



Here is the thread for mission five!

Note: Mission Five takes place several months after mission four. Of course, the main noticeable thing in this is that our characters have gotten to know each other a bit better, and Ellen Washington is only a couple months away from giving birth...

This will be a joint mission with the Endeavour, with each ship doing one part, then getting together for the third part.

Some teaser quotes from the [Endeavour's part of the mission](#):

Nova Europa Colony:

"We are the Borg. You will be assimilated. Your biological and technological distinctiveness will be added to our own. Resistance is futile."

From his standing position, Marcus tapped his comm badge and said, "This is Commander Byrne. Red alert. All hands to battle stations. Prepare for an invasion. This is not a drill."

With that, the senior officers broke from the meeting, rushing to their respective places. As she left, Lt. Cmdr. Flores said, "Well, you wanted some adventure. If we make it out of this, you're on for dinner."

Bridge, USS Endeavour

"Lieutenant Swiftpaws, prepare to launch the shuttle," she called out, looking down at the helm station. They had the unusual situation of having two helmsmen aboard; Petty Officer Sandyman was there too in order to assist Miracle in flying two ships at once. "Lieutenant McKinnon, prepare to route auxiliary power to the engines and weapons; I want to hit them hard and fast."

In orbit around Nova Europa

The shuttle "Ole Grumpy" rose above the bubble and shot forward towards the Borg Sphere, then it disappeared into warp to reappear close to the Borg Sphere at max sublight speeds and slammed into the Borg Sphere....

The effects where without question beyond spectacular. For the first second it seemed as if nothing was happening outside of the initial impact, but then the entire sphere just ceased to exist the energy of the impact created enough energy to turn most of it in vapor and the little which was left

as solid matter was blasted away. The Endeavour's sensor array just went totally blank and shut down due the radiation and sensory overloads and the shields flared up with great intensity blasting away gases, derbies and radiation.

The caves of Nova Europa

In the cave, things were desperate. The Borg had quickly adapted to the phasers and things had degenerated into hand-to-hand combat. The survivors had pushed back as far as they could into the caverns and had, literally, hit the wall.

Marcus rubbed his face with his hand, trying to find some sort of plan. If they had been outside, they would have seen the spectacular display of the Borg ship's demise. Instead they got an increasingly erratic enemy who had just been cut from the Collective. The drones were scared, angry, and alone for the first time since their assimilation.

All of that led to more ferocity in their attack. Marcus took note of the weakened ceiling in the section above their position and the main portion of the attacking drones. If they hit it just right, they might be able to buy some time for rescue. He leaned toward Yvette and Fotu. With an finger pointing at the cave ceiling, he commanded, "Aim there, bring it down."

...

After a few seconds, a series of loud cracks sounded the collapse of the cavern ceiling. Rocks piled up and dust was tossed around making things virtually invisible.

As the dust settled, Marcus noticed that the new rock wall had cut off the large majority of the attacking Borg. There were a few stragglers still with the survivors, but they were now safely trapped. Taking the moment of calm, Marcus nodded toward the few remaining Borg as he went towards the back of the cavern to check on the wounded.

Zureel was at the far rear of the cave, clutching his shattered and now-misshapen left leg; either a Borg had sent the Saurian flying with a mighty bash, or he was simply unlucky during the scrabble. Remaining conscious, the crewman met eyes with Marcus. "Commander," he hissed in pain, but managed a brave nod. "Let'sss hope we don't die here."

Transporter Room Two, USS Endeavour

Marcus had resigned himself long ago to the necessity of the transporter, and this time he felt very grateful for such technology. However, that never stopped him from hating the disorientation felt after being beamed from such a difficult place. '112 people coming home... out of 3,000,' thought Marcus with more than a hint of sadness. His sadness was eased a bit by the relief that they had gotten so many out, there had been other colonies and outposts which couldn't claim even one.

Bridge, USS Endeavour

"Let's get out of here!" exclaimed Kate. "Maximum wa--"

It was too late. The Endeavour shuddered as it was hit by a plasma torpedo. The cube was bearing down upon them, firing all weapons, making it impossible for them to go to warp.

"Evasive maneuvers," shouted Kate as the ship shuddered again. "Head for the asteroid belt; maybe we can lose them there!"

Bridge, USS Endeavour

The tactical officer, Ensign Tina Ashingvale, pulled her phaser a fraction of a second too late as a Borg materialized practically on top of her. With a mighty upward swing, the junior officer was sent sailing across the bridge, sent into a bulkhead with crushing force. She crumpled to a heap, unconscious, or worse.

...

Kate looked around her bridge. From the consoles on the port side where brave officers were fighting bravely to the starboard side where the Borg had completely taken over. Kate raised an eyebrow as she realised that the Borg weren't assimilating anyone, but before she could 'investigate' further another drone appear in front of her and even though people around her tried defending their Captain the drone said "resistance is futile" and disappeared in the Borg's familiar green transporter beam, taking the Endeavours young Captain with him. Immediately followed by the other borg drones transporting off the bridge as well. It almost seemed as if Kate was the target of the attack.

A special guest...

Airlock, USS Portland (docked at Starbase 132)

MD -15, morning.

Authors: Alenis Meru, Timothy Rouse

Docked at Starbase 132, the USS Portland was undergoing extensive retrofits. A second reactor, this one run on a classified energy source referred to only as "dark energy" was being tested, and an aging Miranda class starship was considered the best possible testbed for the advanced technology. The crew had been given some well-deserved time off while the engineers did their work, most of which was top secret and above the clearance level of anyone on the ship, captain included.

But shore leave was over, and walking through the corridors of the starbase to the ship that they called home was Captain Alenis Meru and her trusty sidekick and close confidant, Commander Rouse.

"...and it's really nice this time of year. I think I'm going to get a retirement property in one of the valleys, a little place I can stop by for shore leave and move into when I tire of the Starfleet life."

"That's great!" exclaimed Tim. "You know, I've been thinking about something like that... now that I'm going to have a son, I've been dreaming about a two-story house with a white picket fence on Earth somewhere..." Tim paused for a moment and decided to change the subject. "How was your tour of the Nightingale?"

"Very eventful," replied Alenis. "What was supposed to be a simple cruise turned into... well, I'll tell you about it later."

Unfortunately, their conversation was cut short by their arrival at their destination. Standing at the airlock, with Tim at her side and Ko-ko perched upon her shoulder, Alenis was dreading the moment they were to open for she knew exactly who would be on the other side. "Are you ready?" she asked.

"How bad could it be?" replied Tim in a gentle tone. "It's the Portland."

"Oh, you haven't heard about our special guest?" asked Alenis, raising an eyebrow. "Trust me, it's

bad.”

The airlock doors whooshed open to reveal a tall, severe looking Andorian in a black uniform. “Captain Alenis,” called out Shras th’Karath, the head of the dark energy project. “I was told you were dead.”

“Oh, how I wish I were,” replied Alenis in a droll voice. She couldn’t stand even being in the same room as the man. “Shras, you remember Commander Rouse, right? And Ko-ko?”

Ko-ko simply glared at Shras, taking up a defensive posture on Alenis’ shoulder.

“How can I forget?” he asked rhetorically, taking on a patronizing tone. “Now, Captain, I don’t need to tell you and your goon here about the importance of this project. The dark energy reactor could revolutionize space travel. I trust that you will be more diligent in your duties than the last time we met?”

Alenis’ eyes narrowed. “You mean the time your little stasis field contraption started interfering with the fabric of space-time?”

“I’ll have you know that our team is working the bugs out,” replied Shras defensively. In truth, the project had been put on the back burner as the bugs turned out to be larger than anticipated. And, though he would never admit it, the tests on the Portland did grant his team some valuable information about the device, just not the information he desired. “No thanks to you and your disregard for my technology.”

“Actually, it’s my ship,” shot back Alenis, “including everything on it, such as shuttles, experimental pieces of technology, and your ass.”

“Technically, my ass belongs to Starfleet command,” replied Shras in a dismissive tone, passing Alenis a PADD. “You see that? Those are Admiral Cresswell’s orders, stating that I am to be given free reign and access to any and all of the ships systems in order to complete my research.” He smiled slightly. “A silly thing to have to say, I know, but the last time I was on board, I seem to recall not quite having your full cooperation or that of the crew.”

Alenis gritted her teeth. “Are we quite done yet? Ko-ko is getting hungry, and I think your antennae remind her of the worms on her home planet.”

“For now,” replied Shras, scowling at Tim and Alenis. “For now.” With that, he turned in place and stiffly walked away.

Alenis turned to Tim. “It’s going to be a long mission...”

Personal Log of Commander Shras

Author: Cmdr. Shras (played by Alenis Meru)

Well, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that the head of Starfleet R&D has finally authorized the installation of a prototype dark energy reactor and associated systems into a ship. The bad news is that it’s the USS Portland.

I don’t know what I’ve done to deserve this or who in the admiralty I’ve pissed off, but I’ve already lodged several dozen letters of complaint at being assigned to such a sub-par ship. I’ve heard that

they have gotten some new crew since my last visit, which I suppose is a good thing; they can't possibly be any worse than the crew from the last time I had the displeasure of conducting experiments on board.

I suppose things have not been so bad this time; I've at least been given some office space where I can work in peace for now, however the Chief Science Officer is returning soon and I will end up having the indignity of sharing research space with him. I've sent in a letter protest with Admiral Washington and am looking forward to hearing his response.

The one curious thing is that the main computer core seems to be running slightly slower than usual. I first noticed it when I was trying to do some simple hyper-dimensional calculations and it took several milliseconds longer than expected. Apparently some holo-program is using system resources. I tried to delete it but was locked out, and everyone seems tight-lipped about the nature of this program. I will have to investigate; this 0.17% loss of efficiency in the main computer is completely unacceptable.

Computer, end log.

Hiding out

Time: MD -11

Location: USS Portland – Deck 01 - XO's Office

With Commander Timothy Rouse, Executive Officer and PO Ellen Washington, Nurse and highly pregnant woman.

Tim entered his office and was greeted by Ellen lying on his couch. He slowed his pace and walked to her. "Hello gorgeous." He kissed her softly. "To what do I owe this pleasure?" He said with a grin.

"I'm hiding." She said with a soft voice and winced as she tried to move in another position.

"From who?" he asked, trying to ignore the obvious discomfort she was in. He learned from experience that there would be no point at all in asking her about it, or even suggesting her to take it slower. Being in her seventh month of pregnancy now came with its discomforts.

"Everybody. Somehow there seems to be a flu pandemic going on at the ship. Sickbay is flooded all day with people with headaches, sore muscles, dripping noses and a cough. It's so tire ring. I can barely feel my feet." At the cautious look Tim gave her she quickly said. "Don't worry. I was wearing the electronic safety mask at all times. And got the inoculations." Showing him the canister for the mask.

"If it's too much for you, you should let the Lieutenant know so he can take you off the schedule." He looked at her. "Like I told you about a thousand times by now. You really need to take it slower."

"Because I'm as fat as a whale and walk like a penguin doesn't mean I can't work anymore, Tim."

"You're not fat, sweetie, you're pregnant." Tim argued back, knowing it was pointless. She wasn't going to change her opinion about this fact. He loved how her body was showing off that his son was growing inside her. It made him proud. He grinned as he stared at her, thinking back how her body had changed. "Do you want something to drink?" he asked as he walked towards his replicator. As she affirmed his question he ordered a drink for both of them. He joined her on the couch and took her legs on his lap. Knowing of one subject that would change her mind off the fat topic for long enough, he hoped, he asked her. "Have you chosen what nursery room you want yet?" She had been

showing him different images on Padd's many times. So many he couldn't even remember how many, or what kind there were.

She laughed, knowing very well that it didn't matter anything to him how their son's room would look. "I've narrowed it down to 5 options. I'm waiting for Irma's shipping to arrive. She promised to send some stuff from Suzy when she was a baby. There is also some decorations with it, so I'm waiting to see it in real before I decide what furniture goes best with it. Did you inquire if we can change the wall colors or not."

"Wait, Irma. When did you talk to her?" Tim asked, curious when Ellen and his sister in law had met.

"Yes, Judith introduced us a while ago by subspace. The change that we would be close enough to earth to visit her in real is very small." She explained. "I don't have any friends with kids, and if I have to wait for my brothers to get me any sister in laws I can wait forever, or so it seems."

"Ah," He had nothing again Irma, he just didn't understand why she could be of any assistance to Ellen. Must be a woman thing.

"But you didn't answer my question. Can we paint the wall of the nursery or not?" Ellen asked.

"You need to know that now?"

"I needed to know it 5 weeks ago when I first asked you to ask it." She answered annoyed.

"Sorry, I was busy. Didn't have time yet to ask it. I'll go by Ops soon, ok?" Seeing Ellen's face he asked in surprise. "You want me to ask it now?"

"Yes, please. This room needs to be done soon, this baby is going to arrive in 8 weeks." She replied.

Having a feeling she had a different sense of time as him, he decided to not argue with her but go downstairs to see a guy about painting a room.....

You again...

Science Department, Deck 6, USS Portland
MD -10

Authors: Lt. Jason Beauvoir, Cmdr. Shras th'Zarath (played by Alenis Meru)

Jason had just returned to duty from his shoreleave. He was making his way to his office when he noticed a familiar Andorian. Approaching the man he asked. "What the Hell are you doing here?"

"I have had the misfortune of being assigned to this miserable ship yet again," replied Shras as he turned and glared at Jason. He reached for a PADD on his desk and shoved it into Jason's hands.

"Here. My orders. Straight from your good friend Admiral Cresswell, if you would care to read them. He had quite a few things to say about you, many of which I can corroborate. But that's neither here nor there, the important thing is that my experiments are top priority, and I expect to have my run of the department."

Jason took the PADD and skimmed it and then said. "I hate to break it to you, but this is my department and as such any equipment or personnel you need will require written request certified by myself." His voice held no trace of sympathy. "So, can you handle that, or are you going to go back to Cresswell and hide beneath his shirts?"

Shras let out a brief laugh and sneered at Jason. "You seriously think that I would entrust anything to do with the dark energy reactor to you or any of your staff?" Shras laughed again, even harder this time, and placed a hand on Jason's shoulder. "Do not worry, Lieutenant," he said, emphasizing Jason's lower rank, "I only need a little office space -- which your captain has so generously agreed to provide -- and the occasional use of your sensor array. I won't be interrupting your little potato batteries and baking soda volcanoes."

"Shows how much you know, we use Betazoid tubas not potatoes and 'volcanoes' are much more impressive when you use powdered phosphorous." Jason replied deadpan.

"Fascinating," shot back Shras in the same deadpan tone. "You should really consider getting your findings published."

Jason laughed humourlessly. "Very amusing, now get the hell out of my Department." He said, turning his back on the Andorian and heading for his office.

"All right, Lieutenant, I suppose if we are going to be immature about this, I can play that game..."

The next day:

Jason wasn't happy that Shras was on board, but at least he'd got the man out of his department. Entering his department the Chief Science Officer found tape transecting the floor of his department. Trying to remain calm he asked, "Who put this here?"

"I did," called out Shras as he stood up from a work terminal on the left side of the starboard side of the lab. "Since you have chosen to be immature about the unfortunate reality that we are to share office space, I've taken the liberty of devising a system that even you can understand." Shras pointed towards the orange tape bisecting the room. "Me and my staff will stay on the starboard side, and you and your staff will be able to use the port side of the lab for whatever it is that you do all day. Oh, and don't bother trying to peel the tape up, I used a permanent adhesive."

"So where pray tell did you come up with this idea? From some ancient Earth children's sitcom?" Jason asked.

"Well, *little buddy*, I reasoned that if it worked with Gilligan, it might work for you." Shras sighed in frustration. "My roommate at the academy had an unfortunate interest in 20th century earth culture. It's a shame, really, Cadet Paris could have been a great scientist if only he didn't spend so much time living in the past."

Jason stared at the man in disgust. Then the thought of himself dragging the still protesting Andorian to an airlock and venting him in to space brought a smile to his face followed by another when he noticed something that Shras. "Sir," He began in faux respect. "I hope you and your staff will be comfortable on your side of the department, even without access to an exit or the restrooms."

Shras opened his mouth to reply, but then closed it again. As he looked around the room, he realized that Jason was right. He had failed to take into account which side the door was on. Steaming mad, he clenched his fists for a moment as his eyes darted around the room, panicking. "No matter," he replied in his usual arrogant tone, "I can use the Jeffries tubes; it is after all a rather small price to pay for some semblance of order on this ship."

"So you're willing to inconvenience yourself and your staff in order annoy me? And I thought Cresswell was a stubborn, pompous ass." Jason said.

Shras grimaced. Unable to admit that Jason was right, he simply said, "It is a small price to pay."

Jason just rolled his eyes and said "Suit yourself."

Something Brewing in Engineering

Main Engineering, USS Portland

MD -10

Authors: Sera Williams, Nikki Barclay & Shras (played by Alenis Meru)

Sera rushed through the Main Engineering doors. Sera had been aboard Starbase 132 finishing up the final requisition orders for the Portland before her comm badge had gone w an urgent message from Nikki. It was mostly Nikki frantically telling her that something was going on and that Sera needed to get to Engineering immediately. Sera knew Nikki, and sometimes things tended to be a bit... exaggerated. However, as soon as the Chief Engineer came through the main doors, she saw how serious things had become.

Parts of Engineering had been partitioned to effectively transform engineering into two sections, one of them being blocked from view from the rest. There were also Starfleet personnel wearing a slightly different set of uniforms, maybe an updated or alternate set to differentiate them from the rest of the Portland crew. Here eyes found Nikki arguing with one of the new officers, an Andorian. Sera swiftly walked over to the Nikki and the Andorian.

Seeing Sera approach, Shras broke off his argument with Nikki and pulled out a PADD, holding it out for Sera. "Ah, Lieutenant Williams," he called out, recognizing her from her personnel file. "I have your new orders here."

Sera had opened her mouth to speak, but Shras had given her the PADD containing new orders. Her orders clearly stated that the chain of command had been changed a bit. Instead of reporting to her Captain, she would now be reporting only to Shras. This effectively put the entire Engineering department under Shras, if she was still the Chief Engineer. "Sir, it says I'll be the only Portland crewmember transferring to your command?" she asked with a bit of confusion. Looking between Shras and Nikki, Sera added, "Am I still the Chief Engineer?"

Shras chuckled slightly at the thought. "Relieve you of those duties and allow Ms. Barclay to be Chief Engineer? I think not." He looked up at the warp core for a moment; it was a shame that they had chosen such an archaic ship as a testbed for the most advanced technology in the fleet, but the powers that be evidently didn't want to risk a ship that was actually useful. "You will still be responsible for the engineering staff -- including keeping them from knowing more than they have to -- as well as the basic maintenance of ship's systems. However, you will also be my systems integration specialist, responsible for ensuring that any experimental technologies are properly integrated into the Portland's systems." Shras handed Sera a small data dangle. "Here is everything you need to know in a convenient encrypted data device; fortunately for you it's only seven kiloquads of data. I've also taken the liberty of including a pattern for you to replicate yourself a new uniform." Shras paused for effect. "Congratulations, Lieutenant Williams, it is a great honour to be accepted as part of my team."

Sera was completely shocked. It took her a moment to be able to speak, and even she still didn't

quiet understand the full magnitude of what was happening. "Thank you, sir," was all that she could muster. Someone looking at the Chief Engineer's face would have compared her to a deer caught in the headlights.

Her eyes went from Shras to Nikki. The horrified look on Nikki's face must have snapped Sera out of her daze. She was extremely torn about the turn of events. She loved the Portland, and had just begun to make inroads into being a good Chief Engineer. This was the first mission where she'd be in charge of things without the ship being docked. However, this would be a major roadblock to earning the trust of those in her department. She had graduated the Academy only a few months ago and had leapt to the Chief position at the expense of those who had been on the ship for years. On the other hand, she didn't trust Shras or any of his, well hers now, crew to safely install the new technology. None of them knew any of the Portland's quirks and oddities like she did. No matter how much she didn't want to, Sera had to take the position. With an apologetic look to Nikki, Sera turned to Shras and stood a little straighter. "It's an honor, Sir," she said using her best duty voice, trying to sound convincing.

"Yes, yes, it is, for you," replied Shras in a dismissive tone. "Now, could you be a dear and get your staff to quit lollygagging and distracting my team? They are wasting valuable time, not to mention compromising the classified nature of this project."

"Yes, sir," Sera said mostly because she knew the conversation was over and it was all she could think to say. As the Andorian began to walk away, Sera turned her face to Nikki. She motioned for Nikki to follow her. Sera was fairly sure Nikki would be upset over what just happened, so Sera thought it'd be best to talk to her one on one. Sera then stepped outside the Main Engineering doors into the corridor.

Nikki gave Shras one last glare before turning to follow Sera. Shras simply glared back.

As soon as the doors *whoosed* shut behind Nikki, Sera began, "Nikki, I'm sorry. Our department has been under Starfleet scrutiny and we can't go against their orders no matter how much I disagree with what's happening."

"It's not fair," protested Nikki in a high-pitched voice. She was on the verge of tears with what was happening. "Sera, this guy is even worse than Protein Cube, and now he's going to be splitting the department, bossing us around, and undermining your authority. You should file a complaint with the captain or something; I don't know how we're going to be able to work like this!"

"I don't think Shras would be here if the Captain had say in the matter." Sera put a hand on Nikki's shoulder, then added, "I'll talk to the Captain, but I don't know what will come of it." She looked around for a moment to make sure the corridor was clear before she continued, "Nikki, for now I need you to take my old position... Acting Chief Engineer."

Nikki froze in place for a moment, then started shaking uncontrollably and emitting a sound that was halfway between a squeal of pain and a shriek of terror. "A--a--a--assistant chief engineer?" she stammered as all the blood drained out of her face. A million different thoughts at once began flowing through her head. Is this my big break? My big chance to move out of my uncle's shadow? Will I be able to handle it? What if I have problems? But the scariest thought was the fact that with Sera working with Shras, she would be taking on the role of acting chief engineer while she was busy. Though she had (barely) passed the leadership portion of her academy courses, she had never actually been the manager of anything, preferring to apply her technical skills to a project in a more low-key way.

"I'll do my best," she blurted out, immediately regretting her choice of words. "I mean, I'll do better than my best. A hundred and ten -- no, a hundred and twenty percent! I'll make this the most efficient engineering department in Starfleet! And I won't let you down, I promise!"

Sera couldn't help but smile at Nikki's enthusiasm. Maybe she was making a mistake, things would be tense in Engineering for the duration of the experiment. "Listen, all I need is for the ship to stay flying and the two crews not to go to war."

"Okay." Nikki tried to control her breathing but to no avail; after a few moments she was hyperventilating uncontrollably. "I got this. I got this. I got this..."

Sera smiled reassuringly, and said with confidence, "You'll be fine." The Chief was saying that more to herself. She needed reassuring this time.

We need to talk...

Captain's Office, USS Portland

MD -08

Authors: Alenis Meru, Sera Williams

Alenis had wondered how long it would take for Shras to start causing trouble in engineering, and if the panicked message she got from one Ensign Barclay was any indication, her suspicion that it wouldn't be very long was being proven correct. The sheer number of personnel reports -- and the amount of proverbial black ink on them -- for all of Shras' team was enough to drive her crazy.

But, while working on these personnel reports, she was interrupted by the chime of the door. It opened to reveal Sera, clad in a strange black uniform, one which Alenis recognized as being the same that Shras wore in her last unfortunate encounter with her. "Lieutenant Williams," she called out, her eyes darting from Sera's uniform to the PADD in her hands and back, "you're out of uniform."

Sera blushed a bit, though it was more out of being nervous. She knew that this was a conversation that she needed to have, though that didn't mean that she wanted to have it. "That is what I wanted to talk about Captain." Sera then motioned towards the empty chair across the desk from the Meru. "May I?"

"I insist," replied Alenis, her eyes narrowing as she focused on the young officer in front of her.

"Earlier this morning, Ensign Barclay asked that I come to Engineering... that something was going on. When I arrived, I found Barclay and Commander Shras arguing." She paused a moment to shift uncomfortably in her seat, this was the bad part. "Upon my arrival, the Commander notified me that I had been reassigned to his team, per Starfleet Command."

Part of the Chief Engineer wanted to throw herself into the floor and beg the Captain to do something about it, though she knew that wouldn't do any good. "He also informed me that I would still serve as the Chief Engineer after he handed me the orders and the experimental data. In order to protect the ship from them, I accepted... but I promoted Ensign Barclay to Assistant Chief Engineer in order to help me protect the crew."

Sera knew she had just laid a lot on the Captain, and she honestly didn't know how Meru would handle the situation. She truly felt like groveling. Sera usually showed little emotion in this sort of official capacity, though this time she fought back tears and her face felt like it was on fire.

"I am... familiar with Ensign Barclay," replied Alenis. If she remembered correctly, Barclay was the nervous wreck fresh out of the academy. To be honest, Alenis didn't see much leadership potential in her, but engineering was Sera's department now and these kinds of decisions were up to her. "If you think she's up to the job, then that's your prerogative. As for Shras..."

Alenis sighed deeply and placed her hand on her head. Normally she would try to conceal her feelings and not show her exasperation in an effort to avoid showing weakness, but Shras was just too much. "I don't like this any more than you do, Lieutenant, but it seems as though we have little choice in the matter. You're going to have to try to keep the peace down in engineering, between your crew and Shras' team. This situation is hardly ideal, but because of the importance and secrecy of this project, I don't see us having any options besides toughing it out for the time being and hoping Shras doesn't provoke a mutiny."

"The experiment is promising, but I hope the crew can handle all of this added stress." Sera replied. Things weren't at mutiny level yet, but she had already broken up a couple of fistfights and been called a 'traitor' more than once. She was also talking about the fact that the Captain's own funeral hadn't been very long ago. "Does Starfleet need anything delivered to Risa anytime soon?" she asked, only half joking.

"I wish," replied Alenis, smiling at Sera momentarily. "Now, Lieutenant, what can you tell me about these dark energy systems? I don't like the idea of having some unholy contraption on my ship and being kept in the dark about what it is and what it does."

And there it was, the request that caused Sera the most dread. Unable to look her Captain in the eye, Sera replied, "Captain... I'm, under orders from Admiral Washington. As much as I want to, I can't tell you anything but the dark energy systems are wanted for a future ship design." She had still not made it through all of the data Shras had given her, but had painstakingly read most of it. It was certainly dangerous, but it showed much promise.

Alenis' eyes narrowed and a serious expression appeared on her face. "Lieutenant Williams, you may have been recruited to Shras' team, but you're still my Chief Engineer, and I want to know what sort of unholy contraption is being installed on my ship."

With a slow breath, Sera looked down at the desk in front of her. This was probably going to end with her being reassigned as soon as the experiment was over, but she had to follow orders. "All that I can say is that it has the potential to replace the warp core as we know it." It was the standard response that one would give when seeking resource allocation for the project, but it was all that Admiral Washington had signed off on being alright to talk about.

"And?" added Alenis, clearly demanding more information.

"That's all I'm allowed to say, Ma'am." Sera was terrified at the moment, and didn't know what to do.

Clearly unhappy with Sera's less than forthcoming response, . "Look at me, Lieutenant," she said, causing Sera's eyes to rise from the desk in front of her. "You're going to have to decide at some point whose side you are on, Shras' or the Portland's."

Sera, clearly startled, tried to keep the fear from showing. "Captain, the ship is safe and I will do everything to keep it that way."

Alenis let out an exasperated sigh as she rubbed her right temple. It was clear that she wasn't going

to get any more information out of Sera than the tiny amount she had already provided. "Fine. If you don't have anything more to tell me, you are dismissed," she replied in a disapproving tone.

"Yes, Captain," Sera said as she stood. The engineer then made her way towards the door, which opened with the familiar whoosh. Before Sera stepped into the Bridge, she paused for a moment as though she were going to say something. Sera desperately wanted to tell her Captain about the whole experiment, or better yet give her the data itself. However, she couldn't. It was against orders from an Admiral. Sera stepped into the Bridge.

An Old Beauty

Bridge, USS Portland

MD -08

Authors: Kahnir Dai

Before he would officially report for duty, there was something he had to do. After he stepped down from the transporter pad, his feet had carried him here, to the Bridge. The late watch was quiet as he moved across the deck towards the CONN, and the pilot who was sitting there gave him a curious smile. Kahnir ran a hand along the top of the casing, his eyes wide.

"No worries, Ensign," he said. "I'm the new Flight Chief, just wanted to actually see this in person." Kahnir had only flown a Miranda-Class vessel on holodecks, and that only twice. They were getting so outdated now that the Academy barely used the ship in simulations anymore. Most of their training had been on more recent designs, like the Galaxy, Akira, Defiant, and Intrepid Class vessels, as well as the modern shuttlecraft. This was a real treat, he felt. Kahnir was fresh from the Academy, recently graduated with the latest class, and wanted to see the old beauty that was the *Portland*.

Of course he kept such thoughts to himself, as he didn't want to offend anyone who had been on her long. Of course the console displays and other controls were updated to match current configurations - though he wouldn't have minded working with the controls of a century ago - and besides the shape of the bridge there was little that made it obvious how long this ship had been in service. The Miranda Class vessels had possibly the longest history of service out of any ships in the fleet. They were such an effective work horse, explorer, border patrol, and strike ship, everything Starfleet might need wrapped up in one package. They were getting close to complete retirement, and Kahnir felt honoured to get the chance to pilot what might be one of the last of these amazing ships.

The ensign manning the CONN looked pointedly at Kahnir's own ensign pip, but made no comment. The Betazoid knew it might raise some eyebrows that some might have an issue with that. It wasn't often someone with no experience, green from the Academy, to be given a senior position like this, and so he was prepared for a bit of standoffishness. Fortunately, his fellow pilot made no actual comment about it, and instead asked, "Would you like to take a turn for a minute?"

Kahnir beamed, and gratefully nodded his head, "If it wouldn't be much trouble." He slid into the seat, his fingers touching the controls for the first time. He made a notation on the record of his taking over as protocol required, even if only for a moment. Then he took a look at their current status, which with being docked at Deep Space Nine meant there was actually nothing for the flight control to do. It was only protocol that demanded there be a pilot on duty at all times, in case they were needed. After that, he ran a quick level 5 diagnostic so he could see the systems themselves. Everything was running perfectly. The engineers and flight staff of the *Portland* evidently took as much pride in maintaining her as Kahnir had appreciation for this chance he'd been given. It was an opportunity he wanted to live up to, and though outwardly he might show only a relaxed demeanour

that seemed like almost laziness, internally he was a bit overwhelmed.

The other pilot wasn't the only one with certain thoughts about having a fresh ensign taking over. Even Kahn� was aware of how much responsibility he'd been given. It was more than creating training schedules for his team - Kahn� had done that with the squadron he lead at the Academy. It was more than making sure they maintained flight control systems and shuttlecraft to exacting Starfleet standards - he'd gotten as greasy and as dirty as any engineer might at the Academy taking apart flight systems and putting them back together over and over again until his instructors decided to be merciful. Being an actual pilot of an actual vessel, that meant he was responsible for the lives of the crew too with his flying. It was a big weight to put on his shoulders, but Kahn� was hopeful that he'd pull it off and impress his superiors while doing so.

"Thank you, ensign," Kahn� said, putting aside learning his name just yet. He needed to report for duty still, and review the files for his department, the current duty logs and roster, the duty shift, and that was going to take some time. Kahn� would meet with each of his staff later. The Betazoid logged out of the system himself and gave it back to the man who was on duty, a bit wistfully.

There would be plenty of time to fly the *Portland* soon enough.

To: Gil Meriatha Korat, Starbase 173
From: Lieutenant JG Marcus Kallan, USS Portland

The Daystrom Institute emblem gave way to Marcus sitting in his quarters.

"Hello, Merry," Marcus began, forcing a closed-mouth smile. "Yes, I know, I'm wearing the wrong color. I got shanghaied into a bridge position after dealing with that hologram issue. No, I haven't concluded anything yet, but it's a fascinating hot mess of a holo-matrix, let me tell you."

He tugged at his turtleneck. "Look, I need you to do something for me. This is potentially bad, and Maddox will not approve, so just keep this between you and me, okay?" Marcus sighed, and glanced to the side off-camera as if expecting Security to burst in on him.

"I need you to look up a Starfleet Commander named Shras. Andorian. Works for Admiral Washington. And he's got some experimental technology aboard, and unfortunately our chief engineer is wrapped up with Do-Not-Discuss orders. I don't like what's going on and I don't like being kept in the dark."

He laughed dryly. "Heh, I said 'dark'. Anyway, I can't be specific because I don't want you to get in trouble. You're the closest thing I had to a friend aboard the starbase, and I don't want your exchange officer position to be jeopardized. You can use my old Daystrom Annex codes for the library data banks, they should still work."

Marcus fidgeted a bit. "Anyway, thanks ahead of time. I know saying this to a Cardassian is trouble, but I'll say it anyway: I owe you one."

"Computer, encrypt using methodology described as 'Kallan-Theta' in external holographic memory module currently connected to Holodeck One."

*** Meanwhile in Security ***

Tolaran had been reviewing training schedules and assignments with regards to the potential threat

of Borg combat on the Portland when a small beep drew his attention away. He didn't trust Shras and had monitored all external communication channels and methods and someone had just triggered it...

As the details rolled over his screen he furiously tapped away trying to break the encryption to at least work out who had sent the message, if it had been a regular letter home there would be no need to circumnavigate the system but someone was trying to...

"Son of a..." Tolaran slammed his fist on the console, rather than catching Shras up to something it was one of their own... tapping his comm badge... "Kian to Kallan... my office...now." it wasn't a question or request, but a demand...

"Uh, acknowledged," came Marcus' response, sounding innocently surprised over the comms.

Marcus showed up to Security a few minutes later -- it wasn't a large ship, after all. Looking around for a moment, as he'd never been in Security, he spotted Tolaran's office. Walking up, he peeked his head around the transparent aluminum window. "You wanted to see me, Chief?"

Tolaran looked up, his face a mask as he tried to hide his disappointment and anger at someone attempting to circumnavigate his security protocols. "Yes Lieutenant, I think we need to talk don't you..." *motioning to the empty seat opposite him* "Would you care to explain why you have sent an encrypted message and why I shouldn't go to the Captain regarding this?"

"Because I'm a Federation citizen, and I have a right to privacy if I so choose," Marcus replied, sitting in the indicated seat. "Or is the problem that it's an encryption scheme that you don't recognize and you're worried I'm being subversive?"

"You're a Starfleet officer and you know protocol, so trying to send a message that evades such is definitely against the rules... if it was a standard message you wouldn't try and hide it, and I've been trying to catch out our guest but instead I have you..."

Snorting derisively, Marcus replied, "Lieutenant, as chief of operations, it's my duty to protect the ship's systems from undue stress, as well as know exactly how far she can be pushed. Let's just say that I'm conducting some... research... into what our guest may or may not be up to. And the less anyone else knows about it, the fewer court martials there will be." He leaned in a little. "How far are you willing to go to protect this ship, Tolaran?"

"Do you even have to ask!" Tolaran waved a hand dismissively of the comment "But Marcus, we don't know if Shras is monitoring communications too, I've got to prepare my teams for the Borg!!! We have to be careful, Meru will not look kindly on us for any subterfuge and endangering the mission. Next time you want to do this, just come see me, at least I can cover up the fact better, no offence." Tolaran leaned back in his chair, he didn't like what Marcus had done, but anything they could learn about the Andorian the better...

"I highly doubt he has the experience or the know-how to crack my encoding," Marcus declared arrogantly, almost sounding like Shras himself. Perhaps the best weapon against an arrogant scientist is to use another arrogant scientist. Then softer, "Look, we're on the same side. I don't trust that blue-skinned bastard any more than I could throw him. This whole mission hinges on his ability to deliver. And I don't mean to be fatalistic, Tolaran, but resistance is futile. The Borg are unrelenting monsters. The only reason why Starfleet hasn't released the tech Voyager brought back from the Delta Quadrant is because then the Borg would have a greater chance of assimilating it. It's a trump card, in case Earth is attacked again. So what do they give us? Crackpot theories and unpredictable

dark energy." A pause. "What if Shras fails?"

"Oh he may not, but you can rest assured he probably has members of his team that are specialists... don't get cocky Marcus, thats how mistakes are made you know.." Tolaran sighed leaning back in his chair, looking deep in thought for a brief second before returning his gaze to Marcus "Also don't doubt my team, the Borg can be defeated, but they will adapt and then we'll be in trouble and my concern is more about making sure we survive this suicidal mission, not if Shras succeeds or not but I don't like the fact they are messing around with experimental technology on this ship! What is your plan Marcus, whats the end goal?"

"The end goal is to know everything there is to know about his project, so that if he fails, or if something happens beyond his control, we don't go tits up," Marcus replies. "I may not be a theoretical physicist, but I can read and educate myself, whether he wants me to or not. And..." Marcus glanced over his shoulder to make sure no one was eavesdropping. "...and in case his theories are complete crap, I want to be able to give the Captain an informed opinion."

"You'll also have to explain you have been conducting your own secret investigation with encrypted messages... however, in the interest of ships security, do this and come to me with whatever you find out, and we'll run it as an official security check, the Captain can't argue too much if it's all done 'properly' and then brought to her attention. You may want to speak to Nikki in engineering, you may find her input useful in regards to Shras theories. Maybe try and start a few conversations with some of his engineers, maybe they will let something slip. You have a lot to learn about espionage Marcus" Tolaran winked at him, and added a locked log entry on the investigation so it was documented, that way the Captain would at least see it was an information gathering exercise in the interests of ships security.

"They're all under his command right now. Do you really think they'd risk their careers?" Marcus asked, meaning the engineering staff. "If there's one thing you need to combat an overbearing scientist, it's another overbearing scientist. Look, do what you have to with regards to the Captain... as I said, I've done nothing illegal, and if we all want to waste time getting involved in a debate as to whether Starfleet officers should be sending encrypted inquiries, then clearly we don't have the right priorities."

Marcus sighed. "I'm sorry, Tolaran. I don't mean to make more work for you. I just don't trust anyone playing with volatile subspace mechanics on such a grand scale as a starship. This had better work."

"A harmless conversation over synthohol never hurt anyone... and I'm not concerned about legality Marcus, I'm concerned about the repercussions of looking into an officer working covertly for Starfleet with experimental tech, therefore you." Tolaran stood up and walked around his desk, placing a hand on Marcus shoulder "If this doesn't work, we will have more to worry about than Shras."

Marcus nodded. "All right. My contact is at Starbase 173. Gil Meriatha Korat. She's a Cardassian exchange officer. If she responds, it will be with a similar encryption to what went out. And no, I'm not sharing the algorithm, although I'll share what she responds with. I was planning on going to the Captain, you know, once I learned anything." Marcus stood, and looked at the security officer. "I will let the senior staff know anything I find out. I'm just... still learning I have a support network, here. You wouldn't believe how cutthroat the scientific community can be." He managed a thin smile.

"What I know about the scientific community would probably surprise you Marcus... I come from Trill after all... fine, come to me as soon as you hear anything, then we'll see the Captain together, remember you are not alone on the Portland and everything will be fine." He gestured the

Lieutenant out as his thoughts turned to his scientific training on Trill, he wasn't sure Biology would assist him too much and his parents hadn't really spoken to him much since he joined Starfleet... still, he was happy here, he was at home in the stars.

Big Responsibilities

Captain's Ready Room, USS Portland

MD -08

Authors: Alenis Meru, Timothy Rouse, Kahnir Dai

The moment had finally come, and despite his casual and laid back attitude, even Kahnir had to admit that this was a little intimidating. He was reporting for duty for his very first assignment with the fleet now. It wasn't more than a month ago he'd been wrapped up in preparation for the graduation from Starfleet Academy. There'd been friends and family to invite to see his success there, instructors to visit to personally thank them for all they'd done. Uniforms to press, boots to shine, drills to perfect, and with it all the wonder of knowing how far he'd come in four years time. The Academy had molded him, shaped him, trained him harder than he'd ever thought possible, and he'd managed to keep his chin up and willpower going to make it through. It still seemed almost like a dream to him, that a boy from the vineyards and fields of the backwaters of Betazed, was now standing before his captain's door.

Kahnir reached out and tapped the chime to Captain Meru's ready room door. Or was that Captain Alenis? He tried to remember what he'd learned about Bajoran naming conventions and hoped he didn't screw up from the start. The young man thought he figured it out as he waited for a response.

"Look, Tim, I don't like him any more than you do, but--" Both the captain and the XO were exasperated. Shras had less than a half hour ago dropped off a PADD containing a series of requests - demands, really -- and the two senior officers found themselves dealing with them.

"Can't we just throw him out an airlock or something?" asked Tim. After being on the receiving end about Shras' latest tirade about the inadequacy of his quarters and his demand to be moved, Tim was seriously considering relocating the Andorian and all his belongings to the vacuum of space.

"Unfortunately, we're under orders from your father-in-law, so my hands are tied," teased Alenis.

"Ha ha, very funny." It was at that moment that they were interrupted by the door chime.

"Come in!" called out Alenis. As the doors opened, the young ensign was greeted by three pairs of eyes -- Alenis, Tim, and Ko-ko, perching herself in her favourite spot, on top of Alenis' monitor.

Kahnir took a few steps into the room, gave a big smile to his superiors, and with a posture that was almost as far from attention as one could. His uniform was neat at least, boots polished to a gleam so nice that one might see themselves reflected on them if they got down to look. His voice was just as relaxed as the rest of him as he said, "Ensign Kahnir Dai, reporting for duty, ma'am. And sir. And whatever is sitting on top of your computer, Captain...what is that thing by the way?" The Betazoid was eyeing Ko-ko with more interest to her than to the two other people.

Tim winced at the Ensign's mention of Ko-ko. He had over the past several months managed to get used to the presence of Ko-ko, though he still found it strange that the captain insisted on taking the bird with her while on duty, and continued to be less than amused at her attempts to explain the presence of a large, brightly coloured bird wherever the captain went.

"This," replied Alenis, reaching up and petting the bird, "is Acting Ensign Ko-ko. She's our Chief Morale Officer." Ko-ko let out a soft, soothing coo, one whose relaxing tones filled the room. On her homeworld of Alamis IV, her species had originally evolved their complex vocal chords and calming birdcalls to dissuade predators and attract mates in the dense jungles. But, as Arvel's research had shown, they had proved to be loyal pets and useful in helping patients relax.

Alenis looked up at the ensign in front of her. By his age, uniform, and rank, she quickly deduced that he was the new Chief Flight Control Officer that Starfleet had sent her, fresh out of the academy. "And you must be Ensign Dai," she added.

The Betazoid continued studying the alien bird for a long moment, looking it right in the eye. "Strange, I can feel my morale lifted already." Eventually he turned his attention to the Bajoran and human before him. "Oh, right, sure," he started. "Ensign Dai, yeah. It's nice to meet'cha." He gave a lopsided grin. There was a wispy sort of goatee going on at the moment on the young man, who obviously couldn't grow a full beard to save his life. Perhaps it wasn't regulation, but there wasn't much regulation about his relaxed posture and somewhat lackadaisical manner as he reported for duty. There was all that protocol and stuff. "Sir," he added, belatedly.

"Likewise," replied Alenis, her eyes narrowing as she looked him up and down. The ensign was not like most officers fresh out of the academy. Usually, they were eager to please, perhaps even a little too eager as they would parade into her office as though they were a one-man drill team, their shoes freshly polished and their uniforms perfectly pressed. But this one, she could tell, was different.

Alenis didn't like it.

"Why don't you stand up straight and let us get a good look at you?" she asked in a tone that made it clear that it was not a request.

"Aye, Captain," Kahn� replied, and made a tiny bit of a show of it as he stretched upwards. He was quite tall, when he wasn't slouching at all, and big. He'd gone from young and unimposing, perhaps even a bit lazy, to something else entirely. Perhaps part of his act was to not look threatening. "I have to say, I'm very pleased to be here. The chance to pilot the Portland is quite the honour."

"An honour it is indeed," Tim said. Not having read the bio of the newest addition to the ship yet he asked. "Is this your first posting?"

"Yes, Commander, this is my first posting," Kahn� said, this time with a real touch of pride. It wasn't so much pride in himself as it was for this opportunity. There was no doubt in Kahn�'s mind. The Portland might be an older vessel, but she was also the single most successful class of ship Starfleet had ever built.

"Then if I may ask, how do you plan on being the Portland's Chief Helmsman without any prior flying experience?" He asked, knowing the question was a bit mean. Starfleet wouldn't have sent him if he wasn't up for the job, but it was a fact the Ensign would need to be able to deal with, giving that most people in his department have more flying experience than he does.

"Sir, we logged hundreds of hours both in and out of the simulator," Kahn� explained, telling some of his Academy experience, sounding relaxed at the question. He'd expected it, of course. Starfleet giving him this position was a big deal, for them and for him, and he was going to face doubts from superiors and subordinates. Kahn� didn't see any reason to get overly excited about it though, like

some painfully overdone ensigns were right out the Academy. "Besides simulator time, sir, I have flown fighters and shuttles, and two different cadet training ships from Earth to Andoria and back. I was also the leader of my Academy squadron for four years, and participated in the Rigel Cup. Respectfully, sir, I would not say I have no experience."

"Impressive, but this is your first real assignment," countered Alenis. His academy records were impressive, even if his deportment wasn't. But that was all just in the academy. Mostly holodeck exercises, with senior officers on hand in case he was in over his head. Out in space, they wouldn't have that luxury. Not to mention that flying the ship was only part of his responsibilities. As chief flight control officer, he would be responsible for managing an entire department, dealing with matters of training, crew development, and human resources. "As well as your first experience leading a department on a Starfleet vessel."

"Exactly, Captain," Kahnir agreed readily and with a nod. "I'm excited about finally getting a chance to put what I learned at the Academy to good use. About the Flight Control Department, sir, I look forward to that too. I understand, sir, that there might be hard feelings from some of my colleagues, at first. But that's also part of being in Starfleet. We might not always agree with their decisions, but we do follow orders. I'm certain that in little time we'll be running things smoothly, as a team. Everyone who's ever become a chief of a department was new at it till they weren't. I see this as the same."

Alenis stared him up and down. She didn't know what to think, but fortunately she had her best advisor at her side. "Ko-ko," she called out, snapping her fingers to get the bird's attention, "what do you think?"

Now that was odd. Was the captain truly asking an assumedly non-sentient life form for advice? Or was the more to this Ko-ko than immediately met the eye? More surprisingly, the bird flapped its wings briefly and took flight to land on top of Kahnir's head. It was almost enough of a shock to finally crack the ensign's very laid back attitude. He schooled himself to patience and acceptance of this state, wondering also if this might be some sort of hazing ritual on the Portland. He didn't sense that in the projected emotions of his two superiors. His own mind was calm, and he let his projected emotions out just a tiny bit. Animals did have certain ways sensing things, after all.

Kahnir rolled his eyes upwards, though he could really see Ko-ko from there, could only feel her talons finding uncomfortable purchase in his hair. There was some sniffing of his scents, clean and not prettied up by some sort of cologne. Just Kahnir. After a moment, Ko-ko nipped playfully at one of his prominent ears that must have seen like a tempting target. That brought a smile to the Betazoid's face, along with a bit of a wince. "Will there be other wildlife I'll get to meet, Captain?" Kahnir asked, lifting a knuckle for something else to play with.

"Just little Novia's cat-monkeys," replied Alenis in a nonchalant tone. "Speaking of which, if you ever have to go into the Jeffries tubes, make sure you close the access port behind you. About two months ago someone forgot, and we had to send a security team in to extract Zinzac and Berelca."

Glancing up at Tim for a moment, Alenis could see that he had that look on his face. The one that he always had when Alenis was showing off Ko-ko or acting up in some way. While Alenis was by no means a lax CO, there were times when Tim just had to shake his head. Of course, whenever he gave that look, meant to dissuade Alenis from her current course of action, it tended to have the opposite effect. "I can see that Ko-ko likes you," added Alenis. "That's a good start."

Was grinning as Ko-ko nibbled eagerly at his knuckles, now rather enjoying this. "Cat-monkeys? Can't say I'm familiar with them. We had *salets* as pets on Betazed. There sorta like...well...they are

small and fuzzy I guess, great fun if you don't mind the constant shredding." The ensign lowered his hand, clasped them both behind him at the small of his back. He met the gaze of the XO first, his grin still big, and then his CO's. "I'm really looking forward to this, sirs, and I'll do what I can to impress."

With a snap of her fingers, Alenis got Ko-ko's attention. The captain let out a smile as Ko-ko returned to her, perching on her arm. "See that you do, Ensign, to be granted a Chief position right out of the academy, even on an older ship, is a huge honour." With her other hand, Alenis slid a PADD across her desk. "Here is your welcome package. Orders, room assignments, personnel files of your subordinates, it's all there. Welcome aboard, Ensign."

The Betazoid gave the older officer a lazy smile as he reached down and took the PADD, "Thank you, Captain. I'm sure we're going to have a lot of fun together." Just wait till they saw his piloting!

Engineering Fight!

Engineering, USS Portland

MD -02, afternoon

Authors: Alenis Meru, Sera Williams, Nikki Barclay, and Tolaran Kian

Petty Officer Heinrich Hildebrand was not in a good mood. With over twenty years' experience as a warp field technician, mostly on Miranda class vessels, he was always irritated when he would have some young officer fresh out of the academy appointed as his Chief Engineer. And Miranda classes had more than most, as they would attract only two types of officers: grizzled old engineers who actually like tinkering with old systems, and fresh young graduates who don't exactly have the choice of serving on something newer or more prestigious. He was the former, and most of the officers above him were the latter.

It sometimes took him months, even years, to break in his inexperienced superiors. And he would have to start all over every time someone would come fresh out of the academy to take over. It was bad enough when Lieutenant Williams was appointed, though over the last few months he had taught her a thing or two, mostly about respect for the enlisted crew who actually do the work. But Ensign Barclay... she was another story altogether. Nikki was intelligent, there was no doubt about that, but she was a nervous wreck and the idea of her being in charge of engineering for any length of time scared him.

And on top of all that, there was Shras. The mad scientist had taken over half of engineering, and had even had the gall to erect a wall around half of engineering to allow him to do whatever it was they were doing in secret. His staff were rude, condescending, and arrogant, almost as bad as the man himself, but the wall was what really set Heinrich off. To not know what sort of unholy contraption they were working on, or how they were messing around with his precious power transfer systems, was just infuriating.

As he was ruminating on his frustrations, he felt a sharp pain in his elbow. "Hey, watch where you're going!" he shouted in his thick German accent at one of Shras' black-suited crew members walked by, pushing the cart which smacked him on the elbow.

"Stay out of my way," replied the gruff Caitian, releasing his grip on the cart and turning to face Heinrich. The six foot tall Caitian bared his teeth at the shorter human, as he stared him down. But Heinrich was not one to back down.

"You got a problem?" shot back Heinrich as he balled up his hands into fists. "You're guests on our ship, the least you could do is show some respect to your hosts." He took a step forward, getting into

the Caitian's personal space.

"Our work is more important than yours; it's the future of propulsion technology," snarled the Caitian. As he did so, both Portland engineers and dark energy technicians began forming up behind Heinrich and the Caitian. With all the tension over the past few days, the two tribes in engineering didn't need much impetus to form up behind their own. "Your job is nothing more than to do what you can with this glorified garbage scow to facilitate our experiments."

Heinrich was about to explode. "Glorified garbage scow? Don't you think you should rephrase that a little, furball?"

"Yes," replied the Caitian with a smirk. "I shouldn't have referred to the Portland as a garbage scow. It shouldn't be hauling garbage, it should be hauled away as garbage!"

A roar of laughter emanated from the dark energy technicians behind the Caitian. He turned around for a moment to bask in their cheers, but as he turned back towards Heinrich, he was interrupted by a fist to the face.

Like a spark in a powder keg, Heinrich's punch set off a conflagration which rapidly consumed sickbay. Portland and dark energy crewmen attacked each other with fists. Hyperspanners flew across engineering, and a Bajoran engineer was thrown through the wall separating the two halves of engineering. And through it all, Nikki panicked and screamed, desperately trying to get her department under control.

Sera had been taking the new Chief of Operations' advice to heart and was working on ways to alter the Warp Bubble without overloading the systems. That is until the wall just beside her console had crumbled as an engineer came crashing through. Sera helped the Bajoran up and brushed a few wall pieces off his uniform.

The new hole in the wall also brought the sound of the brawl into the Dark Energy group's workspace. Sera gave a glance to Petty Officer Kendrickson, who returned with a shrug. Sera sighed, then quickly made her way to Main Engineering. She was furious with what she saw.

She walked near the edge of the fray and shouted, "At ease!" A few of the bystanders began to quiet down and move to the side. The Chief Engineer rushed past a panicking Nikki and threw herself between Heinrich and the Caitian. "What is the problem here? We are on the same team," she ordered angrily. Only after she said it did she remember that she wore the uniform of Shras' team, and that the Portland crew was giving her agitated looks while Shras' team returned smug sneers.

No one knew who threw it, but Sera's angry inquiries were interrupted by a PADD bouncing off her head. And that was all that was needed to send the angry engineers into another rage. Fists flew, hyperspanners sailed across the room, and one unfortunate crewman found himself with his head stuck in a hole in the crumbling partition between the dark energy project crewmen and the engineers.

As Sera rubbed her head in pain, Nikki hurried over to pull her out of the line of fire, grabbing her and dragging her behind a console. "I think we need to call in the cavalry." She tapped her comm badge. "Ensign Barclay to security, I need a team down here pronto!"

"Kian here, on my way."

*** a few minutes later ***

Tolaran joined his team after receiving the message from Barclay, he wasn't quite sure what to expect but engineers could always be a bit feisty. He walked into engineering and found the Portland engineers having what could only be described as a bar brawl minus the alcohol. Indicating to his team to break up the fights he raised his voice and tried talking as the first method...

"What the hell is going on here! You are all wearing the Starfleet uniform, have you all lost your minds?! Ensign Barclay, anyone, an explanation please?!" Yelled Tolaran, hoping for the best.

He then had to duck a punch from one of Shras engineers, and sighed, incapacitating them with a quick blow to the throat which sent them to the floor coughing. "I do hope you will enjoy my brig" Tolaran almost grinned...

Nikki was relieved to see Tolaran show up. "They've been at each other's throats for days, this was only a matter of time!" she shouted, before ducking behind a console again to dodge a flying hyperspanner. "They're out of control!"

Sera rubbed her head a bit. She knew that a trip to Sickbay was in her near future. Sera held her frustration in check. She wanted to point out different engineers and scientists to go to the brig, but she knew that would only worsen the situation. Instead, she looked toward Tolaran, "Ever since the partition went up, it's been a powder keg down here."

"They've been on the ship all of five minutes, how did this start?" Tolaran knelt down to check Sera out, looking into her eyes and feeling around her head.

"I don't know!" exclaimed Nikki. "Just help us end it!"

"Just don't break anything," Sera asked. If anything was broken, it could spell disaster for the experiment... and the ship.

"Don't worry Sera, my team won't damage any of your toys." Tolaran stood up and walked back over to where his team were breaking up fights "LISTEN UP, ANY FURTHER ENGAGEMENT IN THIS SCUFFLE AND YOU WILL SPEND TIME IN MY BRIG, REGARDLESS OF WHO YOU ARE. IT IS NOT ACCEPTABLE, STAND DOWN!" he never liked to shout, but this was one of those times where it was needed... lets just hope the others listened.

Some of the engineering crew heeded Tolaran's advice. Realizing that the cavalry was here, they had little choice but to end it. But a few continued to resist, trying to wrest them free of the grip of the guards.

The Caitian who had originally bumped into the Portland Petty Officer simply looked down at Tolaran, blood from his nose staining his fur. "He started it," he said in a sneering voice, motioning towards Heinrich.

"Why you feline f--"

While not very imposing herself, Sera had faced down a group of crazed Terrans in the Mirror Universe and a cell of fanatical Wormhole Alien cult in her short Starfleet career. Perhaps it was even the concussion speaking from her hit on the head. Whatever it was, Sera was not going to let this happen. Sera stepped between the two and said in her best commanding voice, "Don't finish that sentence. If either of you so much as look at the other, I will personally throw you in the brig myself. The security team will be the least of your worries."

The Caitian threw his arms in the air and looked over at Nikki, Tolaran, and Sera. "Fine. Just keep your grunts out of our way," he sneered.

Just as some semblance of order was being restored to the divided Engineering department, thanks in large part to the intervention of security, the doors whooshed open again, revealing the captain. With her quick, deliberate stride and the gruff expression on her face, everyone in engineering knew that the proverbial crap was about to hit the fan.

"Captain on deck!" shouted the nearest enlisted crewman, as he went to attention.

Alenis simply ignored him and marched straight on into engineering. "What the hell is going on down here," she angrily demanded, staring down Sera and Nikki in particular. "We need security to stop your departments from killing each other? Really?"

"I... I... We..." Nikki just stammered in response, melting in front of the forceful presence of the captain.

Tolaran looked at Nikki, feeling sorry for her for getting the Captain's wrath "Sir, I believe from what we've discovered the fight broke out between one of our non comms...a...Hildebrand and Caitian. My team have already begun to take a few, shall we say, over excited crew to the brig. I am concerned that if these two codes teams don't learn to co-operate we will see more tension. If I may say so, Shras team are very rude."

"Agreed." Alenis sighed as she looked around engineering. "Unfortunately, I don't have the luxury of being able to throw everyone in the Brig; we'll have barely a skeleton crew left to run the ship. Round up the ringleaders and let them cool off in the brig. Separate cells. As for you two..." added Alenis, looking over at Nikki and Sera, "my office, ten minutes."

"Yes, ma'am," Sera said, upset with herself that she had not been able to get the situation handled.

Engineering fight aftermath...

Captain's Office, USS Portland

MD-02, Afternoon

Authors: Sera Williams, Alenis Meru & Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru)

Sera looked over at her friend. Sera knew that she had put Nikki into a bad situation, one that the Ensign simply had not been suited to handle. "Whatever happens, it's on me," she said, trying to take a bit of pressure off her friend.

"Are you sure?" asked Nikki, her voice about to crack. She might have been a neurotic, nervous wreck, but she didn't want to leave a friend to get wrung out to dry. "Maybe this won't be so bad?"

Sera shrugged. In her head, a million possibilities ran through her head. Would she be demoted? Would she have to degauss the transporter pads manually? Would she be given a shuttle back to the Starbase? "At least a board of Admirals aren't waiting for us on the other side," she tried to joke. Now, she probably would have preferred the Admirals to an angry Captain.

Hearing the chime ring, Alenis stood up and leaned forward, palms on her desk, in a posture which

projected power throughout the room. "Come in," she called out, knowing exactly who was on the other side of the door.

Sera made her way through the door first. Since Shras had ordered her to join his experiment, things have spiraled. This was probably the low point in her short career as the Chief Engineer of a starship. If Sera was honest with herself, she had not done a stellar job. She wouldn't be surprised if Captain Alenis demoted her and put her in charge of cleaning the nacelles.

Sera gathered what pride she had left and stood before her Captain's desk just like she was trained at the Academy. "Captain," she said. A nasty bruise where the thrown PADD had hit her head was already forming just under her hairline on her forehead.

"You requested us, ma'am," added Nikki, her eyes wandering to try to avoid the captain's glare and eventually settling on a brightly coloured bird in the corner.

"Yes, I did," replied Alenis, in a stern voice, as though she was talking to two cadets who got caught sneaking a shuttle out for a joyride. But in truth, she was as exasperated as she was furious. The past week, her desk and Tim's had been filled with complaints and reports of minor incidents between Shras' team and just about everyone they had interacted with. Apparently the science labs were a powder keg, with Shras himself taking a page from an Earth sitcom and drawing a line down the middle to separate the Portland and the dark energy crews. She might have found it funny if it weren't for the fact that her desk was covered in complaints. But a fistfight in main engineering was a serious matter. "So, Lieutenant Williams, Ensign Barclay, care to explain what happened down there?"

"I...." Nikki tried to speak, but found herself quickly out of breath, on the verge of a panic attack, and unable to so much as look up at the captain.

"Two crewmen bumped into each other, one from Engineering and the other from the Dark Energy experiment. Frustrations and emotions that had been brewing boiled over. I was alerted when a crewman was thrown through the partition separating Engineering." Sera said, trying to keep Nikki from having a panic attack. "It was on me, Captain. I should have been able to keep the two departments under control."

"That you should have." Alenis let out a sigh. "But Ensign Barclay also bears her share of responsibility for this incident. She was acting as your assistant department head, responsible for managing the engineering staff, was she not?"

"I... I..." Hyperventilating, that was all that Nikki was able to get out.

Sera's eyes shifted momentarily to her friend, "Yes, Captain. On my orders." There was no point in keeping that from the Captain, Sera had already informed Meru about the change in the Engineering chain-of-command. "Ensign Barclay is one of the best engineering talents on the Portland."

Alenis looked down at the two of them in front of her, as she did so, the one corner of her mouth curled slightly. "Duly noted," she said in reply. "Now, as for the current situation, I will talk to Shras, but apart from the few who are cooling off in the brig at the moment, it's up to you to deal with your staff. Team building exercises, discipline, you have the authority as Chief and Assistant Chief to do whatever it takes to get the Engineering and the Dark Energy crews working together. Think of this as a challenge; I know you're both recent graduates of the Academy, so show me what you've learned about leadership and make sure this doesn't happen again. Are we clear?"

"Yes, Captain," Sera replied. Solution after solution ran through her head. Parrises squares? No, too violent for an already on edge crew. Maybe a talent show?

"Good. Ensign Barclay, you're dismissed. Lieutenant Williams, a word in private?"

"Of course, Captain, anything," said Sera, allowing sincerity into her voice. She gave Nikki a reassuring smile as her friend left the ready room.

As soon as Nikki was gone, Alenis's eyes fell on Sera once more. "Ensign Barclay, she's very... nervous, isn't she?"

Sera nodded in agreement as she made sure the door to the Ready Room had shut. "Talented engineer, not so much with people," Sera admitted. She suddenly knew that her friend was part of the problem, and that Sera had placed her in a bad spot.

"Yes..." Alenis paused for a moment. "I appreciate you wanting to defend the crew under you. It's part of what makes a good officer. But are you sure she has the leadership skills to take on such a role in engineering? I mean, being a talented engineer is one thing, but..."

"But being a leader is something different," Sera finished for Meru. She didn't want to hurt Nikki, but she had to do what's best for the ship. Looking at the Captain in the eye, Sera said, "No, she was the wrong choice for such a big role. She can keep the ship flying on hope, but she can't patch the two crews."

"I'm glad we see eye to eye," replied Meru. She stood straight up and began pacing her office, glancing out the window as she pondered the situation. "I know Ensign Barclay is your friend, but as you advance in Starfleet, you'll find that sometimes you have to put the needs of the ship ahead of your friends and make difficult decisions." It was part of the loneliness of command that Meru had been feeling ever since her first promotion to an Executive Officer position a few years ago.

"Unfortunately, we don't have many officers in Engineering right now. I'm going to recommend that we replace Ensign Barclay at the first opportunity, and have her attend remedial officer training with Commander Rouse. And she should probably make regular appointments with Delainey as well. Do you concur?"

Sera took a moment to answer as she thought about her friend. "Yes, Captain, I agree. She should be replaced and the counseling would help her."

"Great." Alenis took a deep breath. "And Lieutenant, I know the situation is stressful right now, with the presence of Shras' team and the divided loyalties. Just... try to make sure I don't have a mutiny on my hands, okay?"

"Yes, Captain, mutinies are bad," Sera replied. "I'll do what I can to ease tensions."

"Sounds great." Alenis let out a hint of a smile for the first time in this little meeting. "If there's nothing else, you are dismissed."

"Thank you, Captain," Sera said. Already, she looked as though the weight of the Portland had been lifted. Sera turned, then walked out the door.

MD01, 1000 hours

Authors: Alenis Meru, Shras & Admiral Washington (played by Alenis Meru)

"Captain Alenis!"

Shras' shrill, irritating Andorian voice echoed throughout the bridge as he stepped off the turbolift. "My experiments were supposed to start ten minutes ago! What is the meaning of this? This delay is unacceptable!"

Alenis sighed as Ko-ko nuzzled against her head and covered her eyes with her wing. "I'm sorry, Ko-ko," replied Alenis as she petted her bird. "I promise you, the bad man will be gone in a few days."

After comforting her bird, Alenis swiveled in her seat to face Shras. "First off, take a look at my collar. These four pips mean that you are to treat me with respect, Commander. Second... I assure you that this is simply a routine delay while we realign the sensors, and your experiments will proceed within the hour.

"Within the hour!" Shras tried to contain his anger for a moment, but it simply made his face look like a bright balloon filled with blueberry jelly, about to burst and spill its contents everywhere. His efforts only managed to last a few seconds though, before he launched into another outburst. "Do you realize the importance of this project? My work is the future of Starfleet! Our dark energy systems are the most advanced pieces of technology in the entire fleet! And you dare to delay--"

"Captain, we're receiving a hail from--" interrupted a junior officer at the Ops console.

"I'll take it in my office!" exclaimed Alenis, thanking the prophets for an excuse to get away from Shras. "Commander Rouse, you have the conn," she added, walking swiftly towards her office with Ko-ko on her shoulder.

Alenis sat down at her desk and sighed. These dark energy experiments were going to be the death of her, and it wasn't just Shras. Since they started playing around with this technology, she'd been having strange dreams, and on a few occasions, she thought she saw out of the corner of her eyes shadowy, ghoulish figures. Of course, she chalked it up to simply the additional stress of having Shras on board, but now she wasn't so sure.

Taking a deep breath, she pressed a button on her console to bring up the transmission, and found herself face to face with Admiral Washington. "Admiral," said Alenis, offering him a respectful nod. "You don't know how much of a pleasure it is to get a call from you."

"Shras is that bad?" replied Washington. There was no denying that Shras was a brilliant scientist, but even Washington knew that he was not one to easily get along with people.

"Yes. He is." Alenis exhaled deeply as she placed a hand on her forehead. "So, Admiral, is this a social call, or do we have new orders? Perhaps rendezvousing with someone to take Shras off our hands?"

"You should be so lucky," replied Washington with a smirk. "No, you have new orders. Your dark energy systems may be getting a more robust trial than planned."

"Oh?" asked Alenis. "I can't wait to inform Shras. Where are we off to now?"

"Nebula NGC-3814," replied Washington in a serious tone. "At 1800 hours yesterday, the USS

Endeavour responded to a distress call from the Nova Europa colony. Upon arrival, they engaged the Borg."

"The Borg?" Alenis' face turned white. Of all the dangers in the galaxy, it was the Borg which inspired the most fear in her heart. While most Starfleet officers understood the serious nature of the Borg threat, for Alenis, it was personal. Since the destruction of the Gol at the battle of New Algiers years ago, the Borg had been a consistent feature in her nightmares.

"Yes, the Borg." Washington pressed a couple buttons on his console and sent Alenis a star chart. "This time, however, it is not just one ship. We've traced the Borg activity to NGC-3814. And we'd like the Portland to investigate.

"The Portland?!" exclaimed Alenis. "Shouldn't we send a Defiant or a Prometheus or something?"

"No time. You're the closest ship with the capabilities to explore the nebula. And..." Washington paused for effect, "you'll have Shras' experimental technology to help you."

Alenis gasped. "The dark energy... but that hasn't even been tested yet!"

"In that case, you'll be testing it in the field," replied Washington. "Captain, I don't need to tell you how important this mission is. The fate of the Federation could hang in the balance. Good luck... and god speed."

Stepping back out onto the bridge, Alenis looked over her assembled crew. "All right everyone, we have new orders, straight from Admiral Washington. Flight control, set course for NGC-3814, maximum warp. Ops, cancel the dark energy experiments. Senior staff meeting in ten minutes."

As the crew got to work, one person raised his voice in protest. "Captain--"

"Shut up, Shras!"

Obligatory Briefing Scene

Ready Room, USS Portland

MD01, 1010 hours

Authors: Alenis Meru, Shras (played by Alenis Meru), Timothy Rouse, Sera Williams, Marcus Kallan, Jason Beauvoir, Tyrlai Zade, Brad Silverton, Arthur Reynolds, Kahn Dai, Delainey Carlisle

Standing over the heavy ready room table, Alenis looked over the crew assembled before her. In the ten minutes since her conversation with Admiral Washington, she hadn't told anyone about the nature of this meeting, and could see the curiosity on some of their faces. Even the freshest recruit would have known that a sudden change of course and staff meeting meant that something was going on, and chances are it was serious. But what it was...

She looked down at Tim for a moment. She hadn't even told him, but he could tell by her eyes and her body language that whatever this was, it was serious.

"Thank you all for joining me," started Alenis. "I called this meeting because--"

Alenis froze, her eyes falling on Shras. "You're not one of my senior staff," she said, glaring at him.

"No, but if this meeting -- whatever it is about -- is going to affect my project, then I should be here," shot back Shras.

Alenis sighed. Part of her training as a tactical officer was knowing to pick her battles, and she had more important thing to do than fight with Shras over ejecting him from her ready room. "Fine. So long as you behave yourself."

"I'm always at my best behaviour," countered Shras.

"Whatever." Alenis rolled her eyes then glanced over at Tim; he simply shrugged his shoulders and looked back up at her. Taking one last look over her crew, Alenis tapped a button in front of her to activate the holographic display. A three dimensional star chart showing the position of Nova Europa, the nebula, and the Portland, among a few other things, appeared in front of everyone. "The Borg are back," she said in a firm tone, pausing for a moment to allow that to sink in.

Sera shifted uncomfortably in her seat, her eyes trying to read the reactions of those gathered. The Borg had been more than a match for an entire fleet of Starfleet starships on more than one occasion. They were on a ship built decades before first contact with the Borg, which wasn't very promising. She didn't even know if she'd feel good aboard the likes of an Akira, Sovereign, or even a Prometheus.

Marcus sat across from Sera, tugging at the turtleneck to his new uniform in Operations gold. It wasn't rational that the uniform itched or chafed, as it was made of the same synthetic, hypoallergenic material that all Starfleet uniforms were made of. Still, the circumstances leading up to his inclusion in the Portland's bridge staff still did not sit well with him. But, he had his former commanding officer's blessing and encouragement, with an open pipeline to Daystrom. For that, and for that reason alone, he convinced himself to put up with it.

"Was Nova Europa attacked by the Borg? Were there any survivors?" Jason asked fearing for his sister Yvette's life, she'd recently taking a position as Chief Intelligence Officer. Although the Science Officer had never encountered the Borg, he remembered his mother telling him of her encounter with them during the Battle of Sector 001 almost 20 years ago. He'd always dreaded coming across those cybernetic zombies.

"Yes," replied Alenis in a firm tone. Wearing a dataglove connected to the holo-projector on the briefing table, she pointed towards Nova Europa, highlighting it in red. "XX hours ago, Nova Europa sent out a distress call, reporting that they were being attacked by the Borg. Four hours ago, the USS Endeavour engaged a sphere in orbit of Nova Europa, destroying it and rescuing a few dozen survivors before being engaged by a tactical cube."

"Impressive that a Nebula was able to destroy a Sphere and hold off a Cube," Marcus observed. "Probably some grade-A officers aboard using some zany tactics." He looked across the table at Jason, noting the subdued concern on his friend's face.

"The Endeavour escaped destruction when the tactical cube withdrew," continued Alenis, using her dataglove to control the zoom on the display, "albeit not without some damage and the loss of her captain. Long range sensors have tracked the tactical cube's warp trail back to NGC-3814, a nebula in sector 112. Unfortunately, our long range sensor system can't penetrate the nebula, which Starfleet Intelligence suspects contains some sort of hub for Borg activity in the Alpha Quadrant." Alenis took a deep breath and then pointed to the position of the Portland, highlighting it on the display. "Which... is where we come in."

Sera pulled at the collar of her new uniform, it was the same style as Shras as she had been transferred to his command while retaining her Chief Engineer position. She had yet to really feel comfortable in it, especially when in the same room as the Portland's senior staff. "Was the Captain captured? If so, could this be another Captain Picard situation where her experience and knowledge could create another Wolf 359?" There was the slightest bit of fear in her voice. That battle had destroyed 39 starships and had been as devastating as any of the battles against the Dominion, and that had been against one tactical cube with the knowledge of one Starfleet Captain.

Alenis paused for a moment. "Yes, she was," she replied. "We don't know what they've done with her. All we know is that the Borg broke off their attack and retreated as soon as they captured her, almost as if Captain Banninga was their sole objective." Alenis paused for effect. The Borg were as mysterious as they were dangerous. Their motivations, their strategies... it was still an enigma, something completely alien to individual beings. "We can only speculate as to what was done with her. Unfortunately," said Alenis in a heavy tone, "this is not a rescue mission. Our objective is to perform reconnaissance inside the nebula in order to gather information on whatever the Borg are doing in there so we can stop them."

"Finding a Nebula in a nebula," Marcus observed, his dry wit ever-so. "Captain, I happen to be intimately familiar with all of the data on Wolf 359 and the Borg's first attempt to assimilate a mouthpiece. The Borg don't assimilate individuals unless it suits a greater purpose. What they can't assimilate, they destroy. So it might be worth it from a scientific and cultural standpoint to understand why their behavior so closely matches what happened at Wolf 359. Maybe a secondary objective?"

The doors whooshed open and Tyrlai Zade walked in, dressed in a mostly black stealth field uniform with very shiny deep purple hair, one long strand tied in a braid at her right temple. She looked back over her shoulder speaking to someone in the hallway as she strode into the briefing room. "You did good today, Jena. That stuffy--" she paused as she spotted Shras seated prominently at the briefing table. "Commander, how nice of you to join us so inappropriately like this. Reminds me a bit of myself." The doors whooshed shut on her previous conversation and she sat down at the table and looked at all of the tense faces. "Sorry, I've been preoccupied a bit lately, what did I miss?"

Despite his concern for Yvette, Jason couldn't help but smile at Tyrlai's entrance. He liked the woman for befriending Jena and for the flare with which she approached life.

Tyrlai smiled back at Jason, hopefully he wouldn't be too mad when Commodore Stuffypants found all of that Gelatin in his temporary quarters. For a moment she thought she should probably be teaching Jenna more responsible activities. But those didn't generally make such cool looking swirling patterns of color. She discarded the notion and tried to pay closer attention.

Strangely enough, Arthur didn't seem to give the late entree a second thought. Instead, he appeared preoccupied by the news. Earlier in the meeting, he found the brief banter between the captain and the scientist strange, if not alarming. But nothing could have prepared him for the possibility of renewed Borg activity in the Alpha quadrant. He'd only heard stories of them in the Academy, but while they didn't exactly strike fear in him, they did fascinate him enough to consider joining the Circle Fleet in the Delta quadrant. Unfortunately, those plans were dashed the moment those Yridians got away from him on Starbase Montgomery. "Is there any tactical significance to the nebula? Where's it located?"

Alenis brought up the star chart again and zoomed out so the assembled crew could contextualize everything on the star charts. "It's not too far from Cardassian space, but there is little tactical

significance to the nebula, apart from the fact that the nebula's interference means it can't be pierced by long range sensors, so it's a perfect place for doing something without any prying eyes." Alenis turned towards Tyrlai and said in a serious tone, "the Borg are back, and we're being sent alone into a nebula which is probably crawling with them."

"Starleet is sending the very oldest and smallest ship in the fleet into a Nebula full of Borg?" Oddly enough facing deadly and insane odds was not her first thought, it was how many Gaskets Thosk would lose when he found out about this. "If we were the fastest ship that might be something, why would we even be considered for such a,..." She trailed off remembering who's office she and Jena had just filled with translucent lubricating foam. "The Commodore brought something clever and untested along with him again, is that it? I didn't bring you back from the dead so you could just rush headlong back towards it!!"

"The prophets brought me back." She reminded the Trill.

"Technically." Tyrlai scowled, brightening only slightly as she remembered. "I haven't met the Borg before. They can only be bargained with from a position of strength, the Diplomatic corps doesn't really even have a specialist for them."

"If we do our recon well enough, we shouldn't need one," Delainey replied quietly. It pained her they weren't ordered to attempt a rescue, but she knew better than to voice that sentiment here. They had their orders and no amount of wishing they were different would change things.

Brad had sat silent during the briefing and watched Tyrlai come in late. No doubt she was up to something as usual, but his thoughts returned to the meeting. There really wasn't much for him to contribute towards at the moment. Any medical needs that would arise from a Borg mission would most likely mean a tactical engagement with matching one of the Federations most dangerous enemies with... the might of a Miranda class starship. If it came to combat the Portland would most likely be destroyed. Still, the medical department would be ready when called upon. Brad just spent the meeting nodding to other department heads discussing tactics.

"Yes," called out Alenis, looking over at Sera and Shras in their matching uniforms. Shras was as calm and collected as he usually was, seated with a smug smile upon his face, though Alenis knew that just about anything could set off his hair-trigger temper and turn him from a minor nuisance into a serious problem. Sera, on the other hand, was visibly uncomfortable in her new digs, not the least reason being because of the association with Shras. "Commander Shras, Lieutenant Williams, I trust that these dark energy systems you are testing out include something which will enable us to slip in and out of a nebula teeming with Borg cubes without being detected?"

"Captain, in theory, we could come out of warp just beside a Cube without them noticing," Sera said with as much confidence as she could muster. The team had worked very hard and around the clock to integrate the Dark Energy systems into the Portland, which had not always cooperated. With much less confidence, she added, "However, nothing has been tested outside of the holodecks."

After being on his best behaviour for almost ten whole minutes, the mention of his reactor was the straw that broke the camel's back for Shras. "Captain, I protest -- the dark energy reactor is only just progressing out of the theoretical stages. It is too unpredictable for us to use in a combat situation without being properly tested. And these tests could take weeks!"

Alenis glared at Shras. "What are you saying, Commander, that your amazing new invention is a lemon? That we can't trust your new systems?"

"No, I--" Shras paused and gritted his teeth, realizing he was outmaneuvered. "I suppose in theory, if we were to flood the outer hull with tetryon radiation, we could use the dark energy generator to effect a trans-dimensional warp jump, and by keeping us just slightly out of phase, we could conceal ourselves in the plasma trail of a passing cube with only an approximately..." he paused for a moment to do some mental calculations. "three point seven percent chance of being detected." He looked across the table at the rest of the officers, wondering if their inferior intellects managed to grasp the genius of his plan. "At least, in theory."

Until that moment, Kahnir had been sitting quite peacefully down at the far end of the briefing table. With eyes heavy-lidded and a slouched posture, one might have thought him asleep except for the glitter behind them that had moved towards each person who spoke in turn. He hadn't even moved when the Borg had first been mentioned though that was mainly because he had been busy erecting greater mental shields before any brief surge in fear overwhelmed him. Now he had to speak up, and his eyes opened wider so he could stare at Shras, "You think we can ride the wake of a cube?" It was delivered with such a disbelieving deadpan that it might make blue antennae stick straight up. "And without getting detected, as the ship bounces around - presumably without us shaking apart - causing all sorts of energetic fields to fluctuate as well. Wow, this dark energy is some impressive stuff." Kahnir didn't sound very impressed, he sounded almost impudent as he gazed at the Andorian.

"Impressive is an understatement, Ensign," shot back Shras in a dismissive tone. While he was undoubtedly arrogant, he did not take compliments well. After all, a compliment does not mean much if it comes from someone so far beneath you, as Shras considered nearly everyone he met to be. "This dark energy reactor is the way of the future."

Sera's face went a bit pale at the exchange between both of her superiors. She had needed to keep the Portland-only crew in the dark about the vast majority of the dark energy work that was occurring in and on the ship. It had not earned her very much favor and had certainly gone a long way to distance her from her friends and crewmates. It was extremely dangerous work, and she honestly had her doubts if a ship that had been around during the "Kirk years" would even survive the experiment.

"Dark energy?" Marcus parroted in surprise, turning to regard Shras, then Alenis, and then Shras again. "You're telling me that you have a subspace manifold generator on board? Is that why engineering is upside down?" Despite the awkwardness of his transition to chief of operations, Marcus made sure qualified operations staff helped with the personnel reorganization. He even put in some extra hours, himself. "I mean, you might as well strap a Romulan singularity drive to the secondary hull. It'll be just as safe..."

Jason agreed completely with the Chief Operations Officers sentiments, but said. "Don't worry Marcus, the Commander's prototypes always work, just like his stasis field, that not only succeeded in immobilizing it's target, it also nearly immobilized us, for good, due to its massive energy drain. So I have every confidence that this dark energy field will work fine, I just don't think well still be alive to celebrate. Perhaps we should have the champagne now."

Pondering the situation, Alenis looked over the assembled officers before her. "Unfortunately, unless we have any better ideas on how to fly into a Borg-infested nebula and live to tell the tale, we'll have to entrust our lives to Shras' little gadgets."

Silence.

"Then it's settled," added Alenis, exasperation beginning to show in her voice. Looking over at Shras, she could see a look of smug indignation on his face. Alenis looked at Shras and Sera. She knew this

order would be painful for everyone around the room, but she had no choice. "Commander Shras, Lieutenant Williams, your job will be to train everyone on the dark energy systems, their properties and uses, as well as proper safety protocols."

"Captain, I protest!" shouted Shras, standing up from his seat. "This project is confidential and knowledge of my experiments is on a strict need to know basis, authorized by Admiral Washington himself!"

"Washington," cursed Alenis under her breath. For a split second, she wondered if this was all simply the Admiral's revenge for what happened between his daughter and Timothy. "Commander Shras, this may be your project but it's my ship. And in my judgement, knowledge of the dark energy systems is critical for the success of our priority one mission and the survival of the ship. Besides, the project won't be very confidential if the Borg assimilate you and half the quadrant." Alenis stood up, placing herself at eye level with Shras. "You will train my entire senior staff, and if you have a problem with that, I'm sure Washington would love to hear it -- after we complete this recon mission."

Marcus added nothing more, simply watching the exchange between his captain and the Andorian. He sniffed and rubbed his nose at Alenis' smackdown, no doubt desperate not to snicker.

Sera sat awkwardly as her superiors argued. She made no effort to defend either of them, she was already viewed upon with distrust by many and didn't feel like adding any weight to the rumors.

Shras was boiling with rage. "This is going to go--"

"Yes, I know, in your report," replied Alenis with a wave of her hand. She knew from her last encounter with Shras several months ago that he was extremely meticulous in his reporting, documenting every slight against him, real and perceived. "You have work to do. Get to it."

Shras stared into Alenis' eyes, fuming mad. Then, he placed a hand on Sera's shoulder. "Come on, Lieutenant, you heard the captain. We have work to do." With that, he turned and started to storm out.

With a slight, apologetic smile to the rest of the crew gathered, Sera replied, "Yes, sir." She then turned and followed her commanding officer. She felt a small sense of relief that she would finally be able to let the crew in on what the dark matter experiment actually did.

Marcus' eyes narrowed at Shras putting his hand on Sera's shoulder, and there was a certain rigidity to his spine and shoulders all of a sudden. He watched the two leave, and then sat back in his chair, brooding.

"Everyone else," called out Alenis as the two black-shirted officers left, "prepare your sections for contact with the Borg."

Jason felt for Sera, it wasn't her fault that Shras had recruited her. Not everyone was willing to accept the consequences for disobeying orders they don't agree with.

Arthur pursed his lips as he watched Shras leave, glancing back at the captain with an eyebrow perked. This ship resembled his first assignment on the Warren more and more every day, and that worried him considerably. Crew interactions and relationships were complicated, and the whole mess back on the Warren reminded him of those 20th century soap operas... or certain life experiences of his own. But as anyone who read his Starfleet record would know, his only concern was efficiency - and the lack on the Warren led him, in part, to join the Tactical department. So when

he spoke again, his mind called up whatever information he could remember about Borg tactical systems - and especially their regeneration technologies. "Right away, captain."

Marcus didn't need to be told twice. Once his fellow officers started to move, he headed towards the exit for the bridge.

Tolaran had remained silent through the briefing, absorbing all the new information, he wouldn't question the Captain but he did not like the Andorian, something about him irked him far more than he'd liked. He watched the other officers file out as the briefing ended and knew he'd have to put in extra training for his team, extra security points through the ship in preparation for any Borg that might infiltrate the ship, he had spent a lot of time during his time at the Academy studying the Federation's enemies and had hoped to never meet the Borg. He saw Meru giving him a questioning look and he simply nodded, stood up and began to leave the room.

Kahnslid his long body out of his chair and stretched, big arms overhead, and bit back a yawn. It probably would be pushing proper decorum a bit too far to yawn. He wasn't sure. The Betazoid had some plans in mind for his team. The Portland had two Type 7 shuttles and three Type 8 on board. The 8's were too big and too powerful for what he had in mind, but the low-powered 7's might do the trick. He headed through the Bridge and to a turbolift heading for Deck 6 to see just how low they could get the energy signatures of the shuttles and to make them appear to be tiny asteroids to sensors, as it could be very handy to have a ride or two ready to go to sneak up on the Borg. Kahnslid wasn't going to only rely on Shras' miracle machine, just as he assumed none of the other officers were going to either.

As the crew filed out of the room, Alenis stood and turned towards the window, gazing out at the stars. But when all her other officers left, one man remained.

"Captain," said Timothy in a soft voice, "we need to talk."

Post-Briefing

Ready Room, USS Portland

After the briefing...

Authors: Alenis Meru, Timothy Rouse

"Talk?" asked Alenis as she removed the data glove she had been using to control the holo-display in the briefing room. There was something about the way he said it that indicated to her that this was not going to be an easy conversation. "About what?"

"Are you sure we are the right ship to take this assignment? With your history with the borg?" Tim asked.

"My history?" Alenis' expression instantly turned severe. "Actually, I think having a commanding officer who has experience in tactical and experience fighting the Borg is an advantage. Besides," she added, in an attempt to change the subject, "we're the only ship with the dark energy reactor."

"The Endeavour also had a Commanding Officer with experience in tactical and in the Borg. You think they benefitted from that fact?" he asked sarcastically. He had read the other CO's service record and noticed the similarities between the two women.

"They managed to save the last of the colonists and escape," replied Alenis. "Though there were some casualties, they accomplished their mission and saved dozens of lives."

Alenis sighed deeply. "What are you implying, Tim? Are you saying that you don't trust me to not allow any residual feelings from New Algiers to get in the way of making the right decision as a captain?"

"What I'm saying, or more asking. Are you up for the task? I'm not in the mood to lose you again."

Turning towards the stars, Alenis stared out at the window for a moment as she considered the question. "I don't know how this mission will end. None of us know." She sighed as she turned back to Tim. "We're Starfleet officers. Sometimes that means we have to go on dangerous missions and make the ultimate sacrifice. It's what we signed up for. If I have to make that sacrifice to save the ship or to stop the Borg from rampaging throughout the quadrant, I'll do it without a moment's hesitation." In her eyes was a passion that burned with the intensity of a blue giant star. With any other invader, Klingon, Breen, Orion, it would have been duty. But with the Borg, it was personal. "I did it before, and I would do it again."

Tim sighed. He knew when Meru got like this, there was no stopping her. "Meru," he said, "I'm your friend, and your executive officer. It's my responsibility to make sure you're all right, not just for your sake but for the ship as well."

"I'm fine!" she exclaimed, growing frustrated.

"The fact you're being that defensive tells me you're not," countered Tim. In truth, he had been worried about his friend for some time, but had always pushed those concerns to the back of his mind. "Along with the fact that you're still taking sleep aids, and haven't seen a counselor in months. Not to mention the empty wine bottles I saw in your quarters last week. What are you up to now, a bottle a night? Two?"

Alenis sighed deeply. Tim seemed to know her better than she knew herself. "So, what are you going to do?" she asked, defeated.

Tim stared into Alenis' eyes. "I'm not going to remove you from command," he said. "You're too good of a captain; too good of a tactician. But as soon as this mission is over, I want you to go see Dr. Carlisle. And I'm going to confiscate every drop of wine in your quarters. And the bottle of Romulan Ale hidden in that sculpture of yours."

"Fine," replied Alenis in an exasperated tone. "Is that all?"

"Just one more thing," replied Tim as he stepped towards the door. "Get some sleep, okay?"

Who: Lt. JG Marcus Kallan and Holo-Meru

Where: Jeffries Tube between Holodeck One and Two

When: After the movie, before the nebula

Not technically a tube, the crawlspace between Holodeck One and Two was the home for the memory matrix that Marcus crafted to house the emergent sentient hologram. Having done most of his monitoring and research remotely, he hadn't really communicated with holo-Meru except through diagnostic read-outs and minute adjustments to the memory allocation her program was allowed. But with a potential conflict with the Borg looming, he took the opportunity to gather some materials to perform some hands-on maintenance.

Parking the hoverlift outside in the hallway and moving the various stabilizers and plasteel housing into the crawlspace, he knelt beside the module and cracked open his engineering kit and started to go down his mental checklist. "Computer, activate the holographic copy of Alenis Meru," he said, pulling out a plasma torch.

Appearing in the middle of the room was the holographic Alenis Meru, still wearing the same red leather jacket she wore to the movies. "Marcus," she exclaimed, a smile appearing on her face, "what brings you down to the holodeck; I presume you're not down here for a movie or something fun."

"Well, I figured I would let you know that I'm working on your chicken hut, Baba Yaga," Marcus quipped, flashing the plasma torch. "Don't worry, it's just some hardening in case this deck takes any catastrophic damage."

"Catastrophic damage?" The starfleet captain in Holo-Meru immediately bubbled up to the surface. "What's going on, and why did no one tell me about this?"

Marcus sighed. "We've been over this. You're not *the* Captain Alenis any more. You realize this, don't you?" He started welding together some support struts to the memory module's housing. "You aren't on active Starfleet duty and I don't think that'll change in the near future. Admiral Washington needs a more thorough report on your progress as an emergent sentience before he'll even consider putting it before a judicial review. Besides, I can't tell you. And don't bother trying to search the ship's memory, it's classified to command staff and your... *Captain* Alenis' codes have been changed."

"Well, you can't just expect me to sit down here and wait for the ship to blow up and take my program with it," replied the hologram in an indignant tone, her hands on her hips. "It has been a couple years, but I still know my way around a tactical console. Besides, it could be useful to have an emergency command hologram, just in case the entire command staff gets sucked out a hull breach or assimilated by the Borg."

The chief operations officer snorted in amusement as he worked. "Wouldn't that just tickle Washington. I'll keep that in mind," he said, finishing the tripod configuration frame for her memory module. "There. Now some inertial stabilizers." He started assembling parts. "So, I've been following your program. The good news is that your fragmentation is starting to distribute evenly throughout your program. The bad news is, there's still significant fragmentation and cross-linking. Self-repair routines *should* take care of them, though, at this point." He glanced up at her. "Do you know what that means?"

"It means that I won't need you to fiddle around with my program anymore?" asked the hologram. "That's a shame, I was just starting to get used to your company."

"On the contrary," Marcus said, turning a stabilizer online. "Tell me if that disrupts your program at all. Running a diagnostic on the memory module." He tapped at the module's side, queueing up a self-diagnostic. "Uh, where was I... oh, fragmentation. Right. No, your program could still cascade into a pile of garbage... just now it would be an evenly-distributed pile of garbage. But what I was getting at is that all of these bit-errors are starting to incorporate into your personality. You are becoming distinct from the original templates you were created from. Given enough time, your simulated alpha patterns will be wholly distinct from the real Alenis Meru. Your own person. Exciting, isn't it?"

"Fascinating," replied Meru, in a slightly droll tone, her eyes slightly glazed over at Marcus' technical explanations. "I suppose that does explain my sudden taste for horror movies, but with all these fragmentations in my personality subroutines, how do I know I won't end up turning into a stuck-up

bimbo or a Jekyll and Hyde type serial killer?"

"Welcome to being a sentient being," Marcus quipped, fastening the remaining stabilizer in place.

"You are now a product of your upbringing, environment, culture, and circumstance. Keep your hands inside the vehicle at all times. Enjoy your ride." Grinning up at Meru, he said, "In all seriousness, we ought to have you meet Dr. Carlisle. I may know how to stabilize a holo-matrix, but I don't know anything about psychology. And it would be fascinating to compare her findings with my own."

"Ugh, shrinks..." Meru let out a hint of a smile; there was something a little comforting about being more than just a copy of the "real" Alenis Meru. "I suppose I can't use executive privilege as commanding officer of the Portland to get out of this anymore, can I?"

"Nope," Marcus said, as he packed up his gear. "In fact, you should probably go about thinking about a new designation for yourself. From what I hear, 'Alenis Meru' is taken." He shrugged. "Bajoran surname is first, right? So 'Alenis Somethingelse', maybe?" He frowned in consideration. "Have you, uh, met the Captain?"

"We... don't really talk much," admitted the hologram, a little sheepishly. "She does her thing and I do mine. I suppose it would be awkward, you know, kind of like hanging out with yourself, if you know what I mean."

"All the more reason to continue to distinguish yourself as a separate entity," Marcus explained. He finished packing up his tools, and looked as if he was about to go.

"Oh, I have one more request," said the hologram, blushing sheepishly as she stopped Marcus from leaving. There was no delicate way to put this. "I don't really have a place right now, and I've been discussing this with Lieutenant Beauvoir... if you don't get assimilated, would you mind installing some holo-emitters in his quarters for me?"

A slow smile spread across Marcus' face. "Oh, but of *course*. Anything for Beauvy." The two officers having a shared history, as well as a posting on ship together again, has rekindled their friendship. And no doubt, Jason won't hear the end of this one. "I'll toss a couple of emitters together. Might be a little while, as I'll probably need to run conduit myself, what with Engineering so busy." He let out a small chuckle. "Bye, Meru."

More than Photons

Where: Holodeck 1, Deck 5

Who: Sera and Marcus

When: Some hours after briefing

Sera slammed her fist onto the holographic control console that she had been using. She had just destroyed the Portland for the fourth time in a row. The console had a crack on the display, which wouldn't do. The Chief Engineer rubbed her face in frustration as she took a sip of her Raktajino. "Computer, note in the log that fluctuations in the tetryon field caused a cascade systems failure in the dark energy reactor, cause a loss of containment which ended in a catastrophic failure. The tetryon fluctuation was .025% out of acceptable range."

"Also, reset program and repair control console." The now empty room seemed to shimmer as the Portland's Main Engineering was created and the control console's crack seemed to seal itself. That was the good thing about holograms, they always came back. It was the real test that was coming

that really worried Sera.

The doors to the holodeck closing behind him, Marcus made the observation, "You ought to not beat up on the equipment, even the holographic replicas. It's bad for your blood pressure." Carrying an engineering kit, he strolled up beside Sera to peer at her simulation, albeit a reset simulation. "There is a reason why I spent my career... on a starbase, in a lab, surrounded by algorithms and data banks. There are no admirals there sending you off on fool-hardy missions dealing with wildly unpredictable technologies."

"Computer, pause program and secure classified information, Authorization Williams Lieutenant Alpha-Zero-Alpha." With a beeping confirmation, the holodeck paused as the consoles containing experimental data became unreadable and portions of Engineering became too blurry to see. She knew that would seem rude, but Shras would see to a court martial if any of this data got out to the crew of the Portland. "Sorry, orders," she replied.

"Don't worry, I didn't see anything that a Freshman engineering student didn't already know about the dangers of subspace," Marcus said, wriggling the fingers of his free hand as dramatic emphasis.

Hoping for a bit of damage control, she asked, "How are things going aboard the Portland? Finding your way around?"

Marcus shrugged. "It's got twelve decks. It's not difficult to find things. Although it certainly has 'last century' written all over it." Remembering he was talking to the ship's chief engineer, he added, "Uh, it's, um, sturdy. Yeah. Well-maintained."

With a smile, Sera returned in mock offense, "Isn't the maintenance of the ship your department now? Nothing about being a smooth ride, running quiet?"

"That's all you," Marcus retorted. "You fix them and keep them running to specification. We field-test specification and break limits and create new specifications for you to build towards." He smirked. "Hey, this isn't so bad. I'm like your therapist, or something."

"Better than arguing and insubordination," Sera said. She had not meant to let on that things weren't going well in Engineering, but ships were known for spreading gossip at Warp 10. The biggest mark was the fact that her uniform matched the very unpopular Shras and the fact the Sera was no longer required to report to the Captain. Sera had obliged Shras on that request, only because the work was too important to be held back by Shras and his feud with the Captain.

"You won't get any of that from me," Marcus stated. "I don't like what came out of that meeting any more than you or anyone else did. But orders are orders. And then to have an arrogant 'specialist' foisted upon us like glorified babysitters..."

She tried to hide her now flushed face, by turning her face to the PADD in her hand. She agreed wholeheartedly with his statement, but couldn't openly say it. "Did you need something?" Sera asked, trying to change the subject.

Registering her visible discomfort, Marcus tugged at his uniform turtleneck. "Uh, no. I was just going to fiddle with my holo-memory apparatus. For the not-Meru hologram. But this clearly takes precedence, so..." His lips drew taught together in a forced and nervous smile, and slowly turned to go.

"Before you go..." Sera knew Shras would have her head if he knew she asked anything, but she felt

she had to. "What kind of energy output would a 1% increase in the integrity field and .25% to the tetryon emissions do the ship and the available power resources?"

"Tetryon emissions disrupt space-time and blur the delineation between our space and subspace," Marcus explained, giving the textbook answer. "However, an undirected field, like a warp bubble..." He cleared his throat, making a presumption based on what he has heard and seen to date. "There'd be little to no effect as far as the ship's crew or systems, although tetryon emissions are typically handled only by the ship's main deflector as it requires a tremendous amount of power to be focused. You're looking at diverting warp power for that kind of increase." Looking towards the holographic console and shutdown simulation, he said, "Assuming Shras' little toy has adequate shielding, try rerouting warp plasma to secondary integrity emitters. It may help your simulation, but it'll burn out the emitters very quickly."

"I'll... take that into consideration," Sera replied, giving no indication of how thankful she was.

Marcus regarded Sera quietly for a moment, and then turned to go.

As the doors to the holodeck whooshed closed, Sera turned back to the console, "Computer, resume program and remove blocks. Authorization, Williams-Alpha-Zero-Alpha."

The computer buzzed its affirmation and the program and console began as they had been before Marcus arrived. She implemented Marcus' suggestions and let the program go. She had an uneasy feeling, but there was no turning back.

Sirens

Nova Europa Colony; Orbit MD -03

"So anyway, I'm sitting in the cafeteria at the academy and some person, he must have majored in comedy, comes up to me and punches me on the shoulder and asks me 'what is the difference between a bucket of shit and people from Boston?'"

Jessica bit her lip hard in anticipation. Their patrol was almost over and the whole time Ron had made her cry. The bastard. He may have seemed mechanical on the outside and to almost anyone who talked to him, but to Jess he was just amazing, especially once you got him going. It was a laugh-a-minute ride. "Do tell," she said, taking her view off the console. They'd drop out of warp just as scheduled with or without her gestures.

"The buck-"

Jessica burst out laughing before he could even finish. "What'd you do?"

"Well, I almost slapped him with *this* hand," he said as he raised up The Arm. "But," he continued with a sigh. "I just wasn't in the mood for it. You know? I just faked a laugh and sent him on his way."

"Well, that's a bit disappointing," Jess replied, calming herself in the process.

"Is it? I was sick of it. I can take a joke, but damn. Every day? It's why I learned to talk like this. A bit of fun at my own expense. You know I'd never want to actually kill my accent. It just seemed easier this way."

She didn't even notice. Jess was so into what Ron was saying that she had never even noticed the universal translator kick in when he started speaking Latin. The translator never did do accents well. She shook her head. Engineers. *Easier to learn Latin?* She almost chuckled at the thought. "Well," she said as she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "You know I don't mind one bit," she said through a warming smile.

"Thanks, deah."

"Well, it looks like we're home, Ron." Jess brought the shuttle out of warp. Almost immediately something seemed wrong. Scans where nowhere near what they should be and the beacon seemed to be offline. Where was the *Forefront*? The colony... everything was... "Ron. What's going on," she asked in an uncertain tone.

As he looked over the readings with a look just as confused as his partner's there was a sudden spike and a strange yet familiar sound. It was broadcast on all channels. Instinct kicked in and before anything else could happen Ron shouted "shields" as he brought them online.

The ominous tone that was received suddenly came into focus. "We are the Borg. Lower your shields and surrend..."

Ron quickly shut down the comm. He had familiarized himself with the Borg during his studies and it was their siren's call that he had hoped he'd never hear. He had wrestled with his reasoning on if there would ever be reason to accept their invitation, but with Jessica, or any other unwilling participant for that matter, in the balance it wasn't even a question. No.

"We need to get out of h-" Ron spoke hurriedly, interrupted by a blast of phaser fire from the Borg sphere that had quickly come into range to dispose of or collect any remaining life. One hit and the shields had almost broken in half. "Diverting *all* power to engines and shields," Ron said as everything almost went dark around them where it not for their augmented vision.

"Not the," Jess started.

"Everything! Now get us out of here! Shields are now at sixty-five percent and that's the best I can do," Ron shouted back at her.

Jessica frantically brought the ship about, aiming for the closest safe path away. As the shuttle was just about to enter warp once more, dragging itself forward at a quickened pace, there was a double-tap of phaser fire. A rending shudder later and they where careening out of control at a dangerous rate. Alarms and sirens where blaring all around. It didn't take much for the large sphere to pulverize the small shuttle they where in.

Maybe this is a blessing, Ron thought to himself, trying to control his panic as shuttle parts began falling everywhere. Maybe they'd seem dead. The ship was drifting away from the Borg fast but he had to be sure. They were already probably in pursuit. He knew that for them all life was either an asset or a threat, neither of which would just be let to get away. At this speed all they'd need was a minute. Two, tops.

He leaped out of his seat, taking action before anything else could happen. Shields where gone and systems where damaged. In a minute they'd either be beamed up or destroyed. He got up and quickly looked around. There! A protruding piece of debris. He ran over to it and without concern for his own safety he thrust himself upon it. He had only hoped his aim was true.

It was with a hastiness bordering on desire that he had punctured his one organic lung damaging it beyond use. With that part of the equation out of the way there was only one part left to take care of. He did not hesitate as he moved behind Jessica, but there was an expression of absolute pain on his face and it was not from the fresh wound he had received. He could say no more than “forgive me,” before acting as fast as he could. He wrapped his robotic arm tight around Jessica's neck as he shut down his artificial lung and with a few seconds' thought set it all to lock for two minutes. He had to be sure.

!!! Suddenly Jessica could feel her consciousness slipping from her and she knew not why, tears streaming down her face as she frantically fought the overbearing pressure of the machine wrapped around her neck.

Ron squeezed his eyes shut, crushing the feeling of sorrow under necessity, himself also losing his grasp on reality. In the seconds before he had become unconscious Ron's eyes welled up as he felt her struggle. His brush with death couldn't come soon enough. Seconds later and Jessica, too, became unconscious.

Two minutes later...

With the sudden realization of programmed awareness Ron's one functioning lung shot back to life, reviving him as his re-oxygenated blood quickly returned to his brain. Before even checking the scans for wherever the hell they or the Borg were or seeing the status of his wound he quickly removed his arm from and stood in front of Jessica's motionless body. He set to reviving her. He couldn't even cry. He was beyond it, as though all he wanted was to die. Again. *Not like this*, he thought to himself. *Please...*

With a gasp for life Jessica awoke from her near death. She looked around frantically as though she didn't even know where she was. “Ron...! Capta....!” She blinked rapidly as she looked about, reorienting herself. Suddenly it hit her. Fear. Uncertainty. Betrayal. They were all conveyed behind those robotic blue eyes. “Ron,” she shouted as she recoiled from his sight.

“I... I had to,” Ron said in a trembling voice as he stumbled over to the rear storage cabinet of the shuttle. He quickly tore off his shirt, exposing the bloody wound in his chest and grabbing a large bandage from inside the cabinet. He hastily applied the pad and quickly wrapped the bandaging tight around his body, closing the wound.

“Why?!” She could still feel the marks on her neck. She rubbed at them, trying to soothe the soreness that had persisted since she awoke. “Why would you...”

“I,” he practically sputtered out as he glanced over to the horrified look on his only friend's face. He shook his head and squeezed his hands tight as he turned away and looked at the rear station console. He had to. There was no other choice. “Because we needed to die,” he shouted at her, not turning his head to look at her. “Look.” He pointed an arm at the short-range scanners. “The Borg are gone.”

She was bewildered. What in the name of everything had happened. She quickly looked at her console. They were gone. Everything was gone. Their shuttle was adrift with no orientation to any point in the galaxy. She blinked a few times in confusion before resituating herself in the helm's chair, trying her best to straighten out the ship with what little power it had. A couple moments and a few well timed bursts of the few undamaged RCS thrusters remaining later and the shuttle had found itself on a steady course to infinity. The spinning was gone.

Fifteen minutes of silence later...

"Ron?"

The seat that Ron was occupying turned swiftly in Jessica's direction. He felt a sense of relief almost overload his senses. She was talking to him! For a moment he even forgot the aching pain within him. "Yeah," he questioned.

...

"Was there any other way?" There was an emotional pain in her voice as well as a slight physical strain from the attack. That's what it felt like to her at least, an attack, but she decided she would ask him why once more. She was sure Ron would never actually attack her. Right?

"No," Ron said reassuringly. He pointed at the wound on his chest. "Do you think I *wanted* to do this?" He did. But of course he would never admit that. "It was the only way. The Borg are gone and now we're safe." He then let out a dull, labored sigh, the sole augmented lung he had left not as well suited at conveying such emotion. "But for how long I don't know. Everything's shot. I don't even know what's functioning and what's not. I'll need to check everything manually."

"Just... let me know if there's any way I can help," she said quietly as she turned herself back towards the forward viewport. She didn't say another word as she stared out at the stars in front of her. It didn't take long for her thoughts to turn to the worst. *Lost in space...*

Flying Bricks

Shuttlebay, USS Portland

After the briefing

Authors: Kahnir Dai

"There, that ought to do it," Kahnir said as he finished putting on the last piece. The big rock sitting on the deck of the shuttlebay didn't look a thing like the shuttle it had been a couple of hours ago. The pilot stood back with a proud grin on his face while others standing nearby had various looks of disbelief on their faces. A lot of them were thinking the same thing all at once, which was pretty easy for Kahnir to pick up on even without rooting around in their heads. *Can this thing even fly?*

"You've got to be kidding me," Ensign Jackson Mallory said. There was a hint of scorn in his tone and he turned a hard-eyed gaze on his new superior. That was where a lot of the tension was coming from, and the human pilot had plenty of that. He'd been placed into the ACFCO position while this upstart right of the Academy was given the command of *his* department.

"Naw, no joke, but I know some good ones if you like," Kahnir said with a quick wink. He ignored the scorn, the tension. It was understandable that Mallory might be upset, that any of the other pilots standing there would be as well. To have to address it over and over again each time it came up would get Kahnir nowhere. Instead he had to show this team, his team, that not only did he know what he was doing but that he'd be a good leader to them. That would only come in time. "I know what you're thinking. Hmm, bad choice of words maybe. I'm not in your head. But trust me, this is going to work."

They'd spent the better part of two hours turning the shuttle into what could only be described as a small asteroid. That was after they rooted around in her guts and pulled out a lot of 'unnecessary' systems. Lowered emissions made the shuttle hard to detect, and the replicated rocks that had been

attached all over the hull would make it register just like any other asteroid that had somewhat high levels of sensor reflecting ore. The plan was to have the shuttles available for any sort of stealth mission that Captain Alenis might need. Why it hadn't actually been ordered for their department, Kahnir figured he...how did the humans put it back at the Academy? Kill two birds with one stone. Such a violent metaphor.

Having the shuttle available would give the captain more options to her as they went up against the greatest threat the Federation had ever faced. It might just sit here this whole mission, looking funny, but then again maybe not. The shuttle was basically a pair of engines, life support, passive scanners, and a transporter now. And ugly. The other reason he'd done this was to get him and the other pilots working directly with each other. Ensign Bott had the helm right now on the bridge, which left Kahnir with Mallory, Steel, and the shuttlebay operations team. They had to start somewhere.

"It's enough that it just might," Steel agreed slowly, obviously not liking agreeing with Kahnir very much. She had her arms crossed over her chest as she looked at their handiwork. "The Borg aren't going to look twice at an asteroid, or so we hope. They have navigational shields, same as us, that would bounce this thing away from them if it got too close. But it *can* get within transporter range, I was able to boost the targeting scanner efficiency."

"That's great, Steel," Kahnir said, and turned his head to her as he gave out the compliment. The Betazoid could see her trying to decide whether to be pleased by it, or offended. He hurried on. "Alright, so now that we have one more Type 7 shuttle. Things should go a lot quicker, now that we know what we're doing."

"Wait, what?" Mallory asked, sounding stunned and angry. "You want us to make *another* of these death traps?"

"Well, yeah," Kahnir said, giving Mallory a look like he didn't understand why they wouldn't. "If one of these shuttles comes in handy, let's say for sneaking a team onto a Borg ship, or for pulling people out. Two of the shuttles would be even better." Without explaining himself further, knowing that Mallory would obey for the sake of regulations, Kahnir walked easily over towards the poor, hapless shuttlecraft. The dear thing was about to get her innards pulled out and made to be just about the ugliest shuttle in the history of shuttles.

Mallory stood there and watched, incredulous, as Steel and the others went right behind the green ensign. Then with a rueful shake of his head, he went to join them. "These things are going to fly like bricks," Mallory muttered under his breath.

Holo-Meru at the Holo-Movies
Holodeck Two, USS Portland
MD -02

Authors: Holo-Meru (played by Alenis Meru), Jason Beauvoir, Coln Jena (played by Jason Beauvoir)

In a steamy room made of wood from the Bajoran Karal tree, the hologram known as Alenis Meru sat there, meditating as sweat began to form on her holographic skin. She had been doing a lot of meditating lately, but a traditional Bajoran sauna was a welcome change from her usual surroundings. Being cooped up in just the few rooms on the ship with holo-emitters, she treasured whatever holodeck time she could get, if only because it provided her with a rare change of scenery.

But, she had evidently been enjoying it a little too much, as she had been interrupted by the whoosh

of the holodeck door opening, signifying that it was someone else's turn. Quickly covering herself with a towel, she peered through the steam to see two familiar faces.

"Jason?" she asked. "Jena? I'm sorry, did I go over my allotted time?"

Seeing Holo-Meru dressed in only a towel, Jason averted his eyes and blushed. "Yes, but we can give you a little time to get dressed and such." He said as he and Jena headed for the door.

"Thank you," replied the hologram, offering Jason a little smile. "Computer, change attire, Meru Hotel Seven." With a flash of light, she instantaneously changed her clothes, trading the towel for a sophisticated ensemble featuring a maroon leather jacket and a black beret. "I've had a lot of time on my hands, so I've been playing around with my fashion choices," she admitted a little sheepishly.

Turning back Jena said. "We were just going to see a movie, you can join us if you want, can't she Dad?"

"I have no objections." Jason replied.

The hologram blushed slightly. "Are you sure? I don't want to be a third wheel..."

"Of course we're sure, ain't we Dad?" Jena said noticing her father had become a shy teenager.

"Yes, the more the merrier." Jason said rather lamely.

The hologram paused for a moment to consider the offer. She wasn't sure whether Jason's claimed lack of objections was genuine, but she couldn't say no to Jena. "What are we watching?" she asked, before offering Jason a slightly nervous smile.

"Gulliver's Travels, my father read the story to me when I was a child, it made me want to be a scientist and explorer." Jason told her joyfully.

"I haven't seen or read it, but I checked the description in the database, and it says that it is an amusing satire of 18th European satire." Jena said.

"Fascinating," mused Meru. Growing up on Earth, she was vaguely familiar with human culture, and while she hadn't read it before, she was vaguely familiar with the story. It seemed to parallel a lot of Bajoran folk tales involving long journeys and fantastical lands. She looked down at Jena. "Shall I replicate some popcorn?"

Jena smiled "Of course, you can't watch a movie without popcorn." Then a realisation hit her. "But what about you, Meru, you don't eat?"

"Only holographic food, unfortunately," replied Meru, blushing slightly. Her program was based on one of the most advanced holo-matrices of its time. It was Zimmerman's labour of love, and as such, and subroutines for all five senses. "Though, I think Lieutenant Kallan needs to recalibrate my taste subroutines. For some reason, everything seems to have a strange fishy taste. Except for fish."

"That's odd." Jena said with a quizzical raised eye brow. "But I'm sure Marcus would help."

"Marcus, is it, now, what happened to Lieutenant Kallan?" Jason teased.

"Well, Marcus is his name." Jena said a little embarrassed.

"I hear Nikki calls him Protein Cube..." replied the hologram. She had to admit, even though Marcus was kind of difficult to get along with when she was first activated, he had grown on her a bit, and the sardonic barbs which they would shoot at each other had grown to be based on a grudging affection rather than disdain. "...among other things. Anyways, if you get the theater ready, I'll replicate some popcorn." A wicked grin appeared on the hologram's face. "What would you like for toppings, butter, or Ashalla-style Bajoran hot sauce?"

"Umm hot sauce for me, please." Jena said.

"Computer create a picture theatre, USA, Earth, Circa late 20th century." Jason ordered.

The room around them changed and they found themselves in the lobby of a theatre with a refreshment bar in one corner and the double doors to the theatre proper in front of them.

Leaving the two of them to their own devices, Meru walked over to the refreshment bar for some snacks...

"Dad, I'm glad you invited Meru, I really like her." Jena said.

"Me too, Jena." Jason said with a smile.

"All right, three bags of popcorn -- with Ashalla style hot sauce flavouring -- three large sodas, and some jumja candies," called out holo-Meru as she returned, delicately balancing the snacks in her outstretched arms. Two of the orders were replicated, while the third was holographic, a subtle difference, but one which allowed Meru to at least enjoy the taste and texture of the popcorn, so long as her taste subroutines weren't too far out of wack. "Let's take our seats."

"After you." Jason said holding the door open for Meru and Jena.

As they made their way to the seat, carrying their popcorn and drinks, the lights of the theatre began to dim. Meru and Jena took their seats besides each other. After getting set up with her snacks on her lap and drink in the cupholder, Alenis looked up at the holographic stage, only to realize that they had made the mistake of sitting behind a couple of Andorians. "Computer," she whispered, "reduce the height of the audience members in seats 9F and 9G by thirty centimeters. And remove their antennae."

Jason joined the others, took his seat and said. "Computer play Gulliver's Travels, by Jonathan Swift." The theatre darkened and the movie started.

While the hologram was enthralled with the movie and the fascinating story in front of her, her eyes glanced over for a moment towards Jason and found themselves lost there. Though they had not necessarily started on the best of terms, he was a handsome man, and the way he took care of Jena showed that he was a man of integrity.

Jason sensed Meru's eyes on him and turned to give her what he hoped was a reassuring smile, but probably came off as nervous.

Jena seeing what was going on, just rolled her eyes. Adults she thought.

Once the movie was over, Jena sighed. "Meru, Jason stop 'making eyes' at each other. It's obvious you like each other, why don't you just tell each other how you feel and then you can progress from

there?"

The hologram blushed. Jena was nothing if not observant. Was it really that obvious? "Ummmm... Jason, you go first," she said quickly, pushing the ball into his court.

"I care about you, Meru, I also find you physically attractive and wish to spend time with you." Jason said. He knew quite a few languages, but now he was having trouble even forming coherent sentences.

"Even though I'm..." Meru paused for a moment, also having difficulty expressing herself. "You know, a hologram?"

"Yes," Jason said. "I like you for you, Meru, the fact that you're not flesh and blood is of little concern to me."

A tear of joy came to Meru's eye. After the limbo she had gone through -- the tests on her program, the endless discussions with Marcus and others, and the uncertainty about whether or not she was even a real person -- just being told that was all she wanted to hear. She stepped forward and took him by the hand, staring into his eyes. "I... I really like you too, Jason."

Jason smiled and squeezed her hand gently.

"Kiss her already." Jena said.

Meru glanced over at Jena and then back towards Jason. "You heard your daughter..." she said, before closing her eyes and puckering her lips slightly.

Not waiting to be asked twice, Jason placed a supporting hand in the small of her back and then leaned in. As their lips touched the Science Officer felt a charge of electricity run through his body.

Wrapping her arms around Jason, Meru simply savoured the moment. After they broke apart, she opened her eyes and smiled at Jason and then looked over at his daughter, staring up at them with her hands on her hips. "Jena," said the hologram, "why don't you run on down to the mess hall and get yourself a jumja stick?"

"Yes, ma'am." Jena said with smile. Happy for both them as she left the holodeck.

by **Sera Williams**

Last Meal Before Battle

Mess Hall - Deck 6

Prior to Arrival at Nebula

Authors: Sera Williams and Marcus Kallan

Sera sat at her table, spoon in hand. She ignored the sneers from those crewmen who were pointing at her uniform, why couldn't they understand that she was doing all she could to keep the ship safe? Before her laid a spread of food consisting of a clam chowder breadbowl to remind her of her home in San Francisco, an ice cream sundae with all of the toppings, a loaded cheeseburger with fries, and a cup of whatever a soft drink alternative that had been programmed into the replicator. Normally, she wouldn't have eaten half of what was before her, but she had never been aboard a starship on its way to almost certain doom. Instead of eating, she could only peer through the transparent aluminum window, into the blackness of space. She watched the warp lines appear then fade,

drawing the Portland ever closer to the Borg infested nebula.

At some point, an overtired Marcus toddled into the mess, looking as if he'd been up for hours. He looked a similar pallid complexion, dark circles under his eyes, and mild disarray to his hair much like how he looked when he was first analyzing the Meru hologram on assignment by Admiral Washington. Now, he wore Operations gold instead of Sciences blue, but the look was the same. He ordered his usual from the replicator: an assortment of food cubes and a nutrient drink. As he was about to find a place to sit, he stopped, regarding a pair of gossiping officers.

"Do you see that uniform? She looks like some kind of self-important jerk from Intelligence," one officer said.

"I know!" Exclaimed the other. "I hear Commander Shras dresses up all of his female subordinates that way."

"Hey. You two morons," Marcus called out, getting the two officers' attention, and the attention of a few others by the serving area. "It's probably not smart to disrespect your chief engineer. You know, the person who makes sure a seven billion gigawatt warp core doesn't cook off and fry us. And ensures that inertial stabilizers don't turn us into a thick goop plastered against a bulkhead during a sudden deceleration. Shut your pie hole."

This just precipitated eye rolling, and the gossip continued, albeit far more hushed than before. And Marcus got a few nods of appreciation from the crowd. Glaring after the aforementioned jerks, Marcus headed over to where Sera was having her feast. "What a bunch of jerks," he said, sitting across from her.

Sera shrugged off the comments as she said, "Thanks for shutting them up." She smiled, or was it smirked, a bit as she moved her head to the side, letting Marcus get a better look at the bruise on her forehead just under the hairline. "Words may never hurt, but flying PADDs do," she half joked, referring to the brawl in Engineering a couple of days ago.

"I can't believe the tension on this ship," Marcus sighed, pushing his colorful food cubes around. "No excuse for barbaric behavior like that."

She looked down at Marcus' plate, then continued, "On the Eve of battle, still sticking to your protein cubes?"

"I can't eat anything flavorful, so I stick to nutrition. It was good enough for last century Starfleet, so it's good enough for me," he explained, mirroring her smirk. He regarded her meal. "And what's your excuse? You're eating for two, or you're being executed tomorrow, I can't tell which. For your sake, I hope it's the latter, because the only person you've been hanging around with lately is that blue buffoon."

"Wouldn't that get the rumor mill going?" Sera said with a cringe. She looked down at her spread of food, then answered, "Could be both, we will see if all of the work on the Dark Energy Reactor was worth it when it goes live, and it's going to be a good day or..." Sera let the last part of the sentence left unspoken.

She sat back in her chair and yawned, she must not have known how tired she really was. She had worked almost non-stop ever since the crew came aboard. She had been putting all of her energy into the new experiment, keeping two departments from going to war, and teaching as many of the ship's crew as possible about the new reactor. Who knew life on an 80 year old starship could be so...

busy?

Marcus shrugged. "No point being fearful about something you can't control," he said, although it didn't sound too convincing. "Feh," he uttered, nudging his plate away. "I'm pretty sure I'd be retching in Sickbay if I ate, anyway. Can't be puking your guts out when you have a ship to hold together."

He looked up at Sera, noting her exhaustion. He suddenly felt his own coming crashing down on him, or maybe it was sympathy for the stress his shipmate was going through. He rolled his lanky shoulders back and winced.

Sera responded while using her hands as a mock scale, "Retching in Sickbay, paying a visit to the Borg, comfortable biobed, keeping the crews from tearing each other apart."

"You're right, this will be the first time I've been in ship-to-ship battle if things go bad," she added. She pushed her own meal to the side, no longer very hungry.

"I'm not helping, am I," Marcus observed with a sigh. Instead, he turned to look out the window, warp field streaks trailing behind the Portland.

"It's alright," Sera said as she forced a bit of a smile. She took a look at the starlines outside, then closed her eyes a bit to listen to the ship's hum. She had almost gotten to the point where she could hear various misalignments through the sounds coming from the hull. She turned back to Marcus' food as she tried to joke, "At least your diet won't change much if we get assimilated."

"Synthesizing my nutrients instead of eating? Sounds like heaven," Marcus responded, finding himself smirking at the shared joke.

"The entire crew acting as one, a full eight-hour sleep cycle, now that you mention it, it doesn't sound half bad," Sera morbidly joked, her mood slowly beginning to improve. With a shrug, she asked, "What is it about first missions? My first mission saw the Captain shot, then come back. Yours involves a visit with the Borg."

"This is actually fascinating for me," Marcus replied matter-of-factly. "I've never been close to a species I've spent a considerable amount of my adult life studying from afar. It's too bad we still don't have the ability to study them closely." His left hand began to fidget, left thumb rubbing underneath the fingers of that hand in a subconscious, irritable way. Almost like a tic.

Sera nodded towards Marcus' left hand. With a look of concern, she asked, "Everything ok?"

"Huh?" Marcus looked at his own hand, and then hid it beneath the table as if that made everything go away. "Yeah, why?"

Preferring not to create more conflict, Sera decided to let it go. It was probably just a nervous tick or something that he was sensitive about. Instead, she tried for a save, "Just asking. Everyone seems to be doing better than I would've expected."

"Starfleet. We're tough stuff." Probably the most positive or optimistic thing to come out of Marcus' mouth in a long time. He regarded his food, popped a cube into his mouth, and gathered his tray. "There. That's enough food for 24 hours. Going to occupy my brainmeats and go tinker down in Engineering... any objections?"

Sera playfully replied, "Just don't mess anything up down there. Think you can find your way?"

"Get some rest, Lieutenant," came Marcus' noncommittal answer. As he left, he spared one quick look back at Sera, before giving a quick shake of his head and heading out of the mess.

Back to school

Holodeck 1, USS Portland

A few hours after the briefing

Authors: Sera Williams, Marcus Kallan, Kahnir Dai, Shras th'Karath (played by Alenis Meru)

Sera stepped into Holodeck 1. The black floor with the yellow lines that created a square pattern also reminded her the the Miranda-class was an old ship, all ships made in the last 20 years had an upgraded holomatrix. "Computer, activate program Shras-Williams-Alpha," she said. The computer gave the affirmative tone.

The square pattern quickly distorted and was replaced with a simulation of the bridge. Sera had to admit that she preferred the sterile and bright environment of the 2280s to the dark layouts of the present. She ran a finger over the display on the engineering console as she sat at the station awaiting Marcus and Kahnir. She hoped that this would be less confrontational than this experimnt has shown to be.

Marcus showed up on time, although when he entered, his first words were, "Program Shras-Williams-Alpha is in progress. Do you wish to enter? No, not really. Had you said, 'Williams-Risa-Alpha', then I'd be quite happy to enter." His sarcasm having no limits, Marcus looked around. "So what's this about?"

"This," said Shras, raising a finger in the air as he walked through the doors, "is our crash course on the dark energy reactor, since apparently in her infinite wisdom, your captain has decided to put Starfleet officers unfamiliar with the advanced theoretical physics of the dark energy reactor in charge, and abandon a controlled test for a romp into a Borg-infested nebula." He looked over at Sera, who had almost earned his grudging respect with the speed at which she got caught up on the dark energy systems. "Lieutenant Williams, are we ready to start, or do we have any more guests?"

"Oh, this should be good," Marcus said with a smirk, folding his arms across his chest and leaning against a holographic console.

"We can go ahead and start. Ensign Dai was scheduled to be here, but most of the beginning won't pertain to his duties," Sera replied to Shras. She had wanted to welcome Marcus, but knew Shras would have some kind of comment about this not being a social occasion. "Lt. Kallan, take your station."

As she waited on Marcus to walk to the Operation console, Sera entered a few commands into the console that would have activated the Dark Energy reactor. The readings on her console began to react to the new energy as she created a Warp Bubble, per Marcus' advice in their meeting on the holodeck.

Marcus headed over to the operations position at the fore of the bridge well and sat, logging in and setting up his display in a way he preferred. "May I ask what are objectives are, sir?" Clearly meaning Sera, but ambiguous enough such that any senior officer could jump in and answer.

"Not to blow up the ship," Sera quipped. She was sure Shras would take the joke to be a serious

answer, as it would be a real answer that he might have given. To clarify, Sera turned to Marcus and added, "You'll notice that a few of the ship's systems have added stress. The Dark Energy Reactor is a heavy power drain, but if notice what happens when you polarize the EPS conduits."

"Reactor, heavy power drain, things you shouldn't hear in the same sentence when sitting at an operations console. Right." Marcus began familiarizing himself with the baseline readings from the simulation.

The holodeck doors opened once again, and one could only say that Kahnir sauntered in. He look completely untroubled, not in a hurry. His face lit up with a smile as he saw the others, perhaps just a little maliciously at seeing Shras there. Oh, how he would look forward to flinging little barbs the Andorian's way, even better should they be taken the wrong way as it had during the briefing. This one was far too full of himself.

"Hellooo," Kahnir drawled as he sauntered over to the helm and took a seat. Somehow, he even made sitting look as lazy as his walk had been. "Nice to see you, sirs."

"Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to join us," replied Shras, his tone dripping with sarcasm and disdain. "You must be Ensign Dai. Funny, I would have suspected a department head entrusted with flying a ship outfitted with the most advanced technology in the fleet into a Borg-infested nebula to be a little more... mature." He sighed deeply and shook his head. Thoughts of making peace with his impending death came to mind. He would make a point of updating his will after this little course. "But I suppose this is par for the course on this flying asylum."

"Oh, it's my pleasure, sir," Kahnir said, looking back over his shoulder to give the Andorian a big grin. "The chance to work with you especially is an honour." It sounded perfectly honest, though to the others in the room who did not have egos the size of the rings of Saturn, it was likely quite obvious what the pilot was up to. He seemed to preen under the rest of what had been said. "Youth is good for the crazy task we have in front of us. And thanks for noticing. Wouldn't want to have your mature pilot have a heart attack out of sudden fear. I'm sure you could agree that would be a bad idea, sir?"

Sera turned back to her display to hide her smile. Kahnir had been on her Rigel Cup winning team from about a year ago, so she already knew a bit of what to expect. Turning back to the group gathered in the holo-bridge, Sera said, "The controls will handle a bit differently with the new reactor activated. It won't be as forgiving as the Valkyries we flew at the Academy."

"Actually, if the stabilizers don't explode and turn us all into a barrel of Sir Isaac Newton's snot," Marcus opines while fiddling with his console. "The ride ought to be pretty smooth, if we actually generate a successful quantum subspace manifold..." He glanced at Shras.

Shras glared back at Marcus. "Are you questioning my ability to generate a quantum subspace manifold?" he asked, chortling at the absurdity of some junior officer whose main experience was with fiddling with holograms daring to question his abilities. "That is child's play," he replied with a wave of the hand.

"Until solanogen-based life forms, or worse, detect our incursion into their tertiary band of subspace and try to abduct us," Marcus comments offhand, tapping at his console. "Systems show green, Captain," he finished with, clearly meaning he was deferring to "Captain" Williams.

Kahnir had finished toying with his controls and spoke up, "My that's a whole lot of power. How are the EPS relays holding so much without blowing out and burning us all to a cinder with lovely hot plasma?" He blinked a few times at Shras and Sera, glancing back over his shoulder again. "Oh, right,

helm is ready to respond, though I have to say I'm afraid to push the 'go' button with this much juice."

"We've built some redundancies in the system to compensate. The extra energy will be routed back through the generators so they don't run on the warp core. What's left over will be divided into the integrity field, deflector array, and other systems." She stopped short of Shras' usual condescension of a ship built last century, though even Sera worried about the ship. All simulations ended with almost perfect results, she had to hand it to Shras. He did know what he was talking about.

"I have supervised Lieutenant Williams' work on the systems integration," chimed in Shras. "I must admit, she is... competent." The word came out of his mouth slowly and grudgingly; it was not a compliment that he gave out often. Especially not while he was in the spacefaring hell known as the USS Portland. "I have no doubts that the systems will function without overloading; Ms. Williams here made sure of that. So long as this bucket of bolts doesn't fly apart from the g-forces..."

"Like I said," Marcus quipped. "Sir Isaac Newton is a bitch."

"Quite..." agreed Shras.

"I swear, no sudden turns," Kahn'r promised. "We'll just let the inertial dampeners deal with only our forward momentum. Until you say we're ready for more, sir. We'll follow your lead, of course. I hope to earn the competent title as well!" There seemed to be genuine enthusiasm in his voice. The Betazoid was certainly smiling at his controls broadly enough.

Shras simply harumphed at Kahn'r's excitement. "Perhaps if you can manage to keep the Portland out of trouble," he replied in a dismissive tone.

Tinkering in Crawlspace

When: MD2, in the wee hours before the Nebula

Where: Somewhere between decks near Engineering

Who: Lt JG Marcus Kallan and Ens Kahn'r Dai

In the hours before a battle, a ship's Captain often takes a tour of all decks to bolster morale and ensure the ship is in top fighting condition.

And in the case of not-Captain Lieutenant Marcus Kallan, one tours the Jeffries' tubes and crawlspaces and service walkways between decks, tweaking this system and tinkering with that. Anything to get a fraction of a percent boost on the conventional hardware installed in the Portland, Marcus has touched in the past ten hours. Mildly grimy, the ship's new chief operations officer moved through the ship's systems like a Cardassian vole sniffing out a piece of cheese.

"Ow!" There was a pained shout from further along the tube, and then a clatter of metal on metal. "Aw, come on. I thought I had you. I'm not going to let you go back that easily." Was it a horrible abduction taking place in the bowels of the ship? Or some secret tryst between two lovers before a battle in an interesting place for such things? Nothing quite so exciting. Kahn'r's large frame looked like it almost wouldn't fit inside the cramped space and he had his arms up to his elbows in circuitry at the moment, aiming a hyperspanner at a specific spot. "Oh yeah, I got you now..."

Maybe talking to the wall like that wasn't a good sign.

Marcus peered around the corner. "Dai? Is that you?" He didn't really get a chance to meet or talk

with the flight officer yet, so he only really knew his face and the sound of his voice. "I didn't think anyone else was working in this section so late. What are you doing?"

"Ow!" came again as Kahn timer jumped and hit his head on the top of the tube. He was wincing as he turned as best he could to see who was approaching. "Oh, uh, Lieutenant. Hi there. How you doin'?" The pilot glanced back at the work he was up to and offered his superior a grin. "Well, you see, the helm is getting so much power now that I wanted to see if I could get the command processors to react a bit more quickly too. You know, to get as much benefit as we can out of it. What are you doing up?" Then belatedly. "Sir?"

Marcus waved off the "sir". "Don't worry about formality, Dai. Not when the rest can't hear us. I'm not a stickler for rank except in front of the command staff, when it matters." He glanced down the space where Kahn timer was working. "Secondary processors won't get you anything except backup processing." He indicated with the calibrator wand he was holding, towards another tight crawlspace. "They moved the primaries over there during the last refit. This ship's guts are strung every which way... it's a marvel Sera hasn't lost her mind yet." Meaning the ship's chief engineer, of course.

The pilot grinned when Marcus said he could drop the formalities; sometimes Kahn timer had a little bit of difficulty with remembering that. Then his eyes tracked to where the Ops officer was pointing. The smile slid from his face. "Novas," he said a bit like a curse. "I spent so much time studying a Miranda Class' specs. I guess I didn't think to see if there was anything different about the Portland." Kahn timer double checked to make sure he hadn't ruined anything - he could handle the systems for the helm but outside of that he was no engineer - then put the covering panel back in place. "Maybe I should have asked first," and the smile was back. "Am I in your way, Kallan?"

"No," came Marcus' simple reply, as he finished what he was doing at the particular junction and covered up, too. He simply rested his back against the crawlspace wall and let Dai snake by to where he had to be. Not apparently one for words, Marcus examined his hands, and then wiped them on his uniform pant leg.

It took a bit of doing, to make sure he didn't flatten Lieutenant Kallan to one side of the tube. The Betazoid seemed to find it rather amusing by the expression on his face as he wormed his way through the tight squeeze to get both himself and his toolkit situated. "Thanks. So you never answered my question." Kahn timer pulled off the panel in front of him and peered inside at the processors. "Hmm," came a rather doubtful noise. A moment later Kahn timer had a tricorder out and was scanning. "Why are you up so late yourself?"

"Can't sleep, going to die tomorrow... you know, the usual stuff," Marcus replied, pulling his uniform jacket flat with a hint of irritation. Although his body language told everything, Kahn timer could easily sense Marcus' discomfort when it came to physical contact in general. And his overwhelming combined giddiness and anxiety of the potential to come face-to-face with the Borg is as telepathically clear as day. He peered at Kahn timer. "Are you actually rated to work in this section, Ensign? I don't recall seeing an engineering certification attached to your billet."

"Certification seemed like such a bother while at the Academy," Kahn timer said as he folded up his tricorder and to work. It was plain to see that he was making very minute alterations. "But I did pay attention in Basic Engineering." That likely wouldn't do much for putting minds at ease but so far Kahn timer hadn't done anything bad; he might actually be getting just a few milliseconds of increase out of the controls. "You're pretty noisy, you know?" Kahn timer asked as he directed a hyperspanner into the systems he'd revealed. "I'm usually pretty good at ignoring everyone, Kallan, but that's a little hard right now."

"Noisy?" Marcus' peer turned into a glare. "No offense, Ensign, but I was here first." He accidentally bumped his engineering tool against some housing which caused a harmless, albeit loud, spark. "Damn!" He gave three hard whacks against the housing with said tool, tossed it at his feet in frustration, and then gave an exasperated and tired sigh, wiping his face with both hands.

Black eyes turned to look over his shoulder at the other man. "Are you okay?" It was asked with typical Betazoid compassion, obviously caring deeply about another without reservation but with a politeness to it as well that seemed to say that the offer could be taken or not without insult.

"No," Marcus suddenly pointed at Kahn. "No, I know that question and I know that look. Don't go all Betazoid on me." Kahn could easily sense how frayed Marcus was. And how he desperately needed to open up to someone.

"Gonna have to disappoint, Lieutenant, can't change my race just 'cause you ordered it." Kahn said as he set down his tool and shifted around once more till he was leaning a bit more comfortably; the pilot ignored the work he'd set out to do for now. This way he could look at Marcus Kallan easier, and unwittingly turn the full weight of his black-eyed, sympathetic gaze on the other man. Kallan would realize just how damned persistent this young man could be.

"This is about the Borg. I can sense that and you already know it. What is it about them that's doing this to you?" Now it wasn't just his eyes that expressed a tender willingness to help but even his voice and somehow his large frame that was folded up so awkwardly in the Jeffries tube.

Marcus fumed quietly, glaring at Kahn for what seemed like ten seconds. "Yes, it's the Borg," he breathed. "I've spent my adult life studying every scrap of data available about them. I wrote my thesis on Borg command pathways and access levels and how their data structures can be used to improve modern neuro-gel LCARS efficiency by over 200%. I am a subject matter expert." He swallowed, hard. "They also killed my family at Wolf 359."

Kahn's insides twisted. It was no wonder that the man was so conflicted. This had been going on for years, all the way back to that horrible battle. Kahn hadn't even been born yet, but of course he'd heard the stories. The Betazoid didn't probe into the other's mind as he could sense enough. He knew that there must be such a wellspring of pain and obsession that had built up over the past twenty-five years. "So what are you going to do about it?" Kahn asked, sounding blunt.

"Do my duty. There's nothing else to do," Marcus replied, looking for the dropped hyperspanner. "No amount of heroism or shed tears will make the Borg care about how I feel." He dragged the tool out from an awkward position with the tip of his boot. "It's just like... well, I don't know if it's just like... but confronting a murderer of a loved one for the first time."

"That sounds about right to me. They took your family from you, and now here you are twenty-five years later and after all this time not only do you have to face them but they are just as dangerous as ever." Kahn continued to stare but somehow his look had turned even more compassionate now. "And it's not about how the Borg feel, but how you feel. That's what I meant when I asked: Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine. Don't worry, I'm not about to crack or anything." Picking up the offending hyperspanner, Marcus looked back towards Kahn. "What did old Earth call it? 'Go postal?'" He waved the hyperspanner dismissively. "I'm just overtired, my guts hate me, and we're facing certain doom. I'll be fine. Although there's some appeal to having my nutritional needs replaced by a Borg nutrient synthesizer..."

"Not funny, sir," Kahnir said with a frown. "Are you joking about all this because you have to laugh at it to deal with it, or are you doing it because you don't want to face up to what this really means for you? This is it, your big moment, you're about to face the Borg. All those years studying them and hating them..." The Betazoid was staying out of Kellan's head so he was taking a shot in the dark as much as anyone else might, but he wondered how he'd feel in the other man's boots. "Are you afraid of things changing Marcus?"

"You can't hate a species for the actions of a few," Marcus explained, shaking his head. "At least, that's what I've worked out with my therapists over the years. I could. I really could. Especially when you understand them on a fundamental level like I do. Their thoughts are one. Their actions are one." He regarded the hyperspanner, and began putting away his tools.

"But I don't hate the Borg, Ensign. I hate what they made me into."

Kahnir brightened, his frown turning into a smile, "Well, that's easy then!" The young man shifted again, trying to get comfortable as he talked. An odd place to have such a conversation, he thought. And an odd response probably. "I mean this all seems...poetic? I guess, yeah. You're about to come full circle and what you learned and experienced is going to come into play. When this is all over, have you given a thought to learning something else? Being someone new?"

"Evolve towards perfection," Marcus muttered, standing up after closing his toolkit. "Try not to work too late. We've a big mission tomorrow." And he turned halfway so that he could navigate down the crawlspace without bumping into any protruding electronics.

"That's the spirit!" Kahnir called out at Kellan's retreating form, sounding far too chipper for the late hour. He turned once more to his task but his smile slid from his face after a moment. They were going up against the Borg tomorrow! "Hey, Lieutenant, we're going to be okay right?" Kahnir glanced down the tube again but by then Marcus was gone.

Class is in session...

Holodeck 1

Prior to Arrival at Nebula

Authors: Sera Williams, Brad Silverton, Jason Beauvoir, and Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru)

Sera sat in the familiar chair next to the Engineering console on the bridge. She had taught more of these classes than she could count. While she waited on the latest batch of crewmen, she took a moment to relax. Sera had been pushed and pulled in every direction, it had been a few days since her last decent night's rest.

The Captain was right, this class was very important. If the crew knew how to handle the new system, the mission would be rather easy. If not, things were going to get bad rather quickly. Sera rubbed her face, trying to get the tiredness out of her eyes.

Nikki was the first to arrive. "Sera!" she exclaimed, bursting through the door. "Omigod, you look exhausted! Here, let me get you a coffee!" Before Sera could even say a word, Nikki was at the replicator. "Computer, two large caffe mochas. With whipped toppings. And caramel syrup. And cookie crumble."

As soon as the two overly sweet, highly caffeinated beverages appeared, Nikki quickly grabbed them and plopped one right in front of Sera. "You look tired. Is that jerkbag Shras driving you crazy yet?"

"He's driving me crazy and I don't even have to work with him." Jason said as he entered the room.

Dr Silverton was right behind Jason and added in, "Can we be more specific on who we are talking about because there are a couple people driving me crazy."

"Doctor!" exclaimed Nikki. "Thank god you're here! I had the most terrible headache this morning, and decided to consult the medical database. And you would be shocked -- SHOCKED -- at what I found. I don't know how it happened, but I think we have a ceti eel infestation on the ship! One of them must have crawled into my ear when I was sleeping! You have to find some way to get it out before it eats my brain! Please, Dr. Silverton, you're my only hope!"

Brad wasn't sure what to make of what was just said. "Um. Ah. I'm not sure its possible for an eel to hop out of its aquatic environment, wiggle down the hallway, access the door control and enter into your room. Let's not assume the worst at this point until we get you checked out but I promise you we'll do it right after this. Most brain parasites have to go through a growth and build up phase before reproducing into multiple...". It was at about that time Brad realized he probably shouldn't have said the last part.

"mm... mmmm... multiple?"

Sera took a sip of her overly caffeinated sugar coffee, debating letting Nikki continue her long list of perceived medical issues to the doctor. Deciding that the impending Borg encounter was only slightly more important than Nikki giving the doctor a migraine, Sera said, "With that, I think it's time to get to work. Ensign Barclay, I've programmed an Engineering console for you, and I've set up a secondary Science station for the Doctor. Lt. Beauvoir, take your Science station."

Sera tapped a few commands on her display. The holographic bridge began grew a bit darker and the hum of the ambient ship noises changed slightly, only perceivable to those with incredible hearing or engineers. "I've engaged the Dark Energy Reactor. Each of you should see an increase in power at your stations."

"I'm reading a steady increase in power, Lieutenant. Let's hope it remains steady." Jason reported. Then to Nikki he said. "Ensign Barclay, the Doctor is correct, conditions on board this ship are inhospitable to ceti eels, it's more likely to be a Zarhn borrowing beetle." He teased.

Nikki let out a nervous squeal. "We have a massive increase in power in engineering; it's almost too much. I don't think we can divert it all to our systems without blowing out half the EPS relays on the ship." She reached over and grabbing Brad's hand tightly, while looking up at Sera. "Please hurry," she mouthed a look of dread on her face.

"Maybe the Borg have some sort of cure? Maybe we can ask them," Sera joked, not able to resist.

"No!" exclaimed Nikki. "I'm not letting them put nanoprobes in my head! Doctor, please tell me there is some other way to get them out!"

Brad liked Sera's style and where this was going. "Well there are other ways yes but you have to admit that the Borg have some advanced medical methods beyond Starfleet. Just think of what a body filled with nanotechnology could do to combat viruses and parasites."

Getting back to business, Sera said, "Ok, I think it's time to ruin the fun with what we're here to do." She tapped a few more commands on her console. "The new reactor will not only increase our power

output, it will make us virtually invisible to sensors."

"Omigod, this is so awesome!" exclaimed Nikki as she stared down in amazement at her console. The power readings were off the charts, and in spite of all of that, they were surrounded by some sort of field rendering them practically undetectable. Seeing everyone glaring at her for seemingly siding with Shras, she continued nervously. "But... our warp core is pretty cool too," she added in a meek voice.

Curious Children...

Classroom, USS Portland

MD -04

Authors: Eilis Ross, Novia Yenn (played by Tyrlai Zade), Shras th'Zarath (played by Alenis Meru)

Once more, Shras th'Zarath found himself storming through the corridors of the USS Portland, this time on Deck Ten, and this time, clutching a little Trill girl by the ear. He kept up a quick pace, as he found that doing so prevented the little girl from resisting. Those tiny fists of fury started to hurt after being pummeled with them for minutes on end.

Storming into the classroom without so much as ringing the chime, he pulled Novia into the room and stared at the visibly shocked teacher and her pupils. "Ms. Ross!" he called out, interrupting her lesson, "is this one of your little brats?"

Novia yelped as she was dragged into the room. Her cat monkeys, previously enraptured by a shiny object in the back of the room scampered independently and very swiftly to high points, glaring at the man and hissing, claws extending as they readied to fight.

Novia glared and kicked him in the shin as hard as she could before Miss Ellis could see. "I was just walking by this mean mans collection of tubes and he lost his mind." Her eyes widened as she continued. "I think he's probably mentally unstable and we should call the talking doctor before he develops too many disorders of the brain."

"Mentally unstable? Why you little--"

Eilis was still trying to process and understanding what she was seeing, her hand had moved to the communication panel on her desk as she moved to her feet with anger flaring in her eyes. "Let go of her *now* or I will have you arrested for man handling a minor."

"Fine," replied Shras in his usual sneering tone, releasing his grip on Novia's ear. He didn't see what the big deal was; the little brat was lucky she wasn't an Andorian. When he misbehaved as a child, Shras' mother would grab him by the antenna, which was of course incredibly painful. "But it is her who should be arrested. Trespassing, espionage, attempted sabotage, high treason... these are all very serious crimes, little girl, ones which can get you locked up for a long time."

Eilis easily moved to step between the Andorian and her student as she sheltered the young girl from this new presence. "I'm not quite certain what it is that you are rambling about but your words are very dangerous...accusations such as those you speak of should not just be flung around the way you are doing so now. I will ask you to remove yourself from my classroom A-SAP."

Shras glared up at the teacher. How dare she get defensive? It was no wonder that Novia was such a brat if this was the sort of role model she had. Novia. Why, his mother, god rest her soul, would have slapped the blue off of him for sneaking around and playing with things that are clearly not toys. "I

suppose my work is too important to be interrupted by this... child's play," he said in a dismissive tone. "However, if I am to have to deal with the inconvenience of sharing a ship with a preschool, I'm going to have to insist that you have a conversation with these children and make sure something like this doesn't happen again. My experiments are not toys."

"Perhaps it would be a better idea to check your security? If your experiments are that important than surely a child shouldn't be able to slip into the area in which they are contained so easily?" Eilis couldn't explain it but there was something about this male which she didn't like; something which was setting off her defense instinct. She wasn't about to allow him to blame everything which went on on her children.

"Oh, I will be visiting security shortly, and will be having a word with them about the lax performance of their duties. Of course, the incompetence of the security department is par for the course on this ship; the only halfway competent person I've met so far is Lieutenant Williams." Shras paused and returned to the point he was making. "But until then, you will control these little brats and keep them from running amok on this ship."

That was the last straw for Eilis. "I will do no such thing!" she shouted. Given how well-developed Shras' social skills were, she decided to try using a technique that she had used on unruly children from time to time. "This is my classroom and I've already asked you to leave, so technically, you're trespassing right now. I'm going to start counting, and if you're still here by the time I get to five, I'm calling security to have you removed and thrown in the brig. One..."

"Well, I never--"

"Two..."

"This is--"

"Three..." Eilis glared into Shras' eyes.

It was at that moment that Shras realized that being thrown in the brig would seriously affect his research, and chasing little girls around the ship wasn't a productive use of his time or his genius. "Fine," he said as he pivoted towards the door and left in a harumph.

Eilis looked down at Novia and patted the little girl on the shoulder. "It's okay, Novia, the bad man is gone."

Left Behind...

Shuttle Bay 1, USS Portland

After the briefing

Authors: Eilis Ross, Tyrilai Zade & Novia Yenn (played by Tyrilai Zade)

"Life support systems... check. Cabin pressure... check. Auxiliary power unit... check." As Petty Officer Marek Brzowski ran over the checklist, he wondered if he drew the short straw or not with this assignment. On the one hand, he was going to be safe and sound at the starbase when the Portland flew into a Borg-infested nebula. While he would miss out on all the action, being assigned to this mission instead had no doubt greatly increased his life expectancy. On the other hand, he was not looking forward to being trapped in a shuttle with a bunch of precocious little children.

He wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead and refocused on his checklist trying as best he could to

block out the annoyance that was the gaggle of children. "Yaw controls, check... pitch controls, check..." But as he ran through the list, he was interrupted by a tug on his sleeve.

"Sir, I'm afraid we must wait. I was not permitted to return for the monkeys and they are too valuable to be left behind." Novia looked at him as sternly as she could muster.

"What!?" Merek looked over his shoulder for a moment. "No! No, no, no. Strap yourself in, we do not have time for monkeys." He shook his head and went back to the preflight displays. Borg filled nebula or Monkeys, the girl clearly needed a lesson or five on priorities. He finished the clear and began lift odd sequence as the exterior bay began opening for the shuttle, the soft glow of the atmospheric force field beyond shimmering into view. He took a look behind him to make sure everyone was in a seat and strapping in and gently rotated the shuttle towards the door.

Novia hurried through the corridor towards the turbolift. The shuttle was heading out but she was sure there would probably be another and once she got the cat-monkeys situated they would inquire as to how to go about securing seats. The lift doors opened and the tall, mean Trill lady stepped out. Novia knew the lady was certain to yell and scowl and summon the shuttle back and pack her up without the monkeys. She leaned against the wall and tried to be invisible.

Tyrlai, lost in her datapadd, glanced over at the child trying not to be noticed. "Hey kid, whatever you are doing, knock it off. I'm sure you have some place to be, so get to it."

Novia panicked for a second but managed to squeak out a perfectly serviceable lie. "I have to prepare my monkeys for the trip, miss."

Tyrlai motioned with her hand. "Well get to it."

Novia nodded and darted into the turbolift as quickly as she could.

Scouring the halls of the USS Portland, Eilis was tracking down her missing student. Just before takeoff she had done a quick head count and came up one short. How Novia managed to sneak off the shuttle undetected she didn't know, but she knew that it was up to her to find her quickly before the shuttle left.

Seeing a pair of furry little creatures darting around a corner, Eilis knew she was hot on the tail of the cat-monkeys and thus, more than likely, Novia. As she rounded the corner she came face to face with the little girl. "Novia!" she exclaimed. "What are you doing? We have to get back to the shuttle!"

"We can't leave them here, the Borg will eat them." Novia glared at the possibilities. She then glanced to her left where the monkeys were scampering about looking for an exit. Novia snapped instructions to her charges. "You two, here, now."

The two monkeys glared back at her, oddly enough slightly before the girl had spoken. and then scampered forward and up the Trill girl perching one on each shoulder.

"Okay, we're ready now."

Hurrying back to the shuttlebay with Novia and two cat-monkeys in tow, Eilis was almost dragging the little girl back to the corridor. But as she barged through the door into the shuttlebay, she froze in shock. The transport, the one that was supposed to take her, the children, and all the non-essential personnel to safety, was gone. She paused and took a deep breath as the reality sunk in. They had missed the transport, and now were flying straight into a Borg-infested nebula.

She turned towards the little girl. "Well, Novia, I guess we had better talk to the captain."

Novia frowned, the Captain was only recently returned from the dead and even though Novia was a scientist that was still creepy. The cat-monkeys chittered in alarm. "No, I don't think so." Novia whispered and followed the teacher.

Enter Ron and Jessica...

USS Portland

En route to the nebula

Authors: Captain Alenis Meru, Lieutenant Brad Silverton, Ensign Ronald Roberts, Ensign Jessica White (played by Ronald Roberts), Nurse Maria Hill (played by Alenis Meru)

En route to the nebula, Captain Alenis was on the bridge, dividing her attention between status reports and the PADD she was reading. She wanted to know everything she could about the dark energy reactor, and giving the senior staff some time to rest and study, she had brought the B-team aboard -- junior officers and enlisted crewmen -- to run the ship while en route.

"Captain, I'm detecting a faint distress signal, two six three mark seventeen," called out one of the operations crewmen. "Federation in origin, looks to be from a shuttlecraft."

"Let's hear it," replied Alenis, putting down her PADD.

The signal was automated, the broadcasters having given up days ago on actually having interaction with any other vessel. With the odds calculated at millions to one of ever hailing another ship they had put together a quick recording and left it to broadcast on its own. They certainly had more important matters to attend to on the shuttle than running a radio station. A female voice spoke as follows: "This is ensigns Jessica White and Ronald Roberts of the USS Forefront. Our ship was attacked along with the Nova Europa colony by the Borg. We are all that is left of the crew. If you find us dead, get those bastards." A quick blip of the screen and then: "This is ensigns..." The signal repeated itself.

Ensign Sulek, who was manning the Tactical Station, took a look at the readings of the domm signal, "Captain, it is an automated distress beacon. It is strongly advised that if we must approach, we raise our shields and prepare for a trap," he said with the famous Vulcan charm.

"It's not like the Borg to engage in that sort of trickery," replied Alenis. "But those are appropriate precautions regardless. How long will it take to divert course and pick them up?" asked Alenis. Their mission was important, but she also couldn't leave a ship in distress floating around in space.

The Vulcan tactical officer took a look at the signal and mentally calculated a course. "Captain, it would take ten minutes at maximum warp to reach the distress beacon from our current location."

"Alter course," replied Alenis.

"Aye, ma'am, altering course to intercept." Ensign Holloway replied from the helm station in her rich Yorkshire accent.

Meanwhile, on a shuttle adrift in space with no hope whatsoever of ever being found...

"Ow," Ron shouted as he grasped his shoulder tightly, nursing it after the surprisingly powerful punch he had just received from Jessica.

"Don't you ever say something like that again, Ron. Ever." Jess glared at Ron in a way she had never done before. He could tell she was genuinely hurt.

He sighed as he peered out of the shuttle's viewport towards no particular point. "Sorry, deah." It certainly may not have been the best of timing but Ron had thought it to be a moment of honesty when he said that the Borg were rather beautiful to him. It was his first time they had actually encountered them, and though they had barely escaped with their lives, losing the rest of the crew and the ship as they escaped, Ron couldn't help but comment on the conjured emotions he felt when he first laid eyes on the Borg sphere that had no doubt come to have them join the collective.

After a few minutes of uncomfortable silence Jessica broke it with a humorous comment, trying to lighten up what could be their last moments together. "Should have grabbed the beers," she said with a playful grin.

"Dead and gone," he said about their precious beverages. "Just like everyone else," Ron replied before turning his sights back to Jess. "Just like us."

"Don't make me hit you again, Ron," she continued in her upbeat tone. "We're going to be fine."

"I don't know what you mean by 'fine' but life support is sputtering out and most of our systems are non-functional. We'll be lucky if our distress beacon even reaches anyone's ears and the dilithium reserve is just about gone. No, Jess. We're screwed."

Jess's face saddened a bit. She knew he was right. "Dying cold and stranded in the darkness of space. Just like the song," she said with a half-hearted smirk. "I always thought we'd go out with a bang," she spoke, trailing off towards the end as a mischievous grin crossed her face. "Maybe we can, though. You know. Go out with a bang?"

"What do you mean," Ron questioned as he tried to read her expression. "Go out with a," he grinned widely at her with sudden realization. "Bang."

They were the best of buds and where they to describe it in an honest (and obviously cheesy) way 'love' would be one of the first words to come to mind. They were practically inseparable as friends but had never been able to synch up emotionally beyond that, at least not in Ron's eyes. Their physical interfaces, however, were very compatible.

"Well, it has been a while. I suppose if we've got the time," Ron spoke in jest as he pretended to look around for more pressing matters. "I don't suppose there'll be any interruptions..."

A private and exhilarating ten minutes later...

As the Portland dropped out of warp, a severely damaged shuttle appeared on screen. Alenis stared at it for a second, examining the damage. Plasma beam burns, gashes in the external plating, and a sputtering plasma leak made her wonder if anyone could have survived in the tumbling shuttlecraft for so long. "Hail them," she called out.

The Vulcan at Tactical attempted to hail the damaged shuttles, to no response. "Captain, there is no response. I have been broadcasting in all known languages."

"Scan for lifesigns," added Alenis, hoping that there was someone still alive. She didn't want to have diverted course for a simple repeating distress beacon.

Sulek activated the sensors from his tactical console and scanned the ship. "Captain, I am reading two lifeforms aboard the shuttle."

"Signal the good doctor; prepare to bring them aboard." Alenis paused for a moment. "Beam them directly to sickbay and then resume our previous course. Ensign Sulek, you have the conn. I'm going down to sickbay to welcome our guests aboard."

The Vulcan nodded as another junior officer replaced him at tactical. Sulek calmly sat in the Captain's chair, then pressed the comm button on the armrest. In a voice that was meant to be matter-of-fact but came out more condescending, Sulek said, "Bridge to Sickbay, make preparations for two sentients who will be arriving soon."

Sickbay, USS Portland

Brad responded to the bridge's hail. "Understood captain. We're ready."

As the two castaways began to materialize in the sickbay of the USS Portland their caught-off-guard conversation began to form along with their bodies. "Well that feels different... Wait! What's?"

"Shit! Transporter!"

...

Two bare bodies laying on the pristine floor of a ship's sickbay. It was certainly not an unheard of event, but these two were laid out in a way that would make a Deltan blush. They both quickly scrambled to their feet and spared no time in an attempting modesty, covering the questionable portions of their bodies as these new onlookers stood before them.

Surprise and excitement quickly formed on their faces as Starfleet attire and equipment filled their eyes. Ron wasted no time in addressing the most important request that had instantly come to his mind. "I'm gonna need my arm, if that's not too much trouble!" It was immediately obvious what he meant. Where a right appendage would have been there was a large section of the shoulder missing with an implanted apparatus to attach his mechanical arm.

Brad was trying to balance patience with understanding and urgency with the surprised patients in his sickbay. "We'll get your prosthesis back in place once we've examined you. You two have been on minimal failing life support and we need to make sure there is no damage." Brad was attempting to attend to Ron while Nurse Maria Hill was attending to Jess.

"Right, probably not a bad idea," Ron answered with a nod. "Just make sure your transporter operator grabs that arm. The rest of the ship may be junked, but that thing is gold." It would have seemed strange, but the arm in question seemed more important to Ron than the more immediate issues he was facing; Spending multiple days with a puncture wound to the chest and a failed lung. And those damn rations! Those were probably the worst thing of all for his and Jessica's well being.

Jessica, on the other hand, was being more than cooperative and obviously understood that their health should be their primary concern. Most of all she was relieved to finally have another person to talk to after all the death they had just experienced and the frustrations to follow with Ron. "You don't know how glad I am to see you," she said to the nurse tending to her as if she had known the woman for years.

"I can imagine," replied Maria as she scanned Jessica, making sure there was nothing more serious than a few scrapes and bruises. "Whatever you went through, you're safe now, in the sickbay of the USS Portland."

Brad motioned Ron over to the emergency biobed centered in the room. "It doesn't look critical but I don't want to take chances. Tell me what happened."

"I'm not sure you'd believe me if I told you," Ron spoke with a subdued tone as he sat on the biobed, thinking about the particular necessities of his method of escape. "But here it goes anyway. Long and the short of it is we were attacked by the Borg and they were going to make quick work of us, so I decided to do my best to convince them that their job had been done in record time. I busted my one flesh and blood lung and made myself unconscious for long enough to hopefully get the Borg off our backs. It seemed to work rather well. I," he interrupted himself, a sullen look forming on his face. He'd let Jessica explain how he had helped her feign death. "We're just glad to be alive right now, I think."

"Clever," replied Maria as she grabbed a vascular regenerator to take care of Jessica's bruises. "Faking death so the Borg wouldn't bother trying to assimilate your shuttle. But how did you stop them from detecting Jessica's lifesigns?"

"I... Well... You see, there wasn't much of a--"

"Ronnie aided me in a precisely timed constriction of my airwaves," Jessica interrupted, her tone calm as though to defend his actions as she spoke them. It was still a sore subject, literally and figuratively for her, but she did not want to see her friend in any trouble. Not for saving their lives. "After that he resuscitated me and was sure to confirm I was in perfect working order. He didn't even check his wound until after I was revived," she finished with a small smile of gratitude in Ron's direction.

The face that stared back at her did not respond in kind. It was sullen and quiet, as though to attempt to say 'sorry' in every way but verbally. Ron quietly awaited the verdict from the medical staff around him. He was certain his actions would be seen as brash and dangerous.

The room went quiet as Maria held a medical tricorder up to Jessica's neck for a moment. "There's no lasting damage to her airways, doctor."

"Everything I am seeing here isn't critical either." Brad looked up from his medical scanner and cleared his throat loudly. "Perhaps it's best to let our patients get dressed. There is a replicator in the back room over there. Come out when you are ready and we'll do a more thorough exam."

"Where are our manners, Jessica," Ron all but blurted out at the chance to change the subject. He hopped up off the biobed and made his way to the replicator. "I suppose now that our future is more certain we can make ourselves comfortable."

"Right," Jess exclaimed as she too jumped up with a bounce and headed straight for the replicator. It wasn't odd to be naked in a sickbay. In fact, the staff probably found it to be quite convenient that the disrobing had been done pre-arrival. However, it was probably best that the two of them redress themselves for modesty's sake if the examinations were to continue.

A few moments of shuffling and bumbling later and the two of them returned with fresh-pressed uniforms. "How do we look," they questioned in unison. Even the pitch was perfect. It just had to be rehearsed.

"You look official." Brad said matter-of-factly. "You two seem to be in good shape all things considered. What with facing what you had to believe was the final hours of your lives." Brad spoke to them as he motioned his hand for them to return to the biobeds. "That sort of situation causes very understandable... choices to make that wouldn't normally be made. I don't think there is anything wrong with that at all. You'd be amazed at what people do when they believe their lives are about to end." It seemed rather obvious to Brad why they had been found naked and he attempted to put them at ease. He could just imagine what it would be like if he was in their situation.

The two caught-in-the-act ensigns sat back down on their assigned biobeds with a renewed vigor reserved for freshly replicated uniforms. It was certainly awkward, but the continuation of their lives had made the circumstances of their rescue seem less important. Drawing direct attention to the matter did seem to make Jess a bit bashful, however. "Well, ya know, friends do have different ways of comforting each other in their final hours I suppose," she stated quietly making eye contact with no one.

"So what use would you have for two budding officers such as ourselves," Ron questioned moments after Jess's response. The two had certainly given off awkward vibes but each of a different sort. Ron seemed somewhat more hurried to change the conversation as he asked for his new duties almost too eagerly.

"I'm sure the Captain will be able to find something for you to do," replied Maria as she handed Ron his arm, which had been recovered from the wrecked shuttle. "I hear Engineering could use a few hands..."

"Ha!" Ron snatched his arm eagerly and hastily attached it to the large empty portion where a shoulder would normally be. "I'd be more than happy to help. And thank goodness you got me my arm back or it would have been an odd number of hands in engineering. Not much good that would have done! Consider these hands lent!"

Assimilation

Shortly after "Enter Ron and Jessica"

Captain's Office, USS Portland

Authors: Captain Alenis Meru, Ensign Ronald Roberts, Ensign Jessica White (played by Ronald Roberts), Acting Ensign Ko-ko

The halls of the USS Portland were overflowing with the feelings of contentment and satisfaction,

filling the air like a most welcome contagion. The carriers seemed to spread it to everyone they passed. All the fright and frustration had left the minds of Ron and Jessica as they made their way to meet the captain of the most lovely vessel they had set foot on and they were more than eager to make their place on this new ship, no matter how temporary or permanent it may have been. They were out of their coffin and given a second chance at life.

Given a clean(ish) bill of health (and some clothes), they were now ready to meet the boss. It hadn't taken long for the turbolift to bring them to their destination: Deck 1. The bridge. Jessica instantly fell in love. She never thought she would be smitten by one so much older than herself, but she was beautiful. Like love at first sight. Ron didn't quite feel the same, but he was certainly happy to be in a stable relationship with a ship once more.

They acknowledged all the new faces with a happy nod before making their way to the ready room. Ron and Jess both reached out their hands at the same moment to activate the chime for the occupant on the other end. A stupid smirk crossed both their faces as they pressed the button in unison.

"Come in," shouted Alenis, furiously working away at her terminal, preparing one last report for Admiral Washington to be transmitted before going in. It was somber in tone, containing posthumous commendations, conditional field promotions, and other final preparations in case the Portland didn't come back. Through all of this, Ko-ko was occupying her favourite perch on top of Alenis' monitor and cooing gently.

The two ensigns looked at each other in uncertainty. A shout was a most unexpected reply, though its solemn tone certainly took the edge off. Jessica began to picture an intimidating and overbearing shrew of a captain... perhaps with claws. Ron began to picture an in-charge and no B.S. captain... who happened to be quite attractive. Only one of the two of them was enjoying the image they had conjured. Not wanting to keep the captain waiting, Ron signaled the door to open and a moment later the two of them stepped into the room.

"Ensign Roberts, Ensign White," said Alenis, nodding to acknowledge their presence as she stood up from her desk. Glancing at her empty tea mug, she made a beeline for her kettle. "My condolences on the colony. I hear the Endeavour rescued a few dozen survivors." Alenis winced slightly; saying there were a few dozen survivors seemed to erase the hundreds who didn't make it off that rock. "Can I get you some tea?"

"A rum and coke would be nice," Ron replied with dull sarcasm. Mentions of the colony had certainly taken the edge off his wit.

"Tea will be fine, sir" interrupted Jess before an answer to Ron's request could be given as she nudged him gently with her elbow. She wanted to make a good first impression for her rescuers and it was evident that now was not the time for jokes. They were already standing at attention just as a green cadet aboard a new ship would do in front of a superior and she didn't want to ruin their air of respectability (though for some reason the live bird on the monitor made it difficult to keep things too serious).

"Three mugs of tea then," replied Alenis as the water began to boil. As she prepared the tea, Ko-ko tilted her head at the new officers, examining them closely. Alarmed by Ron's cybernetic implants, she began ruffling her feathers and taking a defensive stance atop the monitor. "Easy, Ko-ko," called out Alenis, her back still to the bird as she poured the tea. She could hear that he was agitated, and she didn't blame him. There had been a lot of stress and discomfort on the ship over the past couple days since they got word of the Borg attacks, and with her empathic abilities, Ko-ko was definitely

picking up on it.

With tea just moments away from being served Ron and Jessica sat down on the guests' side of the captain's desk. Their glances shifted between her and her feathered friend.

A moment later, Alenis turned around, two cups of tea in her hands. "Pyrellian ginger tea with mint leaves" she said. "Fresh, not replicated." She placed the two glasses on her desk in front of Ron and Jessica and then handed Ron a couple mint leaves. "Here, it's her favourite."

"Thank you," Jess said in a voice as warm as the tea in front of them as she slid Ron's cup closer to him. He seemed a bit distracted by the bird and she knew what could happen when Ron was distracted. She just hoped the tea would distract him from his distraction.

Hmm, Ron thought to himself. What a strange little bird, but he knew what birds liked. Back in school he had a girlfriend who would occasionally feed her pet bird with her mouth. Bits of sandwich and whatnot. It seemed repulsive at the time, but what better way to get on the Captain's good side than making friends with her pet? It was practically an invitation with its favorite food, after all. He proceeded to plop the leaves onto his tongue and stick it out at the bird with a come-hither look in his eyes.

Ko-ko was not interested. At all. She let out an all too familiar hiss at Ron, signaling its displeasure in the act. It was just like whenever he tried to perch his former lover's bird on his finger. What a dumb bird, Ron thought at no bird in particular. "Your loss," he said to Ko-ko as he chewed on the leaves, the cooling sensation rushing through his sinuses in no time at all.

Jess just sat and stared without speaking one word, a dumbfounded look in her eyes with the teacup pressed gently against her lips the entire time, her glance shifting between the dolt with the fresh breath and the captain who probably had no patience for fun and games.

Alenis shook her head at Ron and then looked over sympathetically at Jessica. "Now that you've met Ko-ko, we can begin," she said. "I'm Captain Alenis Meru of the USS Portland, and I'm afraid I'm going to have to press the two of you into service. I could always use another shuttle pilot, and with these dark energy experiments going on, I need all the help I can get in engineering. Though I'm afraid that it might be out of the frying pan and into the fire for you, given our current mission."

"That doesn't sound good," Ron replied while chewing on the leaves. "Not the impressment. Anything's better than being lost in space. But what sort of mission are we on?" It was a reluctant question that he hoped would be answered with something pertaining to the dark energy experiments and not something far darker than that that had begun to creep back up into the back of his mind.

Alenis whistled at Ko-ko, who as if on command, fluttered her wings and perched herself upon the captain's shoulder. Then, with Ko-ko's favourite perch vacated, she spun the monitor around to Ron and Jessica could see. "NGC-3814," she replied. "We've traced the Borg activity to this nebula. Our job is to go in and see what they're up to."

"Wait. You want to go in there? No offense captain, it's a nice ship, but," Ron stopped himself mid-sentence. Don't insult the captain's ship. Don't insult the captain's ship! Great. It just seemed so obvious to him that the Miranda class was not equipped to handle the Borg, installed experimental and unstable technologies aside. Why were they even going anywhere close to the Borg?

"Don't worry, Ensign, this old girl has some tricks up her sleeve," replied Alenis, not making it clear

whether she was talking about the ship or herself. "I'm sure Lieutenant Williams will brief you on these -- at the very least, those which aren't classified and on a need to know basis." She slid a PADD across her desk towards Ron. "As for you, Ensign White, you'll be working with our new Chief Flight Control Officer, Ensign Kahnir Dai."

Ron quickly grabbed the PADD and started his own little briefing in the process. He started to poke around at the accessible files within, looking for anything he could read that was unclassified or anything that could give him hints as to what was classified. Secrets. Those were the worst. Especially between the perpetual tinkerers that most engineers were. He'd be getting nose in no time, finding out just what tricks were up who's sleeves, but first he had to meet his direct boss and get situated.

Jess was less enthused and she didn't even have the luxury of hiding the obviously dissatisfied look on her face behind a PADD. It was obvious. The Borg? Not again. She looked over at Ron who was, in her mind, probably all giddy at the prospect of getting plugged into the hive mind and then looked back to the captain. "I'm sure we'll make fine editions to your crew, sir. And speaking of: If I may ask, what quarters will we be assigned," she asked in a sheepish voice. She wasn't sure if it was the right time to ask but she was exhausted. She just wanted somewhere to crash and it showed through her azure oculars just how tired she was.

"You can stay in the guest quarters for tonight; Commander Rouse will find you something more permanent tomorrow. That is, if we survive our little jaunt into the nebula." At the mention of danger, Ko-ko buried her face in her wings and nuzzled herself against Alenis' head. "Awww, Ko-ko," said Alenis, reaching up to pet her bird. "I'm sure we'll be all right." Alenis looked back towards Ron and Jessica, realizing that perhaps she looked a little less than professional at the moment. "If there's nothing else, you are dismissed."

The captain certainly wasn't so reassuring to the two young ensigns. But the guest quarters did sound lovely. At least they'd get some much needed rest in some comfortable quarters and a brief reprieve before they marched back into the jaws of death or worse. Ron thought of a quip about needing a tall glass of Romulan ale and an equally tall woman to accompany him, but he just wasn't into it. The only thing he wanted into at the moment was a comfortable bed and eight hours of undisturbed sleep.

"No, sir. That'll be all." He stood up along with Jess and they gave the customary first salute to their new captain. It was just like any other salute, but inside Ron and Jess's minds it was also saying 'good luck' to accepting the normally quite quirky duo. After the salute was unknowingly returned they returned their arms to their sides and bid themselves adieu of the captain and her strange bird.

Into the Nebula, Part I

Bridge, USS Portland

MD02, 1900 hours

Authors: Captain Alenis Meru, Shras th'Karath (played by Alenis Meru), Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Lieutenant (JG) Sera Williams, Lieutenant (JG) Tolaran Kian, Lieutenant (JG) Marcus Kallan, Lieutenant Jason Beauvoir, Lieutenant (JG) Arthur Reynolds

Step, step, step, step. Sigh.

Turn. Step, step, step, step. Sigh.

Turn. Step, step--

"Don't you have some systems to monitor or something?" Seated in the center chair, Alenis glared up at Shras. As they got closer and closer to the nebula, the man had become more and more restless, and for the past ten minutes had been pacing the bridge, loudly sighing in frustration, and clenching his fists. It was starting to get on her nerves, and was no doubt a distraction to the bridge crew while the ship was supposed to be on high alert.

"What, is my pacing annoying you?" asked Shras in his usual sneering tone.

"Yes," replied Alenis. "And I don't have time to argue with you about it, so sit down and make yourself useful."

With a harumph, Shras returned to his seat. He didn't see what the big deal was; they were all going to die soon anyways, and it seemed petty to him to stop a doomed man from pacing to and fro. It also seemed hypocritical that the captain told him to stop pacing while she let that demon bird of hers perch upon her shoulder, but he figured it was best not to press the issue at this time. He had already put it in his report, and had sent a preliminary version to Admiral Washington, just in case he died before he could finish the whole thing.

As Shras sat down, Alenis' eyes returned to the main viewscreen. The nebula was up ahead, slowly getting bigger on the screen as the ship approached. Were it not crawling with Borg, she might find the swirling gases and plasma streams to be beautiful. But, this wasn't a sightseeing tour; this was a mission whose consequences would be severe for the entire quadrant.

Her mind was going a mile a minute. Soon, she would be face to face with the Borg again. The last time was years ago, at New Algiers. She was the Chief Tactical Officer of the USS Gol, assigned to the left flank of Starfleet's counterattacking forces. The Gol put up a good fight, but once the old Ambassador class vessel was caught in a Borg tractor beam, it was all over. Alenis was the highest ranking officer to get off the ship; only a few dozen of the crew of 500 made it.

She was nervous. Her palms were sweaty, and as she looked up at the glowing nebula, she could see visions from the last moments of the USS Gol. The glowing green tractor beam that they were caught in. The plasma torpedo, the one she stared at as it closed in on the helpless vessel, unable to stop. The flying debris from the explosion, and the flames which engulfed the bridge as she crawled towards the escape pods.

A soft touch on the hand brought her back to reality. She glanced over for a second at Tim, whose subtle pat on her hand helped her retain her focus. His comforting smile... it was all she needed to get her head back in the game.

"Status report," she called out, not taking her eyes off the screen.

Shras had 'urged' Sera to view this 'monumental achievement' from the Bridge of the first ship to harness Dark Energy. Sera had never engaged the Borg, though she had heard virtually every horror story associated with them. It took almost all of her self-control to not stand up to watch the approaching nebula. One of the bonuses of being an engineer was that you rarely ever made it to the Bridge, and you'd never see the danger approaching.

She peered at the readings from the console that she had set up to control Engineering, then turned to Meru. "Captain, Dark Energy reactors are going live. All departments should be reading an increase in power with minimal emissions."

Tolaran stood at a station reviewing the security details throughout the ship, this was a nervous situation and he'd been drilling his teams hard the past few days, all non essential personal were in the mess hall or other safe locations throughout the ship with a security detail, and all major areas of the ship were protected... as best they could be anyway, one team was stationed all around the bridge right now standing ready... "Security teams are reporting ready throughout the ship Captain, if the Borg do get on board we'll give them one hell of a fight."

Marcus sat at Operations, entering a tense situation as the Portland's chief operations officer for the first time. "Ship's systems nominal, Captain," he read out from his LCARS display, keeping an eye peeled on the dark energy readings that Sera was already monitoring.

Jason sat at the Science station analysing sensor data from the nebula, or he would be, if they could pick up anything at this distance. Like the rest of the senior Bridge crew, he had received training in the new Dark Energy systems, and though he'd managed to grasp some of the concepts, advanced physics was beyond his understanding. Even so he trusted it work as planed, about as far as he could throw its arrogant inventor on Jupiter. Like everyone onboard, Jason wasn't looking forward to encountering the Borg, he saw them as a twisted version of his own profession, scientists and explorers who had lost their way.

From his slouched position at the helm, long legs stretched out in front of him and booted ankles crossed, Kahn'r gave his report, "ETA to the nebula is ten minutes, Captain. With all the juice available to the engines I could get us there faster if you like. We'd probably even have time to stop off for some Cardassian Sunrises. If you like Sunrises that is. Sir." He paused, appeared to consider what he had just said for a moment, then nodded and apparently seemed satisfied with his metaphor. The helmsman was rather impressed with how much energy they had pulsing through the propulsion systems.

"Negative on the sunrises," replied Meru in a firm tone, a hint of disapproval in her voice at the young ensign's cavalier attitude. "And steady as she goes, Ensign. Tactical, report? Any Borg activity on the sensors?"

Arthur had his eyes locked on the console during their approach. His attention was rather split at first, however. He wasn't sure whether or not this Dark Energy would cause any serious issues with the tactical systems, but so far, everything appeared to be in working order. But just before he could report that his scans showed no serious activity around the nebula, something blinked to life on the outer edge. "I've got something. Hard to make out at this range... but whatever it is, it's big." A few moments of observation, and Arthur exclaimed, "It could be a patrol ship of some kind. It's moving along the perimeter of the nebula."

"On screen, maximum magnification."

Alenis stared up at the Borg cube for a moment. A chill went down her spine; it looked just like the one she had faced at New Algiers. For a moment she was frozen, but feeling Tim's hand upon hers brought her back. "You know the plan. Prepare the trans-dimensional warp jump; lets get on their tail."

Into the Nebula, Part II

Bridge, USS Portland

MD02, 1900 hours

Authors: Captain Alenis Meru, Lieutenant (JG) Sera Williams, Lieutenant (JG) Tolaran Kian, Lieutenant (JG) Marcus Kallan, Ensign Kahn'r Dai

Sera pressed a few commands on the Engineering console. An extra hum seemed to be added to the ambient ship noise as the Dark Energy reactor began to takeover for the Matter/Anti-Matter Warp Core.

Sera looked back toward the rest of the Bridge, "Trans-dimensional warp is ready. We are unable to be detected by sensors." Sera wanted to add that she hoped the Borg Cube didn't have a viewport, but decided against vocalizing the last part.

"Tachyon emissions are within norms. Transfer conduits are holding at 125% efficiency. Any hotter and we'll start glowing," Marcus reported as he actively monitored the affected systems, as well as the rest of the ship. "Avoid the cube's ion trail and any particles from the nebula and we should be in absolute stealth."

"Excellent," replied Alenis, taking one last moment to stare up at the cube. "Engage"

"Don't make it difficult or anything," Kahnir said, though this time he had the presence of mind to mutter it under his breath. He called out an, "Aye, sir," a moment later. His fingers flew across the control panel as he stared into the sensor readings, trying not to think about just what they were about to follow. Of course, trying not to think about it made him think about it. A Borg cube! Another few moments passed and he said, "Confirmed, we are maintaining a y-axis difference to avoid detection, Captain, and are keeping up."

Sera double checked her display. All readouts suggested the new Dark Energy Reactor was performing better than expected. The link between the Matter/Anti-matter Warp Core and the new reactor was running a bit hot, but it was still within tolerance. She put in a command to have someone investigate the issue, better safe than sorry. Sera turned her head to the Bridge to say, "Dark Energy Reactor at full power, everything is within tolerance." She also gave Shras a nod toward the display, telling him to take a look.

"Just keep us out of trouble for now," replied Alenis, staring up at the screen at the Borg cube. "Are we picking up anything on the sensors?"

"The navigational sensors are registering a much denser mass ahead than should be present in the nebula, Captain," Kahnir said without looking up from the helm controls. He made very careful, minute adjustments to their course as needed; a heavy hand would be a very bad idea given how much energy the engines had. "I can't get anything more specific than that at the moment out of my systems."

Sera tapped the display a bit, hoping the readings were just a hiccup in the late-2200's era technology in the console. With some growing concern, Sera announced, "Captain, whatever is in the nebula is creating an extremely large electro-magnetic field. I'm also reading tachyon emission on a large scale. Whatever it is, it isn't natural to the nebula. It is also beginning slightly affect the Dark Energy Reactor. I wouldn't recommend flying straight into the middle of it."

"Duly noted," replied the captain. She glanced over at Tim for a moment and gave him a subtle nod, reassuring her executive officer that she was in control here. "But we need to take a look at whatever this thing is. Take us in closer, and watch out for Borg scanning beams."

"Aye, Captain, answering closer," Kahnir said softly. So far, so good, but the nonchalant pilot's brow began to bead with anxious sweat as he carefully adjusted their course. The Portland banked slowly

away from the patrol ship, leaving only the faintest disturbance in the gases of the nebula as she went, a swirl that was no different from any of the other eddies that ebbed and flowed throughout.

He remained silent for a long moment until he let out a soft grunt. The visual on the screen tilted sharply as he swung the ship low from her current course. "There's a lot of polaron scanning beams the further we go, Captain. Whatever it is is just coming into range now and-" The young man choked off whatever he'd been about to say and looked up as the wispy clouds parted.

Sera tried to say something about the Borg transwarp gate that was coming into view on the screen and how that explained the readings that she was getting, however what came out of her mouth was a stammered curse.

"Transwarp conduit aperture," Marcus breathed, looking a mixture of horrified and mesmerized. "Captain, just a ballpark guess here without active scans, but that's a fledgling unimatrix complex. No telling if it's fully operational or not." He glanced over his shoulder at Sera, to Shras, and back to Sera again. "Lieutenant, did your simulations ever take into consideration a shuttle departing while the Portland was in stealth mode?" Whatever Marcus was thinking, it was clearly not part of the original plan.

"Wouldn't launching a shuttle, give away our position?" Jason asked from the Science station.

"The Borg would in theory ignore a shuttle, past history shows it wouldn't be a big enough threat for them to even consider... a small team..." Tolaran never finished his sentence, his brain began to runaway with itself partly trying to work out what Marcus was thinking but also he began running plans through his mind to destroy the complex.

Marcus probably had no thoughts of destruction, only science. "Exactly," he said in agreement with Tolaran. He turned to face Alenis. "Captain, we're here to investigate what the Borg are up to. There it is," he said, gesturing at the screen. "If there is any data to be gathered regarding the Borg's activity or why they assimilated Captain Banninga, it will be there. And the Portland can't do any meaningful scans while cloaked."

"Captain, Marcus is on to something here, we could take a small team and investigate the complex from inside. It would be safer than risking the whole ship and unless we start prying too much they shouldn't acknowledge us. We could even lay charges to damage some of it too..."

"We have two Type 7 shuttlecraft ready to go," Kahnr said, turning around in his chair to look at the others. "They've been stripped down till they're nothing but sublight engines running so smooth they hardly leave an ion trail, basic sensors, a transporter system, and made up to look and scan just like asteroids. They aren't pretty, but my flying bricks should be able to get you where you need to go. I figure it's better that the Borg don't even know you're there than them just ignoring you till they wanna assimilate you."

Alenis paused to consider the plan. It was risky, but as the Ferengi say, the riskier the road, the greater the profit. They needed as much data as they could in order to devise a plan with Starfleet to stop the Borg from completing the transwarp gate before they take over the entire quadrant. And if they could delay the construction, even better. "Let's do it."

The Two Shuttles, Part I

Shortly after "Into the Nebula"

NGC-3814 Nebula

Authors: Captain Alenis Meru, Ensign Jessica White (played by Ronald Roberts), Lieutenant (JG) Arthur Reynolds, Lieutenant (JG) Tolaran Kian,

Inside the NGC-3814 nebula, the swirling gases and plasma storms hid a lot of things. Borg cubes, a transwarp gate, a unicomplex under construction, and an old Miranda class starship using dark energy technology to conceal itself. And, two inconspicuous asteroids, about the size of Type VII shuttles, floating slowly towards the Borg unicomplex and transwarp gate.

Shuttle 2:

With almost the entire windscreen of the shuttle covered in rocks, only a couple small slits and the external sensors and cameras gave the crew any visibility in front of them. Not that they could see too much through the thick fog and flashes of plasma anyways. Captain Alenis Meru was in the passenger seat, staring at the unicomplex and transwarp gate on the screen in front of her, and Ensign Jessica White, a new addition to the crew, was at the helm.

The captain had been watching over Ensign White as she flew the shuttle. As a new crew member pressed into service, she had to prove herself, and what better way than to take the Captain for a Sunday drive into a nebula teeming with Borg, with tricobalt charges in the trunk.

The whole flight Jessica had felt as though there was a rock in her stomach. She had just barely escaped with her life after facing down the infernal monsters with a perfectly intact shuttle just days ago. Now here she was flying a half-derelict shuttle right into the den of the beast. She had flown stripped down shuttles before, but not right off the dock and into potential combat. It was always away from combat. The voices around her seemed no more than buzzing. She was focused solely on keeping them all alive, keeping their flight as natural and unaided as possible. Be the asteroid. I am the asteroid. We are an asteroid.

"Lieutenant Reynolds, Lieutenant Kian, are the tricobalt charges ready?" asked the captain, making sure one last time that everything was in order before they engaged the Borg.

This had not been Arthur's first flight into the jaws of death, though he admittedly had no experience with the Borg. At most, he knew the occasional story meant to keep Starfleet cadets in line, but until all the research he committed to yesterday, he'd been in the dark about this age-old foe of the Federation. "Aye, captain." He carefully made a fourth deep-scan of the device while lying on the floor beneath it. He had to manually connect the new set of lockout pathways to the main core, but he was used to wiring bombs since his youth. "It's ready for a security code now, lieutenant," Arthur finally added for the security chief as he slid himself out from underneath it.

"Thank you, this won't take long" Tolaran took Arthur's place under the bombs and entered the security codes he'd programmed in that would hopefully block the Borg from stopping them detonating when they blow the charges. A few minutes later, he was done... "Captain, we're ready back here."

"Excellent. We just need to find a place to put these. Somewhere where they'll do as much damage as possible, really delay their construction." Alenis stroked her chin, deep in thought. "The energy this transwarp gate would require to operate must be huge. Is there a reactor or something like that

we can sabotage?"

Arthur thought back to his classes on speculative warp mechanics at the Academy, but not much came of those. He never quite grasped any appreciation for the theoretical outside a casual interest due to his preference for more immediate, 'practical' concerns. "It's possible, but I don't think there's any guarantees. Voyager had to use several torpedoes to destroy the individual passages from the inside," he finally responded, recalling his more successful classes in History and Tactics. Though his expression didn't show a hint of embarrassment, his next few words suggested he felt otherwise. "If I didn't fall asleep in Theoretical Physics, I'd be able to give you a more concise answer, captain."

"Captain... the other shuttle should be able to help locate weak points in the structure with their scans, however we should also be able to investigate quietly from inside with little trouble as long as we don't do anything to make the Borg view us as a threat, once we get on board I have no doubt we'll be able to work on finding locations quite easily and in all fairness, we have come a long way since Voyager destroyed the installation they faced. I'm sure even with Arthur's sleeping in theoretical physics, we will be able to come up with something." Tolaran grinned at Arthur, trying to keep the mood light in the face of what was to come, however he knew there was a good chance that some of them may not be coming back from this mission if things didn't go to plan.

"All right." Alenis stared out at the unicomplex for a moment. To most people, the architecture of Borg ships and structures looked as though they were haphazardly thrown together, something a small child might build out of interlocking blocks. But the chaotic looking structures offered an insight into the psyche of the Borg. With no regard for aesthetics, everything was just thrown together in the most efficient manner possible. With many redundant systems, the Borg ships were like the collective themselves -- a unique mix of centralization and decentralization. "Let's follow the other shuttle for now, and as soon as they find a good target..."

The Two Shuttles, Part II

Shortly after "Into the Nebula"

NGC-3814 Nebula

Authors: Lieutenant (JG) Marcus Kallan, Ensign Kahn'r Dai, Lieutenant Jason Beauvoir, Captain Alenis Meru

Shuttle 1:

Marcus was no pilot; he was certified, certainly, but he didn't have the knack for navigating in three dimensions. He sat at a side console, behind the seat of the copilot, setting up the programs that would run to do the first set of passive scans. It would be up to their findings, and the Captain's word, to switch to more active analysis. But they had to get closer, first, and that's what had Marcus sweating. He watched the distance measurement tick down slowly as the shuttles traveled inconspicuously closer. "Unimatrix, conduit, tactical analysis," he muttered as he configured, likely the order of the scans.

And they were getting closer. Every second that ticked by the shuttle continued in its odd trajectory that would take them on a wide loop around the Borg. Kahn'r had sent the shuttle into a slow spin around its axis, giving them a more natural, tumbling look as many asteroids had but it probably hadn't made the other occupants very happy. The inertial dampers had been set at the lowest margins possible for safety so with each somersault everyone within would feel it even if they didn't choose to watch the stomach twisting ride through the few gaps in the rocky facade around the viewports. "We're coming up on five-thousand kilometers...mark," Kahn'r said cheerfully from the pilot's seat. He looked far too relaxed and happy for this. "How much closer do you want to get?"

"Well, Ensign, if you can see the whites of their optical implants, you're too close." Jason said trying to use humour to relieve some of the tension he felt being this close to a culture that was the personification of science gone to the extreme.

"Technically, their optic replacements wouldn't have an eye left," Marcus corrected while finishing his calibrations. "Yes, I know, I'm real fun at parties." Tapping the console, Marcus opened a link to the other shuttle. They used a very lossy short-wave radio communication technique that the Borg would dismiss -- at least initially -- as background noise. =/\= "Scan pattern Kallan-Alpha ready, Captain. We could bear to get a little closer but the more we scan the more information we'll get. Waiting on your call." =/\=

=/\="Get in as close as you can without being detected," =/\= replied Alenis. =/\="There should be a central plexus in here somewhere; try to get a scan of that in addition to the transwarp gate.=/\="

"Not a problem!" Kahn'r answered brightly. The tumbling shuttlecraft turned asteroid shifted its trajectory ever so slightly with a careful nudge from the pilot. Too quick maneuvers or sharp turns would completely destroy the ruse so he kept things smooth and subtle. "We should be within scanning range of the center of the complex in about two minutes. Let's just hope they don't blow up incoming asteroids huh?" Jason wasn't the only one trying to stay jovial.

"Actually, asteroids would just detonate harmlessly against whatever passes for Borg deflector arrays," said the Operations officer. "Scans are starting... data is coming in. It'll be a while until we get anything substantial, but... whoah." Marcus peered at his console. "No, this can't be right. Checking diagnostics." His fingers danced over the LCARS panels arranged in front of him.

Jason sat in the co-pilot's seat. As the senior officer aboard he was technically in charge of the mission, but part of being a good leader was to let your crew do their jobs, so he'd been content to supervise. That was until Marcus' exclamation. "Report, Mr Kallan." He ordered, all joviality gone from his voice.

Marcus simultaneously displayed an LCARS-style data graph on top of the shuttle's main visual, as well as transmitted it to the other shuttle and opened a comm. "This is the dark matter energy signature that is currently being generated by the Portland. And this..." There was a brief pause as he tapped on his console and overlaid a nearly identical curve. "This is the energy reading I'm getting from the transwarp conduit, adjusted significantly for amplitude. This is precisely why Shras' equations are working better than simulated -- this nebula is choc full of exotic particles, and the Borg are harnessing them to create their own multiphasic lower-domain subspace manifold. They're going to be able to suck in cubes from the Delta Quadrant and then sling them anywhere into the Alpha Quadrant with little or no warning."

Marcus let that sink in before continuing. "And secondly, they probably have the technology to see the Portland. I don't know why they haven't acted against us yet. Unless they really don't see us as a threat, but we have knowledge of dark energy, so..." At that, the Operations officer scratched his head, nonplussed.

"Perhaps like Terran web-spinning arachnids, they are waiting for their prey to come to them." Jason suggested.

=/\=Portland One, what's going on over there?=/\= crackled Alenis' voice through the audio systems of the shuttle. =/\=I've got some strange energy readings here, and I can't make heads or tails of it.=/\=

=/\= "At the risk of Commander Shras' wrath and a blow to his ego, ma'am, the technology that we've got aboard the Portland matches what's on that transwarp aperture," =/\= Marcus relayed to the other shuttle. =/\= "And it's better. Refined. The Borg could deploy silently to anywhere in the Alpha Quadrant from this transwarp conduit." =/\=

Alenis gasped. The tactical implications of this could be massive. =/\=Relay this information to the Portland.=/\= She looked down at the sensor readings; the readings were definitely centralized in an area with the Borg equivalent of work bees -- nanoprobes ranging in size from small dogs to larger than a shuttle -- buzzing around a large structure. Glancing back at the explosives in the back, she nodded at Tolaran. =/\=We're going in with the charges.=/\=

Kahnir tapped a few controls, fired thrusters, and altered their asteroid's trajectory without waiting for orders. If the Borg were aware of the Portland then they would have seen the two shuttles launch as well. They were out here with stripped down systems, no shields, no weapons, and the other shuttle was going in to deploy a commando strike. To him that meant they needed to be to back them up. What luck, he thought and forced a smile back onto his face, that my first mission is likely to be my last. "I'm going to bring us a little closer, so maybe Kallan can learn some more," he said to Lieutenant Beauvoir. "And we'll be in range of the other shuttle in ten minutes, unless you want to go elsewhere."

Motion in the Darkness

Shortly after "Into the Nebula"

USS Portland, Diplomatic Suite

Authors: **Lt Commander Tyrlai Zade** and **Crewman Andrev Thosk**

Reality was often a mixture of matter and perception.

Tyrlai sat at her desk on deck four watching the swirl of darkness enfolding the Portland as they waited in the nebula silently. She could see the darkness swirling, between the nebula outside and the viewport in her office. The darkness was backlit to a point by the less swirling clouds of the Nebula, as such it was easy to see the motion of the blackness.

When the blackness swirled inside blackness it was harder to sense the movement. If the darkness was 'pure' enough, there was no way to tell if it was moving at all.

Thosk stepped into her office, leaned in really, coming only minimally as close as he needed. "Why are you still here?"

Tyrlai pondered the darkness, how it curled inside the darkness and wondered. "What are you talking about?"

"There are Borg. Poised to eradicate us."

"Yes there are." She focused her gaze on her display and her attention to the corner of her eye and slipped into councilor mode. "How does that make you feel, mister Thosk?"

Thosk looked back moderately bewildered. "Usually when such things are happening you run headlong in to make things worse. Not that this new prudent approach isn't somewhat of a relief, but still."

Her eyes moved to where her cup sat at the corner of her desk. It was perched calmly and solidly on the desktop, as close to the corner as possible to qualify as perching and yet be entirely supported by the smooth and flat surface. She wondered again, how does one perceive motion in the absence of light?

“Well?”

“Well what, mister Thosk?”

Thosk huffed and stalked back with clicking footfalls across the corridor to where his desk sat in the corner of the otherwise empty diplomatic offices. There was some shuffling and then more clicking as he returned to her office, striding a few feet inside for emphasis.

“There is risk and danger and you aren’t taking part in any of it.” Thosk, who never seemed to cease pointing out when she took inordinate risks, seemed rather profoundly agitated now that she hadn’t.

Tyrlai stood and walked over to Thosk who took a careful pace back to make sure she didn’t put her hand on his shoulder or anything. Being comforted by Tyrlai was almost never comforting. “Tell me something, have you even been in a pitch black room and sworn you could see something move?”

Thosk's outward signs of agitation doubled as he looked over the woman he told everyone who would listen was insane, suddenly concerned that he had been underestimating the nature of that problem.

There was a sudden chiming crash as the mug hit the floor, breaking into three major pieces and clattering to a stop a few feet from the corner of Tyrlai’s desk. Tyrlai had a scanner in her hand faster than Thosk could remember to breathe and it whirled away chirping and beeping as she aimed it at the wall near where the mug had fallen. She paused at the readings and held the scanner out so Thosk could see. “What would you say that was?”

Thosk glared down at the display for a moment. “Nothing whatsoever.” He snapped back in a lucid and practical evaluation of the readings from the scanner.

A chill tickled the back of his neck as Tyrlai stepped over to the hull and ran her hand over its cool, slightly curving surface. Pausing to tap at it with a long violet lacquered nail. “Tell me, do you remember a scan ever reading nothing at all?”

Andrev Thosk paused only the slightest of moments and turned on his heel, departing quickly. “I will be working the balance of this shift from my quarters for personal reasons.”

Tyrlai nodded as he left and stared at the wall wondering if those scouting the Borg constructs squirreled away in the nebula were perhaps in the safer place.

The two shuttles, part III

Shortly after "Into the Nebula"

NGC-3814 Nebula

Authors: Ensign Jessica White (played by Ronald Roberts), Captain Alenis Meru, Lieutenant Brad Silverton, Lieutenant Jason Beauvoir, Lieutenant Marcus Kallan, Ensign Kahnr Dai

Shuttle 2

All Jessica could see was black and green and she would have been happy to never see those colors again. After a few seconds of spacing out in her view of space she shook her head a bit, gathering her bearings and quite possibly showing her extreme distaste for the situation they found themselves in. "Going in," she spoke aloud as she adjusted the makeshift asteroid slowly to a new course. The idea of going anywhere near that damn thing was repulsive to her, but the thought of seeing it go up in a brilliant explosion almost made her giddy. It didn't take long to bring them in closer.

"There," called out Alenis, pointing towards a section of the facility still under construction. "They haven't put up the exterior plating yet, that looks like the dark energy reactor in there. Tolaran, arm the charges. Jessica, prepare to beam them inside, as close as we can get to the reactor core where they'll do the most damage."

"Yes, sir. Preparing to," Jessica began before interrupting herself. She pecked away at her console for a few moments before letting coming to an unfortunate conclusion. "Uh, sir? I can't seem to get an accurate enough lock onto the structure. I'm getting a lot of interference here and I wouldn't be able to guarantee one hundred percent transference. We're gonna have to find another way." It certainly wasn't good news and she hated to be the one to bring it to the captain.

Alenis sighed. "Well, we can't beam them in, and we can't fly in..." she looked over her shoulder at Tolaran and Arthur, but her eyes were drawn behind them was a compartment with the words "Survival Equipment. Emergency Use Only" written on it. That compartment would have everything a downed shuttle crew might need to survive a hostile environment -- rations, signal flares, emergency blankets and EVA suits. It gave her an idea.

"Doctor Silverton," started Alenis, formulating her plan in her head. "Please tell me your brought some anti-nausea medication."

"Yes of course Captain. That's a standard medication for an away mission." Brad tapped his hand on a case he brought. About ten pounds and two foot squared. It was far bigger than a standard away team mission emergency kit but this was far from a standard mission.

Medical staff didn't usually see action on an away mission but that was a good thing. Brad had hoped his role in this away mission would be boring but feared it would not. "Why exactly do you ask?" He looked at her with a puzzled expression not quite following whatever plan she had.

"I was just thinking that it might be a nice time for a little stroll," replied Alenis. "Lieutenants Reynolds, Kian, and Silverton, suit up. We've got a little delivery to make."

Shuttle 1:

Jason took control of some of the sensors, sharing the work would half the time it took for them to complete their mission and return to the relative safety of the Portland. "Let's get this done, before the tin men awaken." He said.

"The moment they start arming those devices, Jason..." Marcus said sotto voce, as he transferred his scanning patterns to the other console so that his colleague didn't have to duplicate his work unnecessarily. "I'm working on an optimal pattern, at the same time trying to come up with a way to distract the Borg long enough for the arming." His brow was creased in thought. "Only thing I can

think of is an illogical sacrifice and too large a risk."

"We are approaching transporter range of the other shuttle in three...two...one." Kahnir updated the others. "Engines at station keeping." Now with little for him to do than watch the navigational sensors it gave him more of a chance to talk to the others. "How you guys holding up? I hope you're not really thinking we're going to blow ourselves up or something."

"I can assure you, Ensign, I have no intention of blowing myself up. My daughter has already lost her mother, she's not going to lose me as well. I'm going to get back to her, even if I have to strangle every drone in that complex, with my bare hands in order to do that." Jason said. After a moment he took a deep breath to calm himself. "I apologise for my outburst, I appear to be more on edge than I thought."

Kahnir bowed his head and offered a grin, "Not a problem, sir. I think we're all..." The pilot broke off, gazed at Marcus for a noticeable moment. He was obviously choosing his next words very carefully. Betazoids were usually honest, even brutally so, but he was making an effort to be both honest and gentle this time. "...feeling the strain of what this means for us. We're not going anywhere at the moment. What can I do to help?"

"Strain," Marcus muttered, looking over the numbers that were crunching on his screen. Disrupting the Borg or an armed firefight to distract them was out of the question. The odds were stacked against the Portland. "That might just work. Dai, you're a genius." He opened a channel. =/\= "Kallan to Portland. I need to talk to Lieutenant Sera and Commander Shras." =/\=

A little stroll (Part I)

Shortly after "The two shuttles..."

NGC-3814 Nebula

Authors: Captain Alenis Meru, Lieutenant Brad Silverton, Lieutenant Arthur Reynolds, Lieutenant (JG) Tolaran Kian

Somewhere out on space...

Tolaran had gladly donned his EVA suit, there was always something about spacewalks he'd enjoyed at the Academy, they'd made them compulsory tactical training after the Enterprise E had fought off some Borg who'd been outside on the ship's hull. The scary part was the big case he had strapped to his back containing three highly explosive devices, of course he'd volunteered to take them, it was his responsibility as the security officer. He turned awkwardly in his suit, seeing some green faces. "Just remember, if you're sick inside your suit, you are cleaning them out when we get back..."

"I think the good doctor's anti-nausea medication is working," replied Alenis. She had been space-sick during her zero gee qualifications back at the academy and hadn't been back since. Still, she knew that command is all about confidence, so she tried to hide it as best she could.

With Tolaran carrying hundreds of kilograms of explosives and Arthur carrying the detonators, Alenis took on the role of carrying the line. A long, high-strength microfilament cable connected her to the shuttle and in turn she was tethered to the other three members of the away team. With the push of a button she could reel them back in if things got too hot. That said, the plan was to get in and get out without antagonizing the Borg by posing a threat until it was too late. "Doctor, I trust you can aim that thing with surgical precision if necessary," called out Alenis, glancing over at Brad who was staring down at his compression phaser rifle.

"Well I have to admit it has been awhile since my Starfleet Academy qualifying training Captain and my previous assignment was very uneventful combat wise but I'm up to the task." Brad replied to the Captain.

"I suppose that will have to do." Alenis took a deep breath as they passed through the opening in the side of the Borg structure. But as she did so, the all too familiar black and green structures caused her mind to drift elsewhere.

"We are the Borg. You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile."

She was Lieutenant Alenis Meru, Chief Tactical Officer of the USS Gol again. The ill-fated vessel would be destroyed that day, out near New Algeirs. Sector 262 became the graveyard of thousands of good men, hundreds of them on the Gol itself. Alenis was lucky. She was one of the few to get off, and the highest ranking officer to survive the destruction of the Gol.

"No," called out Alenis. She clenched her teeth. Over three and a half years later, she was finally going to have her revenge. "Resistance is not futile."

"Sorry Captain, did you say something?" Tolaran could have sworn he'd heard the Captain say something about resistance and futile, he hoped that the Captain wasn't secretly hoping to assimilate her team and had been Borg the whole time, that would not be amusing. He thought he could feel a bead of sweat run down his forehead, it was that awful feeling whenever you wear a helmet and you know you can't touch your face, very frustrating.

"I'm fine," replied Alenis, shaking it off and glancing down at a small screen mounted on her wrist. "Straight ahead for about two hundred metres, then hang a left. Keep your weapons at the ready, but don't be pointing them around. I don't want our cybernetic friends to take notice."

"After all the times Starfleet infiltrated Borg ships, you'd think the Borg would consider us a threat whenever they detect us. For a species hell-bent on adapting, they're terribly inefficient at it." Arthur gripped his phaser a little more tightly and made doubly sure the detonators were secured to his waist. Unlike Tolaran, Arthur hated spacewalks - not because they gave him nausea, but simply because his quick reflexes were practically useless. Then again, he felt slightly sick to his stomach, though whether it was because of the lack of gravity or the thought of encountering the Borg, he couldn't say.

As they proceeded deeper into the Borg complex, Alenis began breathing heavier, drawing extra strain on her EV systems. She could hear the screams of the dying on the bridge of the Gol, and feel the sparks of exploding consoles on her skin. But she shook it aside as best she could and focused on the task at hand. Aside from a tense moment when a probe carrying a load of plating passed a little too close for comfort, the approach was as uneventful as sneaking into a Borg reactor core with hundreds of kilograms of explosives could be.

Hundreds of metres inside the facility and after rounding a couple corners, they found themselves face to face with the largest Dark Energy reactor any of them had ever seen. Inside a cavernous room, with worker drones and construction probes milling about, sat a large pill-shaped reactor, one the size of a ten story building. A tangle of hoses and conduits jutted out from every side of the reactor. Between the worker drones buzzing around and the lack of glow, it was clear that the reactor hadn't quite been completed yet. But it would be soon.

"Holy sh.... look at the size of that thing, this definitely beats anything we have Captain" Tolaran

stopped in his tracks, looking up and up and up... the Borg were so beyond what they had on the Portland they wouldn't stand a chance if this got up and running fully, it made the things strapped to his back even more important now.

"There," said Alenis, pointing towards an opening in the exterior plating of the reactor. "That's neutronium-shielded; but if we place our delivery inside that hole, it should focus the blast towards the inside of the reactor and cause maximum damage."

Tolaran glanced towards where Alenis was pointing, it would be risky and the biggest concern was having the Borg show up before they could detonate. "We'll want to double check the shielding inside it Captain, but the theory is sound..."

"Let's do this," replied the Captain as she activated her thrusters again and made a beeline for the reactor's vulnerable spot. "Eyes up. Keep your weapons at the ready, but don't make any sudden moves. We don't want to attract any attention."

To be continued...

A little stroll (Part II)

Shortly after "The two shuttles..."

Borg unicomplex, NGC-3814 Nebula

Authors: Captain Alenis Meru, Lieutenant Brad Silverton, Lieutenant Arthur Reynolds, Lieutenant (JG) Tolaran Kian

Brad followed the Captain on towards the reactor. The realization of where they were had sunk in. Beyond the obvious of their physical location, deep inside a Borg complex, it was the situational location that bothered him. If anything went wrong they were hundreds of meters inside of Borg complex. Who knows how many hundreds of Borg could be between them and their exit. They had their plan and their mission however and the away team would perform well. As with all CMOs, Brad had reviewed the medical and service records of the crew. Let the others attend to leadership and the demolition needs of the mission. He had his own needs of the mission to attend to.

While Arthur concurred with the captain's analysis, he also made several observations himself. For one thing, if the neutronium shielding blocked access to the hole, they'd have to find a way around it; bar that, and they'd still have a small problem. "That could interfere with the subspace communicator. The device is rigged to explode with a timer, but if the Borg neutralize it, we won't be able to detonate it remotely."

"Aha, Arthur, we can use a trusty old method, a timer!" Tolaran had considered this previously and planned so had some interesting old technology made up that would also mean the Borg shouldn't be able to find the bombs so easily. He grinned through his helmet at the tactical officer, and tapped his bag of goodies that was strapped to his waist. "I figured we could try some old stuff, the Borg might not be able to locate them, but they might need backups... it's going to be all about luck here."

"That's perfect," replied Alenis, looking at the primitive mechanical spring-powered timer that Tolaran had brought. "No electronics, no radio signals... they might not even detect the detonator." Alenis' eyes darted back and forth, watching the drones and construction probes do their work. They hadn't taken notice yet, but...

As they arrived at the opening in the reactor shielding, Alenis grabbed onto a cable sticking out to steady herself. "Right in there," she said, motioning towards the opening in the shielding. "Brad,

stand guard with me. Tolaran, Arthur, time to make the delivery. We want just long enough to get out of here without giving them a chance to disarm the thing. Four minutes okay?"

"Understood." Arthur took a deep breath before ducking under an overhang in order to get closer to the space Alenis wanted the bomb planted. "Lieutenant," he addressed the CSO as he got a better look at the surrounding circuitry. "How do you propose we plug a 20th century kitchen timer into an isolinear circuit board? The technology's over four centuries old." Despite having spent the better part of his life jury-rigging an old ship's systems with otherwise incompatible alien technology, he never touched anything quite as ancient.

Tolaran grinned, sometimes he liked to throw things out there and hoped for the best, in this case he was pretty damn sure it would work... "Well, that's the nifty bit that will confuse the Borg, whilst the timer is effectively ancient, I had the sense to create an adapter so really the timer is working but its relaying the countdown through a very minor electronic connection, it will also allow us to remote detonate if possible but the signal shouldn't give the Borg any real sense something is here, it should just fit with the background... well, at least that's the plan... you know how these things are.... no, help me get this in the hole."

With a skeptical, albeit interested, expression, Arthur helped secure the device in the opening with magnetic clamps. He made certain they stayed in place before stepping back and giving Tolaran some room. In the meantime, he removed the tricorder from his belt and began running scans.

"Thanks..." Tolaran moved into place, slowly swinging the bag off his back and removing the first device. "Check it over before we go..."

"I'm on it," was Arthur's brief response as he confirmed the remote frequency and the ionic charges running through the bomb's circuitry. When he stopped, he opened up a small panel on the side and indicated a spot where several circuit pathways merged. "Plug the adapter here. It's sensitive enough to respond to a minor charge, but not enough to detonate prematurely." As he made way for the CSO, he wondered half-jokingly, "If your hobby's making old detonators, remind me to keep you away from the torpedo bay, lieutenant."

Tolaran laughed, and looked at Arthur "There's an interesting story I will tell you later about my time at the Academy when we tasked with finding obscure ways to get out certain situations, it was at that point I learnt that whilst we are very technically advanced, sometimes the older stuff can still be just as effective..."

He turned back and attached the detonator to the circuitry Arthur had indicated, he then double checked the connections and checked the timer, making sure everything was ready to go.

With Arthur and Tolaran hard at work, Alenis scanned the chamber for Borg activity with her eyes. A few probes buzzed around, but it "So, Doctor, I bet when you were assigned to the Portland you didn't think you would be doing surgery on a Borg transwarp conduit, did you?"

Brad had been thinking about the Captain. When they first met she came in for a refill on her sleeping pill prescription. It was all she could do just to get a halfway decent night's sleep. PTSD from her battle with the Borg on the New Algiers. He hoped she was holding out ok.

"No not exactly what I had envisioned my assignment would be Captain. My first tour was aboard the Paul Revere and it was mundane and routine. Nearly bored me to death but that would be a terrible way for a doctor to die. Now on the Portland... well its been quite unusual to say the least from day one."

"The unusual is what we do," replied Alenis, flipping the sight of her compression rifle up and down.
"We--"

She was cut off by a Borg probe appearing directly in front of her and Brad. "Stay calm, no sudden movements," she said, clutching her compression phaser rifle tightly. Out of one of the arms of the probe, a scanning beam was projected, the horizontal beam moving up and down, scanning first Brad and then Alenis.

The scanning beam. To Alenis, it looked just like the tractor beam that had captured the Gol only moments before its destruction. Shaking in her magnetic boots, she gritted her teeth and stared up at the probe, clutching her rifle tightly and ready to bring it to bear at a moment's notice.

Suddenly, the probe spun around and pointed another arm at Alenis. Ducking just in time, when she looked up, she could see two assimilation tubules jammed into the neutronium plating behind her. "Fire!" she shouted, bringing her rifle to bear and blasting away at the probe.

To be continued...

A little stroll (Part III)

Shortly after "The two shuttles..."

Borg unicomplex, NGC-3814 Nebula

Authors: Captain Alenis Meru, Lieutenant Brad Silverton, Lieutenant Arthur Reynolds, Lieutenant (JG) Tolaran Kian

The combined compression phaser blasts from her and the doctor made short work of the probe, but had definitely alerted the Borg. The activity inside the chamber picked up and focused intently on the infiltrators. "Kian, Reynolds, please tell me you're ready to go!" shouted Alenis.

"Oh your kidding me!!!" Tolaran growled out a response they wouldn't have long before the rest of the Borg turned up "Arthur, quickly, enter your activation sequence and lets lock this down, hopefully the Borg will be too busy trying to get us that they will miss this rammed down a hole!"

Without having to be asked, Arthur had already begun sending his temporary activation code to the tricobalt device the moment he heard the quiet humming of the probe nearby. Once he was finished, he quickly gave Tolaran a nod to indicate they were ready to activate the timer.

He twisted the timer for the detonator and then sealed the unit, this would make things difficult for anyone to access the timer and the display on the front began to countdown...

"We're done Captain, as best as we can be given the circumstances anyway!" Yelled Tolaran, sweat beginning to run down down his forehead, they could die right here and that was something he did not want to happen.

"Good enough for me!" With that, Alenis pressed a couple buttons on her wrist, telling the winch to pull them back towards the shuttle as fast as possible. "Hold on tight, and watch for obstacles!" she added as the four Portland crewmen were yanked back in the direction they came. "Ensign White, prepare to get us out of here!"

Grabbing the tether with one hand to steady herself, Alenis glanced over her shoulder to see the other three trailing behind her. With the other hand, she clutched her compression rifle and took aim

at an approaching probe. She fired, but attempting to shoot a compression rifle with one hand, even in zero gravity, her shots went wide.

After one last check, Arthur ducked out from the crevice and grabbed his phaser. Before he could even remove it from his holster, however, a drone stepped around the corner and nearly collided with him. If it wasn't for the countless years he spent learning to fight and survive, he wouldn't have been able to recover and dodge the Borg's attempt to assimilate him. From even a cursory glance, he realized any attempt at hand-to-hand fighting with something covered in so much metal would be an exercise in futility, so instead of engaging the drone, he tried to put some distance between himself and it. "We've got company!"

Tolaran had pulled his phaser free and saw two tubes shoot out at Arthur who dodged it, seemingly effortlessly in space... zero g combat training at the academy was definitely paying off today for them he raised his phaser but had to wait, the drone was directly behind Arthur and he couldn't shoot until he moved "ARTHUR, DODGE RIGHT" he yelled hoping that Arthur would move in time as he fired, the beam passed through space towards the drone, and Arthur...

Perhaps it was the adrenaline, or perhaps Arthur stubbornly defied his own fears of fighting in zero gravity, but either way, he just so happened to be fast enough not only to dodge the drone, but also respond in time to Tolaran's warning. With his back now up against the relay, he let out a grunt and looked at Tolaran with an incredulous look. "Thanks." That being said, no matter how insincere it sounded, Arthur pushed off the hull towards his crewmates while facing and aiming in the opposite direction. In one careful and sustained shot, he sealed the hatch the drone had emerged from.

"You're welcome..." Tolaran turned back around and followed the Captain, it was either shoot the Borg and let Arthur die and once they were through this he'd better buy him a drink at least...

Accelerating towards the probe which was blocking their exit, Alenis clutched her rifle tightly. With the probe blocking the only way out, for a brief instant, Alenis knew that unless some miracle happened, this was it. The Borg would finish what they had started at New Algiers. On her waist was a photon grenade; she wouldn't let them take her alive. If she was about to be assimilated, she would pull the pin and spit her last breath at them.

But then, an opportunity presented itself in the form of Newton's third law. The probe had an exposed tank of high pressure gas to power its pneumatic construction tools. Alenis took careful aim and fired a few shots, one of which pierced the tank, sending the escaping gas spraying out into space and sending the probe spiralling out of the way. Releasing her rifle, she tapped a few buttons on the control panel on her wrist, activating her thrusters. She was accelerating towards the exit with the other three in tow, and without some careful application of thrust, they would find themselves slammed against a wall or some other obstruction.

"Activate thrusters!" she shouted, dodging a beam jutting across the opening as she flew by.

Training or not, Arthur wasn't particularly a natural at operating a standard space suit. He fumbled with the wrist control for a moment before following Alenis, though he had to make far more corrections to adjust for inertia, causing him to lag behind somewhat. His inability to control his own suit for such quick maneuvers which didn't involve using his own muscles meant that as soon as the Borg tried to prevent their escape with any cutting beams or forcefields, Arthur would most likely be in trouble. His jagged course didn't help matters either.

Tolaran activated his thrusters, pulling his arms tightly into his sides as he saw Arthur trying to get his own suit under control, it was never easy but he was sure he'd be fine, he looked ahead and sped up

to reach the Captain, following closely behind her, for a moment he stared out at the vastness of space and could quite happily have forgotten that behind them was a very angry hive or Borg...

Brad fired and dropped another Borg drone that had gotten too close to the others. Luckily, Federation technology had come a long way in combating the Borg but soon they would adapt and be unstoppable. They were Borg after all. It's what they did. He hated killing even if it was the Borg. It seemed so contradictory to his role as doctor. But he was also a Starfleet officer. Sworn to protect the Federation. If the away team failed here, there was no telling what the Borg would do to millions of others. All these thoughts went through Brad's mind but he never hesitated in firing for a second.

Finally, Alenis could see the swirling gases of the nebula ahead -- her literal and metaphorical light at the end of the tunnel. But a probe was moving to block her path. "Hold on tight!" she shouted as she tapped a couple buttons on her arm, dumping all her remaining fuel into her thrusters, giving her one last burst of speed as she pulled her senior officers to freedom.

Overload, Part I

NGC-3814 Nebula

During and after "A little stroll"

Authors: Lt. (JG) Marcus Kallan, Ensign Kahn'r Dai, Captain Alenis Meru, Lieutenant (JG) Sera Williams, Shras th'Karath (played by Alenis Meru)

Shuttle 1:

While Kallan worked on the distraction he'd mentioned, hopefully coming up with something other than the idea that would get them all blown to atoms, Kahn'r had been quietly watching the sensors. There were not many of them to begin with and this close to all the exotic energy that was being generated by the Borg's transwarp hub it made his screen flicker with static and interference. Everything had been quiet out there. Too quiet. Kahn'r had caught the signals of the commando team moving towards the complex but lost them as soon as they made contact. Life signs and comm badges were too weak for him to pick up at this distance.

"They'll be fine," Kahn'r announced, cheerily, to the other men on board. It was hard to appear relaxed though with his face nearly glued to the flickering monitor, eyes intent on any sort of signal. Minutes went by and a drop of sweat worked its way down in between the pilot's shoulder blades. Then- "I'm picking up something," he announced, sounding hesitant at first but growing more confident, and more worried, as he went on. "There's weapons fire onboard the complex!" That was an energy pattern strong enough to register. "Maybe now would be a good time to, I dunno, make the Borg look the other way?"

"Increased activity on Borg subspace frequencies," Marcus said, intently studying his sensor readouts. Glancing over to the other officers, he said, "The Borg are mobilizing." He opened a comm. =/\= "Kallan to Portland. Get ready, Sera." =/\=

As soon as she was inside the shuttle, Alenis was popping off her helmet and barking out orders. "Get us out of here, Ensign!" she shouted as she made a beeline for the co-pilot's seat and opened up a channel to the other shuttle. "Ensign Dai, abort and return to the Portland, NOW!"

However, as the shuttle pulled away from the unicomplex, it suddenly slammed to a halt. Out of the windshield, Alenis could see a green glow, one that she had seen before - on the USS Gol. They were

trapped, in the clutches of a Borg sphere...

USS Portland:

Sera had been monitoring the group's progress from the Engineering station on the Bridge. Shras had only reminded Tim around a thousand times about how important the Dark Energy experiment was. When Marcus' voice came over the comm, Sera took a look at the situation. The two shuttles were too far for the Portland to use a tractor beam and just about any conventional method would be too slow or wouldn't allow the Portland to escape.

With a last look at the technical readouts of all of the Portland's systems mixed with all of the meetings with the other departments about the nebula's makeup, Sera knew what had to be done. She stood from her seat as she muttered, "I... have... a plan." She looked hurriedly at Commander Rouse, "Commander, keep the shuttle doors open and be ready to get out of here when the shuttles are aboard. I'll be in Engineering." Almost pausing mid-stride, Sera added, "I'm not going to lose the Captain a second time."

"Wait, what are you..." Shras paused mid-sentence. "No! I protest! This is too risky, and you'll burn out--"

Despite the Andorian's protest, Sera barely gave him a look as she said, "I have to do this." Fortunately for Sera, the Miranda's were rather small vessels and the turbolift trip to Engineering was a short one. As she stepped through the doors, she ordered, "Dark Energy crew, evacuate Engineering. This is not a drill!"

Overload, Part I

NGC-3814 Nebula

During and after "A little stroll"

Authors: Lt. (JG) Marcus Kallan, Ensign Kahn'r Dai, Captain Alenis Meru, Lieutenant (JG) Sera Williams, Shras th'Karath (played by Alenis Meru)

Shuttle 1:

While Kallan worked on the distraction he'd mentioned, hopefully coming up with something other than the idea that would get them all blown to atoms, Kahn'r had been quietly watching the sensors. There were not many of them to begin with and this close to all the exotic energy that was being generated by the Borg's transwarp hub it made his screen flicker with static and interference. Everything had been quiet out there. Too quiet. Kahn'r had caught the signals of the commando team moving towards the complex but lost them as soon as they made contact. Life signs and comm badges were too weak for him to pick up at this distance.

"They'll be fine," Kahn'r announced, cheerily, to the other men on board. It was hard to appear relaxed though with his face nearly glued to the flickering monitor, eyes intent on any sort of signal. Minutes went by and a drop of sweat worked its way down in between the pilot's shoulder blades. Then- "I'm picking up something," he announced, sounding hesitant at first but growing more confident, and more worried, as he went on. "There's weapons fire onboard the complex!" That was an energy pattern strong enough to register. "Maybe now would be a good time to, I dunno, make the Borg look the other way?"

"Increased activity on Borg subspace frequencies," Marcus said, intently studying his sensor readouts. Glancing over to the other officers, he said, "The Borg are mobilizing." He opened a comm. =/\= "Kallan to Portland. Get ready, Sera." =/\=

As soon as she was inside the shuttle, Alenis was popping off her helmet and barking out orders. "Get us out of here, Ensign!" she shouted as she made a beeline for the co-pilot's seat and opened up a channel to the other shuttle. "Ensign Dai, abort and return to the Portland, NOW!"

However, as the shuttle pulled away from the unicomplex, it suddenly slammed to a halt. Out of the windshield, Alenis could see a green glow, one that she had seen before - on the USS Gol. They were trapped, in the clutches of a Borg sphere...

USS Portland:

Sera had been monitoring the group's progress from the Engineering station on the Bridge. Shras had only reminded Tim around a thousand times about how important the Dark Energy experiment was. When Marcus' voice came over the comm, Sera took a look at the situation. The two shuttles were too far for the Portland to use a tractor beam and just about any conventional method would be too slow or wouldn't allow the Portland to escape.

With a last look at the technical readouts of all of the Portland's systems mixed with all of the meetings with the other departments about the nebula's makeup, Sera knew what had to be done. She stood from her seat as she muttered, "I... have... a plan." She looked hurriedly at Commander Rouse, "Commander, keep the shuttle doors open and be ready to get out of here when the shuttles are aboard. I'll be in Engineering." Almost pausing mid-stride, Sera added, "I'm not going to lose the Captain a second time."

"Wait, what are you..." Shras paused mid-sentence. "No! I protest! This is too risky, and you'll burn out--"

Despite the Andorian's protest, Sera barely gave him a look as she said, "I have to do this." Fortunately for Sera, the Miranda's were rather small vessels and the turbolift trip to Engineering was a short one. As she stepped through the doors, she ordered, "Dark Energy crew, evacuate Engineering. This is not a drill!"

To be continued...

Overload, Part II

NGC-3814 Nebula

During and after "A little stroll"

Authors: Lt. (JG) Sera Williams, Ensign Ronald Roberts, Ensign Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru)

As Shras' crew made filed out of Engineering, some grumbling and others happy to be given a break, Sera walked swiftly through the partition. Once through the hatch, which was made a bit stronger after the brawl from a week ago, the Chief Engineer sealed the hatch behind her. She walked slowly up to the Dark Energy Reactor's main console, going over her plan one last time, checking it for errors. Her fingers began to dance on the console as she input commands.

She focused the reactor's field towards the Borg conduit. This would have the effect of putting strain on the background dark matter that wove through the nebula. That strain would have a destabilizing effect on small areas of subspace, cause energy discharges, micro-explosions, and other problems that would shift the Borg's attention off the shuttles and onto more pressing matters, like keeping their complex together. A side effect would be that the reactor itself would come under the same types of stress, which would have an unknown effect on this side of the partition.

Ron had been torn between the dual duties of helping monitor all the systems running on the Portland and actually getting his knowledge up to date in regards to the charming bucket of bolts he now called home. Fortunately Ron was rather fond of buckets of bolts as they held endless possibilities within, but he was not prepared for the possibility of imminent catastrophe. And that's just what seemed to happen when the east side of the wall started to light up like 1962. The techs had left the area and now suddenly the chief engineer had started something... very interesting? Ron ran over to get a look beyond the wall and could do no more than watch in fascination as the event unfolded.

"Sera!" shouted Nikki, as she ran over towards the partition and banged on the hatch. "What are you doing?!"

"I'm saving the ship," Sera shouted towards the hatch as if she had to yell through the wall itself. She input the last few commands to put her plan into action. As soon as the console beeped it's affirmative of her command, the computer's voice began, "Warning: Destabilization of subspace could result. Warning: Evacuate the experimental chamber."

The Dark Energy Reactor began to glow a bit more purple. Small energy arcs began to come off the reactor. On the Borg conduit, the reactions would be much worse, causing damage and explosions as subspace began to be stressed. On the ship, the reactions were a bit more subdued, but still dangerous. Sera couldn't risk opening the hatch to Main Engineering. If an energy arc was sent toward the Warp Core, the Portland would be destroyed.

Sera walked toward the hatch viewport, looking Nikki and Ron in the eyes, "Put the emergency shielding around the Warp Core. As soon as the two shuttles are onboard, use the console by the hatch to pull the Dark Energy to the Warp Core. After a few seconds in Warp, cut the power to the Dark Energy Reactor. If you wait too long, we will have a cascade failure that will breach the Core."

"Got it," Ron answered with a nod before quickly moving to Engineering's main control, leaving the more human aspects of the situation to Nikki. He always felt quite awkward when lives were on the line, which now seemed to be the case. The comforting and the worrying would be left in more capable hands.

"Sera, what are you doing?!" exclaimed Nikki, frozen at the viewport. "The radiation... it's too dangerous! Who knows what it might do to you?!"

"I have to Nikki," Sera started, "it's this or the ship gets blown up or assimilated." As long as the strain on subspace didn't cause an energy discharge in this chamber, she'd be ok. She'd just have to hold on for another couple of minutes.

"No, Sera!" exclaimed Nikki, unable to pry herself from the viewport. "There has to be another way! Get out of there!"

While Nikki set to doing her job Ron quickly focused on the more pressing matters assigned by their

chief engineer. In moments the emergency shielding was brought up around the Portland's warp core. ^= "Ensign Roberts to shuttlebay. I need you to notify me when we have our shuttles back. Helm; On my order you will go to warp and then cut out on my order. After that, with any luck, we'll see if we're still in one piece." ^= And now the waiting game starts, he finished in anxious thought.

Sera jumped back to the Dark Energy Reactor's main console. She tapped out a few more commands, sequencing the final chain of events that would allow the shuttle crew to return and the Portland to escape unharmed. As she tapped the "Execute" button, the hair on the back of her neck started to stand up with the energy in the room. A few energy discharges sparked across the room, making it appear almost like a early 20th Century tesla coil from Earth.

All Nikki could do was bang on the viewport and sob as the radiation levels in the chamber rose.

Overload, Part III

NGC-3814 Nebula

During and after "A little stroll"

Authors: Commander Shras th'Karath (played by Alenis Meru), Commander Timothy Rouse, Locasta of Borg (aka Capt. Kate Banninga), Lt. Sera Williams, Ensign Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru)

Bridge, USS Portland

"Commander Rouse, this is an unacceptable risk," protested Shras. "Leave them behind! They're only a handful of officers, and you're risking the ship and the Dark Energy project for--"

"Shras, shut the hell up!" interrupted Tim, staring up at the screen as the Portland barreled towards the sphere to rescue the shuttles. "Tactical, target that sphere's tractor beams and fire! Helm, bring us between the sphere and the shuttles. Ops, tractor them in, now!"

At the flight control station, Ensign Kat Steel expertly moved the Portland into position. While she didn't know how long a Miranda class would last up against a Borg sphere, she knew a couple shuttles had no chance once the Borg took notice of them, which they quite clearly had. As the sphere's forward tractor beam faltered under the Portland's barrage of phaser fire, Kat used a quick burst of impulse to place the Portland in between the spheres and the shuttles, blocking their shot.

Trading fire with the sphere in an effort to hold them off until the shuttles could be recovered, the Portland's shields were holding -- for now. On the main viewer, Tim could see three cubes closing in, which would make short work of the Portland. And then, without warning, the screen flickered and he was looking at the interior of a Borg cube. A woman was standing in the center of the room, flanked by Borg drones. She was clad in a dark form-fitting suit made of some sort of synthetic material, with fiber optic cables running up and down and across the suit. Her pale face and neck sported a number of cybernetic implants, and, unusually for a Borg, her dark hair remained. Tim immediately recognized her from a personnel file he had reviewed only a couple hours previously.

"Captain Banninga?" he asked.

"I am Locasta of Borg. You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile."

"Commander Timothy Rouse of the USS Portland, Starfleet, United Federation of Planets." Tim studied the woman on the screen intently; he knew the horrors that Locutus had visited upon Starfleet, and could only imagine what this Locasta was capable of.

"I know all your tactics, Starfleet." Though Locasta spoke in a emotionless tone, her body language still conveyed a certain amount of anger that someone would dare intrude on her nebula. "All your strategies, all your secrets. And I know that your ship is no match for my cubes. And as soon as this transwarp gate is online--"

"Commnder, the shuttles have been recovered," interrupted a young bridge officer.

"Sorry, Locasta, it's been a pleasure to meet you but I've got to jet." Tim pressed a button on his chair, cutting the video feed. "Shras, now!"

Shras took a deep breath. He gave himself an eight percent chance of surviving what he was about to do, with a 29% chance that it wouldn't work and he would be killed or assimilated, and a 63% chance that the dark energy reactor would overload and kill them all. The ensuing explosion would probably tear a hole in subspace and cause some sort of singularity. If he wasn't so close to ground zero, Shras would be excited about the opportunity to observe a dark energy explosion. It would greatly benefit his research.

He closed his eyes and pressed his hand against the glowing red touchscreen. This was it.

1.6 light years away...

Bridge, USS Portland.

Catching his breath as consoles exploded all around him, Tim stood up from the floor of the bridge from which he was thrown. "Status!" he called out.

Kat Steel climbed back up into her chair and felt her head. There was a gash there, from where her head smashed into the console on the way down towards the floor. But that wasn't what mattered right now; what mattered was their position. Looking down at the navigational readings on her console, she could hardly believe it. "Captain, we're one point six light-years from our last know position. We're out of the nebula."

"I'm reading fried EPS conduits on all decks, hull breach on deck 4, structural integrity holding," called out Duvall on ops. "Casualty reports coming in, nothing serious yet, sir."

Shras stared down at the readings from the dark energy reactor. It was as he feared. "Cascading overload in the dark energy reactor. Containment failure in ten seconds." He shook his head. The idiocy of the crew of the Portland had finally gotten him killed. "It was nice knowing you, commander."

Engineering, USS Portland

The Dark Energy Reactor looked as though it were going to burst. The energy arcs were getting worse and the sound of popcorn popping rang through the chamber as subspace holes were created and dissolved. Sera immediately ran to the main console. If she didn't do something, the ship would be lost. There was really only one option that would keep the ship together.

The Chief Engineer tapped commands on the console. The Computer voice chimed a warning over the comm system, "Warning: Degaussing the reactor while it is occupied is not allowed, it can create an unsafe environment." Sera responded, "Override safety protocols and execute. Authorization, Williams-One-Alpha-One."

With a beep of affirmation, the Portland created a lighting storm in the space around it. The backed-up energy created a feedback arc that created an arc that began at the Dark Energy Reactor and struck Sera, throwing her into the partition wall. A few moments later, the computer gave the all clear and unlocked the chamber. Sera laid, crumpled against the wall, burns covering where the discharge bolt had struck.

"Noooooooo!" Nikki saw the whole thing, banging on the viewport the entire time and begging Sera to come out. The instant the door unlocked, she was rushing in to save her friend. "Omigod, Sera, are you okay?" she asked, bending down and trying to wake her, to no avail. So, she tapped her comm badge and shrieked an order for the computer to beam the two of them directly to sickbay.

Good grief what was going on? Arcs of energy. Explosions. Traded weapons fire. Not to mention engineering casualties. With a few words uttered by the frantic ensign and a brief flash of energy Ron was now the only person in engineering with even the slightest chance of getting a handle on the quickly escalating situation. And he didn't even know anyone's name!

"You people," he shouted as he pointed at the crewmen in the strange uniforms that had worked on the project on the other side of the wall. "Get back in there and assess the damage! You'll know what to look for better than the rest of us." He then turned to the rest of the yellow shirts in the room. "The rest of you goons help me button down this disaster of a section." He began tapping away at the main engineering console once more, assessing the damage with a focused look and a frown on his face. It didn't look good.

To be continued...

Overload, Part IV

NGC-3814 Nebula

During and after "A little stroll"

Authors: Lt. Brad Silverton, Ensign Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru), Lt. (JG) Sera Williams, PO2 Maria Hill (played by Alenis Meru), Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Capt. Alenis Meru

In the Portland's sickbay, Brad was giving direction to his staff. There should only be some light injuries with the Dark Matter jump having gone as planned, and they were probably out of the worst of it.

In seeming mockery to the doctor's statements, a blue transporter field phased into existence in the middle of sickbay bringing Nikki and Sera with it.

"Doctor!" shouted Nikki, looking up from her friend, tears in her eyes. With singed hair and burn marks on her uniform, Sera was badly burnt. And the radiation... who knew what that was doing to her internals? "Omigod, doctor, please, help Sera," bawled Nikki. As she held her friend's head, she could feel a wetness on her hand. "Doctor," she said, pulling her hand away. "I..."

At the sight of Sera's blood on her hand, Nikki fainted beside her friend.

Brad rushed to Sera's side. "Nikki what hap..." A soft thud arose from beside the doctor as Nikki

slumped over.

Brad hollered out, "Maria I need you now!" He lifted Sera up and placed her on the emergency biobed. As he pulled his right arm out from under her head, he was left with a sizeable and concerning blood smear on his sleeve. Not a good sign at all.

As Brad examined Sera, the question of what happened soon became clear. Dark Energy radiation had flooded and saturated her entire body, and the electrical burn wound on her head clearly indicated the point of entry. The risk of permanent brain damage was high but he couldn't think about that now. He had to get her stabilized.

"Doctor, what do you need?" asked Maria, wheeling over a medcart by his side, loaded with autosutures, bone knitters, vascular regenerators, and every sort of advanced gadget that one might need to treat a trauma patient. She stepped around Nikki; she had clearly just fainted and would probably come to in a few minutes.

"I'm not getting any vitals. We need to revive and stabilize her. Get the cortical stimulator ready..."

Minutes passed, and Sera was in critical but stable condition. She would live. What type of life that would be was still unknown to Brad. Dark Energy was such a new and untested technology there was no telling how much damage there had been done. Hell, he had just been educated by his very patient on the basics just the other day. She could be fine, or her body tissue and organs could be irreversibly liquefying.

Both Brad and Sera seemed to be in luck to find the half-life of Dark Energy was quite short. Most of the radiation had already dissipated. What the long term effects would be was anyone's guess. Brad begun more intensive longer running tests that would take hours to get results. Thankfully there was no immediate dissolving of her body but the damage could still be minute and limited to her DNA.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers in frustration.

"Computer transfer testing procedures to my office terminal. This is going to be awhile I might as well settle in." He then retired to his back office and got back to work.

Sera's eyes shot open. They revealing an almost turquoise green as opposed to her regular emerald eyes, only noticeable to those who would know her well enough to notice. The devices reading her vitals began sounding alarms as all of them showed a patient in severe distress. In a panicked voice, she called, "Where am I?" Sera then began to fight to get up. Then increasing in volume, she added, "Let me go! I need to get out of here!"

Standard Starfleet protocol dictates that for unconscious patients with unknown conditions and unknown side effects to be held within a restraintment field, for theirs and others protection. It was for precisely the current situation in the Portland's sickbay that that protocol was created for. Brad came running out of his office as soon as he heard Sera awake. "Sera its ok. You're safe. You're in sickbay", Brad said as he arrived by her side at the biobed.

Hearing Sera's cries, Maria stepped away from Nikki, who was coming to, and to Brad's side. On the way, she grabbed a couple hyposprays; analgesics and sedatives, in case the doctor needed them to dull the pain or calm the patient, but as she came to Brad's side, she felt herself pushed away.

"Sera, omigod, I was so worried about you!" exclaimed Nikki, who had darted over to her friend. "You... you saved the ship."

Sera gave Nikki a look that neither confirmed or denied that she understood what she was hearing. Williams could momentarily feel her friend's relief. Her relief, a deep down fear that the doctor's germ collection was attempting to escape from their confinement and make her sick, and the emotions that had made the Engineer faint in the first place. With that, Sera fell back into unconsciousness.

"Well." Brad said surprised, and to no one in particular. "That was unusual." Turning to Maria he said, "If she comes to again in an agitated state put her back under. I don't want anything to complicate her state until the tests are done, and we know her condition."

Brad retired back to his office to continue researching Sera's condition.

Bridge, USS Portland

With only a second to go until he was vapourized in an explosion, his remains being spread through multiple dimensions, Shras closed his eyes and prepared as best he could for oblivion. It was truly tragic, the loss of a mind as great as his. If only he had more time to perfect his inventions...

But instead of the afterlife, when he opened them he was still on the bridge of the Portland. Either he somehow survived, or he had perished along with the Portland crew and was condemned to his own private hell -- being trapped on the Portland for all eternity.

"Status!" called out Tim, hearing the klaxons beginning to subside.

=^= "Serious but stable condition, sir! Taking care of it now," ^= shouted the de facto chief engineer over the comm before it quickly shut back off.

It was at that moment that Alenis, panting heavily, arrived on the bridge. Her uniform was ragged, she had a bruise on her forehead, and she was covered in sweat, but she was here. Looking up at the viewscreen, she could see the nebula off in the distance. "Mister Rouse..."

"Captain," started Tim, vacating the center chair, "we used the dark energy reactor for some sort of subspace jump. I don't fully understand it, but we're safe, 1.6 light years away from the nebula. Damage and casualty reports are coming in, but it doesn't look like anything too serious--"

"Sir, Ma'am," called out Duvall, "we have one casualty. Lieutenant Williams is in sickbay, suffering from severe radiation poisoning."

Alenis looked up at Tim, pain in her eyes. Seeing your crew come to harm in the line of duty was never easy. But Sera... she was too young, and her career was too promising. Less than a year out of the academy, she had been made Chief Engineer and was by all accounts an excellent officer. And, on a personal level, Sera was one of the ones who in the alternate future risked everything trying to save her.

Alenis swallowed the lump in her throat. "Tim, take us out of here. I..." She paused for a moment, thinking of Sera lying in sickbay. Radiation poisoning was one of the worst ways to die, especially for someone so young. "I need to give Admiral Washington a call."
