

Dire News

Chapter I: Under New Management

Featuring...

Evshell.....Captain Caroline Rousseau, Commanding Officer
Kheren.....Commander Shaell, Executive Officer
Sorripto.....Lieutenant Devin, Chief Engineer
Jureth.....Lieutenant J.G. Mikaela Sirus, Chief Science Officer
NEligahn.....Lt. Commander Marissa Arinak, Chief Tactical and Security Officer
Jae Onasi.....Lieutenant J.G. Andrew Johansen, Chief Medical Officer

“Captain’s Log: Stardate 86841.6

On our way back to Starbase 10, we’ve received a message requesting we stop in the Laurentian system as there have been reports of an imminent Borg attack in the sector. My tactical officer, Lieutenant Arinak seems to think that based on unofficial reports, the Laurentian system will not be far enough away. Commander Rousseau agrees. However, I have been given orders to stay in this system, so in the meantime, we are preparing for the worst.”

As he finished recording the log, Captain Johnson stood and stretched, wincing with the back pain brought on by being a Human of 79 years of age, despite the efforts of modern medicine. For the last 20 years he commanded the little Starfleet news media ship. The USS Nuntio's first mission was to escort journalists to Vulcan regarding an investigation into the Hobus supernova. Over the years, they ferried journalists documenting many other significant discoveries made by Starfleet. In 2408, the Nuntio was there when Lotus Fleet was formed, and since then, was primarily assigned to Starbase 10 and some of Lotus Fleet's important operations.

As he left his ready room and stepped on to the bridge of the Nova-class vessel, he looked around at his senior staff before nodding to Commander Caroline Rousseau straight ahead of him. She stood as he sat down to her left.

“Any updates on the Borg attack XO?” he asked her.

The middle aged, attractive woman sat back down and flipped her silky, pitch black pony tail over the back of the seat before responding in a slight French accent. “Reports of a cube attacking Starbase 10, Sir,” she said, nodding. “And others are entering the sector through transwarp conduits and moving toward populated systems. It's only a matter of time until one gets here.”

“Any way we can make our ship less attractive to them? There's no way we'll be able to last long in a fair fight.”

"Lieutenant Commander Shaell is working on something to that end, Sir," she said, motioning to the Science officer behind them. "But the only way any of us are going to survive this is for the majority of our crew to beam down to the planet."

"Agreed. Set a course," he said to Ensign George at the helm. "Aye aye, Sir," the youthful, blonde woman responded.

As the ship began to move toward the planet, the Captain made an announcement. "This is the Captain speaking. General evacuation order is in effect. All hands except for my senior staff, prepare to beam down."

He turned toward Commander Rousseau. "As soon as Shaell is done with his modifications, I want you both to join them." She opened her mouth to protest, but he cut her off. "The Executive Officer goes on the away missions. That's what you always tell me, right? Take Doc and Lieutenant Arinak with you too," he added, motioning to his Security and Tactical chief. "I have a feeling that our weapons aren't going to be very effective anyway and you might need their help down there if the Borg start occupying the planet. That's an order, Commander." The wrinkles on the dark brown face that contrasted his curly white hair and beard became deeper as he gave her a stern look, which then softened when she looked at him with sorrow. "It'll be alright," he said.

"Aye, Sir," she said, certain that she would never see him again. She stood and turned to leave before a single tear ran down her cheek.

Captain Johnson instructed the Chief Engineer to come to the bridge. Commander S'lon, who was Johnson's age, but still young for a Vulcan, entered. "S'lon, I want you to keep the shields up as long as possible. George, evasive maneuvers at all times. We need to hold out as long as we can until we receive reinforcements. Let's take position behind the moon."

Soon after, a Borg Cube came out of warp and began orbiting the planet. The modifications appeared to keep the Cube's attention away from the Nuntio. Commander Rousseau broke the deathly silence. "Sir, the Borg are attacking. We're doing our best to thin their numbers but we're taking on some serious casualties!" Her voice lowered, and she said, "Doc is dead, Sir."

Johnson lowered his head in reverence for his old friend and said, "We'll get you some support, Commander. Ensign Johansen is the next highest ranking and most senior officer, right? Get him running triage down there. Ensign George, take us to the Cube. If they're forced to raise their shields, they can't beam down any more troops."

As they got closer, Johnson fired off all phaser banks at one spot in the Cube. A few major systems exploded, but the redundancy of systems in the Cube would prove the attack to be no more than a distraction. "That's all we're going to get," he said. "Auxiliary and weapons power to shields and engines." S'lon nodded.

The first shot from the Cube took down their shields to thirty-eight percent. S'lon shouted out the figure and the Captain just shook his head. He knew they didn't have a chance. The deft maneuvers of Ensign George, however, made it so they could dodge many of

the shots. For several minutes, the game between taking fire and regenerating shields continued.

However, eventually the Cube prevailed and consoles began to explode around them. Another shot went straight through the bridge causing a beam to fall on Ensign George. S'lon jumped up to help her and another shot destroyed a console near Captain Johnson, who, burned by plasma along most of his body, fell to the floor, dead on impact. As S'lon attempted to move the beam off of Ensign George, another blast caused the viewscreen to shatter and the explosive decompression sent S'lon and the beam hurtling through the opening. George desperately held onto the Conn until a forcefield stopped the decompression. She pulled herself up and just stared at the hole in the screen, knowing that the next energy blast would mean her death. But the shot never came.

Unbeknown to Ensign George, Lotus Fleet had just then succeeded in taking over the collective. She watched, mouth agape, as the Cube simply exploded into a thousand pieces.

Seven weeks later, Captain Rousseau sat in her ready room in the USS Nuntio. It was docked at Starbase 10 and was finally preparing to leave for San Francisco after all the repairs. The journalists aboard during the Borg War had been stranded on Starbase 10, but they kept busy accosting the newly arrived crew of the USS Artemis. Across from Captain Rousseau sat her new executive officer, Commander Shaellyss Ish'YanThee.

"So, X. What do you think of the new recruits?" she asked, sitting back in her chair, crossing her legs before taking a sip of her morning coffee. "Apparently we're getting an Orion Chief Science officer to replace you – that should be interesting – and a Denobulan Chief Engineer. Ol' Press Boat's gonna hum with the noise of a full crew again soon," she added, with a grin she hadn't displayed in almost two months.

The red-skinned, slim reptilian First officer of the USS Nuntio towered over his commanding officer. The chairs in her ready room were not well suited for his gigantic frame.

"Sssorry, captain," he hissed with his whispering yet surprisingly powerful voice, "but I have not sssmelled them yet. But they all look mature enough. We will have to wait for the wind to sssee if they blink." He knew Captain Rousseau was seasoned enough to translate his colorful speech for what it meant: He was reserving judgment for when they would be asked to perform.

From all the years she spent on the same ship as him, Captain Rousseau was used to the hissing voice of her reptilian friend, and could understand the real meaning behind the peculiar words. She still shook her head with amusement, before saying, "You have to lighten up a bit X. While it is honorable that you're reserving judgment, sometimes people just want to have a bit of fun with speculation." She stood and said, "This is the Captain speaking. All senior officers report to the briefing room."

She walked over to the ready room door and turned toward the Saurian. "We'll just have our little laugh session later over a bottle of that brandy you love so much." she said with a wink before she exited the room and headed for the briefing room.

Loosen up... fun... Ah yes. Shaell had seen this laughter thing performed numerous times by Humans and most other species in over a century. He still had no clue what it really was. And yet, after years serving together, Captain Rousseau still tried to incite that very reaction his physiology was incapable of. And she enjoyed it every time.

Was that what they called a joke? He just shook his hairless head and followed her to the briefing room.

"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 serve us. Resistance is futile."

The Tranquility opened fire with all of her weapons as did the other ships in the fleet led by the Enterprise-E. There was no option but to repel the Borg at all costs. Mikaela grabbed the science console for stability as the ship shook under fire from a Borg cube.

"Shields at fifty percent" yelled the tactical officer. The ship pitched again this time harder than before and Mikaela lost her grip and fell to the deck.

"Shields at twenty percent, Borg transporter signatures detected. Captain we've been boarded!"

As if on cue half a dozen Borg materialized on the bridge of the Tranquility. The security officers posted on the bridge opened fire with their phaser rifles. Mikaela grabbed her phaser from its holster and fired at the nearest drone. The Borg dropped and she looked for another target. The bridge had erupted into a firefight, and Mikaela fired again as a drone approached the captain, but the phaser blast dissipated harmlessly against the Borg's shield.

More Borg materialized on the bridge, and security officers burst out of the turbolift. Mikaela could only watch in horror until suddenly she was grabbed by her collar and yanked violently to her feet. Then came the pain...

Mikaela Sirius bolted to a sitting position. Sweat dripped from her forehead, her jet black hair was matted to the back of her neck, and her head throbbed. It only took her a moment to realize that she was not on the *Tranquility* fighting the Borg, but on her new ship, the *U.S.S. Nuntio*, which she had reported to only yesterday evening – and late enough that she'd had to wake the on duty quartermaster to get a quarters assignment.

Mikaela touched her hand to the spot on her neck where she'd been injected with Borg nanoprobes just to confirm that she was alive, and not a Borg.

"This is the Captain speaking. All senior officers report to the briefing room."

"Ohh," Mikaela groaned, she hadn't had nearly enough sleep, and thanks to her infernal nightmares she wasn't going to get any more. She rose from her bed, took the fastest sonic

shower she could manage, pulled on a clean uniform, and left her quarters headed for the *Nuntio's* briefing room.

Mikaela stopped briefly along the way in the mess hall and grabbed a cup of earth coffee, which had always seemed to ease her headaches a little bit, and arrived at the briefing room to find who she knew to be Captain Rousseau and a Saurian whose name she couldn't remember at the moment.

"Lieutenant J. G. Mikaela Sirius reporting for duty, Captain."

Green blood spurted into the air as the injured Vulcan male was beamed directly into the surgery suite of Starbase 10. Dr. Andy Johansen dodged the spray and pressed a hand tightly against the Vulcan's neck to staunch the flow. The Trill nurse pressed a vascular regenerator into his free hand. He set the beam on wide, and the carotid artery sealed, stopping the spurting. "Mara, run a dermal regenerator on that. Plasma infuser wide open."

"Aye, Doctor," she said, her long chestnut hair bobbing as she nodded.

Dr. Aya Leent, an anesthesiologist from Betazed, dashed through the door. She whistled as she saw the massive trauma. "He did an impressive job injuring himself. I'll have him under for you in a moment." She grabbed the delta-wave inducer and placed it on the Vulcan's forehead. "Off to sleep you go..." she glanced at his name now displayed on the biobed monitor... "S'Tolin. We'll get you fixed up quickly. Metoropan and Kayolane," she said to the nurse, who added the medications to the infuser.

Mara said, "Pressure's dropping like a rock. O2 sat at 78."

Andy's green eyes darted to the indicators and back to his patient. "Well, I just *might* be guessing here, Mara, but I think that's got something to do with the fact that he's bleeding all over creation."

"Good thing you've had all that doctor training to tell you that."

"15 cc tri-ox, 40 of inaprovaline, 20 of lectrazine."

"Aye, Doctor."

The surgical bed monitors beeped that the full body scan was complete. Lacerations traced jagged fire-red lines across the computer-generated silhouette of S'Tolin's body, crossing both lungs, his heart, liver, arms, legs, neck, and face.

Dr. Leent attached another instrument to the hemorrhaging Vulcan. "Blood-gas infuser's on board now."

The Chief of Surgery and Starbase 10 CMO, Dr. Michaels, entered the OR. "What's happening, Andy?" he said as he glanced quickly at the biobed indicators and then the scans.

Andy's hands flew over the worst of the ragged cuts with the vascular regenerator, sealing the massive injuries. "Vulcan versus turbine. He's got lacerations all over. Definitely not his lucky day."

Dr. Michaels nodded as Mara handed him another regenerator. "Mmm, I'll have to have a little chat with engineering about safety protocols when we're done here."

The biobed alarms screeched as the indicators bottomed out. Andy looked at the scans. His breath caught as he saw S'Tolin's heart tear apart.

"Exoscalpel," he called out. Mara snapped it into his hand, and he made a long vertical incision down the Vulcan's chest and abdomen.

Dr. Michaels called to one of the petty officers. "C'stal, replicate an artificial adult male Vulcan heart stat. Computer: Location and status of the cardiac team."

The female voice of the computer replied, "Cardiac team is in Trauma 3. Status: Performing emergency aortic aneurysm surgery."

"Full bypass on the blood-gas infuser," Andy ordered. His hands raced over the Vulcan's chest and abdominal wounds, sealing as many as he could while he waited for the artificial heart.

Mara replied, "Aye, Doctor."

C'stal returned shortly with the new heart inside a sterile mini-field. The Caitian purred softly at the Vulcan, as her leonine race often did when one of their own was sick or injured.

"Andy, you ever put a new heart in?" Dr. Michaels asked.

"Only in holo-sims," the young doctor replied, opening the chest and abdominal cavity wider to reveal the ripped, quivering heart. It was beyond repair. He made deft, quick incisions and lifted out what was left of the organ.

"Today's your lucky day, then," Dr. Michaels said.

Andy swallowed hard. His intense green eyes met Dr. Michaels' brown ones. "Cardiac's not my specialty, Sir."

"S'Tolin won't mind if he survives. Ease the implant in and reattach the vessels just like you do in the sims. I'll get these liver and lung lacerations under control while you do that."

Andy gently inserted the artificial heart, and began the meticulous work of connecting all the vessels.

Mara wiped the sweat off his forehead as it threatened to drip into his eyes. "You're doing fine, Dr. Johansen," she said in a low tone meant for his ears only.

"Bet you say that to every surgeon."

She handed him a thrombic inhibitor. "Only to ones named Andy Johansen."

His fingers worked their way systematically over the new heart as the beam of the thrombic inhibitor glowed, preventing abnormally large clots from forming. "OK, everything's sealed. Let's slowly turn off the bypass."

The voice of the computer chimed, annoyingly pleasant. "Incoming message for Dr. Andrew Johansen from the Captain of the USS-Nuntio..."

"Johansen here," he answered.

"The captain orders your return to the Nuntio for a senior staff officer meeting."

The Vulcan's blood pressure slowly increased, and the heart started beating. A fountain of green sprayed Andy in the face. "Bypass on full again!" Mara wiped the Vulcan blood off his face as he searched for the bleeder. "Well, computer, as soon as I can safely get my hands out of the middle of this guy's abdomen, I'll be happy to report," he snapped.

Dr. Michaels grinned. "Computer, inform the Captain of the Nuntio that the CMO of Starbase 10 will release Dr. Johansen as soon as he finishes with emergency surgery."

"Acknowledged," the computer replied.

The CMO continued, "Check the medial side of the aortic root. That's usually the tricky spot."

Andy zoomed in on it and found the tiny leak. "I could have sworn I sealed it."

"I know you did," said Dr. Michaels. "Sometimes it reopens in that spot from the pressure. Patch in some more tissue to strengthen it."

Andy added a couple layers of the delicate replicated tissue, and nodded for Mara to turn the bypass off again. The seal held, and Andy blew out a breath of relief. The bio-indicators started to creep up. Dr. Michaels leaned over again and studied Andy's work. "Nice. The cardiac team might steal you from me here in general surgery when you come back to Starbase 10. Let's finish up."

Both surgeons methodically used the vascular regenerators on all the sliced vessels, sealing the many lacerations. The rest of the surgical team followed with dermal regenerators, closing all the wounds. Most of the biobed monitors were still in the critically low range, but were at least improving. Andy checked S'Tolin over once more to make sure they'd found every single injury. When he was satisfied that they'd healed everything, he finally pulled his hands out of the surgery unit.

"Waking him up now, pain meds are on board." Dr. Leent said.

S'Tolin's eyes opened a crack.

"S'Tolin, the surgery's over," Andy said. "How's your pain?"

The Vulcan closed his eyes and was quiet a moment as he took a deeper breath to test. "It is... sufficiently low."

"You were hurt pretty bad by the turbine. We had to fix up a lot of internal injuries and put in an artificial heart. We're going to keep you in ICU for a while and then infirmary for a few more days. We'll get you back to duty when you're fully recovered."

The Vulcan blinked once in surprise at the severity of his injuries.

Dr. Michaels said, "Andy, I'll brief Dr. Mirelier in ICU. You get cleaned up and report to the Nuntio."

"Aye, Sir." He turned to leave.

S'Tolin said in a soft voice, "Doctor."

Andy stepped back. "Everything OK?"

"Thank you." He did what very few Vulcans do, and touched Andy's arm. It was brief, but Andy appreciated the deep gratitude behind it.

"Just get better quickly, S'Tolin."

"Aye, Doctor."

A short time later, a freshly-cleaned Dr. Johansen arrived on the USS Nuntio and strode briskly to the conference room. When the door opened and he saw the captain seated at the head of the table, he stepped in the door, stood at attention, and said, "Permission to come aboard, Captain. I apologize for my delay."

The hallways of Starbase Ten were bustling now more than ever. People were working to get the Artemis fully squared away before her launch. Arinak, however, was in no such rush.

"Is it always like this?" asked her mother, Helena. She was walking beside Arinak, watching the workbees and tugs move around the hangar.

"Not until the Borg attack," Arinak said. "That diverted a lot of attention toward the Starbase."

"You still haven't told me about what happened that day," Helena said.

"And I probably won't," Arinak said. "Last thing I need is for you to worry about me." They stopped at a window overlooking the little science vessel that had been her assignment the past year. She'd been resistant to it originally, but the tough little ship had grown on her. It had helped that her Captain had probably been the first CO Arinak had actually respected.

Then the Borg came and destroyed it... like they always did.

"I don't worry about you," Helena said. "I worry about everyone else." Her eyes moved towards the Nuntio then back to her daughter. "I've enjoyed the past few days. You need to come home more often."

"I'll try, mother," Arinak said.

"You should probably get aboard," Helena said. "You've got important work to do."

"Yeah, ferrying a bunch of holo-jockeys to Jupiter, loads of fun," Arinak said.

"At least it's better than you gallivanting into some unknown system somewhere," Helena said. "I've heard stories about what can happen to security officers out there."

"Don't listen to them, they're mostly exaggerated," Arinak said. She gave her mother a hug. "Like I said, don't worry. I'll be gone a few days, come back and we can tour the arboretum again."

"I'll hold you to that," Helena said. "Oh, before I forget," she added, reaching into her pocket. She pulled out a small disc and handed it to her. "I made it before I left Betazed. It's for when you feel lonely or sad."

"Thanks mother," Arinak said with a smile. "Take care while I'm gone." Then with a final embrace, she walked over to the nearest turbolift.

"Straighten up!" snapped Lieutenant Holfaak. "I don't know what kind of raw kids they're dropping out of the Academy these days, but you're all pathetic!" He glared at the four Ensigns who stood in front of him. "I'd be surprised if any of you could point a phaser in the right direction!"

"Hey grumpy, the Commander's coming," Lieutenant Junior Grade Cheryl Johnson said from the back of the muster room.

"Don't you call me grumpy you pink-skinned ape," Holfaak said.

"Wow, did you have to look through the databanks to find that one?" Johnson said.

"I will never understand the need for insulting banter between them," Lt. Takek said.

"I don't know much about Tellarites," Lieutenant J.G. Korapok said. "Perhaps it's his way of selecting and testing a mate?" Both Holfaak and Johnson stopped the exchange of insults.

"I have never been so insulted!" Holfaak said. "To think I'd reduce myself to the level of this grotesque-"

"Good to see the no one's wits have dulled in the down time," Arinak said as she entered.

"Commander," Holfaak said. "These are the new Ensigns for you to inspect." He gestured towards the four kids in their neatly pressed uniforms.

"Ah, good," Arinak said. She walked over to them. "I have three rules on this ship. One, you will follow my orders and the orders of anyone above you. Two, I expect nothing less than your best. Three-

"Insult the Tellarite?" said Reynolds, one of the Ensigns.

Arinak turned towards him sharply, putting her face squarely into his. "I'm sorry, Ensign. Was my speaking interfering with your quips?" she snapped.

"N-n-no, ma'am," Reynolds said.

"Get one thing straight, all of you," Arinak said. "Until you demonstrate to me and me alone that you are capable of anything more than wiping your own asses, you are nothing. Right now, you're mine. Everyone not on watch musters every morning at 0430 hours for physical training in Holosuite 1. After that, it's weapons training at 0530. We muster in here every morning at 0700 for inspection."

She narrowed her eyes at Reynolds. "You will not be late," she growled. "Am I clear?"

"Yes ma'am," the Ensigns said in unison.

"Good," Arinak said. "You two," she said, pointing to Reynolds and Kasilariss, "will be reporting to Lieutenant Johnson. And you two," she said, pointing to Cobb and Latorres, "will be reporting to Lieutenant Korapok."

She looked at the ship's clock and noted the time.

"I have to get to the briefing, you're all dismissed," she said as she left the office for the conference room.

It was ten minutes after the last of the officers had arrived at the conference room and Captain Rousseau had been sitting at the head of the conference table, silently reviewing a PADD. The other officers sat, waiting patiently for her to begin. Finally she stood and said, "Does anyone know where Lieutenant Devin is?" The Chief Engineer had yet to arrive.

She looked around as the various head shakes and shoulder shrugs permeated throughout the room. "Very well," she said. "I'll keep this simple and straightforward for

now. I'd like to start off with a moment of silence and reflection for Captain Johnson and our other fallen officers who valiantly gave their lives in their duty and for the protection of their crewmates and the inhabitants of Laurentia III."

Rousseau and her officers bowed their heads in silence and thought back to their fallen crewmates. The Orion in the room did not know those she spoke of, but respectfully observed the heroic death of these Starfleet officers as she would any other such death in the line of duty.

The Captain raised her head and spoke again. "We have been stranded here long enough. It's time to go home and to take the journalists who have been so patiently waiting here home. We will be going to Jupiter Station and then to Earth Starbase. It should be a simple mission my friends, but don't let your guard down. As Starfleet officers, you should know to always expect the unexpected. Dismissed."

As the officers exited, Rousseau moved toward Shaell and said, "X, you have the bridge. Let me know when the departments and Starbase 10 are cleared for launch." She then proceeded across the bridge to her ready room.

Meanwhile the newly discovered Azimuth Horizon anomaly continued to expand, sending out tendrils in seemingly random and unexpected directions. Only the Artemis, Fleet Captain Kotari, and Starfleet Command knew about the true nature and danger of the anomaly. Plasma storms and Theta radiation were ejected in advance of the spreading anomaly in all directions. As the Captain was speaking, one such storm hit and disabled a Tellarite cargo ship and they sent out a general distress signal. The storm then proceeded to move toward the Alpha Quadrant and block the path between Starbase 10 and Sol.

