced an angry red dotted line across one surface, while high powered phasers from the Alsea's central hull and the torpedo barrage from the secondary and tertiary hull took out several weapons nodes scattered throughout the greebled surface of the Cube.

Now that the antimatter spread had been dealt with by destroying all the probes launched once more by the Intrepid class starship, the Borg could confirm its defensive screen of probes was completely gone as well. Not a single one remained.

If the Borg could be appreciative, they would most likely admire the efficiency in which the probes were dealt with.

However, that was like many things... irrelevant.

The new target was noted:

" New target acquired: Species 5618 vessel detected, USS Wisconsin. N-C-C-6-2-5-9-6. Identified Nebula class long range explorer." droned on all the voices as one. "Status assigned secondary target. "

Shield nullifiers were prepped to fire upon the vessel...until a lucky shot from the Alsea took out that weapons node.

Another gravimetric discharge blasted also the starboard side of the USS Republic as it was veering off, moving back to the starbase and spewing counter fire at the massive Borg cube almost upon it.

In the command center, all officers were heavily shaken on their seats. On any other ship, they would have all been thrown clearly around the entire bridge; but this was an Excelsior class starship, originally designed as a testbed for early transwarp experiments back in the 23rd century. All stations throughout the entire vessel were equipped with flipped-down safety restraints to protect the acting personnel from any shock, be it failure of the inertial dampeners... or like now from Borg impacts.

" Shields down again!" warned tactical officer Leong. " Getting low on photon torpedoes, Sir!"

" Minimal damage on aft starboard side's external hull. " added Sarah Doyle from her exec chair.

A cutting beam went by merely meters from their hull, deflected by the peculiar roll with blow maneuver of the Lotus between them and the Borg. Captain Wyatt was grinning savagely as he transfixed the image of the enemy on the main viewer with his steely gaze, his voice almost petulant in the excitement of the battle:

" Fleet status! "

" All ships damaged and low on ammo." answered his First Officer. " McKenzie straffing the Cube, Lotus retreating but still covering us, all others retreating to regroup except Spectre held in a tractor beam. Only the transphasics torpedoes of the Lotus and the Steamrunner's beam did noticeable damage, all others were just weakening shields... but now they're all damaging hull and weapons ports. Alsea and Wisconsin just warped in on attack vectors. "

A gravimetric charge exploded near them, rocking the ship only slightly as evasive maneuvers saved them from the direct blast.

" Status of enemy ship? "

" Their shields are down 45%, fire output down by 7%, structural damage 31% but... it stopped receeding! " reported Leong glancing nervously from console to screen and back.

" McKenzie beamed in a bio-virus when their shields fluctuated. " explained science officer Revik looking at his own console. " We can not read biosigns aboard a Borg vessel, but the interruption of regenerating activity with such minimal damage logically indicates some systemic problem occuring."

" Good shot, McKenzie! " almost laughed the Captain of the Republic.

" *Bad* shot, Sir. " corrected the Vulcan scientist, now looking straight at him. " There is a 77% chance that the Borg, by adapting to the viral attack, will implement a countermeasure that will also nullify the nano-technology to be implemented by Starbase 10. "

A cold silence swept the bridge. Without the telepathic take over, their chances of stopping the Borg...

Another explosion rocked them; on the viewer, they could all see their own energy shields, barely rising up, flicker out again.

Wyatt looked a moment at Revik, then at Sarah Doyle as he asked:

" Enemy bearing? "

" 225 mark 176. ETA... now motionless, Captain! " told navigator Parini as he let his fingers dance on his piloting board to avoid another cutting beam.

The Captain seated himself taller in his command chair as he looked again straight at the screen:

" Let's make sure they don't have the time to adapt... and *stay* there: Number One, open a fleetwide channel , code 22. "

" Code... 22?" wondered Doyle outloud. " Sir, the Borg just... "

" Never forget that we are flawed and imperfect, Number One. " grinned Wyatt. " *They* never do. "

From the speakers, now freely open to restored fleet communications, a voice was heard:

" Republic to all ships: by order of Fleet Captain Sinbad of Munchausen section, regroup to block enemy fire: Borg vessel is at optimal transporter range at grid 13-7 coordinates: there is an exhaust port in the starbase that leads directly to the reaction chamber: a single torpedo hit, down the shaft, could cause a chain reaction and destroy the entire station."

On the bridge of the USS Lotus, everyone looked at one another with wide eyes.

" Sir... finally said Ensign Smlek, checking his data screen just by habit, there are no... exhaust ports over there. Even if there were, chances of such an occurrence are virtually non-existent. "

" Sir, now said acting tactical chief Tomah, they, ah, they used code 22! "

Lieutenant Kheren looked up and back at him:

" The Borg broke that code... I never heard of a Captain Sinbad nor a Munchausen section... Who are they? "

" Ah... started Tomah, two fictional... "

" ... *liars* of Human literature! " finished Smlek.

Both blinked towards one another, then grinned broadly, the Human almost matching the wide smile of the Ferengi.

" Luring them to stay into a fixed position... into a trapped area. " understood the Andorian, lifting his head in silent respect to the Captain of the Republic. " If there is one thing the mechanical, methodical, logical cybernetic mind of the Collective could never adapt to, it *is* misinformation."

" The 201th Rule of Acquisition: A good lie is easier to beleive than the truth. " quoted the Ferengi scientist.

" A sucker is born every day. " translated Tomah.

On board the USS Wisconsin, they were still for their part pondering on the strange message sent by the Republic.er blast.

Then, Commander Gleck coughed back his loud laugh.

Captain Onia looked over her shoulder at her First Officer.

"What in the name of the two moons is so funny? And who the hell is Captain Sinbad?"

"The entire exchange about the exhaust port leading to the reactor chamber is from an old 20th century Earth space fantasy movie called Star Wars Captain. Sinbad is a fictional sailor from the Earthers' tales of Arabian Nights. He's famous on Ferenginar for all his tales of acquisition." Gleck grinned.

Captain Onia tipped her head in thought.

"Since the Borg have all the comedic sense of a dead amoeba, and it's a Code 22 which we know the Borg have broken....ah, we're herding the cube to a trap. Very nice. Helmsman, keep us between the cube and the Lotus and Spectre, but set a course towards grid 13-7. We want to push the cube that way. But don't make it look like we're pushing it."

The helmsman looked up at her in confusion.

"Captain?"

"Fly casual."

"Aye... Captain." His fingers flew over the console, and the ship turned slightly.

"Keep firing on that cube--give it everything we've got," Onia ordered.

"With pleasure, Captain." The tactical officer smiled as he stabbed at the controls that let loose the volley of phasers and torpedoes.

The Deltan steepled her fingers as she watched the phaser beams and torpedoes trace destruction across the cube's surface.

" Zappetti: Code 22 transmission to the Republic. Tell them "Red 5, standing by."

Aboard the USS McKenzie, the bewildering message was also received.

From the aft end of the bridge, Ops Officer Beren announced: "Sir incoming transmission."

And after the voice of Captain Wyatt went silent, that of Captain Crist rose in its place:

"Hmm, ok." he responded. "Normally I would laugh at that, but still I'm sure that will confuse them a bit."

Briefly, he smiled looking at the main viewer in front of him. Obviously the Borg had received it too because they were stationary exactly where they wanted them to be.

" Starfleet Code 22 transmission intercepted. Exhaust port, Federation-standard grid coordinates 13-7. " boomed the Collective.

The cube was also taking a sustained pounding from over a hundred lances of powerful phaser energy that now erupted from Starbase 10. Still, it kept position, starting to fire projectiles towards a specific section of the starbase, only to have them deflected by the shields. Although ineffectual, their other attacks were not: in the midst of the fleet's continued bombardment, the Borg found the ability and time to fire a tractor beam at the Spectre.

Then suddenly, another of the cutting beams, one aimed at the Spectre, flickered out, a result of the nanites Doctor Bindo had introduced.

Then another.

The little machines now had the Borg's attention.

They would find the cause, and assimilate it.

On the Starbase, other were also registering the nanoscopic invasion of the Borg vessel.

"This is Ensign Yylna, in Cargo Bay 147. The T.E.D. project is..."

The young androgyn Ensign was shocked into silence. Its eyes focused on the data appearing on her console screen.

The total number of drones began to drop as more and more were taken off-line. Within seconds, T.E.D. was reporting much higher than expected numbers of infected drones, many of which, were being counted as 'Out of the Collective'; meaning no longer a part of the Borg global consciousness.

The shock passed and the Veldriari officer turned its attention back to Operations.

"Sir, the T.E.D. project is underway. Readings indicate a drop of 30.6% in the total number of active drones, from one hundred fourteen thousand six hundred and seventy-seven to seventy-nine thousand five hundred and fifty-six drones. The drop may have to do with Dr. Bindo's nanites, but I am only speculating. Of the remaining drones, 32.5% are infected with Lieutenant Jori's nanites, the majority of which are a part of a second, Federation controlled collective..."

The Ensign was shocked into silence for the second time as an alarm sounded and warnings filled the screen. The androgyn responded quickly, signalling all medical staff on-hand to Jori's chamber.

"Sir, Lieutenant Jori's safeties have failed and psionic activity is at dangerously high levels. We are administering a para-cortical inhibitor to reduce levels."

Yylna began looking for the problem. It knew that psionic levels that high should have engaged the safety protocols.

What was the problem? it wondered.

It's fingers moved with incredible speed and precision over the console, searching for an answer. Everything looked fine with the device and everything appeared to be working properly.

The search was interrupted by alarms sounding.

"Medical emergency at Chamber Beta 4!" Yylna's airy voice cracked from shock as it watched the life-signs of one Betazoid fade to nothing.

A medical team rushed over and tried to revive the telepath.

There was no response.

Ensign Yylna continued searching through sub-routines, but could not find any problems. Panicked, the Veldriari's fingers faltered and brought up the main T.E.D. interface screen.

The androgyn officer glanced up at the screen for only a moment. Something caught it's attention. It looked back up in confusion, tapped its combadge and let its hands fall to the sides.

"Ensign Yylna, to Operations. One member is dead. Safety protocols are malfunctioning. T.E.D. had originally recorded less than eighty thousand Borg signals after Dr. Bindo's nanite attack took effect. However, we are now showing somewhere in the tens of millions of Borg signals and that number seems to be growing exponentially. I have no idea what to make of this, Sir."

The entire room fell silent from shock and they waited for a response from the command center of starbase 10.

Aboard the ships of Lotus Fleet, requests for data went at an even faster, frantic pace:

"Update from Engineering Mister O'Conner?" asked the commanding officer of the USS Spectre.

"I am transferring power to our secondary shield generators. Shields slowly recharging, at 20%. Primary generators have been shorted out by the Borg weaponry. I have dispatched repair teams 3, 4, 5, and 6 to the forward facing generators. Repair teams 1 and 2 are still working on sealing the bulkheads around the damage from the cutting beam." He replied as he looked over the console before him...

The hangar bay was as chaotic as Re'tok had expected it to be when he had arrived. There were wounded laying outside as the medics treated them. The large entry doors were a gateway into madness. A team of officers were using foam to fight back a fire that was quickly approaching the *Cuanza* and her load of torpedoes.

Re'tok ran into the bay and found where the damage control leader seemed to have his staging point established. He ran over as he heard Ensign Vash the damage control officer yelling over his shoulder at a Lieutenant Reynolds who was the officer in charge of the hangar bay.

"Maintainer team Bravo and most of Repair Charlie are still unaccounted for," Reynolds said. "They were on the far side of the hangar."

A Lieutenant ran over. His uniform was charred and he had an arm in a bandage.

"Ensign Vash, Sir. We have to depressurize the hangar. Repair Alpha is keeping the flames at bay but we've got three other fires further down the line."

"I've still got wounded in here," Reynolds said. "I won't just leave them to die."

"It's either they die, Lieutenant, or we lose half the ship," Vash said. "I'm sorry."

"Excuse me, Sir," Re'tok said.

"Who the hell are you?" Lieutenant Reynolds asked.

"I was sent from the bridge to assess and assist the situation down here, Sir," Re'tok said.

"You can tell them we're torn up down here," Vash said he turned towards the medics. "Move everyone out, we're sealing the doors in four minutes."

"Sir, are you sure there are still wounded?" Re'tok asked Lieutenant Reynolds.

"They were on the other side of the explosion, prepping the other shuttles," Reynolds said. "Before we lost main power, I read a good handful of life signs."

"And is the *Cuanza* capable of flight?" Re'tok asked.

"Yes, but..." his eyes widened and a small grin appeared on his face. "It's absolutely insane."

And we'll be breaking a good dozen standard Starfleet Hangar Bay protocols."

"I believe it is worth it," Re'tok said. "It will also remove the Cuanza from any immediate threat from the fire and allow the fire teams to withdraw."

"Get inside, we've got less than three minutes," Reynolds said. "Good thing she was already spun up, I guess."

He ran over to Vash to clear the plan. Re'tok turned towards the Cuanza and entered through the already open rear hatch.

"Is that everyone Sir?" Re'tok asked.

He and Lieutenant Reynolds were in the forward part of the Hangar Bay. The *Cuanza* parked close by. Re'tok had carefully flown it through the hangar bay and landed it on the other side of the fire to where Reynolds directed him.

Together they'd carried the seven wounded they were able to locate into the back of the *Cuanza*.

"We have thirty seconds until they pump the air out," Reynolds said. He made one more glance around. "I don't see anyone else."

"No, get inside, Sir," Re'tok said. They boarded the *Cuanza* and Re'tok ran into the pilot's seat. "Unfortunately, my plan to fly the runabout out of the hangar is not currently possible."

"What? Why?" Reynolds asked.

"The debris and escaping air could quite possibly send us crashing into the wall," Re'tok said. "That would not be advised if those we rescued are to remain rescued."

"So what..." Reynolds started to say but Re'tok cut him off.

"Re'tok to N'Eligahn: Not much time to explain, but the hangar bay is preparing to decompress in order to put out the fire. Re'tok out."

Then he turned to the superior officer near him:

"Activating magnetic locks; Hold on, Sir."

"Warning: Hangar decompression in progress, please stand by," the computer said in its calm voice.

Re'tok gripped the console as the ship shook, the escaping air rushing past the outer hull. The fire mingled with the hurricane force, as did the debris.

Burnt and twisted rubble shot past the runabout, some smashed into the plexisteel canopy, leaving tiny cracks in it.

"That's not good..." Reynolds said.

Thinking those very same words while looking at the battlefield on the wide screen, Acting First Officer Kheren aboard the USS Lotus was frowning, one of the few very human expressions his rigid face was barely capable of.

As an Andorian, he could never conceive of violence without a reason: and this was exactly what this whole Borg attack was to him...

It was utterly senseless.

They sent a cube against Earth on stardate 43395.9... and it was destroyed. Then, on stardate 50893.5, they sent another cube... and it was destroyed. Now, they send yet another cube on the fringe of the Alpha Quadrant... about to be destroyed... as they claim to come to eradicate our entire civilization.

With one Cube? Where is this vaunted efficiency of the Collective?

Then it hit him like a fist.

Jerking his head sharply up, he turned again towards Mark Robertson with wide eyes and renewed tension in his deep voice:

" Sir! This is a *r'hon*, a jab... a scouting action! The Borg is sacrificing this one cube to lure us into revealing our defenses... before they adapt and launch a full-scale invasion!

We must jam them again before we do, else all is lost! "

Everyone on the bridge was now looking at Robertson; everyone but the Andorian who now looked back at the viewing screen with the far away look and slow, calm voice of the condemned:

" We will be defenseless immediately after... when their invasion will *really* begin! The Collective will know everything."

He barely finished talking that a succession of impacts rocked the Lotus so violently, everyone was flung around like ragdolls. The entire ship inclined itself a moment and, as it righted itself slowly, they all regained their feet, dazed, bruised, confused...

All except Mark Robertson.

The commander of the Lotus had pitched forward as the entire ship was slammed, the inertial compensators woefully slow to prevent bodies from being shaken from their seats, Mark among them.

As the deck suddenly rushed toward his face, blackness overpowered him.

First Officer Kheren didn't even take the time to examine the growing bruise on his superior officer's forehead as he almost smashed his own combadge against his wide torso:

" Sickbay! Medical emergency to the bridge! "

And as if ot answer his previous prophecy of doom, aboard every starship and starbase at the battle, communication officers turned towards their commanders to alert them to an incoming fleetwide Priority One message:

"To all ships and stations under my command, this is Fleet Captain Kotari! This is a Code One alert I repeat: this is a Code One alert."

Code One.

Every officer in Starfleet knew what it meant;

Invasion.

The wide-shouldered bearded Boslic officer on every ship and base screens was striding towards a Captain's chair as he spoke, urgency clear within his brisk pace and slightly leaned-forward stance.

"Two minutes ago, we began receiving reports of "cube-like vessels" exiting the Azure Nebula. The USS Tucker was sent to investigate. They reported discovering a massive number of transwarp corridors before we lost contact with them."

He took a breath, tugged down his uniform shirt, and spoke to someone off-screen for a moment, then nodded and faced the screen again.

"The USS Enterprise has just confirmed what we already knew: their long range scanners have picked up over a thousand Borg Cubes exiting the Nebula."

The words struck harder than any torpedo could. In the utter silence that seem to grip every ship, the next words of Fleet captain Kotari tolled like the bells of Hell:

" We have several fleets mobilizing to greet them: the Enterprise is leading 1st Fleet, with USS Aventine, USS Voyager, USS Defiant, and USS Excalibur leads the other fleets. I am taking command of the USS Solférino to lead as many ships as we can gather from planetary defense forces on short notice." He took a deep breath. "The Federation Council is already contacting the other powers, asking for their aid. The Kzinti Hegemony's Self Defense Fleet, The Klingon Defense Force, the Romulan Star Empire...anyone with ships and weapons."

It sounded like calling the hyenas to fight off the lions... and it probably was.

"For those of you not engaged at Starbase 10, meet me at Fleet Rally Point Alpha. For those of you fighting in defense of Lotus Fleet's home: give em hell. The entirety of Starfleet will be engaged with the Borg by the time you're done out there.

To us all: Good luck.

Kotari out."

CHAPTER 8 : HELL IS FOR HEROES

"Target the lead vessel and fire a burst of three transphasic torpedoes. Helm bring us about to 045 mark 010 as soon as the torpedoes are underway, then proceed to the next target."

Captain Data gazed towards the viewscreen as he gave the orders. The mighty Sovereign class starship Enterprise, flagship of Starfleet, trembled underneath him as it took fire from the incoming Borg vessels.

"Captain!" called Choudhury from tactical. "The fifth tactical cube is accelera-" She cut off, then said with horror, "They've rammed the Mesopotamia!"

Data nodded:

"Damage to the cube?"

"Negligible, Sir. Can't say the same for the Mesopotamia." She glanced to the viewscreen, which was now focused on the twisted remains of the Nebula-class vessel.

"Have the USS Mercy and Adelaide move in to rescue the survivors. Defiant wings and Nova wings to cover."

"Sir, incoming message from the Aventine. The Borg are behaving erratically, but half of Captain Dax's fleet has been destroyed."

"I understand, Commander Choudhury. Send acknowledgement and inform Starfleet that we will move one quarter of our fleet to reinforce Aventine's front. Signal Galaxy wings two and five and Steamrunner wing seven to rendezvous-"

"-Sir, Galaxy wing two has been annihilated."

"Then send Ambassador wing three."

"Yes Sir."

But the echoes of that desperate struggle resonated even beyond the borders of the Federation...

A long black car pulled up to the stone white stairs leading to a large, slightly rusted ship.

Emblazoned on the nose of the ship 6 stories up was the name of the ship. *Keresh*, in ancient Rathiah letters. Surrounding the ship was a 30-story tower, into which the *Keresh* was the only entrance.

The back door of the car opened and a tall, slightly balding Rethian stepped onto the stone sidewalk, squinting into the bright noonday sun. His long, greying hair blew free in the light warm breeze. The Rethian's white eyes gazed up at the ship. The sight of the ancient and revered vessel always granted him a sense of awe and wonder.

A younger Rethian exited the car behind him. He followed his elder's gaze and a small smile appeared on his face.

"Every day we come here and every day you stare up at the ship as if it was your first time, Vrel," the younger Rethian said.

"Always respect and revere your history, Taren," Vr'Elneth, the elder Rethian, said as he looked down at his friend. "But we don't have much time to linger, the message said this gathering was urgent." Tar'Eniel, the younger Rethian, nodded and followed Vr'Elneth up the staircase.

The two Rethians walked down the long marble hallway built into the bottom portion of the *Keresh* before it opened up into a large domed room. Daylight poured through stained glass windows depicting the various accomplishments of the Rathiah to their exile and eventual rebirth as the Rethians.

Sitting around the room on stone benches were Rethians of every size and shape. These were the Rethian Senate. Seated in the front of the room, highest above all others and clad in bronze robes was the Council of Elders. One level below them and the section Vr'Elneth headed towards was the Admiralty Board, the military leadership of the Rethians.

The rest of the Senate filed into their places as Vr'Elneth took his seat. Tar'Eniel took up a small chair directly behind him.

The Elder Councilor stood and banged his gavel on his table.

"We shall now come to order," he said. "I apologize for the short notice of this but it is extremely important, perhaps the most important event we have encountered since the Exile."

A low murmur rippled through the Senators.

"As you all know, we are on the final cusp of membership in the United Federation of Planets," the Elder said. "I'm afraid that we may now have to act upon that membership before it's official."

More murmuring.

"The Federation has sent out a general Alpha and Beta Quadrant distress call," the Elder said. "The Many-Who-Are-One, called 'Borg' by the people of this quadrant, are beginning an invasion the likes of which no one here has ever seen."

No murmur. No gasps. Just silence, as every Rethian's eyes were fixed on the Elder.

Vr'Elneth hid his emotions well as his mind raced. Behind him, Tar'Eniel's jaw dropped. He was looking up at the Elder and Vr'Elneth felt a torrent of emotions from him mingling with the emotions from every other Rethian in the room.

"You lie!" roared a Senator from the far left portion of the room.

"I do not," the Elder said. "Our ancient foes are descending upon those who have pledged to be our allies. We must now decide if we are to respond to that call for help or remain here, deaf to their plea."

"What can we possibly provide?" called another Senator. "They have full armadas with hundreds of ships. We have just christened our third cruiser."

"Correction," said one of Vr'Elneth's fellow Admirals. "We have five fully warp capable cruiser sized ships that we can ready for battle in one hour. We also have eight frigates that can accompany them into the fray."

"And if we do so then Nadea Rethian will be defenseless," said a Senator Vr'Elneth recognized. He was Garu'akle of clan Yekteb. Vr'Elneth had tangled with him on the Senate floor before. He and his clansmen still fought against Rethia's relationship with the Federation, something Vr'Elneth remained steadfast towards. "What if they come here?"

"Then they'll tear through our ships here instead of there," Vr'Elneth said, his voice low. He stood and bowed to the Elder. "Permission to address the floor Elder." The Elder bowed his head in return and gestured towards the center of the room.

"The Elder Council recognizes Vr'Elneth of clan Etarudbo," the Elder said.

"Thank you," Vr'Elneth said. "Noble Senators, Admirals and Elders, for twenty-five years I have fought against isolationism. Our arrogance and steadfast clinging to ancient ideals and customs is what lead to our near extinction and exile nearly four hundred years ago.

"Now that same foe comes again... and, this time, we have no second chances, no escape ships, no empire. But now, the fates have given us a chance at redemption. We may not have many ships, but alongside what allies we can get, they'll get their share of vengeance, I can assure you."

"Permission to address the floor Elder?" Garu'akle asked.

"The Elder Council recognizes Garu'akle of clan Yekteb," the Elder said.

"Brave and proud words, Admiral," Garu'akle said. "But everyone in this room knows how deeply in bed you are with the Federation. Even his own son abandoned his people for it. And now he wants to throw the only fighting ships we've got into a hopeless battle."

"I will not have you dishonor my son in this manner, in this hall," Vr'Elneth whispered.

"He dishonored himself long before we entered this hall," Garu'akle said. He turned to the Senate. "For too long we have dabbled in the business of outsiders, letting them 'guide' us. By the Gods we were among the stars before most of them ever left their homeworlds."

"Indeed, 'were' is the appropriate word," Vr'Elneth said. "Until our own blindness, isolationism and arrogance destroyed us and we were betrayed by our own. If we do not learn from history, then we will be forever doomed to repeat it until it destroys us forever."

"And you would doom our race with a suicide run using our only defenses," Garu'akle said. "Let your fool of a son get himself destroyed light years from home-" Vr'Elneth spun around to face Garu'akle, only this time he held a phase pistol tightly in his hand. The emitter was pointed at Garu'akle's head.

"I tire of your cowardly accusations against my son and myself," Vr'Elneth said.

Beads of sweat appeared on Garu'akle's forehead but Vr'Elneth remained calm and cool.

"Do you fear death?" he asked. "Because all I have been hearing from you are words of fear and terror." Vr'Elneth edged closer, bringing the phaser's emitter even closer to Garu'akle's head. His eyes remained fixed on his rival but his words echoed around the silent chamber. "We made a pact with the Federation. A word of honor to those that over the last twenty-five years have help build us back up to where we even possess these thirteen ships."

He turned away from Garu'akle and tossed the phaser aside. Its clatter broke the stunned silence.

"I can assure both you and every Rethian on this and other worlds that I will not be the one that says we backed down from those we once called friends," Vr'Elneth said. H

e turned towards the large doors to exit.

"I will face the foes that routed and so utterly destroyed our ancestors and I will do it with my fellow sapients."

He glared at the Senators around him.

"And if I have to do it alone, I shall."

"Vr'Elneth of clan Etarudbo," called the Elder.

Vr'Elneth halted in his steps and turned to face the older Rethian. The Elder looked around the room at the stunned and silent faces.

"I move an end to debate and call for a vote of the Full Council."

"Seconded," Tar'Eniel said, shooting to his feet and giving a smile to Vr'Elneth.

"All in favor..." the Elder said.

A chorus of "ayes" filled the room.

"Opposed?"

Garu'akle and a few others muttered something.

"Passes. I now put it to a vote of the assembly," the Elder said. "If you are in favor of supporting our Federation allies against these 'Borg', raise your hand..."

Well over a hundred hands rose into the air. Some hesitantly and some quickly, but in the end, nearly three-quarter of the room approved the measure.

"Opposed?"

The same people who muttered before now raised their hands.

The Elder looked at Vr'Elneth and a smile curved his aged lips.

He slammed his gavel.

"The motion passes. Nadea Rethia goes to war."

And so was sent the call to arms. And it also was heard everywhere within the Alpha Quadrant... but nowhere as loud and clear as on a large icy moon orbiting a ringed gas giant, lighted by the far away lights of two stars.

There was a deathly silence in the Great Hall of the Parliamentary Council. All the representatives of all the clans spread across the sixty-four states of the entire world were all staring speechless at the holographic projection displayed in the center of the vast ovoid black basalt room, right before the empty throne entirely made out from one huge translucent crystal.

They were all staring at a cloud of cube-shaped vessels emerging like out of nothingness to blot even the stars behind their ominous forms.

Over their antennae, waving like a vast prairie of blue reeds piercing the vast snow-covered field made by their white-haired heads, voices could be heard: they came from ships rallying, worlds pleading, automated stations warning...

Then, a million voices drowned all the rest:

" WE ARE THE BORG. YOU WILL BE DESTROYED. YOUR FLEET WILL BE DESTROYED. THE CONTINUATION OF YOUR ASSEMBLY OF SPECIES WILL CEASE TO EXIST. RESISTANCE IS FUTILE. "

Like the roar of a giant beast, the entire assembly rose and howled in anger and outrage. Every Council member was up and pounding the air with their fists, eyes aflame. It was like a blue tidal wave about to engulf the tridimensional image of the invading armada.

They were all on their feet, challenging the Devil himself.

All but the Presider.

But then, slowly, she rose too. And in that instant, all the entire raging assembly fell silent.

But the silence itself seemed to roar with defiance.

Everyone looked at her in her light blue robe, its ample folds not covering her pregnancy; she was nurturing triplets, so rare an occurrence nowadays that she has been elevated beyond the due respect of her office into quasi-sainthood because of it. Her two husbands and their common wife were attending her proudly, a pride of life that was a defiance of death.

The Presider spoke; her soft voice carried itself easily to the sensitive ears in the twitching antennae everywhere:

" Since the first days, we stood as the warriors of the Federation. Be these its last days, we will still be. "

A new roar shook the very stones of the ancient hall; but this time, it was a roar of savage approval. Not one voice remained silent, until the Presider raised her hand.

" The coming end of our people is now to be shared by all among the stars. If we do not act, there will be no one to remember us... and all our battles to preserve this ideal of a peaceful, united galaxy will have been for naught. Our culture will be wiped out, our few children never to be. "

Once more all the voices united to shake the stone walls, now with ferocious denial and defiance.

The Presider lifted both hands in front of her to restore order and silence, and say in a strong, firm voice:

" Uzaveh's name be praised: In his name and that of the entire Fesoan people, I call for the Imperial Guard... I call to the People: gather and join the rest of our brothers and sisters of the stars... Lets go forth and never look back... There will be nothing left behind us. Stand tall and proud and we will choke our enemy with our own spilled blood! "

So loud and fierce was the acclamation that it spilled out of the Great Hall as all coucillors rushed to transporter stations aimed at orbital shipyards and ports. So powerful and raging were all their voices that they rose beyond her high outstretched right fist as her left hand delicately touched her swelled womb... so high they rose that they might have reached the fleet of ships orbiting the icy white moon as it warped out in waves of flashing lights.

They were most of them of the newest Ushaan class, small but agile and heavily armed with the latest technology and entirely crewed by Andorians. Some were to be left here to guard the solar system, most were to be delivered to Starfleet next month for patrol and escort duties...

Now they were all sent to war, with the last fighting sons and daughters of Andoria.

Now alone in the empty Hall, the Presider and her mates stepped slowly down the dais. They all bowed before the Empty Throne, then backed out, heads held high.

" The flagship is waiting, Presider. " Said the other wife of the quad.

" Thank you, Nyllyanni. Tell the Kumari that we will beam aboard shortly. "

" Maray, is it wise for you to risk yourself... "

The Presider interrupted the tallest of her two husbands with a raised hand:

" Nothen my husband... I have been compared to divine Larashkail herself one time too often... Time for me to at least try to live up to the name of the warrior-mother... and for me too, to live up to our modern legends. "

" You're... you're speaking of... Thirishar Reborn? " whispered her second husband, looking nervously at the empty corridors around them.

" Have a care, Sanath! " Chastized Nillyanni sternly. " We are passing the Hall of Heroes! Do not so near it speak of the Abomination! "

Before any argument could break out, the Presider lifted her hand to impose silence once more:

" Whatever Kheren Kalel Th' Ch'Leryll might be... he is fighting with Starfleet... maybe dying... for our sake. Let no one ever pretend that we of Andoria left *any* one of us fight or die alone! "

* * *

Lieutenant Jori was able to sense everything. Each telepath, each infected drone, the Borg Collective, images, sensations, sounds, emotions, thoughts, memories...

...clarity.

He felt as though a veil was being gently lifted from his mind revealing a new way of seeing the world around him.

The physical realm seemed to fade, revealing a world of energy signatures, algorithms, and complex scientific formulas. Molecules seemed to dissolve into understandable pieces of data and he was beginning to feel as though he was one small variable, in a living, breathing formula.

The life-changing experience was interrupted as Vulcan thoughts filled his mind,

" Lieutenant Jori, focus on our thoughts. Let all other thoughts and sensations melt away, leaving only what you will perceive as the sound of our voice. You have begun to lose your way. We will be your beacon."

He could barely hear him over the hum of discovery in his head.

" You have begun to form a deeper link with the Borg. No other member has connected as completely. However, you are beginning to lose yourself within the Collective. You must change direction and follow our thoughts."

He was barely able to understand the words. It was as though they were speaking a language that Braedon had forgotten, but was slowly beginning to remember. The melded Vulcans continued communicating with him, repeating themselves. Jori began to understand and became aware of what was happening. He followed the Vulcan mind voice in his mind.

Slowly, the energy signatures retreated into dark corners, algorithms faded away, and data moulded into mass.

"Welcome back, Lieutenant. We have been unable to pinpoint an exact location of the Borg Queen. We have been able to sense her presence; however, we are unable to link with her."

The telepathic hybrid allowed himself a moment to separate his mind from the overwhelming emotions, having been almost assimilated into the Borg consciousness.

" Thank you for your help." Braedon replied, as his mind slowly became his own again.

He focused on the Vulcans and began sifting through his thoughts and memories to experience his search for the Queen. It was like trying to pinpoint a sound that was nothing more than a figment of one's own imagination. It reminded him of the first time he tried to sense the emotions of a holographic officer.

" I will continue the search, you assist the Alpha team. They will need your resolve if they are going to make any progress." He ordered.

Braedon felt the Vulcan presence fade into the legion of Federation telepaths. He allowed himself to drift in the Borg Collective consciousness. He imagined it as to being on a raft, floating along a rushing river, letting the current take him to the river's ending place.

The closer he believed he was to the centre of things, the clearer the unified voices became.

" Medically-proficient mental subsection of this cube infected with allergen. Rerouting through the Collective."

Braedon Jori's mind became overwhelmed by the addition of what seemed an infinite number of voices.

This was no longer the 'Mind' of this ship alone. This was the entire Borg Collective consciousness!

" Processing Cube 1673's engineering request. Adaptation to microscopic wormhole attack will require modification of Cube 124's adaptation to..."

There were too many presences now. Too many to to continue this way. Braedon felt the Alpha team try to help him focus and continue. The total Borg Collective consciousness was far too powerful for any one person to exist within.

" Starfleet Code 22 transmission intercepted. Exhaust port, Federation-standard grid coordinates 13-7."

Lieutenant Jori was trying to make sense of what he was perceiving.

Without warning, he could sense members of his team fading.

He felt the consciousness of a young Betazoid get swallowed up into the Borg consciousness.

In a state of growing panic, he made the horrifying realization that T.E.D. was not designed to deal with such a powerful force. The safeties would not be able to keep pace in this overwhelming environment. If nothing was done soon, the entire 'Takeover' team would be lost to the Borg presence.

"Akira-class fighter squadrons detected, tricobalt signatures. Responding."

The massive voice washed over him, nearly tearing him apart. Within the terror and infinite numbness, Braedon felt something unique. It was like hearing a high pitched whisper over a mob of screaming. This was not a thought, not a memory, but an emotion.

The Borg were not know for emotion. However, this experience had taught him why.

Thoughts are much more easily controlled than emotions. The truth was, the Borg had no way of unifying emotions. Surprisingly, he was finding out the Borg had emotions; they were just ignored, repressed... They were living as though emotions were irrelevant, in a way that made emotional intensity fade over time.

But he was feeling something, and this was the very basic of emotion:

Hunger.

Somewhere in the vast plane of Borg consciousness, Braedon Jori could feel a flicker of hunger. He quieted his own thoughts and allowed himself to focus on his empathic abilities. He focused on the distant hunger and let himself feel it. It was incredibly distant but incredibly intense. It carried with it the kind of longing and desire that aches across galaxies.

He ignored his thoughts and focused only on the hunger.

He felt his heart breaking as he experienced it.

How could one person feel so much? he wondered in amazing despair.

Then, from the gentle silence of his mind, a thought took hold of him.

One person... this is coming from one, the strongest, no, the only personality:

The Queen!

Braedon Jori focused all of his energy on the unbearable, raging hunger at the center of it all. His mind began to meld with his emotions. He had only ever experienced this sensation once before.

He was a child and carried great sadness living with his Vulcan grandfather on Earth, his emotional centre blended with his telepathic mind allowing him to subconsciously communicate with his twin sister on Betazed.

Braedon's surroundings slowly began to dissolve around him, as though reality was being scared off by a supernatural force. He began to regress. With childlike fear, he fell to the ground in the landscape of his mind, wrapped his arms around his knees, and closed his eyes. It felt like eternities were passing by with no sign of hope.

Fierce gusts of bone-chilling wind began to swirl around him, causing intense uncontrollable shivers. The winds blew, screaming by as though demented. He kept his eyes closed, until he felt the softest, most delicate object touch his cheek. It brought him enough comfort to slowly open his eyes.

It was blinding and beautiful. The most pure, shining white light.

It took a few moments for his eyes to adjust.

The brightness faded revealing a dreary, mostly overcast sky. The area around him was completely covered in snow. Lieutenant Jori looked around for any signs of civilization. Within the blowing snow, he could make out a pair of sea-green eyes flicker in the distance.

Then the eyes disappeared into the mess of wind and snow, only to reappear closer and closer, becoming clearer with each flicker forward.

A tall, lanky figure emerged. Jori studied her large, almond-shaped, lidless eyes. The same sea-green stared back at him, but this close he could see the silver flecks, peaking through the green. Suddenly, the silver flecks angrily multiplied, drowning out any hint of color. She vanished momentarily, reappearing with her face inches away from his, eyes a reflective chrome.

And she spoke into his mind with a single, eerily tortured voice.

"I am the beginning without end. Everywhere and nowhere. The one without form."

" I am Sedín."

The winds seemed to grow more fierce as the rage inside her boiled to the surface. Lieutenant Braedon Jori planted his feet into the snow, held his position, and tried to speak above the winds.

"I am Lieutenant Braedon Jori of the United Federation of..."

He stopped mid-sentence as the winds calmed and he could hear a primal growl coming from the frightening figment in front of him. Her lipless mouth opened slightly releasing a terrible high-pitched screech that seemed to fill the entire planet.

Sedín's scream seemed to command the clouds to part, revealing a sun surrounded by erratic flares. The beauty of the image was distorted by the pain in Braedon's head caused by the sound coming from the Borg Queen.

"Silence!" She mentally shouted, *"You are nothing! I will devour the little distinctiveness you have and..."*

Her mouth closed and her eyes focused above. As the hybrid officer looked into her eyes, he was hit with a wave of terror, despair, and helplessness. He saw the reflection of the sun bursting into pillars of white light and then a prism of colours in her eyes.

Sedín vanished.

Braedon looked up to the sky to see incredible fire hurling towards him.

Instinctively, he began running in the opposite direction. He saw the entire planet melt away beneath his feet. The light grew brighter and brighter until it blinded him. Tripping over his own feet, he fell to his knees and lowered his head until his vision came back to him.

The coloured dots faded from his vision until there was nothing. No light, no colour... just blackness.

In the distance, he spotted a dim, thin red light. He stood slowly, cautious. As the red beam approached, he was able to start making out a figure. His heart dropped as he realized the beam was coming from the figure's right eye.

Borg.

The figure remained under the cover of darkness and spoke softly, with a familiar voice.

"Braedon, do not be afraid. It's me, Lyaxanna."

The voice put his heart at ease. However, he remained cautious. Even though he could feel that she was close, it was still too dark to see her. He felt her cool hand against his cheek and began to feel her presence.

It was a faded version of herself, but it was her: Braedon's twin sister.

"I thought I would never see you again! I always hoped, but..."

His excitement was cut short by Lyaxanna.

"Braedon, I don't have much time. She'll be back soon. She is too powerful to take control of. Her presence has been developing for thousands of years."

Lyaxanna placed her fingertips selectively on his face and continued:

"Our minds. One and together."

A sudden rush of images and sound passed through Jori's consciousness. Images of a Borg history that he couldn't piece together. It all seemed like nonsense to him. Then everything slowed down. He saw the central nexus point of a Borg vessel. He saw the queen. She was in a chamber. Eyes closed, head down. She looked defeated.

Suddenly, her head lifted and her eyes opened.

She looked directly at him, as he felt every drone aboard the ship think the same thing simultaneously...

Self-destruct.

Lyaxanna removed her hands from her brother's face and took his hands into her.

"You see, brother? There is a way. You are the first Federation Officer to reach Sedín; the first sentient being in thousands of years. Because of your technology, you allowed me to recover my own self for a time... and you have the opportunity to connect to the entire Collective across the galaxy. She is strong, but she has a weakness. The only thing that distracts..."

Silence. Darkness.

It seemed as though Lyaxanna was never there.

Then the darkness filled with the sound of the Borg Queen and the Collective.

* * *

"Damage control teams have put out fires on deck 6, 8, 12 and in the hangar bay. But our shuttle launching capability is out of operation."

"I'd say this is as good a time as any to deploy the fighters against them," Rethian Ops officer N'Eligahn Etarubdo said after the starship Spectre's Chief Engineer's report. "Their torpedo capacity combined with the rest of the fleet's against the cube's present integrity and we may be in for a bit of a light show."

"Thank you Ensign; to be honest I forgot we had launched them into hiding a while ago... Send them the message to let the Borg have everything they've got. " Captain Daniel Summers said as he still stood in the center of the bridge, trying to keep his composure under the pressure of the circumstances.

Ensign N'Eligahn nodded towards Captain Summers then further over his shoulder and past Alther at Relys. The Bajoran returned the nod and placed a hand to her earpiece.

The ten Peregrine fighters that made up Firefly squadron floated silently beneath the glowing windows of Starbase 10. Sitting in the lead fighter, its wings painted gold to distinguish it, was the Spectre's Commander Space Group Lieutenant Commander Alan Harrison.

Each of the pilots had been sitting in near silence since launching from the Spectre, partly because of the communications blackout and partly because of the radio silence enacted to keep their positioning secret.

Since the start of the battle, they'd only lost one ship, Stingray Three which had been hit by a piece of wayward debris from the Starbase.

Finally, the silence was broken with a sharp crackle.

"Spectre to Epsilon, Gamma, Stingray and Firefly squadrons," said the voice of the Spectre's Flight Control Officer, Ensign Relys. "You are clear to engage. I repeat, commence attack pattern Sigma Beta. Firefly has lead. Execute."

"About time," muttered Firefly 2.

"Cut it. " Harrison said. He increased his fighter's impulse to full and started to bring it up and around the starbase's docking ring. "This is Firefly Lead, all squadrons fall in behind me."

Around him the other fighters' engines lit up and they took up positions in the large formation.

"Firefly and Gamma will coordinate fire with the Spectre," Harrison said. "Stingray, coordinates with the Lotus. Epsilon will work with the McKenzie. Do not launch torpedoes until you have a clear attack vector. Everyone will fire off both torps, that's an order."

His fighter gave a slight shudder as he lit up the maneuvering thrusters.

The thirty-nine surviving fighters rounded the docking ring into the full on chaos of the battle. Each squadron started to split off towards their own avenues of attack. Harrison watched as the Spectre's main torpedo launchers lit up and opened fire on the cube. He slid back the doors on his own torpedo tube.

"Hit 'em hard and fast," Harrison said. "Engage."

And so, it would end... sighed Kheren inwardly, looking back at the Borg Cube on the USS Lotus main viewing screen, his blue-skinned, white-haired head nodding slightly his acceptance of things.

But his silvery eyes still burned with defiance.

On the bridge of the flagship of Lotus Fleet, silence was almost deafening as the Starfleet General Alert was declared. Each word blared out of the speakers like the toll of doom. As the listing of assembled forces droned on, each officer on the bridge looked at each other with somber faces.

All the more beautiful because it is so useless... thought again the Andorian in the words of the Human poet Edmond Rostand and his heroic, tragic Cyrano de Bergerac character. *Even the Imperial Guard itself will soon join them... no Andorian would stay home to be conquered when he could die with his hands around the enemy's throat. I should be...*

But then, his attention came back to the hail as it transmitted direct orders to Lotus Fleet:

Give 'em Hell... Fleet Captain Kotari had said... *we would need water, not fire* silently said Kheren to himself with sour irony. *Or a company of Angels...*

Just then, near him, materialized the shapely form of a female clad in blue.

" Here!"

Kheren swiftly pointed to the nurse the inert form of Acting Captain Robertson, unconscious in his command chair were he had moved him.

An overloaded, unused tertiary station spewed out sparks and fumes before the automated extinguishers activated a containment field around it to instantly smother out the fire.

" Report! " he said loudly.

" Ah, Borg shields down 45%, fire output down by 7%, structural damage 31%... and increasing."

First Officer Kheren looked up at his former station, antennae waving this way and that:

" Not regenerating? "

The answer came from the science station:

" Not since I read a transporter signature that piggybacked phaser fire from the McKenzie. It contained bionanites signals... "

On the main viewer, they saw the Borg vessel fire a cutting beam at the Akira class USS Spectre, only to have it suddenly shut off by itself.

" The nanite signal in their phaser beam... the McKenzie infected them. " understood the Andorian. He was starting to nod appreciatively, then stopped, frowning.

Was that the plan? He asked silently with his eyes towards the still inert Mark Robertson.

The entire ship trembled and shook as a glancing beam grazed its weakened shields, and those of the USS McKenzie.

Captain Daniel Crist turned to his Chief tactical Officer, Ensign Selcar:

"Damage report."

"Sir, we've received minor damage, only major damage is shuttle bay 3, and port warp assembly. The armor is down to about 28%."

"Good, bring us around the cube, so we can punch some holes in it with the help of the Starbase." The Captain ordered.

While death littered space, life was battling to prevail in the tiny sickbay of the small warship.

"Casualty report, please, Gage. That was a bad hit we just took. Ensign Tenax, get ready to roll wherever they need a team."

Tenax, the young Denobulan medical technician, tapped on a console, scanning the ship for unusual biometric signals, as two humans materialized into sickbay. One woman lay still, her auburn hair blackened at the tips and matted against the side of her pale face. Portions of her uniform were shredded, and long, angry red streaks of raw tissue split their way through large sections of blackened, bubbled skin.

The sickly sweet charred stench of burned flesh made bile rise in Doctor Bindo's throat. She swallowed it down as she briefly scanned the woman for other life-threatening injuries before she was moved further.

Jolie motioned for her techs to move the woman to the surgical bed.

"Get the surgery unit ready, Lockhart. Anesthazine now, get her on the respirator and max infusion on the plasma infuser. We need her BP and O2 sats up before we can work on those burns. Computer, full scan and pull up medical records."

The doctor strode over to the young blond man on the other biobed and looked at the monitor at the head of the bed.

"He has a grade 3 concussion, Doctor," said Ensign Rotureau. "The scan shows a couple skull fractures, another one on his left upper arm, and some rib trauma."

The man moaned and took hold of the doctor's arm. He blinked a few times and looked at Jolie, and then the nurse. His face spasmed in pain when he moved his left arm. He shut his green eyes tight and groaned.

Jolie took his right hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"You're in sickbay, Crewman D'Nenda. You've got a lot of injuries, and I know it hurts. We'll get you out of pain soon. Do you know what ship you're on?"

The Betazoid could sense the swirls of confusion as he tried to think.

"Starbase 10," he panted, opening his eyes again. "I can't stay in sickbay. I have to go to work in a few minutes."

"Well, D'Nenda, we have to fix you up first. You're on the McKenzie, and you got hurt in the battle. As soon as you're feeling better we'll let you go back to work."

Jolie said quietly to her nurse:

"Level 4 neural scan. See if there are any brain hemorrhages. If there are, we might have to move him to the stasis unit--no way we can do neurosurgery in the middle of battle. 4cc trianoline and 10 of cortical analeptic. 2cc hydrocortilene for the pain. I don't want to totally knock him out."

Jolie checked the scans of the other fractures.

"Use the osteogenic stimulator on the humerus and rib fractures. I'll take a look at the skull fractures after the scan."

Gage came up to the Betazoid doctor as she took the few steps across the room to the woman with the severe burns.

"Three more injured in the blasts on the port side of the ship, Doctor. Looks like two are pretty minor, one may need more treatment here."

"Grab one of the anti-grav lifts and bring them in. I don't want to lose a patient to a transporter power fluctuation. Ensign Tenax:you're with Gage."

Tenax grabbed a large medkit and followed Gage as he rushed out the door with the lift.

The doctor looked at the different monitors on the surgical bed. Most indicators were still in the red, but the oxygen levels had improved enough to start surgery.

"What about putting her in stasis?" Lockhart asked.

"I don't think she'll survive reanimation. She has organ failure starting already. We have to get this dead tissue out before it kills her."

Jolie brushed the woman's long hair off her forehead and attached the delta wave inducer to keep her asleep:

"OK, Lockhart, 100cc of Kelotane. Get some dermalin gel on the second degree burns while I start debriding these third degrees. T'Pelin, get a sample of her skin and grow me some tissue for a temporary graft til we can get her to the starbase."

She reached into the surgery unit to start the delicate removal of the severely burned tissue. The damage at the cellular level was even worse than she expected from the initial scans, and a couple of the indicators dropped further. Jolie's hands moved as quickly as they could to remove the charred skin in a race to save the woman.

"Doctor to bridge: Captain, we have one, possibly two, to beam directly to SB10 sickbay when we get a safe window."

"Understood Doctor. Helm, disengage and head around the back side of the starbase. With any luck it should give us time to beam over the injured as well as regenerate our armor."

"Aye." Pilot Hughes responded.

Suddenly there were three short bumps. The crew looked confused since it didn't feel like a weapons attack.

"Sir, the Cube attempted to lock a tractor beam on us, three different times; thankfully, our armor held. The armor is currently at 8%, Sir."

"Understood," Captain Crist said, "Mister Selcar, aft torpedoes please, to cover us. Then, once we're on the other side of the starbase, disengage the armor generators and re-engage them, so we can have a fresh skin."

As the McKenzie moved away from the Borg cube, the Borg managed to get in a lucky shot.

"Damage report." Asked the Captain of his Romulan tactical officer.

"Starboard aft torpedo launcher destroyed, and damage to the number 3 impulse reactor."

"Bridge to Engineering: the number 3 impulse reactor has been damaged. I need you to send a repair team there. I want my speed back Lieutenant."

"Sir, we're in position." announced helmsman Hughes.

"Good. Doctor, beam the injured that you want to be transported now. Mister Selcar, give us a new skin please. Mister Sorripto, in the event that we need to switch to shields, I need them to last, so find a way around the Borg's shield disrupters." The Captain ordered.

Hearing the Captain's orders and knowing full well the importance of keeping their shields up, Sorripto remembered a conversation he had with his new Bajoran friend, Ensign Sisko, about filtering power. A sense of irony filled him, as well an idea that could save the lives of a dozen species... because of the working together of a Cardassian and a Bajoran.

"Captain. I suggest we reroute our shields power through a series of secondary subsystems. It would act as a filter of sorts and, given its frequency modulation, I could easily configure it to vary up the spectrum. "

The numbers would be something he would have to do quickly, but Sorripto knew he could.

"There is no sure way around Borg shield disrupters Captain, but, with a modulated and purer shield frequency, I could get our shields to last at least three times longer against them."

Good, make the necessary preparations, I want it ready to go at a moment's notice. Hopefully the newly regenerated armor will last till the cube is destroyed, but my mind is better at ease with a back up defense." Crist said. "Hughes, let's get under way. Our armor should be back to full strength."

"Aye, Sir."

"Sir, interjected Ops officer Beren, were receiving a transmission, from a fighter squadron; they are from the Spectre."

"Ok," the Captain said. " Tell them: form up on us, we'll be making a series of attack runs on the cube. only use phasers, 'till we get that cube away from the Starbase."

As the channel closed, the commander of the McKenzie muttered to himself:

" I didn't realized the Spectre managed to launch any fighters; they must have done that before we arrived."

And while the Defiant class destroyer went again on the offensive, the stardrive of the nebula class Wisconsin allowed itself some distance from the cubic behemoth's wrath.

Shields at 27%, Captain," the security chief called out to the Deltan captain.

Onia said:

"Kraytine: unless we all want to suck vacuum, we need to deal with those nullifiers NOW."

"Aye, Sir. I'm reconfiguring the shields now. It's going to put a drain on our other systems, however."

Another phaser shot rocked the ship.

"Shields down to 12%"

Onia replied:

"Better a drain than nothing at all, Kraytine."

"Nullifier protection coming online now, Captain."

Another phaser beam struck the Wisconsin, but the shields held, and then started to regenerate.

"Zapetti," Onia said as she turned to her communications officer, "open a secure channel and send Kraytine's new shield specs to SB10 and the rest of the fleet."

" Aye Captain. "

The message was immediately received by the flagship:

" Ah, Sir... we are receiving messages from the fleet, the Wisconsin, Sir." announced Lieutenant Tomah. gripping his console against the impact of a gravimetric charge. " A shield configuration formula to counter the gravimetric effect. And... ah, a Stingray squadron answering to the Spectre is moving to attack and ah, they claim that they will coordinate with us, Sir. "

" On screen." ordered First Officer Kheren curtly.

Before their eyes, a swarm of fighter shuttles emerged from the cover of Starbase 10, moving in attack formation towards the Borg Cube spewing out death all around it at point blank range of the starbase.

Then the speakers blared:

"USS Lotus, this is Lieutenant commander Harriman, Stingray Lead. We are to link fire with you. Send us your attack angle and coordinates. We'll fire on your mark, over. "

" Acknowledge, Stingray... ah, standby. " responded Tomah.

It took all of his self-control for the Andorian not to immediately voice his doubts:

Was THAT the plan?

His face said nothing... but his antennae were trembling forward and his eyes were mere slits.

" Combat systems of those fighters, Mister Tomah. " he asked instead.

" Ah, standard shielding and phasers... but their torpedo launchers are emitting a tricobalt signature. "

" *if* I understand what this is all about... pondered Kheren outloud, it is *too soon*: Unless the McKenzie infection disable the Borg *now*, those fighters will *all* be shot down in the next seconds before they can fire... crippling the station with their residual explosion! "

It was a vision of Hell. And then, Hell's doors opened wide before the ships of Lotus Fleet and right in front of the Starbase. Hell's bells tolled like billions of damned voices speaking soulessly together:

" Battle proceeding with expected resistance."

The statement rang through the joined minds of the Collective, unexpressed verbally through their vast corridors.

"Anomalous drone behavior continues and has mutat... "

The unified thought cut off at that moment, then resumed:

" Secondary collective presence verified. Subversive neural network detected. Attempting to shut down... "

The unified thought cut off again.

" Medically-proficient mental subsection of this cube infected with allergen. Rerouting through the Collective. Processing Cube 1673's engineering request. Adaptation to microscopic wormhole attack will require modification of Cube 124's adaptation to...

The unified voice dropped off once again.

Meanwhile, the battle for Lotus Fleet's survival raged on despite the twin attacks of the allergen nanites and the telepathy nanoprobes. Darting in and out, the McKenzie continued to pepper the massive vessel, while torpedoes and cutting beams continued in a torrential downpour upon the Fleet. It was a light show to end all light shows, filled with explosions interspersed between red, gold, and green lances of lethal energy. Three tractor beams engaged in an attempt to grapple the McKenzie, each with a movement only computers and Vulcans would call "sluggish" compared to previous attempts.

The Cube resumed movement, accelerating once again towards the station. It adjusted course slightly, then accelerated anew. Even as the Spectre's pulse-fired forty-four torpedoes towards its hull...even as the Starbase's phaser banks raked over the Cube. Even as the Steamrunner's torpedoes added to the incoming fire, and the Alsea took out weapons port after weapons port...

" Tactical report! "

The voice of Captain Wyatt boomed across the vast command center now that the gravimetric explosions ceased with their successful evasive flight outside of the Borg's attacking range. The elongated silhouette of the Excelsior refit arced beyond the fixed position of Starbase 10 to double back again at another angle towards the ominous cubic vessel.

" We have received shield frequency protocols from the Wisconsin to reinforce defenses, Captain. " first answered Executive officer Doyle, her anxious eyes fixed to her commanding officer.

" Execute. " immediately ordered Wyatt. " Mister Leong? "

With a slightly panting voice, tactical officer Leong reported as ordered:

" Fleet regrouping to starbase position, Sir, covered by McKenzie, Alsea and Wisconsin; Spectre is positioning for a new attack, all it's fighter squadrons deploying, one pushing through towards the McKenzie, one other veering off to group with the Lotus. All ships suffering at least moderate damage and tactical effectiveness steadily decreasing. Enemy vessel immobilized on target point, fully operational at 74% structural integrity; shields buckling but offensive and propulsion capabilities optimal. However... "

Leong stopped talking, trying to make sense of what his tactical board was registering.

And so were the observers in the command center of Starbase 10:

"They're moving again towards us," called out Ensign Rynn in the silenced command center of Starbase 10. bearing... "

Then, she gasped, keyed frantically on her board then almost jumped out of her seat as she shouted:

" Sir! The Borg are accelerating on a collision course!"

" Dear Heavens! exclaimed the Republic's flight officer Parini at the exact same moment, his face blanching as his voice, they're heading straight at.... "

" Hard to port! " shouted Wyatt gripping the edges of the science console, his arms enclosing Revik as he braced himself against it. The entire bridge inclined itself sharply, pushing them both face first into the console.

The USS Republic banked abruptly to the left, narrowly escaping collision with the cubic behemoth accelerating in a straight course towards them... then beyond them...

"Evasive maneuvers! All ships evasive maneuvers!" Lieutenant Commander Harrison screamed as the massive cube encroached on the starbase. The cube's attack caught Gamma squadron hard. Seven of their fighters were taken out almost immediately while another was hit by debris and sent spinning into the starbase. His own firefly squadron dispersed like a panicked flock of birds.

"Move Port, move Port!" Alan Harriman, Stingray's squadron Lead, screamed as he moved sharply left to avoid the rapidly accelerating Borg cube.

"All hands, brace for emergency maneuvers," N'Eligahn yelled as he put the *Spectre* in as sharp a turn as he dared and switched to full impulse. The massive cube was going straight at the starbase, the view screen displaying the charge in every vivid detail.

The Rethian brought the *Spectre* a bit more distance away before turning her to regroup with the rest of the fleet.

Captain Summers watched in horror as the Cube came crashing into the Starbase Starbase's outer docking ring.

The massive pylons holding the ring in place buckled as the shockwave rippled through the outer ring, duranium and tritanium shrieking in agony as the Borg's flat leading plane continued to devastate the station's ring. An explosion indicated the Cube had indeed fired a projectile at the coordinates of the mythical exhaust port. Lodged where it was, several cutting beams began the task of freeing the Cube by means of dissecting the massive torus.

It was a good thing the Spectre's fighter squadrons had moved when they did: the impact would have annihilated them utterly.

Still, the Cube had been eerily precise and ruthless as it rushed past.

" Akira-class fighter squadrons detected, tricobalt signatures. Responding."

Even as the Lotus intercepted the tractor beam on the Spectre, the Cube fired pinpoint beams of energy at each fightercraft as they revealed themselves. Several of them missed. One or two even fizzled out.

However they were exceptions rather than the rule.

"Keep it loose and form up," Harrison called to his squadron as a large piece of debris from the starbase provided them enough cover to round away from the cube after it slammed fully into the superstructure. Stingray 2 and 5 formed on his wings as again they approached the Lotus.

"Firefly, Gamma, form up, Spectre's three clicks left, all weapons switch to fire," Harrison said. "USS *Spectre*, this is Firefly Lead. We're to match fire with you, just tell us where and what and we'll kick some ass, over."

Of the fighter squadrons deployed by the Spectre, Harriman's team had lost Firefly 9, 10 and 7 in the initial attack and number 3 to debris.

But since they'd already been moving away Stingray squadron escaped relatively unscathed. Only Stingray 4 and 8 fell victim to the Borg's assault. Harriman couldn't see what had happened to any of the other squadrons.

The shock of those two immense masses colliding was horrifying... but still, even less than what was felt in all their minds. The spraying of matter, energy and bodies exploding between them was staggering... but still, even less than that of their thoughts as they all witnessed the unpredictable maneuver.

The only Andorian on the bridge of the flagship USS Lotus, the First Officer was thus the only one to keep his wits in the following seconds; but even he was speechless for a moment despite his physiology: it was already so narrowly focused on the danger anyway that he was just reacting reflexively, even as he shouted:

"Casualties? Mister Smlek, Mister Tomah! Report! "

The angry voice of Lieutenant Kheren suddenly standing up as if about to charge brought everyone back to their senses:

"Ah, Borg Cube, ah, immobilized in Starbase 10's ah, outer ring, following, ah, ramming attack. " first reported Lieutenant Edward Tomah, his peculiar speech pattern even more pronounced in his obvious state of shock. " 19% damage to station, enemy vessel down at, ah, 41% structural integrity. "

"Borg casualties only, Sir... if any. " now added Ensign Smlek looking goggle-eyed at the scanning data while listening to station reports on an enclosed channel. " Starbase 10 was already emptied of all non essential personnel before the attack, and active personnel is concentrated in main command centers of the base. "

What were they trying to do? It makes no sense! thought the tactically-inclined mind of the Andorian. *Unless...unless they thought to get in position for a truly crippling blow... like... what this Captain Sinbad...*

Surprisingly, a half-smile stretched the rigid face of the Acting First Officer as he realized how well Captain Wyatt's deception had worked... Maybe too well...

That shadow of a smile disappeared as fast as it came.

"Damage-report!"

The roar of the Kzinti could barely be heard over the painful shrieks of the Starbase, even as the computer's voice droned on in the background, reporting hull breaches and structural collapses.

Speaker climbed back up into his chair, blood matting his fur in front of his left ear.

Over the chaos of noise, one voice responded:

"Sir, not sure, but... it looks like the Borg rammed us! The outer ring's a mess!"

Female voice. Red hair. Orange-scented perfume...

Lieutenant Rivers.

Speaker was having a hard time seeing. He reached up with annoyance and wiped blood from his eyes.

"Fire Mister-Selcar's plasma torpedoes! Mister-Savok! Engage oscillating tractor beam!"

Unaware of it, the Starbase Captain thanked fate for having sent Lieutenant Jori's team to a cargo bay in the main hull of the Starbase. Still...they'd only *just* repaired the massive hangar doors samaged during the Romulan sneak attack earlier this year.

"I want options, and I want them last Tuesday!"

Admiral Redding lost his footing upon feeling the bone-jarring impact of the cube and slammed his elbow into a console panel.

He knew what happened in an instant, having rammed a ship or two himself.

Pulling himself up painfully, he went over to the damage control station, helping up Ensign Giovanni Picard as he went. The control panel of the Ensign showed him massive damage to the outer ring, just as Lieutenant Rivers gave her report.

Shaken, Speaker-of-Names bellowed out orders.

"Speaker!" Redding shouted out : "I don't suggest torpedoes at point blank range, Captain!"

Unless these modified Torps worked differently, he thought. We'd come off the worse for it.

He glanced back at the panel.

"They're jammed into our forward Ring, witch has been evacuated already... My two cents? Rotate the station... rips their guts out.."

He said the last part through clenched teeth.

"Hard to regenerate what's not part of the ship anymore..."

Soon after the Borg Cube crashed into the station with the impact of a thousand photon torpedoes, and everyone in the operations room were picking themselves off the floor and tending to their injuries, Philter, the holographic Borg, leisurely strolled into the room, seemingly unfazed by the impact or the battle being waged around him. The starbase was fully equipped to allow a holoprogram to walk from room to room by simply transferring control to the computers that existed in the next room. The original program was still stored in the holoprojector in Transporter Room 4, but the program was redirected to the starbase's computers upon activation.

Philter spoke, but not above the din of the Captain growling out orders and Admiral Redding responding to him, along with the many shouts of casualty and damage reports coming from the other officers in the operations room.

"It's interesting that you want the Collective to know about all these tricks you play on them. In a way, it forces you to be more creative and come up with a different set of tricks for each cube. I'm not sure, however, that it is the best time for personal enrichment of your creativity. With all the cubes that have just warped into Federation space, you would have to come up with an average of 4 new plans per second."

As Philter was talking, Sisko half-heard it, but was also focusing on what he was doing and did not fully absorb who was doing the speaking. About halfway through, he turned and realized that Philter was standing before him, yet the initial shock of the sight of a Borg during a Borg invasion took his breath away and his adrenaline levels spiked.

Before he could say "Philter, what are you doing up here?", he heard a shout and saw a phaser beam pass by him and hit Philter square in the chest. The beam split the photons that made his form, which were being redirected from the Operations room computers. But the phaser beam passed through unhindered by the photons, eventually landing on a console being manned by a starbase security officer. He fell out of his seat and turned too see a Borg, causing him to draw his weapon as well.

Before he could fire, however, Sisko bellowed out a command that made everyone in the room seem as if they were posing for a painting.

"HOLD YOUR FIRE!"

"It's a hologram," he continued. He turned to look at a red-faced Petty Officer who holstered his phaser, and who's eyes silently apologized to the security officer across the room that he had almost shot.

He then turned back towards Philter.

"You were asking if we WANTED the Borg to know about our... 'tricks' as you called them?" Sisko asked incredulously.

Philter responded with his usual matter-of-fact attitude with a simple "Yes".

"Well, no... we don't," Sisko responded. Then it hit him like a Larish Pie to the face.

"Of course, they will eventually determine what is happening to them. We need to jam any and all transmissions that could go to their Collective if we want to retain any hope of using these techniques in the future. We can send probes out to jam the Cube's transmissions, but we saw how the Cube adapted to the Lotus' probes and use them against us."

"Captain, he said as he turned towards Captain Speaker-of-Names, recommend we send any probes Starbase 10 has out in all directions. 12.5 degrees of separation would be ideal, if we have enough. They must be over three hundred thousand kilometers away to be out of reach of Borg influence. We'll set all probes to jam every known frequency including natural ones. This means we won't be able to communicate with Starfleet, but I fear we don't have much more to say at this point, anyway, at least until the Cube is destroyed."

Or we are, Sisko didn't say.

" Proceed Ensign-Sisko!" roared the Kzinti captain.

Then Speaker tapped the com panel:

"Ensign-YylNa! Status-report!"

The Veldriari technician stationed to aid Lieutenant Jori replied in a woodwind voice,

"The Project is a bit shaken, but undamaged. I am performing minor repairs to the anti-grav units to adjust misalignments introduced by the heavy shaking."

YylNa quickly glanced at Jori's status and continued:

"Lieutenant Jori's psionic activity is still at high levels, but the para-cortical inhibitor seems to be stabilizing his psionic energy field. Levels are no longer rising. However, Sir, I believe the Starbase's jamming probes are interfering with the fleets telepathic communications systems. We must allow Lieutenant Jori to continue his mission. We will need to bring them offline."

Admiral Redding's voice seemed on the edge of panic as he yelled:

"Philter! I need you to interface with the T.E.D. program currently running in cargo bay 147! I want you to get in there and reinforce our people with the Anti-insurgency program. Remind them who they are, and if you can't do that, send the Borg chasing ghosts!"

Philter looked completely calm in return:

"Admiral, there is no way of insuring that the program would be compatible with the current system parameters. But I speculate..."

But Redding cut him off:

"Just do your best, get going!"

With an odd somewhat annoyed look, the hologram nodded.

"Transferring Philter program to cargo bay 147 now." and faded away.

After Philter left the operations room, Sisko just finished monitoring the jamming probes and, still thinking about the problems in cargo bay 147 and the telepathic takeover operation, he furrowed his brow and said:

"That can't be right. The jamming probes are well beyond the starbase and any of our ships, and they're only configured to form a spherical shield to block outgoing communications. Nothing inside should be disrupted. In other words, it's like the outer hull of a Borg sphere, not a star where the gasses are the jamming signal which would flow all throughout its inner mass."

He turned to Captain Speaker and added:

"Sir, I recommend we maintain the jamming probes, this may be a trick by the Borg to get us to lower it so they can communicate our plans to the rest of the Collective. I will run a diagnostic to make sure no communication is being interfered with inside the jamming field."

" Damage report first, Ensign-Sisko. " ordered the felinoid commander, tail twitching.

The young officer from Bajor started scanning:

"Sir, fifty-three degrees of the outer docking ring has been taken clean away by the Cube and it appears that the forcefields have extended to fill the gaps in the outer hull plating. No casualties reported, due to the fact that the area had been evacuated. The station at a whole is still at 89% structural integrity. Also, I'm reading lifesigns in the outer ring now. The Borg must be transferring over from the Cube where the station ring meets up with it."

By habit, Sisko placed his hand on his phaser and then mused, *But how can we tell if it is the Borg being controlled by Jori's team or not?*

Speaker nodded in Ensign Sisko's general direction:

"Ensign-Sisko: seal off the docking-ring and activate the transporter-inhibitors. We will avoid dealing with the Borg-drones and how to tell them apart for as long as we can. Find out what ships can evacuate us if necessary. Then go to the main hangar and prep the Argo-shuttle."

"Aye, Sir. Docking ring sealed off and transport inhibitors activated. All controls in the outer ring are locked out, and transporter inhibitors may be deactivated from the inner transporter rooms for evacuation."

"Captain Speaker, permission to take command of the Artemis. " now asked the Admiral of the starbase commander. " I captained the USS Response for two years, a rescue and recovery vessel; I know a thing or two about evacuating a station."

His ears flicking as he picked up the sound of the Admiral's voice, Speaker-of-Names answered:

"Admiral-Redding, we won't be able to use the Artemis." The Kzinti groaned as he shook his head. Images were becoming clearer, but still too blurry to trust his eyes. "Her EPS-conduits were fused when a repair-crew triggered an Obsidian-Order trap."

The Captain of Starbase 10 then directed this to Redding:

"Admiral-Redding, Sir, could you begin your evacuation procedures? We will use whatever starship is available..."

"Captain." The voice came from in front of him. Lieutenant Rivers again; "Sir, Steamrunner reports she's ready to evacuate the station on your order."

Speaker's ears flicked in amusement.

"Correction, we will use the Steamrunner."

At this, Sisko asked:

"Sir, do you still want me to contact the other ships as a backup plan, just in case the Steamrunner doesn't make it?"

Speaker nodded to Sisko as he spoke:

"You make a good point. Make the arrangements for multiple ships then, with Steamrunner as the primary vessel."

Captain Speaker-of-Names flicked his tail in frustration. The next decision was one he needed to consider carefully.

Very carefully.

Yylna or Sisko? Whose information would he go with? The Kzinti growled low in his throat, the sound echoing within the chambers of his barrel chest, the knowledge that one way or another he could be dooming the entire Federation with his next command weighing heavily upon him.

"Turn off the jamming-probes," he ordered finally. "We will trust in the telepaths decisions for a little longer."

"Aye Sir," Sisko said, and deactivated the probes. "Probes off."

Then he put in a fleetwide announcement:

" Starbase 10 to all ships. Captain Speaker would like to know which ships besides the Steamrunner will be available to evacuate the base for the final assault. Please acknowledge."

Lieutenant Rivers then spoke up.

"I will coordinate the evacuation, Ensign."

"Yes Sir," Sisko said, and pressed his finger back onto the communications icon. "Ships ready for evacuation, please report to Lieutenant Rivers."

Standing up and tugging on his uniform, he proceeded to the door and turned to Captain Speaker.

"Heading to the main hangar to prep the Argo, as commanded, Sir," and walked out without waiting for an acknowledgement.

As Joey Day Sisko headed to the hangar bay, he heard a feminine yet commanding voice behind him:

"Ensign, wait up!"

Lieutenant Rivers approached him; the smell of her perfume and the movement of her hips as she walked made his heart race slightly. He longed to run his hands through her soft red hair that clearly affirmed some Irish heritage, mixed with the very white skin and blue eyes of Scandanavian descent.

What a time to feel like that, he thought. He turned, in order to appear nonchalant while she fell into step with him.

"I will be coordinating the evacuation from the main hangar too," she said.

Sisko just nodded. They continued to walk at a brisk pace to the hangar and he sensed that she wanted to make small talk, the reason for wanting to catch up to him. He never was very good at that sort of thing. Although he inherited his commanding attitude from his grandfather and mother, he didn't have their social affinity. He was quite shy, like his father, Jake Sisko.

He worked up the courage to ask:

"So how did you come to be on Starbase 10?"

She was silent for a moment, and her brow was furrowed as if she was trying very hard to remember something. She shook it off, grinned at Sisko and answered;

"I've known Captain Speaker for a very long time, almost as long as I can remember. I served under him on the Lotus... Oh, here we are."

As the doors to the main hangar bay slid open, his attempt to get to know her better cut short, Sisko breathed a sigh that was a mixture of disappointment and relief.

"I'll be in the shuttle performing the preliminary launch checklist if you need me," Sisko said as he left her standing alone in the hangar bay to prepare the evacuation.

She spoke into her combadge:

"Lieutenant Rivers to all security personnel. Please begin forming teams of two to escort remaining personnel to the main hangar bay. Leave those in Operations for last."

As the young half-Bajoran walked toward the shuttle, he turned to take a last look at her, and although her back was towards him, she could feel his eyes attempting to penetrate through her uniform. She grinned slightly and wasn't offended. She worked hard to keep her physique and was proud of it.

She also thought he was pretty cute too.

But then, her eyes fell on the external view of the starbase on the monitor in front of her. A mind-boggling view that was retransmitted by the approaching attack cruiser USS Alsea.

The sight on the viewscreen of the USS Alsea made Calderwood Kyran tighten his grip around the arm rest of the command chair he was occupying; this time, not only for his tertiary hull but for the entire three parts of the ship. He could feel the blood rushing through a gash he had sustained from a previous impact, which had caused his head to take a sharp bow on one of the railings.

"What the hell are they doing!" Kyran shouted over the bridge commotion of various klaxons.

The bridge had fallen silent as they witnessed the twisted metals intertwine with one another.

"I want a status report of the Starbase as soon as possible!" Kyran ordered as he wiped his blood stained face on his uniform and choose to shoo away the emergency medical personnel who insisted he stayed still.

A flash of inspiration stuck him:

If the Borg are confused enough to make a huge navigational error such as that then we might have a chance of destroying some of their weapon systems. he thought.

A smirk formed across his face and the gleam in his eyes could almost rival that of the shine of his combadge.

"Time for the vultures to circle" he said still smiling.

His bridge crew all joined his train of thought:

"Helm, I want you to tell the other two sections of the ship our flight plan, Omega Fox-trox 4; We're going to need some fancy flying to pull this off. "

The young woman and the helm nodded and turned around to grace the console with her hands. The Bajoran officer then turned his chair around to the tactical and engineering consoles:

"I'm going to need you to reroute auxiliary power to the weapons systems and charge the phaser coils. "

A nod from one of his engineer crew was all the answer he needed; after all, he did take pride in the ability of his engineering teams.

"Tactical; I'm going to need you to have a keen eye on where your shooting, you're going to only be able to use phasers. "

A puzzled look came back to him.

This ensign must be new to the ship. Kyran thought.

The young Bajoran flashed him a winning smile:

"We're switching to phasers as the impact from torpedoes on the hull of the cube could send shockwaves through its superstructure and damage the starbase further than she already is... and we also have to be careful for possible away teams on the cube. "

The officer nodded his head in acknowledgement.

"Course and flight pattern established Sir" the older woman at the helm announced, much to Kyran's delight. He spun around and thrust his hand forward:

"Engage!" he said, with an exhilaration which almost made him topple forward out of his chair.

The Primary and secondary sections of the Alsea had closed into a tight formation which almost appeared as though they were one ship again. They began their approach to the cube tightly in formation.

The Bajoran was on the edge of his seat. This manoeuvre required precision timing and a close formation. They were heading closer and closer to the Borg hull...

"WARNING COLLISION COURSE" the computer's voice resounded, "IMPACT IN 5 ... 4... 3..."

"NOW" Kyran yelled.

The primary and secondary hulls each rolled out in opposite directions as the tertiary pulled up against the Borg hull. They were a little too close for the computer's liking, but as he knew, you couldn't always play by the rules.

The three sections were sending out short bursts of high powered phaser blasts at various weapons nodes on the Borg cube. A few of them exploded...

...but not all.

As Kyran's section reached the peak of its ascent, it rolled one hundred and eighty degrees to utilise the phaser banks on the top of the hull; so as to not blow out the charged ones on the underside, both the primary and secondary hulls had corresponded with the same manoeuvres, and now that they had made their pass, they were heading for the starbase.

"Helm, loop us back over." Kyran said, feeling a tad bit queasy. Although the artificial gravity was on line, it didn't stop his heart from jumping up into his throat as he watched the ship looped just shy of the starbase.

"Another hundred meters and you would have scratched the paint work." the young man joked aloud to ease the tension on the bridge. "If anyone lost their lunch, blame Ensign Langford's flying."

A laugh or two now helped ease them a little more.

In the McKenzie's sickbay however, nobody was laughing. The voice of the new Chief Medical Officer rose over the din of frantic activity:

"Doctor Bindo to Starbase 10 medical: two to beam directly over."

"Belay that, Doctor," said the starbase's chief surgeon. "The cube just crashed into our outer ring. We're evacuating now."

Jolie's heart sank into the pit of her stomach.

"Understood, Bindo out."

"Her cardiovascular system is starting to fail," Lockhart said in a tight voice.

The doctor's hands flew over the surgical controls, racing the crashing indicators.

"Come on, you can make it. We're not going to let you go without a fight," she called out softly to her patient. She reached into the woman's unconscious mind. Her will to live was flagging. Jolie took precious time to bolster her spirit, working to reattach the tendrils of her soul where they'd broken loose.

Some of the bio-indicators moved up a few notches. The doctor's legs were shaking under her when she came back to herself.

"Chief! Chair for the doctor. Now!" Lockhart barked as he looked up and saw the color had drained from Jolie Bindo's face.

T'Pelin rushed over and slid the chair in behind her, and she sat down with a grateful sigh. Sweat dripped down the side of her face as she concentrated to keep her hands from quivering.

The chief grabbed a small towel and wiped her forehead and face off.

"Thanks," the Betazoid doctor said.

"Doctor Bains never would have done something that risky," the head nurse muttered as he continued applying burn treatments.

Jolie kept her eyes focused on the surgical console. Her voice was iced steel:

"I would hardly expect an Andorian to attempt a Betazoid healing technique, *Ensign*. We can discuss it in committee when we finish saving lives here. This is *my* sickbay, now. Twenty-five more of Kelotane and fifteen of Triox. Turn her on her right side now so I can reach her back."

Lockhart complied in silence.

Ensign Tenax rushed into sickbay with a Bolian man lying on the lift, deep blue from shock. Rivulets of sapphire blood streamed off his face.

"Gage tended the minor injuries," she explained as she passed by Jolie to the last empty biobed. "He ran aft to see about injuries in the reactor section. Aldell here took a hard shot to the chest. He has some heart damage along with the rib fractures. The head wounds are minor for him, but he's lost a lot of blood. His cobalocyte level's pretty low. He's had 50cc of inaprovaline, and I've got him on 100% oxygen."

She raised the lift to the level of the biobed, and Ensign Rotureau helped her gently slide the injured man over.

Doctor Bindo blew out a breath.

"OK. Get a full cardioscan. Give him 2 units of cobalocytes. If his CPK levels come back high, give another 50 of inaprovaline. If he crashes, put him in the stasis unit. Transporting him to SB 10 is out."

The indicators crept up as Jolie rushed to reach healthy tissue in all the burned areas. T'Pelin brought over skin grafts as the doctor called for them, and the three worked in tandem to cover the wide swathes of raw tissue. The nurse ran a dermal regenerator over each section of graft that Jolie laid down, coaxing the underlying tissue to knit together with the new sheets of skin.

Jolie moved the surgery console out of the way when they finished, and looked up at the bio-indicators. Most were still in the red zone, but were rising slowly rather than falling. The doctor allowed a small smile to flit across her lips.

"Dermaplast on her chest and back, please. Lockhart, let me know instantly if those vitals go down."

"Aye, Doctor."

She inserted her hands into the disinfecting biofilter before checking on D'Nenda.

"No hemorrhage, Doctor," Rotureau reported.

"Thank the Gods for small favors, keep him sedated and repeat the neural scan in an hour. We'll see how it's going then." Bindo said. "Tenax, what's the word on that CPK?" She walked over to her Bolian patient.

"3582, Doctor," Tenax said in a tense voice.

The Betazoid woman shook her head back and forth once at the news.

"Sky high. I don't like it. 5cc Cordrazine and get me the cardiac regenerator now."

Gage called over the comm.

"We have five injuries, Doctor, pretty minor. I'm bringing them to the mess hall for further treatment."

"Acknowledged, Gage," Jolie answered. "Sickbay to Captain. I have two critically injured, one in stable condition, and five more with minor injuries. We've converted the mess hall to a triage area. Our patients are going to need some other advanced medical center as soon as the battle's over since SB10's not an option now."

The doctor brushed sweaty strands of auburn hair off her face and went to work on her Bolian patient.

"Understood Doctor." Daniel Crist replied.

And this is but one battle... he thought grimly, not knowing why he felt so much foreboding in his mind.

* * *

The mind of Braedon Jori approached the presence of Sedín, the Borg Queen, slowly. but with purpose.

"There is so much desire inside you. Too much longing for one person to bare."

He slowly began putting up telepathic walls and mental blockers.

"It must be infuriating to be so powerful and yet so lonely."

She turned her face to the side to look away, disappointed with the delay in her plans. Braedon continued moving closer toward her until he was within arm's reach. He reached out, took her hand, and tried to catch her eyes.

"Let me give you a moment of peace."

He placed his hand lightly against her cheek, the way a father would his child and turned her face to meet his gaze.

Sedín mentally shuddered, pulling away from the touch of this Starfleet Lieutenant. Yet even as she did so, her mind was still partly elsewhere, commanding her fleet of Cubes.

For a lesser mind, it would be an impossible task. But for her, it was no different than for a human to command all the cells in their arm and hand to pick up a glass.

Adapting the mental assault the Federation used against her Collective was no more trouble. It was a fine tool that served her as well as it had been intended to serve this Betazoid. Better in fact.

For while he had led a team to rip the Cube attacking his insignificant little station from her control, she had gained the knowledge of how to telepathically attack the Federation.

She was not a telepath herself. She had, however, assimilated a great many telepaths over the years. While this Lieutenant Jori continued talking...continued assaulting...she wrestled control of the Cube he was using from him again, this time with the force of her telepathic drones behind the attack.

The telepathic takeover was backfiring under the ancient mind of the Borg Queen. Beyond her own Collective, she was now exerting her implacable will on the most sensitive and powerful minds nearest to her connecting vessel: those of Lotus Fleet.

* * *

On board the closest ship to the Republic and the cube, the USS Lotus, Doctor Darum Bains himself had the back of his mind whispering to him; but he shrugged it off, seeing all the lives that were now resting in his hands. Reflexively, his mind had reacted to his entire Andorian physiology in its typical peculiar channeling of hormones and vital energies towards the source of immediate tension and danger; body and mind were deeply and exclusively focused on the challenge before him: saving lives.

There was no place for anything else in his mind.

He activated his combadge:

"This is a shipwide announcement: sickbay has been relocated to Cargo Bay 2. All personnel requiring medical assistance are to proceed to Cargo Bay 2." announced Doctor Darum Bains over the comm systems.

Bains and the rest of the Lotus Medical Personnel were working tirelessly in Cargo Bay 2. They had managed to recover most of the patients, but some had been lost. There had been an attempt to remove those patients requiring intense medical care, but had been unable to transport any successfully. Fewer patients were entering the makeshift sickbay now, but supplies were short and the work was tedious without complex medical consoles.

With the EMH out, the Andorian doctor had barely any medical assistance. He hadn't heard from the bridge and some time since their urgent call, and began to wonder what was going on. The wrenching feeling in his gut told him he wouldn't like it.

"Bains to the Bridge." he communicated, "Can I get an update on the situation? Is there any other way we can assist?"

" This is the bridge. " answered the First Officer: " Hope you have things in hand down there because the Borg just rammed the starbase. Prepare for a possible heavy influx of casualties: we may also have wounded pilots beamed directly over to you. Following emergency protocols, you are given full use of cargo bays 1 and 2 and the mess hall and can requisition all non combat personnel for medical assistance. Bridge out."

As if on cue, a communication came in.

"Star Base 10 Medical to USS Lotus Medical. We are evacuating, beaming additional patients to your location. Do we have clearance?"

Doctor Bains tapped his communicator:

"Yes, beam them to the area within the transporter enhancers in Cargo Bay 2. We require additional equipment, can you compensate?" He replied.

"Yes, supplies and patients en route." Replied the Starbase.

First the patients arrived, followed by the supplies. The majority of the wounds consisted of cuts, burns, or bruises. However, some of the other wounds consisted of anoxia and severe punctures or fractures.

As one of the Vulcan crewmembers was leaving the improvised sickbay with the aid of a security officer, he grabbed her phaser and shot her in the chest.

The Vulcan took aim at another crewmember, but Bains was faster and had already stunned him before he fired.

"Take him to the Brig. I want updates as they come." Ordered Bains

"Sir, Nurse Waja is dead. The phaser was set to kill." Informed one of the crewmembers.

Damn! Thought Bains. *Things are getting worse. What had made a Vulcan act so irrationally?*

He noticed a patient staring at the body.

"Is everything ok?" Asked the Doctor.

The Napean continued to stare.

The doctor suddenly understood. He knew Napeans were telepathic... and so were Vulcans... and that nagging feeling at the back of his mind...

Kheren had barely closed the inner comm channel when the new Chief Medical officer called right back.

Maybe he had noticed Kheren hadn't given any name while talking to him...

"Bains to the bridge; have you been having any trouble with telepathic crewmembers?" Said Darum through his combadge.

That's when the First Officer of the Lotus noticed for his part was how stationary they were.

In front of him, Lieutenant Azji seemed completely paralysed, his eyes leveled with the viewing screen showing the Borg Cube imbedded in the starbase's outer ring.

" Helm! Lieutenant Azji! *Lieutenant!* " now shouted the Andorian gripping both armrests of his exec chair.

But the Betazoid pilot wasn't responding.

he wasn't even blinking.

And at the same instant, on board the USS Republic, science officer Revik was reporting:

" Telepathic assault ongoing... Sir. "

The Vulcan's voice was distant, his gaze unblinking, as if he was distracted, his mind elsewhere... His cold voice was sounding almost mechanical as he continued:

" Biowarfare attack compounding systemic malfunction of the Borg ship as nanoprobes infiltrate the... Collective's... couns...cious... "

Then, he was silent, unmoving, like someone hypnotized...

The Captain of the Republic bolted out of his chair to go to the science station, his face etched with concern:

" Revik! *Revik!* Lieutenant! Snap out of it! "

But before the Vulcan could react or Wyatt grab him to shake him out of his trance, a voice resounded over the bridge's speakers left open to all fleet channels:

As someone talking in his sleep, science officer Revik, still seemingly paralyzed, droned in a lifeless, toneless voice:

" Resistance has and will always be futile. "

In Starbase 10's command center tactical screen, those same words were repeated in a slow, lifeless monotone by the Vulcan ensign Savok, staring unblinking beyond his console.

But in the raucous of the Borg ramming, the evacuation and red alert condition, nobody heard.

Mechanically, his hands put the tractor beams of the station offline.

As if controlled by the same puppeteer, those of Vulcan Science Officer Revik on board the Republic also flew over his own console.

At the same moment, the voice of the Chief Engineer of the USS Republic rose in alarm:

" Captain! I'm reading a command code for a warp core overload! "

Captain Wyatt didn't ask where it came from, or which code it was; there were only four people with the proper command codes: and right in front of him, he was looking at Second Officer Revik running his fingers on his console... without looking at it.

He grabbed the Vulcan's slender wrists... but he was not strong enough to move them away.

The same sense of growing helplessness gripped all the other starship crews.

" There is nothing we can do, please continue to brace, Sir," Re'tok said to everyone in the hangar bay of the USS Spectre.

The last thing to move was the charred hulk of the *Atrato*. The *Cuanza's* sister ship first fell onto its side then started moving down the flight line and straight for the *Cuanza*. At the last second it collided with another piece of debris and spun around. It slammed into the bottom of the *Cuanza* before it tumbled out into open space.

A few moments later the force field was restored and the hangar bay doors sealed shut.

"Hangar repressurizing, please stand by," the computer said.

"Well, that was certainly, interesting," Reynolds said.

"Indeed, though admittedly I do not care to repeat it. Let...us..." Re'tok's voice trailed off.

Something was not right...

An odd tickle began at the base of his skull and traveled up into his head. If he didn't know any better, he'd say it was the sound of a small river rushing past. Someone or some thing was attempting to get into his mind.

He began erecting mental barriers, but then the bubbling sound gave rise to a new one, like dozens...no...hundreds... thousands of voices speaking...

"You all right?" Reynolds asked. He waved a hand in front of Re'tok's face but got no response. "Ensign?"

The torrent of voices seemed to barge past his mental barriers and there was nothing he could do about it. A voice, louder than the others spoke in his mind and Re'tok found himself repeating the same phrase out loud.

"I am the beginning without end. " he said, stunning Reynolds.

Re'tok's voice wasn't entirely his anymore:

"I am the beginning without end. Everywhere and nowhere. The one without form..."

Reynolds opened the main hatch out of the *Cuanza*.

"Hey, I need a medic in here," he called.

"All hands, brace for emergency maneuvers," yelled a voice over the shipwide communication channels.

Re'tok recognized it but for some reason couldn't place it.

He felt something harden in the pit of his stomach... an emotion he thought he'd left behind decades ago.

Fear.

They are here.

Re'tok's mind was chaos. Every time he tried to erect a barrier to stop the mental onslaught, the voices would tear it down and plunge deeper into his psyche.

He was moving now and not of his own accord. His eyes were focused forward but he caught movement in his peripheral vision.

"Where are you going?" Lieutenant Reynolds asked.

Re'tok didn't respond. Instead he reached up and removed his combadge. The device clanked to the floor of the hangar.

Two more officers took up a synchronized step behind him as they exited the hangar. The Vulcan was being led somewhere and he couldn't stop himself.

They met a second group in the corridor, a group of four led by a young Betazoid woman. Her eyes stared vacantly ahead. For a brief moment their eyes met and a mutual feeling of terror shot through them like electricity.

Illogical! Illogical! his mind screamed.

The larger group rounded the corner and walked for a few more moments until they reached what the Vulcan officer innately knew was their destination: main medical.

The doors hissed open and a relatively young-looking man approached them with a smile.

"Please state the nature of the med..."

"Computer," Re'tok said. His voice was eerily detached from his own. "Terminate EMH program." The man disappeared but an angry nurse appeared from around the corner.

"What the hell do you think you're..."

Re'tok tossed her into the wall.

Behind him, the six other officers went through the wounded in sickbay, collecting combadges and phasers. The Betazoid woman sealed the door shut behind them.

He had to stop this. Now.

Re'tok set up the last of his mental defenses. He froze mid-stride. The sound in his head rose to a crescendo as it tried to move past the last attack. A new voice rose above the din. This one was calm and collected.

You are chaos, the voice said. Why fight the rise of order?

The Betazoid now had moved over to the replicator and was rapidly typing in a string of commands and requests.

"You do not seek order, you seek control," Re'tok said, finally in control of his own voice. "I cannot allow that."

He concentrated harder and was amazed to find he was pushing the noise in his head back.

"You will not prevail."

Perhaps not now, but our victory is inevitable, the voice said.

The Vulcan now saw the Betazoid replicating hypospray vials of some sort of dark substance. It felt like something dropped a heavy rock into his stomach, but his life-taught reasoning prevailed.

"As long as there is free-will, free-thought, then there will always be resistance to you," he said.

He could move his fingers now, a bit more effort and he'd regain full control.

"That is simple logic."

The Betazoid picked up one of the hypos. Her movements were slow and mechanical, her hands shaking. She placed the hypo to her throat and injected its contents. After a brief moment black veins began to expand from the point of injection.

Re'tok felt a lump grow in his throat. That was why they were led to medical.

They were manufacturing nanoprobes.

" There is a sudden high intensity power allocation increase in sickbay, Sir. " reported at this very moment Chief engineer O'Conner, frowning.

" Ship Satus, Mister N'Eligahn. " requested the commanding officer of the Spectre.

The Rethian still looked straight at the viewer as he answered:

"Sir, she's still flying fine, recommend..." his voice trailed off.

He felt an odd tickle at the base of his skull. The last time he'd felt it was on the... his eyes widened in fear.

The USS Tempest.

He shut his eyes for a moment and blocked every possible entry into his mind.

"Sir, there's no time to explain, send a shipwide message: anyone with any empathic ability whatsoever needs to block it out. Now!" he yelled.

Kelsey Alther looked at N'Eligahn funny before grabbing its head in pain and falling over. The androgyn let out one swear word before slipping out of consciousness.

Kelsey woke in a strange structure.

Looking around the tactical officer of the Spectre noticed something:

This looks like Borg Technology.

As the Kalthurian examined a wall closely, it looked down to see what looked like a dead drone. Then, as the Ensign knelt down, the entire room changed to that of the USS Tempest's interior.

" What the hell?" said the blue-skinned officer walking down the hallways, before N'Eligahn came down the hall.

" N'Eligahn! " Kelsey yelled with a smile; but then, the androgyn noticed something:

The Rethian had his left eye replaced with a bionic one and he had veins coursing all over his body.

Ensign Alther's jaw dropped as it whispered "No" before seeing itself walk around the corner; but this time, the tactical officer of the Spectre did not have free will.

A massive drone voice could be overheard:

"We are the Borg, You will be assimilated, Kelsey Alther" the voice said as Kelsey turned around... and the rest of the Spectre crew, already having being infected by the Borg, came marching towards the lone Ensign.

Alther paused for a moment, remembering what it was doing before...

" This is not real! " yelled the androgyn, at the same time triggering mental barriers and breaking free of the illusion.

Kelsey woke up violently, stumbling back to the tactical console.

"Ow" the Kalthurian said, rubbing its temple with its left hand while its right supported it. Kelsey looked around and everyone and nothing had changed much.

Must have only been out for a few seconds Ensign Alther thought, then asked the crew with a half hearted smile :

"Did I miss anything?"

N'Eligahn turned towards Kelsey. The Kalthurian's collapse had caused all sorts of alarms to ring in his head but when it shot them the half-hearted smile, he allowed himself a sigh of relief.

Just then, Kelsey Alther, standing behind the tactical station overlooking the bridge, realized something:

" The Borg are targeting those with mental abilities."

The androgyn's hand went down towards it's own phaser.

"Captain, aren't you Betazoid?"

Captain Summers grabbed the sides of his head and fell to his knees screaming.

As his screaming subsided, he heard voices in his head, hundreds of them as one came over all:

"Resistance is Futile. You will adapt to service us. Your biological distinctiveness will be added to our own. Your failure here will be a model for others to not resist us."

Summers stood up with no control over his own body, moving slow and robotic towards the Helm.

Kelsey drew the phaser and fired at Daniel Summers directly in the back.

But he kept going as if he had not been shot by a third level stun setting at all.

The adrogyn swore as the Captain picked up N'Eligahn and tossed him over the console towards it's station and O'Conner's.

Grabbed by the shoulders and lifted from his seat, the Rethian was thrown backwards, slamming into the tactical control arch and flying over the top of it, his body impacting Kelsey hard. The two of them landed on the floor with a sharp thud as the tactical officer let out a sharp yelp of pain.

The Kalthurian had tried to move out of the way but the Rethian's body connected and they both went down, Kelsey's head striking the ground.

The blue-skinned Ensign gasped as N'Eligahn's Headspines punctured it's chest and struck ribs, along with it's head cracking on the floor of the bridge. Kelsey groaned, trying to shove N'Eligahn aside before it fell unconscious from the pain all over it's body.

O'Conner watched as Commander Summers tossed N"Eligahn across the bridge like he was a rag-doll. He flinched a bit as he saw the spiky Rethian land on the blue-skinned tactical officer.

Then, one hand slid to his console and, with a few quick commands, he had ordered a medical team to the bridge... while his other hand moved to the modified phaser rifle at his side.

Captain Daniel Summers turned and faced the rest of the bridge crew.

"Resistance is Futile. "

* * *

Elsewhere in the vastness of space, far away, the USS Titan, Luna-class vessel, swerved and ran, her damaged starboard nacelle trailing a volatile cloud of plasma. Forty-one dead already on the vessel. Swooping into view behind them came three Borg Tactical Cubes, one of them harried by a school of "jellies" - those beings that they'd originally encountered on the Enterprise at Farpoint, then again out by the gigantic propldy entity they'd discovered many years back. They had wanted to express their friendship by helping in the dire struggle.

And so, their massive, tentacled jellyfish forms were shooting powerful beams at the Borg vessels that dwarfed them despite their size five times more massive than the biggest Starfleet vessel,

"Captain," Came Deanna Troi's voice, strained and distant, somewhat sing-songy.

The Titan's Captain, William T. Riker, looked at her, worry creasing his features even as the ship rocked from another blast. The jellies were doing all they could, but this was likely to be the end of their explorations.

"What is it? If the Jellies are getting too hurt, tell them to-"

She shook her head, and winced.

"Will. It's the Borg. They're attacking us."

"Yeah, I noticed." Captain Riker braced himself as another torpedo punched into their hull. The console behind him exploded with the EPS overload, launching the crewman stationing it into the viewscreen. The lights went out, shortly followed by dim red emergency lighting coming online. The Titan couldn't take another shot like that.

"No, I mean us." Her voice was drifting further away, even though she sat at his side."...the telepaths and empaths. Get security to-"

She trailed off, and stared blankly forward towards the screen.

* * *

"I know you, Braedon Jori. I know what you're trying to do."

Her essence whirled at him, shredding at his mind with her insanity.

"It is FUTILE!" Futile. futile. resistance is futile. Your biological and...

Then, a booming laugh.

Your desperation has given me access to your fleet. Know the minds of those you've betrayed!"

Flashes of images.

Kelsey Alther running through the corridors of the destroyed USS Tempest.

Daniel Summers hurling N'Eligahn Etarudbo across the bridge of the Spectre.

Lieutenant Azji staring at the nav console of the USS Lotus, a mental war raging within the Betazoid pilot.

Hyposprays filled with replicated Borg nanoprobes.

Vulcan hands touching in the necessary codes to begin an overload of the Republic's warp core.

Still, the essence of the Borg could not keep other images from flooding in as well:

Alsea's daredevil point-blank phaser delivery.

The irritation Sedín felt at being unable to escape the Wisconsin's attack.

The takeover of the Borg Cube's surviving drones was almost complete.

The knowledge that the secondary collective that Jori's team had formed would die, as she willed the disobedient Cube to its destruction, an explosion that would take out Starbase 10 and every ship in the area.

The Take-over teams would see it at the moment the command arrived, a directive sent to every member of the Borg vessel's crew: Sedín's command to the Cube to self-destruct.

She needed only one loyal drone to carry out the order.

* * *

Resistance has and will always be futile, the voice said.

He watched as one of the officers injected themselves with the nanoprobes before leaning over and injecting the unconscious nurse. They began moving down the line of wounded. Anyone who tried to move was held down and injected.

"I believe you have been," Re'tok said, "and always will be, mistaken."

He would stop this, they had to at least find out on the bridge.

One of the other officers approached him, the dark veins already spreading on his face. He was holding the hypospray in his right hand and brought it up towards Re'tok.

At the last second, the Vulcan dodged to the side, narrowly avoiding the injection. He threw the officer aside and grabbed one of the phasers that had been confiscated from the wounded. Re'tok aimed and fired, first hitting the Betazoid then two others before he aimed at the replicator. The blast blew one of the other officers through the glass between main medical and the chief medical officer's office.

The five remaining rounded on him. One tore the phaser from his hand while two more threw him to the ground. Two more officers held him down as the first one reached for a hypo spray.

Re'tok stretched his fingers towards the phaser.

As the hypo neared his throat, he wrapped his fingers around the phaser and set it to overload. Using his last ounce of strength, he shook off the five men pinning him and, as they jumped again on him, flung the phaser into the air.

The resulting explosion blew him and everyone else in main medical to the four corners of the room in a terrible, blinding flash.

Damage control teams have put out fires on deck 6, 8, 12 and in the hangar bay. But our hangar is out of operation." then reported Chief Engineer O'Conner to the rest of the bridge crew.

Ensign N'Eligahn Etarubdo, the Rethian Chief of Ops turned back to his console to see a small stream of messages appear.

"People are abandoning their posts and wandering through the passageways," he said. "They all seem to be heading towards one location..." he typed in a series of commands. "Sir, I've lost contact with main medical."

On the bridge, Chief of Security and Tactical Kelsey Alther activated its combadge after noticing on the ship situational board an explosion in main medical.

"Security Teams 1 through 5, head to Main Medical and wait outside for Arizhel."

Kelsey turned to the security assistant:

"I want you to coordinate the teams."

Arizhel nodded as she walked into the turbolift and the doors shut.

Alther read the reports on the console:

"Captain, there was phaser discharges and also a phaser overload explosion in the medical bay. Security teams on their way."

And it didn't take no longer than for Arizhel to get down there for such precautions to prove themselves justified.

"Keep firing!" Arizhel yelled as the security teams were immediately attacked by Borgified crewmembers. The security teams had just arrived when many spectre crew who had been infected had begun appearing outside of main medical.

Arizhel threw her phaser rifle at them after they had adapted to all its frequencies before pulling out her Mek'Leth and charge into the drones, bowling a few over.

She picked up her phaser rifle again and set it to overload, yelling:

"Computer! set up a level 5 forcefield in this corridor!"

Then, she immediately managed getting up to jump into main medical.

She stood up and noticed there was several hyposprays of some dark fluid in the hands of other zombie-like crewmen. Arizhel, instead of questioning anything, picked up her Mek'Leth and attacked the hypospray holders. She managed to dodge the hyposprays but only barely before they were all dead.

Arizhel turned around to see more Borg drones coming towards her.

She quickly tapped her combadge :

"Security Teams, get in here now!" she yelled as the drones continued their march.

They had just extended their arms to her as loud shots rang out and they fell to the floor, with Devna behind them holding a TR - 116.

Arizhel smiled as she activated again her combadge:

"Main Medical secure, Chief Alther. Vulcan and Betazoid crewmen were replicating Borg nanoprobes and infecting others. Send some more medical staff. We have a lot of wounded down here" she said as she looked at the carnage in the room.

She saw a horribly injured Vulcan and, noticing him from the bridge, tried to use her basic Starfleet knowledge of first aid to help him. Devna directed the security teams that had just managed to get in after fighting off the last of the Borg to defensive positions, and a few to help with the wounded.

Over ship comm was heard:

"Alther to all decks; any available, please head to main medical. We have wounded there."

Onboard the nearby USS McKenzie's own sickbay, Doctor Jolie Bindo suddenly dropped to her knees as the mental attack finally extended to Captain Crist's ship and lanced through her paracortex.

She grabbed the sides of her head and howled. She heard a loud clatter from the lab and T'Pelin's gasps, but the pain held her in a tight grip and wouldn't let her move to help the fallen Vulcan.

Lockhart ran over to the doctor and pulled out a tricorder.

"Tenax—go check T'Pelin."

Tenax grabbed another tricorder and rushed to the lab.

"Doctor! What's happening?" Lockhart asked as he knelt down over her.

Jolie curled up into a tight ball. All her muscles were shaking.

"Oh Gods, my head! Make them stop! Make them stop!"

"Make who stop, Doctor? Your paracortical readings are off the charts. I'm giving you some synaptizine and hydrocortilene now. Captain: we have an emergency in sickbay. Doctor Bindo and Chief T'Pelin have collapsed."

Jolie Bindo didn't even feel the hyposprays. She just knew some moments later that she'd stopped shrieking. She threw up mental blocks to stop the Borg assault and gulped for air as her heart raced. She didn't have the strength to brush off Lockhart as he put an oxygen mask on her. She started trembling, and the nurse pulled a warmed blanket out of the heater and spread it over her.

"Lockhart...Tell the captain...Borg attacking telepathically...millions..."

Sweat trickled across the betazoid doctor's face. She squeezed her eyes shut against the minds ripping at hers, trying to steal away her individuality. An eternity of anguish passed, and then suddenly was gone.

Jolie gasped in relief as the pain evaporated. They hadn't taken her. Her lids fluttered a few times, and she squinted up at Lockhart.

Concern furrowed his brow. "Feeling better?"

"Oh, Gods, did they get anyone else?"

"What do you mean?"

"T'Pelin? Any other telepaths on the ship? Did the Borg get them? I got the mind blocks up just in time, but they might not have."

"T'Pelin's unconscious, but it looks like she's stabilizing. We haven't heard about the others, yet. "

" What is going on there, report!" Captain Crist ordered from the bridge.

Lockhart said:

"Sickbay to Captain. The doctor says she's under some kind of telepathic assault by millions of Borg. "

Jolie bindo fought through the fog of the receding pain and medications. Her voice sounded thick to her as she spoke:

"Computer. Locate all telepaths and empaths. Captain. Send security teams and first aid to all of them. The Borg may have taken them over. If any of them acts unusually, stun them immediately."

A moment later, Lockhart replied to the Captain's order to report;

"I believe the Borg are attacking telepathically, Sir."

The Captain thought for a moment and quickly gave out his new orders.

"Mister Hughes, belay that last order and stay behind the Starbase. Mister Selcar, disengage the armor and raise shields. Mister Sorripto, activate your shield enhancements to lessen the effects of the Borg shield disrupters. Hughes, once the main shields are up, carry out my order to return to the battle."

Acting quickly Sorripto entered the information at his console. Rerouting the power was easier then he thought, but combining his shield modulations with the standard Starfleet systems was giving him pause. Pounding his fist on his console he shouted:

"Damn system can't handle it. I've seen Galor class ships with an easier interface then this."

Looking at Beren next to him, obviously upset by this Cardassian with a working knowledge of both Starfleet and Cardassian ships, Sorripto smiled:

" Remind me when this is over that this system needs an upgrade."

Typing back at his console, the Cardassian rerouted power through the secondary subsystems, quickly reconfiguring his new modified power output to shield modulation. Thinking, he quickly used the replicator systems' secondary charges and routed them through the tachyon filters on the deflector array. Realizing it was working, he finished routing the shield modulation through the replicators.

" Sir our modified shields are up and running. That should do it..."

A brief smirk crossed Sorripto's face.

" I just wouldn't order a salad anytime soon, if I were you."

As the McKenzie's Armor retracted and the shield became active, the McKenzie left the cover of the Starbase, with the Epsilon squadron in tight formation. The formation of the McKenzie and the fighters swung around and started there new attack on the cube, with full phasers.

Like the McKenzie, the USS Steamrunner was at the same instant circling the ravaged starbase like a wounded hawk.

Helm, bring us about." Captain Ramabai said as he gazed intently at the viewscreen and the destroyed section of the docking ring.

Such carnage! Such senseless carnage!

"Chief, get me Captain Speaker. Let him know we can begin evacuating the Starbase as soon as he's ready."

The bridge about him smoldered and smoked, but his was a tough ship. Every Steamrunner since his was renowned for their durability; and it was of his ship that they were based on. He was willing to bet that his ship was the most intact out of the entire task force.

Still, that wasn't a thing to be happy about.

A sentiment shared by the commander of the USS Wisconsin closing in. A similar thought nipped at the edge of the mind of the Captain of the USS Wisconsin as her Deltan passions swirled.

Cube crashing...why...it's not normal, even for a damaged cube....

Captain Onia sat down in her command chair of the USS Wisconsin, stunned for a second at the sight of the Borg cube crashed into the outer ring of the starbase, as if it were in some bizarre, violent mating ritual.

There was complete silence on the bridge for a long moment except for the beeping of various consoles and the red alert claxon. The captain gathered her wits quickly:

"Damage report, Gleck,"

Her First Officer answered:

"The outer ring was evacuated. No Starfleet casualties reported, but they're at 89% structural integrity. The Borg cube is down to about 40% integrity, Captain."

"Tractor beam on the Borg vessel. I don't want that cube moving so much as a nanometer closer to that station. Configure our shield disruptor to match the Borg frequency and shut it down. Ready all weapons for my mark."

"Aye, Captain," called out the tactical officer.

Commander Gleck said:

"Captain, if we use torpedoes at this close a range to the Starbase, it'll tear her apart."

"I know, Gleck. I want them ready if the Borg are idiotic enough to risk gutting themselves in a full reverse maneuver."

Phasers streaked out from the Wisconsin in angry yellow lines that raked the surface of the Borg ship as the shield disruptor took effect. The Borg ship returned fire in sporadic spurts as their weapon systems failed under the internal and external attacks.

"Our shields are holding at 72%, Captain," said the security chief.

Gleck watched a console and called out:

"Shields decreasing from 55% to 34%...28%...17%...9%...facing shields are down, Captain!"

Onia stood and stabbed a finger at the Borg ship.

"Full power to phasers. Fire every single one NOW."

The energy beams of the stardrive section of the Wisconsin struck the colossal cube who curiously looked as if it was starting to shake under the impacts.

Onboard the starship Republic, flying near the nebula stardrive, another battle was ongoing:

" Computer! Lock down science station, priority command Wyatt One One Nine ! "

" Priority command on voice recognition confirmed. " responded the calm soft voice of the ship's computer. At the exact same moment, the board before the dazed science officer went completely dark and silent.

" Chief! "

" Countermanding Revik's command input, Sir; power levels returning to nominal. " almost sighed the engineer. " A few seconds more and he would have encrypted it... "

" Security! interrupted the Captain, still holding the Vulcan's hands. Revik stayed there, unmoving, gazing at emptiness; "Relieve Mister Revik and confine him to sickbay.."

He then tapped hard on his combadge:

" Doctor Quasst! Lieutenant Revik is in some sort of a trance that made him almost destroy the ship! "

" Understood Captain." answered the bubbly voice of the Denobulan chief medical officer. " We have similar reports from all over the ship coming in about our few telepathic crewmembers. They tried to access replicators but they're all offline of course... except here... "

" I'm sending him down... "

" No need to overcrowd us, Captain. You can treat him immediately yourself: slap him. "

" What? "

" He's a Vulcan: they use physical pain to snap out of trances. Slap him... hard. "

Wyatt, frowning, lifted a hand to stop the bridge's security guards from taking Revik into the turbolift. He went in front of the hypnotized science officer and looked into his unblinking dark eyes. For a moment, he just stood there in front of him.

" Sorry Revik... Doctor's orders... "

And he slapped him... hard.

Again... and again... and...

A powerful grip caught his wrist on the return slap, right in mid-flight.

" Thank you, Sir... I'm fine now. "

Wyatt looked for a long moment at Revik, unsure; but the light in the black pupils was back, and he knew his friend was fully himself again.

" Sorry about that... I wasn't sure it would work... "

" Your... ministrations themselves... seemed pretty convinced... Sir. "

" How are you feeling, Mister Revik?" now asked Wyatt, concern etched on his face as much as in his voice.

" I'm fully functional, Sir. " stoically answered the Vulcan.

" No after effect of your... *seance*? "

" My mental barriers are fully up, Sir. The fringe effect of the telepathic takeover will not catch me by surprise again, " stated Revik with calm assurance.

" You still have enough juice to keep them up? " wondered Wyatt still.

" Captain; mental barriers are not some energy shield like that of a ship. They are simple mental processes. Vulcans, Betazoids and other telepathically endowed races usually drill themselves in this because of natural necessity and through rigorous training. They are simple background mental exercises that cuts off insinuating thoughts, be they from internal and external source. "

" Sounds handy... whatever that means. " commented the helmsman without moving his eyes from the viewer. " Think you could teach us someday... or is it only one of those Vulcan things again? "

" Easy enough, even for you, Mister Parini. " said the Vulcan, coming back to the familiar banter with his fellow officers. " Recite in your head the multiplication table backwards, or a poem, over and over, each time you get in and out of bed, until you can do it effortlessly. Then you'll do it in the back of your mind while going about your duties with little effort. "

" Yeah... a Vulcan thing." sneered the pilot.

" It does require some minimal brain power. " flatly commented Revik to no one in particular.

" OK People, let's now concentrate on the job at hand. " softly ordered Captain Wyatt. Through his eyes, it was evident his own mind was visibly fully concentrating.

All the while, the sudden immobility of the flagship on the viewing screen did not escape the vigilance of the bridge officers of the Republic.

What are they doing? wondered Adam Wyatt.

But then, tactical officer Leong's voice rang out:

" Sir! I read a power surge! "

The Captain spun around on his heels and almost ran to the engineering station:

" Chief! I thought you had that overload command code disabled! "

" Not from us. Sir! Answered again Leong: from the Borg Cube! "

Now they were all looking at the main viewer and the terrible scene of the monstrous cubic vessel imbedded in the starbase's outer ring, the McKenzie with a squadron of Peregrines straffing freely it's damaged outer shell with phasers. No weapon fire was coming out of it now... but lights were pulsing everywhere on it's battered surface.

" My... *God...* " whispered Wyatt.

They were all transfixed for a moment before the tactical officer spoke again, looking at a blinking light near his console's tactical screen:

" Sir? The Lotus... it's moving into a collision course with the Borg! "

Wyatt went back to his command seat, fists straight at his sides, growling:

" What are these idiots trying to do? Precipitate the explosion? Mister Revik: tractor beams now! "

" Sir, we can not immobilize a ship at full impulse... " started to explain the Vulcan coming back at his own station. But Wyatt turned angrily to him:

" Slap some sense back into them! "

The entire Intrepid class starship suddenly banked so hard that everyone gripped his chair to avoid falling off.

Everyone but Kheren.

He was already aware of the pilot's abnormal behavior well before Azji turned the ship around, towards the gigantic Borg vessel jammed into the external structure of starbase 10. When the Lotus moved without any command into an obvious collision course, he knew instantly they were compromised.

So he let the sudden shift throw him out of his chair directly into the navigation console.

His half-chitinous body easily absorbed the impact and the resulting fall as Lieutenant Azji's own body further softened the impact. The Betazoid and the Andorian fell down on the deckplates in a jumble of arms and legs.

Pilotless, the USS Lotus went at full impulse on it's direct course with the Immobilized Borg Cube.

Then suddenly, they were all thrown down to the deckplates, as if a titan has slapped them; the image on the viewer spun brutally away from the starbase, a greenish light framing it as the stars went curiously sideways.

A black blur flashed over the two downed officers besides the piloting station; in one mighty feline leap, Ensign Mrrriish jumped straight out from her post near the ready room's door to the navigation station. With effortless grace, she slid her lithe furred body into the piloting chair and took back control of the ship, steadying it and bringing it to a stop.

" Ah, it was the Republic, Sir. " explained Lieutenant Tomah as he climbed back to his seat and looked at his console. " They deflected us out of our trajectory with, ah, with their tractor beam... reversing it's polarity. "

Ensign Tyvva went to the acting First Officer's aid; but Lieutenant Azji was not struggling; he was just looking into emptiness, his body limp. As the giant Andorian woman took care of the mesmerized navigator, Kheren got back to his feet, looking at the security station behind Edward Tomah:

" Mister de Paul! "

" Reports coming in shipwide, Sir. " already answered the soft-spoken blond man turning sideways to address him: telepathic crewmembers were starting to wander off, some trying to access replicators. But as is standard during alerts, replicators are all offline... except in sickbay of course... now destroyed. "

" Internal security status. " asked Kheren.

" Antiboarding protocols in effect, Sir. " confirmed Ensign De Paul. " Compromised security officers neutralized by their comrades as soon as they started to wander. Each deck section of the ship isolated with internal forcefield grid to contain and neutralize others. They are being sent to Doctor Bains. Immediate danger averted."

De Paul and Tomah exchanged a knowing glance; for weeks they had joined the silent and sometimes not so silent complaint of many security officers about the daily antiboarding drills Kheren had put them through since he came on board as chief of security; they both had been particularly ruffled when the Andorian, or some other officer secretly pre-designated by him, would violently turn against them in mid-exercise.

Now, that preparedness against shapeshifters and telepathic manipulators had just saved them... for now.

" Doctor Bains, bridge here: Starbase 10 has implemented a telepathic attack on the Borg and it's effects were spilling out to our telepathy-sensitive crewmembers. Things are resorbing now but the danger is not yet over: security has already contained and neutralized victims of this effect throughout the ship. Doctor, sedate any person within your area with a medical record of psi aptitude, however minimal, and restrict access to all replicators. Influenced people reportedly wanted to replicate Borg nanoprobes. We are sending security reinforcement. Bridge out. "

How could the Borg be using telepathy? Thought Darum Bains. The Borg were too erratic, even through their relentless perfection they couldn't force the telepathic minds of billions. Something else must have happened during the time he spent in Star Base 10 Sickbay.

The doctor new many people had psi abilities, and he new he himself did when performing specialized Andorian meditation, a rare feat among his people.

"Nurse, sedate anyone with psi abilities and keep a close eye on them. No one is to use the replicators. Anyone exhibiting strange behaviours is also to be sedated. " Said Bains.

"Computer, lock out all consoles on this deck to officers with psi abilities, authorization Bains Talon Theta 736."

A message started over the Comm. Systems. " Doctor Bains, this is Ensign Scott. The bridge has asked me to inform you to keep a tally of the dead and wounded. Send anyone who can function at a minimum level back to their stations."

"Acknowledged" Replied the Andorian medic.

"Nurse, get me that report ASAP" he ordered.

A nurse came over and handed the doctor a PADD.

"Bains to the Bridge, twenty-two confirmed casualties, thirty-three wounded, seven in critical condition. We should be able to get the majority back on their feet." Said the new Chief Medical officer of the flagship.

Security arrived a minute later and began to deal with the remaining telepaths. Within the next few minutes, the medical crew managed to patch up fifteen of the wounded, and the amount of patients coming in decreased.

Suddenly, a patient began screaming erratically. His shouts seemed to pound inside of the doctor's head.

"I AM SEDÍN! I AM the Borg! I... "

One of the security officers stunned the screaming patient, and took him out of the room. The other officers looked up to the doctor for guidance.

"As you were." He ordered.

Four decks above, order was also restored by another Andorian, who lifted his silvery gaze to the security station:

" Mister de Paul: deploy deck 4 security to the triage area to assist Doctor Bains. Evacuate deck 4 and seal it, but keep internal sensors on it in case of a boarding attempt through the damaged area. "

" Aye, Sir. Redirecting guards, sealing bulkheads and activating level 10 forcefield. " calmly answered the blond man as his fingers flew on his board. Sir, triage area reports telepathic takeover in their sector, but danger is contained. Borg cube has been towed away and locked to a safe blasting area and is reported powered down. We are still battle effective but Starbase 10 is requesting assistance from all ships. Sir, recommend launching all shuttles to base while we coordinate with the fleet when comes the order to dispatch the Borg."

" Shuttles rready to deparrt, Sirrr. " confirmed Ensign Mrrish still manning the helm. " Attack vectorrr plotted, still holding position at two thousand meterrrs frrom enemy vessel."

" Shields and armor fully restored, phasers recharged, photon and transphasic torpedoes at your discretion, Sir. " added Tomah from tactical.

" Borg cube stationary and dormant, minimal power levels, Sir." added Smlek at the science console.

" Engineering: report." now spoke Lieutenant Kheren through his combadge. The voice that answered was unfamiliar:

" Engineering to bridge: we were pretty shaken up down here; Chief engineer N'Arti was injured in the first fire exchange and has been sent to sickbay uncounscious. We have restored power at 82%, holding steady. All hull breaches contained and emergency repairs underway. Aft section of primary hull will require dock repairs however. Full report coming up to your station, Sir. "

The acting First Officer glanced at the PADD integrated to his command chair without really seeing anything.

Sent to sickbay... before it was destroyed.

He shivered; Barile N'Arti was not only from Andoria like Doctor Bains and him, but like him, he was an outcast: Kheren was a mutant, and the chief engineer was a hybrid: something never heard of in the entire history of their dwindling race... and evidently born like him from science... and against Andorian tradition. Both were... unnatural.

Beyond his racial bond, Kheren felt a special kinship with the Half Bajoran-Half Andorian, even if he had barely met him once.

And how many had already lost colleagues, friends, parents, children even in these few hours of this terrible war?

And to think that the tragic fate of his proud, passionate race was now shared by the entire Federation...

PART 9 : LET THAT BE OUR LAST BATTLEFIELD

The entire ship rocked as if a giant hand had slapped it. At their stations, none of the black clad officers wavered from their controls, even as sparks and flames briefly spurted out of an unused console, to be almost instantly smothered by the coldness of the ambient atmosphere and the internal security forcefield.

At the back and summit of the oval shaped, stratified bridge, the Presider and her three advisors stood besides the command chair while Captain Shillinra barked:

" Tactical report! "

From one of the stations, all turned sideways to both the command chair and the viewing screen, a tall Chan answered without looking up from his console:

" The flanking wedge of Borg cubes is trying to force a gap through the main body of the Starfleet Solferino battle group. We have succeeded in flanking them all in turn but we lost 12% of our own battle force, now regrouping with us. Ship has sustained moderate damage to aft section of the hull but pylon geometry is still fully operational. Shields are down to 74%, weapon power fluctuating, attempting to rerout. "

There were no casualty reports; Andorians stoically accepted all injuries during battle and mourned after it was over. Thus, they fueled their rage.

" Presider, you should take my seat. " proposed for the second time the tall Shen commanding the flagship of the Andorian home defense force. And for the second time, the equally tall pregnant Zhen shook her head:

" I am not here to sit and relax, Captain; nor my quad: we are here to share the pain and sacrifice of our people; and so will our children. "

Having said so, she now turned her icy blue gaze down to Shillinra:

" What is your assessment of the situation, Captain? "

Another impact shook the starship, but this time it was but a glancing blow, absorbed by the shields and inertial dampeners.

The commanding officer of the Kumari sat back in her chair, frowning as much as her rigid face allowed her to:

"The Federation is overwhelmed; each one of these Cubes is enough to tackle an entire task force. In such numbers... it is only a question of time before this turns into a rout."

"Why can't we compensate with tactics?" prodded the leader of the Andorian planetary government.

"They are too well coordinated, much more synchronized, perfectly equipped to work in such perfect systematic battle order. Starfleet is still trying to coordinate itself into a cohesive front, especially with external elements like our own force coming in. But they lack time to do it; they lose ships and crews faster than they can organize them."

"So... in short, the Borg are ready for us better than we were ready for them."

Captain Shillira looked up quizzically at the President beside her:

"What are you getting at, President?"

"Something my duelling master taught me once..."

"You mean..."

"We shall not speak his name here," sternly ordered the President. "But we shall speak of his wisdom when he once said: *don't fight the fight of your opponent*."

Now she looked straight ahead at the battle scene shown on the main screen:

"Time to become unpredictable... and fight like Andorians."

The captain stared blankly at her for a moment, then nodded. Her face almost smiled devilishly as he ordered then:

"Open a channel to our ships."

"Channel open," answered one officer on her right. Then she spoke:

"To all ships of the Imperial Guard: this is the flagship: regroup in quads and prepare for harpooning maneuver. Hook the point, replenish your losses and come back to the Kumari for the rest. Execute on my signal."

At the fringe of the battlefield, a little more than twenty Ushaan class escorts of the latest design broke attack and regrouped around the four-nacelled Kumari. They divided in groups of four, with three forming a cone in front of a fourth one, creating five distinct groups that left three ships in reserve to escort the Andorian flagship.

The Kumari was a prototype. Its mobile nacelles allowed it to evade deftly most incoming attacks; the design had been rejected by Starfleet because it was too complicated to build and maintain, and even more to fly effectively... it was too demanding on coordination... too Andorian.

But now, it served well as the command center of the daring maneuver the Andorian home fleet was about to start:

"Imperial Guard: attack!"

One escort was obliterated by a cutting beam before they could even accelerate, and another left the Kumari to replace it. And so, five groups of 4 ships went at full impulse towards the Borg armada, each branching out to target one specific cube. The close formation of the escorting three ships overlapped their shields, boosted to overload, in front of the fourth one between them, none firing a single shot until reaching point blank range. Then, all together, along with the central ship, they focused all of their torpedoes and phasers into one massive salvo, at one very precise point right in front of their trajectory.

For a short moment, the Borg defenses faltered at that one single point; their sensors were completely overloaded by the antimatter spread of such an intense, amplified photon detonation: and as the three foremost ships of each group peeled off and away in full evasive maneuver, the fourth one shot through the brief gap... and impacted against the huge face of the Cube it was aiming at, it's overloaded warp core detonating.

In a single instant perfectly timed, five Borg cubes exploded.

" Report!" demanded Captain Shillindra as the glare of the explosions subsided.

" All five targeted Borg vessels destroyed, Captain. Squadrons regrouping and reforming with remaining ships for a second assault We lost 18% of the harpooning crews but the rest are now filling up their depleted crews and the others transported from the escorting ships to us. The Borg flanking group has been shattered. Starfleet vessels now coming about to intercept the others. "

" Well done Guards! Exclaimed the Presider herself. Let them now learn what it means to fight the protectors of Andoria! "

A cheer went up throughout the ship, then another as Captain Shillinda ordered:

" Imperial Guard: prepare for the second assault! "

" They will adapt, Captain Shillindra. " commented the Presider, her hands covering her ample front protectively.

" And so will we, Presider. The next attack run will be a standard straffing maneuver; then on the third, we will let the core ship veer off and be tractored by her sisters.. .while leaving her overloaded warp core in her wake... Then the next one will involve tricobalt charges and transporters... "

The Andorian fleet was engaging in it's own way: passionately and totally.

Suddenly, warp signatures exploded everywhere near them.

They were not alone anymore.

Vr'Elneth Etarudbo, now clad in the garb of a Rethian Admiral, walked into the bridge of the Rethian flagship. The *Nadea Keresch*, the ship into which his people had poured so much of themselves now flew through warp with her four sister ships to defend a people who for all intents and purposes they barely knew.

The design of the ship was part an homage to the Keresch itself, and part an homage to the Federation with whom they've had relations with for the past twenty or so years. The main hull was long and sharp-looking. Her twin nacelles bore a slight resemblance to the Excelsior-class ship with whom first contact had actually been established.

Beneath her main hull was a secondary hull that ended in a curved weapon pointed forwards, a weapon culled from their past. A duplicate weapon curved upwards from her dorsal hull. She had enough power in her to fire both weapons while firing the phasers along her port and starboard sides.

"Report," Vr'Elneth said as he stood at his station. There were no chairs on a Rethian bridge, comfort was not really critical for them, not when they could retreat into their own minds while still remaining fully aware at their station.

"The fleet will be emerging from warp in one minute," the officer at helm and tactical said, a younger Rethian named Kor'Narel.

"Coordinates set to emerge near the main Federation defensive line in the Beta Quadrant," said M'Tarel, the female Rethian at the science and navigation station.

"Very good, signal the *Rathiah*," Vr'Elneth said. The *Rathiah* was the *Nadea Keresh's* direct sister ship and flew directly alongside her. M'Tarel nodded and in a moment Tar'Eniel's face appeared on the viewer.

"Good to see you Sir," he said. "We're making final preparations."

"How is she, Captain?" Vr'Elneth asked.

"Handling like a dream, Sir," Tar'Eniel said. "Thank you for this chance. I won't let you down."

"Thank me after we're out of this," Vr'Elneth said. "Good luck to you and your crew, my friend." Tar'Eniel bowed his head and disappeared from the viewer.

"Emerging from warp in three...two...one," Kor'Narel said. Vr'Elneth kept his eyes fixed on the viewer as the stars gave way to a scene of absolute chaos and destruction.

Ship debris from dozens of worlds intermingled with Federation ships adrift and venting atmosphere. Vr'Elneth steeled himself as they passed through the graveyard and came face to face with the wall of cubical monstrosities.

Another larger fleet was already engaging the Borg. Vr'Elneth watched them pull the most unorthodox maneuver he had ever seen, using their own ships as bombs.

Gutsy and direct, the kind of strategy he liked.

"Sir, comm channels say most of the Federation fleet is breaking up," M'tarel said. "Those ahead are the ships of the Andorian Imperial Guard."

Andorians. Vr'Elneth had heard bits and pieces about them and they were a most intriguing race.

"Let us get into the action before they either run out of ships or we run out of Borg," Vr'Elneth said. "Signal the *Rathiah* and *Kaltar*. Form them up with us. Triangulate plasma distribution on a single central point of the lead Borg cube. Move in frigate squadrons Harget and Keltho with explosive rounds. Have them target the breach made by the plasma."

"Yes Sir," Kor'Narel said.

The primary weapons on the Rethian cruisers were very direct and fired only forward, which was why they always preferred to head into fights directly. The beam created a cylinder of phaser fire which when fired at shields, disrupted the area inside the cylinder, allowing a ultra heated stream of hot plasma to pierce the shields and hit the foe, causing direct burning damage.

When enough ships coordinated and targeted the same point, it pooled the damage into one area, allowing the heavier hitting frigates to loose their torpedoes through the shields and into the burning and melting section of hull already damaged by the plasma. This made the relationship between the cruisers and their escorts extremely close.

With *Nadea Keresh* in the lead and the *Rathiah* and *Kaltar* close behind, all three ships combined their fire onto a single point which pierced through the Borg cube's shields.

The cube responded with its cutting beams. The first few missed entirely but the fourth sheered off the *Kaltar's* starboard nacelle while two more cut into the *Rathiah's* encroaching Frigates, damaging one and causing another to explode outright.

But the damage was done. The remaining frigates loosed their high explosive rounds through the breach in the shields and impacted the damaged area of the cube. Cracks appeared in the cube's hull and nearly broke it in two, but it remained barely whole.

"Get me a damage report on the *Kaltar* and signal the Andorians," Vr'Elneth said. "Tell them we're ready to coordinate fire."

" Captain: we are receiving a communication from a ship called the *Nadea Keresh*... they're Rethians, Captain. " announced the ops officer of the Andorian flagship *Kumari*, a smallish *Thaan* seating near the main screen on the right.

" Those odd-looking ships that just blasted the farthest Cube? " asked Shillinra in response.

" Yes, Captain. Their ships are apparently adapted from older Starfleet designs, but their weaponry is designed to concentrate firepower and create a puncture into energy fields through which they fire plasma and hard shells. " reported the tall tactical officer.

" It's like they know of the Borg already, whoever they may be. " commented the commander of the Andorian flagship. " Obviously effective. What do they want? "

" They offer to coordinate attacks, Captain. " answered the ops officer.

Shillinra stood up and ordered: " patch me through to them. "

" You are in direct communication with their leader, Fleet Admiral Vr'Elneth Etarudbo, on their flagship."

" Hail the Rethian warriors! I am Fleet Captain Shillinra of the flagship *Kumari*, commanding the Andorian Imperial Guard; we salute the bravery of new friends and will share our spit with them in the face of our common enemy! Send targeting telemetry of your next piercing attacks, and we will do the rest. "

Still standing, Shillinra then ordered:

" *Kumari* to the Imperial guard fleet: coordinate with our telemetry: the Rethian ships will open the door for each one of you: break quads and regroup in pairs. Stand ready!"

" Your Revisionist views are showing through, Captain. " commented the Presider with a smile in her voice.

The commander of the Andorian flagship just sat back, looking straight ahead:

" With all due respect, only the dead do not change, Presider. We adapt before we die... or we just die. With the help of those Rethians, we will just last a little longer to bloody our enemy even more before the end. "

It felt like Eternity in Hell.

Starfleet vessels exchanged fire and sacrificed lives to oppose the onslaught of the Borg armada.

It was almost walling space itself with the sheer number of their cube-shaped behemoths and spherical destroyers. A myriad of smaller fleets, Homeworld defenses pouring from over a hundred star systems, joined in the desperate struggle for Federation survival. Even freighters and civilian ships came, offering supplies and relief, picking up lifepods and sending out transporter signals to depleted ships or those about to be destroyed.

But the defenders of the Alpha and Beta Quadrants were still outnumbered.

And so was the Imperial Guard.

" Tactical report!" shouted Fleet captain Shillinra as smoke cleared all around the bridge. Coughing a bit to clear his dried throat, the Chan at the left console answered with a raspy, excited voice:

" The Athlirith move... the phallanx maneuver of Starfleet failed! The Borg didn't fall for it! They are not emotional enough to react to the bait and pursue the attacking and retreating squadron to get trapped between the two wings of envelopping ships! They are keeping formation... except on our side. "

" What about us? " Now asked Shillindra to the tactical officer.

" We are down to 27% of our initial battle force, Captain." now he reported, getting back his composure under the steely gaze of his commanding officer. " The Rethians opened funnels for us to send ships, tricobal devices or warp cores through, and using pairs instead of quads made us last longer: 17 Cubes have been destroyed by our Ushaan wings... but now, there is only 1 left fully operational and 11 without warp cores, thus reduced to impulse power, minimal shields and low on torpedoes. They are all preparing to board the enemy, Captain. "

" Not yet. Beam them our shuttles warp cores for another bombing pass. Then..."

" What about the Rethians? " now asked the Presider, still standing with her spouses and wife, covering her pregnancy with protective hands.

" They fought well, Presider. " answered the officer: " But they sustained heavy losses; half of their escort ships.... one capital ship also... and another is heavily damaged."

" Captain, now proposed the First Officer standing on her left, we can send them transporter protocols to assist and relieve... "

" Negative, Exec." cut short the Captain. "None of our warriors will even consider leaving the battle now... and Rethians coming here will only do so to die with us, away from their own kin. Surviving this war will be worse than loosing it. We... "

She stopped talking, her antennae suddenly waving this way and that, her eyes opening wide. For a good moment, no one spoke on the bridge until she did so again:

" Listen... do you hear anything? "

They all shook their head, all their antennae now moving around in the sudden silence

" Negative, Captain. " finally confirmed for everyone else the First Officer.

" Exactly. tactical: battlefield report. "

" Captain? The Borg... " started the Chan looking nervously at his board, the main viewer and back again before lifting eyes back towards the recessed command chair: " Enemy fire sporadic and diminished, Captain. Armada movement becoming disorganized, disjointed... Some enemy vessels are not firing at all... others have come to a full stop... I read fluctuating energy outputs, erratic maneuvering... Captain... it's like... "

" They're stopping? " wondered aloud the Presider, looking down at the seated field commander of the Imperial Guard. Shillindra just kept looking at the main screen, her eyes reduced to slits, antennae pointing.

" Do we hold off attack, Captain? "

" Have you lost your antennae, Dheel? " suddenly said the Captain to her Exec. " We are not Starfleet! We are Andorians! We do not offer *humanitarian* aid to a weakening invader!"

Standing up, her blue skin turning slightly purple with contained emotion, she ordered:

" Helm! hard about! Cover the next attack run start, then full evasive! Tactical: boost weapon power and once more fire at will to distract the targets! "

" Yes Captain! " answered both officers resolutely while the others alerted their own departments.

The war in space raged on... and at the same moment in time, another battlefield opened... where even time and space had no meaning.

In the otherworldly realm of the mind.

* * *

The mind that has been Lyaxanna Jori did not dare stand before Sedín's presence. She hated leaving her brother alone, especially after finally seeing him after so many years. She retreated back into the safety of the weak remnants of her own self.

However, there was something in her thoughts that she had no memory of. A Betazoid man named Daniel that she knew she had never met. After a moment of reflection, she realized that it must have been one of Braedon's memories. The more she wondered about this 'Daniel' the more she understood what her brother was planning.

She allowed her consciousness to roam once more, focusing on the single memory her twin brother had shared with her.

They were sitting in a ship's lounge having a telepathic conversation.

She focused on Daniel's face until this time she found herself in the present, on the bridge of a Federation ship... and found him, standing before his crew, insisting that 'resistance' was 'futile'.

" Daniel Summers, you are not a Borg drone."

In his own mind, he turned to look her directly in the eyes and she continued:

" You are a Federation officer and familiar to my brother, Braedon Jori. He needs your help."

Summers began to realize what he had done, but Lyaxanna knew there was no time for apologies or second-guessing.

" We need to attack the Borg Queen Sedín. There is no time to question me, she will find me soon. You must convince everyone to experience hunger, the entire fleet if you can. Favorite foods, favourite lovers, goals, ambitions... all types of hunger. Do you understa.... Oh, no! Tell Braedon I will always be with him and that I love..."

Without warning, the Spectre's Captain mind saw Lyaxanna in excruciating pain. She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out. Instead, a brilliant white light spewed out between her lips. The light overwhelmed her body, enveloping it and within seconds she was gone.

With the white light and disappearance of Lyaxanna, Daniel Summers was hurled back into reality and regained control of his own body and mind.

Somehow, he believed her and took her words to heart.

Ensign N'Eligahn rolled off of the androgyn tactical officer, coughing, his chest in pain. He felt blood moving down the back of his head. He reached a hand back to see if he was wounded, but his hand showed only dark blue blood.

"Damn it," he groaned, his eyes fixed on Kelsey.

He slid open the panel in the bottom of the tactical arch that housed a first aid kit and began sealing the wounds in her chest. Before he could say anything else, he heard a groan from the Captain as he fell to his knees again.

A moment later Captain Daniel Summers stood once more, this time seemingly in control of himself.

"Ensign Alther! open a channel to the fleet and Starbase 10, I have an important message to defeat the Borg once and for all" Summers stated as he walked over to help up the young Ensigns he had attacked. "And get me something for the pain of that phaser shot" he finished as he walked back over to his chair and stood tall in front of it, staring at the viewscreen.

While still checking the androgyn's vitals again, N'Eligahn keyed in an open frequency on the tactical terminal.

Once the channel was open, his commanding officer took a deep breath:

"Lotus Fleet, this is Captain Summers: I need every member of the Fleet to make themselves feel hunger, hunger for anything, love food, friend, brother, sister and so on....trust me on this, I'll explain later, Summers out."

The Rethian didn't even hear his commander's message to the fleet, concentrating on the task of stabilizing Ensign Alther, but regained all his composure when saw his friend slowly regaining consciousness. Two medical ensigns had already arrived and he moved out of their way. The medical ensigns worked their magic as the androgyn regained consciousness with a massive cough.

Kelsey groaned trying to get up, ignoring the holes in its chest caused by N'Eligahn's head spines as the medical personnel tried to keep their blue-skinned patient down.

"Just give me a hypo for the pain" the tactical officer muttered.

One ensign pulled out a hypospray and use it, making the Kalthurian sighed, stand up and walk to the tactical console and lean on it.

Daniel Summers turned and faced his bridge crew:

"My apologies for not being able to control myself or block this takeover; I was a little overconfident and not expecting that at all. Try your best to carry out my orders to the rest of the Fleet." and with that, he turned back around and sat in his chair to hit a button on the armrest signaling the rest of the ship:

"USS Spectre this is your Captain: all of you of need to force yourself to feel hunger in any way possible, the hunger for anything, love, food, friendship, or family... Try your best to do so. I feel it's the only way to defeat the Borg... Summers out"

He canceled the transmission and started to reflect on the one thing he could: the love of his father and how he missed him so, since the Borg assimilated him many years earlier.

As he moved around the tactical arch back towards the helm, N'Eligahn froze in place.

He didn't hear that right. He couldn't have.

Open themselves *further* to the Borg?

"Sir, with all due respect," N'Eligahn said. "I must object to this course of action. You're telling the fleet to open themselves more to possible Borg interference. Are we trying to chase away the Borg with feelings?"

He gestured towards the view screen where three ships were maneuvering to pull the cube off of the Starbase.

"We have them in a place where we can finally take them out and get the fleet out of danger. We need to seize this chance," he said.

Having said his piece, N'Eligahn walked over to the helm and regained control. He placed the Spectre on a course towards the cube, all her forward weapons facing the monstrosity.

"What the hell did I miss?" Alther asked. "All I heard was N'Eligahn talk about more Borg plans?"

"We're supposed to open our minds and feel hunger to help make the Borg go away," N'Eligahn said.

Damn his chest hurt. He had to have cracked a few ribs. And it didn't help that he hadn't heard from Re'tok in nearly ten minutes.

Kelsey coughed, eyes opened wide.

"After what I just went through and after what our Captain went through?"

The androgyn officer looked at Summers:

"All due respect, Captain, but... Are you insane?" it asked, mouth slightly open. "You just threw N'Eligahn at me, ending with me having a punctured chest. I just went through a personal hell of mine and you want all of us to want to open our minds to those things?"

Kelsey still looked straight at Summers:

"Order respectfully disobeyed. "

Quietly, O'Conner watched from his console in the corner of the bridge. He never did quite understand telepathic ability of some races. But after listening to the Ensign's mutinous comments, O'Conner finally said:

"Perhaps you should explain now, Sir?"

And he thought about how much he *hungered* for a vacation...

And a transfer.

"Ok now that everyone has had a chance to vent their thoughts, I will reply. Number One, I can't really explain it too well at the moment, but lets say I had a telepathic vision Mister N'Eligahn, yes, I expect you to do it as best you can without leaving yourself vulnerable. You don't have to open your mind per-say; just make yourself feel any sort of hunger."

N'Eligahn stopped for a moment and turned to look over his shoulder. He regretted the motion later as it just made his chest hurt more, but for now he wanted to look the Captain in the eyes. There was something there that struck him almost as hard as the tactical arch had. It was almost an air of sincerity.

No matter how insane this idea was, or how far fetched it seemed, the Captain believed it.

The Rethian returned to his console, then looked up at the viewscreen. The massive hulk was still clinging to the station like a garmek in heat, ships still trying to remove it. He took a deep breath and sighed.

"All right," he said. He confirmed the Spectre's course. "Yes Sir."

He closed his eyes and flattened his spines against his head, just in case the captain decided to play "Toss the Rethian" again.

Hunger? What the hell was he supposed to think of?

He opened his mind just a bit and focused on the one thing now, more than ever, that he wanted.

Images of Nadea Rethia filled his mind. He focused on that.

The one place in the galaxy he'd wanted to escape from had become the only place he wanted to return to.

Summers still spoke, looking around the bridge, watching the expressions of his crew:

" Ensign Alther, get the hole in your chest checked out. I do apologize for my actions and I must admit I like how very open you are about your views and how you stand by them... but this is one of those times where I need you to trust me. We won't stop firing at the Cube; this is just a way to, not only save the Fleet, but possibly this entire Quadrant of space."

Kelsey shooed away a Medical Ensign trying to see to the hole in its chest. It had stopped bleeding and it wasn't in pain so the androgyn didn't mind it, but turned around when the Ensign came with a dermal regenerator.

Kelsey sighed as the hole was fixed while listening to Summers.

The call from the Spectre was heard everywhere across the Fleet and at the starbase:

"Now...about hunger..."

With these words grumbled in a low voice, Captain Speaker opened a channel stationwide and began speaking:

"Command center to all remaining personnel aboard the Station. This is an...unusual request. But. I expect you to fulfill it," he rumbled. "We need everyone on the station to feel hunger. Any form of it you can imagine. Food, love, sex, knowledge, whatever. Do it."

He rolled the next words as his fur began to stand on end,

"Feel it. But do not let it consume you. Bring yourself to the edge but remain in control. We still have a battle to fight - a predator to escape. Speaker out."

Down in the main hangar, Ensign Sisko began to let himself feel his rising lust, instead of blocking it. He thought back to his earlier feelings and began to imagine Lieutenant Rivers... Rachele... taking him by the hand as he followed her into her quarters. As they began to slowly peel away the uniforms, he could truly feel the soft caress of her hands on his mocha tinted skin, and a shiver ran down his back and through his ridged nose, a distinctly Bajoran feeling that couldn't be shared by his lover. They stared deeply into each others' eyes, and he grasped her head with both hands and pulled her forcefully, yet gently towards his lips. As he closed his eyes for the long passionate kiss, he began to think about Borg for some reason...

I wonder if this is really working, he thought, as he snapped back to reality. He began to find a balance where he could keep the feelings in the back of his mind, but still function. His imaginary encounter fading away, he turned and smiled nervously to Lieutenant Rivers.

His Kzinti commanding officer was also struggling for balance. Descended from the Great Plains hunting cats, his species had no trouble at all with the concept of hunger. It was a primal driving force in so much of what the Kzin did. The difficulty would be not in feeling hunger...but keeping it from harming those around him.

They were all meat.

It was so difficult back then, in the Academy. A true Hero knew these things: From birth, a Hero knew that when they fought, it was for food. It was to dominate and possess. Security classes brought so much confusion to him. He needed so much restraint. These were grass-eaters with no fangs or claws, not of his species. He had fought for food and possession - to fight, to *spar* as they called it... and then to not eat or dominate his opponent...to *not-feel* the blood dripping down his fur. To *not-hear* the whimpering of his conquest. The restraint needed was unbearable.

The food. The ethics of the Federation placed him on the edge even when he needed to sate his hunger. There were no hunts. No thrill of the chase, no feel of his prey's hot blood pulsing into his maw. The meat was all burnt. No elasticity, the flavors chased away by these things the humans called "caramelization" and "char". He asked the computer and there was his food, set on a plate before him. To ask for anything else gave him Looks.

Especially from the Vulcans.

His people, the Heroes...he knew why they hated the Vulcans so much. They were grass-eaters of the worst sort. Cold. Telepathic and yet not insane. Disapproving of their ways and traditions. They abandoned their emotions and instincts, yet for some reason they were strong.

Hunger...it was dangerous for him to feel Hunger, even now. Years of Starfleet training gave him the ability to tuck it away, to act on it only within the confines of a room no one could see. The room was a shackle. To protect the sensibilities of his crew, to protect those who could not stomach the sight of his replicated raw prey as he tore it limb from limb...stripped its mediocre meat from the bone.

The scent of blood filled the air, enticing him...taunting him. It mingled and weaved with the tang of metal, the orange-scent of Lieutenant-Rivers, and the repulsive stench of char, but it was there. He was having trouble seeing, but he knew where it was. It leaked from the fragile beings all around him. Sweet, hot blood. He growled low in his throat, his claws flexed. Every muscle and tendon in his body screamed to pounce upon what was rightfully prey. To devour them whole, to slake his thirst on their blood, to fill his belly with their still-twitching meat.

But like all other times, the Kzinti held it back. His mind was always more powerful than his body. He was more than an animal, more than the sum of his past. He was a Starfleet officer...albeit a very hungry one that began to wonder how Borg flesh would taste.

His hunger was basic, primal; for others, it could take a much different but no less form of craving.

A similar animalistic snarl formed on Redding's lips, sharing that hunger as well:

"Hunger? fine.. I'll give you hunger."

He had gone through countless mental resistance course's in order to hold on to his mind if ever infected by the Borg and he now used that training to sharpen on a memory...

Just outside the Sol system, two small highly modified and illegal starships made a desperate play to slow the Borg advance on the Human homeworld as the fleet gathered to defend it.

"Captain! The bombing run was successful Sir!"

The view screen showed an impossible sight: The cube had been taken completely by surprise by the modified phase cloak of the USS Blackheart, his ship.

That was for you, Dad..

Explosions rocked it from the inside out, literally ripping it apart.

"Redding to USS Cerises, you are clear for your run, I repeat.. give 'em hell, Cerises."

The remaining Cube stopped.

**Understood Blackheart. Starting our attack ru...*

then all hell broke lose.

The ship buckled in a way that couldn't be explained.

His science officer, Marnoc, responded before Redding could Finnish asking:

"Some kind of spatial disruption, Captain.. its Multiphasic in origen.."

Redding snapped at the tactical officer:

"Drop the cloak, now!"

The second they reappeared into normal space, the ship stabilized, but the Cerises wasn't as fortunate... Later, when the wreckage of the Blackheart was salvaged, the sensor data seemed to indicate that the USS Cerises simply dissolved out of existence.

The battle that followed between one of the best ships the Borg Task Force had constructed and the remaining Cube lasted not even five minutes.

the Blackheart floated, mortally wounded, most of its crew dead.

As per Borg task Force protocol, the ship ripped its own systems apart, charges built into its Jeffreys tubes and control systems had done their job, leaving the Blackheart a ruined, lifeless hulk, not fit for assimilation... and no longer a threat the Borg ignored it.

The seven crewmembers that remained floated in suits designed to mask all life signs by killing its wearer, and suspending their body until later revived.

If there was a later...

Redding focused on this memory, the faces of his crew as he helped salvage his own vessel. Their twisted torn bodies drifted about the ruined sections of the Blackheart almost serenely. And the bitter knowledge that they would never be recognized for their sacrifice grated him more than he could bare...

This emotion he blasted out of every pore of his body.. the longing.. the hatred.. the despair that had cost him his next command and nearly his career.

This, he set loose like an enraged animal freed from its chain at last to rip at the throat of its tormentor.

The HUNGER.. FOR BLOOD!

As Lieutenant Rivers was coordinating the evacuation down on the main hangar deck of the starbase, she began to think about the way the Ensign in the shuttle was looking at her.

Well, she thought, the Captain ordered us to feel hunger for something, so that is what I will do until ordered otherwise. That's an order I can follow with pleasure.

Grinning, she imagined what it would be like to have those big hands of his grasp her waist and pull her into a fiery, passionate kiss. Then to feel one hand slowly move downwards to her firm backside, to pull her towards him until their bodies were interlocked in a steamy, trembling mass of limbs, and then...

On board the Wisconsin, Commander Gleck grinned at the thought of the bridge full of latinum and rare treasures, taken from his most ruthless business competitors. He imagined running his hands slowly over every single glittering bar, caressing each one in a lover's touch as his competitors wept in agony over their empty vaults. He wanted to feel every bar and gem pressing itself against him. He wanted to swim in the huge pile, die happily buried in the giant mound if he could. In between his thoughts of his hunger for pure wealth, he watched the monitors.

"Keep that tractor beam on that cube. Keep firing the phasers."

"Aye, Commander," the security chief replied.

Gleck thought of all the spoils that would come with defeating not just one Borg ship, but an entire fleet of Borg. All his descendants would be guaranteed a place in the Eternal Vault before they were even born. He craved the wealth inside the ships and on the thousands of conquered planets.

Captain Onia didn't even need to think about her hunger. For a Deltan, the hunger was always there, an urgent, longing ache suppressed deep inside, kept in check only by the strongest will and pheromone suppressors. She closed her eyes and let her mind have free rein to roam where the Oath of Celibacy forbid it to roam in Starfleet.

It's been far too long since I've been home, or even anywhere joined with other Deltans.

She slowly unstrapped the mental armor, letting her hunger for passion spill out as the iron will slipped off her sinuous form, leaving her emotions bare. She brushed a fingertip over the top of her bare head, down the length of her neck, and over her curved bounty, inhaling sharply at the unadulterated, silken pleasure. She throbbed deep inside with the need to join with someone.

Her lover, whispering kisses across her lips, down her neck, caressing her, one firm leg slipping between hers.... Arching her back to fit his contours. Tracing a finger down his muscled back, over the round of his hip, across the smooth skin of his thigh....

She panted in unfulfilled hunger, yearning for the ultimate release of joining body and mind.

Onia then let a new hunger pulse through her : the hunger to destroy all Borg.

Aboard the warship McKenzie, Summers voice was received by the chief of Ops with puzzlement:

"Sir, now announced Beren, I'm getting a transmission from the Spectre. They are telling us to... feel hungry?"

"Hmm, ok, great now I have a craving for pizza. Commander Teancum, please notify the crew to feel ... hungry." Crist ordered.

But on Lotus Fleet's flagship, the strange message transmitted by the USS Spectre was received with the strange calmness of those already looking death in the face:

Why would he want that? Thought Doctor Darum Bains, hearing it over the comm of his improvised sickbay in cargo bay 2. *It must be important.* he thought, searching inwardly for what he wanted most.

He could remember leaving Andoria so young, the youngest to enlist and graduate in the Academy, the difficulties of joining Starfleet. He had left a dying world behind, one of the last of his species, the disappointment of leaving a honourable tribe, the shame of leaving his homeworld.

He wanted so desperately to go home... for Andoria to be thriving, and for the removal of the Borg who had done so much damage today.

On the bridge, the question was openly addressed:

" Ah, so it work both ways. " understood Edward Tomah grinning.

" I doubt it will work on mindless drones. " objected Ensign Smlek.

" They're not mindless drones anymore, explained Kheren; since the second Earth assimilation attempt, they made the error of adapting from a Collective to a *Hive*. Now they *have* one major weak point: a central command."

" They're targeting the Queen. " understood the Ferengi, now smiling also.

" She is emotional, individualistic... connected to each an all drones across space and in total control with her *one* mind as their own: if *she* falls, the *entire* Borg civilization falls with her; if she disconnect herself, they will *all* become leaderless, inert, defenseless...

... Check mate."

And the same conclusion was reached at the same moment aboard the nearby USS Republic:

" They're attempting emotional overload, Sir. " summarized Revik with evident first hand knowledge.

" Number One: retransmit the message shipwide. " swiftly ordered the commanding officer of the Republic.

The message of captain Summers however, was not so well received and understood back at its source, on the bridge of his own starship:

"You are asking me to trust you after you just threw N'Eligahn at me, turned all Borg-like on us and have a plan that I find highly risky? How can the Borg know what I'm feeling unless they can access my mind?"

"No" the Kalthurian said. "I'm not taking another risk with my mind"

It looked down at the hole in its uniform.

Not to mention I don't respect you enough to put myself at that much risk the tactical officer thought in a closed off section of its mind, sitting back down on the tactical chair and proceeded to fire another volley of torpedoes...

The entire starbase rocked, shields pelted with flaming debris under the detonations on the Borg cube imbedded in it's outer ring.

* * *

The essence which once knew itself as Sedín regarded the presence of Lieutenant Jori and his mental assault teams, even as her voice seemed to echo from the mindless millions of drones whose thoughts created this mental space.

"I am the Borg."

The thoughts of billions echoed her own, magnifying her need to unbearable levels.

Hunger. Hunger. Hunger

She wanted more. She needed more.

" More food, more sex, more blood, more money, more... "

"NO!

I will not listen to you! It's futile! All your efforts. ALL of it! I just want- a great big flame- I just want to purge...

YOU WILL CEASE THIS! "

The command came with the backings of millions of drone voices behind her, their tone now seemingly as unbalanced as she, their minds wielded like a powerful but clumsy battering ram against the Telepathic Take-Over's attempts.

The chink in the Borg's armor was there. A community so completely linked needed only one breach to fail.

But it wasn't enough.

Sedín had hundreds of thousands of years to master the Borg. Even through her insanity, the Borg had conquered countless civilizations. Millennia upon millennia upon millennia of conquest. An inevitable march of eons. Jori's team had minutes.

She had inadvertently given his team the most powerful tool to use in the fight against the Invasion - but that was it.

The Borg Collective was this deranged soul's body...and she was not giving it up.

Then, her scream resonated both in the physical and mental world: one shot of the Alsea blew out and entire section... and the drones still left operational and under her control that were implementing her self-destruct order.

* * *

As Rachelle Rivers almost moaned audibly, that's when her thoughts were interrupted by a loud, deafening noise and the Starbase shuddered so much she nearly lost her footing, and grabbed at the console to steady herself.

As she began looking over the reports coming in from Operations, Sisko appeared in the shuttle door and shouted:

"What the hell was that?"

Lieutenant Rivers turned and, even though she knew he was there previously, was still slightly shocked at seeing her fantasy lover standing in front of her. Breathlessly, she said:

"It looks like the Spectre fired a tricobalt device at the Cube and it blew away part of the Starbase."

She then turned her head, not wanting Sisko to see her expression. Lust, fear, happiness, hope, anger, and love all mixed into one emotion cocktail that she couldn't imbibe. She had to sit down and reset to take control of herself. She counted to ten and put it all out of her mind.

As she did this, Sisko was thinking:

The Spectre shot at the Cube WHILE it was lodged in the Starbase? I'm starting to wonder about being the Chief Engineer on a ship who's personnel treats Starfleet equipment with such abandon.

The androgyn Starfleet officer Sisko was unknowingly thinking about was about to check reports, glancing over at the viewscreen then saw the speckles of light blue in space; its eyes opened wide as one hand reached for the command to end the Tricobalt devices' slow advance towards the cube.

Kelsey hit the panel just after the tricoblat torpedoes had impacted with the cube.

The Starbase shook after a massive explosion ripped through more of the outer docking ring and the tricobalt devices blew a significant chunk off the cube. However, it detonated too close to the Starbase.

A huge chunk of the Cube simply vaporized with other parts spinning out of the way of the explosion. A very large section of the outer docking ring had simply vanished.

Summers watched with complete disarray not believing what just unfolded before his very eyes.

The Kalthurian's head hung low with a sigh:

"Great, just what I needed: more destruction of Starfleet property on my file."

The blue-skinned face then was raised to look at Summers.

"Least it will be easier now to tractor the cube out?" Alther offered.

"I wouldn't worry too much about it, Ensign. It's not like there aren't going to be workers out there fixing the Starbase later on any way... and Yes, I would assume that the Cube should be easier to remove from the Starbase now, as opposed to a few minutes ago."

Summers ended his rant with a chuckle and a shake of his head.

Man-O-Man I can't wait for this to be over already... Summers thought as he walked around the bridge, assessing his crew and the seemingly minor damage to the bridge considering the pounding the ship took only minutes earlier.

" Ah, Sir, said the Lotus Acting Tactical Chief Edward Tomah, tractor beams disengaging from starbase... torpedo tubes locked on but not firing... this close to the station, no one can fire detonating weapons without risking damage to the Starbase also. "

This however didn't seem to bother the USS Spectre who fired a full volley of torpedoes at the Borg vessel.

By miracle, they all found their mark... but pelted the starbase shields with a shower of flaming debris.

" What the hell do they think they are doing?" shouted Tomah, agape at the utter recklessness of the Akira class attack ship.

" Sir, the Borg are trying to destroy themselves! " then pointed navigator Azji as the main viewer; the titanic cyber construct was trembling and showering space with added debris, cutting beams now mostly engaged against the colossal structure twisted around it. It's monstrous geometrical mass was slowly deformed by the energies forcing it to move despite the cyclopean structure holding it like an immense pincer.

As he saw the three parts of the Prometheus class Alsea do their attack run, Kheren was still caught in a vision of the Andorian watery hell, it looked like a gargantuan demon-crab holding the flat-sided world of ancient beliefs.

Then it hit him:

" Depth charges. "

" Ah, would be fine if we were underwater... " answered Tomah. " Incompressible water pushed against a hollow structure by paired concussive explosions would squash that structure like an egg, yes, but, ah, no go in the vacuum of space. "

" Transphasic torpedoes explode across multiple subspace frequencies at the same time, yes? " retorted Kheren, beginning to formulate in clear terms his sudden inspiration.

" But, ah, we can fire only two torpedoes at a time, Sir. " reminded Tomah, frowning to bring in his own reasoning. " Two torpedoes will never be enough to create any, ah... shockwave big enough to shatter such a massive construct... et alone squash it between them. "

" No... but adding twenty tritobalt-enhanced explosions right *through* them will... "

" Calculations confirmed, Sir! " declared Smlek a moment later to answer Kheren's statement. " If all their defenses are still fully operational, it would still cause complete obliteration of at least 33% of their total structure. Without them..."

" And we have, ah, a full squadron of ten Peregrine fighters, each properly armed and awaiting our orders. " again reminded the acting chief of tactical, a light shining suddenly in his blue eyes.

" But... I beg your pardon, Sir, now interjected Lieutenant Azji from the helm station, aren't subspace weapons banned? "

" Ah, they are. " suddenly confirmed Tomah, gloom returning to his face and erase the hope that was barely dawning there.

" But, we are not talking about mass destruction explosive devices creating a subspace shockwave, subspace implosion, or subspace tear: we are talking about channeling conventional explosives through multiple subspace frequencies" explained the assistant chief science officer. " We are not doing anything different than a simple transphasic torpedo does... only multiplying it. "

Nodding in approval, the Andorian returned to his chair, looking briefly at his unconscious commanding officer still ministered by the nurse:

" Order the squadron in tight formation behind the protection of our screen and armored hull; circuit-slate their launchers with ours. At optimal distance, they fan out around us and before dispersing out of enemy range, they all fire precisely with our transphasics in a small conical dispersal pattern top and bottom of the target: with a tight enough pattern, the transphasic explosions will carry along all their frequencies those of the tritobalt on both sides at the same time towards one another... "

" And crush the cube like an egg. " finished Tomah.

" Or at the very least weaken them up for a finishing blow by the rest of the fleet. " added Kheren. " And most of all: for the short time of the detonation, all subspace frequencies will be oversaturated for seconds, down to the quantum level... cutting them off from the Collective. "

Hopefully long enough for something else to happen... prayed the Andorian.

It was a long shot... From the outside, it would look like a spine-flower of Gamma Trianguli VI opening to shoot it's deadly barbs then shunning it's petals before a frontal wind... Absolutely perfect flight coordination and fire timing were the key...

But Kheren knew: if one ship could pull it off, it was the USS Lotus... especially with the Wisconsin's clever gravimetric-reducing shield configuration just being implemented, their own now proven deflecting maneuvers... and the elite flying pilots from the USS Spectre.

If they did it *now*.

" Fighter torpedo tubes slaved to ours, Sir. " finally announced Edward Tomah.

" Helm: straight course to the target then 000 mark 90 as soon as torpedoes are away. Stingray squadron: at point blank, spread out pattern Colbert. Engage! " ordered Kheren.

The Lotus arced in a wide trajectory around the starbase and came about to pass over it. She darted in a straight line towards the cube with the fighter shuttles in a conical formation behind it. The Intrepid class vessel was almost on top of the starbase and moving straight at the enemy ship.

" Mark!" said Tomah.

" Fire! Pull out! " shouted the Andorian.

A wide volley of torpedoes rushed on each side of the trapped Borg cube, a transphasic torpedo in the midsts of both swarms. As they exploded, the cumulative explosions were propagated through amultiple layers of subspace and blasted the monstrous vessel at the same time from both sides.

It did not have enough firepower to crush it... but it caused so much subspace pressure that the colossal construct compressed, visibly deformed in a shower of debris...

And floated free of the broken outer ring of the station.

At this, On the bridge of the Wisconsin, Captain Onia's eyes snapped open.

"Helm! Full reverse! Tractor beams on full power. Pull the cube off the Starbase, now! They will attempt to self-destruct! "

"Captain, that might take more of the outer ring with it," Gleck said.

"If we don't pull that cube away, there won't *be* a starbase left, much less a ring. Open coded communications to the entire fleet. Tell them to tractor the Borg away from the starbase. "

Her officers rushed to comply with her orders.

And so did the officers of the nearby Excelsior class USS Republic coming alongside the Wisconsin:

" Captain: the power surge within the Borg cube... Looks like their self-destruct mechanism is now offline."

" They are no more imbedded into the starbase's outer ring, Sir. " observed Sarah Doyle.

Captain Wyatt was back in his command chair, looking intently at the viewer.

Hell of a gamble the Spectre took there... shivered Captain Wyatt inwardly. Must have a prime marksman over there for Her captain to even allow this. But whatever the Lotus did, however, it worked... some kind of directed subspace detonation? and not even scratching the starbase paint...

He whistled softly at this apparent miracle but he kept his doubts silent. He was the Captain.

Captains know everything... even... especially... when they do not.

" Thank you for small favors, Lotus." he simply said. " Mister Revik: all tractor beams on that thing. Mister Parini: plot a parallel course to the Wisconsin on the other side of the Cube and let us pull it out with them. At two kilometers, the both of us shall be able to drag it out easily enough. "

" Tractor beam anchored, Captain. " now reported the calm voice of the Vulcan back at his own science console.

" Ship and power status? " asked First Officer Doyle, looking at the engineering station:

" The matter-antimatter inducers are lighting up like fireworks but we still have 85% power available. " retorted the Chief Engineer without looking at her. " Structural integrity down by 22 % but we're holding together. "

Sarah Doyle activated her comm panel on her armchair:

" Bridge to Dr Quasst: casualty report. "

The soft voice answering sounded strangely jovial and strained at the same time, something probably only a Denobulan like Quasst could manage to do:

" Four dead, forty-two missing since those cutting beams carved us open, eighty-nine wounded, mostly burns and concussions... and over three-hundred other casualties. "

" That makes up for the entire crew, Doctor! " said Doyle. " What kinds of casualties? "

" Wits... as in frightened out of... Sir. "

The half-hearted humor managed nevertheless to relax the entire bridge crew.

Sarah Doyle was therefore answering:

" Thank you Mister Leong. Chief, channel all power to impulse and tractor beams but be ready to switch it all off to our rear shields. "

" Good work people." complimented Captain Wyatt. He moved a finger to his First Officer and she nodded as she opened comm channels for him:

On the Spectre, Captain Summers heard it as he watched the Republic and Wisconsin towed away the massive Borg ship the astonishing double torpedo salvo of the Lotus and her escort squadron had pried it free off the Starbase:

" This is the Republic: With Wisconsin, we are now taking out the trash... tractoring the enemy at full impulse away from Starbase 10. We will need cover... just in case... then some help to clean up. Wyatt out. "

"Open a channel to the Republic" Summers said as he stood up and fixed himself to look somewhat presentable given the circumstances.

"Republic this is Spectre we are more than happy to help you with the trash, we'll keep you covered."

" Thank you Captain Summers. Have your big brooms ready please. "

"Spectre out"

"Helm, plot a course to follow the Republic, Tactical keep weapons locked on the cube just in case" Summers said as he looked around the Spectre's remodeled bridge and sighed.

He realized there were going to be some really long days in their near future.

N'Eligahn looked over his shoulder at Relys and nodded.

"Firefly and Gamma squadrons, form up on our tail and prepare to fire," Relys said as she moved the fighters' positions around on her control board."

" Mister Parini: hard about, bearing 180 mark 45, full impulse. " now ordered Captain Wyatt as he now addressed the helmsman of the Republic

" 180 mark 45 full impulse, aye Sir. " answered the dark-haired man, his obsidian eyes glued to the screen as his fingers found by themselves the piloting controls. " Matching Wisconsin's speed and trajectory. "

On the main viewer in front of him, the deformed cybernetic construct, now completely sheared off the starbase's ruined external structure. It was leaving a trail of debris behind as the battered Excelsior class pulled it away with her heavy duty tractor beams. On screen, the stardrive section of the Nebula class USS Wisconsin was also tugging at it with its own tracting emission, while the sleek, slightly fuming form of the Akira class heavy destroyer came about farther away over the procession.

"Sir, informed the McKenzie's tactical officer Selcar, the Borg are freed and powering down... and the rest of the Fleet is trying to tractor the cube away from the starbase."

"Hold fire. Helm, plot a parallel course, we'll give them cover. Inform the squadron to stay in formation."

As the cube was being tractored away from the station, the McKenzie joined the Spectre to act as an escort on the other flank of the tractored cubic vessel, in case the Borg started up there attack again. The Captain was relieved that the battle could possibly be over, though it was still a long way off.

The view from the starbase's monitoring screen was impressive enough.

"So does that mean we don't have to evacuate?" asked Ensign Joey Day Sisko.

Lieutenant Rachele Rivers just sat there and didn't respond.

He cocked his head slightly and looked quizzically at her for a moment before moving over to where she was sitting. He went down on one knee and put his hand on her shoulder:

"Are you OK?"

[*IA dumb question at this moment*, he thought, but he didn't know what else to say to comfort her.

She looked up and just for a second gave him a longing look, but then that look turned into a stern gaze:

"I'll survive Ensign." Then responding to his earlier question, "Until I hear otherwise from the Captain, we will continue with the evacuation as ordered. Besides, there is still a chance that the Cube will detonate within range of the Starbase causing massive structural damage and possibly causing more unnecessary deaths. No ships have responded yet, including the Steamrunner."

She stood and ran her fingers over the console to initiate another fleetwide message:

"USS Steamrunner and all Lotus Fleet ships, please respond if you are prepared to evacuate the rest of the Starbase 10 personnel."

Captain Ramabai stood up as the message came in:

"Bazel dock us with Starbase 10 now!" he ordered as he responded to Lieutenant Rivers message:

"Rivers, this is the Steamrunner; we are docking now. Prepare the people there to organize into groups. One will join us by foot, the others we will transport." he finished.

The Steamrunner glided straight into an open door in the main docking area, its lights highlighting the still dormant USS Artemis.

As the Steamrunner docked, Ramabai smiled as he contacted Rivers.

"Begin sending the people now, give us the coordinates for the transporties" and he quickly tapped his combadge: "Captain Ramabai to all transporter rooms, begin transporting all members at the coordniates about to be sent to your consoles."

He sat back down in his command chair with a sigh.

" Thank you Steamrunner. Starbase 10 out. "

Her voice had also been heard aboard the USS Republic.

Some desperation had crept into the voice coming from the speakers.

Sounds like a brave and responsible junior officer overwhelmed by the proximity of danger estimated Captain Wyatt silently. The woman, whoever she was, sounded just like him when he had been an Ensign himself, prematurely thrown into the last days of the Dominion War.

Hang on lady, you got the right stuff. he wished her inwardly.

" Starbase 10, this is the Republic. " he then stated outloud, sitting deeply back in his command chair. " We are bringing the Borg out of detonation range along with the Wisconsin. However, we are able send you all available shuttles to assist. Please confirm evacuation order still in effect. "

He then turned towards his First Officer standing at his right hand:

" Shuttles all ready, Number One? "

" Affirmative, Captain. " answered Sarah Doyle without even looking at any PADD or console. " Red alert procedures still in effect: all six shuttlepods and all six shuttles powered up, crewed and ready for launch. "

" Launch. " ordred Adam Wyatt, then louder for the comm channel to the base;

" Starbase 10, we are sending all our auxillary vehicles to you. "

" Aknowledged, Republic... and thanks. "

" Fine. Now let's see what starbase 10 is going to do with this whole mess. " commented the Captain of the Republic.

And pray for Starfleet to be as lucky as we are here... he wished silently, his eyes glued to the image of the powered down, battered Borg Cube.

The young woman kept the channel open for any other response to her request.

Then, Rivers turned to Sisko:

"Please continue with the pre-flight checklist for the shuttle. Assuming, they respond, the Steamrunner should be here to evacuate the teams that I sent to various transporter rooms throughout the base. The shuttle will transport the Captain and the few remaining personnel."

She tapped her combadge:

"Rivers to Captain Speaker: I have the hangar prepared to become the temporary Operations center for you and any critical personnel to use before we evacuate via the shuttle."

As Sisko returned to his work on the shuttle, Rivers checked the duty roster list to see where he was to be stationed after this mess was finished.

The Spectre, hum, too bad, she thought. I would've liked to get to know him.

She then grinned again, as she thought about the double entendre resulting from using the word "know".

Sisko heard the communication from the USS Steamrunner, stepped outside the shuttle and approached the console that Lieutenant Rivers was standing at. He looked down at it, and said:

"Why did they dock to have people transported over?"

Rivers shrugged:

"I would say that they want to accelerate evacuation by using hatches and transporters at the same time. " Then she asked him: "What's your status?"

"All systems operational and pre-launch task list complete, Sir," he responded.

Rivers winced slightly at the word "Sir". She knew it was Starfleet regulations to reply to all superior officers with the word, but being from Earth, for her it still had a masculine connotation. Her voice softened:

"Just call me Rachele, Joey," she responded. "I think we can move beyond the formalities at this point."

As she said this, she moved in so close that her body was just inches from his, and looked up at him with a serious, yet sensuous glance. The fingers of her right hand obtained a mind of their own and began searching for the tactile experience they longed for. Ever so gently they grazed the back of his left hand and it sent a shiver up and down his spine and nasal ridges.

So caught off guard by her advances, Sisko just stammered:

"Y-yes Si... Rachele. "

He had no idea that she had reciprocated his feelings for her. She must have had quite an intuitive mind to sense his thoughts, which he was sure he kept quite private. Maybe a Betazoid ancestor that he, and possibly she, were unaware of?

Regardless, this was not the time and the place for this.

Well, that was what his mind told him, but his current situation made him unaware of logic and reason. He ever so slowly put his left hand on the small of her back as his right hand gently brushed aside her long red hair. As he pulled her closer and his lips began moving closer to the prize they had been deSiring since their initial walk from Operations, the console suddenly belted out:

"Ramabai to Lieutenant Rivers: beam over complete. We have reached maximum evacuation capacity."

Their lips just barely grazing each other, Sisko and Rivers broke away as the moment was lost in time, as surely as trillions of other moments never to be experienced again, except in dreams.

As Sisko pretended to fiddle with his hyperspanner, Rivers recomposed herself and tugged on her uniform top to straighten it. Then she walked over and with a hint of irritation in her voice responded:

"Thank you, Captain Ramabai. You may undock at your convenience. The rest will depart in shuttles." She looked down to see a notice from Ops to stand down from evacuation procedures, and shrugged.

At least they're safe if all hell breaks loose for whatever reason, she thought.

* * *

Suddenly, N'Eligahn's console started lighting up.

"Sir, transmissions from all over the quadrant: the fight's not going well on any front and the Borg are preparing to break through our lines and head for the inner planets,"

N'Eligahn felt an odd tingle in the back of his head again. It was from the avenue he'd left open for the connection to the other telepaths. Only instead of quickly closing it, he listened to it.

Echoes of another voice, the same voice he'd heard on the Tempest...

Only now, it was experiencing a whispered rage.

The thing that had always terrified N'Eligahn about the whole episode on the Spectre was how easily his mind had connected with the Collective. It was something about the way the Rethian mind worked. Back home the minds are somewhat telepathically connected on an instinctive level: a leftover from the race's ancient pack mentality, but also a valuable tool in the sometimes volatile clan debates.

The whispering grew louder and more unbalanced. It was a central voice backed by a chorus of others.

A realization dawned on him after a moment. There was nothing mystical or strange about the Borg mind, it was just a computer network and the queen was the central core. Right now, he had a back door access to the system.

He could use it, trace it back...

... and hurt her.

A smile grew on his lips.

He could hurt her like she had hurt everyone else.

He keyed in a course that would take the Spectre around the Republic and sent a message to Relys to monitor him. Before she could respond, he removed most of his defenses, save the ones guarding motor control and decision making, and lost himself to the transmission.

His decision was about to be mirrored elsewhere among the psionically endowed officers of Lotus Fleet.

The new Chief Medical Officer of the USS McKenzie saw all the information on the Borg attack streaming in. The situation was grave. The immunology nanites had worked in concert with the telepathic project—it might be the only thing that saved the Federation, too.

Jolie massaged her temples. The throbbing was receding, at least. For the brief seconds that she'd been under attack, she realized what the telepath project was trying to do—reach the Borg queen.

She also realized the queen was entirely psychotic, experiencing hunger and need at a pathological level. If the Federation didn't exploit that immediately, they were doomed.

She tapped her combadge.

"Dr. Bindo to Captain. Sir, we need to transmit the data on the immunology nanites and the telepath project to the entire fleet immediately. I've re-configured the immunology nanites to attack different types of cells so there's less chance of adaptation. All of our telepaths have recovered. Our casualties are all being treated. Three in serious condition in sickbay, seven more in stable condition in the mess, eleven with minor injuries being treated—they should be back to duty shortly."

"Ok Doctor. We are transmitting... now." replied the voice of Daniel Crist.

The doctor turned back to T'Pelin and the three other telepaths sitting in chairs crowded into the tiny sickbay. She ran a tricorder scan on each again and nodded, satisfied, at the normal results.

"Lieutenant Jori is trying to reach the queen telepathically. He needs every telepath he can get to bolster his power and attack her once her mental defenses are breached. I plan to use the mental attack defenses employed on Betazed during the Dominion occupation."

She stopped and looked at each Vulcan and Betazoid.

"We lost 40% of our telepath fighters in that war. We've learned much since then, but the mortality rate using this technique is still substantial. I will not order anyone to join me. However, if we don't destroy the queen right now before she can adapt, we will have won the battle here, but lost the war. Our homes will be destroyed, our people annihilated."

Jolie Bindo swallowed to wet her dry throat.

T'Pelin stood up and straightened her uniform.

"Doctor, as Ambassador Spock once said to Captain Kirk, 'Logic dictates that the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few.' There is no question that I must contribute my skills where they will have the most effect."

The others nodded agreement without hesitation.

Jolie took a deep breath to steady herself and tapped her combadge once again.

"Doctor to Captain. All the telepaths need to join together to fight the queen while she is still vulnerable. We have our mental shields up. We will be utilizing the Betazoid mind assault"

Understood Doctor. Beren, transmit the Doctor's information to the rest of the fleet, in an encrypted signal."

In sickbay, Doctor Bindo looked over at Ensign Lockhart.

"Have several resuscitators prepared. Put us in stasis if needed."

She sat down, closed her eyes, and concentrated on reaching for the queen. She steeled herself for the pain that would come for both of them.

* * *

Doctor Jolie Bindo found herself with the other four telepaths inside the virtual mind of the queen. The ground shook underneath her feet. The air was thick with moisture. A fierce wind blew strands of auburn hair around Jolie's face. She looked up and saw gray-green clouds roiling overhead, with golden streaks of lightning shooting through the clouds. Funnels dipped down, threatening everything around her with destruction.

Symptoms of just how bad the psychosis really is... she understood.

She imagined Sedin's brain, and it materialized before her. Storms of electrical activity raked the surfaces of the alien anatomical landscape. The pleasure centers were firing furiously, as were the pain centers.

Jolie ignored both, and searched for the part of the brain that governed her psychosis.

She skimmed the surface of the higher brain centers, and found the knotted patch of tissue, firing furiously. She imagined herself shrunk down, and walked among the tangled thatch, running one hand over a damaged nerve as she stepped over clear microtubules that nanites had built around the area in response. Pale blue light pulsed around her.

"I am Sedin," the queen announced in a feminine voice backed by millions of drones. *"Resistance is futile."* The queen's presence drew close to Jolie Bindo in an aggressive posture that clearly spoke 'threat'.

Jolie smiled. Sedin may be many things, but she was not a doctor.

"I am Jolie Bindo. I see where you have taken significant brain damage. It is still reparable. However, it would require you to disconnect yourself."

Sedin laughed.

"Why in the universe would I do that?"

"If you don't shut down, Sedin, you will die in a very short time. Nanites can't fix this. Your medical drones are compromised by your psychosis and can't do it. It requires micro-surgery by someone who is not in the collective. I offer you a cure."

Sedin sneered:

"You offer me NOTHING, you pathetic little INDIVIDUAL. This is just a plea for your life."

The doctor mentally shrugged her shoulders.

"It's a plea for the lives of the entire Federation, actually. You've had this brain damage a long time, and it's expanding. Let me show you what happens if it expands more."

Jolie called out mentally to the other telepaths with her, and directed them to specific spots around the brain lesion. She imagined an increase in the neurotransmitters in those spots, and the microtubules started rupturing. Nanoprobes rushed in to repair the breaches, but couldn't keep up with the leaking fluids. The lesion expanded.

Sedin gasped. Her vision wavered, and her connection with the Collective faded in and out in fits of static.

* * *

"Report from all divisions, please," Onia said, pacing in front of her captain's chair, hands clasped lightly behind her back.

Her tactical officer, Lieutenant Commander Mm'tek, reported:

"Shields are slowly regenerating. The deflector dish took a moderate hit. The hull breach on deck 7 has been secured, though we sustained heavy damage on the decks 5 through 8 on the port. Structural integrity is at 81%. Damaged phasers are being repaired. The undamaged phasers are at full power, torpedoes locked and loaded."

"Excellent. Helm?" Onia asked.

"Tractor power on full. The Republic has joined us in pulling the cube back. The Borg are not fighting the beam. Warp coordinates are entered in case the cube powers up for self-destruct, but they are powered down right now."

"Keep us on course. Zapetti, open a channel to the Republic so we can coordinate."

Her communications officer nodded. "Aye, Sir."

The chief of security frowned at his console.

"Anti-boarding measures are in effect to prevent potential Borg beam-overs. A couple of the telepaths were overcome by the Borg mental attack and had to be subdued. They are in sickbay now."

The Deltan nodded understanding and called down to the engineering department. "Kraytine, how long until we have full power back?"

The chief engineer replied:

"At least an hour, Captain, and more like two. I pushed the warp core beyond the max limits during the fight. We risk a core breach if we fly past warp 3 right now."

"Damn. The rest of the fleet will be nothing more than shiny bits in the star field if we don't move out quickly after getting rid of this--" Onia made a rude hand gesture at the cube on the view screen, "hunk of junk."

She leaned over and tapped the ship-wide com button on the arm of her chair.

"Attention, this is the Captain. All available personnel report immediately to engineering to assist Commander Kraytine in any fashion he deems necessary. Captain out."

She called back to engineering.

"Kraytine, you have one hour."

She tapped another button.

"Doctor, I need a casualty report."

"We lost four in the hull breach. We have two in critical condition, seven in serious condition, and nine more stable. About fifteen are being treated for minor injuries. We'll get them back to duty as soon as we finish patching them up, Captain."

"Acknowledged, Doctor."

Onia rubbed her forehead. The headache from the attack was still there. The queen was insane with her hunger, and Onia had managed to distract her. She was not broken, yet, as Onia had hoped. They had been so close before. She sighed as she listened to Lieutenant Zapetti relay the fleet-wide report of all the ships lost in the invasion. Her hands balled up in frustrated fists. Lotus fleet had won this battle, but the Federation was going to die before their eyes. She stood rigid, evaluating all her options. She had only one.

"Commander Gleck," she said in a tight voice. "Please meet me in my ready room when you finish your current task." She looked around the entire bridge. *Her* bridge. She turned and walked in determined strides to her ready room.

The door slid shut behind the Ferengi First Officer after he entered her ready room.

"Lieutenant Commander Mm'tek has the conn. You wanted to see me, Captain?"

His nose flared in spite of himself at the unpleasant smell in the room.

"I'm sorry, Commander, for the odor. I have the pheromone suppressor on maximum." She gestured at her couch. "Please, make yourself comfortable."

He sat down as she continued to pace in front of her desk. She finally settled down on the corner of the desk and blew out a breath.

"When I connected mentally with the queen, I learned her mind is extremely unstable. Her hungers have driven her to the level of insanity. I may have the ability to driver her over the edge to let the rest of the telepath team make their attacks."

"And yet you're hesitating," Gleck observed, sitting back in his seat and crossing one leg over the other.

Onia rubbed clammy hands on her legs.

"I want you to understand one thing, Commander. You are free to refuse this request, and there will be absolutely no consequences. I may well lose my commission for what I intend to do. I will make sure you do not."

Her XO snorted. "There's nothing you could do short of treason that would get you booted out. You're too damned good a captain."

"Breaking the Oath of Celibacy would."

Gleck uncrossed his leg, sat up, and leaned forward. "Captain, you're strong enough to handle this--"

Onia waved a hand to stop him. "No, no, it's not about me. You remember why we take the Oath?"

"Non-Deltans can't handle the extreme pleasure of joining mind and body with a Deltan. It makes them insane, and...." Gleck suddenly realized why she had the suppressor on the maximum setting. She didn't want to influence him inappropriately. He appreciated the gesture. "You want me to join with you."

The captain nodded slowly, relieved that he'd figured it out.

"If I grab her mentally while joining, it may drive her completely insane. The telepathic team will be able to finish her off then. However, I need a partner here to join with physically. You're the only one on the ship strong enough to withstand the emotional toll it may take. At best, I sacrifice my career. At worst I die. However, if I don't help the Federation destroy the queen in the next few minutes, all of us will die. Yet, I cannot order you to do something that may cause you permanent mental damage."

Commander Gleck got up, walked over to the Captain, then stood at parade rest. "Permission to speak freely, Captain."

"Granted."

"Making love to save the Federation has to be the single craziest plan I have ever heard of."

Onia tilted her head in acknowledgment and smiled slightly.

Gleck looked at her eyes. The creases in his face softened. He took her hand, surprised to note it was trembling.

"If anyone else requested this, I'd be calling the CMO for an emergency psych eval."

He reached around her to shut off the pheromone suppressor on her desk, brushing against her provocatively.

Her body responded instantly. The room filled with an exotic scent that reminded him of the hanta passion flowers Ferengi men placed in their bedrooms on their wedding nights for virility. He brushed a kiss on her neck and breathed against her ear:

"I can go crazy, or I can die. At least this way, I go out with a smile."

She traced the top ridge of his earlobe with a gentle finger. He shivered in pleasure.

Gleck found the zipper on the back of her uniform and drew it down.

"To be honest, Onia, I'm not a pervert like most of my kind. I've wanted to see you out of uniform ever since I was assigned to your command."

Her laugh tinkled across the room. She stood, and the uniform slipped down to a heap on the floor. She stepped out of it and walked slowly to the couch.

"Most sentients want that, Gleck. I find it odd when they don't."

The commander whipped off his uniform, joined her on the couch, and pulled her tenderly to him. He hugged her close for a moment, then slid his hand over the smooth skin of her head. He brought his lips gently to hers. She inhaled in pleasure, and their kisses became harder with urgency.

* * *

Hot ecstasy flowed through and around Onia as her arms wrapped tight around Gleck and her mind intertwined with Sedin's. Onia tilted her neck back as Gleck's lips swept along the curves, shivering in delight.

Come join me, Sedin, and know true pleasure, said Onia.

Sedin drew closer in tentative steps. No drone had ever been able to bring her this kind of unadulterated bliss.

The captain felt Sedin's mind synchronize with hers. Onia arched her back and stroked the Ferengi's earlobes. He cried out his passion, and drove her towards the peak. Her mind united with his as her euphoria swept over her.

A tsunami of rapture flooded Sedin's mind, and she moaned in delirium.

Onia reached out for Sedin's mind as Gleck stroked his hand down the length of her body. His leg brushed her thigh. She moaned in deSire, and he responded with ardent caresses that drove her to a frenzy. "Come, Sedin," she whispered to the queen's mind. "Neither of us have shared passion in a very long time."

Part of Sedin's consciousness drew closer as Onia's passion grew. Onia reached out, gripping Sedin's mind as hard as Gleck gripped her in his arms as he joined with her. She gasped in pure rapture. She opened her mind wide and let it release waves of ecstasy.

Sedin's mind bent under the pressure, her mind swirling violently out of her control.

Lieutenant Braedon Jori could feel the emotions filling her mind like wild rivers rushing into the ocean.

Thousands of people going through the motions of lust, revenge, thirst, longing, hunger. It was incredible! Sedín was free-falling into a deeper despair, until the sound of millions of disturbed drones stopped her descent.

"YOU WILL CEASE THIS!" the Collective called out in anger and confusion.

Braedon could feel the energy around him changing as reality began to bend. It felt as though entire worlds were crashing into each other, however environments were not being destroyed, but melting together to form a cohesive, disturbing place. It felt like the place where nightmares are born and hope goes to die. Braedon could feel the presence of new personalities in the distance. Not Borg, these were individuals. One personality was getting closer... quickly!

Jori's reality shook hard as another reality crashed into his existence. Black lesions appeared against the green lit walls of Sedín's chamber.

Doctor Jolie Bindo appeared.

"You've had this brain damage a long time, and it's expanding. Let me show you what happens if it expands more."

Jolie called out mentally to the other telepaths with her, and directed them to specific spots around the brain lesion. She imagined an increase in the neurotransmitters in those spots, and the microtubules started rupturing. Nanites rushed in to repair the breaches, but couldn't keep up with the leaking fluids. The lesion expanded.

Sedin gasped. Her vision wavered, and her connection with the Collective faded in and out in fits of static.

However, the hundreds of thousands year old consciousness quickly re-emerged, more focused and hungry than ever.

Sedín's anger exploded, knocking her attackers back.

Braedon and Jolie looked at each other as they felt another personality close by, not Borg. Sedín's image began to phase in and out, like a holographic image losing power. Suddenly, another reality slammed into view and gave her full form, millions of voices crying out in anguish.

N'Eligahn Etarudbo appeared in front of her.

For a few moments, he was surrounded by a bleak and suffocating darkness. The whispers intensified around him until they rose to a deafening crescendo. It felt as if he was rushing through a narrow tunnel, the edges just brushing his fingertips. The whispers continued to bore into his head, threatening to tear it apart.

After what seemed like an eternity, he emerged into a blinding light.

He flew through the air and landed with a sharp thud on what felt like ground. N'Eligahn looked around and recognized the area immediately. It was the plains right outside Keresh on Nadea Rethia. He looked ahead and saw the carefully carved towers of the city, the senate building and ship Keresh towering above it all.

Only the entire vision was oddly distorted. The sky above was blazing red. The voices around him began to grow again, only it seemed to be spaced with voices he recognized. Occasionally they would rise above the din and he would catch snippets of words.

"Gone." "Lost." "Deserter." "Destroy."

Ahead, Keresh began to change as if to punctuate the words. The beautiful buildings overtaken by blackened machinery. The plains around him became more and more bleak.

Beneath his feet the ground cracked and broke. It soon became a swirling whirlpool of earth and stone. Pieces of rock and debris floated in the chaos like small islands of safety. N'Eligahn leaped onto the first island. Then onto the other.

"This is just an illusion," he told himself. *"An image created to keep me back. Away from my goal."*

Before he could leap onto the next island, the entire scene dissolved, engulfing him in a swirling hurricane of earth and debris.

"Just..." he coughed as the dirt filled his nose and throat. *"Just an...illusion..."*

The swirling dirt and debris stopped suddenly and N'Eligahn found himself falling through nothingness. The voices were no longer just noise, they were now concentrated and focused, chanting things he couldn't comprehend.

After falling for a few moments, he smacked into something hard. He gripped the edge before he could slide off.

A light from nowhere illuminated the large gear he was now holding on to. He recognized this as the interior of the Keresh clock tower, the second tallest structure in the city. His father had taken him to visit it when he was younger. Seeing the intermeshing gears, all the little pieces coming together to create a larger picture had been what drew him towards engineering and starships.

Dark shapes appeared on the gears around him. They were Borg... but as they stepped into the light towards him, he recognized their faces.

His father, mother, people from the Spectre, from the Academy...

They all marched towards him in the cold, plodding pace the Borg took.

N'Eligahn scrambled to his feet as they got closer. Their mouths all moving wordlessly but the chanting incoherent voices around him grew in volume.

Something grabbed him from behind and yanked him backwards. He felt the sharp prick of something stabbing into his neck before whoever held him tossed him back down to his knees.

The Rethian coughed and gagged before turning to see it had been Borg Kelsey Alther.

The altered androgyn stared lifelessly ahead.

To his own surprise, N'Eligahn burst into laughter.

"I refuse to play this game anymore," he said between laughs within his mind. *"If you can create things in my mind, then so can I."*

He felt a sort of rush through his body as the nanoprobes did their work. Though he remembered they were nothing but an illusion, nevertheless he had to choke down the urge to vomit. He closed his eyes and concentrated until he heard a sharp clatter in front of him.

N'Eligahn picked up the fully charged phaser rifle.

"How's this for a damn mind game?" his mind asked.

He raised the rifle and fired, taking down the Borg that looked like his father. He fired again and again, killing the drones around him. As they started to adapt, he smiled again.

"Oh no you don't," he said mentally. *"You wanted to fight on this battlefield, you have to know the rules."*

He concentrated and continued adapting his own rifle to the drones, each shot continuing to take them down.

The whole battlefield of the mind had been a poor decision on the part of the Queen. They were too confined by the reality they existed in, with simple two dimensional thinking; it wasn't going to work in a realm as freakish and unpredictable as the mind of an independent thinking sentient.

As he took down the last of the Borg, the world around him began to blur and dissolve as attention focused elsewhere. The chanting voices were drowned out by other sounds, an odd combination of pure joy and painful longing.

A light seemed to open directly above N'Eligahn. He looked up at it. Every fiber of his being told him this was the right way to go. Before he jumped, he closed his eyes and focused on the illusion of the Borg nanoprobes in his body and forced them violently out.

A black cloud emerged in front of him before dissipating into the blackness around him.

N'Eligahn knelt there, coughing for a moment before he looked up again and leaped towards the bright, inviting light.

N'Eligahn flew through the bright, blinding light. Moments before he left what would be his own mind and entered into that of the Borg Queen's domain, he concentrated and formed something in his left hand to compliment the phaser rifle.

After another moment he emerged from the light into a dark, metallic place. It bore a remarkable resemblance to the main engineering section of the Tempest where N'Eligahn has collapsed the vinculum there.

Standing directly in front of the green warp core was a female humanoid. All of the mental currents flowed towards her. She had her head tossed back and her jaw agape, as if lost in the arms of someone she truly cherished.

There were others around her, but N'Eligahn payed them no mind. His eyes focused on this one creature. The root of everything. She was responsible for the Borg being here, attacking the Federation, the take over of the Tempest and assimilation of its crew.

And now she had the gall to seek the feeling of pleasure?

No, he couldn't allow that. Not after all she'd done. Not after the pain she'd inflicted.

A grin grew on N'Eligahn's face as he tossed the rifle aside. He wouldn't need it. He passed the weapon he now held from his left to his right hand. It was a long dagger, curved and serrated. It had three blades all moving upwards, yet curved to inflict the maximum pain possible.

"This is a Rathiahn Ceremonial dagger," he said. His mindvoice was low, cold and dark. *"A relic from a time when we were a truly savage and vicious people. But the Borg are a whole other level of savageness."*

He pushed past the others until he stood directly in front of her as she writhed in pleasure. She seemed to be trying to make herself return to her organic roots. Seeing herself in her mind's eye as less machine.

"You steal choice and will, zombies of a whole new age," he said. *"And now you have the gall to attempt to experience that level of emotion that you have so willfully stolen from so many other good sentient people? No."*

N'Eligahn smiled.

"No, I will not allow that."

It was good that she was feeling more organic. It meant she would feel more.

He raised the dagger and swiftly stabbed it into her abdomen, right where her kidney would have been. He angled it up and into where her liver and stomach would have been. She gasped.

"You feel that? That's pain," N'Eligahn said in this world of the mind. *"Its what you inflict with reckless abandon."*

He slowly twisted the knife and dug it deeper into her flesh.

"Where's your perfection now?" he roared mentally.

Sedín may have been superior in every way, except that she had never dealt with this kind of telepathic attack before. She was the Borg. Every drone, piece of technology, every single nanoprobe was a creation that allowed her mind to survive.

But this time, it was her mind being attacked not her thralls, nor her technological forms.

Braedon Jori turned his head back to face Jolie Bindo and smiled at her.

" That's it! " he thought, giving her his best 'I'm about to do something crazy' look.

" Cover me. " He transmitted, rising from his prone position.

He focused his mind to clear out everything but Sedín.

Slowly, the walls around faded into nothing, the crashing and explosions of realities coliding diminished into silence, and all that remained was N'Eligahn twisting the blade deeper into Sedín.

Braedon hoped that Jolie would be able to protect him as he charged the Queen. He tried not to focus on anything but Sedín's face. In that moment, she was looking up and screaming in agony... then, suddenly, her head fell forward and her now completely silver eyes focused on him.

He continued to remove everything around him and saw only Sedín.

"Twist harder!" his mind called out as he reached N'Eligahn and his target.

He lunged at her, putting his arm around her, swinging around to face her back. He effortlessly placed his fingertips strategically on her face and, in a calm state of clarity, spoke directly into her mind:

"Our minds, one and together."

Braedon reached out his mind to Jolie, N'Eligahn, Lyaxanna, Daniel and anyone else who might hear him.

" Don't let me forget who I am. " he begged, before turning his focus back to Sedín.

"You hunger, is my hunger... my mind is your mind. One and together..."

Lieutenant Jori felt the beginnings of the mind meld taking hold.

" Harder, N'Elighan! " Jori thought, hoping he could.

Braedon felt his consciousness and Sedín's meet. It was like a raft being dropped into the middle of raging storm in the deep seas.

"Our minds become..." the tension in his face disappeared.

"I am Sedín." he said strangely.

Then, the tension in his face reappeared and his voice returned to normal.

"One... mind..." he forced.

Braedon was quickly losing himself in the unimaginable vastness of Sedín's ancient mind. He was able to release a fleeting thought. Simple, but still obviously his own.

" Help me... "

* * *

"While we are doing a mop up, lets have the Damage and Casualty reports please" Summers said as he sat back down "Oh and Mister N'Eligahn, please have our fighters follow us and the Republic with weapons locked on the Cube. "

Kelsey Alther sighed, looking at the tactical console as reports from all over the ship flooded in:

"Captain, Engines and Weapons were largely undamaged by the Borg Cutting Beams. However, shields are severely damaged. Main power is still out, but back ups are online,"

Kelsey paused.

" Looks like some time in the drydock Sir" the androgyn finished while the board listed the casualty reports.

" Fifty dead, fourteen injured"

The kalthurian had a suprised look on it's face.

"That seems pretty small for what the Borg through at us"

Kelsey read the list of names before closing both eyes a moment, then opening them.

Ensign Rhedshiyt was on the list of casualties.

Ensign Alther activated its combadge:

"Kelsey to Arizhel, how is main medical?"

Arizhel had finished administering first aid to the rest of the crew of the Spectre who had come in under the spell of the Borg and was examining the damage when the message from Kelsey came in.

"Everything is under control here. We stunned most of the crew that came in, a few were killed in trying to get in. We are currently patching up most of them."

She walked over to the Vulcan who was in a critical condition on a biobed.

"We have one Vulcan here... he is pretty banged up Sir: he has fifty percent of his face and body covered in deep burns... and before we dosed him with meds, he was going on about a lack of feeling in his legs and something about a Borg plot involving telepaths minds " Arizhel finished.

After listening to the report, O'Conner quickly enter commands on his console.

"I have ordered my engineers to stun anyone acting zombie-like."

"Keep me posted, Arizhel." the tactical officer said before ending the communication, relaxing and looking around at the Spectre's bridge.

A few things were damaged but, like the casualty reports, it had made it relatively unscathed.

The blue-skinned androgyn moved its neck and it made an audible crack, making the androgyn cringed a little, hating loud noises that sounded like that. The medical ensigns had long since gone off to help others as Kesley was fine, looking again at the hole in its uniform.

The Kalthurian sighed, looked back at the tactical console and waited for orders.

On the bridge, N'Eligahn's body did nothing but stare blankly ahead.

It had only been a few moments since he'd dug deeper into the connection between his mind and the Borg.

Occasionally he would cough or shudder, but for the most part, he just stared.

Ensign Kelsey Alther stood at the tactical station while glancing over reports, occasionally telling the Captain pertinent bits of data, until a message came... and came again...

" Help me... "

The Voice sounded desperate and in need of help.

Summers felt like he was hit by a big 20th century 18 wheeler, he grabbed his chest as he stumbled before he caught himself and heard the plea from his friend Braedon.

Daniel tapped his mind into Braedon and saw a twisted green vision with a million voices behind it...

" Braedon....listen to me: it's Daniel. Remember yourself, your sister, your friends and career in Starfleet. Don't loose yourself in this sick, twisted mind... you are stronger than that... You are a Starfleet Officer, a Brother, and a Friend. Remember yourself, remember Lyaxanna, remember yourself and your training. "

Summers ended the contact, hoping to help his friend break this curse

Kelsey knew also what it was... and where it was coming from too.

The head of the Kalthurian androgyn turned, eyes shut, before swearing and taking its mind into the very thing it had swore not enter.

* * *

The Spectre's Chief Tactical Officer, Ensign Kelsey Alther, dropped in to the Tempest once again, but this time in full ancient Kalthurian armour and holding a deadly, native halberd-like Deki'Kah.

The androgyn saw the very place that had haunted it the last time; but this time, instead of running away, Ensign Alther lifted the halberd and grinned.

"Prepare to die" the armor-clad form said telepathically as it started slicing it's way through all the drones that stood in the way.

Kelsey continued attacking as assimilation tubules bounced off the armour, beams simply fizzled as it blazed a trail of death through the ranks of the Borg drones.

After what seemed like minutes to the kalthurian, it had cleaned through a deck worth down to Engineering where now it stood, stunned.

Alther now saw Sedin, along with a multitude of people clustered around her or on the floor.

It helped that Kelsey saw N'Eligahn stabbing the Queen as it inspired the Spectre's officer to move forward and join the assault

Kelsey lifted the Deki'Kah and sprinted straight for Sedin. A primal yell rose as dropped the entire length of the blade just above N'Eligahn's knife. Then, the armored Kalthurian began a process of cutting Sedin along the chest.

Alther grinned as the blade acted like a surgeon's blade, trying to slice Sedin as if she were an animal to be dissected.

Sedin attacked as Jori cried.

Jolie Bindo closed her eyes and hung her head a moment in frustration at the lost opportunity for peace, minute as that chance had been.

She looked over the brain anatomy again. The pleasure and pain centers were overloading, putting a combined strain on the psychosis lesion that was overwhelming. The blue lights were strobing so fast there was no time for the nerves to regenerate electrical power in between firing. She rallied the five McKenzie telepaths.

"Now's the time for our attack. Focus your attack on the lesion causing the psychosis. It's overloading. If we destroy it, she won't be able to function."

The four of them joined minds.

Braedon Jori identified Doctor Jolie Bindo's presence and looked down towards the shard at his feet. He could see her holding a brilliant, incandescent great sword slashing wildly. Kelsey Alther and N'Eligahn Etarubdo were there too, trying to cut through Sedin, as though moving in slow motion. The entire area seemed to be electrically charged, flashing and streaking blues and greens throughout.

Jolie had indeed pictured herself wielding their minds in her hands like a two-meter long great sword. The blade was nearly clear, like a diamond claymore with edges that could cut air. Light sizzled over the faint silvery edges. The doctor howled into the chaos of roiling light and sound as she found the lesion and slashed at the nanotubules. The blade screamed on contact, and the microtubules burst, spewing malevolent dark fluid into the air.

The Betazoid woman whirled, swung the giant sword and, with surgical precision, sliced through brain tissue. Bits of white neural matter, sparking circuitry, and carbon tubes exploded away from the arcing weapon. With the defensive and medical nanites preoccupied with repairing and supporting the pain and pleasure portions of the neural net, Jolie marched through the lesion unopposed, cutting wide swathes through nerves and support structures. She left behind smoldering neurons and hissing tubes that whipped wildly around, spraying everything with inky fluid.

Jolie Bindo made multiple passes through the lesion before stopping, leaning over to catch her breath. The center of the area was a ragged, expanding pool of dark in the center of a lightning storm. Waves of snaking electricity rushed away from the black hole and washed over the repair nanites, making them spark and fizzle out. Streams of blue light burst in irregular patterns through the rest of the neural net.

Braedon heard a terrible cracking sound as reality seemed to shatter into large pieces around him. Each shard contained its own world, people and sounds.

He looked around to see thousands of shards, each containing a different existence. He could see Borg ships at war with the Federation, Klingons, Ferengii, and hundreds of others. There were planets being overrun with Borg drones. Terrified, he rushed back to the shard where Jolie and the others were. He looked down and could see that it appeared that the betazoid woman was winning the fight.

Then suddenly everything froze and went silent.

From within the shard, Sedín looked up at him.

"Lieutenant Braedon Jori of Starfleet: If our minds are one, than you must know that destroying me in one place will not destroy me in everyplace."

Braedon stood there confused.

Who was she talking to ? he wondered.

Nothing seemed familiar. He looked around him to see if she was talking to someone else, but he became distracted by the many different images of Sedín around him. She seemed to be everywhere all at once. He walked toward the largest shard ahead of him. When he was close enough, he could see that this shard was nothing more than a mirror. He stood in front of it and watched the reflection as he brushed his long thin, finger across his tiny, thin mouth. He looked into his large, almond shaped eyes. Their sea green colour seemed familiar and brought him comfort. He became mesmerized by the many silver flecks showing through the green.

* * *

Mark Robertson felt afloat as he heard various people speaking from far away, but was too dazed to make any of it out, drifting in and out of consciousness, until at last he pushed himself back up, blinking hard to try and make the three shapes out directly in front of him.

As he regained his senses, he realized he was looking at the step into the command well, the blurred triple-image thankfully temporary of a medic officer as he grunted:

"Report!"

Ensign Smlek spoke up first, his gravelly voice reverberating in Mark's ears for a moment while he slumped to the Captain's chair:

"Borg Cube has been disabled Sir, their power levels have been minimal for the last few minutes. Apparently one of the Starbase's counter-measures had a serious effect. We own this Cube, but a full invasion force has attacked the Federation. At last report, the situation was dire, but..."

The Ferengi glanced across the Bridge to Lieutenant Azji, and the Betazoid straightened when Mark's eyes followed:

"Unfortunately Sir, I had to break contact with the telepathic attack force, but I believe their last strike made a significant impact."

The Betazoid nodded to Ensign Mriish and reclaimed the Conn, causing Mark to frown, wondering at what had happened prior to the whole ship shuddering, but he decided to put it under 'irrelevant' at the moment and glanced over his right shoulder to Lieutenant Tomah and Lieutenant Kheren:

"Our status?"

Tomah cleared his throat slightly before responding:

"Ah..main power at 82% and holding, hull breaches are contained and emergency repairs are under way, all weapons and defensive systems nominal. Ah..we were about to respond to the Starbase's evacuation call after the Borg rammed them, but now they're standing down the evac, since the Cube's been tractor to a safe distance. We're ah... two thousand meters from the enemy at the moment, Sir."

Nodding while rubbing his pounding head, Mark responded:

"Mmnh...keep the shuttles hot and ready to go for the moment and signal the Starbase that we're ready for new orders."

His own aching head and neck reminded him of the newly-arrived Doctor Bains:

"Ah...and inform Doctor Bains that I want him to take a tally of the wounded. Anyone who can still reasonably function gets treated and sent back to their station when ready. Anyone incapacitated or otherwise, well...we'll just see what else the Borg have up their sleeve."

He glanced to Kheren and chuckled ruefully:
"Sounds like I missed one hell of a party."

In all the frantic moments of the last minutes, barely after hearing the fleetwide alert about the imminent all-out attack of the Borg armada against coreworlds of the Federation, he had not noticed Commander Robertson reviving.

This lapse made him angry: it was his job to look after the ship for his Captain... and that included looking after the Captain himself. Without a commanding officer, a ship was without a mind, without a will... What would have happened if the Captain had been severely injured or killed, and he hadn't done anything? just like now?

Never again he vowed silently, his silvery orbs mere slits under his flattened antennae.

" The main dance is still in full swing, Sir. " He finally answered with a forcibly controlled voice.

Science officer Smlek suddenly reported:

" Sir! I am reading a power surge from the Borg vessel!."

They looked at the viewing screen: the mindboggling scene of the huge Borg Cube jammed against the starbase's outer ring showed sickly green lights pulsing all over each face of the cube-shaped construct. But there was no more cutting beams or gravimetric charges coming out of any dark, fuming weapon port, even as the McKenzie and its escort squadron peppered it with phaser fire. Obviously, all power was channelled inward.

It could mean only one thing: and Tomah voiced it for them all:

" Ah, Captain! They're on a build up to detonation! "

The Andorian spun around, antennae bristling:

" Misteriish! We will need warp one the instant that thing explodes! "

Then, Kheren almost slammed into his own seat, getting back to Mark Robertson:

" Sir! We must send a fleetwide order... what the Republic just showed us: all ships and starbase to tractor that cube away! Now! "

As if to second his proposal, Lieutenant Tomah said:

" Fleetwide priority message from the Wisconsin, Sir: Captain Onia urges every ship to tractor beam the Borg before they self-destruct. "

" Sirrr, said the Caitan woman now handling the helm, Wisconsin alrrready tractoring... if the Rrrepublic joins us both at two kilometerrrs distance frrrom the Cube, we will be able to move it away at full impulse. "

But for how long? How far away ? said the Andorian's silvery eyes looking at his commanding officer. The ship could effortlessly outrun any explosion at warp one... but the starbase could not.

It was but for Acting Captain Mark Robertson now to give the word...

The silence and calmness that now gripped the entire bridge of Lotus Fleet's flagship was almost unbearable after the last furious minutes of pandemonium on the command center, of battle for the survival of Stabase 10, of anguish over the fate of the entire Federation.

In all this, acting Captain Robertson had maintained extraordinary composure when even his stoic appointed First Officer barely contained his own battle lust.

Humans, mused Lieutenant Kheren looking at his commanding officer, *they can be as passionate as any one of us... yet so Vulcan they can also be in the face of death. No wonder they are the core of Starfleet and of the entire Federation...*

Reports were coming in about repairs underway, injured personnel being treated, combat status being returned to full operational mode. On the main viewer, the daring blasting of the outer ring by the Spectre allowed both Wisconsin and Republic to tractor away the enemy vessel, now dormant, to a safe distance.

The standby warning of the Republic and the call for assistance from the starbase followed one another on the speakers. But the Andorian was not listening to them, not even looking at the quiet battlefield displayed on screen.

His antennae had picked up the change of pulse and breathing in the Betazoid pilot Ensign Tyvya had barely removed away from the navigation console.

Not again... he suddenly thought.

And obviously, Lieutenant Azji had caught his thought as clearly as he had heard him:

" I am in control again, Sir. I was caught with my mental barriers down but they are fully erected now... And... I am receiving a thought... a cry for help... "

" The Borg?" asked Kheren with as much suspicion as disbelief.

" No Sir; only a Betazoid can cry out that strong from that far through another's mind shield. It is a Lieutenant... Brandon Jori... from Starbase 10. I... I must... help him... "

Aside from the unexplained link that bonded all four members of a married quad and the half-mythical Aenars, Andoria had no history of psionics; Kheren was naturally quite confused by the Betazoids abilities... and with recent events, all the more nervous. But his tactical sense told him something bigger was in the works... so he said:

" Ensign Tyvya: cover Lieutenant Azji with your phaser, point blank range: set it on level 3 heavy stun. take him down if he attempts any unannounced move."

If Azji heard or realized anything of what was happening around him, he didn't show it: he just stood there, arms along his body, looking straight ahead without blinking.

But in his mind, a desperate struggle was raging.

* * *

"Braedon Jori... I am Trennon Azji... I am with you, Braedon Jori..."

Jori turned around to see the faint figure of a Starfleet officer. That name again... Braedon Jori. He looked at the Betazoid briefly, before turning back to the mirror. Staring into his reflection, he contemplated his existence and then turned back to face this Trennon Azji.

"I am Sedín. Your species is irrelevant." he replied.

Azji was shocked. Braedon's voice had been replaced with the terrifying Borg monotone.

"Braedon Jori... let your mind anchor itself through the perfect logic of mine; let my mind rein in the emotional turmoil of yours... and hers... Let us together channel the power of the others into your own, Braedon Jori... Let us climb the steps together."

The young Lieutenant turned to his right to see the image of a Vulcan in a familiar uniform fade in to view. He wondered if he was going mad. He turned back to the mirror. His reflection was muddled now and he seemed to have no discernible facial features.

The Betazoid doctor, near him and yet far, recognized the destructive pattern of the cascade failure. The overload had reached the critical stage, and without immediate neurosurgery by someone outside, death would come in minutes.

The queen had no such neurosurgeon.

Jolie yelled out loud and in her mind:

"Everyone! Out! Now!"

Azji faded away, further confusing Braedon.

Jolie Bindo felt herself slamming back into her own mind.

Her body convulsed several moments. She opened her eyes and immediately shielded them with a hand from the bright lights in sickbay, then sat up with a groan, holding her pounding head in her other hand.

She ignored her staff scanning her with a medical tricorder and tapped her combadge.

"Doctor to Captain. Send a priority message to the entire fleet that the queen's neural net is in cascade failure. Anyone in the Telepath Project needs to evacuate her mind immediately, or they'll get caught in the breakdown and die. If they can't, the medical personnel need to take the telepaths offline using any method possible to save them."

N'Eligahn dug the dagger in deeper. He could feel the tendrils of the queen's broken mind dipping into his own, like a drowning person gasping for a distant branch. He would not give her that luxury.

Then he heard the imperative order to get out of the mind contact.

He didn't know who owned the voice, such was his vision locked on torturing the object of his personal hatred. But it was so insistent and direct, the Rethian knew it was right to follow.

N'Eligahn wrenched the dagger from the queen's mid-section, tearing out whatever had been there. He locked eyes with her.

A thousand words passed through his mind, but nothing fit. No words could describe the emotions he felt

Instead he simply tossed the dagger to her feet.

And closed his eyes.

It felt like he was being pulled backwards with a cord. He flew back through the tunnel of light until he was once again overcome by darkness.

Kelsey continued slicing despite the warning. The Kalturian threw off her helmet and looked Sedin straight in the eyes:

"Burn in hell" the androgyn cursed as it stuck the weapon in the middle of Sedin's forehead and left.

Quickly.

Summers too heard the warning and escaped back to his own body and with a quick glance around the bridge he barked:

"Status Report!"

Consciousness came back to N'Eligahn like a crashing tidal wave. He fell sideways out of his chair to the deck, coughing loudly.

After a moment or two he returned to his seat, his vision clearing as he remembered where he was.

It took another few moments for him to use his voice again.

"On course straight at the cube, Sir," N'Eligahn said. "Primed and ready for your order."

Kelsey Alther's eyes opened too. Cracking its neck and smiling, the androgyn looked around then heard the captain's request too.

"All weapons armed and still locked" was the answer as the tactical officer sighed quietly soon afterwards.

That experience with the Borg would be the last Kelsey promised inwardly.

A report had to be sent to the homeworld about the Borg later... but not now.

First, the job had to be finished.

As he stood up from his chair, the half-bajoran Captain looked around the bridge, straightened his uniform out and stated:

"I am going back for the mind of Lieutenant Jori to try and get him to safety. Keep a check on my vital signs as well as my brain wave patterns; if I seem to be in imminent danger, try to snap me out of it." Summers finished and sat back down in his chair.

A medical Ensign set his tricorder to keep a watchful eye on his condition.

The last thing he saw before he woke up in what looked like a house of horrors was this young Bajoran medic standing in front of him.

"Braedon? I've come to bring you home pal, where are you?"

In the realm of the mind, at this very moment, Bindo's order to leave managed to force its way through the torrent of ecstasy washing over Onia and the queen.

Doctors... always too cautious, Onia huffed.

The captain of the Wisconsin was not yet satisfied. She stayed, a part of her watching a broad expanse of the net collapsing away from the diseased section. Another part of her watched Sedin's net fragmenting under the assault of agony. She saw Jori and his sister crying out in a black hole of anguish that threatened to pull him in forever, save for those Vulcans who mind-melded with him and anchored him to reality.

Another man dressed in a Starfleet uniform stepped through the mirror. Braedon recognized him.

"You are Daniel Summers of Starfleet." [/IHis mind said, slowly feeling the presence of Revik clear his mind.

"That is correct Braedon" Summers said with his own mind as he reached his psychic hand out towards the younger man.

A handshake... he mused; it might be enough to bring him back.

"I am..."

Jori stopped. He looked at the Starfleet Captain, unsure of himself...

Perhaps, this is trap.

He became frightened.

She howled in frustration. The scream forced Braedon Jori back into the moment.

Jori looked around and noticed that a few different images of Sedín within the shards had taken notice of the intruders. He felt an overwhelming sense of deSire.

"Hunger..." his voice trailed off as he saw new figures walk through the shards and into his space. He didn't recognize most of them. But one stood out from all the others.

"Lyaxanna!" he telepathically shouted, as his memories rushed back to him.

"I almost lost myself in her mind." He said to the group as he realized the truth behind the Borg's attack, still bonded with Sedín's memories.

"Sedín's deSires have lead her to a new... dark place. She has realized that she... the Borg, will not achieve perfection through assimilation. It has been decided that the only way to achieve it is to destroy everything else. When she is the only consciousness left in existence... she will have nothing left to hunger for. She doesn't have body, or a mind for that matter. She exists as pure consciousness. She has no body... no mind as we know it. The only way to destroy her is to put an end to the Borg. I know how, but no one mind is enough."

Braedon was interrupted by a familiar voice.

"But many minds, working together might be enough to take over her thoughts for a moment."

Savok and Revik of Vulcan both together clamly replied as many other Vulcans stepped forward, revealing themselves.

"Precisely!" Lieutenant Jori said with excitement.

It was obvious that the overt display of emotion made the large group of Vulcans uncomfortable. Savok moved closer to him.

"I failed in my original search for Sedín. The hunger was far too powerful for my mind to tolerate." Braedon could sense that Sedín's hunger concerned the group of remaining Vulcans.

Savok continued:

"In order for us to be of any help to you, Sedín's hunger will have to be nullified in you."

"I believe that Mister Summers will be able to help with that." Lyaxanna replied mentally.

"Why not you, sister?" Jori asked, afraid of the answer.

"Braedon, you have created a new reality within Sedín's consciousness. But she will need a vessel to..."

Her voice cracked.

"All this time..." Braedon's heart felt heavy as it dropped in his chest, *"I have wanted to save you from this..."*

"Brother... end this... and I will be saved." She said softly with sadness and anticipation.

"We must begin this." Savok said bluntly.

In the world of his mind, Braedon Jori took the hands of his sister and the group surrounded him. Braedon kissed Lyaxanna sweetly on the forehead and then approached Daniel Summers.

"Open your mind and your heart to me." he said aloud placing his hands on Summer's face. The hybrid officer could feel his own mind solidify as each Vulcan initiated the mind meld with him through his own Vulcan heritage.

Suddenly, Braedon could sense Sedín's familiar, terrifying hunger overwhelm him anew.

But he looked into the half-Betazoid's eyes warmly.

"Our hearts... one and together."

Lieutenant Jori could hear his sister scream in agony as Sedín ripped through her. Braedon felt excruciating heartache, but tried to focus only on Daniel.

"My pain, is your pain..." he continued through his tears, *"my heart is your heart..."*

As the so called Heart Meld was starting to work, Daniel Summers could sense not only his own emotions but the emotions of Braedon Jori, whose heartbreak was almost as unbearable as his own... while Savok and the rest of the Vulcans flooded his mind with a mental strength borne of pure logic and discipline as he has never felt before.

In the realm of the imagination, he dropped to his knees and wept as tears fell from his eyes like the waters of Niagara Falls on Earth.

He looked up to see the others looking at him.

I have to be strong, he thought, stoic if I have to. I am a Starfleet Captain.

As he began to regain a sense of control over the emotions, he started laughing loudly as if he had heard the joke of all jokes. As seconds passed the laughter turned into anger and hatred as he started mumbling about his father. His emotions turned sour even more with emptiness and the longing to free his father from this living nightmare. Then he started weeping again at the end, repeating the cycle.

Braedon Jori's voice trailed off as he felt his heart become light while Daniel Summers buckled under Sedín's unmeasurable hunger.

I AM SEDÍN!

I AM BORG!

The words swirled through the fragmented myriad realities twisting through the Borg Collective Consciousness. They came from everywhere. Every wall. Every conduit. Every Borg-operated subspace channel. The words even came from every Borg Nanoprobe.

Upon the USS Challenger, Captain Geordi La Forge watched agape as his viewscreen, once filled with intercepted Borg tactical chatter, flowed with only those six words.

Upon Vulcan, Ambassador Picard gazed up at the stars, a small, bittersweet smile playing upon his age-lined features. Somehow, he knew that Anika Hansen was doing the same thing from her home on Earth.

Upon the USS Spectre, those who had just survived the telepathic Borg assault were assaulted again, their minds flooded with the overwhelming savagery of Sedín's defiance, even as Lotus Fleet's powerful telepaths began their efforts to contain her within Braedon's sister.

The barrage came without warning and Chief of Operations N'Eligahn Etarudbo had neglected his own mental defenses. The mental assault hit him like a hammer striking steel, knocking him from his chair. It rolled into his mind freely and he had no way to stop it. Thousands of voices flooded his head. It was like it had been when he ventured into the Borg's mind, only now it was more direct and actively inside his own head.

He couldn't move and could barely think. Only flashes of images raced past his vision, ships halfway across the galaxy. The voices were all locked in a single mesmerizing harmony that seemed to be both everywhere and focused at the same time.

"I AM SEDÍN!" he heard in his mind as the voices merged for a brief moment into one solid and distinct statement that burned its way into his brain. *"I AM Borg!"*

The terror of the whole thing made N'Eligahn shake uncontrollably as the assault pierced its way further into his mind. It was too late for any sort of defense or resistance, in fact he realized his deSire to do so was lessening.

He tried to tell himself it wasn't what he wanted, that this alien force was altering his thoughts but that voice was drowned out by the chorus again until it seemed to mingle with the voices into a now deafening crescendo.

It was like staring into a swirling inferno, both terrifying and beautiful at the same time. At times the voices sung a song of perfection, community and belonging. At others it was darker and sung of loss of both will and independence.

"I CANNOT be contained!" the voices said, merging together again.

No, N'Eligahn thought, you cannot. You're everywhere.

A stone dropped in his stomach as he realized he was thinking this and actually starting to believe it.

"I WILL FIGHT!"

"I am the voice of ten THOUSAND years!"

I believe it, the experience of so long. So much knowledge, N'Eligahn thought. He wanted to lose himself in it all, if only to end the dueling between the two halves of his mind.

"Your crude blades and mind games will NOT work!" As these words were spoken he lost himself more to the despair as the voices rushed into the now open areas of his psyche. They hadn't, they wouldn't.

N'Eligahn was exhausted, both mentally and physically. The voices offered him a place now, something he'd never experienced, belonging and companionship. Most Rethians are born as twins or triplets. It allows them to form a metal bond right away with similar people to create a sort of emotional crutch, a support system. Over time it lessened but the bond was always there.

N'Eligahn had been born a single child. He'd grown and lived in a sometimes alien world, where everyone else seemed to be on a different page as a mental network stretched across the face of the world. Sure, he could always patch into it, but it was never the same, he was always on the outside looking in.

Now the voices offered him a new perspective, a new world of people and minds. He could be an equal part of it. N'Eligahn felt the fear and terror lift from his body. He was ready, he wanted to lose himself to the inferno. He listened as the voices merged for a final time.

"I WILL resist!"

What?

Resist? But...

N'Eligahn heard a far distant, yet recognizable voice. A...was it a friend? He couldn't tell, the voices said nothing. The new voice belonged to...yes, a friend with a broken and battered body, but his mind was intact. In fact it was as sharp as it had ever been. The voice was broken, but seemed to rise above the din of the chorus.

"You...resist?" it projected. *"How can...do it? When you have not acknowledged it yourself?"* The mental voice grew more and more clear. *"Yet again...you are mistaken. As you have always said, 'Resistance...is futile.'"*

The voice said it again, louder but still calm and measured.

A name entered N'Eligahn's head.

Re'tok!

"Your resistance, Sedín, has and always will be, futile," the mind of the Vulcan Re'tok said.

The essence of the Borg then lashed out irrationally, with dire results. Sedín was exerting her will over the entire Borg fleet. While not a telepath, she was linked through every Borg drone through every bit of tech within their bodies. She was what made the Borg...Borg. The queen of queens traced the neural pathways the telepaths were using even as they assaulted her, detonating any Borg vessel under her command housing drones that were being used against her.

Thankfully, the cube at Starbase 10 was fully under Lotus Fleet's control...at least for now.

Keeping that cube docile was a monumental effort.

Sedín's fury was not contained to just the cubes however. Insane as she was, she knew still that she was losing. She sent one last command to every remaining cube:

" Form three groups, and push to Earth, Vulcan, and Betazed. Destroy everything!"

The new flight plans for the eight hundred and sixty-six cubes still in Federation space carried them away from Starfleet's chosen front lines, or through the weakest point, on a deadly course towards the heart of the Alpha Quadrant.

Sedín was smug. She knew the Telepathic Take-Over team had been pulling out. She knew that they did not have enough psychic manpower to take over the billions of drones out there. No Starfleet, Rethian, Andorian or other fleet could destroy that many cubes. Thus, as they continued to stuff her massive, shattered presence within this frail mind, Sedín was for the first time in a long time...

...amused.

Kesley Alther was not.

The blue-skinned androgyn was thrown down from the force of the message penetrating its mind,

Both eyes shot open as, with a snarl, Kelsey climbed back up and shut them again.

Not this time you won't! the Kalthurian thought and dived straight back in Sedin's mind.

Ensign Alther arrived once again in the same old room and saw Sedin grinning. The Spectre's tactical officer sprinted towards Sedin and tackled her into a nearby wall.

"ENOUGH!" Kelsey's mind yelled at Sedin, throwing her into a wall *"END THIS NOW!"* the ensign yelled again, picking up Sedin and throwing her across the room.

Sedin may or may not have tried to stop Kelsey; it was unknown as the androgyn had so much anger that it had focused every last bit of power into maintaining its reality and treating Sedin like a rag doll.

Alther picked up Sedin after dragging her up and said:

"You will stop what you are doing or so help me I will torment you for the rest of your days!" vowed Kelsey, throwing Sedin to the ground and punching her continually.

"Eight-hundred cubes headed for Vulcan, Betazed, Earth! I ORDER you to stop them! Use any means necessary-"

Kelsey heard it and realised it was from Speaker-of-Names, the commander of Starbase 10. The Kalthurian turned to Sedin:

"You will stop those cubes!" Kelsey yelled at Sedin, picking her up once more and tackling her into a wall across the room.

Kelsey looked down at Sedin, heart full of rage and hate.... then, knelt down to Sedin:

"I will not let any more people be assimilated or destroyed while I can help it"

It was just a mental whisper as the androgyn got up and glared at the Borg Queen, waiting for her to dare move or talk.

The Kalthurian assault had taken away much energy from the mind of the Borg Queen; just enough to give them a bit more time in the realm where it had no meaning.

Onia heard Sedin's order to her cubes to attack the planets. Her breath caught in fear a moment—but then she concentrated on pure pleasure again, pressing the breakdown of the pleasure center further. The cascade failure was increasing—but not fast enough to prevent the attacks on the planets.

There must be another way to delay or avert the attack, shut them down somehow... the Deltan Captain thought.

In the meantime, she searched out any codes that would stop the Borg assault—codes to drop out of warp, to shut down deflector shields, to self-destruct, to put all the Borg drones into stasis...There was one possible solution, distasteful to her as it was, after fighting the Borg so many years. Onia hoped her poker face was as good telepathically as it was at the card table.

She called out:

"Sedin! Your net is failing. You have no one to repair it, and yet you pursue revenge. You and I both know that this is...inefficient."

Sedin snarled as she appeared before Onia.

"I was destroying what I could not assimilate for a thousand years before your planet flew the stars. Don't talk to me about 'inefficient'."

"Sedin, you cannot win. You will die without someone who can stop the cascade failure in your net. You might take out those three planets, but everything that makes you Borg will die with you. It is illogical to pursue this course of action. When your drones do something illogical, their programming forces them to shut down. Yet you continue."

"Do you really think I'd program myself with such a simple override?" Sedin laughed.

"Of course not," Onia scoffed. "I'd be quite disappointed if you were. Nevertheless, I offer you an alternative to death."

"Why in the world would I trust you?"

"I'm the only one who hasn't hurt you, even when I had opportunity."

Sedin tipped her head, metallic eyes glittering.

"I'm listening."

"Deltans would consider you a sufficiently mature species—one with whom we could share our full pleasure, but only as equals. First, however, it requires you and your drones to go into stasis for Federation scientists and medical specialists to repair the damage to your net. Second, you must agree not to attack or assimilate any other species. We would, of course, install a fail-safe."

Sedin's eyes narrowed.

"You expect me to believe that the Federation would bring me back out of stasis? You're a fool."

Onia shrugged mentally.

"Look around the net, Sedin. You can see for yourself that it's shutting down. The damage is accelerating. You have no more time. You have no one who is capable of repairing it. The Federation does have the capability. Many Deltans would welcome the opportunity to share the experiences of our ultimate pleasure and love with a new species. Your choice, Sedin. Trust me that you will, at some point, re-awaken, healed. Or die. It's quite simple. I'll release you to consider it. You have five minutes."

* * *

Onia cried out as she came back to herself, pressed deep into the soft couch.

Gleck's sweat-slick body was entwined with hers, head nestled on her chest. He breathed evenly, eyes closed, a smile lifting his lips.

"Gleck?" Onia called to him softly.

There was no answer.

"Oh, Gleck," Onia said as a tear slid down from one eye. She held him close and stroked his head tenderly, brushing across one ear. "I'll find you the finest neurologists on Delta. We'll heal you somehow. I promise."

Gleck took a deep breath, eyes still closed.

"Onia, if you try to give me any more oomox right now, you're going to kill me. Even Ferengi have their limits."

The Deltan snatched her hand away from his head, and laughed, then hugged him tight.

"I'm so glad you're going to be okay."

"Holy latinum, Onia, 'okay' is the understatement of the millennium."

Onia sighed.

"I suppose we should get back to business."

They both sat up.

"Please report to sickbay for an evaluation, Commander. You may reveal my oath violation only to the CMO."

"I was a willing participant, Onia, you and I both know that."

She cupped a hand gently on his cheek.

"I know, my dear, but an oath doesn't stop being an oath when it's convenient."

He got up off the couch and held out a hand to help her up. She took it willingly. He kissed her once before picking up their uniforms. He handed Onia's uniform over and grinned.

"You'd better break your oath with me quite often, then."

She smiled.

"You are now *aladwata*, Gleck--an 'equal' in sexual maturity in the eyes of all Deltans. It would not be considered a violation of my oath anymore."

Gleck clutched his uniform to himself as he closed his eyes in pure pleasure.

"The Holy Vault has descended upon me and blessed me beyond all Ferengi who have or ever will live."

She laughed, the sound tinkling across her ready room. She tapped the comm button on her desk.

"Captain to Zapetti," Onia called out as she pulled her uniform back on. "Priority coded message to all Federation fleets and allies."

Without any warning, the voices disappeared, as if moving off towards a new source.

N'Eligahn Etarudbo, second in command of the USS Spectre, was once again alone in his mind.

He slowly regained his senses and found he could move again. Sitting up, he found himself face to face with a phaser rifle. His eyes followed the barrel up and met Relys' own eyes, fixed squarely on him.

"I'm...okay," N'Eligahn said after a deep breath.

It wasn't exactly true; his head was pounding and he felt like he was going to throw up any second. But he reached up and moved the rifle away from his face.

He rose on shaky legs and saw three other security officers, their own rifles pointed at the tactical officer and the Captain. N'Eligahn nodded to Relys and took his seat again.

He re-routed the weapons controls to his console at least until the kalthurian came out of her stupor. Suddenly, the communications channel crackled. The console read it as Captain Onia of the Wisconsin.

"I have offered Sedin a bargain. If she goes into stasis within the next four minutes, she and her race are to be spared. If she does not, she has rejected the offer of healing in exchange for her life, and the life of all Borg. If she chooses to continue the fight, the USS Wisconsin and its crew will give her no quarter. She will be utterly destroyed. With this transmission comes the self-destruct code for all the Borg ships. All ships should ready themselves for emergency warp-out in...T-4:01. Captain Onia out."

N'Eligahn maneuvered the ship into a position alongside the Wisconsin before opening a channel.

"Wisconsin, this is Ensign N'Eligahn of the USS Spectre," he said. "I'm acknowledging your transmission. We're right with you."

In that one moment, N'Eligahn had never felt so truly alone. His mind raced through multiple ideas and solutions until the only thing he could do hit his mind hard.

His fingers raced across the console. He had one mission now and one mission only, save the ship.

"Security, attempt to wake the Captain and Ensign Kelsey," he said, his voice hard as he choked back any emotion he felt. He heard them move as he ticked the seconds off in his mind.

Back on the Wisconsin, Gleck stopped with his head only halfway through his uniform neck. His eyes were wide.

"You found the self-destruct code?"

"The code was at the top of her mind--it wasn't hard to find at all. The hard part was not letting her know I knew."

He finished dressing.

"You know, if you ever decide to give up being captain, I think we could make a killing playing high-stakes poker together. You'd probably be banned from the Ferenginar casinos in about 10 minutes, though."

Onia rolled her eyes and grinned. "Get to sickbay, Commander."

"Aye, Captain."

But there was no rest for the rest of Lotus Fleet.

"Captain Speaker, this is Kotari."

The message was audio only, and distorted. Yet clearly it was the Fleet Captain's voice.

"Solférino has ... significant damage. ... unable to pursue the Borg any The ENTIRE Borg ... set course at maximum warp for ...th, Vulcan, and Betazed. Fleet ...mated at still over 800 vessels. If you're done there send all ships to protect Federation space. We're pulling ... ships on the ... border to try to stop them."

The transmission ended, leaving an already frustrated Kzinti even more so.

"Admiral-Redding." He stated, his voice carrying a growl as he tried to keep from baring his teeth. "You have Operations."

With those words, Speaker-of-Names rose from his command chair stalked past the human Admiral quickly towards the unmanned transporter.

"Computer, initiate site-to-site transport" he ordered once he arrived. "Cargo-Bay 147: Project Telepathic-Take-Over."

The Captain rematerialized a moment later near the TED and Ensign Yylna. "Rrreport." it was his version of a gruff command, the sound rolling deep within his barrel chest.

"Sir," began Yylna. "We are as stated before: taking out telepaths from the chamb-" She blinked as the Captain stalked past her towards one of the recently vacated chambers. "Sir?"

He settled inside, squeezing in sideways and craning his head towards the inside of the device. "Pull me out if I am not back in five minutes, Ensign."

The Kzinti took a deep, steadying breath, even as Yylna's fluty voice faded from his sensitive ears. She had made some sort of affirmative, he'd imagined. The thoughts whirled and magnified in his mind. They tore at his civility and every fiber of his body screamed to him that he was trapped within this cage, that if he did not escape soon he would be devoured by a much bigger predator than he. Stories of the telepaths of Kzin haunted him. Would he succumb to the depression too? Would he no longer care for his fur, leaving it to mat and rot on his flesh if this worked? Would the courage melt from him like ice from a white-hot brand, leaving him a cowering fool? His chest burned. Powerful lungfuls of air drawn in and expelled, fogging the glass.

Then suddenly, he was there.

Sort of.

He raised one arm and saw himself mostly transparent, like a ghost or a badly transmitted hologram. Past that he saw that he was at the last known location the last telepath who used the device had been. There were essences which he knew to be Summers and Jori, and several others as well. He began to move, but afterimages assailed his vision with every step, nauseating him. It was like he was in the chamber, but not. He could still see Yylna and the other telepaths through the fogged window. He could still feel the pain of his large body crammed within space designed for a humanoid literally half his size. The textures, the smell of his own sweat as he tried to retain control.

There wasn't time. THERE WASN'T TIME!

He shook his head, reached out with a barely visible hand towards the familiar entities ahead of him. So close but so far away. So he roared.

"JORI! SUMMERS!" He bellowed telepathically as well as vocally, *"Eight-hundred cubes headed for Vulcan, Betazed, Earth!"*

The fire in his chest flowed up into his mind.

"I ORDER you to stop them! Use any means necessar-"

"-ainwaves off the charts, get him out of there."

"-got his arm, help me. On three. One, two..."

"Bring me forty ccs feraprovaline! He's going into..."

No. He had to make sure the message was given. It was NOT five...

"He's sedated for now, Ensign. We'll need a specialist in neurosciences to do any more."

* * *

Braedon could sense the confusion from his Vulcan brethren as his connection with Sedín strengthened. A few of the Vulcan telepaths were nearly incapacitated by the initial shock of Sedín's emotional hurricane. But they remained vigilant and stayed the course as he sent the emotional outbursts into Daniel's mind.

Summers fell to his knees in tears. He looked up at and began laughing uncontrollably before his heart and expression filled with anger and then despair.

"JORI! SUMMERS!" the psychic voice bellowed, *"Eight-hundred cubes headed for Vulcan, Betazed, Earth!"* The fire in his chest flowed up into his mind. *"I ORDER you to stop them! Use any means necessar..."* The contact trailed off.

Braedon Jori's heart filled with rage.

Earth, Vulcan, Betazed!

The warning seemed to echo endlessly in his mind.

* * *

Captain Wyatt let his First Officer handle the details of their maneuver, listening to her soft but firm voice distractly as he pondered the whole situation they were facing, here and elsewhere in the Alpha Quadrant.

One probing Borg Cube struck specifically at Lotus Fleet to draw out prematurely the always unexpected responses of Starfleet to their invasion. They knew they never managed to adapt to the unpredictability of numerous minds working independently; so they efficiently maneuvered to focus them all on one specific target. The Borg stabbed at one single, most effective flank, namely Lotus Fleet, to draw the Federation out into revealing to soon it's assets at one focal point... allowing them to identify, adapt and counter it for the following major extermination assault

As Sun Tzu stated: if you know thy enemy as you know thyself, never will you be defeated mused the Captain of the Republic in his command chair, looking on the main screen at the stars beyond the Cube where thousands fellow officers were dying. *They can't understand individuality... so they made us think and act as one unit... as them. And now they have us just where they wanted us...*

His thoughts were interrupted by the voice of his tactical officer:

" Captain; we have reached safe detonation distance. "

" Thank you Mister Leong. " answered Wyatt straightening in his chair. " Number One, signal the fleet: ready to fire at will..."

" Captain, please do not. "

The sudden call of Lieutenant Revik widened all eyes towards him.

" Mister Revik? Explain. " ordered Wyatt not without some perceptible annoyance creeping in his strained voice.

" Captain, we are currently attempting a telepathic takeover of the Collective... and this cube is the only link making that attempt possible. That is why the Borg tried to destroy it themselves. I respectfully suggest we hold fire until Starbase 10 signals us. "

It took a moment for Wyatt to grasp the idea... but then he stood up, signalling to Commander Doyle with his finger before speaking outloud:

" This is the Republic to all ships in the fleet: do not, I repeat, *do not* open fire on enemy ship until given the order by Starbase 10. Anchor all tractor beams to maintain it to present position. Starbase 10, please order firing the moment your operation is over or compromised. We will not be able to just hold it if it rejuvenates to operational status. Base and all ships, please confirm. "

Following at best striking distance, the escorting McKenzie received the message as they saw the procession come to a full stop on their screen.

" We're at a safe distance of detonation damage, Sir." confirmed Hughes from the helm. " The tractorship ships have stopped. "

"Ok, Hughes, hover us around the area, but keep us in weapons range and try to keep the cube in front of us if you can." The Captain ordered.

A few minutes went by, until suddenly the doctor's was heard:

"Doctor to Captain. Send a priority message to the entire fleet that the queen's neural net is in cascade failure. Anyone in the Telepath Project needs to evacuate her mind immediately, or they'll get caught in the breakdown and die. If they can't, the medical personnel need to take the telepaths offline using any method possible to save them."

"Sir, said Daniel Beren from ops just as he finished transmitting the warning, we're getting reports that the rest of the fleet aren't doing so well... and the Borg started to launch a final attack on Earth, Vulcan, and Betazed."

"We can't help, just yet that is, or at least 'till an order from the Starbase is given. We need to stay here, since that cube could reactivate at any time... plus, we need to find somehow a way to stop the rest of the Borg invasion fleet." The Captain explained.

"And the Starbase?"

"We're no good for an evacuation, Mister Beren. We wouldn't be able to take on many people, so unfortunately they'll have to make do until the threat is over." The Captain further explained. " Acknowledge to the Republic, Mister Beren. "

" Republic, this is McKenzie. Message received, standing by. "

" Thank you McKenzie answered USS Republic's First Officer Sarah Doyle. "

" Captain! "

On the now peaceful bridge, tactical officer Leong pointed his finger towards the science console, alarm filling his voice.

Behind the scanning station, Lieutenant Revik was, once more, rigid and unblinking.

" Damn it, not again! " swore Captain Wyatt popping off his command seat to go towards the entranced science officer. " Computer... "

" Do not be alarmed, Captain." suddenly said the Vulcan's calm, low voice, albeit with even less inflexions than was usual in his always emotionless tone. " I am still in full control of my mind."

Stopping just before him, Wyatt looked at him quizzically before asking:

" Report! "

" The telepathic takeover is so powerful, I can still connect to it even through my mental defenses... but, nonetheless, it is faltering. " slowly answered Revik, standing rigid and looking straight ahead at something well beyond the bulkheads of the ship. " The mind spearheading the attempt is losing its identity to the Collective. "

For a moment, the commander of the Republic didn't know what to make of any of it. But finally, not without some anxiety etching his voice, he asked:

" Can we do anything about it? "

" Please stand ready to take me out of the trance if need be, Captain. The leading mind is powerful but undisciplined; it will need anchoring to succeed. To do so, I must attempt a mind meld. "

Wyatt came around to stand right next to the Vulcan:

" I thought physical contact was needed... " he began; but Revik retorted coldly:

" The telepathic nanites infecting over 100,000 Borgs with the combined power of a hundred telepaths is multiplying psionic energy exponentially. It has transcended physical boundaries and travels even through the Borg link everywhere across space. They are attempting to subdue the Queen; they are about to fail. "

" Do it! " then hurriedly ordered Wyatt, even as he wondered about all that was said and understanding none of it.

And the Vulcan went silent. But in his mind, he was clamoring:

My mind to your mind... your thoughts to my thoughts... we... are... one... I am... Revik... You are... Brandon Jori... we... are... Revik... Brandon Jori...

All around the Vulcan's inner eye, chaos swirled with unruly emotions and straying images, thoughts going wild, passions flowing unchecked, from innumerable minds. But Revik was left untouched. The disciplines of the Kolinhar he had mastered in his youth easily protected him from the mental maelstrom as he plunged uneeringly right into the eye of the telepathic storm:

Brandon Jori... let your mind anchor itself through the perfect logic of mine; let my mind rein in the emotional turmoil of yours... and hers... Let us together channel the power of the others into your own, Brandon Jori... Let us climb the steps together.

Out in space around Starbase 10, all was deathly quiet; in the realm of the mind now raged the final war, as desperate and violent as the one burning in Federation space.

As the telepathic roar of Sedin resonated accross the limitless mindscape created by both the telepathic takeover and the Collective's very existence, it flooded the mind of the Vulcan scientist named Revik.

Revik blinked. Once.

The torrential flood of emotions was like a tidal wave against his own mind; but his mind, tempered through the harsh, purging disciplines of the Kolinhar, was like a rock splitting the furious waves all around it.

Kolinhar: the total purging of all emotions... the ultimate achievement of perfect discipline... the complete acceptance of total logic.

These had been the last words of the masters of Gol when he had completed with success the years long ordeal. These words instantly recalled, were all that Revik needed to take in and go through the emotional surge that would have submerged even the mind of any other Vulcan not so forged. But fire cannot burn where there is no fuel: emotion, however strong, could not resonate into a totally emotionless soul.

Even the scrutinizing gaze of Captain Wyatt could not see the strength of will and mental mastery his science officer had opposed the rage and fear of one millenias old mind reflected into billions of echoes.

But those still inside the mindscape felt it.

And on starbase 10, they could see it happening.

Ensign Yylna stood up to speak with the other two medical officers. But before the androgyn could utter a word, the room came suddenly to life as telepathic participants began to rise one after the other from their chambers.

Yylna returned to her console to view T.E.D. status reports. The medical team, regained composure and attended to those returning from the mission.

The Veldriari noticed a unique pattern from the status reports and sent the information to Starbase operations.

"Operations, this is Ensign Yylna. The telepathic participants are returning to their bodies and coming out of stasis. However, no Vulcan participant has returned. I'm not sure what this means, but I have sent you the status reports to look over."

* * *

Lieutenant Braedon Jori had always felt torn between these three places. Each planet represented a different part of him. His mother was born on Betazed, his father was born on Vulcan, and both had a Human parent. Braedon was raised among Humans on Penthara IV.

His heart was breaking.

Some of the Vulcans were beginning to wince at the feeling, when a mind entered their thoughts.

"I am the rock in the raging sea... Brandon Jori... Daniel Summers... all of you, free minds... Anchor yourself to the rock... our minds are one..."

The young Lieutenant was able to focus and sent his anger to Daniel Summers. Every last fleeting emotion fell away from Braedon's consciousness. The Vulcan contingent began to solidify the young telepath's willpower and mental fortitude. Braedon felt his mind open further. He felt as though his entire essence was stretching across the galaxy, through space and time. He could sense hundreds of Borg vessels, hundreds of thousands of drones, infinite numbers of nanoprobes and pieces of Borg technology. The last of the telepathic team solidified their positions as they all felt Braedon and Sedín becoming one.

Lieutenant Jori's mind could then perceive like a voice bargaining with Sedín.

"Your choice, Sedin. Trust me that you will, at some point, re-awaken, healed. Or die. It's quite simple. I'll release you to consider it. You have five minutes."

Braedon watched as Onia's mouth opened... and she was gone.

Jori's mind was becoming more closely tuned to Sedín's.

A memory flashed in his mind. It happened only moments ago. In true deception, worthy of Q and the most clever sociopaths, Sedín 'allowed' Onia to detect a fake self-destruct code from her thoughts. She knew that Onia was powerless to destroy her now, but became infuriated with the knowledge that this inferior creature was of the mindset that those of her race were 'equals' with her. The more she thought about it, the hotter the rage inside her boiled.

As Braedon and the telepaths became stronger, he was able to access Sedín's mind with control and precision. He was not able to affect it, but could listen in from the first-person perspective.

"Continue Primary objective" Sedín ordered precisely to three hundred and seventy-four specific Cubes in range of Starfleet vessels.

The young Lieutenant knew the Primary Objective was to destroy the Federation.

"Continue current course and objective" She commanded the rest of her fleet. Braedon could sense those ships getting closer to Earth, Betazed, and Vulcan.

"1853 restore vessel and resume orders 5-7-3-4-2" .

Cube 1853 was the Borg ship at Starbase 10.

Sedín knew too that too many telepaths had returned to their bodies, leaving her back in command of the ship. She was going to fight and destroy the fleet.

Summers, Savok, and the other Vulcan's knew now more than ever that they had to act quickly.

Braedon knew it too.

However, they were all aware of a problem they had yet to answer.

Sedín had a strange, unfamiliar barrier that kept them just outside the centre of her consciousness. They would have to reach the centre to have any chance at stopping the Borg from destroying everything that mattered to them.

But he knew the answer. He had the unique experience of having the passion of a human, empathic responses, and yet the goal of achieving a balanced, indifferent logic. Over and over again, he watched the Borg Queen fight off her emotions to issue cold, calculated commands to her fleet. It reminded him of his childhood when he had not yet learned how to quiet his emotions and bring stillness to his heart.

Braedon would exploit this fact to reach the centre of Sedín's mind.

He began forcing his and the Queen's emotions into Daniel, hoping he would be able to survive the ordeal.

When he had nothing left in his heart, he blocked the reciprocity of his connection with his half-betazoid compatriot, leaving millenias of emotions to fester and grow inside him.

Within seconds, Daniel Summer's soul was suffocated by an awesome presence of pure emotion. It was not fear, anger, or even love. It had turned over so many times inside of him, it had transformed into a pure energy force.

" This should break down the barrier long enough to reach her." Lieutenant Jori announced to prepare the Vulcans.

Braedon reached out into Sedín's hunger and strengthened his connection with her. He focused his core and reconnected with what used to be his friend Daniel Summers. They connected like two powerful electric currents, sparks illuminating their souls like thousands of fireworks igniting simultaneously. The powerful current exploded from within Daniel, passed through Braedon like a lighting rod and raged into the Borg Queen's mind, burning through her barriers and creating a smouldering path to her centre.

As she was incapacitated by the emotional violation, Braedon Jori and the team travelled the path and reached the true centre of her twisted mind.

They could hear her screams of terror and cries of pain echoing around them, as though the sounds were real and travelling through water.

Braedon went to work quickly, now in control.

"All vessels, cancel current objectives. New orders: self-destruct issue 191."

Sedín fought harder, attacking the Vulcan minds.

"1853 new order, open channel with Federation."

He was nearly overwhelmed by the immense sense of power, but was kept grounded by the powerful will and absolute disciplined control of the Vulcans. He felt the channel open to Starbase 10 and the fleet's ships. He spoke through the terrible voice of the Borg:

"This is Jori. Borg vessels to self-destruct in 1 minute. No time... warn others...you must put distan..."

Braedon trailed off and the channel closed as he felt the mind of one of his Vulcan comrades surge with energy before dissipating into nothingness.

"We must hold on." Savok called out with his powerfully disciplined mind.

"I AM SEDIN! I AM THE Borg!" Sedín called out, picking away the minds of her intruders.

"Forty-five seconds untill self-destruct" Jori shouted psychically, trying to strengthen his mind, feeling another mind of their coterie drift away.

"YOU ARE WEAK!" her psyche screamed, through child-like laughter. *"I AM Borg!!!"*

The young telepath could sense the horrifying mixture of amusement, rage and desperation.

"Hold on." Savok repeated as another Vulcan mind disappeared... then another... and another...

Braedon could feel Sedín trying to tear away at his mind, but he continued to push her back. There were only a few of them left; Braedon, Savok, Summers, and two others. He felt his thoughts slipping away.

He had almost let himself go under the colossal pressure, but was brought back from the brink when he felt a nudge from Daniel Summers.

"Just 10 seconds..." Jori called out, trying to keep his wits and hoping to rally the minds left.

He felt another mind slip away. Then another...

"WE WILL ADD YOUR DISTINCTIVENESS TO OUR OWN!" She declared, getting closer.

The mental roar shook every sensitive mind for a moment, even those disconnected from the telepathic net... but, on board the SPECTRE, N'Eligahn pushed it aside.

He keyed in a course and destination, his finger hovering over the engage control. He heard the efforts behind him to revive the rest of the bridge crew. N'Eligahn didn't look behind him to see if they were being successful. There wasn't any time and he didn't think he could live with himself if he knew.

And things went frantic again on board the nearby flagship USS Lotus:

One moment, Lieutenant Azji was immobilized in a trance; the next, he was suddenly back, blinking and looking around.

" Lieutenant: report. " asked First Officer Kheren, letting Acting Captain Robertson review the current status of ship and fleet.

" I... Sir... We were ordered out... out of the link. The Borg... they are going insane. They..."

Then, brutally, he shot both hands to his head and started shouting:

" I AM THE Borg! I AM... "

" Ensign! "

One word from Kheren and the Andorian giantess Tyvya fired, point blank, at the staggering, roaring Betazoid.

The navigator crumbled in a heap, unconscious.

With two hands gesture from the Andorian, the security woman once again dragged Azji's body away from the navigation board and Ensign Mrrish once more took over the helm.

" Captain, now said Kheren, the battle is now waged on two fronts it seems. And it looks like we are loosing on both. We can do nothing more here... but three worlds are now about to be burned down, and the Federation with them. "

* * *

"It's happening... we must return." Savok said allowing his mind to slip away and return to his body.

Braedon turned and looked down at Daniel still on his knees, with blank expression.

"Daniel, its time to go." he said, kneeling down in the realm of minds to make eye contact.

Captain Summers continued to stare forward, having heard nothing. The Lieutenant stretched out his mind and reached out around him. He reached further and further into the half-betazoid's mind, until he finally reached him.

"Time to go." he whispered again from inside Daniel's mind. The other's eyes shifted to look up at Braedon and he nodded his head slightly in agreement.

" Thank You." Summers said as he got up and ran back into his own mind.

They could hear Sedín's mental voice in the distance screaming in terrible fear and pain. The was getting closer. Louder. It was rushing towards them like a raging thunder storm. Jori shielded his mind from the blast and began his journey back to Cargo Bay 147.

"Jori. Summers. Out." The two empaths could barely perceive the calm mind of Savok over the tremendous last roar of the Borg Queen.

"RESISTANCE IS....."

PART 10 : FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS

Captain Ezri Dax paced the deck of the USS Aventine in frustration. Her arm was in a makeshift sling crafted from her torn sleeve, and she cradled it to her with her other arm as the reports continued to flood in.

"Forty-nine percent of our remaining forces are in fighting condition, Sir. We'll be operational again in five minutes. Still no sign of the Klingons nor the Romulans."

"Captain, the reinforcements Captain Data sent to us were discovered on their way to us. The Challenger reports that they're the only ship left. Captain LaForge says they'll make the rendezvous, but he's not sure how much more his ship can take."

"I've finished gathering the casualty reports, Captain. We've lost a hundred twenty three, with another fourteen seriously injured."

"Captain, Borg Cubes on screen. They're chasing the Challenger Sir."

Finally, Ezri had had enough. She gingerly let her arm go, and raised her good one up.

"Enough with the reports for now. Let's see what we can do for Captain LaForge. Signal the Enterprise and the fleet. We're moving out earlier than expected."

The message of the USS Aventine reached the federation flagship while its android captain assessed the entire battle while directing his own ship at the head of the fray:

"Target the lead vessel and fire a burst of three transphasic torpedoes. Helm bring us about to 045 mark 010 as soon as the torpedoes are underway, then proceed to the next target."

Captain Data gazed towards the viewscreen as he gave the orders, the mighty starship trembling underneath him as it took fire from the incoming Borg vessels.

"Captain!" called Choudhury from tactical. "The fifth tactical cube is accelera-" She cut off, then said with horror, "They've rammed the Mesopotamia!"

Data nodded:

"Damage to the cube?"

"Negligible, Sir. Can't say the same for the Mesopotamia." She glanced to the viewscreen, which was now focused on the twisted remains of the Nebula-class vessel.

"Have the USS Mercy and Adelaide move in to rescue the survivors. Defiant wings and Nova wings to cover."

"Sir, incoming message from the Aventine. The Borg are behaving erratically, but half of Captain Dax's fleet has been destroyed.

"I understand, Commander Choudhury. Send acknowledgement and inform Starfleet that we will move one quarter of our fleet to reinforce Aventine's front. Signal Galaxy wings two and five and Steamrunner wing seven to rendezvous-"

"-Sir, Galaxy wing two has been annihilated."

"Then send Ambassador wing three."

"Yes Sir."

New battle reports flashed across the commander's screen.

"Sir? The Andorian and Rethian support fleets are taking a heavy toll; the Imperial Guard escort wings are almost decimated and the Rethian flagship is under heavy fire. "

On their viewer, the largest rethian vessel rocked as it took a heavy hit in its side from a cutting beam.

It took all the strength Vr'Elneth had to remain standing.

"Hull breaches on decks 5, 6 and 7," Kor'Narel said. "Force fields are holding."

The coordinated fire with the Andorians was proceeding well, though the Rethians had lost half their Frigates and the *Kaltar* was still attempting to limp to a safe distance.

"Lock into formation and target the center of the middle-left cube," Vr'Elneth said. "*Ters Rethan* and *Ke'lanel* form up on our wings. *Rathiah*, take your wing and eliminate the two spheres to its port and starboard."

The three ships locked in step and fired, their combined beams tearing into the cube's hull as the frigate escorts unloaded their weapons into the breach.

Before the explosion, however, the cube locked all of its cutting beams on the formation. *Nadea Rethia* and *Ke'lanel* managed to pull away, but all of the beams converged on the *Ters Rethan*. Vr'Elneth watched on the viewer as the ship was carved up like an ancient sacrifice until the beams tore into its plasma hold, an area quadruple reinforced to ensure something like that didn't happen.

Except it had and now the plasma was ignited, burning through the lower levels of the ship and creating a bubble of abhorrently hot fluid around the ship from which it couldn't escape. Then the beams cut through the engine compartment, sending the ship into a warp core breach. The *Ters Rethan* exploded in a fireball, igniting the remaining plasma and incinerating what few escape pods had been jettisoned.

Rage filled Vr'Elneth as he watched the scene.

"Bring us about and fire again," he said, his lips curled into a snarl. These monsters may win the war, but his comrades would be avenged. Vr'Elneth was perfectly sure of that.

"Sir, the Federation is backing off from the fight," M'tarel said.

"But the Andorians are not," Vr'Elneth said. He gestured towards the screen. "And the cube that killed our brethren still exists. We shall ensure it does not for much longer."

"Yes Sir," M'tarel said.

"*Ke'laniel* and *Rathiah* are forming up alongside," Kor'narel said.

"Excellent, ready plasma for-" Vr'Elneth began but stopped mid-sentence as the lights on the bridge flickered and went out for a moment before switching over to emergency lighting. The deck beneath his feet shuddered and rumbled.

"What was that?" he barked.

"I can't tell Sir," M'tarel said. "It didn't come from the cube. Sensors are saying it came from inside."

"Sir, the plasma system is overheating," said one of the Rethians behind Vr'Elneth.

"Vent it," Vr'Elneth said.

"Ventilation systems aren't operational."

"Containment systems are offline," M'tarel said.

"Dump the entire system," Vr'Elneth said. "Engage the redundancies."

"None of them are responding, Sir," M'tarel said.

"Signal the *Rathiah* and *Ke'laniel* to get clear," Vr'Elneth said.

"Captain we've had multiple detonations down here and the warp core is venting plasma coolant," called the Chief Engineer over the ship's intercom systems, "Core ejection systems are offline. I would say we're looking at a breach within the next seven minutes."

Vr'Elneth stared at his console for a moment. It didn't add up, the only way this many systems could have been brought down like this would be...

"Sir..." M'tarel said. Vr'Elneth looked up to see Kor'narel pointing his disruptor squarely at him.

"What is this?" Vr'Elneth asked. Kor'narel's hand was shaking, his eyes full of terror.

"The voices called, I have to obey," he said.

M'tarel went for her own disruptor but Kor'narel was a hair faster.

He fired, hitting her in the chest and shoulder. She fell backwards onto the floor.

"I'm sorry," Kor'narel said.

Before Vr'Elneth could move Kor'narel fired again.

The disruptor blast hit Vr'Elneth squarely in the chest.

He fired two more times, taking out the rest of the bridge crew before he moved towards Vr'Elneth. Vr'Elneth was on the floor coughing, blood dripping from his mouth.

Kor'narel stood over him, his disruptor leveled.

"All glory to Tor'akhal," Kor'narel shouted.

Suddenly, he lurched forward and disintegrated.

Behind him stood M'tarel, her disruptor held in her non-wounded hand.

When she saw Vr'Elneth, she dropped the weapon and ran over to him.

Vr'Elneth coughed again and pushed her away. He grabbed the console and used it to get to his feet.

"Evacuate...the ship," he said. He pulled off his slightly burned rank sash and passed it to her. "Get...please get this to Tar'Eniel," he said, coughing louder. "He'll know what to do."

"Sir, I'm going to..." M'tarel said.

"That's an order Lieutenant," Vr'Elneth said.

She said nothing else. With a single nod, she turned and limped from the bridge.

Vr'Elneth was now alone on the ship's command center, his lifeblood slowly dripping onto his boots. He looked down at his console and keyed in a course directly towards the cube. Even if its shields were still full, it wouldn't matter once the core went critical.

He used the last of his strength to open a comm channel to the *Kumari*.

"Andorian commander, this is..." he coughed again. "*Nadea Keresesh*. We're going critical. I...advise your ships steer clear. We're...going to make a pretty big mess." He tried to chuckle but it turned into another cough. "It's been an honor to kill with you. May your hunt be long and gainful...Keresesh out."

He keyed out the viewscreen and leaned against the console as the face of the Borg cube loomed ever larger and closer. This ship had been his dream for nearly fifty years. He'd designed and built her.

Ahead the cube was mere meters away from the tip of the *Nadea Keresesh's* hull.

Vr'Elneth smiled and closed his eyes.

He was ready to die with her.

On the bridge of the Andorian flagship *Kumari*, all eyes and antennae were sharply focused on the viewing screen, and the dramatic image of the Rethian battleship about to collide with the huge Borg vessel.

"Can we get a transporter lock on him?" softly asked Fleet captain Shillinda with a strangely flat voice.

"Negative, Captain. The shields on the *Nadea Keresesh* are still at full strength. And plasma leaks everywhere aboard are interfering with our scanners."

She nodded to her tactical officer, and slowly rose from her command chair, her four oculars fixed on the main viewer. The events suddenly unfolding had a brutal dampening effect on the flaring Andorian battle lust. Her teeth clenched, she ordered:

"Imperial Guard: lock tractors on all Rethian lifepods, disengage and fall back to the position of the Starfleet Battle Group."

Every ship left in the Andorian home fleet, barely half a dozen now, still launched a last, defiant volley of torpedoes and phasers before complying. As all the ships moved away, towing all the lifepods ejected by the Rethian ships, the coldness and silence of space itself seemed to grip each and everyone aboard their battered hulls.

In the silence, all officers on the bridge of the Kumari rose also to join their commander and the leaders of their homeworld in lifting their heads high in the most respectful Andorian salute.

"Praise be the name of Vr'Elneth Etarudbo, hero of the Rethian people, hero of the United Federation of Planets." then said in a strong, vibrant voice the Presider of Andoria, as it was broadcasted on all channels across the sector. "Let us all remember the name :*Nadea Keresh*."

Before their eyes, the receding image of the dying starship, plowing through the flat front of the monstrous Borg cube, took a tragic, mournful turn as they backed away from the blinding explosion that shook their own entire ship, even so far away.

Not one Andorian, not even the pregnant Presider, faltered on their feet. Because their hearts never backed away... and were shaken more still.

And in the deathly still silence of space, the war raged on.
"Saucer separation complete, Sir. Course laid in."

Captain Data looked around the Sovereign-class battle bridge, confirming in his positronic matrix within that glance that all was prepared. Once he'd made that confirmation, the android spoke:

"Update on reinforcements."

"No answer from the Romulans, Sir. The Klingons never arrived. What's left of Andoria's fleet is regrouping with us... Rethian Home Fleet is gone... The way the Cubes are tearing through our lines..."

"Very well. Commander Kadohata." He took a breath, then paused, turning a quizzical expression towards his First Officer. "Have you deployed the crew's farewell messages?" It was his understanding that Kadohata's family was of prime importance, thus, he felt the necessity to make this inquiry.

Miranda closed her eyes and inhaled before nodding. "Messages away, Captain, including your schematics and the backup copy of B4's personality and memory matrices."

"Very good then. Computer. Initiate ramming sequence Delta Alpha Tango Alpha Eight. Authorization-" The android immediately shut his mouth with an audible click, then narrowed his eyes at the viewscreen. "Belay that. Display and enhance tactical grid location Zero Six Two Beta."

The viewscreen immediately zoomed in on a sector of space forward and to the left of the Enterprise's battle group. An explosion.

"Sir, that was the tactical cube that destroyed the Santa Maria earlier. It appears to have self destructed!"

"Commander, scan the other cubes."

* * *

Hundreds of Cubes quietly and unerringly approached the planet, glistening in the sun's radiance amidst the backdrop of space. Between them and the entire populace of Betazed stood five stalwart Starfleet vessels: The USS Gabriel Bell. The USS Archer. The USS Degra. The USS Chapel. The USS Shallash.

Each bore the scars of combat, each bore crews who could have fled, should have fled but stayed, unwilling to leave the Betazoids alone to their fate.

In true Tellarite fashion, the Shallash fired first. The Nebula-class starship's weapons pod lit up as it loosed its ordinance of torpedoes, while phasers lanced from every emitter array the vessel had available. The Galaxy-class Gabriel Bell and Archer added their firepower soon after.

It was a futile fight. The Borg had long since adapted to phasers and quantum torpedoes. One more torpedo flew from the Degra's Excelsior-class hull. One more stream of orange energy flew from the Intrepid-class Chapel's arrays.

And then the unthinkable happened.

The beam and torpedoes hit their mark: and the Cubes exploded. And exploded. And exploded.

A great rippling red and gold wave spread out across the viewscreens of each ship, crews staring at the display on every bridge.

The scene was repeated light-years away, near Vulcan. Light-years still near Earth.

And upon every starship fighting this losing war, from one end of the Alpha Quadrant to the other end of the Beta Quadrant, cheers arose from every officer and crew member.

The War of One Thousand Cubes was over.

The Borg Invasion was broken. The Federation had survived.

Out in the Delta Quadrant, Undine vessels paused, their fight with the Borg tactical cubes in the Delta Quadrant suddenly, violently ended. Yet still, they had not detected the destruction of those Borg vessels that had entered the nearby nebula. There were three of them, and they had used odd tactics. It might even be construed that they were fleeing.

Sedín.

As the last cube obeyed Jori's detonation order, every single telepath at the Battle of Starbase 10 could hear her scream.

She had been contained...on vessel 1853.

The massive fireball tore apart the sickly green interior of the ship, while the force of it devoured and savaged the exterior of the vessel. Debris rained all over the Starbase's shields, but the quick thinking of one Ensign Sisko had once again saved the station from further damage. The shields held, and the debris were safely shunted away from Lotus Fleet's home.

It was up to the skills of the crews of the vessels assembled there as to whether or not they survived. Still, whether they survived or not, every single one of them was a hero.

Not just to Lotus Fleet. Not just to Starfleet. Not even just to the United Federation of Planets. For this single battle, waged for what seemed to be an eternity, had made each member of Lotus Fleet a hero for the entire galaxy.

The Borg, and Sedín, were no more.

* * *

"This is Lieutenant Jori. Borg vessels to self-destruct in one minute. No time... warn others... you must put distance..."

Captain Wyatt immediately turned his gaze from his entranced Vulcan science officer to bark:

" Mister Leong! Tactical sensors on the power output of that Borg cube! "

" Aye, Sir. " responded the tactical officer blinking furiously as his fingers implemented the necessary adjustments.

" Mister Parini! then said the Captain of the Republic, Hook your helm computer to the tactical sensor grid. Maintain position but take heading 180 mark 4. I want warp one exactly 2 seconds before the blast! "

" 180 mark 4 hard about, Aye Sir!" responded the sweating pilot between clenched teeth.

" Chief! Do the same with our tractor beams. At the same instant, we will need all available power to shields and propulsion!" then ordered Wyatt.

" Aye, Sir! All power ready to be rerouted. "

" Captain, then asked First Officer Sarah Doyle turning to him with a frown. " Shouldn't we immediately move out... "

" Negative, Number One. We still need to hold that monster there, out of range of Starbase 10, until the very last moment. And this battle is not yet over.. "

Wyatt was again looking at his unmoving, silent friend, gazing beyond space in a realm beyond the physical world... where all was about to be decided.

The open channel with starbase 10 came alive just then:

"Rivers to the Wisconsin and Republic. Suggest you get on the other side of that cube and reverse tractor beam to push it away from the base as much as possible. Leave time to warp out though."

Wyatt made an impatient gesture at his First Officer and she opened a channel as he requested:

" Starbase 10: this is Republic: wake up! the cube is already past the safe detonation distance and we will keep it there... but keep your shields up for the debris field aftermath. Republic out. "

" Fifty seconds left," Rivers then said to Sisko. He swore and began typing furiously on the console.

A few seconds later, Sisko finished what he was working on and contacted the Captain.

"Sisko to Captain Speaker, I've rerouted ALL available and emergency power to station's shields. I've also extended the shields in the direction of the Cube so that the force of the explosion will actually ricochet off the shield and hopefully send most of the debris in the opposite direction of the starbase. I must warn you however, that if the force of the explosion is too great and the shield fails, it leaves us completely vulnerable to the debris."

He checked the console.

"We have 30 seconds left. I can pull the shields back in if you think it is too much of a risk."

She shook her head.

With nothing more they could do or discuss, Ensign Joey Day Sisko and Lieutenant Rachele Rivers stood silently side by side and watched the console in the hangar bay, as the Wisconsin and the Republic maintained the Cube away from the Starbase with their tractor beams.

Not so far, the retrofitted cargo bay became abuzz with activity as the Vulcans, the last operational Telepathic Take-Over personnel were coming back, the lone Veldriari technician overheard the information from Captain Speaker-of-Names' combadge. With the soft pads of its fingers, it quickly tapped it, and stated with a fluty voice:

"Captain Speaker-of-Names is unconscious. This is Ensign Yylna. What you've done is theoretically sound." A pause, and then with a bit of uncharacteristic humor, she continued. "You know...we'll know soon enough, won't we?"

On the bridge of the USS Spectre, others were also comatose after entering one last time into the twisted psychic realm of the Borg Queen.

Kelsey woke with a shock on the Spectre and just stared, blinking, before regaining senses completely. The tactical officer looked around the room with a confused set of eyes.

Crap. the Kalthurian thought, no matter how hard I try, I cannot remember what happened in Sedin's head at all.

Ensign Alther cracked its neck and waved at the Security Officers pointing their weapons and sighed.

And Captain Daniel Summers opened his eyes with a gasp of air and fell on his back. He laid there, unable to speak or even to think, eyes glazed.

The captain of the Nebula class starship USS Wisconsin, however, was far more agitated, walking back and forth in front of her chair.

"That spawn of a hairless sterile tribble," Onia swore as she heard the one minute self destruct. "I should have known better than to trust information from a complete psychopath. Helm: bring us around hard and push that cube as fast as possible away from the Starbase. Engineering: what's our warp status?"

"Online, Captain."

"Good. Warp 2 in 42 seconds, or we're going to be space flotsam when this cube explodes."

"Aye, Sir!"

"Tactical, blow that cube to smithereens if she so much as looks at us funny."

"Gladly, Captain."

The seconds ticked down as the Wisconsin raced to push the cube as far from the starbase as possible. "Cube's warp core is reading critical, Captain," called out her science officer. "Borg warp core breach imminent. Recommend we warp now."

"Warp on my mark," Onia ordered.

She waited several more seconds, trying to buy more time for the broken station.

"Now!"

The stars stretched out into long lines as the ship entered warp.

The Wisconsin blinked out of normal space moments before the Borg cube exploded.

Bare seconds before, the Captain of the warship McKenzie ordered:

"Tell the squadron to break formation. Tell them to either return to the Spectre, or to the Starbase. Helm, lay in a course out of the system warp 1, and stand by."

" Standing by, Sir. "

They didn't have to wait very long before the monstrous cubic vessel shook in it's death throes.

"That's our cue: Helm, get us out of here" Crist commanded as he stood giving the order.

The fighter squadrons that had previously been with the McKenzie, had already broke off towards the starbase for protection at a safe distance and under the starbase's shields. The McKenzie turned starboard 150 degrees and spent forty seconds at full impulse till it jumped to warp 1.

On the viewing screen of starbase 10, all the ships of Lotus Fleet were disengaging to put a safe distance between themselves and the ominous cube-shaped construct where energy flares were now starting to light up erratically accross it's entire battered surface.

All ships but one.

" Ah, Sir... the Republic... She's still maintaining tractor hold. " reported Tomah, his breath shortening by the second.

" I read a power build up, Sir. " added Smlek, his huge brow covered in sweat.

" They'rre coming about... angling forrr deparrrture but maintaining distance and contact, Sirrr. " completed Mrrriish at the helm, her blue-slitted eyes unblinking and wide.

" Captain, then concluded Kheren looking at Robertson, they're holding the Borg until the last moment... preparing for a warp burst to escape... hoping their shields will hold during the few seconds needed for their warp field to form. "

" Chances are slim... " grimly evaluated the Ferengi science officer. But the Andorian acting as exec officer already knew it as he added:

" We can even the odds, Sir... if we go alongside the Republic to do the same... and overlap our shields with theirs, our armor giving us the chance they lack. "

" Ah, ten seconds before detonation. " announced Edward Tomah.

"All hands, brace for impact!" screamed Doctor Darum Bains across the cargo bay. It was transmitted throughout the ship and up to the bridge itself.

The Intrepid class vessel boldly went between the valiant USS Republic and the pulsing metallic titan, her armor glowing and hissing like metal melting as the shields of both starships met in a fizzle of energies.

As the USS Spectre warped away too, the multitude of screens on the Akira class ship came alive with the image of the cube still caught in the Lotus' and Republic's tractor beam. Then, mere seconds later, the Republic's engines lit up and she warped out as the cube turned in to one huge shrapnel filled firework.

" Warp speed! "

The voice of helmsman Parini was drowned by the sudden surge of the engines as a blinding green flash flooded the main viewer, forcing them all to turn away despite the glare compensators at full... and the rumbling of the immense detonation reaching their shields drowned everything.

The ship trembled and they all hung to their seats, their hearts skipping beats as klaxons and voices resounded everywhere.

" Shields buckling, Captain! "

" Power dropping! Compensating!"

" EPS overload on decks..."

Suddenly came about a stillness, a blackness, a silence as total as that of death.

Then lights came back.

They looked at one another in the growing lights, wordless, panting, sweating... then at the screen coming back on... and the stars streaking by.

one voice broke the silence, brought every one back to life like a long sigh of relief:

" It is over. "

It was Lieutenant Revik.

From bow to stern, a wild cheer made the USS Republic tremble almost as much as the Borg's destruction did. Laughter, tears, prayers of thanks, back slapping and handshakes exploded on each deck, between each surviving crewmembers.

Except one.

The somber face of Captain Wyatt silenced the entire bridge crew as he finally unlocked his hands from the science console and went slowly back to his command chair. His voice tolled like an ominous bell:

" The Lotus? "

Light years behind, as the energy built-up in the Cube expanded like the blast of a nova and a small flash showed the Excelsior vessel of Captain Wyatt warping out, Mark Robertson gripped the arms of the Captain's chair and roared: "Helm, Warp 1!!"

The flash of light and the sudden bucking of the ship told him the words had been meaningless... Nevertheless, he gripped the Captain's chair with all his might, staying put as the ship rocked from the blast, his heartbeat hammering in his ears in the darkness as he breathed...

There was a hellish moment of slow motion, a deafening shockwave that shook the ship. It felt as if the whole world was being torn apart, a moment of silence, and then screams filled the room.

Light and thunder swarmed the entire bridge of the Lotus as the explosion of the battered Borg vessel suddenly enflamed the cosmos with a final burst of raging destruction. Everyone was thrown out of their seat as the inertial dampeners failed to completely absorb the shockwave, sending the Intrepid class vessel at an odd angle just before the warp field completed itself...

And then collapsed.

They were gone.

In the expanding field of debris and plasma, quickly dissipating even before reaching Starbase 10's shield with barely more than a shower of small debris, no trace of the flagship could be found.

There was only darkness... and silence.

EPILOGUE

Silence.

The Borg Queen had stopped mid sentence.

The entire Collective seemed to freeze in time... and disappear.

All the sounds of war were gone. Inside the stillness, Braedon's mind raced with thousands of images from Sedín's memories. For a long second, it paralyzed him. He was only brought out of the moment by Savok's unfazable mind meld.

He awoke in his T.E.D. chamber slowly. He wasn't sure where he was at first. The whole experience was dizzying and made him queasy. Images continued to flash in his mind, but were beginning to slow, until finally stopping on the image of Ensign Yylna looking down at him.

"Lieutenant Jori, welcome back." the androgyn whispered in a voice like a gently played piccolo.

The medical staff raced over to him and began taking readings and administering neural stabilizers. As his life-signs and psionic energy readings returned to normal, the medics began removing the T.E.D. implants and the para-cortical inhibitors.

Yylna gave Braedon a hand and helped him stand.

"Thank you, Ensign." he said genuinely. "Ensign Yylna, can you open a channel to the Spectre, please? "

The Veldryari signalled that she had cleared autorisation from central command and opened the channel to the USS Spectre.

As the explosion died on the long range sensors, N'Eligahn swung the Spectre around and warped back to Starbase 10, emerging outside the Borg cube debris cloud. He scanned for any lifepods or ships that needed aid before angling a course for the Starbase's main bay doors.

There goes my revenge. Kelsey thought, not knowing what to do next.

The ship came to life with the roar of cheers of happy crew members and officers.

Chief Engineer Michael O'Conner was far more serene, not knowing about the other cubes, he just sighed lightly. Then he went back to quietly working, to get the ship and her crew fixed once more by sending out repair teams and coordinating medical teams, as he had done while the rest of the bridge crew was out.

Ensign N'Eligahn Etarudbo, the Rethian pilot, signaled to the Starbase that they were preparing to enter and waited for the appropriate clearance and for the doors to slide open. He chose the doors on the far side to avoid both the battle damage and the floating Borg debris.

He didn't want to think about anything, just the controls and the docking maneuvers. He had no doubt he'd have to do it manually and a good portion of the ship's thrusters were on half power.

The Spectre received the acknowledgment and the doors to the starbase slid open. The ship glided into the interior of the starbase. Inside it was relatively undamaged when compared to the docking ring and exterior.

The computer guided N'Eligahn towards the berthing the Starbase's command selected for them. Luckily most of the thrusters on that side were operational and N'Eligahn pulled the ship into the berthing with barely a bump. The ship's computer acknowledged that a seal had been made with the starbase.

He leaned back in his chair and sighed, tapping his combadge:

"Bridge to all medical teams, evacuate wounded to the starbase's designated medical areas," he said. "Cargo Bay two will be set aside as a temporary morgue. Bridge out."

The blue-skinned androgyn looked at the viewscreen and then towards N'Eligahn:

"What happened while I was out?"

"I didn't kill you!" he yelled.

Kelsey poked its own stomach and smiled at the rethian:

"I seem to be alive and in one piece" the androgyn told him, walking over to his console and standing next to him to whisper in his ear:

"Thanks"

"Spectre, this is Lieutenant Jori. What is the status of Daniel Summers?"

The voice from the speaker sounded like a sigh of relief that the universe was still there for them all.

"I am fine Lieutenant thank you, for everything... and I'm sorry" Captain Daniel Summers said as he knew that the apology was not only for Braedon losing his sister but for Daniel coming to the stunning realization he would never see or hear from his own father ever again.

Somehow, he knew he had to apologize aloud to find some peace with that realization.

Daniel Summers got up and walked into his Ready Room, which was in ruins, but still capable of sustaining his need of solitude.

Just before the doors closed, he said :

"Ensign N'Eligahn you have the bridge. "

The doors hissed shut behind him, walked over to his chair and sat down in total darkness and total silence.

Elsewhere, others were also realizing what had finally happened... and stunned silence was replaced by spontaneous cheers and applause.

"Captain—I'm getting reports from all over the Federation. The Borg cubes have all exploded!" His eyes were wide, and a grin spread across his face. "The battle is over!"

"What about the one by SB10?"

"It self-destructed, but far enough away from the starbase that there was no damage!" the communications officer reported.

The bridge officers cried out in joy. Onia allowed herself a few moments to celebrate before saying:

"Helm, set a course to SB10. Lieutenant Zapetti, send an order to the saucer section to rendezvous with us there. Commander Gleck, gather full reports from every station and let me know when they're all in. I'll be in my ready room 'til then. You have the bridge."

The captain sat down at her desk in the ready room, sighing. She ran a hand across the finely polished Deltan wood. She wasn't sure what would happen with the Wisconsin next, but her course was already set.

"Computer: Coded transmission, classified, to Captain Speaker-of-Names and to the Starfleet Deltan representative. Message as follows: "I regret to inform Starfleet and Delta IV that I must tender the resignation of my commission at a time of Captain Speaker-of-Names' discretion. I have violated the Oath of Celibacy. The circumstances were as follows...."

She finished the full report and sent it off, hoping for some measure of mercy.

Onia tapped a comm button.

"Commander Gleck to my ready room."

The Ferengi First Officer arrived moments later. "Aye, Captain?"

The captain waved a graceful hand at the upholstered chair across from her desk. Gleck sat down, crossing one leg over the other. She slid a PADD across the glossy desktop with the tip of one elegant finger.

"I sent this to Captain Speaker-of-Names and the Deltan Starfleet representative."

Gleck read through her resignation request and then looked up at her, shocked.

"What did Captain Speaker say?"

"He's been in the infirmary the last two days. His assistant will forward the message to him when he's back on duty. I wanted to prepare you in case you're called upon to take over as captain."

Gleck closed his eyes and breathed out in relief.

"Good. There's still time to fix this horrendous error."

"What do you mean by that?"

He got up from his chair, grabbed her hand, and pulled her up out of her seat.

"Come with me."

Something in his tone, uncustomary in its firmness with her, made her comply. He kept hold of her hand as he strode briskly onto the bridge. He did not let go even when the eyes of all the bridge officers turned to the two of them.

"I have an announcement, and I say this to prevent any rumor-mongering, not to embarrass our Captain," Gleck said, looking at every officer. "The captain and I, *together*, utilized her unique telepathic abilities to try to stop Sedin. And yes, it involved both of us breaking her oath of celibacy." He looked every officer in the eye with a steely gaze, searching for the least challenge. There was none. "If we *both* had not done that, Sedin would not have lost her grip on reality. Earth, Betazed, and Vulcan would be nothing but dust now, and the entire Federation fleet would be lifeless, broken hunks of metal floating in space."

He turned back to Onia.

"If Starfleet decides to discharge you or reprimand you for saving the galaxy in an unorthodox manner, it will be a grave injustice and a complete violation of every single thing I respect about Starfleet. I will not participate in a miscarriage of justice." He gestured broadly around the bridge. "Everyone on this ship, in this fleet, and on three planets are alive because you had the courage to use your unique skills in a unique way. No one else could have done what you—and I—did. You are one of the finest captains in Starfleet. If they choose to throw that away, I want no part of it. My resignation will be on the desk with yours."

Lieutenant Zapetti rose from his seat and stood at parade rest, chin lifted high.

"My resignation will follow, Captain."

The rest of the officers stood, echoing Zapetti.

Onia brushed away a tear that slid down her cheek. Gleck caught both of her hands in his.

"Onia, my dear, I will not let you fall on your sword. Nor will this crew. We—I--love you too much to let you do this to yourself."

Within an hour, classified transmissions arrived at Starbase 10 from every single officer serving aboard the *Wisconsin* for Captain Speaker and Starfleet. They were long transmissions, detailing Captain Onia's merits as captain, and informing Starfleet that they would have no choice but to resign with Captain Onia if she were removed from command for violation of her oath.

The *USS Wisconsin*'s battered stardrive section was met by her other half, and, fortunately, battle damage did not prevent a successful reconnection of the saucer section to the rest of the *Nebula* class starship.

As it docked at the starbase, all the members of her crew could see that such good fortune hadn't been given to the three separate hulls of the *Prometheus* class assault cruiser *USS Alsea*.

An electrical spark flew out from one hull connector and deep inside along the EPS conduits to a command console. The overload spilled out through other systems and died in a flash of sparks and fumes in the main transporter room.

"Replace the Hinesburg compensators, and make sure the power flow is steady, I want our transporters working by the end of this week, until then inform the starbase that we'll be using cargo bays 1 and 2 as beam in points" Chief Engineer and Acting First Officer Lieutenant Commander Calderwood Kyran said to the repair crew in the room.

A unanimous 'aye Sir' told him his crew understood.

Walking out onto the corridor, he dropped his guard and the preverbal weight from his shoulders. The task ahead of him was slowly starting to become a routine in his life. He missed the days of when the ship fully functioned and his feet could feel the slight movement in the deck plates when they went to warp.

As he walked towards the cargo bay, he joked to himself that, in this state, if the Alsea went to warp, the deck plates would fall off.

The large firm doors opened, revealing the large room that was cargo bay 1. Like te other parts of this ship, it was busy with people coming and going.

He made his way to the area they had stated for beam outs. Kyran was lucky he was able to remove his cargo of spring wine to his quarters before someone else discovered his stash.

He looked at the crewman who was co-ordinating the transporter efforts with the starbase:

"Alsea, Main bridge" he requested.

The ethereal glow surrounded his body and his vision blurred, soon focusing on the new room he was in.

The central bridge was busier than the tertiary hull and Lieutenant Commander Kyran had to step back to allow two engineers to pass with a component for the helm console.

It jogged Kyran as to why he was here; he looked over towards the tactical station. One of his very best engineers, Brenson, was working there,

"Ready over here" she announced as the Bajoran Lieutenant Commander walked over to the helms console,

Having to read the console upside down to allow the engineers access to the Multivector assault mode protocols, Kyran gave a nod to Brenson who pushed a few buttons on the console and returned his nod:

"Computer?"

A chime acknowledged his request.

"Run self diagnostic, initialise standard operation protocol and report."

A scrolling sound was heard confirming the computer was processing the request.

" Diagnostic complete, Vessel Diagnostic: USS Alsea, Prometheus class, Primary Hull: this vessel is currently at starbase 10 undergoing repairs. Current status of repairs: Sensor array 92% operational; as a result, this vessel is able to scan its counterparts currently stationed for repairs. Weapons array currently offline; diagnostics show this vessel has exhausted its supply of Quantum torpedoes. Hull repairs on this vessel are completing final stage; the structural integrity grid is ready to be reinitialised. Computer Core 94.5% Operational, Key components missing are related to Multivector assault mode. "

Kyran had heard what he needed and gestured to Brenson to cut the audio.

It seems the work on this section has completed quite quickly, Good job everyone" he said, clapping and smiling at the bridge crew as they too erupted in applause.

After the short celebration died down, the young Bajoran had found himself sitting in the captain's chair, reading over one of the answer reports from those he had sent to the starbase, about how long it would take to requisition parts for the rest of the ship. But hs gaze had been failing him, often looking out at the starbase doors hoping they would open.

His daydream was cut short by Brenson whisper ing in a teasing manner as she walked past:

"No, Kyran, the Fleet Captain will not let you give this part of a ship shakedown, so no daydreaming," patting him sympathetically on the shoulder

He turned in the chair and his eyes threw a proverbial dagger or two in her direction.

Calderwood Kyran wasn't one to mind her casualness on duty. He knew what the state of the crew morale was and he'd rather they were enjoying themselves.

"You know, I could say the prophets willed me to do it" he replied smirking

He handed her the PADD as he walked to the ready room

The door shut behind him. He was looking around to admire the restoration work. the lighting still needed work as the only source of light was coming through the porthole. The repair crew had removed the fish tank, which Kyran thought was a shame, He knew how much both her previous Captains had liked keeping a fish, though he, himself, was not as good with pets of any kind... so he admired seeing this in others.

The young man stood in the porthole which looked out onto the rest of the starbase; He was able to see the majority of the fleet, and the secondary and tertiary hulls of the Alsea.

Kyran knew the statistical reports of the damage to the Alsea; but, seeing both parts in need of dire repair, he dipped his head slightly crestfallen and placed his hand on the forcefield,

The Alsea, once apple of his eye, had now a deep hull breach along the side of her deflector opening, up decks 12 through 15, like a gaping wound now being patched up slowly. Lights in certain windows were dimmer than usual, the occasional one flickering on and off. And her left nacelle had the casing to her warp coils torn open.

The ship had been their home for a long time. It had seen them through thick and thin, and as stubborn as she sometimes was, now she lay wounded inside the starbase after an immense battle, while her sisters also tended to their own wounds.

A single tear ran off his chin and landed on the carpet, and another followed.

Not everyone had come back from Hell.

The smaller debris from the destroyed Cube of the Collective travelled at almost a quarter of the speed of light, way past the scarred starbase, millions of kilometers away, in an almost eternal race beyond the limits of the sector, towards the end of the void. Much faster, the remnant of the final energy wave went with the last light of the explosion well before any matter, to leave a final souvenir of the flash of death on every celestial body across its path.

Including a three hundred meters long heavily plated starship hull.

It floated beyond the edge of the battlezone, like a last remnant of a war that almost consumed all the stars... inert... dark... silent.

" Emergency lights!"

The voice of First Officer Kheren brought light and life back onto the bridge of the USS Lotus.

Breathing...not a bad sign... thought with a smirk the Acting Captain of the flagship as the Andorian ordered the emergency lighting, and the Bridge became awash in the red glow.

Under the dim lighting, shadows moved; bodies rose from the floor, still shaking with the last vibrations that had seized the entire ship.

" Emergency power online. Bridge! Anyone alive up there? "

Boards all around them went back to life and the familiar, if muted, sounds of the the bridge filled the silence again as the officers of the starship rose back to their seats and started diagnostics and reports. For a few seconds, they were all silent, revelling in the sound of their own breathing.

" That will depend on you, Engineer." answered the Andorian sitting back in his chair. " I do not mind the cold myself, but we need as much power as you can before everyone else start to freeze up here. "

Down in cargo bays 1 and 2, some of the crates hadn't been secured properly. They had fallen and crushed many people.

"WARNING! Fire Suppression System Failed. Plasma Containment Failure. Fires on Deck 4. Hull breach imminent. Transporter systems failed." Said the computer in its calm monotone.

"Computer, reinitialize replicator access, authorization Bains Talon Theta 736. Replicate fire extinguishers in Cargo Bay 2."

The computer beeped in acknowledgment.

They were alive, just barely, but alive.

The medical crew and the security personnel continued their efforts to assist throughout the vessel.

After a moment, lights in the command center came fully back on and the giant viewer lighted up to show only that the stars too were still there.

On the entire flagship of Lotus Fleet, it was like one titanic sigh emanated from the whole vessel. Everyone smiled and went almost limp with relief, still too shaken to express fully the joy of being victorious; the simple joy of being alive and whole was too overwhelming.

Kheren himself didn't say another word for a time, trying to completely calm down the intense danger mindset and reactions of his physiology with sheer will. He looked at the various reports pouring in from all over the ship and from all comm channels. Then, he simply transmitted the summary to the Captain's own chair PADD.

Bains had confirmed casualties just before they tried to warp out covering the USS Republic's own flight with their reinforced shields. The closeness of the detonation and the tardiness of their escape had put their warp core offline after merely a few seconds of activation, hurtling them instantly several light years accross the sector with the lighter debris pelting them. Their energy shield faltered too, but their advanced armor saved them from damage as they were violently pushed away beyond even the sensor range of the starbase.

There was double the wounded now, but fortunately no more severe ones and no more deaths.

No more deaths... thought Kheren, closing his eyes as if making a promess to himself.

Slowly, Robertson peeled his fingers from the arms of his chair, the long digits aching slightly while he flexed them and stood, lending a hand to some of the other crewmen who had been thrown from their seats.

" Full powerrr rrestorred, helm answeerrring all grrreen. " reported out loud the Caitan Ensign Mrrriish, her ruffled furry form still filling up for the stunned Lieutenant Azji. " Seems we can make it back to the Starrrbase on ourrr own, Sirrr. "

"Warp 4 Ensign, nice and easy does it."

The Caitian woman nodded to her commanding officer and the Intrepid-class vessel oriented itself for Starbase 10, its variable nacelles craning into position as it accelerated steadily, rather than immediately, building the power levels to Warp 4.

" Ah, Sir, there is heavy chatter on all comm channels." then said Edward Tomah, wincing slightly because of a nasty bump on his forehead."The entire Borg armada is destroyed; only a few damaged cubes managed to flee in erratic fashion. The war is officially declared over, Captain. All ships are to report to their local command center. There is, ah, a specific order about all officers and crewmembers of the USS Artemis to report immediately to Starbase 10."

" We still have fully prepared shuttles for that if need be, Sir. " added Smlek from the science station, still rubbing his huge skull with one hand.

The Borg had been destroyed; here and everywhere else... everywhere...

The battle had been won, and the most lethal enemy the Federation had ever faced had been vanquished...or at the very least, dealt a truly crippling blow.

But Mark recalled from the reports he'd read prior to the fighting, that if the Borg had a gift, it was tenacity.

Not so unlike us, really.. Mark Robertson mused to himself.

They had made their choice. There were survivors, no doubt... but whatever was left of their Collective would be so dispersed, so weakened, so directionless... It will take them decades, if not centuries, to recover. Many more would die still... but in the end, despite their own folly and shortsightedness, some should survive. And they would never be the same.

Just like us suddenly also realized Kheren.

Looking at the ship around him coming back to its customary efficiency, he wondered if he himself would; the entire war was replaying in his still troubled mind, all the decisions, or the lack of them... all the actions, or those never made... all the consequences, those avoided and those felt... So much destruction... so much death...

As Mark Robertson flopped back into the captain's chair, he looked at him, so brutally entrusted with all this weight of responsibility upon his shoulders, like all starship Captains... and it suddenly hit him, and it blurted itself out of his lips:

"Sir... what about Captain Felez?"

Mark's blood ran cold, and his eyes flicked to the time on the Captain's viewscreen, which read 1701.

He couldn't help but laugh inwardly at that, and looked over his shoulder to his Acting First Officer,

"I'm sure the Captain and Commander Calhoun are still out there, Lieutenant. We've got just over five hours yet to get to the rendez-vous point.."

His brow furrowed as he cupped his chin with one hand, looking out to the stars as gears turned,

"The Romulans could damn well capitalize on the opportunity the Borg just gave them, if they managed to stay out of the fightin-" He stopped cold as he did the calculations, a glance at the viewscreen readout telling him their position.

They didn't have time to go back to the Starbase, and the Romulans might notice if they suddenly showed up where the Alsea had been patrolling...

He squeezed his hand into a fist in the air, jaw working side-to-side as he bottled his frustration for now, and smirked tightly:

"Mister Tomah! Hail Starfleet Command, Fleet Captain Kotari..." He wouldn't bother with encryption, doubting the Romulans were going to be watching that closely just yet.

"Ah..I have him for you Sir. Would you like it in..."

"Onscreen, Mister Tomah."

Robertson rose as the Boslic Flag Officer appeared onscreen, straightening his uniform before speaking:

"Sir, USS Lotus reporting in, we suffered moderate damage in the explosion, but we're still breathing. Interestingly, we got blown near the Alsea's patrol route... We are ready and able to pick up the slack until they can make their way out here. I'm sure with the confusion galaxy-wide, someone might get it in their heads to try some mischief. I'm sure the Romulans don't know what to do with themselves at this point."

He stressed 'Romulans', and prayed the Fleet Captain would pick up on the reminder of the Lotus's original mission, and the suggestion to have the Alsea meet up with them.

He could only hope that Captain Felez would have some good news for them once he contacted them. Mark's plan didn't leave a whole lot of room for error.

But on the Lotus, that was miles of space.

The image on the screen of the Lotus showed a battered bridge, still recognizably of Steamrunner configuration. Kotari sat in the command chair, and nodded. He looked down at a PADD in his hand after Robertson finished his report.

"Understood, Commander. More than the Romulans are unsure what to do at this point. Why, my own Steamrunner might have to fill your ship's role by the time all is said and done. Or perhaps the Lotus will be forced to take on double duty. Patrol and mission. At least until the Fleets are organized again."

As his commanding officer finished with Fleet captain Kotari, Kheren stood up besides Commander Robertson then turned to him to ask:

" Permission to address the Fleet Captain on a personal matter, Sir. "

Robertson, now also his mind back to the fate of the actual Captain of the Lotus and her Chief science officer, was not one to deny his Acting First Officer a request... especially as it allowed him time to keep priority contact with the fleet leader and think about their next action, so soon after the horrendous moments they just went through.

Mark nodded at Kheren's request, folding his hands behind his back.

The Andorian turned towards the main viewer and the image of the bearded Boslic officer:

" Fleet Captain Sir: request permission to stay on board the Lotus until Captain Felez... "

" Denied... Lieutenant Commander. With the state the fleet is in right now after this flash war, the launch of the Artemis becomes a necessity of prime importance, especially considering the volatile situation in your sector. "

Addressing him by his new rank was how Fleet Captain Kotari made serious his answer to the Andorian. But Kheren was standing ramrod straight, saying in a calm but firm tone:

" With all due respect, Fleet Captain Sir, I insist. The ship is not fully recovered from the battle, almost a third of the crew is dead or incapacitated... The Lotus needs all the help it can get to ensure the safe return of Captain Felez. "

The eyes of the high-ranking officer on the screen were softening, but his tone was still hard:

" And so does Starfleet, Lieutenant Commander. Captain Robertson has all the discretion he wants to resume his previous mission and help *his* Captain. Your loyalty is duly noted, but *your* Captain is expecting you *now* to help him launch the Artemis. You will immediately take a shuttle with the assigned transferred personnel and come back to Starbase 10, best possible speed. Is that clear, Lieutenant Commander Kheren? "

The Boslic was not only one who knew how to command; he obviously knew how fiercely loyal - stubborn - Andorians were... and how, violently passionate as they were, they nevertheless responded to discipline. He was even looking at Kheren with his head lowered and his eyes fixed on him, imposing his will in pure Andorian fashion. And he got the reaction he expected:

" Aye... Sir. " just said Kheren, lifting his head and, still very straight, turned towards Mark Robertson and saluted him:

" It was an honor to serve with you Commander Robertson. Please make sure Captain Felez returns safe and sound. And please tell him I owe him everything... and I thank him for it. "

He extended his hand to him, human fashion, to exchange a handshake.

Mark smiled while the Andorian tried to stay aboard the Lotus to lend his expertise, and was ordered to his new post by Fleet Captain Kotari. His smile was strained by regret as he took his proffered hand and shook it firmly, "The honor was mine, Lieutenant Commander, I'll make sure the Captain gets your message when we bring him back. Good luck on the Artemis...to all of you."

Kheren nodded and went to the turbolift door, eyes straight ahead, Ensign Tyvya, Ensign Mrrriish and Ensign De Paul following him as they too were transferring to the Artemis.

On the doorsill, he paused, turned to the nearby tactical station, and again extended his heavily callused hand, this time towards Edward Tomah:

" Thank you to you also, Lieutenant. You showed me the ropes. I just hope the next security officer will be as lucky as I am in knowing you. "

Speechless, Tomah just took his hand and shook it sincerely.

When the lift cabin emptied itself of the replacement bridge crew, including a bewildered Lieutenant Azji, Kheren and the three ensigns entered and disappeared behind its sliding door.

Kotari smiled once the discussion with Kheren was over and the Andorian had departed the bridge.

However, knowing the *Solférino* needed to depart for the next search zone, he looked to the lone command-ranked officer on the Lotus and respectfully inclined his head towards him.

"Use your own discretion for now, Commander. Kotari out."

As the communication cut, the Boslic Fleet Captain allowed himself a bit of a tired sigh. He knew Robertson could pick out the details in his own game, and Kheren was an Andorian who seemed to remind Kotari of a certain young Boslic Lieutenant.

Young...hell. Was he really thinking himself old now? He resisted the urge to head to his ready room and check his mirror for new gray hairs again.

"Helm, set course for the next search zone. Warp four, and engage."

On the Lotus, Commander Robertson watched as goodbyes were said, and strode to the Captain's chair, his head still pounding in his skull as he noticed Lieutenant Azji leaning heavily on the navigation chair while he tried to resume his post.

Mark stood and put a hand on the Betazoid's shoulder:

"Lieutenant, you've done more than enough for one day. Get yourself down to Doctor Bains. " He kept one hand on the navigation chair, memory returning to the simpler tasks of piloting the damn ship where the Captain wanted to go..

He was so lost in thought, he didn't notice Lieutenant Piruya standing to take the Conn in Azji's place.

The Denobulan female tilted her head curiously,

"Sir? Are you alright?"

Snapping back to the moment, Mark Robertson smiled and nodded, pulling the chair out for her,

"Of course Lieutenant.."

He leaned down to the console and brought up the coordinates from the Alsea's original patrol route, with a glance to the time as well.

"As soon as the shuttlecraft is away, set course for this patrol route, Warp 2. We've got some time to kill before the Captain is supposed to contact us, we might as well not strain the ship any worse than we have already."

At a more modest speed, the former chief of tactical of the flagship and next First Officer of the USS Artemis was also moving towards his next assignment.

Once the lift started moving, Kheren activated his combadge:

" Lieutenant Cheonghi: This is Kheren. We are to take a shuttle to our new assignment at once. Get ready and meet us in shuttlebay 1. "

It didn't take long for them all to pack their things and reach shuttlebay one. Cheonghi was already there... and someone else:

" Well Ensign Graalthrii: are you to pilot us back to Starbase 10, so to make sure we will not come back? "

To the astonishment of all, no witty reparte came back from the Tellarite. In fact, his tone was uncharacteristically subdued:

" Ah, hum, well, Sir... No... I... I am going to the Artemis too... transfer orders are recorded and authorized... with your approval... of course. "

As they boarded the shuttle, the Andorian could not hide his surprise... and his amusement, despite his surprise:

" You sure, Ensign? I'm to be First Officer over there, you know. I had a feeling you were disapproving of my methods. "

It took a moment for the short, gnarled security officer to diffuse the redness from his cheek; so, to better hide it, he brought over the redness of anger, blurting out:

" Damn right you are... Sir! And I want to be there when your crazy, stuffed-up Andorian... methods... will smack right back into your face... Mister Lieutenant Commander Sir! "

There has been too much tension in the last few hours; too much pain and grief and fear,,, It all finally dissipated in a spontaneous burst of laughter, barely silenced by the closing of the hatch door.

" You had me worried there for a moment, Ensign." sighed Kheren as the shuttle lifted off. " Borg becoming insane is one thing... But Tellarite becoming nice? *That* would bring down our whole universe. "

The renewed laughter drowned even the low grumbling that ensued. but, it too sounded like laughing... and relief.

After last procedures from the ship's flight control, the shuttle zipped neatly from the Lotus's Docking Bay and went to Warp for Starbase 10 almost immediately, while her mothership turned and warped away, resuming a mission potentially exacerbated by the Borg...

Life still was going on... and the adventure was still just beginning.

Life and death... beginnings and endings... they were all jumbled in the minds and hearts of those aboard the very ship limping back home that had seen the start of it all...

The USS McKenzie.

Jolie's knees shook, and she held onto a biobed, white-knuckled in pain, as Sedin's screams sliced through her mind. T'Pelin slid down the wall she'd been leaning against and sat on the ground, staring blankly. The other three telepaths collapsed. The doctor staggered over to help them as the sickbay staff rushed over, scanning her and the other four.

"Bevok's coding," Lockhart called out.

"Put him on my desk," Jolie said, holding her head in one hand. "Lockhart, bring me the cardiostimulator. 50 cc. norepi. Put the cortical stims on him." She glanced at the rest of the staff. "The rest of you take care of the other three telepaths."

Lockhart put the cortical stimulator on the Vulcan's forehead. Jolie put the hypospray on Bevok's neck and pressed the button, then used the cardiostimulator.

"He's flat-lined, Doctor."

"Cortical readings, too?"

"Yes, Doctor."

She did a neural scan. Bevok's brain was damaged beyond repair from the telepathic assault and Sedin's final attack. Jolie closed his eyes, took the cortical stimulator off, and covered him with a blanket. She sat down in her chair, leaned her head back against the wall, and shut her eyes. She didn't brush Lockhart off when he scanned her with the tricorder.

"You need some medical attention, too, Doctor Bindo," Lockhart told her. "Your paracortical readings are very erratic."

She barely heard the cheer that erupted when the entire Borg race self-destructed.

The McKenzie remained at warp 1 for five minutes, and dropped to normal space. The McKenzie was now five light minutes from its previous position, which was near the cube.

Up on the bridge's viewscreen, the crew could see the explosion of the cube, as if it was a green supernova. The crew cheered as they saw it, as if it was the best thing in the world.

The Captain just sat back down in his chair, and leaned on the left arm rest with his hand holding up his chin, and he just smiled.

Daniel Crist spoke up amongst the crew's cheering:

"Hughes, best impulse speed back to Starbase 10."

"Doctor to Captain. We've lost Bevok in the telepathic assault. Multiple casualties to take to SB 10 if they can handle it. The telepathic team needs immediate neurology attention."

"Understood Doctor, we're already heading back to the Starbase. Once where there you can send over our injured." Crist responded.

It took about the same time for the McKenzie to return at warp 1 and the ship maneuvered passed all the Borg debris at full impulse to finally make it back to the Starbase.

The McKenzie docked with the station and began with the relief effort for the Starbase, and transported all seriously injured crew to the Station sickbay.

The Captain arose and spoke:

"Commander Teancum, you have the bridge: Starbase 10 has priority; once they're ok, begin our repairs."

The Captain left the bridge and headed for his ready room. Once there, he sat in his chair. closed his eyes and thought:

It's finally over.

* * *

Lieutenant Rivers had left the hangar as soon as she'd heard Captain Speaker was in the Infirmary. With all the chaos the Starbase had been through the past few months, aside from Admiral Redding, she was the ranking officer now. If Redding didn't choose to assume command, the Starbase was leaderless until she got back to Operations.

A bit of regret and a bit of relief mixed in equal parts within her as she moved. Ensign Sisko was certainly the sort of man she could fall for. That hunger she'd allowed herself to experience during the conflict was true. She'd denied herself that and many other emotions. It wasn't logical. Posted as a security officer on one of the Federation's most volatile frontiers, how could she risk hurting a man with the very real possibility of her death? Better to take after her step-father's philosophy. The Vulcan way of life was honored and revered among human cultures.

And yet.

She paused in a burnt out corridor, the red emergency lights washing over her face as she closed her blue eyes.

"Enough Rachele." She nodded to herself, realizing that she was right. "There's too much to do. I've come too far to let a moment of weakness let down the Captain."

The massive Kzinti hadn't even looked at her when they first met. She was dismissed outright. Useless even as a tool for him then. And now...somehow through service to the Lotus, then Starbase 10, she had become important enough for him regard her as his personal assistant. A Number One until Starfleet could find a First Officer capable of stomaching the Kzinti's eating habits like she could.

Judging by today's events, they wouldn't be sending someone soon...so she had a job to do.

Rachele opened her eyes and stepped into the turbolift. "Ops."

When she arrived, she pushed her red hair behind her ears and strode to the command chair. There were, as she expected, messages. One to Speaker from the Captain of the Wisconsin, coded. Another from Fleet Captain Kotari. She decided to handle them in order, and opened a channel to the Wisconsin.

"This is Starbase 10 to the USS Wisconsin. Message received. If this is a priority, be informed that Captain Speaker is in the infirmary. I can forward your message to Fleet Captain Kotari in that case." She got her reply from the Wisconsin, and nodded. "Understood. I'll proceed with that then. In the meantime, I'll begin clearing room for you at docking port 12."

Biting her lip for a moment, she tapped her combadge.

"Ensign Sisko, can you begin calling people back from the Steamrunner? We're going to need priority on flight control, medical, and engineering in that order. Flight control needs to prioritize docking port 12 for the Wisconsin, and the engineering teams will need to rush to the Spectre. She's in bad shape."

She waited for his confirmation before turning to her other duties.

Next was Kotari's message.

"Speaker, this is Kotari. The fleets are regrouping as best we can, and we're going back to rescue survivors from the wreckages of the other starships. I don't have much time to talk, but good work out there. I don't know what you did out there, but damn fine whatever it was. Prioritize the launch of the Artemis, even over Starbase 10. The Federation needs good news. Kotari out."

Well that was that then. She dutifully dispatched a message to the Lotus, hoping that the station's automated communications relays would find the ship for her. Within the message, she detailed the Fleet Captain's request that the Artemis be launched on priority.

She sighed then and stepped past the wreckage in front of the Command seat to the replicator. Immediate concerns over for the moment, she called up her favorite relaxant.

"Cappuccino, double sweet."

For his part, Starbase Commander captain Speaker-of-Names tried in vain to relax in the infirmary as more and more people came and went.

The station seemed alive with activity, wounded coming in from everywhere it seemed and not just the station it self.

But he knew he had to compose himself and did so.

There would be plenty for him to do when the time came.

Off near the main door he heard someone say "Admiral" and he glanced that way to see Redding making his way over to him.

The Kzinti Starfleet officer did his best to compose himself and Redding for his part did nothing to stop him from doing so, choosing not to make a show of telling the big cat to stay at ease.

Redding himself stood there at ease smiling.

"Well.. its not how I thought it would end Captain, but it is over for the best. Whats your status? going to fight another day are we?"

Speaker practically snarled in reply:

"Only death can keep me from battle Admiral. I survive."

Redding Nodded in agreement.

"Perhaps not even then Captain. I had intended to take command *after* the battle and oversee the station operation during this recovery from the Borg attack, but your girl Rivers has been doing an.. enthusiastic job to say the least. To be honest I think *I'D* be in *her* way if I tried."

He gave a sigh and leaned up against the bed.

"And I do have other matters that require my attention as well, something I have to verify.." and there he gave a wink "Something.. special."

Then he stood at attention and gave an old fashion salute.

"Its been an honor working with you captain, keep up the good work."

And he left the Infirmary.

After leaving the Infirmary, Redding checked in with various areas around the station offer help or advice as he deemed it necessary. The over all 'feel' to the station was weary but relived and he couldn't blame them for that.

He wished he could feel that way as well but it wasn't in him.

They had done the impossible, there was no doubt about that. The Borg had been fatally crippled, hundreds of ships lay in ruins and he had been told that the Uni-Queen herself was destroyed in some sort of final mental battle.

But he just couldn't bring himself to believe it, at least not all of it.

There was an old Earth saying "If its to good to be true, it probably isn't."

And had seen first hand what happens when the Federation decided the Borg threat was over the first time...

Well, not this time.

He and his friends would make sure of that.

"Admiral Redding, Sir"

Redding looked around for the source of the voice and met eyes with a young ensign.

"Ah, Ensign.. Marrymore was it?"

"Marrins, Sir. I retrieved the storage unit as you requested."

The young officer stood stiff and tall, like he might hurt himself if he bent even a little.

"Thank you Marrins."

The Admiral took the 'Philter' storage unit from the security officer.

"I want to tell you I was impressed with your reaction speed back in Ops, when you saw a Borg in the command center and shot it, no hesitation at all."

Marrins clearly thought he was going to be disciplined for that and so was truly caught off guard.

"Uh.. well thank you Sir, But I'm not sure if my supervisor would agree with your perspective."

Redding just gave a friendly smile:

"If you ever get notion to leave star base 10, give me a call, I have some friends that could use a man like you."

And with that, he gave him a pat on the shoulder.

Looking genuinely surprised, security Ensign Marrins tried his best to keep a straight face.

"Thank you Sir, I might just do that."

He nodded to the Admiral and then excused himself.

No sooner the man walked away that Redding's combadge beeped. But the beep sounded different from the standard comm signal. Redding acknowledged it with a touch.

Then, he vanished almost instantly, with no hum or fading glow.

Almost as quickly, he reappeared in the transporter room of a cloaked Bird of Prey nearby... the source of the very curious signal Ensign Joey Day Sisko had detected before the Borg Cube warped into the starbase's vicinity. It was Klingon by design, of that anyone could see, but it had been refit with Federation Technology as well as other technologies less readily identifiable.

As soon as Redding materialized, the strange scoutship moved out undetected at full impulse, away from the station. At a proper distance, it's special systems masked it's warp signature as it jumped to maximum warp for just enough time to be out of sensor range of the starbase.

Then, a milky white funnel opened before it and sucked it out of our spatial frame to propel it at speeds even the Borg transwarp technology couldn't match.

"The Captain is ready for you on the bridge, Admiral." the Tellerite transporter operator informed him.

Redding nodded but waited a second for the transporter effect to wear off. That form of quantum dematerialization was risky, but very secure.

He arrived on the bridge shortly and the Captain met him at the lift doors.

"Welcome back to the Raven Admiral, You'll find the refit of its systems to be complete."

Redding gave a half smile and looked around.

"The most modified and illegal ship in the Alpha Quadrant, just being onboard would warrant a court martial."

" If that's your worry Admiral... they can't hang a dead man. You know very well that most of us on this ship were given up for dead years ago."

Tor'ic, the Captain of this unregistered vessel, was an Andorian with several cybernetic implants showing, marking him undoubtedly as a liberated slave of the Borg.

Redding nodded again, somewhat impatiently.

"How did it go Captain Tor'ic? any conformation?"

Tor'ic smiled in a very peculiar non-Andorian way:

"See for yourself, Admiral."

The main view screen switched on, showing a Borg Command Cube.

It was inside a huge cavern that resembled a shipyard. It seemed to barely fit in it.

"That cube is surrounded by over three hundred meters of barrinite, Admiral, as well as being sheathed in natural occurring therian radiation. No signals, not even a Borg one, is getting out of there... or more importantly, IN there."

Redding read over the report he offered him.

"And your sure Philter is able to take command? I don't want this thing going rogue on us."

The Andorian gave a serious nod.

"Over half the crew died but what was left was direction less. The crew was 'assimilated' almost immediately. Currently they're asleep and standing by for Philter."

Looking pleased, Admiral Redding spoke to the bridge crew:

"Good work everyone. This time, we wont rely on politics or budget restrictions to decide the Federation's fate against the Borg.. If ever they manage to survive and rebuilt again, THIS time, we WILL be ready to take the fight to THEM when the time comes. "

He stood straight and looked at everyone in turn before saying in a firm voice:

Gentlemen.. project LEGION is a GO.."

THE END

