



When: After Escaping the Borg Nebula

Who: Marcus Kallan and Sera Williams

Where: Sickbay, USS Portland

Sickbay was not on the top of Marcus' list to visit, especially not with the chance of running into Dr. Silverton. Still, he had someone to visit, and that warranted the risk of another confrontation with Brad. He arrived at Sickbay, a cube of transparent aluminum in his hands with some sort of purplish, scintillating crystal embedded within it. Discreetly inquiring with a nurse as to where Sera was laid out, he headed over to her where her biobed was. He waited to make sure he wasn't interrupting a treatment or a nap or anything like that.

Sera turned her head toward the door as her name was spoken. Before she could see who it had been, she had an almost gut feeling that Marcus was visiting. Three minutes ago had marked the longest that she had been conscious for however long she had been in Sickbay. As Marcus became visible, Sera greeted him with her best attempt at a smile. The Cortical Stimulator on her forehead and the various other medical devices attached to her must have made her look like a machine. Sera gave a simple welcome, "Hello Marcus, I'm glad you made it back to the ship."

"Hey, trooper," Marcus said as he approached. "All in a day's work, y'know? You look like hell." While talking, he turned the cube over in his hands; the crystal didn't seem to retain its shape, shifting from pattern to pattern. "I wanted to come in and check up on you. You know, I kind of feel a *tiiniy* pang of guilt for you almost getting killed because of my idea."

As Marcus talked, Sera felt a sizable amount of guilt for something that she couldn't place. Rubbing her head for a moment to try to clear her mind, she reassuringly responded, "All of us are still here." It was then that Sera noticed what the Chief of Operations was carrying. Nodding at the cube, she asked, "What's in the box?"

"So when we cracked open Engineering, we had a fair amount of contamination to clean up," Marcus explained. "And since I know just enough about subspace harmonics and subdomains to be dangerous, they called me in to help. Ever hear of subspace manifold intrusion-calcification? Well, this is it." He placed the cube beside Sera's biobed, next to whatever other flowers or personal items she's had brought to her. "Most of the intrusions dissolved immediately. It's got a half life of about three days, as subspace is resolving itself back to normal, but I thought it was kind of pretty. And it completely ignores Euclidian space,

so I put it in specimen container treated with a warp field. It's its own pocket of reality. Neat, huh?" He shrugged. This was the closest anyone was ever going to get flowers from Marcus.

Sera took a look at her new gift, it really was her own small part of real subspace. Sera was mesmerized by the way the substance changed shape and color. In all honesty, it was better than a dozen flowers or a well-wishing card. "Thank you, that is a great gift," she said with real appreciation. Pointing at a half eaten tray of protein cubes on a retractable table near the biobed, Sera said, "The hospital food would meet your highly refined tastes." There was a hint of playfulness in her voice, at least as much as a person in her shoes could muster.

He glanced over at the tray. "Supplement twenty three. It's not bad. Kind of tastes like chicken." Marcus looked back at Sera, his expression turning a mixture of hesitant and confused. "Hey, I, uh, wanted to tell you. I had a dream about you." He fidgeted a little. "About us. It was weird. I got hurt in an accident very similar to what you went through. Ended up needing biosynthetic replacements across half of my body. You ended up helping me through it all." Why was he telling her this? "I guess I'm trying to tell you that, if you need anything, I'll be holding Engineering together for you." He smirked. "You know, because Nikki isn't having any meltdowns over you or anything." He seemed to take some kind of sarcastic pleasure in her discomfort for whatever reason.

Sera couldn't help but feel bad for her friend in Engineering. The poor woman had almost put Quark's tavern in lockdown after the ever infamous sand pea incident, Sera shuddered to think about what was happening in Engineering now. Going back to what Marcus said, "I saw something about that too. It was our future selves bringing back the Captain." She paused for a moment then continued with an intentionally vague response, "I remember that that future me was devastated when the..." what was that ship called, "The E... Eclipse stopped chasing the Portland."

Marcus frowned; he was clearly being careful with his language because Sera was in such bad shape. "Just a dream, Sera. The danger's over now."

For some reason, she knew Marcus was having a much more difficult time being here than he was showing. Getting a bit more serious, she returned, "I appreciate the offer and the help. I'll ask if I need anything. No matter what Nikki says, it's good to have you aboard." She added a smile to the last part of what she said. She then asked, "How did you make it out of the unicomplex? I was a bit... unconscious at the time."

Getting a warning look from one of the nurses, Marcus patted Sera on the arm. "Look, I'll visit you soon, all right? You need to rest." There was no need to overload her with details. "I'll see you soon, all right?"

Sera nodded her head, she was a little disappointed that he didn't tell her what happened. She knew that he had his reasons, so she simply replied, "I expect a list of the best food supplement cubes by the time you return." Almost before he turned around to leave, she quickly added, "And be careful, that dream vision, or whatever it was... it better not happen."

"Don't worry. Dreams can't hurt us, Sera." Perhaps the most gentle thing Marcus Kallan has said or ever will say, he turned to let his friend rest, the light of the subspace intrusion lulling her back to sleep.

When: Sometime between mission Five and Six

Where: Captain's Ready Room

Who: Lt. JG Marcus Kallan and Capt. Alenis Meru

Dropping by the Captain's Ready Room was not high on the list of things for Marcus to do, especially since he spent so much time conversing with her holographic copy. Still, the two had grown distinct in likes and personality that made them more identical sisters than clones of each other. That didn't make Marcus' off-bridge interaction with the Captain any easier. Sighing, and swallowing his social anxiety, he pressed the door chime.

"Come in," called out a strained voice from the other side of the room. Now that she had some time to reflect on her interaction with the Borg, Alenis was badly shaken, and not even Ko-ko could calm her. A part of her wanted to find her relief in a bottle of springwine, but she had promised Timothy that she wouldn't.

"Ah, Lieutenant Kallan," she called out as the doors whooshed open, Ko-ko pivoting to face him as well. "Can I get you a mug of tea or something form the replicator?"

"No, sir, but thank you," Marcus replied, coming to halt in the center of the room. He was fidgeting with his hands, left thumb occasionally sawing against his index finger in some sort of nervous tic. "Um, sir, I'll cut to the chase. I have a personal request of you, if that's all right."

"Oh?" asked Alenis, glancing down at Marcus' hands, recognizing that something was wrong. Ko-ko, using her empathetic abilities, also detected some anxiety and let out some calming coos. "What is it, Lieutenant?"

"I went to see Sera, er, Lt. Williams, in Sickbay. And it came up that we've both had dreams, or visions if you believe in that kind of thing. And that they are both of an alternate future where I ended up in an accident much like what she went through with the dark matter reactor... except a lot worse." Marcus began to pace. "There was a lot of subspace tessellation during the reactor overload, which means, potentially, a lot of alternate realities could have touched. And the probability of both of us having the same dream is impossible without external influence, so... I guess..."

Marcus stopped pacing. He looked at Ko-ko. He looked at Alenis. "Captain, did I die? In the alternate timeline, I mean."

Alenis took a deep breath. She hadn't talked much about her death and resurrection in the months since it happened. She didn't even tell Tim the whole story, never mind Muldur and Lucsly from DTI. "Marcus," she said, speaking slowly and deliberately. "You have to realize that what I saw was just one possible future out of an infinite number of possibilities. And

that this future has already been invalidated by my continued presence in our timeline."

"Forgive me, sir, but I don't care about causality and timeline integrity crap," Marcus spat, almost shouting. He gestured backward, pointing. "I have what amounts to my only friend on this boat laid out in Sickbay after being exposed to tessellating subspace quanta of unknown frequency and intensity. Do you know what that does to our biology? She's lucky she's alive!" He lowered his voice. "And it was my idea. I did something similar in the other timeline, didn't I? And then later, I sacrificed myself to save the Portland, didn't I? Some... some kind of Borg freak."

Alenis was taken aback by Marcus' response. Aside from the fact that it was disrespectful to a superior officer, it was out of character. She didn't know Marcus to be one to get emotional over anything. Sarcastic, maybe, but not emotional.

Standing up from her desk, Alenis rose to nearly eye level with Marcus. "Lieutenant," she started, reminding him of the difference in rank, "first, you're going to have to calm down and remember how to address your superior officers. Second..." She paused and let out a sigh. Marcus was right, and the fact that the three of them all had the same vision couldn't be a coincidence. Her eyes fell down towards the bottom left drawer of her desk. She had promised Tim that she wouldn't touch the stuff, but between the Borg outside, Sera in sickbay, and the return of these visions, she figured that now was as appropriate time as any.

Leaning over, she opened a desk drawer and produced two small glasses. Then, a glass bottle with Bajoran markings on it. "Not all Bajoran spirits come from the celestial temple," she said as she poured the clear liquid into the two glasses and then put the bottle away. "Drink, Lieutenant," she added, sliding one of the glasses across her desk. "It clears the mind."

Marcus regarded the glass as if he were calculating something, perhaps the odds as to whether or not it would make him ill enough to warrant a trip to Sickbay. Exhaling a sigh, he took up the glass and drank. "Hmm, not bad. Never had springwine before." Looking down at his shoes for a moment, he said, "I apologize, sir. I don't know why I'm so upset about Sera. Ever since the dreams started, and then Sera saying she experienced something similar... it made me recall my studies of anti-time echoes and alternate subspace realities and... well, the mind goes to Warp 9 pretty quick."

"It's all right, Lieutenant, temporal mechanics can drive one to drink," replied the captain, raising her glass. Then, with a smooth motion, she downed half the contents and placed the glass back on the desk. Taking a deep breath to regain her composure and control the strong aftertaste, she looked back towards Marcus. "If you want the truth, Lieutenant, the prophets did show me what happened in that timeline. You're right; you sacrificed yourself to allow the Portland to get away. I suppose in some strange sense then, I owe my life to you and to the crew. But as for why you're having these visions right now..." Alenis took another sip of her drink. "I can't say. The prophets work in mysterious ways, but perhaps dark energy works in ways that are stranger still."

"At first I thought they were just, y'know, subconscious expressions," Marcus explained. "But

when Sera mentioned she, too, had a similar dream, my thoughts immediately went to the alternate timeline." He eyed his glass. "Oh, and the fact that we might still have some subspace contamination on the ship. Or that the clean-up crew was exposed to more tessellated energy than previously expected. I'll recommend everyone get a check-up with Sickbay again, just to be sure." He winced -- rumors were beginning to circulate about his regular butting of heads with Dr. Silverton.

"Level with me, sir, if you would indulge me... there's one other thing that doesn't make sense. I got the impression that Sera and I..." Marcus shook his head. "...were closer than friends." It was hard for him to say, despite he and Sera having a good working relationship. "I can't imagine someone like her falling for a jerk like me."

"Well, Lieutenant, I'm sure you have your redeeming qualities," replied Alenis. She had seen that they were close in the alternate future, but how close, she didn't know. Raising her glass again, she finished her sentence. "...whatever those are."

Marcus shrugged. He didn't like that answer, but he had already pressed further than was appropriate. He finished the drink and placed the glass on her desk. "Sorry to bother you, sir. I'll... I'm going to go think."

When: Sometime before Episode Six

Where: USS Portland, somewhere in the Alpha Quadrant

Who: Ensign Malbi and Lieutenant JG Marcus Kallan

Title: Welcome, Warrior?

Marcus swore under his breath as he thumbed angrily at his PADD. He had intended on reading up on the Portland's new computer specialist before she arrived, but with the aftermath of the nebula still keeping people busy, as well as the planning of the return mission, it slipped his mind. And now, he couldn't find much about the Ensign called 'Malbi tai-Konjah' other than she was an Ensign and that this was her first real assignment.

Oh, and she was a Klingon.

When the signal came from the USS Canterbury that they were within transporter range, the transporter chief on duty let Marcus know. He looked up from his PADD and nodded grimly. "Right. Energize, chief."

Malbi was still not used to transporters. She by far preferred shuttlecraft and such, but beggars can't be choosers. As her particles reassembled, she could make out two figures in the room: one operating the transporter, and the other, in yellow, she assumed was her new boss. She'd done her research, his name was Lt JG Marcus Kallan, Chief of Operations, a Human from Mars. He looked tough. She respected that.

As she fully materialized, Malbi resisted the urge to look down and make sure that all her limbs were still in their proper places. Instead, she stepped off the transporter pad and up to

her new commanding officer, giving him her best salute and saying, "Ensign Malbi tai-Konjah, reporting for duty, sir."

"Relax, Ensign, this isn't the Academy," Marcus replied. Tough wasn't a word that described Marcus, who was more lanky and tall than anything, although he had a dry wit about him that some Klingons, in his experience, found refreshing. "No need to salute or make believe you're in the marines or anything." He indicated towards the exit. "I'll show you to your quarters. I think you're the first in that room, so you get to pick your bunk. Fun times."

Malbi nodded, not how she was supposed to act if her usual academy-trained way wasn't what he wanted. So she followed him out the exit, and decided a smile might be in order. She wasn't very good at appearing happy, but she replied anyways, "Thank you, I'm glad I'll finally get top bunk."

As they headed towards the turbolift, Marcus made smalltalk. "So, uh, I've read over your record, as much as has been sent over so far, anyway. Good grades. Uneventful cadet cruise. Got a specialty, or are you a general computer nerd?" Somewhat informal, this one is...

"I started programming computers and robotics when I was young, continued that at the academy, and that's about as specific as it gets. I can also work with the hardware as well, but programming is where I like to work," Malbi replied. She had never really thought about it much, he just did whatever she thought would be the best path to discovering information about her past. She was about to add about how she had started as a hacker, hacking the Starfleet database, but she knew from 5 years in Starfleet that some people didn't approve of that. So she pushed that aside to perhaps mention at a later date.

Malbi waned to ask the man about himself, but she never knew how to ask a superior officer anything personal. Heck, she didn't know how to ask her own peers anything, so she just kept quiet. Maybe this made her seem distant and impersonal, but at least she didn't seem like a fool.

"Good. We've some hairy and complex systems running on the Portland, and I'd be glad to involve you." Marcus pressed the call button for the turbolift. Rocking on his heels, he looked as uncomfortable with smalltalk as Malbi felt. So he went with what he knew, dry humour. "So, uh, headbutt anyone interesting lately?"

Malbi snorted, trying to keep the sass out of her voice as she replied, "No, Starfleet doesn't take to kindly to that kind of... interaction." The turbolift opened and she stepped in, then continued. "But if they ever choose to amend their rules on physical assault, I'm sure I'd find someone to headbutt." She joked, hoping her humor wasn't too morbid.

As Marcus stepped in to follow his new computer specialist, Marcus nodded appreciatively. And right before the doors closed, Marcus said, "I think we're going to get along just fine, Ensign. Welcome aboard."

Skot reporting in

Captain's Office, USS Portland

Sometime between mission five and six

Authors: Skot Petryr, Alenis Meru

Initially tasked with being part of the relief effort for Nova Europa, when it became clear that there was nothing left to relieve, Skot was transferred mid-flight to the USS Portland and had just gotten off his shuttle. He had heard about the Captain being Bajoran, and was genuinely looking forward to reporting in. He grew up on Bajor and thus knew all about the prophets, and knew they were with him this, and every, time.

Inside her office, Alenis was deep in prayer. With their encounter with the Borg, her flock had been through a lot, and one of her crew members, Lieutenant Williams, was clinging to life in sickbay. Not to mention the fact that she still had not quite gotten over her last encounter with the Borg years ago, when the ship she was on was destroyed. But, instead of seeking the answers as the bottom of a bottle of springwine as per usual, she was now looking to the prophets for guidance.

Hearing a chime at the door, Alenis quickly rolled up her prayer mat. "Come in," she called out as she fiddled with the piece of rope she used to tie around her mat to keep it rolled up.

Skot stepped inside, coming to attention before speaking, "Lieutenant Junior Grade Petryr Skot reporting in." He went with the standard way of introducing oneself on Bajor, since he knew there'd be no confusion about his family name here.

"Welcome aboard, Mr. Skot," replied Alenis, recognizing him immediately from his personnel file. Placing her prayer mat in the corner, she sauntered over to a side table and turned on her kettle. "Would you like a cup of tea? My office has the best selection of Bajoran teas in the sector."

"Yes sir." It had been a long time since he had a good cup of Bajoran tea, the replicators mess it up worse than coffee most times. "That would be such a welcome taste, real Bajoran tea."

"All right; two mugs of Pyrellian ginger tea coming right up," she said as she began getting the tea ready. Off in the corner of her office Ko-ko was in her cage, taking a little birdnap. "I only had a chance to peruse your personnel file," added Alenis, "why don't you tell me a little about yourself?"

"Well my father is Bajoran, my mother a human who came to help rebuild. She got pregnant, I guess she got tired of the culture, after she had me she left. I was raised on Bajor, and I have this really annoying allergy to some Bajoran foods." Skot hated admitting to his allergies, since he disregarded them and usually just ate whatever he wanted.

"Really?" asked Alenis, raising an eyebrow as she fixed the tea. She was surprised that someone could get tired of the rich culture of Bajor; even though she grew up on Earth and

hadn't returned to Bajor until recently, she would study the culture with an intense fascination. "Moba fruit? I hear a lot of people from the Dakhur area are genetically predisposed to that allergy. Honey or no?"

"Mostly all kinds of fruits and vegetables from our homeworld." Skot admitted, "And yes to the honey."

"Tea with honey..." mumbled Alenis as she stirred a dab of honey into both glasses. After garnishing both with a mint leaf, she turned and delivered Skot his drink. "So, you were raised by just your father then?"

"Yeah, never met my mother. My father says the Prophets meant it to be that way, but I sometimes doubt that they even cared." He felt bad talking about the Prophets like that, but sometimes it seemed that way.

Alenis paused, surprised that a Bajoran could have these sorts of negative opinions towards the prophets. She gazed out at the stars once more; growing up on Earth, the prophets weren't as big of a part of her life until recently. Sure, she had worn the earrings, studied the culture, and gone through the motions, but she was a rationalist at heart. Not until her recent experiences with visions and coming back from the dead had she had her religious awakening.

Placing her tea down on the desk she stepped forward and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Lieutenant, do you mind if I feel your pagh?"

Skot was slightly startled, not by the request itself but more by its abruptness and lack of warning. He was used to many Bajorans just grabbing his ear upon their first meeting that he hadn't really noticed that it wasn't done yet. "Oh...yeah, why wouldn't I be?"

"Some people aren't comfortable with that," replied Alenis as she gently squeezed his left earlobe between her thumb and forefinger. She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to feel his very essence. "Your pagh is strong, Lieutenant," she said, releasing him and returning to her desk. "At the risk of crossing the boundaries between a Starfleet captain and a Vedek, I'd suggest that the prophets often work in mysterious ways. Even tragic, senseless events make us who we are, both as individuals and as a people."

"You sound a lot like my father, he'd say the same thing. I do know one thing, if the prophets tell me to go somewhere, I'm going." Skot said, before continuing. "I'm not really good at it, but could I feel yours?"

Alenis smirked slightly at the comment about her being like Skot's father. As the ship's captain, she felt in some ways as though she was a parent to the hundreds of people on the Portland. More than just telling them what to do, she would look out for their safety, provide them with guidance, and try to support them in their development as officers as people. "Go ahead," she said, "just don't squeeze it too hard."

"I've never been able to quite get it down, but any practice helps." Skot said, gently

squeezing Alenis's left earlobe. He closed his eyes, trying to get it right. After a few moments, he let go with a sigh. "Still nothing."

"That's alright, I never quite got the hang of it until recently," replied Alenis. "So, have you been to sickbay yet?"

"Ah, not yet. I was going to go there next. How's the CMO's competency level?"

"According to his records, Doctor Silverton is a brilliant young doctor," replied Alenis, taken aback by the bluntness of Skot's question. "Plus he's saved more than one life on the Portland so far, so I can't really complain. Though, we do have a patient who is suffering from radiation exposure, and I see that you have a specialty in that field..."

"Yes, the prophets told me to go that route. It's come in handy a few times, so I can't complain." Skot was more at ease when talking about his specialty and medicine in general.

"Well then, I shan't keep you much longer." Alenis pressed a button on her terminal to pull up Skot's transfer orders. Pressing her thumb against the screen, she formally signed his transfer papers and with a swipe of the finger sent the official acceptance notice to Skot's PADD. "Report to Lieutenant Silverton at your earliest convenience, and if you need any help settling in, contact Commander Rouse. Welcome to the Portland, Lieutenant Skot."

Chief Morale Officer to the rescue!

Sickbay, USS Portland

Before the briefing

Authors: Captain Alenis Meru, Lt. Brad Silverton, Lt. (JG) Skot Petryr, Lt. (JG) Sera Williams, Acting Ensign Ko-ko (played by Alenis Meru)

By now, most of the Portland crew had gotten used to Alenis' pet bird, so that she didn't even bat an eye when walking through the corridors of the ship, Ko-ko perched upon her shoulder. While Alenis was headed down to sickbay, it was her companion who had the most business to attend to. As captain of the ship, it would be remiss of Alenis to allow one of her crew who was in severe pain and confined to a biobed to go without a visit from the Chief Morale Officer.

"Hello doctor," asked Alenis, spotting Brad as she stepped through the doors of sickbay. "Doctors," she added, spotting Skot as well. "How is the patient?"

Ko-ko just tilted her head at Brad; she had recognized the man from previous visits to this room of his. The last time she was here, the man held a strange metal object up to her and then injected her with something. She didn't know what it was, but she did know that whatever the man did, she felt better afterwards. And that the man didn't like it when she pecked at his tricorders. The other man, she didn't recognize, but he was wearing the same clothes as the first.

"Captain," Brad said slightly surprised. "It's difficult to tell right now. She keeps going in and

out of consciousness, but she remains stable. She doesn't appear to be in any immediate danger like normal radiation would cause, but the long term affects..." Brad shakes his head in response to his own statement. "this dark energy radiation is unlike anything I have seen before. Radiation poisoning is not my specialty though. Its actually perfect timing for Lt Skot here to join us. He's been a huge help with Sera."

"I've just been using Hyronalin to slow down and temporarily counter its effects. If its similar to Theta Radiation then I'll change it to Arithrazine. Won't know anything until after we get the readings back" Skot said, since this was his specialty.

"Have your treatments been effective so far?" asked Alenis.

Brad responded to the Captain. "We've had mixed results. Her internal organs tissue all appear fine and no damage. However there is a very small but detectable trace of the dark energy radiation. A doctor probably would miss it unless they were specifically looking for it. Its unlike anything we have really encountered before. Dark energy is after all still very experimental for all the sciences. Then there are the outbursts."

Brad didn't mean to make a dramatic pause. It just sort of happened as he collected his thoughts.

"In the beginning. Sera would slip in and out of consciousness. Sometimes shouting. Sometimes just raising her head, looking around, and then going back unconscious. It is obviously linked with the radiation but we aren't sure how."

Alenis glanced towards her chief engineer and then back towards Brad. Even Ko-ko, who couldn't understand the words that the humans and Bajorans were saying, but she could tell with her empathic abilities that whatever it was, it was distressing.

"Is it brain damage?" asked Alenis.

Brad replied, "Not that I can tell Captain. At least there is no physical evidence of it, though Lt. Skot might have better insight on that."

"It could be, still too early to tell." Skot said, "although it doesn't seem like it'll develop any time soon."

With Ko-ko perched on her shoulder, Alenis walked towards Sera. Lying there in the biobed, she looked pale and weak. A number of sensors placed on her body picked up detailed readings, checking for the extent of the damage caused by the radiation poisoning.

"Lieutenant Williams," said Alenis in a soft voice, loud enough to get her attention but not loud enough to wake her if she was sleeping.

Sera stirred a bit. She had been told that she had been drifting in and out, but all of her times being away seemed to run together. She felt exhausted and really wasn't quite sure what had happened. Her last memory was running to Engineering, desperate to get the ship out of danger.

Detecting movement, Alenis stepped forward. "Lieutenant Williams, you have a visitor."

In a raspy, weak voice, Sera said, "Why hello Koko. Thank you for the visit." She attempted a smile, but it probably wasn't her best. Turning a bit serious, the Chief Engineer asked, "Are we safe, Captain?"

"Yes," replied Alenis as she held her arm out, a signal for Ko-ko to transfer herself onto her wrist. Gently, she placed the bird next to the head of Sera's bed, where it immediately started emitting a series of calming coos. "I've been told by Ensign Roberts and Ensign Barclay that you saved the ship."

A look of relief crossed Sera's face. "I'm glad I could help. And I'm glad that all of you made it back. And that everyone is safe," she rambled a bit. Her hand went up to Koko, trying to gently pet the bird that was cooing just beside her head. Clearing her thoughts for a moment, she asked, "Can I go back to wearing my greys? I don't like the black uniform anymore."

Alenis smiled. It was nice to see that Sera was already thinking about getting out of sickbay. She placed a hand on Sera's other shoulder. "I think as soon as you get out of this hospital gown, I'll let you wear any uniform you want."

Brad added in looking to Sera, "I don't see any reason why you cannot return to duty on the condition that you feel anything abnormal that you alert me or Doctor Skot immediately. Deal?"

"But don't do it if you don't feel you have the strength for it," interjected Alenis. "I suppose we could get Marcus and Nikki to set you up with a video uplink so you can work from sickbay."

Skot remained silent, having learned that stress and too much physical activity might aggravate the radiation poisoning.

The Chief Engineer looked at those around her. Something drew her to the way the new radiation doctor stood silently. "Have Nikki and Marcus put something together when they have time, though I think the new doctor should clear me first. I don't want to create a safety hazard in Engineering." Realizing she had yet to introduce herself to the new doctor, while conscious that is, Sera said, "I'm Sera Williams, the Chief Engineer, though you probably already knew that."

"Yeah I did, and many forms of radiation poisoning can be aggravated by high stress and physical activity, I would highly recommend spending a few more days in sickbay to be sure its not going to come back with more symptoms." Skot said, simply stating the truth.

Nodding her head, Sera shrugged her response, "I can do that." Her voice was full of relief, but she was anxious about returning. Just behind her, a medical tricorder fell to the ground from a tray next to a biobed.

Meet the Hologram!

Holographic Lab, USS Portland

Shortly after Malbi's arrival

Authors: Malbi tai-Konja, Holo-Meru (played by Alenis Meru)

Malbi was working at her station, patiently checking through the system. She thought she had found a bug, or at least a faulty subroutine that was diverting an excessive amount of power to a holo-program. No hologram ever needed that much power. At least, none that she'd encountered. So she plugged the hologram's recall information and went down to a lab to check it out.

A few minutes later, Malbi arrived. She placed the paDD on the access panel and directed the computer, ^=Computer, open the file in this paDD and route controls through this terminal.^=

Appearing in the middle of the room, the hologram looked around and took in her surroundings. In front of her was a yellow-shirted Klingon, obviously a new member of the crew. "Good morning, ensign, I'm afraid we haven't met," said the hologram who was the spitting image of the captain, only with red hair instead of black. "I'm Alenis Meru."

Malbi stood at attention on instinct, "Captain, I... Wait. You can't be the captain, you're..." She trailed off, confused.

The hologram sighed. "It's a long story, and I see you haven't been briefed by Lieutenant Kallan yet. Though perhaps to avoid confusion, I should pick out a new name. I've always been partial to the name 'Nerys;' what do you think?"

"I... Uh... That sounds... lovely," Malbi replied, her hands moving awkwardly over the computer panel, trying to remember what she came down here to do. Then she realized that she'd been asked a question, so she replied, "Oh, I'm Ensign Malbi, computer systems specialist." She saluted.

"Don't bother saluting, I'm not the real captain," replied the hologram in a lighthearted tone. "It's nice to meet you. I suppose since you're into computers, we'll be getting to know each other very well. So, Lieutenant Kallan seriously hasn't briefed you on my program?"

Malbi shook her head solemnly, "No, we haven't gotten much of a chance to really talk yet. He's been 'lly busy, and it must have slipped his mind." She felt bad for the chief, honestly. He had a lot on his plate, and dealing with a new ensign was just extra work. Not to mention, she was a Klingon, and he probably didn't want to deal with her hot temper.

"Ah. Well, in that case, I'll give you a quick run-down." The hologram was interested in Malbi; there weren't many Klingons in Starfleet, and most of them seemed to be more interested in phasers and photon torpedoes than in lines of computer code. "My program is based on the Portland's EMH. For reasons that are perhaps best left unsaid, the EMH was

reprogrammed with a copy of the captain. And..."

Pausing for a moment, the Alenis hologram gathered her thoughts on how to explain this. "Well, you know how the EMH Mark I had that bug where under certain conditions it may become sentient?"

Malbi nodded, then slowly realized, "Oh... So that happened to you? You're actually sentient?" Her eyes grew wide, probably making her look angry, but then again, she always looked angry. But he was in awe. She'd never met a real sentient program before.

"At least, I think so," replied the hologram. "And, I think, therefore I am, so, therefore, I am. I think." She sighed and let out a smile. "At the very least, I think I've managed to convince the Lieutenant that I'm more than just a disjointed jumble of code."

Malbi nodded and then out of curiosity, pulled up the expanded version of her code on the computer panel and began to scroll through it. "So you're formatted off of the Mark 1, you said?" She asked, seeing many similarities to the Mark 1 programming style. She had studied this program extensively in her last two years at the academy, since Starfleet was always looking to inspire creativity in the students. Her professors had always used this as an example to show that mistakes can often yield the best inventions.

"Yes, though fortunately they changed that default greeting line. I was getting tired of asking people to please state the nature of the medial emergency all the time." The hologram smiled at Malbi, and glanced over at the readings on her PADD. "but enough about me; I've never met a Klingon computer systems specialist before, and I'm sure we'll end up spending a lot of time together. Why don't you tell me a little about yourself?"

Malbi froze. "I... uh... well there's not much to say." She thought for a moment, not wanting to reveal her entire life story to the hologram, but also not wanting to seem completely rude. She started with, "I've worked with computers and programs since I was a child, and Starfleet seemed like the right next step to continue that. It's just what I do. Outside of work, I run and box, but I try to stay away from Klingon combat holodeck programs. They bring out the worst in me."

"Well then," replied the hologram, "I'd suggest we might practice Hal'Kereth, the Bajoran martial art, sometime, if that might not bring out the worst in you. It is the unity of the spiritual and the physical, the perfect martial art for fitness, self-defense, and spiritual health."

Malbi already had a routine, but perhaps she could use something new in her life. She'd made so many changes to her lifestyle already, so why not one more? "Thank you," She replied, "I'll think about it." She didn't know what else to say, she wasn't much of a conversationalist. So she waited for the hologram to see if she would try to further the conversation.

"So..." started the hologram in response to the awkward silence, "how's my program looking, doc? Are all my subroutines stable? No bugs or viruses?"

Malbi finished scrolling through the extensive code and nodded, "It looks like you're in perfect working order. No glitches, no bad subroutines, a clean bill of health, if you will."

Malbi picked up her paDD, moving around the access panel to come face-to-face with the hologram. "Well, it's been a pleasure meeting you, but I've got to get back to engineering." She stuck out a hand for her to shake.

"The pleasure was mine," replied the hologram, shaking Malbi's hand. "Welcome to the Portland."

"Thank you," Malbi replied, then moved towards the exit. She turned back to look her new acquaintance in the eyes as she said, "Computer, end program." She watched the hologram disappear, and then left.

Briefing Time! Part I of III

Briefing Room, Starbase 375 & Holodeck One, USS Portland
MD01, mid-afternoon

Authors

Portland crew: Captain Alenis Meru, Major Judith Rouse (NPC Tim), Lt. Tyrlai Zade, Lt. (JG) Marcus Kallan

Endeavour crew: Cmdr. Marcus Byrne, Lt. Miracle Swiftpaws, Lt. (JG) Rebecca McKinnon, Lt. (JG) Zhuang Fotu

Guest stars: Admiral Washington (NPC Alenis), General Mar'dok (NPC Sera), Captain T'Lisa Anderson (NPC Jason), Gul Jatok (NPC Alenis)

On Starbase 375, the briefing room was set up for the type of emergency conference that happens only rarely. Portable holo-emitters stood in each corner of the room, patched into the a holo-communicator that would allow captains and senior officers from across the sector to patch in from their holodecks as though they were actually there. Many distinguished captains who had joined the makeshift fleet assembling at Starbase 375, including Captain Anderson of the USS Canterbury, General Mar'dok of the IKC Gre'thor, and Gul Jatok of the CDS Galandar, were there in person along with most of the senior staff of the USS Endeavour.

With so many distinguished officers, the yeomen kept themselves busy offering glasses of water and PADDs to everyone present and ensuring that everyone was comfortable while they discussed the most uncomfortable of topics: the impending Borg invasion of the Alpha quadrant.

The atmosphere in the room was serious; there was a bit of idle chatter as the officers got to know each other before the battle, but there was a distinct somber tone to it -- except for the Klingons, who were almost boisterous in their anticipation of the coming battle. For everyone else, there was no looking forward to what was sure to be a good day to die.

Nodding towards one another, the yeomen hurriedly activated the holo-communicators.

With a flick of the switch, the room went from half-empty to completely full, as the senior staff of the Portland as well as a couple other captains flickered into appearance at some of the empty chairs. Respectful nods were exchanged, and Gul Jatok's eyes lit up in surprise at the appearance of Captain Alenis of the Portland, who he had heard was killed in action the last time they met.

But Judith was perhaps even more surprised at the sight of General Mar'dok. He had not yet made General when she divorced him, but since Klingon culture apparently does not allow for divorce as easily, she had to find a way to get reassigned to the other end of Federation space to get away from him.

At the head of the table, Admiral Washington, commander of all the Starfleet forces in this sector, also appeared, along with a couple PADDs and a holographic glass of water in front of him. "Greetings," he said, getting the attention of everyone at the table. "I'm sure you all know why we're here," he added, pressing a few buttons to activate the holographic display at the center of the conference table, a star chart appearing before them with the position of the Portland, the starbase, and all the ships in the improvised task force in the center of the table before them.

Captain T'Lisa Mary Anderson, CO of the USS Canterbury, looked around at those present, both physically and by hologram. An admirable effort had been made in assembling this fleet, but would it be enough? The Borg were a formidable adversary due to their ruthlessness and their adaptability. Stood next to her was Commander Caelena Drusa, her new XO. The Romulan woman had replaced her good friend Charles Walker who had been killed during a recent failed diplomatic mission. Drusa was former SI and the Captain was not sure whether she could trust her or not.

Commander Marcus Byrne, Captain of the Endeavour sat with his XO, Eahar R'Soll at the conference table. His crew, more than most, had seen these Borg up close. His outpost had been destroyed by an attack and his new ship had lost its former Captain to the invaders. He kept his eyes on the holographic star chart. He most certainly wasn't in a social mood, given the mission they were about to undertake it would be better to view the casualty reports as though they were only names.

At the other end of the spectrum, General Mar'dok had been the picture of Klingon confidence. He had stocked his Vor'cha class warship with enough blood wine to go around the task force. Accompanying him were the Captains of the Birds of Prey that were part of the Klingon forces, each seemed to match not only Mar'dok's temperament, but his love of battle. The Klingons sat in their own corner, impatiently awaiting the call to arms to take on such a worthy adversary.

One of the younger Klingons looked to his left as what appeared to be an adolescent Trill sat down at the edge of the Klingon contingent, dressed in a grey sciences coverall and bearing some sort of strange feline creature on each of her small shoulders.

Lieutenant Swiftpaws groomed and wearing a newer lighter authorized version of the Starfleet uniform, looking sharp with her hair tied back into a ponytail. She sat next to

Captain Byrne, just back a bit, yet still in full view of everyone. Her eyes sparkled mischievously as she glanced over at the Klingons. Then to the rest of those present. She had managed to get one of the Minor Klingon Captains riled up a bit more than usual. She had her mottled black, grey and dirty white digital camouflage electronic notepad (laptop) on her lap ready to go, along with her everpresent wrist computer. To take notes, receive and send data as needed. Ears swiveling to take in the ambient noises and not to miss anything that would be important later on.

Lieutenant McKinnon, sat next to her friend Miracle and keyed into the comm array looking ahead at the files to be presented and quietly monitoring comm traffic in and out of the room.

Standing behind the seated Endeavour senior staff, Zhuang Fotu stood at parade rest. He appeared to be human, although his nose had slight ridges indicating Bajoran heritage. Whereas his frame was physically imposing, his face was kind and he wore a passive closed-mouth smile on his face.

Tyrlai Zade walked in, late as usual and surveyed the assemblage. A few centuries of diplomatic experience told her that this room was a bad idea. She elected to sit at the equidistant point between the Cardassians and the Klingons. This would give her an equal running start at whomever started the fighting later on.

Marcus Kallan, a tall and lanky human male of unremarkable stature, sat/was pictured with the rest of the Portland's bridge crew. His arms were crossed and he looked generally annoyed at nothing in particular.

Washington cleared his throat and pressed a button to begin the presentation. "A few days ago, the USS Endeavour responded to a distress call at Nova Europa. There, they engaged the Borg."

In the center of the table, the tactical view was replaced with telemetry from the Endeavour, showing the destruction of the sphere and the approach of the cube. "Only a few dozen officers and colonists survived. And in the ensuing battle with a Borg cube, Captain Banninga was kidnapped by the Borg." Washington put up a picture of the captain for emphasis.

Flicking another button, Washington returned to the long-range tactical view. "Using long-range sensors, we tracked the Borg vessel which kidnapped Captain Banninga to the NGC-3814 nebula. When we sent the Portland in to investigate, this is what they found."

In the center of the table, a holo-image of the transwarp gate appeared. "This," said Washington, "is a Borg transwarp gate. If it is completed, it will allow the Borg to send massive numbers of cubes streaming into the Alpha Quadrant. And that's not the worst of it. They are using an experimental dark energy reactor, which, if our theories are correct, would allow them to then catapult those cubes hundreds of light-years, deploying them deep into Federation space. I don't think I need to tell anyone what the tactical and strategic implications of that would be."

Washington took a deep breath before he launched into the most chilling section. "And then we have this." He brought up a recording from the Portland's viewscreen. In front of everyone was Captain Kate Banninga, complete with cybernetic implants and flanked by drones, as the new Borg Queen of the Alpha Quadrant.

"I am Locasta of Borg," she said, "You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile."

Briefing Time! Part II of III

Briefing Room, Starbase 375 & Holodeck One, USS Portland
MD01, mid-afternoon

Authors

Portland crew: Capt. Alenis Meru, Lt. Arthur Reynolds, Lt. (JG) Tolaran Kian, Lt. (JG) Marcus Kallan, Lt. Brad Silverton, Lt. (JG) Delainey Carlisle, Lt. (JG) Jason Beauvoir

Endeavour crew: Cmdr. Marcus Byrne, Lt. Cmdr. Eahar R'Soll, Lt. Yvette Beauvoir, Lt. Miracle Swiftpaws, Lt. (JG) Rebecca McKinnon,

Guest stars: Admiral Washington (NPC Alenis), General Mar'dok (NPC Sera), Captain Vek'ma (NPC Alenis)

Washington paused the recording, allowing those words to sink in. "I think we've all read our history and know about the battle of Wolf 359. If Locasta is able to get her transwarp gate online, this could be the end of not just the Federation, but the entire quadrant."

Lieutenant Yvette Beauvoir watched the presentation as she stood next to Lieutenant Zhuang. Her face was impassive, but inside she felt anger and hatred for the Cybernetic zombies.

Lieutenant Miracle Swiftpaws felt a loss at seeing Captain Banninga all implanted with cybernetics that ruined her once natural looks. Subconsciously, she reached up and pinched her ear stud at the base of her ear. Miracle leaned forward and spoke in a well modulated voice, "Squeakies, Mez Lord Admire. Whoz will be the Flagship of the joint Cardasian, Klingon and Federation Fleet for this assault on this Borg Forward Operating Base?"

"Excellent question, Lieutenant," replied Washington, a little surprised at being referred to as "Mez Lord." Not that he minded all that much, it was a very respectful salutation. "We've developed a plan of attack involving two main forces. The USS Endeavour will lead an assault on the unicomplex, with the goal of severing Locasta from the collective and recovering Captain Banninga. Meanwhile, our Klingon friends will, using their cloaking device, escort the USS Portland to the transwarp gate."

Captain Vek'Ma, one of Mar'dok's best Bird of Prey commanders, scowled at Washington's response. She knew the Federation was soft, but not this soft. "You aim to capture Locasta?" she asked in a sneering, incredulous tone before turning and spitting on the floor. "We should kill her. Cut the head off the snake, nice and quick. Honour demands it." Her eyes darted across the room. "And you would have us be led into battle by a museum piece? This is an insult, and--"

Tolaran bristled with anger listening to the Klingon. "Excuse me Captain, but I believe the Klingon fleet are full of Bird of Preys and other older ships yet you would see fit to talk about the Portland in such a way... if you've even read about her records in combat and other missions which I'm sure the Klingon Empire has access to then you wouldn't be so disrespectful. The Portland is more than up for the job of leading your ships and ours into any engagement that is to come." he knew it was dangerous confronting a Klingon in such a way but he also knew that to gain any respect from them then the Federation couldn't show signs of weakness...

Alenis couldn't help but let out a smile at Tolaran's spirited defense of the Portland. But they had business to take care of, and little time for arguing with the Klingons. "Thank you, Lieutenant, I think that's enough. I'm sure the good Captain will eat her words in a few short days upon witnessing the Portland in battle."

"Need I remind you that a lowly Bird of Prey took on and destroyed a Galaxy-class starship?" asked General Mard'ok with a bit more pride than intended. Not giving the Lieutenant time for a response the General continued, "We will ensure the Portland remains intact long enough."

"Killing Locasta does nothing, Captain," Marcus said from across the table, leaning forward, but still holding arms crossed. "She's a mouthpiece, nothing more. The Borg collective consciousness is distributed evenly throughout every drone. If anything, we should aim to capture her and use her command pathways to shut down the Borg's efforts in this quadrant with a minimal loss of allied forces. We can't hope to stand up against that size of an armada without tricks."

"I agree," replied Arthur, who finally weighed in on the conversation. He'd bit his tongue through most of the meeting, but now he felt a need to contribute. "The Borg are about efficiency. It would be too inefficient if they all continued to rely on a queen, particularly after the past few incidents when Starfleet disabled a fair number of them by simply targeting said queen. If they're really looking for perfection, they'll adapt... and if they adapt, they'll change tactics."

"Which is exactly why we can't simply kill her," interrupted Washington. "Lieutenant Kallan, if we can capture Locasta, would it theoretically be possible to allow her to regain her individuality as Captain Banninga while still preserving her command pathways?"

"It's been done before, but under very specific circumstances," Marcus replied, looking thoughtful. "To even have a chance at doing what the Enterprise did after Wolf-359, I'd need a ship mainframe more powerful than what the Portland has, and a sophisticated cybernetics lab." He looked pointedly across the table at the Endeavor crew.

"We can give you remote access to the Endeavour's mainframes until we rendezvous," chimed in Eahar, recalling the sheer computing power his crew had at their disposal. The refit nebula class, as a large vessel, often outfitted with a sensor pod for scientific surveys, had one of the most powerful main computers out of any ship in the fleet. "And I'm sure Lieutenant McKinnon will be willing to provide you with anything you need, right,

Lieutenant?"

"We are actually in a fair state of repair at the moment." Bekka mentioned looking across the room at the pale man from the Portland. "The core is operating at full capacity, as for the lab we have a myriad of multi functional facilities. We can augment what we currently have and probably get close to the best possible field cybernetics lab. You wont find a starbase level lab flying about, I'm afraid. Those are at the colony currently, prying it back from the Borg."

"Lieutenant Kallan, is this going to be sufficient?" asked Admiral Washington.

"I'll coordinate with the relevant officers," Marcus replied to the admiral, leaning back in his chair again. Once again, Washington called on him to do the impossible...

"Good. Make it so," replied Washington in a gruff voice. "You'll also be working with our medical officers, Lieutenants Vanth and Silverton. I don't want Captain Banninga dying on us before she can give the command."

Doctor Brad Silverton had been silent until now that he was addressed. He was content to let others speak out of turn in front of the Admiral and Generals of the various Alpha Quadrant races. "Don't worry Admiral. Starfleet Medical has made it a priority to research and develop ways to reclaim those that have been assimilated. We'll be ready."

Brad wasn't thrilled to have to work with Marcus. However they were both Starfleet officers and professionals. He was sure they'd both do their duties regardless of their continued personality differences. In the grand scheme of things it did seem to be such a petty minor thing compared to the task before them.

Echoing Dr. Silverton's words, Delainey Carlisle offered, "I'd like to be on hand to help provide any psychological support you may need. At this point, I think it's wise to act on the assumption Captain Banninga is fighting every bit as hard as Captain Picard did when he was assimilated and there may be some psychological traits we can identify to predict her behavior and to aid in her fight to return to us." Despite the practical necessity of the discussion, it bothered Carlisle greatly to speak of a fellow officer as a specimen or a component to be manipulated or calibrated precisely to achieve their ends. Before Kate was any of that, she was a sentient being, a current tortured captive, who deserved to be treated as such as much as they dared. The thought of bringing a woman in that condition back to a lab with engineers and scientists broke Carlisle's heart.

After staying quiet through most of the meeting, Commander Byrne spoke up, "If we do manage to retake Captain Banninga, I have an idea that may help." Turning his gaze toward Bekka, he continued, "In a recent tour of our computer core, I spoke with the Lieutenant about ways to counteract the Borg Collective. I believe that she may be on to something that could buy us some time. Care to take over Lieutenant?"

Bekka stood, brushing her long blonde hair out of her eyes and addressed the assemblage seeming unusually calm and collected for someone who looked like they should be stressing

over academy entrance aptitude tests. "I have collected a couple quad crystal matrices worth of otherwise useless comm chatter as relayed through 75 starbases. I have layered that under a fractal generated series of algorithms to make it look like we are trying to hide this data, below that it should appear as if the useless conversational snippets are encoded with another layer of important data. All of this is further encrypted.

"The notion, is that we will send it out on a wavelength that the Borg can process, but we send it fast. In order to ensure that what we are sending is not a threat will require analysis. The Borg will farm this work out to drones when it overtaxes their systems. As it then overtaxes the drones they will co-opt more resources. All the while we will be sending more data. It took 75 starbases more than two years to package the data. Without the encryption keys it will take far more effort for the Borg to decode the burst. They are designed for this, but the best estimate is that they will take in excess of six minutes to determine that our transmission is garbage. There is an outside possibility that we will bring down the central vinculum and cut the Borg off from the collective. That case may buy us hours. If we have the Captain at that time our chances improve dramatically. She is the one unit given the luxury of independent reasoning and therefore the one unit that could suspect that our encrypted data is really an attack.

"In order to stress the capacity of a uni-matrix we will need to augment a main deflector to act as a transmitter. It will be able to send the data faster than even the Borg can collect it, which will further hamper their efforts to analyze the datastream." Lieutenant McKinnon sat down and after a moment stood back up hurriedly. "Oh, sorry. Any questions?"

Marcus scoffed lightly, "Encrypted data isn't enough to get the Collective baited," he said to Bekka. He was clearly dubious of her, likely because of her age, although he didn't outwardly indicate one way or another. "Wrap some faked telemetry and ship positions in loose fractal encryption. Heck, send bits of Shras' dark reactor research; that'll get their attention. If they think they could get a tactical advantage or anticipate our 'talking' -- " He made air quotes. "- about their technology and how to stop it, they'll prioritize the processing faster."

"If you have four quads of that sort of data you are welcome to try." Bekka glared at her counterpart. "They will assimilate your information in a portion of a second and be able to spend the rest of that second assimilating you."

Having kept his own counsel until now, Jason rose and said. "Forgive me, I am but a simple scientist, so could someone explain to me how exactly we intend to destroy the whole Borg transwarp system?"

To be continued...

Briefing Time! Part III of III

Briefing Room, Starbase 375 & Holodeck One, USS Portland
MD01, mid-afternoon

Authors

Portland crew: Captain Alenis Meru, Lt. Tyrlai Zade, Lt. Arthur Reynolds, Lt. (JG) Sera Williams, Lt. (JG) Marcus Kallan, Lt. (JG) Tolaran Kian,
Endeavour crew: Cmdr. Marcus Byrne, Lt. Cmdr. Eahar R'Soll, Lt. Miracle Swiftpaws, Lt. Julian Horn,
Guest stars: Admiral Washington (NPC Alenis), General Mar'dok (NPC Sera), Captain T'Lisa Anderson (NPC Jason)

Miracle busily tapped away on her laptop, downloading the information on the Borg Structure into her laptop and once it was uploaded, she began to look at it from all angles. She wiggled her nose and whiskers as she made tentative routing courses to bring in the Endeavour to where Tactical could deploy the Away Team with minimum amount of time to reach this 'Locasta' and get back to the Endeavour. She was more interested in the gaps in the structure for the Endeavour to traverse. Her Laptop gave off muted sounds of a video game. Her ears swivaled to follow the conversations going on around her, as she 'played' with the 'game' of finding the most advantageous route to where most likely 'Locasta' would be at.

A very gaunt looking Sera stepped forward. She had met the requirements for a return to duty, but she was still not fully recovered. Raising her hand a bit to signal that she had something to add, she interjected, "I think this is where I come into the mix." She clicked a small button that changed the holographic image into a model of the dark energy reactor housed on the Portland. She could feel the emotion from everyone in the room, she could distinctly read fear, bloodlust, anger, and anger. It was almost overwhelming, however, she needed to hold it together.

The display change to illustrate her points as she continued, "As we saw when the Portland escaped the nebula, the Dark Energy Reactor has the ability to 'aggravate' subspace when it is altered." Her eyes found Lt. Kallan when she used his word to described what happened with subspace. The display changed to show the Reactor floating towards the transwarp conduit. "If we can create the same type of dark energy 'storm' that we created earlier, then overload the reactor with energy, then eject it... it will create something that dwarfs a warp core breach by several orders of magnitude."

Julian Horn, the Chief Engineer of the Endeavour stared at the display in front of him, assessing quickly the dark energy reactor, it was fantastic, ridiculously dangerous, but fantastic.

"Subspace manifold juxtaposition and subsequent rupture, for those playing along at home," Marcus offered. "It'd make that sector dangerous to traverse, but it'd eliminate the threat. The nuclear option, as it were."

"And the Portland is the delivery system," chimed in Alenis.

Julian coughed, his voice coming out quiet, talking to his teams was one thing, but this wasn't something he was used to. "That is a very last option, based on the very brief calculations in my head..." he breathed out a heavy sigh "you could potentially destroy the whole system and maybe rip a hole in space so big we may not escape it..."

"Hopefully it won't come to that," added Alenis. "If we detonate the reactor inside the conduit, most of the damage should be contained inside their subspace network." She pressed a button to activate a computer simulation of a dark energy explosion spreading through a subspace network, collapsing transwarp conduits and causing the transwarp gates on either end to collapse and implode. "Of course, things will have to be timed just right to give the fleet a chance to get away from the blast, and there will be a massive burst of radiation and some severe subspace disruption on either end, so you will need to keep your shields up."

After listening a bit more, Commander Byrne looked around the room. Tapping his fingers on the table as he talked, he mostly asked those in the Medical department, "Would we be able to remove Captain Banninga from the Collective before such a drastic action is taken?" He let the question hang for a moment before adding, "Borg who are removed so suddenly from the Collective do not tend handle that loss so well." His voice carried an amount of worry over the person who had rescued him and the remains of his outpost colony from a fate worse than death.

"Based on available information, we'd have to time Locasta's separation from the Collective at the same time of the destruction of the aperture," Marcus said, responding to Byrne. "We'd need her connected up until the end, though, to try and utilize her command pathways to distract the Borg and get them properly chewing on Lieutenant McKinnon's data."

Tylrai spoke up, a little disappointed that the fighting hadn't started. Back in the day, they would have smacked the Commander around for a few different 'slights'. "We would have to be sure she was on 'our side', otherwise she will know its a ruse and they will discard everything. Or perhaps trick her into believing the data is genuine."

Eahar grunted; surprised at the ambitious nature of the plan. "I probably know Kate better than everyone. It's not going to be easy to trick her; she is very cunning."

"Then don't trick her. Just make it enticing for her to comply with your wishes. Truth. But not the Truth." Miracle paused in her studying, speaking thoughtfully, "Misdirection. I think the human term is." Giving Earhar a cheeky smile, Tone of her voice showing affection and respect for the big gruff Caitian Officer.

Tolaran tilted his head towards the Caitian "You all should remember and keep in mind, the collective had access to everything through Locutus, it would be no different now and I'd recommend if you have anyone even attempt to trick her it would ideally be best that she doesn't know that person then she can't use her experiences to deal with the responses she will receive, she is probably expecting anything her old crew do, she will know what to expect from you all.

"Then it sounds like we shouldn't pull our punches. As the Admiral said, we can't just kill one queen and expect the collective to break down. We need to focus on the unimatrix first, not her." Arthur didn't realize how cold he'd sounded, but at that moment, he didn't care. In his

mind, the goal was to rid the sector of the Borg threat... no more, no less. "Maybe we can get her out, but what if we can't? Is anyone willing to sacrifice her? Because, if not, the Borg will know that... and they'll use her to that end. I don't believe even a queen is completely independent from the collective mind, because if she is, that's another weak point they haven't adapted to for nearly thirty years. Should we really rely on them to keep overlooking that hole in their system?"

With that, Washington chimed in. "I'm sure we all agree that we will do what we must to eliminate the Borg threat. If we can capture Locasta and use her command pathways to our advantage, that would be ideal. If not--" Washington paused for a moment, only to be interrupted by Mar'dok.

"It would be better for Captain Banninga and any others to die than continue an honourless existence as Borg," the Klingon General said with disgust seeping through his voice. He never understood the Human notion of putting everything back, some things weren't able to be brought back. He, for one, did not welcome the thought of an Borg Queens having access to allied vessels.

"Well, let's just hope it doesn't come to that," countered Washington. "Any further questions?"

Captain T'Lisa Anderson a veteran of the Battle of Sector 001 and with over 15 years of command experience rose from her chair. "This is not actually a question, but logic dictates that if you enemy knows all your tactics, then you must change your tactics, in order to defeat him." She said in a calm voice that like the calmness of her features, did not betray the anger and guilt that bubbled just beneath the surface.

"Well, in that case, I don't think they'll see the Portland coming," replied Alenis with a smile.

"Good." said Washington, in a gruff voice. "Then I declare this meeting adjourned. Everyone, get to your ships and set course for the rendezvous site. We depart in one hour."

A diplomatic incident...

Holodeck One, USS Portland

MD01, immediately after the briefing

Authors: Captain Alenis Meru, Gul Jatok (NPC Alenis), General Mar'dok (NPC Sera), Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Maj. Judith Rouse

As soon as Washington had ended the meeting Gul Jatok made a beeline for Alenis. "Captain Alenis," he said calmly, "it has been a while. And here I thought you were dead."

"I was," replied Alenis. "It's a long story. Perhaps I will tell you sometime over a bottle of springwine," she added, surprising even herself. The idea of a Bajoran and a Cardassian sharing a drink, especially a former soldier during the occupation and a refugee, was almost inconceivable, even so many years later. But Tim had told Alenis of what Jatok had done for Inaji Narale, and in that moment, managed to convince Alenis that perhaps not all

Cardassians were monsters. Of course, one good deed could only go so far in changing Alenis' mind about the Cardassian people as a whole, but now wasn't the time to live in the past, it was time to stand shoulder to shoulder against the Borg.

"Perhaps," replied Jatok. "Perhaps." He paused for a moment, staring into Alenis' eyes. "Captain, you'll be pleased to know that central command has accepted the recommendations in my report. The Gamia system is to be considered a forbidden zone; no attempt shall be made to open contact with the Gamians, and no Cardassian vessel is to visit the system."

"Likewise for the Federation," added Alenis, nodding along. "Though the Bajoran Council of Ministers still holds hope that one day the Gamians can be re-united with the Federation, it won't happen so long as they're run by cultists."

"Agreed," replied Jatok. "There has been enough--"

Suddenly, the conversation between Alenis and Jatok was interrupted by loud, angry voices. Looking over at the source of the commotion, Alenis was shocked to see her own Executive Officer, Tim standing in front of his sister, ready to go toe to toe with General Mar'dok.

"You let this...," Mar'dok looked at the Portland's first officer with disgust, "patak speak to your husband in this manner." The Klingon General gave Judith an eye that screamed for her to get Tim under control before he did it in a much more... Klingon fashion.

"Judith is my sister!" exclaimed Tim, balling up his hands into fists. "You must be confused, old man, she was never married! Now, stand down and apologize for bothering her!"

Behind Tim, Judith just bit her lip nervously.

The Klingon General laughed the laugh of a man who were about to stomp an insect that had been buzzing by his head all day. "It seems your sister hasn't told you all about her visit to the Empire." Changing to a more condescending tone, he added, "Now, don't just stand there looking like you want to hit me. Show a spine... I'll even let you have the first hit."

Seeing a major diplomatic incident about to occur, Alenis did the only thing she could think of to avert it. "Computer, end transmission!"

As the holo-communicator transmission ended, the briefing room was replaced by the familiar yellow on black grid of the holodeck walls, and all non-Portland officers -- including the angry Klingon -- disappeared. "Tim, Judith, my office, now," called out Alenis in a serious tone. "Everyone else, I believe you all have work to do. Get to it."

Poop Creek

USS Portland; Main Engineering

Shortly after the Overload incident

Authors: Ensign Ronald Roberts, Lt. Jason Beauvoir, Cmdr. Shras th'Zarath (NPC Meru)

The situation within the USS Portland's main engineering section had begun to seem more and more dire to the young engineer who now found himself in charge of almost everything within it. In just a few short days his title had changed from Assistant Chief Engineering Officer to De Facto Chief Engineering Officer and the burden was taking its toll. He was floating on down poop creek and all he had at his disposal were useless and ineffective paddles. And one really annoying one that he would have just loved to stick right down into a rushing current of excrement.

But the high-stress thoughts were just the beginning. There was a busted up dark energy reactor and a whole bunch of equipment that was dangerously close to said reactor. Things had happened, things could have happened, and things could still happen depending on what that damn reactor did or still could do. There were too many questions and so, for the moment, Ron had delegated clean-up duty to just about anyone within earshot that had idle hands while he set out to address the more important matters. Namely the pet science project and how it was going to remain contained after whatever the hell the chief engineer had done to it and almost died in doing so.

Shras. The name sounded uninviting and in the short time he had been aboard he had heard many stories. The guy was about as pleasant as the creek he found himself up, but he had the answers. "Excuse me, uh, Shras," Ron beckoned to the sedate looking Andorian. Just what was he doing anyway?

"Oh, hello there, Ensign," replied Shras, his arms crossed with disdain as he surveyed the mess that was engineering. "I presume you will be getting this mess cleaned up shortly?"

"We," Ron corrected in an offhand manner. "I'm sure with our two teams we'll clean up your mess in no time. And just what's with that thing anyway," he asked as he gestured to the dark energy reactor. "No safety shutoff? No emergency eject? You know, they say 'pride comes before destruction, and an arrogant spirit before a fall.' Would it have hurt to put in an escape clause?"

Shras bristled at the comment. How dare a plasma-monkey like Ron criticize his work? He has no appreciation for the elegance of the dark energy interaction formulae, or the complexities of a drive that generates power from the very fabric of space. "The Dark Energy reactor needs nothing of the sort," he countered, in a dismissive tone. "I have worked on these equations for years. In theory, my invention is orders of magnitude safer than your primitive matter-antimatter reactor. Of course, that safety also relies on people not monkeying around with it and overloading the system well beyond established parameters." Shras placed his hands on his hip in disdain. "Any system is only as safe as the primitive bucket of bolts it is attached to, and the troglodytes running it."

"Yes, Ensign, the Commander can not concern himself with the trivialities of mere mortals. Robust safety procedures would take time to implement and that would delay the great work, which is something that can not be allowed to happen. Is that not right, your Lordship?" Jason said as he walked into Main Engineering.

"I'm glad to see that someone gets it," replied Shras, perfectly serious.

Jason rolled his eyes, then ignoring the pompous Andorian he turned to Ron and said. "Ensign, I am Lieutenant Jason Beauvoir, Chief Science Officer."

Ron almost visibly had to swat away the cloud of arrogance that was emanating from Shras. Arrogance of that level would most likely accompany a most spectacular fall, but even Ron hoped it would be another day. He needed all the help he could get and when the chief science officer walked on in Ron immediately added him to the list in his mind of 'volunteers' to help. "That's great! I'm sure your knowledge will come in handy. Oh, and I'm Ron!" He was about to stick out his arm to shake the man's hand but realized he hadn't done the same for Shras so he decided to move on before things got awkward. "So... Thoughts," he questioned to no one in particular as he looked about the disheveled engineering interior.

Jason surveyed the damage before answering the engineer's question. "Now, I am no expert in this dark energy, but from what I understand, I suggest we set up a modulating containment field around the generator, preferably one with a power source not attached to ship's systems, as a safety precaution."

Shras let out a harumph at the thought. "It will have to be a level nine field," he muttered. "If you're going to overload my precious reactor and use it as some sort of subspace bomb, you'll need a field that can contain dark energy radiation. Now, I don't know where you're going to get all the power for that field from." The idea that they would be willfully destroying his precious reactor didn't sit well with him, but he eventually relented to the possibility when he realized that if the entire quadrant was assimilated, he would be unable to continue his work. "I suggest shutting down non-essential systems, like this hologram that everyone seems to be all hush-hush about."

Jason's face darkened when Shras mentioned what would essentially be killing Meru. "We could use the Matter/anti-matter reactors from our shuttles to supply the power." The Chief Science officer suggested.

At this point Ron was mostly surprised by the positive suggestions from both sides of this family feud. Better to keep them both moving forward if any more good ideas were to come about. "Well, Shras, the idea is sound, but I'm not sure shutting down holograms, holodecks, and the like will net us enough of a gain to consider it. Trust me, it's small beans compared to what we'll need. Siphoning energy from the shuttles will certainly give us a start, but I fear we'll need more for a level nine containment. The rest can possibly be supplemented from Portland's core, giving us a safe draw nowhere near total output. I think she's going to have to pay part of the dues here."

"Great," replied Shras in a decidedly unenthusiastic tone. "You think this antique vessel can handle that? I mean, this old ship should be in a museum, not in combat with the Borg or testing out advanced prototypes."

"Well, unless you have a Sovereign Class starship concealed about your person, Commander,

then we will have to make do with this <i>museum piece</i>." Jason said.

Ron gave a nod in the direction of Jason as though he had just decided on some sort of small standoff. "I'm gonna have to give the 'W' to Jason on this one, Shras. Either you start working with what you got instead of complaining about what you don't or we'll have to take over without your input. I'm sure you want some say in your fantastic device's send-off, right?"

Shras simply harumphed and turned his back, walking over towards a console. "In theory," he said, drawing up a simulation, "the dark energy reactor could provide enough power to run its own containment field throughout the overload process. Of course," he added, "we will have to time the ejection just right, in order to avoid flooding engineering with dark energy radiation, but theoretically, it is possible."

Dammit if Ron hadn't thought of exactly the same thing! He reflexively clenched his natural arm in frustration of the missed opportunity of showing up Shras. He was about to interject with the completely made up calculation that the odds of a well timed ejection would have been at least seven hundred and twenty-five to one, but he would have been breaking his rule of working with what he had almost immediately after stating it. "That may well work my blue skinned buddy," he exclaimed. "And we could use the shuttles for extra energy to ensure that pet of yours doesn't get overloaded trying to shield itself from the rest of us! It'd certainly buy at least a couple extra seconds of sustained shielding when the reactor is launched, at least."

"Very good, except for one thing." Shras pulled up a schematic of the Portland's engineering section. "We'll have to eject the dark energy reactor through two layers of hull plating, a Jeffries tube, and a half dozen EPS conduits. Even if we were to create some sort of crude ejection system, we would--" Shras paused for a moment. "YOU would have to cut out a section of hull plating. From the outside."

And now here Ron was, the young engineer who in short time had almost gotten blown up by the Borg and stranded in space for the rest of his short life, now finding himself at the head of the engineering department and in charge of both repairing and dismantling an ageing wreck of a vessel. He couldn't help but shake his head. He knew exactly where he was: Poop Creek.

Changing of the Guard

Holodeck Two, USS Endeavour

While the Endeavour is docked at Starbase 375

Authors: Cmdr. Marcus Byrne, Ensign Dima Reda

On the holodeck of the USS Endeavour, the distinctive sound of bursts from a compression phaser rifle rang out. An excellent markswoman, Dima made sure to spend at least an hour a week practicing target shooting, and another hour with tactical combat drills.

Hearing the whoosh of the opening holodeck door, Dima immediately safed her weapon and

turned towards the new entrant.

"Commander Byrne," she called out, standing at attention and shouldering her weapon, as though she were back on the rifle drill team at the academy. "Welcome aboard, sir."

"As you were Ensign, and thank you for the welcome" he said with a friendly grin. He took a look at the scoreboard. "Not too bad," he said, not trying to hide the fact that he was impressed.

Marcus picked up one of the unused phaser rifles in the weapons rack. The rifle buzzed to life as he activated it and checked to ensure the safety was on. As a career Operations Officer, he liked to keep his tactical training up as much as possible because he never got the chance in the line of duty. Turning to the Ensign, he asked, "Mind if I join?"

"Go ahead, sir," replied Dima, pressing a button to bring up a second target. "At this range, the standard for qualifications is seventeen hits out of twenty shots in thirty seconds. The target will move three times during this exercise." She turned back downrange and readied her rifle. "Ready, sir?"

Marcus gave her a nod that he was ready. The practice session began and Marcus let loose a volley of shots on the targets, only missing one time. "Maybe I'm a bit rusty," he said, clearly wishing that he'd gotten all twenty shots. He put the weapon in safe mode and replaced it on the weapons rack.

"Ensign, I wanted to ask about your duties," he said, not sure of where to begin. "How do you feel about everything? Speak freely."

"Is there a problem with my duties?" countered Dima, her voice taking on a defensive tone.

"Oh not at all, Ensign," Marcus' voice immediately took on a more apologetic tone. He then added quickly, "I only wanted to make sure that you had no hard feelings about not retaining your Acting-Chief of Tactical and Security role?"

"No hard feelings," replied Dima, in her stern tone, swapping out the power pack in her rifle. "More target practice, sir?"

"Sure, I believe it's your turn Ensign?" the Commander replied, unsure if he had made things worse by his visit.

"I suppose it is," replied Dima, turning towards the target range with a snappy, precise movement. As the program started, she focused intently on control of her rifle and managed to get a number of hits very quickly. She was on track to get a perfect score in half the required time when she missed her last shot.

"Damn it," she exclaimed as she safed her rifle and turned back towards the commander. It was evident on her face that in spite of her tough exterior, there was something bothering her, something on her mind that made her miss that last shot. "Sir, permission to speak

freely?" she asked.

"Of course, Ensign," Marcus said, trying his best to not be intimidating. "I have an open door policy."

"Why was it that I was passed over?" she asked, looking directly into Marcus' eyes. "My scores in marksmanship, physical activity, and leadership exercises are all top-notch. I was ready for this, and now I'm back to my former position. There has to be a reason."

"During the crew evaluations when I took command, we took in to account every member of the crew. We looked at their experiences, their performance evaluations, what they had seen and been through." Marcus paused for a moment, knowing that he wouldn't get away with the standard 'you were my next choice' answer.

Looking Dima in the eye, Marcus continued, "You had slightly better range scores than Lt. Zhaung, but he had been an Assistant Chief and Chief of Tactical for the last ten years. Ultimately, that was what made the difference."

Dima let out a sigh. "Thank you, sir," she said, pressing a button readying the range for some more target practice. "I suppose I'll just have to wait my turn."

Empty Monsters

Jason's Quarters, USS Portland

During the briefing

Authors: Novia Yenn (played by Tyrlai Zade), Holo-Meru (played by Alenis Meru), and two cat-monkeys

Zinzac scurried down the corridor as fast as his legs could carry him. Berelca was hard on his tail matching every leap and bound as Zinzac darted along the corridor from side to side and up along the walls at certain points. The clan was clever and would now have treasure. They would set it totem and it would light the darkness. The flowing one would be proud of this find and the glowbox would spirit bonus rations. A turn suddenly to fool Berelc who matched him and they scabbled up a wall and paused suddenly over on the doorways. Soon the doors slid open and a figure stepped out, moving about with a cluttered mind bent on foolish magics.

It did not stop them or see that they had one of the spirit stones. They bounced down in two jumps and raced through just as the door closed again. A quick skip scamper and they hopped to the softrock and up to the glowporch. Berelca pushed the sparkle rocks in the proper order and the panel slid open and they darted inside, hiding the spirit stone in the leafpile. They had crossed half of the world but now it was theirs. It beeped as it sat there half buried in leaves and they chittered in excitement and hopped in a few circles and then dashed out to find the flowing one.

Bounding down and crossing the room they raced in circles at the foot of the door until it slide open and then out in a mad race, Zinzac chasing Berelca this time to where they could

heal the flowing one. Dashing madly back and forth along the corridor as they raced, half to their destination and half in a maddening game of whom could trick whom into missing a turn. Bound, jump, sprint a sudden left up and off the railing and the sliding into a junction, bouncing off the figure as he pried his strange purposes in the direction he had come and bursting forward and quick-- the figure had come from the door they needed and they were through by a tailhair skidding to a stop with clattering nails on the strange ground.

'we are three here' It was a concept, not so much in words for when the clan was whole; Zinzac, Berelc and their newmother. The one who had helped them when their first mother had fallen. The flowing one, for her head tail, strange and mesmerizing in its movements; called noh-vee-ah by the others. She turned a met their gaze and they made the pictures of victory and spirit stones and the importance of an extra ration from the glowbox.

"Oh, these are my cat-monkey's, you may have met them and I apologize if you have. They are very clever and don't often think of others as being more than strange moving trees." Novia smiled back at Holo-Meru as the cat monkeys twirled in a quick pair of perfectly coordinated circles.

"No, I've yet to have the pleasure," replied Holo-Meru, leaning forward to put herself a little closer to eye level with Novia. Wearing a white bathrobe, she had spent most of the morning reading Bajoran holy texts and drinking holographic springwine in Jason's quarters, while the Chief Science Officer was out on duty. Without any quarters of her own, she found herself confined to only a few rooms with holo-emitters, and thanks to a special request from Marcus, Jason's quarters had been recently outfitted. "Why don't you introduce me?"

Novia's eyes widened in alarm and the cat monkeys suddenly twirled and raced around as if looking for a hiding spot. Jumping off walls and furniture and chittering madly. "Stop it, what are you doing, stop this now!" Novia glared at them and they raced back to the door and stared at Holo-Meru. They made the picture for the cave-things, the ones their mother had warned about. Walkers in the darkness, the empty monsters. Novia looked back and forth between the cat-monkeys and Holo-Meru.

"I'm terribly sorry, they can't see you properly and they think you might be a cave monster from their planet. Gamina III?" Novia wondered if Holo-Meru could shed any light on the issue.

"Yes, Gamia III..." replied Holo-Meru. If she never returned to that planet, it would be too soon. "Fortunately, we're a long way away from there, and there are no cave monsters on the Portland. Just the occasional technician crawling through the Jeffries tubes..." Alenis smiled at the monkeys, trying to calm calm them down. "What's their favourite treat?"

"Gamia III," Novia repeated to herself thinking she should properly be able to recite their homeplanet in case people asked. "I have twelve treats programmed in the replicator. They most approve of banana squares, which are an Earth fruit."

"Banana squares..." Holo-Meru walked over to the replicator, gambling that Jason wouldn't mind too much if she allowed a couple feline-primate guests. "Computer, two banana

squares, please."

Returning to living room with the banana squares in her hand, she let out a whistle. "Here, little guys," she called out, beckoning them to come over.

Zinzac looked over, it was a predicament. The empty monster had control of the glowbox and was holding their rations hostage. The flowing one should begin the fight, he sent the picture and waited. Berelca was hungrier and took a tentative step forward. He signalled her in alarm, it was the greatest danger their mother had warned of. The empty monsters that dwelled in the caves and came out only to kill.

Novia looked flustered. She could get across the concept of scolding but more complicated things like this she hadn't yet figured out. "I'm sorry, they think you are a cave monster. I'm not sure what that is but they fear it. I think it might be because you are a hologram."

Holo-Meru sighed. Animals had a way of making a connection with living creatures. But now that she was a hologram, for whatever reason, they tended to act strangely around her. It took her long enough to get Ko-ko to like her again, and even still, the trusty pet bird would sometimes act defensive around her. "Well then," she said, looking down at Novia, "how do you like banana squares?"

Novia shook her head wide eyed. "They would be very cross with me. Banana squares are their treats from the, um, what do they call it, shimmering box. If I ate them, especially if you gave them to me, it would be as if I had decided to leave the clan and join the cave monsters." She furrowed her brow and came up with a plan. "If you let me snatch them and give them to Zinzac and Berelca that might be okay."

"I suppose..." replied Holo-Meru, as she took them over to the kitchen table and placed them in front of her. "I sure do enjoy banana squares," she mused loudly. "Boy, it sure would be a shame if someone were to steal them from me..."

"They don't understand talking." Novia explained and then darted forward and snatched the banana squares and stepping back and kneeling presented them to her cat-monkeys.

Zinzac beamed and Berelca jumped up and down, it was a perfect victory. Outwitting one of the empty monsters and stealing its treasure. The clan was strong. They each grabbed a banana square and celebrated. Berelca sent a picture wondering if two victories should also warrant a second banana square.

Novia stood and smiled back at Holo-Meru, "they are pleased with our victory. So have you figured out who you are going to be yet?"

"I've been thinking about that," replied the hologram. "It's difficult choosing a new path for myself, and a new identity." She paused for a moment, looking down at Novia. "What do you think of the name Alenis Nerys?"

"Hmmm,..." Novia cocked her head to the side and considered the name. "What does Nerys

mean? Does it have a particular connection?"

"It's an old Bajoran name," explained the hologram. "I had a grandmother named Nerys; I never met her. The name means wind. It symbolizes freedom, liberty, and constant change." She paused for a moment. "Alenis Nerys. What do you think?"

Novia considered it very deeply and decided. "I suppose if wind and freedom mean the most to you, than this would be a good name."

The hologram stroked her chin for a moment and considered Novia's response.

"Hmmmmmm..." she mused, before looking over at the cat-monkeys, who cowered slightly at her glance. "Thank you, Novia. I should probably let you go; your pets are looking a little impatient."

"Very well." She smiled at the holoperson. "Let me know if you need to discuss this further." Novia said looking very serious. She turned and led her little clan out into the corridor. "No, we don't get extra banana cubes for stealing banana cubes. I can't say--what is that even?" The doors shut behind her leaving Holo-Meru to her holothoughts.

The truth comes out...

Captain's Office, USS Portland

Immediately after the briefing

Authors: Alenis Meru, Timothy Rouse, Judith Rouse (played by Timothy Rouse)

Leaving the holodeck, Alenis walked back to her office at a brisk pace, with Tim and Judith barely able to keep up. She was strangely silent as she walked, as she considered just what she was going to say when they arrived in her office.

As soon as the door was closed behind her and Tim and Judith were in her office, Alenis leaned forward onto her desk and looked them both in the eye. "So, Tim, care to explain why you risked a diplomatic incident with the Klingons right before a battle with the Borg?"

"Me??" Tim said in a tone louder than he intended. "He started it. He was insulting my sister."

"Fair enough, but challenging a Klingon general to a fight just before we're about to engage the Borg isn't a good idea for anyone." Alenis paused for a moment and looked over at Judith, who had a look on her face like someone who had something important to say but didn't want to say it. She sighed and gave Judith a sympathetic glance before continuing. "It seems as though there has been some confusion here. Mar'dok seemed to be under the impression that your sister was his wife. Judith," she added, "you look like you have something to say."

"So, I did hear that correctly" Tim said; the smoke was almost coming out of his ears.

"I uhm.." she looked from Tim's angry face to Alenis in the hope for some support, but

realised she would need to explain first before getting some help.

"Mar'dok and I dated shortly when I was serving near the Klingon border on a joint mission. And then, one thing led to another..."

"And you what? You accidentally got married to that... brute."

"Hold it," said Alenis, raising her hand in an effort to calm Tim down somewhat. "Let's discuss this rationally." She looked over at Judith. "And let me guess, the relationship ended and he never quite got over it? He seemed to be acting in a rather possessive manner towards you."

"Klingon custom doesn't allow for divorce so technically we're still married" Judith said quietly. The nightmare she had feared for years was coming out, Mar'dok and Tim meeting.

Alenis cringed at the thought. Seeing that Tim was in shock and in no condition to speak, she took a deep breath and considered the situation. "Well," she started, "I'm not a lawyer, but my understanding of Federation law is that it does not recognize either forced marriages or marriages under which either party is denied the right to seek divorce, so as long as you stay out of Klingon space, it shouldn't be hard to get that marriage nullified."

Taking a deep breath, Alenis continued. "As for the matter at hand, we're going to have to work with Mar'dok over the next few days. Is this going to be a problem for either of you?"

"I've worked with him before. He is a good officer. I don't expect our history to cause any problems. At least from me." At the last she glanced at Tim, who apparently was still trying to get a grip on the new info.

Tim snorted when he noticed both woman were looking at him, expecting an answer from him. "Guess I don't have a choice."

"Okay." Alenis took a deep breath. This was a delicate matter to say the least. "Judith, if it does cause any problems or he makes you uncomfortable in any way whatsoever, contact me and contact security immediately. And Tim..."

Alenis sighed. She sympathized with Tim's predicament. "Try not to challenge him to any duels to the death, okay? I don't want to start looking for a new executive officer."

"I can handle him, Captain," Judith smiled. "I didn't marry him out of freight."

"Very good." Alenis grabbed her travel mug of tea and headed for the door. "I'm going to go for a little stroll... I'll leave you two; I imagine you have things to talk about..."

Dark Matter Ejection, Part I

USS Portland, Airlock 1

While awaiting rendezvous

Authors: Lieutenant Arthur Reynolds, Lieutenant (JG) Sera Williams, Ensign Ronald Roberts, Ensign Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru), Ensign Jessica White (played by Ronald Roberts), Petty Officer Ferguson (played by Jason Beauvoir)

"Dark matter ejection." It sounded so scientific and beautiful. Like some sort of rare cosmic occurrence to be cataloged by the ship's science team. But for the Portland the term was a little closer to home than some far out natural occurrence. It was a matter of fact necessity that the De Facto Chief Engineering Officer had found himself in charge of and there was a significant portion of him that was happy to do so. It was a neat science project for sure but it seemed more than wise to get rid that seriously unstable bit of equipment, especially since it was going to help the mission in the process.

And now here they were. Ron and his team of merry misfits out to do a little bit of surgery on the aging vessel. He had hoped she would survive the ordeal. After all, it wasn't every day that you had to chop through a significant portion of a ship to install an improvised ejection system for a piece of equipment that ought not be installed on the ship in the first place. But with this team he was certain, somewhat at least, that the job would get done. And of course, as leader, Ron found himself to be first in line and ready to step out of the Portland's airlock, tools and gizmos in hand.

"Alright people, let's make this short and sweet. We don't want to bang this poor baby up too bad."

A gaunt looking Sera stepped into the airlock, just before the Engineering crew could open the outer air lock. She arrived dressed in her EV suit and had taken her Chief's prerogative of adding herself to the job. She had yet to be medically cleared for a return to full duties. Looking at Ron, Sera said, "I want to be there if anyone is to perform surgery on my ship. You have the lead, but I've worked on every square centimeter of the ship. I know her better than anyone alive."

"Sera!" exclaimed Nikki, dropping the heavy cutting tools she was carrying to give her friend a big hug. Of course, wearing a bulky EV suit, the hug was more awkward than anything as she struggled to not trip and fall. "Wait, are you even supposed to be here?" she asked, talking a mile a minute in her excitement. "I didn't realize they let you out of sickbay. You don't look so good. Maybe you should sit down. You can patch into my camera and watch us. Or maybe you should monitor the systems while we work..."

Ron just stood there and watched for a few moments. Sera's words had stuck with him as Nikki barraged her with concern. At the moment it looked as though there was the possibility that with too much bumping and jostling that the Actual Chief Engineering Officer would no longer fit the 'knowing her better than anyone alive' part. He found himself agreeing with Nikki, wondering if perhaps she would be more suited in the fields of medical or moral support rather than engineering.

"Nikki's right, Sera. No offense but you look more beat up than engineering and I'm afraid my expertise is purely mechanical. I'd much rather you watch from in here than risk me needing to repair you out there."

Admittedly, Sera knew they were right. EVA normally took a lot out of a person in good condition, so she would probably add an extra element of danger to the job that wasn't needed. Returning the awkward spacesuit hug, Sera stepped back through the airlock door. She felt a defeated and a little demoralized that she wasn't yet able to return to full duties. The Chief removed her helmet and said, "I'll monitor and guide from my station in Sickbay."

She laid her helmet on the bench in the changing room as she pressed the airlock close button. She thought about throwing her helmet across the room, but decided against it. That is until the helmet itself seemed to slide itself across the bench and onto the floor.

With the less reliable variables of the situation taken care of Ron donned his helmet and made a quick check of any more problems that could arise. He began to quickly check his suit, looking over any linkages for problems and doing a general check. He was especially sure to check the modified part of the suit that allowed his mechanical arm to protrude. It was of his own doing and even though he was an engineer there was always the possibility of overlooking something. "Mic check. Mic check. Suit checks, everyone. When you're ready state your name and favorite color. Like this: Ronnie is green. Yeah yeah, I know green means good, but it seriously is."

"Jessica is green," the young co-pilot who had quickly volunteered for a nice EVA jaunt replied.

"Jess?"

There was an audible sigh from Jessica's comm. "Jessica is orange."

"Good! Everyone else?"

"Nikki is red. No, wait, blue. No, wait, purple. No, wait... can I get back to you on that?"

"Ferguson is black, the colour of my tortured soul." Said the Irish born half Tellarite Structural Engineer, in his usual melancholy way.

Arthur, always the talkative one, had stood quietly to one side as Ron gave his brief speech to the team. He volunteered for this assignment simply because he wanted to make sure these alterations would meld well with the ship's tactical systems. That, and he felt his last spacewalk was enough of a disaster to warrant further practice with the EVA suit. With a lopsided grin or smirk, he answered in his staple smartass way, "Arthur is colorblind. Can we go now?"

"Right! We're all ready. Everyone be sure to keep Sera and myself informed of any issues that arise. I'm a bit new with these ole hunks of junk, myself." He would have much rather had Sera out on the ship with him if he could have helped it. She seemed more fond of these vessels than himself, but he would just have to make due with the situation. Besides, how hard could it be cutting a few holes and channels in the ship? It'd be like a scrap operation.

"Airlock depressurizing; Now. And three, and two, and one. We're good. Opening up the outer airlock now." With those words the door to the great beyond opened up, Ron stepping out almost immediately after. "OK. Let's get to work, people. And try not to drop any tools." With a beckoning signal with his hand Ron started to walk his way slowly towards the site to be modified.

Nikki shivered as the airlock opened. Throwing the cutting tools over her shoulder, she took a few careful steps towards edge of the airlock. Staring out at the great expanse before her and the rocky, red planet the Portland was orbiting suddenly reminded her of her fear of heights. Her heavy breathing could be heard through the comm system. "I... I just need a moment..." she said as she desperately clutched the handrail on the side of the airlock. She hoped that this would go better than her training at the academy, where some poor soul ended up with the unenviable task of washing the vomit out of her EVA suit.

"Okay, I think I'm good..." she said as she carefully transferred herself onto the outer hull, using the magnetic boots to her advantage. Looking down at her feet she slowly began walking; it was going to be a bit of a hike all the way from the side airlock to the middle of the underside of the ship, but so long as she didn't look up, she figured maybe she could make it.

"Just don't look down... up. Whatever." Arthur chuckled a bit as he stepped out behind her and followed their fearless leader. In his case, a lack of gravity never made him sick. His time aboard a pirate ship as a child, along with his experiences on Starfleet ships, meant he was very familiar with it. That said, Starfleet's EVA suits were slightly different than the civilian ones he'd grow accustomed to, and even his zero-gravity experience on Federation vessels was strictly in parts of the ship which lost their gravity plating, so he rarely had a chance to use the suit.

Just to be sure, though, he stayed close to Nikki in case she started having trouble. He owed her that much. Subtle concern notwithstanding, he hated leaving a debt unpaid. Besides, chances were he'd be the poor bastard to clean the vomit out of her helmet if something did happen....

To be continued...

Dark Matter Ejection, Part II

USS Portland, Exterior Hull

While awaiting rendezvous

Authors: Lieutenant Arthur Reynolds, Ensign Ronald Roberts, Ensign Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru), Ensign Jessica White (played by Ronald Roberts), Petty Officer Ferguson (played by Jason Beauvoir)

The walk wasn't a long distance, but it took a while. With every step, Nikki listened carefully for the sound of the magnetic boots activating and de-activating, knowing that they were the only things keeping her attached to the ship. And, they had to take a few moments on two occasions to calm her down, once when she accidentally looked up and threw up in her

mouth a little, and once when she happened to think of the damage a micrometeorite or a tiny piece of space junk could do to her at a relative velocity of several thousand metres per second.

"Are we there yet?" she asked, as they walked across the underside of the engineering deck, between the warp nacelles of the ship.

At the sound of the skittish ensign's question Ron stopped in his tracks and pointed to a spot not too far ahead of where they were. "'X' marks the spot." There really wasn't an 'X' or anything resembling the sort, but he could visualize it as he pointed at their target. "OK, everyone still got their equipment? I hope nobody left anything in the airlock!"

As they had made their way to their destination, Ferguson had been singing sad old Irish folk songs. It was a way to take his mind off his current situation. He checked his equipment. As Structural Engineer, it was his job to make sure the alterations these officers were going making, didn't have too much of a deleterious effect on the integrity of the ship's hull or superstructure.

"I've got the plasma cutter!" exclaimed Nikki, struggling slightly with the heavy tanks of fuel that powered the beast. As they were weightless in orbit, the bulky equipment wasn't so much heavy as it was awkward. "Mark out the location of the cuts while I get this thing set up."

With an outstretched arm Ron, gave Nikki a solid thumbs up. "Wicked! Jess; Arthur; Help me out with the marking. We want to get this right. Ferguson, could you pull up Portland's schematics and make sure we got this right. I don't want to go breaking into anyone's quarters," he spoke through a chuckle as he envisioned opening up some cute officer's quarters while she slept. "And Sera, do keep an eye on your friend while she works. As you said, you know her better than anyone and I'm sure it won't take much for that thing to do some damage."

"I'll watch her," replied Sera from her biobed in Sickbay. The hike back to Sickbay had taken a lot out of her. She grabbed her PADD and used one of the station's outboard holocameras to zoom in on Ensign Barclay. "Nikki, the cut you want to make is here..." she drew a line on the holographic ship beside her that would then appear on the ship through Nikki's HUD inside her suit. "Be careful though, power to the torpedo launcher on top routes about 5 meters below." Sera's new work station in Sickbay made great use of the room's holo-emitters and was almost better than Sera's office in Engineering.

"Okay," said Nikki, panting heavily. "I think I can handle this, just as long as I don't look down. Or up. Or whatever."

"Aye sir." Ferguson said bring up the Portland's schematics on his HUDs.

Ron's cavalier attitude didn't go unnoticed by duty-minded Arthur, but the latter held his tongue. His priority was to be as efficient as possible, and he intended to see that through

regardless. "Fine. But let's make sure not to torch any of the tactical systems. If we really need to, let me find a way to bypass the relays without sacrificing too much system efficiency." He glanced stolidly at Ferguson. "Where to first?"

"20 metres northwest of my position, Sir." Ferguson reported.

Ron slowly surveyed the land in front of him. There was certainly a lot to take in, to speak nothing of all that lay beneath, as the very observant Arthur pointed out. "Right. Veins and other vitals just below the surface of the skin. We're going to have to be sure to divert or bypass wherever we can. No doubt everything laid down is necessary." He cut his comm off for just a moment to quietly mumble expletives as more and more seemed to pile up onto his already overwhelming duties. Then the comm came back. "Everything's looking good! Nikki, when they're done you can get to cutting! Arthur and Sera will guide you and the rest of us can help tidy up as we go."

"All right," said Nikki, a plasma cutter in her hand connected by a coiled hose to a pair of large plasma tanks she had set down next to her. "One hole in the Portland's external plating, coming right up."

Kneeling down, Nikki paused for a moment before starting up the cut. Somehow, it didn't feel right to be cutting into the Portland like this after the old girl had saved her life. "Don't worry, old girl," she said, gently placing a hand on her cool exterior plating. "I know this might hurt a little, but you'll be all right. I promise."

"I don't think 'she' is going to say no, ensign," Arthur replied with a curious, albeit perhaps misconstrued as an annoyed, look.

"Oh. Right." Nikki blushed and lit the torch. "Beginning the cut... now."

To be continued...

Dark Matter Ejection, Part III

USS Portland, Exterior Hull

While awaiting rendezvous

Authors: Lieutenant Arthur Reynolds, Ensign Ronald Roberts, Ensign Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru), Ensign Jessica White (played by Ronald Roberts), Petty Officer Ferguson (played by Jason Beauvoir)

With the cut nearly completed, Nikki reached up with one hand to wipe the sweat from her brow, momentarily forgetting that she was wearing an EV helmet. Before making the final cut, she looked around and made sure that her magnetic boots were firmly attached to the hull of the Portland. "All clear!" she shouted as she brought the plasma beam back to where she started, melting away the last little piece holding the section of exterior plating on.

Unfortunately for Nikki, with all her focus on making a clean cut, she failed to realize that the piece of hull plating that she made sure she was firmly attached to for safety's sake was the

very same piece that she was cutting out. As soon as that piece -- Nikki and all -- started drifting away, she realized her error.

"Help!" she shouted, hanging onto the plasma cutter for dear life, its hose being the only thing connecting her to the Portland right now. "Woman overboard! I'm drifting away! HAAAAAAAAAALLLP!"

At first, Arthur had been focused solely on the work at hand. It wasn't until Nikki started shouting that he looked up and realized what was happening. Without a word, he closed his tricorder and plugged it to his belt as he 'jogged' over to her. "Here," he said as he made certain his magnetic boots were strapped securely to the hull and the pull generated by them was increased... though knowing Arthur and space suits, he could've made any number of mistakes. With an outstretched arm, he tried to grapple with any limb of hers still within reach. If he couldn't find any, he'd have to elucidate: "Rotate yourself and take my hand."

Panicking, Nikki flailed her arms, trying to connect with Arthur. Eventually, however, she got a hold of his hand. As she did so, she released her magnetic boots, allowing the piece of hull plating to drift harmlessly away. Holding on tight to Arthur's hand, Nikki's legs flailed in panic. Not only was Arthur the only thing keeping her from floating away, but the anti-nausea medication she had taken wasn't quite strong enough and she could feel her oatmeal coming up.

Arthur grit his teeth as he tried to hold on. Though he pulled with all his might, he found it difficult to move in the EVA suit. Nikki's movements weren't making things much easier either. "Ensign, could you hold still for just a--" Before he could finish that sentence, he felt his own magnetic boots loosening. There's no way he'd be able to hold on for much longer at this rate. In a sharp tone, he shouted, "Stop moving!" He held up his free hand for just a moment before using it to reach over to the controls mounted on the wrist she was grasping.

Shocked, Nikki just froze and held on to Arthur as tight as she could,

After just a few adjustments, arguably moments before he lost his 'footing', his boots clamped down on the hull and he was able to reach up with his free hand and pull Nikki toward him. Once she looked to be close enough, he ordered, "Alright, swing your legs down just a bit. Lean forward so you don't start doing somersaults on us." He tried to keep her balanced with his own grip until her feet were near the hull. Somehow, he maintained a relatively calm demeanor as he patiently guided her. "Okay, now remagnetize your boots. Use a free hand."

As soon as Nikki's boots magnetically locked to the hull plating, she breathed a sigh of relief. She could have kissed the hull of the Portland if it weren't for the helmet between her and the vacuum of space. "Okay," she said, panting heavily as she looked towards the gaping hole in the Portland's hull. "I guess that was the easy part?"

Jessica just shook her head. She felt bad for her poor buddy who would actually have to work with that on a regular basis. It was bound to be trying. She glanced over to take a look

at the expression on Ron's face. And there it was...

It was surprisingly emotionless, like it was just taking everything in. The thoughts behind that still face was a little more in motion, though. If that was the easy part then just what in the hell is the hard part going to be? He shook his head of the thoughts and moved forward to examine the hole. No, it was not directly into an attractive crewmember's quarters, yet, but it did look like they were going in the right direction.

"I see very little damage so far. The cut certainly looks good and there's very little to bandage at this point. Get ready, though," he started as he could visualize their whole track through to the reactor from where they were standing. "I have a feeling that the deeper we go the more trouble we're going to run into."

After two and a half hours of hard work, Nikki looked around at the mess of wires and conduits that they had rerouted around the hatch. "Are we just about done?" she asked over the intercom. "I really have to go to the bathroom."

"And I could do with wee dram of whiskey, Lass." Ferguson said.

"Well aren't we all just a little impatient," Ron spoke in a sarcastic tone to those eager to quit. In truth, though, he was just as willing as everyone else to drop what they were doing now. "But yes, this is as good a time as any to stop. All the major work is taken care of and surprisingly there was very little to move. All that stuff up there," he began as he pointed back into the new route they had cut into the Portland, signaling towards the minor alterations that still needed to be done, "can be taken care of by the rest of the team. So what do you say we all head back and then part ways?"

"Sounds like a plan," replied Nikki, admiring their handiwork. The moment that she was able to take off her EVA suit and breathe the relatively fresh air inside the Portland couldn't come too soon.

Ferguson smiled. "Anyone, who'd like to share a drink is welcome ta join me, I'm buying." The Structural engineer said.

"Sure," came a shout over the comm from Jessica. The young flight controller could certainly use some loosening up after all the hard work they had done and there was no better way than with a few stiff drinks. "You comin' along, Ron?"

"Maybe later, Jess. I think I'll head over to engineering and oversee things from that side. It won't take much now but a watchful eye never hurt."

"But you need a break!"

"Later, Jess. Besides, I'm the de facto department head. I'll just kick back with one of those drams and watch the others do the dirty work. I'll be fine. I promise."

"Well, alright then," Jess relented.

As they made their way onto and over the Portland's hull Jess was sure to invite anyone else who had not accepted the invitation earlier. "Anyone else coming," she questioned openly. "I'm sure we've all got stories to tell! I've got a couple of doozies, myself," she added mischievously.

"I'm sure you do, bonnie lass." Ferguson replied.

"Yay! Stories!" exclaimed Nikki, staring down at her feet on the metal hull of the USS Portland in an effort not to accidentally look up and get space-sick again. "Bathroom first, though."

Disinterested, but dedicated, Arthur spent the last few minutes away from the others making scans and whatever remote realignments of the tactical systems he could. He didn't finish every last correction he could make from outside the ship, so when everyone started talking about a break, he muttered, "If it's fine with you, I'll stay here and make a few last adjustments to the tactical network relay." Still focused on his tricorder, he added, "Might not get this done before my shift's over, but it's got to be done." With a glance back at them, he slowly carried himself past them and followed a particular line of circuitry. "If you'll excuse me..."

Reassignment

TopDeck Bar, Starbase 375

During the Taskforce Briefing

Authors: Ash Sullivan

Ash sat alone at the bar on Starbase 375, drinking a pint of Terran Ale. He was reading through the daily newscast from Earth when a notification flashed up on his PADD.

"Ensign Sullivan report to my office at your soonest convenience. Captain Starling." He read the message to himself, puzzled by the vague nature of the request. He had only had to report to the captain's office once before and that was when he first came aboard the Fitzsimmons so he figured it must be serious. Opting not to down the rest of his non-synthehol beverage right before a meeting with the Captain he left the half full glass on the bar and waved to the bar tender as he hurried off to change into his uniform.

Captain's Office

USS Fitzsimmons

A few minutes later and he was standing outside the Captain's office in a clean, pressed uniform. The tailored outfit hugged his muscular form tightly yet remained comfortable. If he had his way his sleeves would be rolled up to his elbows, an odd habit he has had since he was a child, but the formal occasion called for certain etiquette to be followed. He tightened

the elastic band holding his long hair back and then pressed the chime nervously.

"Come in." Captain Starling responded simply as he stood from his chair. He noticed Ash was nervous and stiff and decided to try and ease the tension. "Relax ensign, you're not in trouble. Have a seat." He said pointing to a chair opposite him.

Ash sat down and cleared his throat, "If you don't mind me asking sir. What is this about?" He said still not quite comfortable though the captain's words had eased his mind a little.

"Ensign Sullivan we haven't spoken much during your time on this ship but I'm told by your superiors that you're a hard working individual, always seeking new adventures. Would you agree with that assessment?"

"Yes sir. I do my best." Ash replied.

"Well it looks like you're in for a new adventure. You've been reassigned effective immediately. I don't know the details of your new post, apparently they're classified but that probably means it will be interesting." Captain Starling explained. "I know this is probably a lot to take in but you're to report aboard the USS Portland by 0800 tomorrow morning. They ship out a little after that."

Ash sat silent for a moment as he let the news sink in. After a moment a grin of excitement spread across his face. "That does sound exciting sir. Is there anything you need from me before I go?" He asked already making a checklist in his mind of things to pack and imagining why some classified mission needed him so urgently.

"No Ensign, I've already informed your superior officer and he assures me everything will be taken care of. Here are your transfer orders," the captain said handing a PADD across the desk, "you're dismissed... Oh and good luck ensign."

With that Ash stood and offered a sharp salute. "Thank you captain." He replied before turning and heading for his quarters to pack.

Welcome Aboard, Mr. Paladin
Captains Office, USS Portland
Shortly after the rendezvous
Authors: Captain Alenis Meru, MCPO Gregory Paladin

Only a few moments after Ash left, Alenis heard another chime at her door. Sighing, she looked over at Ko-ko. "They just won't leave me alone," she mused. Detecting that her owner was stressed, Ko-ko let out a few calming coos before the chime rang again. "Come in," shouted Alenis, standing up from her chair to stretch her legs.

Gregory entered once the door slid open, quickly coming to attention before the Captains desk. Out of the corner of his eyes he made quick note of the odd avian species on the desk, though he presented no overt interest in it. He was crisp, refreshed from his journey on the

USS Canterbury. He had taken a shuttle from Earth to Starbase 375 prior, and the Intrepid-Class provided the last leg of the transport to his new - potential - posting. While Starfleet had accepted the accommodations, in Gregory's mind he was still on the ropes with the entire ordeal. While not presenting - nor allowing - any of his internal misgivings to be exposed as he stood before his new Captain, he maintained them nonetheless. Eyes focused forward to the wall, he spoke, his voice soft, yet firm and having an aged drawl to it.

"Master Chief Petty Officer Gregory Paladin reporting for duty, Ma'am," Gregory stated, his body relaxing somewhat in its posture. It wasn't as if he was new to this kind of thing, after all. "I formally request permission to come aboard your vessel."

Alenis looked the master chief up and down. "Do you have your boarding papers?" she asked.

Gregory nodded, retrieving from one of his uniform pockets a PADD. He pressed a few commands on its surface, bringing it to life as he extended his hand to give the PADD away.

"Thank you." Alenis scrolled through the PADD that Gregory had handed her, containing transfer orders and a copy of his personnel file. She took a few moments to size him up and skim his Starfleet records. Her first impressions were positive; the man's body language and spotless uniform indicated a certain seriousness and attention to duty, while his record showed over a decade of service on Miranda-class vessels. "Well, Ko-ko," she said, turning towards her pet bird, "what do you think?"

Ko-ko tilted her head slightly and chirped at Alenis.

"Agreed," replied the Captain, pressing her thumb against the PADD. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Paladin. Please, take a seat. May I get you anything to drink?"

It was then as Gregory took his seat with a polite, "Thank you, Ma'am," in return that he realized the avian was anything but a standard animal. It displayed intelligence, though whether this intelligence was due to being a well-trained pet was to be seen. He would keep his eye on that one, the bird. He got comfortable in his chair, adjusting his duty uniform of the wrinkles produced when his body moved to sit. After he casually put his hands on the arm-rests, he looked to Captain.

It crossed his mind then that she hadn't issued any formal commands to him; at-ease being one such. Perhaps she was a casual Captain, perhaps not. First impressions seemed to be pleasant so far, though Gregory detected an underlying fury in those eyes, and an equal amount in the avian which - he suspected - was anything but.

"No ma'am," Gregory replied to her inquiry, "I appreciate the offer though. I figure I'll get some grub when I'm formally situated, if that pleases you, Ma'am."

"At ease, Mr. Paladin," said Alenis, leaning back in her chair and tenting her fingers to signal that this meeting was transitioning to the casual phase. With a press of the button, Alenis brought up Gregory's personnel file on her terminal. "I see you've served on Miranda class

vessels before," she said, scrolling through his service record. "Your experience is impressive. We could use someone like you on board."

Gregory's body almost immediately entered into a different phase; Gregory leaned back into his chair, his arms relaxed, he crossed one leg over the other long ways, one elbow was on the rest, while the other rested across his crossed leg, and body language signaling absolute compliance to an order of at-ease. His expression was to change also; stern to relaxed, lines and creases on his forehead diminishing instantly. All the while, despite his brief transformation into a more relaxed and casual state, his uniform somehow remained brisk and tightly dressed to his body. How he did such a thing could only be left to experience, or perhaps circumstance.

"I have," Gregory replied, tone relaying a more relaxed state as well; more of a drawl to his voice, "USS Nautilus to be exact, practically the only Miranda-class I've served on. I was with her through two Captains. Captain Arrow, the latter of the two, is the one you can thank for me being here today."

He allowed her to scroll further through the PADD, after which her mention of his experience was greeted with a slight chuckle, and a shy grin. "No ma'am, by far not the most impressive. I know for a fact there are plenty others better at this than I am, I'm just passionate about my duties."

After a moment of digesting her words of being able to use someone such as himself on board, Gregory rubbed his chin briefly, clearing his throat. There was something he was hiding. It wouldn't be long before he offered the truth.

"If I may be honest, ma'am," Gregory said after a moment of silence, "I'm not here to further my resume. Captain Arrow has, repeatedly, offered me a position as commander on his ship. I've repeatedly decline - personal reasons which I do not feel inclined to mention, though which he is keenly aware of. He mentioned your ship not because of what it could offer, but because of what it didn't offer - memories. I'm here to get over a few things from back during the war, ma'am. I feel serving on your ship, to fullest of my experience and capability, will help me move on and feel more inclined to accept Captain Arrows offer. And, if in the happenchance I like it here, perhaps further my career here."

He had looked down during his explanation, only now looking up to his new Captain. "I'm here for personal reasons ma'am, and why I don't anticipate those reasons to interfere with my duties, I wanted to make sure you were aware of it. If this bothers you, I'd be happy to pack my things and leave."

"But as for my experience, which I never elaborated on," he continued, clearing his throat, "I've always made it my duty as the Chief to oversee the logistical flow of the ship I would be serving on. On the Nautilus, that included a system catered not only to the flow of resources - such as power, manpower, and assets and consumables - but also the personal and professional logistics of a crew. I always tried to keep everyone under my command in line with each other and themselves, and always tried to keep those above me keenly aware and, at times, in line themselves. I value efficiency, ma'am, to a very deep level. It is my

belief that the more efficient a ship is, the more productive it will be on its missions. Including fleet-based efficiency, which is also critical on any basic level."

"I understand," replied Alenis, as she stood up from her desk. She paced back and forth a couple times before pausing to look out the window. "Perhaps more than you know..." She sighed and took a deep breath before turning back to face Gregory.

"I was at New Algiers," she explained. The statement needed no elaboration; it was the deadliest Borg incursion since Wolf 359. "On the USS Gol. Not many survived the destruction of the ship; I was the highest ranking officer to make it off."

Pausing for a moment, Alenis allowed those words to sink in and to take a moment to remember the lives that were lost that day. "If you need to, we do have counseling facilities on board. And..." She looked over at Ko-ko, who stopped what she was doing and stared back into Alenis' eyes. "Ko-ko's species has some natural empathic abilities," she explained. "Having her at my side has greatly helped with these issues. If you would like to spend some time with our Chief Morale Officer here," she continued, referring to Ko-ko, "be my guest."

There was a shift in his pleasant demeanor, the experienced Chief displaying traits of one whom had just heard something somberly. His eyes briefly gazed towards the Captain after her revelation. "Battle of sector 262," he commented idly. Gregory leaning on his elbow, the attached hand rubbing its fingers across his chin, his eyes looking to the right of the room as he pondered his knowledge of the event. His impression of the Captain began to change; positive change towards more respect.

Her mention of Ko-Ko caught his attention, bringing him from his stupor of daydreaming. Only his eyes moved, drifting towards the figure of the intelligent avian creature. This was the first time he had laid eyes on Ko-Ko, and for a moment he felt *vulnerable*. There had been several engagements that Gregory had partaken in during the Dominion War, but unlike Officers, he was beneath decks; resisting boarding parties, avenging the fallen, trying to save the living, et cetera. The enemies that the Captain had faced? No wonder she had an emphatic pet. He had read up on some summaries and theories on the effect the Borg had on individuals, particularly the personal events of one famous Starfleet Captain, Jean Luc Picard.

Comparable to Alenis, Gregory's issues were insignificant. It made him feel ashamed at bringing his ultimatum so suddenly, so forwardly, to her. Then again, they were comrades in arms, with the exception that Alenis had been through far more hell than Gregory had.

"Alright," Gregory said, accepting her offer. "I think it might do some good to get some stuff off my shoulders. If you're still sane after what you've gone through with...Ko-Ko...then I suppose I'll benefit as well."

Alenis let out a hint of a smile and petted Ko-ko, who let out a few calming coos. It was a bittersweet feeling; in Starfleet, there was no better way to bond with your fellow members of the fleet than to share each other's pain. "Sane might be a little on the optimistic side," she added, only half-joking. "We have a spare office on deck one for you, but I can set you

up with an office on the lower decks if you would prefer to be a little closer to more of the enlisted crew."

Gregory mulled over his choices briefly. Looking at Ko-Ko, he replied.

"I'm very much in favor of being near the my charges," he said, looking then to Alenis. "I'm not particularly fond of trying to appear above those under me. If I can't work among them, I have no right to lead them. An old friend taught me that."

He was mentioning a fellow crewman from the Nautilus, someone he saved during the war. If it hadn't been for Oscar, Gregory might not of had the drive to continue during those dark days.

"And," he continued, "I'd like it if you gave quarters with the rest of them. I only need an office for paperwork." He smiled thereafter, adding, "So when do I schedule an appointment with our Chief Morale Officer?"

Alenis' lips curled into a slight smile. "I'll pencil you in for next Thursday, assuming we survive our encounter with the Borg," she replied. "In the meantime, I'll get our executive officer to get you set up. Is there anything else, Mr. Paladin?"

Gregory smiled, somberly. Mention of the Borg had not eluded him. He had been aware of the forthcoming conflict. With a nod to Ko-Ko he stood, further nodding to Alenis. "That'll be all for me, Ma'am," he said. "I'll get right on preparing myself for my duties."

"Very good," replied Alenis. "In that case, you are dismissed." As Greg turned to leave, Alenis called out to him one last time. "Oh, and Mr. Paladin, welcome aboard."

Reporting for Duty

Ready Room

USS Portland

Authors: Ensign Ash Sullivan and Captain Alenis Meru

After packing his bags and making his way through two security checkpoints, Ash finally stood on the bridge of the USS Portland. He looked around at the interesting mashup of old and new as the ship had obviously been updated over its many years of service. He wasn't quite sure how he felt yet about the transfer. His last ship was huge, a Galaxy Class where he worked in a department so large he didn't even know half the people in it. The Portland was much smaller and would likely take some getting used to. He was also still a little nervous about the classified reason behind his transfer. After adjusting his hair and the duffle bag over his shoulder, Ash pressed the chime and awaited the captain's response.

"Enter," replied a voice from inside the office. The captain's voice was firm but strained, as though she had a lot to do and didn't appreciate interruptions.

Ash entered the room cautiously, noticing the captain's strained tone. He took in the scene,

first noticing the bird on the desk which was a bit of a surprise to him. He snapped a sharp salute to the captain as was the protocol then stood at attention until he was addressed.

As Ash walked in, Alenis raised a finger without even looking from her terminal, motioning for him to give her a minute while she finishes up what she was doing. Meanwhile, Ko-ko, who was previously strutting her stuff on the captain's desk, froze and stared at the new entrant, trying to read if he was a threat or not using her primitive empathic abilities. Just to be safe, she ruffled her wings and took up a defensive position, ready to leap into the air at a moment's notice.

Finishing up what she was working on, Alenis finally looked up from her computer screen. She didn't recognize the Ensign before her; it could possibly be someone on the lower decks who she rarely saw, or possibly a transfer from one of the other ships in the task group. "May I help you?" she asked, sizing up the young man before her.

"Uhhh..." Ash started unusually nervous. "Ensign Ash Sullivan ma'am. I've been reassigned to your ship though the circumstances surrounding the change were classified." He explained shaking off the nerves. He wasn't sure what it was that was causing his anxiety, maybe it was the suspicious look he was getting from the captain's pet. Setting the PADD containing his transfer orders on the desk he added, "I'm your new Assistant Chief of Security."

"At ease, Ensign," replied Alenis, as she slid the pad towards herself on the desk. Picking it up, she began skimming his personnel file. "Let's see here, Ensign, three years of experience on the USS Fitzsimmons, solid academic record..." She paused and stared at the PADD a little more, as Ko-ko continued sizing up the guest. "I see you've been doing some research on adaptive shielding technology," she added in an inquisitive tone.

"Yes ma'am." He replied a little more relaxed now, "More specifically I was researching ways to combat Borg adaptive shielding. It was untested but we had a good theory about phaser frequency modulation." He explained, not wanting to bore his obviously busy captain with the details unless needed.

"If you don't mind me asking this, what is the Portland's current mission? Like I said everything on my transfer was classified and I'm not really sure why I'm here." He asked inquisitively.

"Capture the Borg queen, destroy their base, and save the quadrant," replied Alenis, only half-jokingly. She pressed a few buttons on her desk to activate the holo-projector, showing a model of the Borg complex and transwarp gate. "The Borg have stationed themselves in the NGC-3814 nebula," she explained. "We need to take out this transwarp gate before they can bring it online and send swarms of cubes into the Alpha Quadrant."

Alenis leaned back in her chair. "So, you might be getting a chance to test out your research firsthand," she added.

Ash's first reaction was to laugh, which he promptly suppressed. After seeing the holo-projection he knew the captain wasn't kidding around. Many people wouldn't take the news

that they had been reassigned to what could reasonably be called a suicide mission so well but Ash couldn't help but feel excited. He was a thrill seeker and what greater thrill could there be than facing off against the Borg. Understanding now the strain he had noticed in the captain's expression Ash decided it would be best to get out of her hair and let her return to her duties. However not before one last question. "This may be a strange question ma'am and I promise this is my last one before I let you get back to work but... Is that your pet?" He asked referring to the bird which was still eyeing him off suspiciously. "It's a beautiful creature but I feel like it doesn't like me." He said with a slightly nervous laugh unsure as to how the captain would respond to his casual question.

"This," explained Alenis, as she got up and walked over towards a small tin that she kept on the shelf, "is Acting Ensign Ko-ko. She's the ship's Chief Morale Officer." Quickly and discretely so that Ko-ko didn't notice, she pulled out a mint leaf from the tin. "Ko-ko is from Alami IV, and in addition to being a very intelligent animal, her species has empathic abilities. How she was assigned to me is a long story, but yes, you could say that she's my pet."

Alenis placed the mint leaf in Ash's hand. "Mint leaves are her favourite treat. Just relax, think positive thoughts, and hold out your hand."

Ash smiled, "That's amazing. Hello Ensign Ko-ko." He said happily as he held out his hand containing the mint leaves. He had heard of empathic and telepathic animals but never seen one in person.

Ko-ko glanced up at Alenis. Seeing the encouraging smile on her face and feeling the positive thoughts emanating from the two people in the room, she slowly and hesitantly walked towards Ash's outstretched hand. She took one last look up at Ash before leaning over with her beak and eating the mint leaves out of Ash's hand. Partway through the meal, she looked up at Ash and let out a calming coo.

"I think she likes you," said Alenis with a smile.

"Well I like her too." Ash said with a smile as he reached his other hand up to pet Ko-ko. "The ship's morale is in good hands." He added.

When: Before the attack on the Borg

Who: Marcus and Nikki

Where: USS Portland, Sciences

The Portland's computing lab was a unique combination of modern and antiquated instruments designed to maintain the ship's primary and auxiliary memory cores. While the ship's systems were up-to-spec for older, refitted ships, there were still components that heralded back to when the Miranda class was in active production.

Equipment was strewn about the room and patched with ODN fiber; in some cases the white fibers were bare to the open air and a communications hub spliced in. There was a

deliberate pathway into the center of the mess where a small desk laden with PADDs and a small pile of old moleskine notebooks lived. A plate of stale, half-eaten protein cubes from whenever Marcus ate last sat precariously balanced atop an old teradyne duotronic relay connecting two gel-pack ancillary processor units. The entire room spoke of 'Mad Science', but who else to coordinate the Borg problem than the task group's leading cybernetics researcher?

"Solve a problem that the Alpha Quadrant has been dealing with for over thirty years, they said," Marcus muttered from behind his desk, stretching and rolling his shoulders. "No big deal. No pressure."

At that moment, the door whooshed open. "Hey, Marcus, I need your help with..."

Seeing Marcus look up and catch her eyes, Nikki froze. She was used to a messy workspace, but when she saw the dark circles under his eyes, the stubble, and the look of even more frustration than usual on Marcus' face, she immediately became concerned. "Marcus?" she asked, in a gentle voice.

Looking over, Marcus' mouth turned up into a quickly vanishing smile - not because he was disappointed, but likely because of his fatigue. "Hi, Nikki," he said. No sardonic greeting, no acerbic salutation. The two of them hadn't spent much time together since that brief shoreleave and Ellen and Maria's manipulations, and the topic of continuing their relationship had always taken a back seat to ship's business.

"Omigod, Marcus, are you all right!" exclaimed Nikki, in a sudden outburst of concern. "You look terrible! When was the last time you slept? Or ate? Have you been at this workstation all day? Do you even know what time it is? What day it is?" She took a few short, heavy breaths and then looked over at the mess on his desk. "Here, let me clean this up for you," she said, precariously stacking the empty coffee cups, plates, and utensils. "You shouldn't leave food lying around, that's what the recycler on the replicator is for. At least, that's what my roommate always used to tell me at the academy. But T'Espera was one of those Vulcan types, with a stick up her..."

It was at that moment that a glass coffee cup slid off the plate of half-eaten protein cubes, shattering upon impact with the floor. "Omigod, Marcus, I'm so sorry!" exclaimed Nikki, running over to the replicator with the rest of the stale food, plates, and utensils. Quickly, she shoved it all inside the slot and pressed the button to recycle it. "Ummmmmm... do you have a broom somewhere in all this mess?" she asked, looking sheepishly down at the broken glass on the floor.

Marcus walked over and attempted to navigate around Nikki while she was fretting back and forth, trying to get a word in edgewise. "No, I'm..." "No, really, it's okay, I..." "Hey, would you slow down a second?" He folded his arms across his chest. "This is my mess. You don't have to do this," he finished with. "Computer, detect replicated detritus on the floor of this office. Activate cleaning sequence." And with a sweeping gesture of his hands as the floor briefly lit up in a transporter shimmer and a smirk, "Voilà. Better living through technology."

But yes, he did look exhausted. "I don't sleep much when I've got a major deadline. You know, Borg, unimatrix, rescuing an assimilated Starfleet captain... no pressure."

"Well... you should," replied Nikki, crossing her arms as well. "Studies show that your productivity decreases drastically when you don't sleep. And if you don't take care of yourself, then who is going to save the galaxy like a big hero?"

Marcus snorted. "I'm no hero. I'm just a lab rat. Which is just fine by me. The statistical life expectancy of a Starfleet officer in blue far exceeds the other branches." He went to go sit down, and he rubbed his eyes tiredly. "We understand so little about them, and they're our most determined enemy..."

"Yes, they are a mystery..." With no other chair, Nikki pushed a few of Marcus' PADDs aside and sat down on his desk. She picked one up and started flipping through it. "Locutus' tactics at Wolf 359... interesting..." She placed it back on the desk. "Did you know that my uncle Reg served with Captain Picard? He's a total genius. He saved the Enterprise on more than one occasion, and was known as one of the best engineers ever. He fought the Borg, and worked on the Pathfinder Project. And he even shook hands with Zefram Cochrane. Zefram Cochrane! Can you believe it! He's..."

Nikki took a deep breath, realizing she was prattling on. "Sorry. Uncle Reg is kind of my hero, and I get... excited sometimes. Though it's hard living in his shadow."

Marcus dropped his hands and looked up at Nikki. "Must be nice. Having someone to look up to. You know, my father died in service at Wolf 359. And my sister. We got separated in the evacuation corridor." His eyes unfocused briefly, no doubt recalling the stuff of nightmares. "My whole career has been devoted to learning about the Borg. Figuring them out. Learning how to beat them. You've had a hero to look up to. I've just had revenge dressed up in Starfleet's higher purpose." Marcus' eyes alighted on Nikki. "Is that all there is, Nikki? All there is to what I am?"

"Oh, Marcus," said Nikki, taking his hand in hers and gently caressing it. In front of her, Marcus looked like a sad puppy dog. "You're so much more than that. Just think of all you've done for the Portland in the short time you've been here, and what you did for Holo-Meru. And..." she paused for a moment, looking into his eyes, "I know it might be hard to believe, but you have people who care about you."

For a moment, Marcus lost his ability to be self-deprecating. But he froze when Nikki took his hand in his. "So, uh, on that subject," he said slowly. Not sarcastically, but more like he was being extremely careful with his words. "Ever since shoreleave, I've been meaning to, ah, ask you something. Where do we stand? With each other." His speaking increased in speed rapidly, not unlike how Nikki winds up. "I mean, I'm perfectly okay with being professionals about this. We're in different departments and everything, so there wouldn't be a conflict of interest, so that's good, but..."

As Marcus rambled on, Nikki leaned in closer. Then, without warning, she kissed him softly on the cheek.

"Has anyone ever told you that you ramble sometimes?" asked Nikki, blushing slightly.

Letting out an unintelligible, "Guhh..." followed by a nod, Marcus, for a short moment, looked completely disarmed and dumbstruck. When he found his words, he stammered, "I... I was g-going to wait until after the Borg, but..." Then, with a shaky hand, he reached up to caress her cheek, catch her gently by the chin, and kissed her.

Nikki just wrapped her arms around Marcus and savoured the moment. Had someone said a few months ago that she would develop feelings for him, she wouldn't believe it. But underneath his sardonic exterior, Nikki could see that there was another side to Marcus; an intelligent, sensitive man who suffered a tragedy and is afraid of getting hurt again. While they didn't exactly hit it off in a positive manner, Nikki could feel that her and Marcus were about the only people on the Portland who could truly understand each other.

As soon as the kiss broke off, Nikki smiled, barely able to control the torrent of emotions before her. Then, she grabbed his hand. "Come on, I have a holodeck program that can help you with your work," and with that, she was dragging him through the corridors of the ship, holding his hand tightly.

Training Time

Holodeck One, USS Endeavour

Between the rendezvous and the attack on the Borg

Authors:

Portland Crew: Ensign Ash Sullivan, Major Judith Rouse (played by Alenis Meru), Lieutenant Commander Tyrlai Zade, Lieutenant Tolaran Kian

Endeavour Crew: Ensign Dima Reda, CPO Marcella Solari (played by Yvette Beauvoir), Lieutenant Zhuang Fotu, Lieutenant Yvette Beauvoir, Lieutenant Miracle

Others: General Mar'dok (played by Sera Williams)

"We are the Borg. You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile."

Running through the corridors of the Borg unicomplex, Ensign Dima Reda blasted away with her compression rifle at any Borg drone that was in her path. They had been detected, and were still a hundred metres away from the central plexus where Locasta was located. Now, it was just a mad dash towards their objective before they were swarmed by drones and assimilated.

General Mar'dok had led a group of Klingons that were attached to some Starfleet personnel. They had already ditched their disruptors when the Borg had adapted, now they were using the much more preferred Bat'leths. They had left the Starfleet personnel to their fate, though Mar'dok would have given anything to have a few more soldiers right now. They were currently being overrun with Borg. Before he could get his bearings, he felt a strong hand grab him from behind, then pain in his neck as an unnoticed Borg injected his neck with its assimilation tubules.

Ash had never faced the borg before today. He had researched them, their technology and weapons and had read reports about their strength, tactical strategies and precision. None of that research could have prepared him for the real thing. As drones gathered in around him and his phaser modulations stopped working he resorted to hand-to-hand combat. While he was quite strong for a human he was no match for the 10 or so drones that now surrounded him. He managed to fight off a few but the rest soon had him pinned and he felt their assimilation tubules enter his neck near the base of his skull.

Mercy found herself separated from the others. She was a former Marine and had been in combat before, but the Borg were relentless and not easy to kill. Several drones had herded her into a dead end. With her phaser ineffective, she waited for them to close in on her before setting the weapon to overload. Moments later she smiled as it exploded, killing her and taking several drones with her.

Lieutenant Zhuang Fotu was a skilled martial artist, and despite the Borg adapting quickly to their phaser rifles, he was able to toss a few around into bulkheads and each other with graceful yet forceful throws and deflections. But unlike the colony, where they literally brought the cavern down on top of the Borg onslaught, there was no cavern here; a lucky drone managed to snag Fotu's arm with an assimilation tube before going limp, and the Endeavour's tactical officer went down in agony.

The only one left on her team, Dima was close to her objective. She could see the central plexus, with Locasta inside. But as she ran towards her target, she was suddenly stopped by a Borg force field. Turning around, she saw two drones closing in on her. She fired, but to no effect; the Borg had adapted, and her weapons were useless.

She had one weapon left. "Assimilate this," she said, pulling the pin on a photon grenade and waiting for the Borg to take her.

"Computer, end program," called out Locasta. With the Borg ship around them disappearing, the holographic representation of Locasta disappeared, revealing Major Judith Rouse. "Better, but not good enough," she mused. They had been at this for hours, and had still not managed to succeed in their objective once, and frustration was beginning to bubble over.

"Yooz didn't have mez part of the team." Miracle entered, wearing her usual garb of all black. Only thing added was the jacket and combat load bearing vest with tools of her trade as a Commando. Speaking softly with a coldness that belied her warm nature. "Iz am here just incase I'm not needed on the Endeavour as pilot."

Miracle moved over to Ensign Reda. "Use more Explosives. Even the Borg are not immune to the laws of physics. Use EMP wave generators to shut down their electronics of mechanical parts. Don't be afraid to destroy the Complex. Yooz don't live here." Eyes, once warm, now ice cold. "Use the Laws of Physics to yooz advantage. Use their strengths against them." Looking at the rest of those assembled for the raid as she spoke. She gave Major Rouse a nod of an equal to another. "Shall wez have a beer or two to reflect on what transpired?"

Judith looked over at the new entrant. "No celebrations until after the battle,

unfortunately." She glanced over at Mar'dok for a split-second. "Though if we're alive by then, I imagine there will be some blood wine all around."

Fotu stood, the holo-alterations of his assimilation melting away as the program ended. Despite being quite physically fit, he was sweating through his uniform. "Strength is irrelevant, Miracle," he reminded her. "The Borg can be surprised by projectile weapons and explosives, but only for a short time. We must find another path to the other side of the mountain, and through does not seem to be a valid approach."

"Then take away what they need to survive." Miracle shot back at Fotu, eyes getting that mischievous sparkle. "For all species use, or travel in space need one thing paramount before all others. Power. If you don't have power. Nothing works after awhile. Mechanical things stop. Even computers. Communications. Section Shields. Security Cameras. Rest is mice in the walls." Glancing at the Klingons, "I'm sure they could handle taking out a few power sources."

"Personal modulating shields that the Borg uses to prevent those probes injecting crap into our system." Miracle was on roll and showing that she did her research very diligently, ferreting out details that most overlook."

Miracle took a step towards the exit. "Oh... And use personal cloaking devices. And don't say they're against Federation usage. Or I'll let our Klingon friends here know a dirty secret about the Federation. Or maybe I should say the Romulans and the Cardasians and let them jump to their own conclusions."

Yvette shook off the effects of the holodeck's representation of being assimilated and resolved not to experience for real. "Also the Borg have the home court advantage, and to continue the sports metaphor, they know all our play, we need to come up with stratagems that they will not expect." She looked around. "We know what can hurt them; EMPs, projectile weapons, high explosives, and blades. We just have to come up with new ways to utilize them."

"Maybe we are fighting too much." Tyrlai said looking at a wall display that was running simulations based off the holographic data. "We are all converging on one target in groups. This close to the queen none of the drones are in 'safe mode' they all follow us. As we get closer to the center all of the Borg start swarming in and we get penned up. We need to specialize. Say one recovery group of three or four for the queen. The rest of us, once we are engaged we pull back, away from the queen. Keep the drones on you and pull them back to open up room for the recovery team to move. The recovery team does not fight-- they run and evade until they reach Locasta."

Judith considered the plan. It was sound, though it would require a lot of coordination between the multiple boarding parties. "It is worth a shot," she said, before looking over at Mar'dok, the man who was technically her husband according to Klingon law. "Unless you think that these tactics are cowardly and dishonorable, General."

The Klingon General gave a short snort. He felt his neck where the assimilation tubes had

just gotten him, then looked at those gathered. In a surprising response, Mar'dok said, "That is a sound plan. We can create circles of choke points for the recovery team. We hold points along the entry and exit path. As the recovery team runs out, those holding the choke point will follow the team out." Giving those gathered a warning look, in a gruff voice he add, "Nothing is more dishonorable than being one of those... things."

"Excellent," replied Judith, pleasantly surprised. "Let's try this out. Fotu, Reda, Beauvoir, you're on the recovery team. Mar'dok, your Klingons will do what they do best and cause as much damage to their power systems as possible. While the decentralized nature of Borg systems means you probably won't be able to take them out, even creating a diversion and causing momentary hiccups in their internal security systems would help confuse the Borg. Everyone else, use hit and run tactics to pull the drones away. Understood?"

The holodeck doors opened and Tolaran walked through in his combat armor, looking at the assembled crews and narrowing his eyes slightly at Mar'dok, after the meeting he had been left with a bitter taste of the Klingons and their attitudes. "I apologise I'm late, I had to deal with some security protocols for the Portland. Now... what can I do."

"We have another Trill?" Tyrlai slinked her way through the small throng of Klingons. "When did this happen? Hi, my name is Tyrlai." She extended her hand smiling.

"Commander Tyrlai, we do seem to keep missing each other don't we... or I usually hide away in the background. I am Lieutenant Kian, the Portland's Security Chief." he tried to keep a stern look on his face as he took her hand, in truth he'd been trying to avoid Tyrlai, he was never sure of other Trill as his parents were well known on their homeworld as scientists and he'd followed a very... different path.

"Not at all, Im the one who barely knows half the department heads. Mostly cause of my complete lack of oversight. They should have assigned someone to keep an eye on me. I'd say we should get together and reminisce about home, but I haven't been there in twelve years and they kinda tried to kill me that time. So, I'm bitter, I trust your experience was better?"

Tolaran smiled "Hmm, that is a discussion for another time, but lets just say the fact I didn't become a scientist upset family members. I haven't been back since I joined the academy I'm afraid, that was a while ago now. For now my main point of living is to keep the crew of the Portland safe. What would you like me to do?"

"Continue keeping us safe," replied Judith, interrupting the conversation. "Lets set up for one more simulation, this time with a change of tactics." She leaned back and held her back; the pain was starting to come back again and she would have to sit down after this last drill. "Capture me if you can."

Running the Asylum

Captain's Ready Room, USS Endeavour

Shortly after the Rendezvous

Authors: Captain Marcus Byrne & Commander Eahar R'Soll & Lieutenant JG Dawn Solaris

Dawn took one last look in the mirror in her quarters. This was her first official posting onboard a starship and wanted to make a good first impression. She took the time to review the ship's protocols and had a general idea on what needs to be done before setting in to her duty station.

Wearing the same uniform is something I had to get used to. Dawn thought as she exited her quarters.

Immediately she was greeted by the artificial light within the ship's corridors as she walked leisurely towards the closest turbolift. Memories of morning sunshine on the planetside was still fresh in her mind. Dawn pushed those thoughts as she walked into the turbolift.

The turbolift parted and deposited her on to the bridge. With Alpha shift in full swing the bridge was bustling with activity. Dawn was greeted by the duty security officer, after she introduced herself followed by a brief discussion the Counselor was directed to a door on the far side of the room. Upon approach she pressed the door chime.

Marcus and Eahar's status report meeting came to an end as the door alerted them that someone was on the other side, awaiting entry. Giving a quiet nod to his XO, Marcus replied, "Enter." In a hushed voice he added to Eahar, that must be our new Counselor."

Dawn took sight of the two individuals as she entered the room. Upon noticing the rank insignia on their uniforms she was able to put the two together. The faces matches the service records she had glance over before coming onboard.

"Captain Byrne, Commander R'Soll." She greeted them with a smile. "I am Counselor Dawn Solaris, a pleasure to meet you both."

The Captain stood from his seat and held out his hand. With his best diplomatic tone, he added, "Welcome aboard Counselor. I hear that you have some good recommendations."

Dawn shook his hand in return, unsure if she was interrupting.

Placing his soy latte on the desk in front of him, Eahar stood up and extended his paw towards the newest member of the Endeavour family. He had read her personnel file, of course, but there was only so much that one could glean from what was there. First impressions meant a lot.

"Welcome aboard, Counselor," he said, examining her closely. "I've read your personnel file."

"Thank you." Dawn replied as she shook his hand. She assumed they would have some questions for her.

The Captain had already memorized Dawn's personnel file, but he knew that written words

could only tell you so much about a person, he preferred meeting everyone who came aboard face-to-face. "I read that you spent time performing first contact studies. Could you tell me about the Vaccans?" he asked, hoping he correctly named the Vacca VI inhabitants.

"The Federation first set up an observation post on Vacca VI close to twenty years ago. It happened at the end of the planetary civil war which result in the planet united under one leader. Ever since the planet has focused on developing warp technology and other scientific endeavours as a way of bringing everyone together." Dawn decided on a brief summary, unsure where the conversation is headed.

"I joined the first contact team at the latest stage in the planet's warp development. Over the course of the past twelve months I was disguised as a local living in the capital city Daccra. My assignment was to understand the inner workings of the latest planetary government, also to found out which group of leaders would be receptive to the Federation contact once the planet achieve interplanetary travel."

"The closest Federation race I would compare to the Vaccans would be the Caldonians. Since the civil war has ended scientific research is the driving force that brings everyone together. It has achieved the desired result that their founding leader has intended."

"Impressive," replied Eahar, before taking another sip of his coffee. "I only wish that the Borg were as receptive to diplomacy as these Vaccans were."

"If only the Borg were as receptive to diplomacy as the Klingons, we'd be in a better spot," Marcus only half joked. He picked up a PADD from the table as if it had been something he had been searching for for some time.

He handed it to the new counselor as he said, "This is the ship's manifest. As soon as you're given your security access, everyone's medical history will be unlocked."

The Commander gave his first officer a look, then turned to Dawn. "You may have come to us at the wrong time, or the best time. I'm not sure how much information you were given about our orders, but we will be taking on the Borg. To make matters worse, they are being led by the assimilated former Captain of this ship."

Dawn shivered at the mention of the Borg. As a Starfleet Officer she was trained in the subject matter like everyone else, but to actually dealing with the subject matter up close is entirely different matter.

"Commander, due to sensitive nature of the subject as you indicated I was not given any information." Dawn stated in matter of fact way. "Nevertheless I will do my best to assist the crew with their recovery."

With a serious tone, Marcus returned, "There are only three people aboard who have the authority to take me off the Bridge." With a nod toward Eahar, he continued, "Him, the doctor, and you."

His seriousness broke with a lopsided smile as he said, "Welcome aboard Counselor. Feel free to make use of the ship's facilities. Your office is on Deck 12, the Deck is is shared with Medical."

Rendezvous at 29-Alpha

Waypoint 29-Alpha

Deep Space

Authors:

Portland crew: Capt. Alenis Meru, Ens. Kahn Dai, Lt. Sera Williams

Endeavour crew: Cmdr. Marcus Byrne, Lt. Miracle Swiftpaws, Lt. Zhuang Fotu

Others: Locasta of Borg, General Mar'dok (played by Sera Williams), Captain T'Lisa Anderson (played by Jason Beauvoir)

Out in deep space, a combined task force of Starfleet, Cardassian, and Klingon vessels converged on waypoint 29-Alpha, an empty area of space which was their designated rendezvous point. Already there was a small Miranda class light cruiser, an antique vessel but one which was key to their plan.

The heavy cruisers took up a position front and center. The strategy called for powerful vessels like the Sovereign and Galaxy classes to lead the assault and draw the fire of the Borg defenders. A number of smaller escorts took up the flanks; these would go wide and exploit any opportunities that came up with hit and run attacks on the enemy flanks.

Behind the initial line was the Endeavour, flanked by two Cardassian cruisers. The Endeavour would attempt to break through at the first opportunity and head straight for the unicomplex. Delivering boarding parties into the unicomplex, they would hopefully take advantage of the Borg's confusion and kidnap Locasta.

Finally, the Klingon vessels formed up on the USS Portland. With the dark energy reactor, they would be the ones to deliver the killing blow to the transwarp system. Activating the cloaking devices and the dark energy stealth systems, the Klingon vessels and the Portland disappeared. The only trace of them was the battle chant over the comms systems.

Central Plexus

Borg Unicomplex, NGC-3814 nebula

Inside the central plexus, Locasta watched the scene unfolding before her on her long range sensors, flanked by two drones. She couldn't help but let out a hint of a smile at the sight before her; the pitiful Federation had teamed up with the Cardassians and Klingons to attack her nebula. Closing her eyes for a moment, she issued orders to her drones to prepare their defenses. Shields, weapons, and polaron detection beams to detect the cloaked vessels.

This rag-tag fleet would simply having the privilege of being the first to be assimilated.

USS Canterbury
Bridge

You didn't have to be a Betazoid to sense the feelings of fear and doubt that pervaded the every part of the Intrepid Class vessel. Captain T'Lisa Anderson could understand this, the Borg brought to mind many shared fears. Fear of death, loss of identity, friends and colleagues being turned against you by an outside force. It was no wonder that the mythologies of many worlds and cultures possessed tales of the dead returning to prey on the living. The Zombies and vampires of Earth, the Klingon Dishonored, Vulcan Walkers of Death and the Bolian Death-Eaters, just to name a few.

Leaving her Ready Room, the Vulcanoid Captain walked onto the Bridge. "Report." She said as she approached the Captain's chair.

"We've arrived at the Waypoint and all departments report all systems are a go, ma'am." Commander Drusa replied as she rose from the Captain's chair.

"Thank you, Commander, I have the Conn relieve Commander Gar'Rel at tactical and contact the Portland."

"Aye, ma'am." The Romulan replied and walked up to the tactical console. "Commander Gar'Rel you are relieved."

The bear like Ursinoid Security Chief looked questioningly at the Captain.

"It is all right, Kror, my old friend, Commander Drusa can sufficiently handle tactical, I want you to provide Security on the Bridge, should the Borg board the ship."

"Aye, ma'am." He replied deep melodious voice as he claimed the XO's vacated seat and reprogrammed the console to clone the Security console.

"Ma'am, the Portland has acknowledged our hail."

USS Endeavour
Bridge

The Endeavour came out of warp and easily slid into it's position as the spearhead of this operation, a testament to the flying abilities of it's Chief Flight Control Officer. On either of it's sides were Cardassian cruisers. The significance of such a formation was not lost on the Endeavour's CO. Commander Byrne stood from his chair, pulled down his uniform's jacket and said, "Nice flying Lieutenant."

He had called all Senior Officers to the Bridge save Medical, which would be busy in Sickbay

preparing for the arrival of the former Captain Banninga as well as the unfortunate who would be injured. The Bridge had been configured so that every officer would have a console on the bridge. Operations, Tactical, the Counselor, the XO, and Flight Control had their usual spot. His Assistant Chief of Tactical and Security had been given a console that would allow Ensign Reda to monitor internal ship security, allowing Lieutenant Zhuang to handle the tactical situation of the space battle. Lieutenant Beauvoir was given a console that had been configured to allow her access to any and all data gathering and collection.

Giving a look to Tactical, Commander Byrne said, "Lieutenant, send word to the Portland that we are here and ready."

Tapping his tactical console, resulting in the usual chime of a channel opening, Fotu spoke. "Portland, this is the Endeavour. We are standing ready."

"Very good, Lieutenant," Marcus stepped back toward his seat. He looked at each of the crew on the Bridge as he said, "All departments, report status."

"Flight Department is ready, Mez Lord Captain." Miracle busy setting up the run at the Borg Complex. She double checked that all RSC Maneuvering Thruster were fully charged and ready for action when called upon. Her Co-pilot nodded affirmation from his spot next to her at helm.

Yvette poured through data coming in from the ship's sensors, picking out any data that may be of use and saving it for further study later...

IKC Gre'thor
Bridge

General Mar'dok sat in his elevated chair above the rest of those on the Gre'thor. He had named his ship after the Klingon version of hell. It had been a way to show his enemies that this crew would punish them so severely that Sto-vo-kor would not be waiting for them. Never had that been so more apparent than with this mission. This ragtag bunch of ships would take on the greatest abomination in the Galaxy. He wondered to himself if the very first Borg had been without honor, were they so pathetic that they needed machines to work for them?

It was no matter, they would be crushed this day. Swiveling his chair to his first officer, he commanded, "Signal to Stahrfleet that the Gre'thor awaits battle and that the Klingons await Sto-Vo-Kor!"

USS Portland
Bridge

Alenis let out a smile at the Klingon chants. She, for one, was glad to have them on their side rather than up against their bat'leths. "What is the status of the dark energy reactor?" she

asked, to confirm that their stealth systems were active.

"Captain, the Dark Energy Reactor is at full power and is stable. We can begin the overload on your order," came the voice of the Portland's Chief Engineer. Sera gave a nervous glance towards Nikki Barclay. The two of them would be in charge of the Dark Energy Reactor while Ronald and Ensign V'arek handled the regular engineering needs of the Portland.

"Very good," said Alenis. "Helm, set course for NGC-3814"

"Course plotted and laid in, Captain," Kahn said, prompt in the response but lazy in his delivery. He was calm on the outside, nervous on the inside, and that of course made it nearly impossible for him to add a quip. "Our in-flight holo-vid today will be Captain Proton and the Saucer of the Snake People."

Flanked by two drones who were tending to her implants, Locasta stared up at a viewscreen in her central plexus. The Federation, one of the most stubborn groups of individuals that the Borg had encountered, was preparing to resist.

But resistance is futile.

A hint of a smile appeared on her face as she looked over the task force which had been assembled to destroy her. Their forces were no match for the Borg. Soon, they would be a part of her collective. And she would show them true perfection.

Welcome Back, Chief!

Main Engineering, USS Portland

Before the battle

Authors: Lieutenant (JG) Sera Williams, Ensign Ronald Roberts, Ensign Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru), Petty Officer Ferguson (played by Jason Beauvoir)

Inside Main Engineering, Nikki was frantically running around, making sure everything was perfect. But she wasn't adjusting plasma relays or rerouting EPS conduits. No, she was doing something much more critical and much more important.

Balanced precariously on a railing, she was decorating the warp core. Specifically, she was trying to wrap it with streamers that read "Welcome back, Chief!" on them. This was going to be Sera's first day back on duty after the incident with the dark energy reactor, and Nikki wanted to make sure that she was going to feel welcome. So, she had gotten up early and replicated some streamers, balloons, and various party decorations and had spent three hours on the midnight shift doing decorating.

As she reached over to stick the streamer to the warp core, she heard the whoosh of the main entrance open. She gasped, hoping that it wasn't Sera. But as she turned to see who it

was, she slipped and lost her balance, falling backwards onto the floor of main engineering. Quickly getting up, she dusted herself off and looked over at the new entrant.

"Ronald?" she asked, holding up one end of the streamer. "Can you help me decorate the warp core?"

"Welcome back, Chief," the de facto Chief Engineer read aloud quietly. Was this finally it? Would he be the assistant once more? It was almost sad. Like handing a child, the Portland, back over to its mother. But Ron wasn't one for kids so it wasn't that sad at all, really.

"Gladly," he then replied excitedly to the request. "But you gotta tell me now: Will there be drinks? Will there be any Warp Core Breeches?"

"Warp core breach the disaster, or Warp Core Breech the cocktail?" asked Nikki as she climbed back up onto the warp core to put up the streamers. "Oh, good idea!" she exclaimed. "Let's replicate a tray of warp core breeches before she comes in. The cocktail, of course. And with synthale."

Ron had of course meant the latter choice, but it still wouldn't have hurt for Nikki to answer for the former as well. She seemed like the kind of person that could trigger a warp core breach with just one misplaced swing of the arm. Maybe he did mean the actual disaster?

"Great idea, Nikki!" It kind of wasn't. At least not for Ron. He certainly preferred actual alcohol and all that was implied, but for everyone else the idea was probably a good one. "I'd hate to get our dual engineering teams fired up on real liquor. Then we'd have to worry about an actual breach! So, what can I do to help?"

Ferguson entered Engineering his arms laden with food. "I brought some grub, I hope everyone likes haggis and Stobhach Gaelach." He said.

"Some what?" replied Nikki, jumping down from the railing to examine Ferguson's food. "Put it over on the pool table," she added, referring to the large diagnostic table in the main office area of engineering. She glanced at her chronometer. "And hurry up, the chief could be back any second!"

"Just don't get any of it in the computers," Ron commanded with a tone of concern in his voice. It had already become clear what he would be charged with doing: coordinating. "Alright, well if we're going to have goods and goodies strewn about I suggest we keep it all confined to one area," he began as he became deep in thought. A few seconds later and he came to a somewhat inconvenient conclusion. "Right there on the pool table," he admitted with a sigh. "But again, please don't spill anything. I don't think Sera would want to be cleaning up her department the day she recovers from a crisis in the department!"

As Ferguson placed his food onto the pool table and Nikki hurried around making sure the decorations were just right, she heard a beep coming from her comm badge. She had rigged it up to the proximity sensors on the door to give her a few seconds warning for when someone was heading towards engineering. "Everyone, hide, quick!" she called out, before

taking one last look around. "Computer, cut the lights in engineering," she called out before quickly jumping behind a console.

Sera had been away for too long. She was nervous, almost as though she was about to report for duty on her first day out of the Academy. She stopped for a moment just outside the range for the door to Main Engineering to pick up her intention to enter and open. She caught her reflection on one of the hall's display screens. Sera smoothed out her uniform and attempted to make sure her hair was pulled back in a better ponytail. Giving a sigh, the Chief Engineer walked toward the door.

Instead of revealing a bright room full of activity, she discovered a dark and empty place. The Warp Core gave it's warm blue glow as the plasma made its way around the chamber. "Well, that's unexpected," muttered Sera to herself and to the empty department. She tapped her comm badge and said, "Ensigns Barclay and Roberts, where is my department?"

"Surprise!" shouted the engineering crew as they came out of hiding and turned the lights back up.

Nikki came running towards Sera. "Sera!" she exclaimed, "I'm so happy your back! I arranged for some snacks, and decorated the warp core... I hope you like it..."

Sera shook off the sudden illumination of Engineering and gave Nikki a surprised smile. Normally, she would have yelled at Nikki for making such a big deal about her returning, but due to the circumstances Sera made an exception. She gave her friend a huge hug and whispered, "Thanks for this, I really needed a pick-me-up."

Stepping back from her friend, the Chief looked around to everyone who was gathered, "I want to thank all of you for the visits, the cards, and for keeping the ship together until I got back." While looking around, Sera spotted Ronald, then said, "I also would like to thank Ensign Roberts for the job he did while I was gone. The alterations to the ship seem to have been installed correctly and look good." Clearing her throat to force a segway into a new topic, Sera continued, "So... um, who else wants cake?"

"Me!" It was somewhat of a thrill for Ron to hear his superior was ready to take over. He was qualified, but doing it without the help of someone more experienced definitely had made it more difficult for him. He'd have to thank Sera later for the praise, but for now he just wanted to dig in to some celebratory baked goods. "I'll grab the laser cutter!"

Where: Holodeck One, USS Portland

Who: Lt. JG Marcus Kallan, Chief Rocha (via Jason Beauvoir), LT Arthur Couer-Reynolds, ENS Malbi, LT CMDR Tyrlai Zade, LT Rebekkah McKinnon

When: After the briefing, before the attack

"Computer, create a standard computer lab capable of cyptographic analysis, compatible with both the USS Portland and USS Endeavour's main computer. Link the simulation to both systems via subspace high-bandwidth holographic channel." Where Marcus stood, a

computer lab shimmered into existence; not quite state-of-the-art, but on par with what both ship's main computers could both provide. "And patch in Chief Rocha aboard the Endeavour."

"Good day, Lieutenant, Lieutenant Beauvoir informed me that you may have need of help." Chief Rocha said.

"Thanks for helping, Chief," Marcus said, turning to face the holographic representation of Rocha. "So, here's our task at hand. The Borg vinculum broadcasts on very specific subspace frequencies, but their communications are often scrambled. What we need to come up with is a set of algorithms that will allow us to engage in electronic attacks against the Borg during the upcoming smash-and-grab." He smirked. "I hear you're a hotshot at cryptography. You up to the challenge?"

"Now that is a challenge, Sir. And although I wouldn't call myself a hotshot, I believe it is within my capabilities." Rocha replied. "How are we planning to get these algorithms into the vinculum?"

"Unless I'm mistaken, we may need a cortical implant from a drone." Arthur had volunteered to help Marcus prepare this particularly crucial element of the mission, seeing as it would play an important part in making Tactical succeed in its own role. Prior to the rendezvous at holodeck one, he took the time to do some research on Borg technology. There was a lot to sift through, but he felt he'd learned enough of the basics to get him started. "Can we replicate one or does it need to be removed from an actual body?"

Marcus said, tying both officers' ideas together, "The goal is to somehow acquire Locasta and keep her alive and functional long enough to use Borg command pathways to assist with the attack. So while we won't be inserting anything into their vinculum, we will be using these algorithms as attack vectors to bypass Borg security. It's been done before, but unfortunately we don't have a Soong-type android available, so..." He spread his hands, indicating the holographic lab.

"I have cortical implant simulation data downloading from Daystrom right now, and should be processed and categorized by tomorrow," Marcus said, glad he still had lines of contact open with his previous assignment. "But for now, we need to figure out how to get the simultaneously outdated and uprated computer cores of a Miranda and a Nebula to work in tandem over holo-link, while at the same time deciphering the encoding used by this unimatrix."

Malbi had been sitting and listening intently up to this point, where she spoke up, "I could assist with that. Deciphering the code, or coordinating the ships' link. Hacking the Borg unimatrix would be a challenging task, but I - well, we - could handle it." She was nervous to speak up, especially around a group of people she'd only been working with for a short time, not to mention they all outranked her. She almost wished she could take the words back, but she stood her ground and added, "If that's alright with you, of course," with a nod to her chief and the holographic chief from the other ship.

"I'd be glad for your help, Ensign." Rocha said with a smile. "As for processing power, perhaps we could use the dataprocessors from some of the Endeavour's shuttles to pick up the slack."

"Oy!" Bekka McKinnon stalked through the whooshing doors of the Holodeck. "Who is messing with my computers,... oh, you." She came to a stop glaring at Marcus Kallan and brushing back a combination of misbehaving blonde hair and mild rage. "I'm sorry, this is my fault. At some point I must have said please avail yourself of my personnel and resources without letting me know about it. I'm sure what I meant to say was, 'get the hell out of my office', or something along those lines. They should have taught me to communicate better when I was in school for my linguistics and communication degree."

Tyrlai, having followed the stormy blonde girl in, after spotting her in the hallway. "Bekka, how are you?" She interrupted, attempting to help smooth things over in a minimalist kind of way. "Don't mind Marcus here, we let him move into the holodeck a couple months back and Alenis had to give him a job once I brought her back from that death thing."

Rocha watched as the new people entered the conversation, he was unaware of what they were referring to.

Crossing his arms, Marcus smirked defiantly back at Tyrlai. "Someone around here has to do more complicated math than $1 + 1$," he quipped. "Sorry, Lieutenant - McKinnon, yes? - the Chief seemed to fit the bill, and since we're all working towards the same goals on this project, I felt the usual paperwork to be unnecessary. Unless you'd rather I fill out a requisition form in triplicate?"

"Computer, locate Marcus Kallan and repeat this message to him in exactly twelve seconds. Paperwork is quite unnecessary, however the courtesy of a message before you divert resources would be appreciated."

There was a soft chime and the ship's computer spoke. "Message relay for Lieutenant Kallan: Paperwork is quite unnecessary, however the courtesy of a message before you divert resources would be appreciated."

Holding out his hands, palms forward, Marcus acquiesced. "Okay, okay, I get your point. Let's just deal with it after we blow up the Borg, shall we?" Looking to Tyrlai, he said, "You're the ranking officer. If you want to drive, then be my guest. But I'd wager that I have more Borg knowledge than your half-dozen lifetimes do. Also, it means filing status reports with Washington, and I know how much you love him."

"Closer to two dozen." Tyrlai smirked defiantly back. "But otherwise you are right, I have never met the Borg before in any of them, or this Washington character you speak of. So your show, Marcus, no interference from me."

When everything had been worked out between Lieutenant Kallan and the new arrivals, Rocha said "Sir, ma'ams, perhaps we can get back to the topic at hand?"

"Right." Marcus exhaled. "Let's get to work."

Where: Holocommunication between the Portland's and Endeavour's Sickbays

When: After the briefing

Who: Lt. JG Marcus Kallan, Dr. Brad Silverton, Dr. Vanth

Doctor Vanth stayed behind after the meeting, s/he stood. "Computer, link up with the U.S.S. Portland's sickbay simulation, and activate program, projecting my image into their sickbay." Amiri wasn't sure what to expect nor what s/he'd see. Though s/he anticipated s/he'd be projected into the other ship's sickbay, and perhaps they'd even be looking over a simulation of hir former alpha.

The Doctor waited for the computers to make the connections.

Lt. JG Marcus Kallan, the Portland's chief of operations, arrived in Sickbay after the meeting concluded; physically located on the Portland, of course, it took time for the relevant Portland crew to assemble there. A lanky human male, somewhat on the pale side, he peered around Sickbay looking as if he were expecting someone or something. But once he noticed Vanth's holographic projection, he straightened his uniform and approached. "Dr. Vanth, I presume. Lieutenant Kallan."

Brad walked out of his office and came over to the others. "Sorry I'm late. I had to finish integrating the latest research theories that Starfleet Medical has on the Borg."

He nodded at Marcus. "Lieutenant."

Brad then turned to Vanth.

"Doctor Vanth, this is Dr. Brad Silverton, your counterpart aboard the Portland," Marcus said by way of introduction. "And without going into too many unsavory details, he's the reason why I'm stationed here. My bestest pal."

"Yes we are good pals. Ones that understand how the other always performs their duties to take care of their patient's best interest." Brad responded with the same tone as Marcus did. "At any rate lets begin. Computer. Pull up Silverton-Borg Simulation 1."

In the center of the holodeck beside Marcus, Brad, and the projection of Vanth, a female Bog drone materialized. Brad began discussing his preliminary plans.

"We won't know the specifics of any special enhancements that the Borg might have given Locasta over a regular drone so we'll have to proceed with what we do know. Starfleet medical has made some interesting advances in combating the Borg assimilation process. Its not quite finished or field tested but it is at least something to start with."

Marcus regarded the holo-Locasta. "If we're successful at gaining access to her command pathways, we'll have a full list of her implants. But that's the cyber aspect of our mission, so I won't bore you with egghead stuff," he said. Looking to Vanth, Marcus asked, "What's your

experience with cybernetics, Doctor, if I may ask?"

"I must admit it's not my specialty," admitted Vanth. "I suspect I'll be mostly trying to keep the captain alive as her body rejects the implants."

"Okay, we're gonna need plenty of that," Marcus agreed. "Really, what it comes down to is that we must push Locasta to the very edge and keep her fully functional up until the destruction of the unimatrix. Before then, if the Borg think she is a liability, they will terminate her and fry her implants. And it's up to us to come up with the means to keep her human self alive, her implants humming, and her neural pathways open."

Marcus sighed. Might as well broach the unpleasantness now. "I'm going to say this now, because I'm sure it's unpopular but it needs to be said anyway -- as per Admiral Washington, restoring Captain Banninga is a secondary objective. Our primary objective is to use her command pathways to give the fleet an edge in dealing with the Borg. I understand that I'm up against two Hippocratic Oaths, but that's the task at hand."

Brad nodded along with what Marcus said. "Agreed. As much as I will want to save the Captain at any cost... we have to keep in mind that the cost could be the entire quadrant."

Vanth's tail wagged in frustration. "We're doctors. You do what you have to do, but we're going to try to save her."

"Hopefully if what I have in mind works, it won't come to her death." Brad tapped away at a console to advance his simulation. The Locasta simulation zoomed in to nearly microscopic proportions of her shoulder. Several Borg nanites were floating through her blood vessels. "Gentlemen. I think the expression is 'turn about is fair play'? We can inject the Captain with modified Borg nanites that Starfleet Medical has been working on. Essentially they will target the true Borg nanites and reprogram them. They'll be flipped to work for us instead of the Borg as a sort of Borg Vaccine only attacking Borg implants and undoing the damage caused. They'll then leave the human parts of the Captain alone and once no more Borg nanites are detected they will deactivate. Then it's a simple surgical process of removing the implants."

"What's the catch?" Marcus asked; he knew about the experimental nanoprobes, but it hadn't been the focus of his studies at Daystrom.

"Well there are two problems. One, this is all theoretical and untested. It's a sound theory, but still untested. The second problem is the bigger one. This Borg Vaccine process is intended for low level drones. The Borg will detect something is amiss and could kill her or block her authority as a Borg queen. It's hard to say."

"A possible solution," Marcus offered, rolling his shoulders as he considered. "Low-level command pathways could grant access to drone identity. We could try to confuse the Borg collective consciousness by spoofing her identity throughout the network so they lose focus."

"Interesting." Brad spoke softly while thinking. "Make the Borg lose track of who and where

she is? I like the idea but how would that be possible? Wouldn't that be distracting the entire collective?" Brad wasn't fully convinced just yet.

"Doesn't that work to our advantage?" Marcus asked. "The more resources they spend regrouping and trying to find their 'true queen', the less quick they will adapt to task force tactics and other intervention. This is the Achilles' Heel of the Borg's use of the 'Queen' paradigm: It is a weakness introduced to better-interface with the assimilation of humanity."

"If we brought down the full attention of the entire collective it wouldn't take them long to analyze and figure out who is the real Locasta if it is just spoofing her identity onto drones.... unless its more then just her identity. Marcus, what if we also gave out fake commands contradicting one another from the various drones we spoof her identity on? Buy us some more time to let our our little borg vaccine to do its work. And to give the task force more time?"

Nodding, Marcus folded his hands behind his back. "Yes, I think this is going to work."

"I think it will," replied Vanth, his tail wagging in excitement. "I just hope we can save Kate as well in the process."

Who: LT JG Marcus Kallan and ENS Nikki Barclay

Where: Holodeck, USS Portland

When: Before the attack

"...and my uncle Reg, when he worked on the Pathfinder project, he used something like this to help him develop and refine his ideas. It really helped him focus his brilliance. Oh, the pathfinder project. Did I tell you about that? My uncle Reg was the first person to open communication with Voyager, tens of thousands of light-years away. He is just so brilliant! Anyways, I think this program will really help you with your work, and..."

Dragging Marcus by the hand through the corridors, Nikki came to a halt just outside holodeck two, which was fortunately not in use. "Computer," she called out, "Activate program Barclay Tango Four."

Nikki took a deep breath and straightened her uniform. "After you," she said, motioning for Marcus to enter.

Marcus looked briefly dubious. But, having heavily relied on advancements in holo-matrix technology since the start of his career, he knew the sometimes-unpredictable nature of holo-programs often allowed for strokes of insight. "All right." And he entered.

"The mess?" He asked Nikki, somewhat incredulously.

The second Nikki stepped through the holodeck doors, she was a totally different person. Cool, calm, and collected, she knew how to work a room, so long as the room was filled with holograms. "Good evening, everyone," she said, sauntering in.

"Nikki!" exclaimed what seemed like half the mess hall, all excited to see her, seemingly competing for the attention of their favourite friend and coworker.

"Ensign Barclay," called out the holographic Tim at a table with a few other senior officers as Nikki strolled by, with Marcus in tow. "We missed you at the poker game last night."

"Sorry, Tim," replied Nikki with a smirk, "but it just doesn't feel right taking all your money now that you're an expectant father. Too much like taking candy from a baby."

"She's got you there," joked Jason, the only one at the table not keeled over laughing at Nikki's little joke, as he gave Tim a gentle tap on the shoulder. "Listen, Nikki, some of us were planning on going white-water rafting on the holodeck a little later, and we've got room for one more."

Nikki sighed. "Oh, that's too bad. I already promised Dr. Silvertan that I would be at the rehearsal for his play later today. We can't have Pinafore without Josephine," she said, trailing off.

"Oh, you accepted the role!" exclaimed Tolaran, clearly excited. "I must say, I'm looking forward to our big kiss..."

"Awwwww, Tolaran," replied Nikki, blushing slightly at the comment but clearly revelling in the attention. It was at that moment, however, that she was interrupted by a loud bird-call. Buzzing dangerously close to Marcus' head, Ko-ko perched herself on Nikki's shoulder and began nuzzling herself against Nikki's head affectionately. "Aww, Ko-ko, how are you?" she asked.

"She's fine," replied the holographic Captain, her stride quickening as she walked towards Nikki. "Ensign, I've been hearing a lot of good things about you from Lieutenant Williams. Keep it up and a promotion might be in the works."

"Really?!"

The holographic captain smiled. "Well, nothing is official until it's official. But you might say a little birdie told me that you're being seriously considered. Keep it on the down-low though."

"What promotion?" asked Nikki, rhetorically, winking at Alenis.

"Exactly." The holographic Captain Alenis looked over at Marcus and tilted her head. "Who's your friend, Nikki?"

"Oh, this is..." Nikki froze for a second, remembering that she was the only one who would recognize Marcus. Her holographic crew members all had their own holographic Marcus that they all knew and, if not loved, barely tolerated. "This is my friend Mark. He's from the Daystrom institute."

"Pleasure to meet you, Mark," said the captain, extending her hand. "Any friend of Ensign Nikki Barclay is good in my books."

"Charmed," Marcus -- or 'Mark' -- replied. "Would you excuse us?" He took Nikki by the elbow back a few steps as to talk with her in hushed tones -- not that he was worried about offending a group of holograms, but it seemed the social thing to do. "What the heck, Nikki? I was expecting some sort of lab simulation or recorded cybernetics conference. This is... I don't know what this is."

"They help me with my work," protested Nikki, as she pulled her arm out of Marcus' grasp. "Look, Marcus," she explained, her voice trembling slightly at Marcus' harsh tone, "sometimes I find that when I'm stuck working on something, having people there to bounce ideas off of can help improve my productivity. And since holograms are easier to get along with sometimes, and are available whenever I need them, I created a little program in the holodeck to help with that." She looked down at her feet, her right foot pivoting around the ball of her foot anxiously. "I just thought it might help you with your work..." she added, trailing off.

Marcus sighed. He softened the edge that he was previously speaking with. "Look, holograms are designed by the computer to be exactly what you want them to be. Or, in this case, need them to be. I don't like people, and I especially wouldn't like sickly-sweet versions of the same people." He looked back towards the holographic representations of the crew. "But, I guess I can't say this is completely weird. I've talked problems through with holographic versions of specialists before. Just... not real people that I would meet in the real world."

"Okay, well, let's try it," replied Nikki. She turned and looked towards the gathered senior officers of the Portland before her. "Hey folks, me and Mark need your help with something..."

"Oh?" asked Alenis. "Well, I was going to go to the holodeck, but I suppose we could get the gang together... what's your problem."

"Well..." started Nikki, before trailing off

Marcus sighed again. "I'm doing some cryptanalysis of Borg communication channels, specifically with those that deal with command pathways. I'm researching ways to covertly insert and intercept transmissions in the Borg vinculum, except that I can't quite get the algorithms fast enough. Simulations have been inconclusive." He glanced at Nikki for confirmation at the level of detail he was supplying.

"Hmmmmmm, it sounds like this would be right up Protein Cube's alley," replied the holographic Alenis. She pressed her comm badge. "Captain to Protein Cube..."

While the holographic captain tried to contact her chief of ops, Nikki froze. Her neck muscles tightened up and her hands started shaking. A loud, high-pitched squeal emitted from her mouth, as the realization that Marcus would be meeting his holographic self sent her

hurtling towards another meltdown.

"Here I am!" Came the jocular response of a character already on the set. A blockish caricature of Marcus came bounding into the mess hall. Looking a cross between a 16-bit animation of Marcus himself crossed with bumps of pastel greens and blues common to textured protein supplements, faux-Marcus bounded over to the holographic Alenis. "How can I help, Captain? You know, I'm ****always**** eager to help!"

The real Marcus folded his arms across his chest and scowled. He said nothing. Strangely enough, he continued to watch the interaction.

"I... ummmmm... errrrr..." shaking, Nikki stammered out a random jumble of words. "Borg... neural transmitters... protein cubes... creative liberties... holodeck... Queen..." Taking more than a few deep breaths before continuing, she was able to form a semi-coherent sentence. "Mark," she said, motioning towards the real Marcus, "friend needs help. With Borg stuff. To save the galaxy."

"But of ***course***!" Protein Cube bounded over, thrusting his hand out in an exaggerated way to be shook by Marcus. "Anything I can do to help a friend of Nikki's!" Stage-whispering to Nikki, Protein Cube said, "And he's kind of cute, too!"

"Computer," Marcus said, already turning to leave, leaving Protein Cube hanging to his dismay. "End program."

As her fantasy world disappeared around her, Nikki returned to her old self. "I'm sorry!" she exclaimed, grabbing Marcus by the hand and preventing him from leaving. "I made this program a long time ago... before I got to know you... I know I probably shouldn't have downloaded so many personnel files... I just needed something to help me focus... and someone to bounce ideas off of... people are so scary... please... I'm so sorry..."

Marcus didn't pull his hand away, although it was stiff in Nikki's hand, the touch sending an uncomfortable sensation up his arm and through his spine. His own anxiety was welling up, but his means of dealing with it wasn't Nikki's way. He dealt with it his way. "You know what's funny?" He said, not facing Nikki, still looking at the exit doors. "The reason why the Borg hate us so much? Because we're so bloody inferior, and yet we've managed to stymie them time and time again. We are fraught with useless emotions and dalliances that distract us from being productive and purposeful. And somehow, they still lose to us." He was starting to shake. "Maybe we won't win. Maybe we shouldn't win."

Nikki moved in closer and placed another hand on Marcus' shoulder. "I don't think we're inferior," she said quietly. She too had been fascinated by the Borg, both because of her difficulties interacting with other people and because of the tales of Uncle Reg. "Those 'useless emotions and dalliances' are our strength. They give us the drive to explore, to invent, to create. If not for those, we wouldn't have journeyed to the stars, not to mention all the glorious cultural achievements we've produced. Not to mention the fact that in every engagement we've had with the Borg, it was our creative abilities -- abilities which the Borg lack -- which turned the tide in our favour. The Borg don't think, they just assimilate

knowledge. And if we were so inferior, they wouldn't bother sending cubes halfway across the galaxy to assimilate us."

"Besides, even an uptight protein-cube eating conformist enjoys a dalliance or two from time to time, right?" asked Nikki, leaning in closer.

Exhaling a hmph, Marcus peered down at Nikki. He didn't know whether to continue to be angry or not. But the closeness began to disarm him. "Resistance is futile, huh?" He said, turning to face her, trying not to smirk. It was pretty funny, in retrospect. "You're a jerk, by the way."

"And you're the biggest punctilious doofus I've ever met," replied Nikki, leaning forward and kissing Marcus on the cheek. "...Mr. Protein Cube."

(Backpost) Goodbyes...

Docking Port, Starbase 375

Shortly before the departure of the Endeavour

Authors: Lt. Cmdr. Eahar R'Soll

Backpost

Starbase 375, Docking Port 5

"Daddy, please, I don't want to go," protested Korra M'Ress. The thirteen year old Caitian had only recently moved onto the Endeavour a few months prior. The main reason Eahar had took the assignment on the Endeavour was because it was a ship with accommodations for officers with families, and he could finally be with his wife and daughter. After a rough start, Korra had finally started to make friends on the Endeavour, when now she was being told that she would be staying on Starbase 375 for a couple weeks, away from her father.

"You can't stay on the Endeavour, Korra," replied Eahar, looking down at his daughter. "We're fighting the Borg; it's too dangerous."

Korra stamped her feet. "Urgh, you're always saying it's too dangerous!" she shouted.

Eahar was taken aback. He glanced over at his wife and then back towards his daughter. "Korra, what's gotten into you? Is everything all right?"

It was at that moment that tears began to appear in Korra's eyes. She darted forward, wrapping her arms around her father. "Daddy," she cried, "I don't want you to go."

So this was what it was all about. Korra was worried about him. Eahar placed his hands on Korra's shoulders and gently comforted her. "I have to, Korra, it's my duty."

"But what about us?" she cried. "It's always about your duty to Starfleet; that's why you're never around. And finally we can be together as a family again, and now you're running off to fight the Borg."

Eahar knelt down to eye level with Korra and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Korra," he said, quietly, "it is because I care for you that I have to do this. If the Borg gain a foothold in the Alpha Quadrant, you and your mother will never be safe. And the crew of the Endeavour are some of the most talented officers I've had the privilege of serving with; I trust them to keep us safe."

Wiping a tear from her eye, Korra gave Eahar a big hug. "I love you dad," she said, "please, try to come home."

"I will," replied Eahar, hugging Korra back and savouring what could be his last moment with his daughter.

"Sir, we're leaving in two minutes," called out a young petty officer on the other side of the docking port. "You better come aboard."

Eahar sighed. It was never long enough for a proper goodbye. "Okay, Korra, run along now," he said, standing up and handing her some Starfleet credits. "Go order some lunch for you and your mother, and get a jumja stick for yourself."

Taking the Starfleet credits, Korra hugged her father one last time before running off.

"Eahar..." started Niwara, a tear beginning to form in the corner of her eye.

"Shhhhhh..." said Eahar, "we've said all that needs to be said." With that, he wrapped his arms around his wife and kissed her goodbye, hoping it wouldn't be their last.

Meeting the Chief

Security Offices

USS Portland

Authors: Ash Sullivan and Tolaran Kian

After his initial meeting with Captain Alenis, Ash had made his way to his quarters and dropped off his belongings before heading to the ship's security officers to meet his new department head. Now that his transfer orders had been signed and he had access to the Portland's computer he quickly skimmed the Chief Security Officer's file to get an idea of the officer he would be working under for the foreseeable future. After walking for about 15 minutes and getting lost twice, a feat he hadn't thought possible on a ship this size, he entered the security office and looked around for the Trill Officer in charge.

Tolaran looked up, to see a rather bewildering looking Ensign walk into his office, his file had already come across his desk and a wry smile crossed his lips "Ensign Sullivan... welcome to the Portland, please take a seat" he said gesturing towards one of the empty chairs opposite him. "My name is Lieutenant Kian, it's nice to meet you, your file has already been sent to me."

Ash sat down in the seat but kept his posture upright and formal. "Nice to meet you too Lieutenant. Since I'm assuming you've read my file you know I'm a weapons specialist. But according to my transfer orders I'm also to become your assistant chief, is that correct?" Ash asked with just a hint of trepidation in his voice. He wouldn't admit it to any of his superiors but he didn't really have much interest in leadership.

Tolaran looked straight at the Ensign "You can relax Ensign, I'm not going to bite you know. Yes, in short you have been assigned as my assistant, as the tactical position is split on the Portland and covered by Lieutenant Reynolds it gives us a lot more time to spend on other matters. Your expertise in weapons will be well utilized and one of the reasons your here. The main job you'll have initially is to help run training sessions and help me manage the duty roster as well as cover for me when I am otherwise occupied, also when we need additional security teams on away missions, you'll lead a second squad... is that a problem for you Ensign Sullivan?"

The thought of having to manage duty rosters reminded Ash of why he avoided command training but he didn't let his discomfort show. "Not a problem at all sir." He said relaxing his posture a little. "I've already spoken to the captain regarding the Portland's upcoming venture. What exactly will my role be during the attack on the Borg?"

"You will lead a secondary team if needed for any incursions, otherwise you'll be here to make sure everything goes smoothly with the defence of the Portland if I'm off ship or otherwise unable to fulfill my duties as the Chief of Security. I'm sorry, I know it's not the ideal position or what you were expecting for this assignment and I wish it was something not so life threatening but unfortunately we are in these circumstances and we have to deal with them as officers." Tolaran let out a loose smile and spread his hands, the gesture with almost a quick shrug of the shoulders as if to say 'ah well' and then he picked up another PADD and handed it over to the Ensign. "These are the current rosters and logs of what's been going on, take a look over and see if you have any ideas for improvement."

"Certainly." Ash said as he took the PADD from Tolaran. "I think I'll probably need to get to know the other officers in the department a little better before I have any suggestions for changes to this but I'll look over it." He explained. He then thought about what the Chief had said about their current mission, "To tell you the truth, and this may sound strange given the assignment ahead of us, but I can't help but feel a little excited at the thought of going up against the Borg. Or maybe excited isn't the right word... It's a little like that feeling you get right before you go skydiving, if you've ever done it before. A mixture of fear and excitement I guess."

Tolaran's immediate thought was one that was very different to the Ensigns, however not long ago he'd been taking on a space walk and planting bombs whilst fighting off a Borg and in his mind anyway, saving Arthur Reynolds' butt from one... but he had to admit before going on that walk he'd felt the same way and that made him sigh a little "I know what you mean Ensign... let me tell you, bravado aside... it's terrifying when you see your first Borg, despite all the training you can't prepare for it. They just seem to appear, their grey skin so unnatural and the blank stare because there is no anger, no aggression or compassion. All they want to do is add you to their collective and for that split second you'll be stuck in place

but then that passes and you just react, that is when the training does kick in and I have no doubt in that moment you will be fine Ensign, otherwise you wouldn't be here on this ship with this assignment. I don't mean to scare you, and hopefully it won't but shoot the bloody hell out of those things." Tolaran ended with a smile, maybe it was his own fear, his own trepidation taking over with the mission ahead, they had been to the Borg facility but now they were leading a fleet... it was a completely different situation. "As for the other officers, I am sure you will be acquainted in no time, it may also be worthwhile meeting our Tactical Chief, he's a very interesting man" he said as he suppressed a small laugh.

"I certainly hope to do so but I may have to wait until after this mission is over." Ash replied in a tone that was confident without being arrogant.

"Of course Ensign, now go do something fun... before it's too late. Dismissed."

Ash stood from his seat and gave the Chief a short salute. "Thank you sir." He said with a smile before turning and heading for the door.

Tolaran watched the Ensign depart, how was it that in such a short space of time he'd gone from feeling so young and full of energy to feeling old and tired, the nights he lay awake or drifting in and out of sleep were taking it's toll as they approached the launch date, he would have to remember to see the Doctor... or the Counsellor soon, if possible.

Waking Up, Part I

Sera's Quarters, USS Portland

After being medically cleared

Authors: Lt. (JG) Sera Williams, Lt. (JG) Marcus Kallan, Ens. Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru)

Sera stood, cornered in a corridor of some kind. It was humid, warm, and lined with what appeared to be people standing in mechanical chargers. Each had a green disc above their heads with what looked like lightning inside the disc. Inside her head, the Portland's Chief Engineer heard whispers. The whispers kept her calm. They gave her purpose.

The person beside her had been a small time trader. He had owned his own ship and had transported medical supplies, food, livestock, anything that would keep his ship flying. That was irrelevant. Sera walked toward a vertical console that had circular lettering. She was number eight out of the twelve others who were tasked with working on this console. The whispers contained a vast library that contained medical, engineering, cultural and historical data about more species than she could count, all of which was irrelevant to her task. As she stepped toward the console, Sera lifted her hand. From her hand shot two probes that linked her to the console.

With a start, Sera shot up into a sitting position and covered in sweat. A quick glance around brought her back to where she was. She was in her quarters on the USS Portland. Her name and rank were Lieutenant JG Sera Williams of Earth. She ran her hands through her hair to try to calm down a bit. She took a quick look out of the viewport in case the vastness of

space could take away the fear of the nightmare. Neither of those seemed to do much to help. Sera got out of her bed and walked toward the sink. She filled her cupped hands with cold water and splashed it on her face. Then she noticed that what she was feeling was not coming from her. She was feeling the fear, the thirst for revenge, the battle-born excitement, apprehension, and other emotions from the crew of the Portland. It was almost as if she were hearing the whispers, but she was not a Borg. This shouldn't be happening.

She looked at herself in the mirror. Her face still looked a bit pale and she still had circles under her eyes, but she was looking more like herself. Her eyes, they still were a slightly different, almost glowing, shade of green. Everyone else had brushed away her question about eye color, saying there was no difference. In the mirror, she thought she saw a moving shadow at the door. She turned quickly with her hand out while asking, "Who's there?"

As if she had thrown something from her hand, the flower vase near the door tipped over and exploded into glass chunks. Not really knowing what to do, she ran to the side of her bed and picked up her comm badge. She didn't know who else to contact with her sister being dropped off at the station for safety, so she tapped the badge, "Nikki/Marcus, something is going on very weird is going on. Can you come to my quarters?" She tossed the badge onto the pillow as she tried to lose herself in the space beyond the viewport.

=/\= "On my way," =/\= Marcus replied through the comms.

Nikki didn't reply. Instead, a few moments later, she appeared at the door to Sera's quarters clad in her Flotter & Friends pajamas. "Sera!" she exclaimed, out of breath from having sprinted across the ship. "Omigod, are you all right? I came as fast as I could!"

Sera was seated on the floor just on her bedroom side of the bathroom door, facing the shattered vase by the door to the corridor. She was shaking from fear. Her hair was a mess and her Starfleet issued sleepwear looked as though it had been through a rough night. Sera looked up at Nikki, tears in her eyes. "I... I... I don't know what's happening," her hands widened as if revealing the ship. "I can feel everything."

She pointed to the wall behind Nikki, "Lieutenant T'Val lives there, she is a Vulcan who is right now wide awake... fearing the Borg." Her hand pointed to what would be down the hall outside her quarters. "Someone is approaching. They lost their father at Wolf 359. They want revenge for a shattered life."

Marcus arrived a few moments after Nikki, uniform jacket unfastened. He looked tired. He had an engineering kit with him. "Hey. What's broken?" He asked, but then when reading their body language, he realized that the engineering kit would likely not be of use.

Sera looked up at Marcus. She nodded her head at the broken flower vase near the Chief of Operations' feet. "The vase. I..." she tried to think of a way to explain it without sounding crazy. None of it helped her cause, so she decided to just say it, "I was by the sink and thought I saw something behind me. I turned around with my hand out, wanting to throw something at the corner." She then nodded at the dresser beside her, the one that was at least two meters from the sink and behind the door frame, then added, "The vase flew from

there to there." Her hands traced the path of the flying vase.

"Flew?" Marcus set down his engineering kit and pulled out a tricorder. He began scanning, first by the path of the would-be projectile, and then focusing his scans on Sera. "Nikki, what does this look like to you? It's there, just... faint. Let me boost the signal." He tapped a few buttons and then tilted the tricorder towards her, the device beeping as it registered an energy signature.

"Yeah, when I moved my hand the vase launched itself to the corner," Sera said, trying her best not to pull a Nikki and freak out. Then, the words that came out of Marcus' mouth registered in her head. His tricorder had picked up something and he had rushed to see what it was. She blinked through the tricorder's lights and feeling her own fear about to take over. "What are you reading? Is it Dark Energy?" she asked trying not to panic.

"I..." to Nikki, who had spend the past couple weeks in engineering worried sick about what sort of radiation Shras' infernal contraption was giving off, the readings were clear. "Maybe we should take you to sickbay?" she suggested, evading the question.

"This shouldn't be possible," Marcus said, examining the readings on his tricorder more intently. After tapping a few times to reconfigure the scan, he shook his head. "Yeah, you ought to have Silvertown check you again. I'm no doctor, but I know neural network patterns."

"Neural network patterns? Are you saying that my brain has been reconfigured?" Sera said, wanting nothing more than to go home, back to Earth. She looked down at her hands, trying to imagine a glowing aura around her. "Maybe....," she started, "maybe we should go to Sickbay."

Waking Up, Part II

Sickbay, USS Portland

Immediately after Part I

Authors: Lt. (JG) Brad Silvertown, Lt. (JG) Sera Williams, Lt. (JG) Marcus Kallan, Ensign Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru)

Brad settled into his chair. He had no other appointments for the day yet he had a good deal of work ahead of him. All he had to figure out was how to disable implants within a Borg queen before she was able to destroy the alpha quadrant task force and save Captain Banninga in the process.

"Simple!" Brad said out loud to himself. At least he was able to have some peace and quiet.

"Computer pull up..."

The doors to sickbay opened, revealing three officers. Ensign Nikki Barclay was in the lead, and she sprinted towards Brad's office for the third time in as many weeks. Of course, the last three times all turned out to be figments of her imagination -- when she convinced herself that she had food poisoning, a brain tumour, and the Talaxian Flu. The latter was in spite of the fact that she was over 70,000 light years from the last recorded case of the Talaxian flu, but she knew in her heart that it was possible for flu bugs to traverse the

vacuum of space halfway across the galaxy. "Dr. Silverton!" she shouted in a tone even more panicked than usual. "Dr. Silverton, are you here!"

"reference.. research.... of..... borg." Brad's command to the computer trailed off into a sigh as he thought to himself.

'Of course Nikki is here. Why wouldn't she be? I'm sure she found a case of Talaxian flu variant that places itself into suspended animation and is undetectable.'

He walked out into the central hub of sickbay. "Ensign Barclay I am sure whatever it is you think you might have is not as bad as you believe." He stopped in his doorway and looked at all three officers.

"Sup, Brad," Marcus said, his arm in Sera's, not out of any gesture of romantic association, but to help keep the officer on her feet despite bouts of dizziness. "Grab a neural scanner. Cross-link it with ship's internal sensors. I bet you'll find something interesting in Lieutenant Williams' gray matter."

"It's me this time," Sera reassured Brad. She too had learned to cope with Nikki's variety of perceived ailments. "I can read emotions and I threw a vase into the wall... a vase that was two meters away from me," added the Chief, trying to downplay her own fears. "Biobed number three?" she asked, referencing her temporary home in Sickbay after the incident with the reactor.

"Well that one seems to be your new second home." He went over to help Marcus get Sera to the biobed. He went over and got a neural scanner and started to activate it. He continued as he started to scan Sera. "Now what do you mean you can read emotions and move objects?"

Had she been Ensign Barclay, she would have explained the situation in terms of being able to launch the Portland lightyears on a whim or being able to read every thought and memory in the quadrant. However, Sera tried to downplay what was happening because of her own fear. "Well," she started, "I woke up in the middle of the night from a nightmare about the Borg. I went to the sink to splash some water on my face when I thought I saw a shadow move near the door, when I moved my hand the vase sitting on my dresser flew towards the door and shattered. After that, I could somehow feel what the crew in adjacent rooms were going through. I could feel their fear, their hatred... everything. I even knew why they were feeling what they were feeling." She turned her eyes to the doctor as she said, "I even know what each of you is feeling now."

Nikki tensed up at the mention of knowing what everyone was thinking. Her breathing became shorter and shallower and, not wanting anyone to read her thoughts, she tried to block Sera out. Closing her eyes, she focused intently on the most neutral thing that she could think of. Her breakfast. "Bagel. Cream cheese. Smoked salmon. Black Coffee," she repeated over and over in her head until her mouth began to water.

Brad spoke to Sera without looking up from his console as he made adjustments to the settings, "If that is the case Sera than what am I feeling right now?"

"Well, I wouldn't call it arrogance, but you are calm and confident in your skills," Sera returned, feeling a little relieved that the doctor wasn't in a state of panic. That, or maybe he didn't yet know what was going on and thought it may be a quick fix.

Brad smiled reassuringly to Sera. "See? We'll get to the bottom of this and have you back in Engineering in now time."

Out of the corner of his eye, Brad saw Nikki tense up after Sera spoke about her telepathy. He wasn't relishing having a second patient on his hands with a concussion from her passing out and striking her head on something. "Nurse Hill. Please administer to Lt Williams 50 CCs of D-glucopyranose."

Maria paused for a moment confused. "Sir? But that is just gluc--"

"Please save the commentary for later discussion Nurse Hills." Brad turned to Sera, "This will block Lt Williams' ability to read Ensign Barclay or anyone else's emotions." If she really could read his thoughts she would know to play along. That and the wink he gave her while saying it couldn't have hurt.

As Maria injected Sera with the hypospray, Nikki breathed a sigh of relief. But as she did so, her stomach growled in anticipation of the bagel that she couldn't get out of her head. "May I use your replicator?" she asked sheepishly.

"It's... quiet now," Sera said to mostly Nikki. "The clutter is gone and I can't read any emotions," she lied. Knowing Nikki like Sera did, she knew that her friend needed everything to be normal or the neighboring biobed would have a new patient. "What now?" Sera asked Brad. Uncontrollably, Sera's stomach growled a bit and the craving for a bagel hit Sera. She waved it off with a look at the wall clock as she said, "Has it been that long since I ate?"

Brad finished up with linking up the neural scanner with the ship's internal scanners as Marcus had asked. He had already seen the increased amount of dark energy radiation inside Sera's brain. That certainly couldn't be a good thing. "Alright Marcus we're linked up. What exactly am I needing to look for?"

"Look for cross-firing between the hippocampus and the rest of the brain," Marcus said, pointing to a diagram on Brad's screen. "The signal will resemble a subspace manifold signal along the second and third harmonics." When the inevitable blank or exasperated look no doubt came his way, Marcus added, "It's the same signal of a dark energy envelope being created and collapsing in the span of a millisecond."

"Damn" was the only response Brad gave for a moment.

"Well I guess that answers the question of how long it would take for the residual dark energy radiation to dissipate. " Brad turned his focus from the screen and back to Serra. "As we already know, Dark energy is barely understood by engineering but even less so by medical. There is nothing to go off of Serra so I need you to tell me everything that has happened to you that is out of the ordinary or anything you have felt since you left sickbay."

"Until tonight, there wasn't a whole lot." Sera thought for a moment, "Now that you mention it... there were a few times that I imagined that I heard other people's thoughts. Also, when I came back into the airlock, my helmet seemed to slide itself off the bench. I just thought it was my imagination or some magnetic glitch."

The Chief Engineer looked past the doctor at her scans and added, "That almost looks like a subspace transmitter, communication relays open subspace eddies on that end," she pointed to the active portion of her brain.

"Which is why playing with subspace manifolds is *insane*," Marcus said. "Not to be a broken record, but Shras is a nutjob." He glanced at Sera. "I'm not helping, I know. Sorry."

Nikki stared at the readings, then back towards Sera, then back at the readings again. She didn't know what was happening, but it didn't sound good. "Would an ice cream sundae help?" she asked in a meek voice, remembering what her mother would prescribe to her as a young child when she was sick.

"You know, I'd love a sundae. Could you drown it in chocolate?" Sera asked, feigning a bit of excitement. She was glad to have a friend like Nikki, doing everything that she could do to try to help... even if it meant ice cream at times when ice cream may not be the best solution.

With that, Nikki darted off into Brad's office to take advantage of his replicator.

Brad shrugged his shoulders slightly. "Well chocolate does have some miraculous properties. This dark energy residue or whatever it is, is flickering in and out of existence. The scans aren't showing anything dangerous or to be overly concerned of. Many types of radiation and energy residue does absolutely nothing. However with that said, I'm afraid you'll have to stay in sickbay once again. We have a good deal of time before we get to the nebula and have you out before then."

"I almost missed being here all the time," Sera replied, trying to sound a bit more enthusiastic than she was but sounding sarcastic.

Emerging from the office, Nikki balanced four bowls precariously on her arms. "Three hot fudge sundaes!" she exclaimed, carrying them towards the biobed. "And one bowl of shaved frozen protein cubes, supplement number 29. Enjoy!"

"Chocolate, the one thing that makes you feel better no matter how bad things get," the Chief Engineer replied as she took her bowl from Nikki. "Thanks!" she added, her voice muffled by the spoon full of hot fudge sundae that she had already eaten.

Something in the Walls

by Tyrlai Zade and Zirra Kajat (Jason Beauvoir)

"Shivering, shivering,... the walls are shivering. They weep for mercy."

Tyrlai knelt next to what remained of Crewman Abendin. He rocked slowly back and forth, breathing raggedly and thinking somewhat worse. Tyrlai was leaning on her Psychology background and she was about out of questions. "Your name, crewman, what is your name?"

"Butterflies in the margarine, they are so,... silent now."

She took his hands, met his addled gaze with bright blue eyes. "Your name, crewman. Think, what is your name."

"Like tea cozy's left too long in the sun. Left too long,..."

The doors whooshed open and the duty assignment security officer stepped in. She took quick note of the crewman's disheveled quarters, everything scattered and out of place as if it had been ransacked. She had been summoned by the second officer.

Tyrlai stood and gestured, "I think its been thirty hours. He was off schedule yesterday, when he didn't report today they called me, well Tim, but I meddled." She looked at the Gorn, as if surprised the ship had one. "He was attacked."

Petty Officer Zirra Kajat looked around the room trying to piece together what may have happened. It appeared as though the attacker may have been looking for something. Turning back to the Second Officer, she noticed an all too familiar look on the woman's face. She understood, Gorn weren't exactly in abundance with in the Federation, let alone Starfleet. "Ma'am, I'm Petty Officer Zirra Kajat, has the victim said anything coherent?"

"Not even slightly, and I was trained as a counselor by Starfleet." Tyrlai walked over to the wall panel by the door. "Computer, display time reference aught seven two by seven yesterday." For a moment they were watching the crewman get dressed for his duty shift. Just as he turned to leave the wall behind his bunk warped around itself, tendrils of a shimmering wall and bunk mixture reached out for the crewman, enfolding him. He screamed soundlessly, staring with bulging eyes at the shimmering warped wall as it settled back into its normal shape. "This is just a sensor display, it interprets the data it has. I do not believe he saw the same thing we saw. But,..." She looked over at the Gorn as if for dramatic effect, "These are the sensor readings of that wall." She pointed to various readouts. "No movement, no matter readings, no energy readings, no heat. Nothing at all. In fact what we see on the display is just the surrounding material of the ship warping to cover something the sensors cannot display to us due to the limitations of this equipment. They do not know how to represent nothing whatsoever."

"You think that he was attacked by nothing, ma'am? Isn't nothing a scientific impossibility?" Zirra asked after viewing the display.

"I'm not sure there is such a thing as a Scientific impossibility." Tyrlai frowned. "But in this

case I would say that the difference between what attacked Crewman Abendin and nothing would be found in the limitations of our internal scanners. It's not so much nothing as it is something that the sensors cannot detect and therefore do not register." Tyrlai finished and stared at the bulkhead. "And it can go through walls."

Zirra looked quizzical she was aware that there were several substances that were undetectable sensors, due to them scattering the wavelength that sensors employ. Then she remembered the unfamiliar smell she picked up when she entered the room. "Ma'am, can you smell that? It's kind of a burnt sugar smell."

"I am unfamiliar with that, what is it?" Tyrlai had noted it but assumed it was something the crewman had prepared for himself before losing his mind.

"It could be Valogen, a volatile chemical that produces a burnt sugar when it comes into contact with oxygen. It is undetectable by sensors and its molecules are small enough to pass through duranium. I know this because special containment vessels are needed to transport it."

"Does Valogen cause madness and then seep back into the hull when it's done?" Tyrlai seemed dubious. "Still it's interesting, perhaps Valogen is a side product of whatever we couldn't scan. Does it break down into something we can scan perchance. After all if we can smell it we should be able to scan it."

"I have not heard of Valogen having that effect on humans, Valogen Oxide can be detected if we realign the sensors." Zirra said. Happy that her time on Starbase 12 in Customs inspection was coming in handy.

"Could you realign a hand scanner quickly?" Tyrlai thought as she reviewed the sensor data once again. "I have a bad feeling we may be able to narrow this down more easily. Computer," she said turning, "Are there any other members of the crew who have not reported for duty in the last 24 hours."

"Crewman Kaslar and Crewman Thosk."

"Commander Zade to Thosk, are you working from your quarters again?"

"Well, I'm not going near your office." The slightly squeaky voice of her administrative assistant filled the room.

"So far it looks like this thing targets people in their quarters." Tyrlai waited.

"Perhaps it would be best if I followed you and took notes."

"Pick up a pair of hand scanners and meet us outside Crewman Kaslar's quarters." Tyrlai closed the channel with a tap on her badge and opened another. "Medical emergency and security to crewman Abendin's quarters." She then turned to Zirra, "let's hope Kaslar just has the flu."

"Indeed, ma'am." Zirra said as she followed the Second Officer out of the unfortunate Crewman's quarters.

Ghosts of the Past

Captain's Office, U.S.S. Portland

The afternoon before "Into the Nebula"

Authors: Captain Alenis Meru, Lt. Cmdr. Tyrlai Zade, Lt. (JG) Brad Silverton

The bridge's turbolift doors opened and Brad Silverton walked out. He didn't often venture onto the bridge and had been meaning to change that. He just wished it was for something more pleasant than what he came to discuss.

Tyrlai waved from where she leaned against a railing trying to play some sort of odd wooden flute. She was multitasking while watching the stars flow past the viewscreen.

Brad saw Tyrlai and stopped beside her before continuing to see the captain. "Commander. I didn't know musical instruments were allowed on the bridge." He paused for a moment to ponder. "Then again birds aren't either so there is that."

Tyrlai turned and smiled pleasantly. "I'm not yet at a level of proficiency that can be described as musical. Hence I have found a loophole."

"I don't know about that. It sounded quite pleasant and I'm sure you have more than a few hours practicing." Brad looked intently at the flute. "I haven't seen a flute like that. A family heirloom?"

"It's a nalu flute, from the replicator. It usually takes several years of training at a musical academy on Trill. I'm using the do it yourself method. I'm sure I'm doing very well." Tyrlai wandered over in Brad's direction. "I don't have a family, so no heirlooms."

Brad made his way over to the Captain's office door. He beeped in and waited for the Captain's response. He was still going over in his head what he had planned to say, as if he hadn't rehearsed it a dozen times already on the walk up from sickbay. Tyrlai followed him in and sat in the corner looking at some instructions on her handcomp and then back at her flute.

"Come in," called out Alenis in a slightly strained voice. When the door opened to reveal Brad, she looked up in surprise. "Dr. Silverton?" she asked. "Did I miss an appointment, or have you started doing house calls?"

Brad laughed lightly. "Is everyone going to give me a hard time for not coming to the bridge more often? No, you didn't miss an appointment," His smile dropped and his tone became more serious as he walked over to the chair on the other side of the captain's desk.

"But I did want to talk to you about our current mission. On a more personal matter."

"Oh?" Alenis raised an eyebrow and tilted her head slightly, a motion that was mimicked by Ko-ko. Immediately realizing what Brad was referring to, her defenses went up. "What sort of matter is this?" she asked in a cautious tone, attempting to draw him out.

"Captain. When we first met, you came to me for tranquilizers to help you sleep." Brad was biting his lower lip trying to dance carefully on the subject. He realized the futility of it and went straight in. "Have you thought about what it will be like to be ship to ship against another Borg vessel?"

"Are you questioning my ability to command this ship in this engagement?" countered Alenis in an acidic tone, responding to his question with another question.

Both a horrified and confused look came across Brad's face. "No no no. NO!" He took a quick breath. "Nothing of the sort Captain." He stopped for a second and tilted his head to the side when what Alenis meant dawned on him. "Captain did you think I would? No I am not here medically relieve you. You have my full confidence."

"I've never met a Borg before." Tyrlai said absently, staring at her flute.

"Okay," said Alenis, leaning back in her chair while Ko-ko glared suspiciously at Brad, "then what exactly brings you to my office?"

"Well to be honest what brings me here is... concern. We fought the Borg together hand to hand on the away team mission. There were a few moments before the action when you seemed, well distracted." Brad quickly raised his hands defensively and hopefully disarmingly.

"And rightfully so Captain I cannot blame you and can understand. But it has been pretty nonstop since then. Have you had a chance to talk about it? Apart from Delainey, there aren't too many people that know the details."

Alenis sighed and stood up, and without a word walked over to the counter on which she kept her teas. This was going to be a long conversation and not exactly one she was looking forward to. Making herself a tea, she looked over her shoulder at Brad and Tyrlai. "And I suppose Ms. Zade is reprising her role on the Ares as a ship's shrink. Strange," she mused, "I thought that was Delainey's job."

"I dabble." Tyrlai leaned back in her chair. "Music, gambling, telepathy, photon torpedoes, whatever's needed at the moment."

"I see," replied Alenis, adding a mint leaf to her tea. "Can I get you some tea as well? I have Pyrellian ginger, Deka tea, and a rare Tulaberry blend from the Gamma Quadrant. I know tulaberries are a bit passe," replied Alenis, referring to the great Tulaberry bubble of the 2380s, when the Ferengi created a profitable trading empire in the Gamma Quadrant through their linkages with the Dosi and others. But, the smell of profit in the wind attracted too many traders and they oversaturated the market. The ensuing crash wiped out a number of investors throughout both quadrants and destroyed Ferengi-Dosi relations. "But I have to say," she added, "this tea got me through my first Chief Tactical Officer assignment. Care for

some?"

"I haven't had the pleasure of any of those so surprise me?" Brad was feeling a little bit better, but only a bit. This was his first tour as CMO and here he was essentially challenging the Captain. Not truly challenging as he had no intention of relieving her. But to even bring up the matter seemed to be at best stepping right up to an unspoken line if not crossing one outright. While Brad was no councilor he was a doctor, and Alenis' prescription history concerned him. She had stopped, though not without a stab at trying to get more from Brad. The fact that she had felt the need to take them in the first place was an indicator of how bad things had been, and how bad they might become again.

"Three tulaberry teas," replied Alenis as she began preparing the drinks for Tyrlai and Brad. "So, doctor, you came to talk about the upcoming engagement. You're concerned that fighting the Borg again will trigger my memories of New Algiers in a way which will negatively affect my health or my performance, correct?"

Brad took the cue that Alenis talking directly and openly with Tyrlai around meant she also knew of the Captain's past, or at least the Captain wasn't afraid to talk about it. "Well to be clear it's not your performance I have concerns about. When push came to shove with the borg at the complex you didn't let anyone down. In fact I believe if memory serves you got more drone kills than I did. No, my concern is with your health Captain." Brad drew silent for a second while he gathered his thoughts and stared into his tea.

"You are about to re-enter a very similar situation as on the Gol. On a bridge, facing the borg. But this time you'll have the weight of command of not only the Portland but of a critical part of saving the entire quadrant. Captain have you thought about that aftereffects even in a good case scenario?"

Alenis took a sip of her tea as she thought about her response. Part of her wished that it were springwine instead. All eyes in the room, even Ko-ko's, were on her. She took a deep breath, stood up, straightened her tunic, and sauntered towards the window. Somewhere out there were the Borg. The most feared power in the galaxy, the ones who caused so much pain at New Algiers.

"That," she said, "has been at the back of my mind since Admiral Washington first told us that we were going to be engaging the Borg. I know it's not going to be easy for me, but I have a job to do." She paused and turned back towards Tyrlai and Brad. "There is one difference between then and now though. After the Gol, I was alone. I didn't know who to turn to, and didn't have anyone I could trust to talk about it. They had to force me to see Arvel for counseling. Now..." Alenis let out a hint of a smile, "I have you two. And Tim. And Delainey, and Ko-ko. And the prophets." She intentionally neglected to mention the bottles of springwine in her quarters. "The Portland is more than a command to me; with all we've been through together, it's a family. Even just knowing that I have a family out here on this tin can gives me the strength to conquer any adversity."

Brad nodded and smiled at Alenis' declaration. "I'm glad to hear that. Even in the best of conditions it can be hard. But you are right. You do have a lot of support here." He was even

more relieved than she would know. He had been tempted to offer her tranqs again if it had come to that. Oh he would have hated himself for that afterwards but between a guilty conscious or having the Captain lead a critical mission distracted, he knew what he'd have to do. Luckily he'd not have to cross that bridge.

"Very good. Now," said Alenis, reaching into her desk drawer, "since this may be our last cup of tea together, care to make it Irish?"

Restless Nights

Sullivan's Quarters, USS Portland

The night before "Into the Nebula"

We are the Borg. Lower your shields and surrender your ships. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to service us. Resistance is futile.

Ash woke with a start and jolted upright in his bed. His sheets stuck to his skin with sweat and he quickly pushed them away. When studying the Borg in the academy Ash had listened to that transmission countless times, reliving previous encounters with the Borg on the holodeck. But at the time they were merely an academic pursuit, a means to increase his knowledge and his chances of a more interesting posting when he graduated. Now they were real and every time he closed his eyes he replayed those holodeck simulations in his mind except this time they couldn't just be switched off or paused or changed at his whim.

He ran his hands through his hair, pushing it back and out of his face, then rubbed the sweat off on his sheets before standing. "Computer, ice water." Ash said as he made his way to the replicator. "And bring the lights up to 60%."

He took the cool glass and sipped from it slowly, closing his eyes and rolling his shoulders trying to relax. His heart and mind raced as he paced the room, backwards and forwards. It was a strange feeling that he couldn't quite put into words. He wasn't afraid of the Borg, or the mission ahead, or even of dying. However the thought of being assimilated terrified him, being turned into some sort of mindless slave for the rest of his life was one of the worst fates he could imagine.

Ash sat down at his desk, opened up a blank communique and began typing:

"Dear Mum and Dad,

I know we haven't spoken in a long time. I know we don't really see eye to eye but I wanted to let you know... That I'm going on a mission tomorrow that I may not come back from. I'm not sorry for my actions and I would do it all again but I do miss you and I wanted to be able to say goodbye.

So Goodbye.

Ash"

He read over the message again and again for about 5 minutes but couldn't bring himself to press send. "Computer save this message for now." He said as he slammed a fist on the desk. A tear rolled down his cheek but he quickly wiped it away.

When nothing else worked to help him sleep Ash turned to his 'addiction' as many people called it. He pulled on some shorts and a tank top before beginning a run around deck 3. He lost track of how many laps he had done and just kept running until he felt tired enough to try and return to sleep. A solid 45 minutes passed before he reentered his quarters. He did some push-ups, some squats, and some pull-ups on a bar he had set up himself before finally entering the bathroom for a sonic shower.

A few minutes later Ash stripped back his bed, replicated some new sheets and climbed back into bed, now thoroughly tired. Tomorrow was going to be big day and the more sleep he could get the better. "Computer deactivate lights and play playlist Sullivan gamma at 25% volume. Set timer and deactivate music in 45 minutes." With that command Ash closed his eyes and tried to focus on the rhythm of the music and forget about the anxieties the next day would bring.

It's happening!!

Authors: Alenis Meru as Maria Hill, Brad Silverton and Timothy Rouse as Ellen Washington.

In the hours before the battle, sickbay was abuzz with activity as the nurses prepared for the inevitable casualties. The normally chatty Ellen and Maria were both quiet, engrossed in their work and affected by the ominous mood permeating the ship. Maria was the first to break the silence. "So..." she started, trying to think of a lighter subject than the impending assault on a Borg facility, "have you heard anything about Nikki and Marcus?"

"Heard what?" Ellen asked her friend while she tried to stand up straight and rubbed her back. Her back was killing her, but as many has said, she was too stubborn not to work. Besides, who knew, maybe this baby will come out finally if she continued to be busy instead of reading holonovels all day.

Maria smiled. "Just yesterday, Petty Officer Liu told me she saw them heading to the holodecks together. I think our efforts at matchmaking have been successful..."

Brad was only slightly to the side but well within earshot. "You set them up too? Do you two have involvement in everyone's dating life." Brad laughed. "I hope it goes well for them." Brad thought about Marcus and Nikki together. Sure Marcus was a pain in the ass but he did wish him luck in finding someone. "How many dates have they been on?"

"I'm not sure," replied Maria. "Intelligence on those two is hard to come by. And Marcus was very insistent that their relationship was none of our business." She paused for a moment. "Of course, he did use the word 'relationship'..."

Ellen turned around and with her belly she bumped over a tray. She let out a small curse and sighed when her attempt to pick the equipment up failed. "Damn," she said seconds later, when she was up again and moved her hand to her back.

Maria looked up at Ellen. "Are you all right?" she asked, looking into her friend's eyes.

"This back pain is killing me." She grabbed hold of the handlebar in front of her and pressed with her other hand as hard as she could at the lower back, the only thing she could do to relieve the pain. She refused to say out loud that the last twinge was way more painful than before.

Maria gasped. "Dr. Silverton!" she shouted, in a tone that made it clear that he was needed immediately. "Ellen, get on the biobed."

Brad had gone back to double checking and stocking an emergency medical kit. If the need arose, they would need to enlist the aid of the ship's crew and they would need supplies and medical tricorders. He turned quickly towards Maria.

As Maria helped Ellen onto the biobed, she glanced over her shoulder at Brad. "Dr. Silverton, it's time," she called out, the meaning of her words obvious in context.

"You're overreacting," Ellen tried to reassure her best friend. "I'm not in labor, it's not my time yet. I still have two more weeks to go! Check it for yourself," she said and nodded in the direction of a medical tricorder.

Maria sighed and reached for the tricorder. They say that doctors make the worst patients, but nurses like Ellen weren't much better. Waving the tricorder over Ellen's pelvis, the results were unusual but not surprising. "Get on the bed; little Andy is arriving early."

"That can't be," She exclaimed in surprise. Before she had a chance to ask Maria to check again she got another contraction. She moved to her side and grabbed her belly. "Maria, call Tim!"

"Whoa now let's not be too hasty. The ship is about to go into battle with the Borg and we could be hours away from..." Brad looked down at the readings that Maria had gathered of Ellen. "...ok well maybe we should hail him."

Barely able to contain her excitement for her best friend, Maria tapped her comm badge. "Petty Officer Hill to Commander Rouse..."

"We're about to assault a Borg-infested nebula and I'm a very busy man," replied the gruff voice on the other end. "This better be important..."

"It's the baby," blurted out Maria. "He's early."

Tim's eyes widened at that. "I'm on my way!" he said and ran towards the turbolift.

Hearing Tim was on his way Ellen leaned backwards on the bed closing her eyes, relaxing at the thought Tim was on his way. Until the next contraction came along what made her bolt forward again and let out a scream. She tried to remember the breathing exercises she had been thought in the academy, but having it happen to yourself was really a completely different case

"Okay, Ellen, just stay calm," said Maria. "Tim is on his way."

Into the Nebula, Part I

Various Locations

Authors:

Portland: Capt. Alenis Meru, Ens. Kahn'r Dai, Lt. Arthur Reynolds, Lt. (JG) Sera Williams

Endeavour: Cmdr. Marcus Byrne, Lt. Miracle Swiftpaws, Lt. (JG) Rebecca McKinnon, Lt. Cmdr.

Eahar R'Soll

Bridge, USS Portland

Captain Alenis Meru stared up at the swirling gases of the nebula on the viewscreen. Somewhere inside this nebula were one of the most dangerous enemies the Federation had known: The Borg.

"We are the Borg. You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile."

Staring intently at the screen, Alenis was back on the USS Gol, at New Algiers. As Chief Tactical Officer, she was responsible for trying to do as much damage to the Borg as possible. On the screen, she saw the Borg cube, the tractor beam, and the plasma torpedo that wrecked her ship.

She closed her eyes tightly, urging the flashback to go away.

"It's as thick as a Caitain's hide in here," Kahn'r observed with displeasure, meaning the miasma outside the ship. "We've got a little bit of gaseous intake on the main impulse drive, nothing to worry about for now. What kind of approach you thinking? I can do the Centauri Manoeuvre, a Kappa 010 might look nice...oh, and I have really been wanting to try out an Omega Four sometime in this baby." The pilot went silent for only just a moment and added in, if reluctantly, "Or I guess an Alpha approach could work, if we didn't want to show off." From his disapproving tone it was obvious that he really wasn't a fan of the last suggestion.

"Nothing too fancy, just keep us away from their scanning beams so they don't detect us," replied Alenis, brought back to the bridge by Kahn'r's voice. "Speaking of which, how's the dark energy reactor doing?"

"Captain, the dark energy reactor is currently operating with safety limits." Jason replied. "Also its illustrious creator would like me to remind you that since we are using it for other than its designed use, we have voided the warranty and he therefore takes no responsible

for any undesired effects it might have on the ship and/or its crew."

"Duly noted," replied Alenis. "And the stealth systems?"

"Operational, if only just," Arthur responded from behind the tactical console, a dissatisfied look on his face. "But I doubt the Borg will see us unless we want to be seen."

Alenis nodded along. "Good to know. I don't plan on being seen until it's too late for them." She pressed a button on her command chair to call up engineering. "Engineering, please tell me that the dark matter ejection system is operational. I don't want to be anywhere near that thing when it blows."

==/\=="All systems are green, Captain"==/\== Sera's voice replied over the comm with as much confidence as she could muster. While they had tested the ejection system numerous times in simulations and on the holodeck, this had been something that could never have been performed live. In her year aboard the Portland, Lt. (JG) Williams learned that real life was vastly different than simulations.

Bridge, USS Endeavour

Commander Byrne sat in the Captain's chair, eyeing the sensor readouts and ship readiness reports on the console beside his chair. This would mark the first time that he had led his ship into battle. The night before had been restless as he had toured the ship as Captains do prior to a large engagement.

"We are the Borg. You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile." the Borg voice called over the ship's comm. It had no emotion and echoed the hive nature of the Borg. It was the speech that all Starfleet officers fear hearing, yet there it was.

Marcus stood from his seat and tugged down his uniform's top that had been slightly riding up his back. With a breath he remembered the events at Nova Europa. The Captain who had saved him, the crew he had lost. In a voice slightly above a whisper, he said, "For Kate." Turing back toward his chair, he called for the Yellow Alert to turn to full Red Alert. With a calmness, the Commander pressed the ship's intercom button and the comm button to the small fleet of Klingons and Starfleet ships following the Endeavour on it's attack run, he announced, "We are engaging the Borg. I need a readiness report from all departments and ships."

Miracle sat at the helm, once again in her usual unauthorized garb, her huge mug with it bright yellow smiley face sat in its holder at the side of the helm console within easy reach. The flight path already logged into helm console and sent to the ships that were part of the Endeavour's Armada of Ships from various Star Empires. "Flight Department and helm is ready, Mez Lord Captain." Her voice serious and soft.

"Very good Lieutenant," Marcus paused before adding, "I thought we talked about your... choice of attire." Letting it go for the moment, he gave a look toward the other Bridge Staff.

Becca glanced at her display as a blur of readiness reports came streaming into her console. She looked at the display on the main viewer and the first tactical scans that came through the com channels. Her mind was whirring as she drank it all in. Battle with the Borg, it was going to be such a cool story when she was old. She could already see herself corrupting her grandchildren's minds with sordid tales of adventure. There was a look of curiosity and wonder on her face. "Last ship has reported ready, Captain."

Marcus looked back at his Chief of Operations and nodded his acknowledgement. "Lieutenant, be careful down there. Godspeed," he added, trying his best to sound reassuring. He wanted his first away team to come back without casualties.

Checking her chronometer, Lt McKinnon turned her station over to the ops watch officer and headed for the transporter room.

Miracle eased the Endeavour into the wisp of the gasses and small particles that made up the Nebula, separating from the rest of the Task Force. She kept tight to the flight vectors she had meticulously plotted out to give each ship room to maneuver to avoid collision. It was all a matter of timing to reach each point to maneuver onto the new vector. Eyes darting to the sensors screen and other flight readings. She upped the deflector output to catch what she didn't see or caught on scanners.

Eahar looked down at the auxiliary screen on the side of his chair, which he had folded out at the beginning of the battle. Looking at the strategic situation, he shook his head. "May the great creator smile down upon us," he mused. "We'll need her blessing."

Marcus turned his head back slightly from the viewscreen as he muttered, "We'll need all the 'blessings' we can get." Turning back to the task at hand, he added, "Let's get the Captain back, shall we?"

To be continued...

Into the Nebula, Part II

Various Locations

Authors:

Endeavour: Cmdr. Marcus Byrne, Lt. Cmdr. Eahar R'Soll, Lt. Miracle Swiftpaws, Lt. (JG)

Zhuang Fotu, Lt. Yvette Beauvoir, Ens. Dima Reda, Lt. (JG) Rebecca McKinnon

Portland: Lt. (JG) Brad Silverton, Petty Officer Maria Hill

Other: Locasta of Borg (aka Capt. Kate Banninga)

Central Plexus, Borg Unicomplex

Surrounded by screens, Locasta watched the task group approach. They had put together a pretty good force, but it would be no match for her cubes. But more important than the forces at her disposal right now were the forces just on the other side of the transwarp gate. The saboteurs from the Portland had delayed her efforts to bring the gate online, but it

would all be for nought. Repairs had been nearly completed and they were only minutes away from activating the transwarp gate and sending a massive invasion force into the Alpha Quadrant.

As she stared up at the screen, she nodded towards one of the drones in her chamber. Pulling some cords down, the drone connected them to the implants on the side of Locasta's head. She would be controlling the defenders of the gate personally.

"We are the Borg," she called out, on all known hailing frequencies. "You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile."

Transporter Room 1, USS Endeavour.

Inside the transporter room, Dima flicked the rear sight on her weapon up and down. She was trying, but not succeeding, at hiding her anxiety about the mission. This would be by far the most difficult and dangerous challenge that she had ever faced. And the stakes were immense -- success or failure on this mission could determine the fate of the entire quadrant.

Yvette prepared herself for what could well be her final mission. She showed no outward signs of her apprehension, part of her job was making others see only what she wanted them to see and over the years she had become very good at it.

A slip of paper, somehow tucked into one of Yvette's halter straps for her assorted gear and weaponry, slipped out onto the floor of the transporter room. Written in the tiniest of Chinese characters, and then Vulcan script beneath, it read, "We escape the Lion's jaws only to leap daringly into its den." It could only have come from Zhuang Fotu, a poetic way of saying "good luck", or perhaps, "good bye."

Rebecca Victoria McKinnon stepped onto the pad, a variety of EM equipment in a shoulder pack, four transport buffers were slung over her opposite shoulder. and a marine grade phaser pistol at her hip. The Borg would no doubt adapt after a couple of shots but she was not planning to need more than that. She had wrangled her long blonde hair into a ponytail with the exception of a few rebellious strands and looked around excitedly at the others.

Yvette picked up the piece of paper and read it. A smile crossed her features and she whispered in Bajoran "Let us hope we can tame this lion, my friend." She then secured the note in a safe place and let her smile fade.

Sickbay, USS Portland

"How much longer, Doctor," whispered Maria, holding her best friend's hand as she was in the throes of labour. From now, there was only so much she could do -- Brad would be taking care of the delivery, and she was just there to help make sure Ellen was as

comfortable as possible.

"I'm not sure," replied Brad, over Ellen's screaming. "She's almost fully dilated; hopefully he arrives before everything hits the fan in here..."

Bridge, USS Endeavour

"Approaching safe transporter range in... 5... 4...3....2...1! ... Wez with in transporters range within the safety parameters for an space environment as this." Miracle sang out from her spot at helm. She took a sip of her orange slushie as she took in the vast Borg Complex that was in view and not obscured by the nebula's particles and gases. She quickly conferred with her counterparts aboard their ships. "All ships of ourz fleet are at their assigned position and beaming over their combat troops." Miracle informed the rest of the bridge as she prepped for evasive maneuvers while awaiting the pick-up signal from the Endeavours Away team.

"Lieutenant Swiftpaws, keep us in range of the away teams. We can't lose them before the Portland detonates their weapon." called Commander Byrne from a standing position near the Captain's chair. His vision switched from the viewscreen at the front of the bridge and the small console at his chair's armrest.

"Lieutenant Fotu, keep the smaller Borg ships off of us, fire only when they see us as a threat. We have to keep them distracted so the Portland's group can sneak in," Marcus ordered his Chief of Tactical and the rest of the fleet that had gathered around his ship.

"Tracking," Fotu replied, monitoring his display like a hawk. His expertise was required on the bridge, and he was not selected to join Yvette and the distraction and extraction teams. No complaint came from the warrior-poet, although this did not go without artistic expression elsewhere.

Eahar pressed a button on his chair. "Engineering, divert power to the shields. I want us to last long enough for the away teams to do their thing."

Returning back to his seat, the Commander simply gave the biggest order of his career as a commanding officer, "Lieutenant, take us in. Mr. Zhuang, ready the phasers and torpedoes."

The Canterbury joined several Cardassian Galor class Destroyers as they engaged the Borg spheres.

And Unto the Beach, Part I

Various Locations

Authors:

Endeavour: Lt. Yvette Beauvoir, Ens. Dima Reda, CPO M'Jart S'Rem (played by Jason Beauvoir)

Portland: Capt. Alenis Meru, Lt. Jason Beauvoir, Lt. Arthur Reynolds

Other: Locasta of Borg (aka Capt. Kate Banninga)

USS Portland

"Initiating evasive maneuvers!" Kahnir called out suddenly, sending the Portland into yet another desperate dive. They'd repeated this half a dozen times now on their approach through the nebula, avoiding the anti-proton sweeps that could potentially expose them to the Borg sensors. With the huge amount of power the experimental reactor flooding through the vessel's systems, the old Portland was able to move with nearly the maneuverability of a runabout. The inertial dampers struggled to keep up as the ship twisted off its original course and ducked just under another one of those pulses, making people need to hang on or buckle up to stay in place. The pilot laughed as the ship shook around them and he picked up on the emotions of surprise, frustration, and even anger for whoever was flying the ship from the crew on the lower decks.

"Sorry about that," Kahnir added, sounding far too cheerful after having tossed everyone about, adjusting their pitch to level things out again. "There's not much warning time between detecting their sweeps and getting out of the way."

Climbing back into her command chair, Alenis looked up at the screen. "Any indication that they've detected us or the Klingons?"

Arthur double-checked the readout, having held on tightly to the console in front of him as the ship bobbed and weaved around the sweeps. It reminded him of his time aboard the pirate ship *Orion Dawn*, when they did similar maneuvers to avoid being spotted by Federation or Klingon ships. Actually, this was far nicer; the *Orion Dawn* didn't have inertial dampeners half as strong as ones on the Portland. "None yet, but we're cutting it close. They clearly suspect we're out here, as they've increased the spread and intensity of their scans."

"Thank the Prophets for small miracles, I suppose," muttered Alenis, staring up at the few spheres between the Portland and the transwarp gate. With most of the ships engaging the Endeavour's task group and the Cardassians, Locasta had left only a few spheres between the Portland and the transwarp gate. No sooner had she said that, however, than she felt the ship shudder and come to a halt. She had felt this once before, three years ago on the *Gol*. A Borg tractor beam.

"Report!" she called out, knowing exactly what to expect. The green glow on the screen meant that the Portland was caught in a tractor beam. Instinctively, she placed a hand on her phaser, flicking off the safety and setting it to its highest setting. She wasn't going to go down without a fight.

"Captain I-" For once, the pilot didn't so relaxed and sure. His mouth had dropped open the moment they'd been caught, disbelief plain on his face. "They scanned us and initiated a tractor beam in less than two seconds!" Kahnir even sounded offended, as if his manoeuvres should have been enough to get them all the way and that the Borg weren't playing fair.

Jason could feel his body prepare itself for battle. It wasn't a new feeling, he'd felt it

numerous times before, but this time he was facing the Borg, made this a whole other ball game. "Captain, I'm detecting a build up in energy within the Unicomplex. They're powering up the transwarp gate. Computer estimates 3.5 minutes before they can establish a stable conduit." He reported stoically from the Science Console.

"Then we have three minutes to get to the gate," replied Alenis. "Lieutenant Reynolds, fire at will." She took a deep breath; the fact that the Borg hadn't fired a barrage of plasma torpedoes at the Portland meant that she had something that they wanted. Which meant that she knew what was about to happen. "All hands," she said, activating the intercom, "prepare for boarding parties."

Central Plexus

Inside the Central Plexus, Locasta smiled as she looked up at her screen. The Portland had fallen into her trap. Soon, they would be assimilated, and the greatest mind in the quadrant when it came to dark energy would be part of the collective. The secrets of dark energy would be hers, and nothing would stop the Borg.

Borg Unicomplex

Upon materializing inside the Borg Unicomplex, Ensign Dima Reda immediately pulled out her tricorder. The Borg drones off in the distance were ignoring them for now, and she had told herself to ignore her urge to start pointing her rifle at them. "It's this way," she whispered, pointing down a corridor. "Let's just hope the other teams are drawing enough of their attention."

Yvette checked her honor blade and phaser rifle. She could smell ozone in the air and hear the hum of machinery. The temperature was a little higher than room temperature, which she found quite pleasant. The light was more subdued than that on the Endeavour. "Indeed, Ensign."

Dima nodded in response as she pressed a few buttons on her tricorder, activating a small dampening field. It wasn't quite a personal cloaking device, but it was the next best thing. They would be all but invisible to Borg internal sensors, a vital component to their plan to infiltrate the central plexus and make it to Locasta. "Dampening field activated," she said, "Stick together, and don't attract any attention. As soon as they realize that we're the main threat, this is all over."

Chief Petty Officer M'Jart Artalu S'Rem, Endeavour's Boatswain surveyed her surroundings with senses of a hunter. Her culture was an odd mixture of hunter/gather and Federation level technology. Her planet's Capital was the only scale settlement, with smaller villages scattered throughout its many jungles. She checked her equipment, including her N'Zhara blades, which if all went to plan, she wouldn't have to use. Satisfied that everything was

where it should be, she signalled her readiness to move out.

Taking a deep breath and clutching her rifle, Dima led the way, pushing any hint of nervousness out of her head. The future of the Federation was at stake; this was no time to let emotions and weaknesses get in the way of what had to be done.

And Unto the Beach, Part II

Various Locations

Authors:

Portland: Capt. Alenis Meru, Lt Cmdr. Tyrlai Zade, Lt. Jason Beauvoir, Lt. Arthur Reynolds, Petty Officer Zirra Kajat (played by Jason Beauvoir), Lt. (JG) Marcus Kallan

Other: General Mar'dok (played by Sera Williams)

Bridge, USS Portland

"Increasing power to the impulse drive," Kahn'r replied to his superiors, trying to break them free of the tractor beam. The ship shook hard as a rising vibration built up around them, and they started to move again. "We're breaking free. Just a few more seconds-" The Sphere that held them opened fire with their cutting beam, damaging the shields, threatened to punch through and carve a chunk out of their hull. Even as it fired, the high-pitched harmonics of active transporter beams sounded throughout the bridge, and suddenly they were boarded. Kahn'r rolled out of his chair as a drone opened fire, turning his seat to slag in an instant.

Tyrlai stepped through the turbolift doors her hand sweeping smoothly in an upward arc cutting one drone out from under its legs and slicing its partner from waist to shoulder. She slammed the hilt into the side of its head, there was a flash and it fell allowing her to step past and avoid the one legged drones tubules.

"Damn," Arthur cursed when the transporter beams slipped through the shields. So this ship's shields still couldn't repel Borg transporters, even after receiving a few upgrades here and there. "So much for Starfleet ingenuity."

As one of the drones approached his station, he stumbled away and grabbed the phaser out of its holster at his side. One shot was all it took, but it wouldn't be long before they adapted. When he found an opportunity amid the chaos, he ran up to his console and checked the internal sensors. "We've got drones beaming in all over the ship! Attempting to compensate!" True to his word, he tried to oscillate the shield frequency, but knew he wouldn't be fast enough to outmatch the Borg. Still, there was a certain random, chaotic tendency to it which could at least buy the ship a few intermittent moments during which the tractor beam would be weaker.

Alenis and Tim fired their phasers at the Borg drones on the bridge, trying their best to cover the bridge crew in between calling out orders. Back to back, they lay down covering fire.

"Keep rotating shield frequencies!" called out Alenis as her phaser battery ran dry from all the high-powered shots being fired. Tactical, fire a full spread of torpedoes at the spheres; maybe it will--"

Alenis was stopped in her tracks by a metallic hand gripping her by the arm. She turned towards her attacker, coming face to face with a Borg drone. Trying to push the Borg away with her other hand or trip it with her feet was futile, and a second later, she saw the drone raise her arm, preparing to extend her assimilation tubules. Desperately, she resisted, but the drone was too strong.

Zade ducked under the railing and slashed upwards taking the tubule arm with a flash of her sword. Outside of Klingons she rarely got to use the thing and it was exhilarating. She slashed down taking the second arm off at the elbow, the molecular edged force field that formed the blade of her sword sparkling a vivid burning red with each strike. Spinning back from Alenis she swung hard taking the head of a second drone clean off. Continuing her spin with a gleeful yelp she leapt and planted both boots into the chest of a third drone. It staggered slightly and she bounced off the much heavier Borg and landed flat on her back with a high pitched yelp.

Alenis breathed a sigh of relief as the amputated arm released its grip and fell to her feet, before turning her phaser on one of the remaining drones. "Damn it, where are the Klingons," she muttered.

Before Jason could compliment the Second Officer on her swordmanship, a drone appeared in front of his console. The Chief Science Officer drew a double barreled shotgun from behind his console and fired both barrels into the face, practically obliterating its head. He wiped the blood from his face as the drone hit the deck.

Tyrlai used Jason's console to pull herself back up. Rubbing her aching lower back and wincing. She glanced around and muttered. "Four and a half." She then looked over at Jason with a quizzical expression while shouldering her glowing sword. "Why do you have a shotgun?"

"I watched a holovid of an old Earth film about zombies. These beings were animated corpses and therefore bore a resemblance to Borg Drones. Shotguns appeared to be effective in combating zombies, so I figured they would also be effective against Borg. I was correct." Jason replied.

"Non-regulation weaponry on the bridge," mused Alenis, looking around at what was left of the Borg. "Normally that's a violation of Starfleet regulations, but I'll let it slide."

"Merci, mon Capitaine." Jason said.

Tyrlai flicked her wrist and the level two forcefield that covered the edge of her sword shimmered and vanished. "Just this once, mister." She pointed an accusatory finger at the Vulcan. There was also a smirk, thrown in for his Human side.

Jason just raised a knowing eyebrow at the Trill Second Officer.

Bridge, IKR Grethor

The General's bat'leth crashed through the eye implant and cut through a few circuits as the drone in front of him began convulsing as it fell to the floor of the bridge. He looked around to see that his bridge crew had similar success in dealing with the invaders. Giving a full belly laugh at how pathetic the resistance had been, he congratulated the crew on the victory. He then pressed the comm unit on his chair's arm, "All ships, form up on the Portland. Clear out the spheres and scout ships."

He sat back in his chair, and looked through the attack periscope. The Borg Central Plexus lay just in front of them. It wouldn't be long before the Borg Unicomplex went up in a blast that would, no doubt, be seen in Sto-Vo-Kor! The bridge of the Grethor erupted into song as it began the attack run that would open the door for the Portland to do its duty.

Main Computer Core, USS Portland

Zirra had been put in charge a small unit of Enlisted Security guarding the Main Computer Core. Three drones materialised in the corridor. The first one was downed by one of the Security team's phasers. The second was hit in the shoulder, it temporarily lost its footing, but kept coming. The Borg adapted and the phasers were useless.

As it closed the distance the crewmen drew bladed weapons or used their rifles as clubs. The Borg drones threw them into bulkheads.

The Gorn stepped forward. Grabbing the nearest drone and pulled it close to her. She held arm and the other shoulder as she opened her mouth wide, before bring the full force of her jaws on its neck and ripping the head from its shoulders. The whole attack took a matter of seconds.

The final Drone was disabled by an EMP grenade.

Black viscous liquid dripping from her lips, Zirra said. "Stay alert, there will be others."

Cybernetics Lab, USS Portland

Constructed in the final hours before the assault, the hodge-podge of cross-linked technologies across three decades of cybernetics and artificial intelligence studies that were originally in Marcus Kallan's office were now in this room.

"All right," Marcus said, slapping his hands together and rubbing them. "Computer, begin sequence Crypoborg Alpha-One."

As the machines flashed and sputtered to life, joined by glittering ODN conduit, their beeping and whirring almost sounded musical. Marcus closed his eyes, allowing himself one

moment of respite as the algorithms derived by the joint task force's brightest minds began compiling and throwing kiloquads of confusion into the Borg subconscious. His mind drifted to when he and Nikki were last together, and the awkwardness on the holodeck.

He sighed.

To be continued...

And Unto the Beach, Part III

Various Locations

Authors:

Endeavour: Cmdr. Marcus Byrne, Lt. Cmdr. Eahar R'Soll, Lt. Miracle Swiftpaws, Lt. (JG)

Zhuang Fotu

Other: Gul Jatok (played by Alenis Meru)

Bridge, CDS Galandar

Barking out orders, Gul Jatok stared up at his screen, completely focused on the tactical situation. Covering the Endeavour's assault, the Cardassian fleet was engaging the Borg defenders. They just had to keep the Endeavour alive so that it could deliver its boarding parties and recover the queen.

"Port shields at 46 percent," called out a female Glinn at the tactical station.

"Reroute power to compensate," replied Gul Jatok. "Flight control, maneuver to protect our left flank."

The Glinn at tactical pressed a few buttons on her console and then let out a gasp. "Tactical cube approaching, 287 mark 12!"

"On screen!" Gul Jatok stared up at the cube. He knew that a Borg tactical cube would make short work of the Endeavour, and that if it did so, all would be lost. The Federation ships were doing well enough at protecting the Endeavour, and looking down at a tactical status, he knew that they had one chance to save the whole operation.

"Glinn Kotara, signal the Cardassian fleet. Tell them to break off and engage the tactical cube. Flight control, prepare an attack vector"

"Gul Jatok, engaging a tactical cube is suicide!" protested his flight control officer.

Most Guls would have officers removed at the slightest sign of insubordination, but Jatok didn't have the time and he needed his flight control officer. "Then," he said, in a deathly serious tone, "as the Klingons say, it is a good day to die."

Bridge, USS Endeavour

Eahar stared down at the tactical overlay on his screen, seeing movement among the Cardassians. "Sir, the Cardassians are breaking off the attack," he said, the annoyance easily detectable in his voice. "Where the hell are they going?"

Marcus gritted his teeth as he heard the news about the Cardassian ships breaking off, "Should've known, getting them here was too easy." Nodding his head back toward Tactical, he added, Lt. Zhaung, report on their heading."

"Cardassian ships are heading 1-3-5 mark 3-5-2. It appears they are withdrawing," Fotu reported, frowning in disappointment as he worked his scans. Another signal crossed his board. "Sir, the Portland is caught in a Borg tractor beam and is being boarded."

Miracle was moving the Endeavour to put the Complex between the Borg Cube and them, "Borg Cube appeared on extreme range of flight scanners, Commander," Speaking same as before as her hands flew across the helm console. "Which iz not very far in this Nebula. A few thousand clicks at best."

"Are they moving to engage?" asked Eahar, raising an eyebrow. After how reluctant the Cardassians were to commit any forces at all to this attack, he was surprised to see them taking on such a dangerous role. "They were covering our left flank; Captain, I suggest diverting some forces from our right flank to compensate and increasing power to our shields."

By now, Marcus sat on the edge of the Endeavour's center chair. As much as he wanted to capture the former Captain, he knew that the fate of the Federation sat with the Portland. He looked at the streaming battle data and ship status on his own display console. "Make it so, fortify our left flank. Fotu, would an attack run still keep us within transporter range of the away team?"

"Yes, but only just," Fotu replied, already reconfiguring his tracking sensors to give them the maximum amount of accuracy at this range. "Shield and weapons ready."

"Do what you can, but keep us within transporter range," the Commander ordered both Fotu and Miracle. In his mind, he tried to visualize how far along the away team was in their task and calculate their needed time. He didn't want to leave anyone behind, but if the Portland had to detonate the Dark Energy Core, a few lives weren't worth the entire ship. He gave Eahar a look that said that this operation would be cutting it close.

Miracle flew in arc that at the Apex put them in well within the striking distance of the Borg Cube with the Endeavour canted just right to bring maximum array of weapons to bear on the Borg Cube. "Five minutes to download maximum fire power," She sang out to Fotu, even slowing the Endeavour down to give him a very stable firing platform to bring maximum firepower upon the Cube.

A full spread of photon torpedoes streaked out from the Endeavour, only a few bright red

twinkling stars missing their target. Phaser fire proved to be ineffectual at this range. "Minimal damage, but we are drawing attention to ourselves," Fotu reported.

After the barrage from the Endeavour, Miracle scooted the Endeavour back to place the Complex between them and the Borg Cube and within transporter range of the Away Team. Allowing Fotu get off several aft torpedo shots as she made the Endeavour duck into the Tinker-toy like Borg Complex making her a very hard target to get to. And well within Transporter range of the Endeavour's Away Team.

To be continued...

And Unto the Beach, Part IV

Various Locations

Authors:

Portland" Capt. Alenis Meru, Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Lt. Cmdr. Tyrlai Zade, Lt. Jason Beauvoir, Lt. Arthur Reynolds, Lt. (JG) Sera Williams, Ensign Ronald Roberts, Ensign Malbi tai-Konjah, Petty Officer Ferguson (played by Jason Beauvoir), Ens. Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru), Cmdr. Shras th'Karath (played by Alenis Meru)

Other: General Mar'dok (played by Sera Williams)

Engineering, USS Portland

Engineering was a chaotic scene; as the engineers scrambled to give the bridge as much power as they could to try to get away, security officers engaged Borg boarding parties. Ensign Nikki Barclay hid behind a console, peeking up just enough to manipulate the controls and keep the power distribution as optimal as possible. After ducking to avoid some crossfire, when she looked up, she saw a horrible sight. A Borg drone, with his assimilation tubules planted in a console. But not just any console; it was the console which controlled the dark energy reactor ejection system that she had just installed.

With all the security officers engaged, Nikki realized that it was up to her to save the ship. She reached towards a plasma cutter that was lying on the floor, hoping it had some gas remaining. As she activated it, her adrenaline took over. Standing up, she let out a scream; a war cry that was heard throughout engineering and that a Klingon would be proud of. Bolting towards the drone, she cranked the plasma cutter's beam up to maximum and brought it down on the neck of the drone.

Swinging the cutter back and forth, Nikki made short work of the drone. As its head rolled across the floor of engineering, Nikki breathed a sigh of relief. But her relief was short-lived as she saw a warning appear on the half-assimilated console.

"Dark Matter Ejection System offline"

"No..." she gasped, as she frantically tried to operate the half of the console that was still controllable. But it was to no avail.

Ferguson moaned as he shook his head to clear it as he pulled himself off the deck. A Borg's swinging arm had sent him crashing into a bulkhead. The alarm blared in his ears. Seeing Nikki he asked. "What's going on, Las, it sounds like all Hell's breaking loose."

"The ejection system," cried Nikki, helplessly beating on the console, "it's broken... we can't eject the reactor."

Sera swung a curved pipe that had broken off during the current Borg battle at the attacking drone, crumpling it to the floor. "What's wrong with the ejector, Ensign?" Sera asked as she quickly jumped toward the ejection console. The Dark Energy reactor had already begun its overpower sequence. There wasn't much time before they needed to get it out of the Portland before containment degraded to a point where space and subspace would destabilize into a very big problem.

"The conducting rails for the ejection tube aren't operational!" Ron had noticed it about a minute ago during the attack and was already frantically in the process of trying to fix it. Hearing that time was running out certainly wasn't helping his composure. "If we don't get them running we're going to have to fire the core's thrusters from inside engineering and there's no way in hell we're going to want to be around for that mess!"

Malbi had been fighting several of the Borg hand-to-hand, as her phaser had been rendered useless early in the battle. She was armed with a metal pipe of some sort, using it to bash in every Borg head she saw. As she neared the group of engineers, she overheard their distress and spoke up. "Then I suppose you'd better fix it," she stated as she impaled one of her attackers. She turned to make eye contact with the ensign, "If you lead the way, I'll guard your back."

While Malbi covered her and Ron, Nikki frantically tried to reset the conducting rails on the system, but to no avail. "It's no good," she cried, after a few moments of looking at diagnostics. "Signal the bridge," she said, crumpling to the floor, "tell them the ejection system is offline."

Malbi hesitated to tap her commbadge, "Are you sure there is nothing more we can do? Quickly find a way to replicate replacement parts? Was there no backup system or alternative way of ejecting the dark matter?" It may have been her Klingon stubbornness, but she wasn't prepared to give up this easily.

"Well I have no idea if the fields would hold for long enough," Ron started in a tone that seemed to suggest that what was to follow was not a terribly good suggestion at all. "But if we can throw up the containment fields around the dark matter reactor we could fire the thrusters here in engineering. I just can't promise there will be an engineering in the aftermath if that field does not hold!"

"Sounds grand to me, Sir." Ferguson said. "I wasn't planing on living forever anyway."

Malbi nodded, "Today is a good day to die."

"Not a good idea," Sera called out from her position at the Dark Energy Reactor's control panel. Her voice sounded as disappointed as the rest of them were sure to feel. "If it were the Warp Core, I'd say go for it. With all of the thruster exhaust and expended energy when this thing leaves, it will breach the Core no matter how many containment fields we put up. Also, the problem is with the clamps, they aren't releasing. We'd rip the ship in half"

Nikki collapsed against the wall and let out a deep sigh. So this was it. She tried to remain strong, knowing that these were her last few minutes. As she looked up at Sera, a hint of a smile appeared on her face. If she was going to die here and now, she couldn't think of anyone she would rather spend her last moments with.

Bridge, USS Portland

Shras stood up from the console that he was hiding behind and sighed heavily. The Borg had seemed to take a keen interest in him, and it was only by the skin of his teeth and the hand-to-hand combat skills of some of the other bridge crew that saved him from being assimilated. "Captain, we have a problem. The reactor ejection system has been damaged by the Borg. There's no way to eject the reactor. We have to abort the attack."

"Belay that," replied Alenis, with a wave of her hand. She took a deep breath; she knew what order she had to give. It was one that no commanding officer wanted to give, but the stakes were too high to even hesitate. "Flight Control, set course for the transwarp gate. I want us inside that conduit the millisecond it opens."

"Captain," protested Shras, his eyes wide-eyed, "you're not--"

"I am," replied Alenis in a firm tone.

"You'll kill us all!"

"I've been dead before," countered Alenis. She took a deep breath and stared up at the screen. "We're Starfleet officers," she added, for good measure, "and we all know what has to be done. I suggest you all do what you can to make peace with it while you can, and know that your sacrifice will save billions." The Portland rocked, hit with a plasma beam from the Borg sphere. "Hail Mar'dok. Tell him to cover us. We're going in."

Arthur briefly hesitated, if only because of Alenis' statement, but ultimately followed through in hailing the Klingon ship. "Message sent, captain."

"Good." Alenis paused for a moment and took a deep breath before pressing a button on her chair to activate the ship-wide intercom. "Attention all crew," she said in a firm tone, "the delivery system for the dark energy reactor has malfunctioned. I have ordered this ship to set course for the transwarp gate; we will be the delivery system." She paused for a moment to let that sink in. "All non-essential personnel, head for the nearest escape pod. To all my

crew, it was an honour serving with you. May the prophets bless us on our final journey."

Tyrlai shouldered her sword and headed for the turbolift.

Alenis exhaled and placed a hand on Timothy's hand. "Go," she said, looking into his eyes. It wasn't an order, though she could make it one. It was more of a plea. "Take Ellen. Andy is going to need a father."

Tim looked around the bridge before turning his gaze to Meru. He was in doubt. He had a duty to Meru, but he had a even bigger duty to Ellen and his about-to-be-born little boy. He stood up and turned to her. "You get yourself out of there in time, do you hear me! I don't want to loose my best friend again. Once has been more then enough!"

"Someone has to see this through, and the captain has to go down with the ship," replied Alenis in a firm tone. She looked up at Tim and placed a hand on his. "Don't make me make this an order," she said, not wanting to ruin her final goodbye to her friend. "The prophets willing, we shall meet again."

Tim nodded and walked to the door as fast as he could without actually running. He stepped in the turbolift and turned around to look at the bridge one more time.

"We're on target for the transwarp gateway, Captain," Kahn� said, for once sounding subdued. The young man hadn't hesitated long when following the order that would lead them towards their destruction. "ETA is two minutes...mark." He kept his eyes on the screen and his controls, not letting himself look around, fighting against the sweeping fear throughout the ship that assailed his senses. He'd known, signing up for Starfleet, that someday he might be called on to make this sort of sacrifice. "I just never thought it would be so soon," Kahn� muttered.

Jason stood at his station, empty shotgun at his feet. He'd faced death before, several times. The Chief Science Officer figured he should something profound and although he was well read and knew countless languages, nothing would come to mind, so he faced his demise in silence.

Bridge, IKS Grethor

"General, the Portland sends her regards. They are having problems and are going to ram into the Borg station," the tactical officer stated. The General nodded his head solemnly, the ship's Captain had shown herself to be worthy though he wouldn't miss it's First Officer in the slightest. "Patch me through," he commanded.

Once he got the confirmation, Mar'dok began, "Captain, may Sto-Vo-Kor's gate open for you and your crew. We'll keep the metal heads off you to the last."

"And may the prophets smile on you, General," replied the female voice on the other end.

"Q'apla!"

With a smile that only a Klingon who was in a battle with the odds stacked against him could give, General Mar'dock commanded, "All Klingon ships, keep the abominations off of the Portland. A hundred barrels of Blood Wine to ship that does the most damage!"

With that, the nebula was lit up with the reds and greens of Klingon disruptors and torpedoes clearing the way for the Portland's final run.

To be continued...

And Unto the Beach, Part V

Below Decks, USS Portland

Authors:

Portland: Gregory Paladin and Tyrlai Zade

USS Portland; Below Decks

The Chief of the Boat was running like a chicken with his head cut off. Two other enlisted and himself - the two enlisted some crewman security specialists - had been on their way to bolster the waning areas of the engineering decks. That was when the group of three drones had ambushed them, rather suddenly. Gregory had placed himself before the assaulting drones, only to be picked up by one and thrown into the nearest bulkhead. He cracked his jaw, and felt a few more bones snap in the process, all before he had managed to recover enough to watch as one of his enlisted fell, taking a drone out in the process.

The scene was gruesome, to say the least. The crewman had fired his phaser in time, only to be flung into the wall before the first drone somehow overloaded from its prior phaser strike. It would crumble in a heap, shaking as if it had short circuited. Gregory watched as the crewman fell, eyes wide in the deepest emotion. He had try to call out, but all that emitted from his mouth was a mush of words; his jaw temporarily useless due to the pain.

He had stood then, despite that pain, and attempted to use his phaser. It took down the second drone - surprisingly - leaving a final one that the last crewman and himself had to deal with. He had managed to cry out to the remaining security specialist in warning, ignoring his jaw pain. The creman ducked in time to a swing by the final drone; a phaser strike by both the MCPO and the crewman now ineffective due to adaptive shielding. Gregory looked for alternatives, and, seeing a broken pipe on the floor proceeded to pick it up. It had once held circuitry, running inside the bulkheads, but now would serve another purpose.

He rushed the drone as it was momentarily distracted by the crewman. He'd not see another one of his men fall this day, not in front of him, not because of inaction. He let loose a roar, primal and full of hatred, as he swung the pipe. The amount of force used stunned the drone for a second, and seeing a shimmer around it, the crewman took the initiative to try the phaser - it worked. The drone fell, dead, and after Gregory checked the lifesigns of the

fallen crewman - none - he nodded to the remaining. "Ge-"

The signal to abandon ship had gone off then, interrupting Gregory's attempt at giving an order. There was a silent, understanding gaze between the crewman and the MCPO. They both nodded to each other and, after the crewman ran to assist with the evacuation, Gregory slumped against the bulkhead. He was in pain. He had seen several situations of loss of personnel on this day; the crewman fell by the Borg, more on the ground dead or dying from console explosions or worse, and two whom had lost their lives trying to save others as pieces of bulkheads and walls crushed them. Somehow, Gregory still lived. Sucking up the pain - he was bleeding now, he felt the warm liquid flow down his neck - he stood and proceeded to assist in his new directive.

As Gregory shuffled towards the door a cabin door slid open behind him and a young, coltish Trill girl with long dark hair and ice blue eyes whispered to him, waving him over.. "Psst, not that way. Over here, in here."

Gregory had, by now, a blurry line of sight. The blood loss was significant. Do when the younger trill appeared, he nearly stumbled, grabbing his side pathetically as he attempted to quickly ascertain who it was. Though, with little time, he refused to hesitate long. A few quick stumbles later, he followed the voice into the cabin.

She looked a little wide eyed at his wound and motioned for the nurse to come over. There were four other people hiding in the girls room. "We will get you stabilized. Then we can get you all to an escape pod." A pair of feline looking alien monkeys ran up either side of the girl and perched on her shoulders, head and eyes darting about as if they were looking through the walls for threats.

Outside the lift doors Gregory had been heading towards opened and a pair of metallic footfalls proceeded down the corridor just outside the room. Novia looked at the MCPO and held her finger over her lips.

"Shhhhh,..."

It was comical, to say the least. In waning consciousness, having someone gesture silence unto him, as he struggled with pain in his jaw that prevented him from speaking. Then again, he could still groan in pain, something he hadn't done yet. He nodded simply to her, eyes fluttering occasionally as he tried his hardest to remain awake. There was very little else that could be done. The Master Chief was at the mercy of this young Trill; fear struck him then, at this prospect. A natural death was welcome, capture by the Borg was not.

But it was going to be okay. It was, wasn't it? Surely...surely it would be.

His vision blurred completely, and, he saw pure white. For a moment, he believed he could hear the sounds of long-lost relatives, children of the family whom had yet to make it to adulthood, and great grandparents with words of wisdom. There was something ahead of him, some type of pasture and plain, and there was a man that looked awfully like the crewman that di...

Gregory fully passed out, then. The blood loss significant. He wasn't dead, yet, but with the proper medical care in a pinch he could be brought back.

To be continued...

And Unto the Beach, Part VI

Various Locations

Authors:

Portland: Lt. (JG) Marcus Kallan, Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Nurse Ellen Washington (played by Timothy Rouse), Nurse Maria Hill (played by Alenis Meru), Ensign Ash Sullivan

Cybernetics Lab, USS Portland

As the last trio of Borg burst through the reinforced lab doors, Marcus Kallan turned to face them stoically, surrounded by his own machines. The three drones staggered forward, one of which had an arm hanging uselessly at the shoulder, held on only by cabling and tubes. This did not diminish their destructive power, however, as their green plasma shots rang out and destroyed console after console, showering the room in white and yellow sparks.

"Come on in, gentlemen," Marcus offered.

As one drone reached Marcus, it reached out to grab his shoulder, assimilation tubules already emerging. "Resistance is futile," it intoned in its duo-toned, oscillating voice.

Yet it found no purchase. It flailed twice through the holographic image of Marcus. Yet, despite his ruse working, there was no triumphant grin on his face; only hatred.

"For you," holographic Marcus whispered.

The lab -- or, the holographic representation of the lab -- exploded in a shower of more sparks as carefully-tuned EMP generators overloaded every electronic system within. The Borg shuddered and stuttered, and fell to the ground dying as their cybernetics failed. Marcus reached over and touched a panel that had already been destroyed by the invasion, and yet still a shimmering of Starfleet transporters enhanced with the green swirls of Borg technology dematerialized choice parts from the three drones.

Then everything went dark.

In the real cybernetics lab, Marcus tapped his combadge as the neural processors materialized on his work table. =/\= "Kallan to team. I'm proceeding with signals intelligence. We'll be ready for our guest, should she choose to be cooperative."

Escape Pods, USS Portland

With the evacuation underway Sullivan moved to his nearest bank of escape pods to ensure everyone got away safely. With drones still aboard it was dangerous to be running panicked through the corridors of the ship. He inspected all of the pods to ensure they were safe to fly and then began directing staff into them, ensuring they were filled properly. For some in his position it might have been tempting to board one of the escape pods, preferring to face court martial over almost certain death. For Ash the thought never crossed his mind. Even if he had only been aboard a short amount of time, he was dedicated to Star Fleet. It was all he had and if his death could contribute to saving billions in the alpha quadrant then he was happy to stay.

"Ensign" called out Maria, pushing Ellen on a stretcher towards the escape pods as fast as she could. Ellen was fully dilated and the contractions were getting closer and closer together, which meant the baby would come any moment now. She just hoped that she could get Ellen onto an escape pod in time to not only escape the assured destruction of the Portland, but to allow Brad to deliver the baby. "Help me get her into the pod!"

"I can't take it anymore!" Ellen yelled. "I need to push!" She wanted to ask about Tim, but didn't. Not wanting to hear any eventual bad news now.

Ash took a quick look down the corridor to ensure it was clear before he ran towards the two women. "Here this pod's empty. You'll have plenty of space but the stretcher won't fit." He said indicating the furthest most escape pod. The Portland was rocked by fire from outside and the corridor trembled suddenly. Ash could hear the sound of a transporter nearby and saw down the corridor two drones materialise. Not wanting to worry the pregnant officer Ash didn't mention the Borg drones behind them. He simply locked eyes with Maria so she could see the urgency in his face. "Let's make this quick. Is it safe to lift her?"

"Of course it's safe to lift me." Ellen snapped. "I'm in labor, not sick!"

"Just be careful," replied Maria, "especially with her legs."

Carefully, and trying to maintain Ellen's dignity Ash scooped her up in his arms and moved as quickly as he could to the escape pod. "You're going to be fine ma'am." He said with a smile trying to be reassuring, all the while looking back at the slowly advancing drones. He set her down gently in her seat then turned to the nurse. "Do you have a scalpel in your medkit that you won't need?" He asked urgently knowing the Borg had by now almost certainly adapted to his phaser fire.

Arriving at the Escape Pods Tim saw the two drones standing between him and his destination and yelled to the Ensign. "Get them inside, I'll take care of them." He unholstered the gun he had quickly taken from his office, having a feeling that it might be handy with the Borg. He aimed the gun he got from his father in law and fired two old fashioned bullets into each of the drones heads. "Assimilate that" he couldn't resist saying as he saw both of the drones fall to the ground. He quickly rushed to the pods. "Ell? Are you

ok?" He said after kneeling beside her. Looking around him he asked. "Where is the doc?"

Ash was visibly impressed by the XO's actions and this was likely evident by the stunned look on his face. "Forget the scalpel." He said simply as he stepped back out of the escape pod. He offered a sharp salute to the XO who he hadn't formally met yet. "Sir. This is the last pod to be filled up in this bank. Once all pods are full here I'll engage the launch sequence." It was a rarely spoken rule that all pods launched in groups as it increased the likelihood of some people escaping. Though that wasn't what the people on these pods needed to hear right now. "I take it your waiting on the doctor?"

"He's right here," replied Maria, motioning towards an out-of-breath Dr. Silverton who had lagged a little behind. "Brad, Tim, get in here, Ellen needs you!"

And with that Tim took one look in the hallway before stepping in the escape pod. "Doctor, you take care of Ellen and I'll get us out of here." He stepped to the control panel next to the entrance and closed the hatch. He glanced at the others. This was so not how he envisioned his son to be born. At least they were safe. Due to all the chaos he hadn't found time to contact Judith or see where she was. She prayed to God that she was in one of the escape pods as well. But knowing his sister he knew almost certain that she was still on the ship.

With all of the escape pods loaded and full, Ash entered the command for them to launch and watched as the last way off this most likely doomed ship floated away into space. The realisation hit him at that moment that this was likely to be his last mission. He was almost certainly going to die, he knew for a fact he wasn't going to let himself be taken by the Borg. As he headed over to the drones that Commander Rouse had so effectively decommissioned he tapped his comm badge, "Computer locate the nearest drone boarding party to my location." He said as he pried the Borg plasma weapon from the dead drone's arm. If he was going down, he was taking some drones with him.

After the escape pods release Tim walked over to Ellen and knelled beside her head and whispered. "It's going to be ok, sweetheart."

To be continued...

And Unto the Beach, Part VII

Various Locations

Authors:

Portland: Lt. (JG) Tolaran Kian, Captain Alenis Meru

Endeavour: Mercy Ryan, Dima Reda, Rebecca McKinnon, M'Jart S'Rem, Yvette Beauvoir

Other: Captain T'Lisa Anderson and the crew of the Canterbury

Borg Unicomplex

Former Marine Mercy Ryan of the USS Endeavour had been assigned to one of the Klingon distraction teams. Her team members had given disparaging looks and taunted her. She

couldn't blame them after all she was a short, weak, human female. Their assessment of her changed for the better when she dispatched a Borg Drone with a single explosive round.

"Come on, Little Warrior." Said the Klingon in charge. "Let's annoy these metal heads like a swam of glob flies."

Mercy smiled and followed the Klingons down the corridor.

Bridge, USS Canterbury

"Captain the Galandar has broken formation." Commander Drusa reported from the Tactical console.

"Strange, I did not think Gul Jatok a coward." Commander Gar'Rel, the Security Chief responded as he stood over the remains of a Borg Drone.

"Let us not make hasty judgements, Commander contact, the Galandar, I want to hear from the horse's mouth." Captain Anderson ordered.

"Aye, Captain, hailing them now." Drusa replied.

The image of the Galandar's bridge appeared on the main viewscreen of the Canterbury. The Galandar's bridge shook violently as it filled with smoke. Jatok had a bruise on the side of his forehead, from an impact with a handrail when he was thrown across the bridge. Behind him, a console exploded in a shower of sparks. "Canterbury, this is the Galandar. I'm not sure how much longer we can hold off this cube."

"Hold on, Galandar, we are coming to your aid." Captain Anderson said. Then turning to her own crew, she said. "Helm, plot a course to intercept the Borg Cube that the Galandar is fighting and engage when ready. Tactical prepare the transphasic torpedoes."

"Aye, aye, Captain." They said and did as they were ordered.

USS Portland, Deck 10

Tolaran wiped the sweat from his brow, his uniform was looking a bit worse for wear as the lighting flickered from the strain on the ship as she came under fire and inside the crew were trying to repel the borg invaders... he'd setup his command post from the amourey on deck 10 and had got as many non-essential crew protected in the school as possible as he'd come across them. The on going fight was starting to take it's toll and his team had lost several members. He leant against the bulkhead as he took a drink of water, "Status report Petty Officer!"

The Petty Officer checked a PADD, his face falling as he read the list of casualties and known

fatalities, it could be more. "Sir, we have three known losses, and ten casualties that have meant we've had pull those crew from their teams..." he stated followed by a sigh.

Tolaran nodded. The Borg... well at least he could say his first tour of duty had been an interesting one, albeit a possibly short one. "Just make sure the crew get to the evacuation pods, once they are off then the rest of you get into them too... do you understand?"

The Petty Officer had a confused look on his face "But Sir, what ab..." Tolaran held up a hand "I'll be on the bridge. Don't question me, now go." he watched as his team split off, heading towards points where they were able to get the crew into the escape pods as they escorted them from the school, they had done as well as he could have hoped, Borg bodies lay on the floor here and there with sadly a few of their own too. An image burned into Tolarans mind was seeing a crewmen wearing a science uniform struggle as a Borg probe penetrated his neck, he could tell it was already too late and without thinking he fired on them both... it was something he'd have to deal with if he made it through this which he wasn't expecting anyway.

=/\= Kian to bridge, I'm on my way. Once I arrive my security team will take the final escape pods after making sure they have got everyone possible off the ship. =/\=

=/\=Thank you, Lieutenant, =/\= replied Alenis, in a slightly strained voice. =/\=Make sure as many people get off as possible. =/\=

Borg Unicomplex

Sneaking through the Borg unicomplex, Dima led the team towards the central plexus, carefully avoiding any of the Borg drones milling about. Feeling the complex shake from the sound of explosions on lower decks, she figured that the demolition teams had been successful in their mission. Swiftly moving towards their target, the team found themselves blocked juts a few dozen metres shy by a force field. "Damn," whispered Dima as she pulled out her tricorder. "We need to find a way around."

In preparation for this mission, M'Jart had studied all sensor and tri-corder scans, that Starfleet had from past interactions with Borg vessels. Looking around her, she finally found what they needed. For want of a better name, it was a maintenance hatch, that covered a maintenance shaft. Removing the hatch, with little difficulty, she used her tri-corder to scan inside. It was clear of Drones and from what she could map, led in the right direction. "Lieutenant, Ensign, I think, I've found a way around the force field." She said.

Dima nodded. "M'Jart, take point. Yvette, take up the rear. Prepare the transport enhancers; I don't want to be hanging around in Locasta's chamber a moment longer than we have to."

Becca pulled the enhancers one at a time and quietly checked the settings. They were ready to be activated with one push of a button.

The SerNumi Boatswain nodded and entered the maintenance shaft. It wasn't well-lit, but

the illumination from her tri-corder was enough to light the way.

Dima looked around at her strike force. All of the training Starfleet, or any other military organization for that matter, would never prepare someone to take a leap of faith into the central command structure of a Borg complex with countless drones. Waiting for each member of the team to nod their readiness, she stepped into the tube and ordered, "Let's do this."

As the Security Ensign entered the shaft, Yvette set a trap for any Drone that tried to follow. That done she followed, replacing the hatch behind her.

And Unto the Beach, Part VIII

Various Locations

Authors:

Endeavour: Cmdr. Marcus Byrne, Lt. Zhuang Fotu, Lt. Miracle Swiftpaws, Ensign Dima Reda, Lt. (JG) Rebecca McKinnon, Lt. Yvette Beauvoir, CPO M'jart S'rem

Other: Locasta of Borg

Bridge, USS Endeavour

The ship was now in the thick of combat. Commander Byrne stayed in his seat as he analyzed the streaming data from the fleet and barked orders about various evasive and attack patterns, always mixing up the strategy and never using the same one twice. This was like a title fight from his academy days, this time it reminded him of his fight against a Vulcan tactical cadet. As a human, Marcus didn't possess the strength to go toe-to-toe with a much stronger Vulcan, but he was able to out imagine his opponent.

With an enemy like the Borg, the fleet stood no chance at trading fire with the much more powerful adversary. They needed to get creative and forget the tenants of a good battle. He looked up at Tactical and said, "Zhuang, attack pattern Omega-Alpha-Two-Byrne"

"Firing." The weapon systems of the Endeavour surged into life, their reverberations sounding in a complicated staccato. Photon torpedoes flew out in a chaotic pattern, with their trajectories and speeds changing on a pre-programmed fractal pattern. They struck seemingly scattered points on their targets, inflicting minimum damage -- but they were a distraction, as precise frequency-rotated phaser fire struck hard. "Direct hits scored, showing considerable damage. That tactic will not work again," Fotu reported.

"Swiftpaws, evasive pattern, I don't know... scamper away." He ordered, hoping that his helms operator would get the picture.

Miracle twisted and maneuvered the Endeavour through the warren of the Borg Complex as Collision warning siren blared of immanent contact with the Borg Complex Passageways and nexus points of the Complex, so that every time the Borg Destructive energy lanced their way, had a chance to hit their own complex, than the Endeavour. They wanted to be the Cat in the Cat-n-Mouse chase, She'll gladly be the Mouse in this chase, letting them be the ones

to destroy their own Complex as she dodged and maneuvered within the Labyrinthine ways of open space in the Borg Complex, Letting Fotu use phasers and what ever was at his disposal to cut a path for her and the Endeavour.

Utilizing the twisting, turning piloting done by Miracle, Fotu used the terrain to their advantage, firing volleys at Borg targets and receiving minimal hits in return, as the Borg proved unwilling or unable to damage their own structures. A structure threatened to come free as the Endeavour roared past, and a quick application of the aft tractor beam pulled the chunk free, blocking the pursuit of smaller cube from pursuit.

He tapped the comm control and said, "Byrne to Engineering, vent plasma and anything else that can make us harder to see in this nebula."

Borg Unicomplex

Dima took a deep breath and held it. Just past this hatch laid their objective, Captain Banninga... and whatever the Borg kept in their command center. She held up a hand and whispered, "This is it. Yvette, S'Rem, you two grab the Captain. I'll lay down covering fire and keep the drones off as long as I can. Grab the Captain and we run back to Bekka."

With her raised hand, Ensign Dima counted down from three, then opened the last hatch. "Go," Dima whispered as she stepped into the command center with her phaser rifle at the ready. She didn't want to fire unless absolutely necessary. They only had about four shots at maximum before the Borg adapted and there was still a small chance that their "cloaking device" was still masking them as a threat.

As her eyes adjusted, Dima could see that what the Borg called "Locasta" was isolated about 15 meters from her position. There were about thirty drones in the room, but if they made it quick, this was definitely possible.

Yvette approached "Locasta" from left while M'Jart approached from the right. As they came within touching distance of the former captain, two Tactical Drones left their positions and headed in the direction of the invaders.

Yvette grabbed on arm of "Locasta" and started to drag her back to where Bekka was waiting. The "Queen" struggled as M'Jart grabbed her other arm.

Dima fired a phaser blast into a conduit next to a few approaching drones, sending them to the ground in a spray of sparks. As she neared her former Captain, the Assistant Chief of Security took a hypospray from her pocket and injected Locasta with whatever sleeping agent the canine doctor had developed. Not seeing an immediate effect, Dima hit the Borg with the end of her rifle in a way that would cause unconsciousness.

A Tactical Drone came too close and M'Jart severed it's reaching hand with her N'Zhara blades. The Drone stared at its wrist as if it wondered where its hand had gone.

"Let's get out of here," Dima called as she made her way back to the tunnel's opening. She tapped her badge to make a clicking noise over the short range communications, hopefully alerting Bekka that they were on their way. Dima waited by the entrance for the other two to make it through with Captain Kate.

Yvette and M'Jart dragged the Borgified Captain back to Lieutenant McKinnon's position.

Ensign Reda did her best attempt at the standard covered retreat. She followed closely to Yvette and M'Jart, always keeping an eye on where they had just been. If non-assimilated beings had one bonus over the Borg, it was agility and speed. The Borg couldn't hope to cover the distance that the away team could, even while carrying an extra person.

As the team reached Bekka, Dima looked at the set up of the transporter enhancers. "Please say we can leave now," Dima said, holding back a level of anxiety. The sooner they were back on a Federation ship, the better in her mind.

Bekka glanced down at her chronometer. "Very good, you've shaved three seconds off our record time in the holodeck," she replied as she activated the transport enhancers.

The Endeavour's transporter beams enveloped the away team, whisking them away from the Borg Complex.

To be continued...

And Unto the Beach, Part IX

Various Locations

Authors:

Portland: Lt. Jason Beauvoir, Ensign Ash Sullivan, Lt. Arthur Reynolds, Capt. Alenis Meru, Lt. (JG) Sera Williams, Ensign Malbi tai-Konjah, Ensign Nikki Barclay

Bridge, USS Portland

"Tachyon levels are raising to dangerous levels. Tactical, I suggest altering our shield frequencies to compensate." Jason said concentrating on the job at hand.

Ensign Sullivan stepped off the turbo lift and onto the bridge, taking position at the security console which was currently vacant since the evacuation. He checked the status of the ship's escape pods and was pleased to see all had launched successfully and were safely exiting the nebula. The crew manifest indicated all non-essential crew had escaped successfully. He thought about reporting this fact but the tactical officer may have already done so and silence seemed appropriate given the gravity of the situation on the bridge.

"Right," replied Arthur as he put Jason's suggestion to good use. His brief focus on that left him momentarily distracted from the signal indicating the escape pods were launched, but after a few seconds, he verbally notified the captain without a skip in beat. If there was one

thing he learned since his days aboard an Orion pirate frigate, it was to focus on the task(s) at hand during an emergency situation. He would have time to ponder the inconsistencies of Borg efficiency later, even though he might find an opportunity in due time to take advantage of them. On the other hand, he wasn't looking forward to a repeat of the "Charge of the Light Brigade"; communication was key, and he would have to play off the Miranda-class vessel's strengths instead of pitting a unit of "light cavalry" against an artillery barrage.

As the Portland approached the transwarp conduit, Alenis sat there, stoically, just staring at the viewscreen. This was it. Light-years away from the prophets, inside a transwarp conduit, facing the Borg. This was where it would all end. Gritting her teeth, she just stared at the viewscreen in anger. In death, she would have her revenge on the Borg. She would sacrifice everything to rain perdition down upon the Borg, that unspeakable evil which caused so much suffering at New Algiers.

Looking around the bridge, at the officers manning their stations, a tear came to her eye. All had done their duty and stood by her, even as she led them into the flames of destruction. And all without objection or question. That was the mark of a true Starfleet officer. Had she had time for one last log, she would recommend them all for the highest honours in the fleet. "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more..." She took a deep breath. "Activate the dark energy reactor overload sequence."

All this time Ash had viewed this encounter as just another mission, another story to tell his friends around the poker table. It was at this moment that the realisation hit him. He wasn't coming home from this. He was about to lay down his life alongside a crew he'd only just joined for the sake of the entire alpha quadrant and suddenly he felt numb, he didn't know how to feel.

Main Engineering, USS Portland

With a frustrated growl, Sera pounded her fist against the display screen with a muffled crack. The Chief Engineer lifted up her hand and noticed a small crack in the status report screen. The evacuation orders on loop mixed with the alarm klaxons left the Lieutenant with a sinking feeling of failure.

"Ma'am," Malbi jogged up to the chief engineer, "We need to evacuate." She noticed the chief's slumped shoulders and frustrated demeanor, and felt awful for having to be the one to tear this woman away from her ship, her baby. "You've done the best you can," she added as kindly as a Klingon can.

She appreciated the condolences, but she had lost the Portland. The clamps had not released, which had put the Portland on it's final flight to save the quadrant from the Borg menace. If only she could rip the clamps apart, that would certainly fix things more than a bit. With her mind, she pictured taking a sledgehammer to the stuck clamps. Knowing such thoughts were futile, just like their resistance had been to this point, she turned to the remaining crew. "Get to your escape pods, we've done all that we can." Her voice was that

of a person who had lost a world.

"They're all gone," replied Nikki, placing a hand on Sera's shoulder. "It's over."

She gave a last look around Engineering. This was her first stop in a starship and she had just gotten to know the ship and all of her quirks and sounds. Now she was sending the ship to its doom, but at least it wouldn't wind up forgotten in a junkyard. In an outward display of anger, she kicked a wrench on the ground and let out a loud curse. As if on cue, the sound of metal buckling and ripping sounded four times.

Sera ran to the display and saw that the clamps had just failed to hold together and were now broken hunks of metal. She quickly tapped her combadge, and in a desperate voice called out, "Bridge, this is Engineering, the clamps holding the reactor have just released. We can launch the Dark Reactor when ready!"

And Unto the Beach, Part X

Various Locations

Authors:

Endeavour: Lt. Farkas Vanth, Lt. Yvette Beauvoir, Lt. JG Rebecca McKinnon, Ensign Dima Reda

Other: Locasta of Borg

Sickbay, USS Endeavour

Inside sickbay, the away team materialized with their target. Dima breathed a sigh of relief and then tapped her commbadge. "Bridge, this is Ensign Reda. We have Locasta." But as she finished speaking, she glanced over and saw the knocked out Locasta stir to life.

"Resistance is futile," uttered Locasta angrily as she wrestled one arm free of Yvette's grasp. Grabbing M'Jart by the throat with that arm, she held out her other and extended her assimilation tubules.

Not knowing if her phaser rifle had been deactivated by the transporter, Dima quickly jabbed the butt end of the rifle into Locasta's face. It was sure to get her a nasty look from one of the doctors, but it was better to have only one Borg aboard. The shot was only intended to stun, maybe knock her out. "Sorry Captain," she muttered, taking a look at M'Jart to check on the crewman.

Dr. Vanth had been standing by, ready to step in at a moment's notice, but the security officers' reactions had been too sudden even for him. With the female Borg stunned from the blow, the Caninoid doctor maneuvered in with a hypospray, and sedated the one called Locasta.

Meanwhile, Petasher went to M'Jart to free her neck from the Borg's grasp and check on her. "Are you alright?" the Hermat asked.

M'Jart took in a large gulp of air. "Thanks to you and Ensign Reda, I will be fine." She said as her skin took on a more relaxed hue.

Bekka watched as M'Jart recovered and then wheeled her contraption closer. She had a pair of data cores attached to a null box. Not only was it cut off from the ship's comm network but the physical components that would allow the interface had been stripped out. What it did contain was a giant fractal data trap that would hopefully lead the Borg processors on an hours long chase for a live data source that wasn't actually there. She reached over to Locasta and placed a pair of receivers at her temples and then stepped back and tapped her commbadge.

"Computer, erect a level six subspace and EM barrier per specifications in file McKinnon Borg oh one." She then turned to the others and held out her hand. "I need everyone's commbadges. We can't leave any way to link through the barrier."

Dima took a look at what used to be Kate behind the forcefield barrier. The slight shimmer to the air that separated them gave the Assistant Chief of Security relax a bit easier. Dime plucked the commbadge off her uniform and handed it to Bekka. Knowing what she knew about the Borg, she wasn't going to let Locasta take control of the ship.

While Vanth observed as the Operations Chief went to work, s/he leaned over to Petasher 253 and dismissed them. Vanth didn't want to needlessly expose any of his staff members to Locasta if they didn't need to be there. S/he went on to try and recall everything s/he had read about The 'D's encounters with the Borg, and the Voyager's as well as others. Upon hearing McKinnon's request for his commbadge, s/he wasn't clear on why, but s/he immediately complied, and handed it over.

Becca gathered the other badges and walked through the shimmering barrier to place them on a console at the far end of sickbay. She then walked in and looked at the Doctor.

"Whenever you are ready. She's not likely to get any more cooperative than this until we get some of the circuitry out."

Vanth got started in much the same fashion as other doctors had before him. Some of the easiest components to remove were ones that weren't attached to vital organs, but s/he needed to be able to see inside to be sure. "Would it be safe enough for me to have a medical tricorder?"

Yvette stood out of the way of those working on Locasta but kept her rifle trained on the unconscious Borg Queen.

Becca walked through the shimmering field once more and over to a tricorder. She popped the panel on the back and carefully staring into the casing pressed the point of a laser scalpel against a pair of crystalline broadcast nodes. Primary and backup fused, she closed the case and turned it on, walking back to where Vanth stood. She handed him the tricorder. "Here you go, Doctor. Ignore the flashing red light there."

"What flashing red..." Vanth looked at it. "Oh... you mean I'm not going to be able to have

full access to all it's functions..." Hir ears drooped, "I guess I can get by without those that need to access the database. At least I still have x-ray and MRI functions and such."

"Yes, it will do anything it can normally do, it just won't be able to upload it to the other displays." Becca said smiling, as if the information was very helpful.

Vanth began hir scans. S/he saw the implants at the end of Locasta's left upper appendage had a sort of multi-purpose tool with menacing looking attachments on it. "Well we should be able to get rid of this menacing looking thing with no problem." With a twist it released, then Farkas followed a cable to where it was plugged into a power source on the outside of the borg armor. S/he handed it to Bekka. "Perhaps you can learn something from that."

Becca took the device and looked at it for a few moments and then took it over to a nearby table and set it down and erected a force field around it.

S/he continued, soon finding a release for the whole arm mechanism. Pressing it, several hook-like clamps released Locasta's flesh. "Hmm... now, if I... just..." s/he hefted the long forearm Borg attachment. Sliding it gently off of their former Alpha's limb trying to be careful in case there were any other attachments. S/he noticed several gyros and servers powering down as s/he pulled and twisted, revealing Kate had no hand, only about half of hir actual forearm left, and the end of the stump had diodes, and plugs in the end of it, as well as random green and red blinkies. Vanth frowned, unsure what to say.

Dima looked over the doctor's shoulder to get a better look, even though she was standing a few feet behind the doctor with containment field energized between them. She had never seen what the assimilation process actually did to the drones outside of her studies at the Academy.

Once the multi-tool attachment on the end of the attachment was released Vanth was able to better examine the housing assembly. "Hmmm..." S/he looked at hir tricorder, and back at the housing. "Suggestions as to how to tackle getting this off?"

Vanth seemed to be looking at her so Becca shrugged. "I'm a communications specialist. I would suggest removing it?"

Vanth continued the operation. S/he soon was able to remove the whole cybernetic sleeve over the captain's arm. S/he looked at everyone as if to say 'here goes nothing,' and began to lift it off slowly. Once it was clear, s/he handed it to the security officer, "I'm sure, you may want to study this."

And Unto the Beach, Part XI

Various Locations

Authors:

Portland: Capt. Alenis Meru, Cmdr. Shras th'Karath, Lt. Jason Beauvoir, Ensign Kahnir Dai, Lt. Arthur Reynolds, Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, PO Maria Hill, Andy Rouse

Other: Admiral Washington

Bridge, USS Portland

"Shras, eject now!" shouted Alenis, estimating that their forward momentum would propel the reactor towards where it needed to go. She didn't know what Sera had done, but whatever it was, it was just in time, with only a few seconds to spare. "Flight control, reverse course! All power to the aft shields! We're going to have to ride this shockwave out!"

"I am no structural engineer, but I suggest strengthening our SI fields, so we do not get torn to pieces by the gravimetric shear." Jason said.

"Noted," replied Alenis. She pressed a button on her intercom. "Engineering, I need whatever emergency power we can muster to structural integrity fields."

Kahnir was standing over the helm since his chair had been basically vapourized by one of the Borg who'd boarded them, or more accurately he was hunched over uncomfortably. With his feet braced wide and one hand holding on to the console for support, the pilot entered in the ordered sequence, "Impulse engines and thrusters are now at maximum reverse thrust." The steady vibration of the vessel began to pick up as the ship fought against its own inertia and began to back track.

As the ship creaked and rumbled, Meru stared up at the screen. Carried by inertia, the dark energy reactor sailed deeper into the transwarp conduit. "Captain, I predict fifteen seconds to reactor overload."

"We're not going to make it," whispered Alenis, staring up at the screen, realizing that they would never escape in time with impulse and thrusters alone. But the Portland and her crew carried them this far; she wasn't going to give up on them just yet. "Shras, is there some way to repel ourselves off the shockwave of a dark energy explosion and ride it towards the aperture?"

Placing a hand on his chin, Shras thought for a couple seconds. "I suppose, in theory, if we were to use the deflector array to energize our shields with anti-graviton particles, but--"

"Do it!" shouted Alenis. "And prepare the ship for a bumpy ride."

"Aye, Captain." Jason said and began reconfigured the deflector.

In the distance, further down the transwarp conduit, Alenis watched as the dark energy reactor sailed off, propelled by the Portland's forward momentum. And, on the viewscreen, she could make out some grey specks; a Borg armada, no doubt, on the way through the transwarp gate from the other side. "See you in hell," she muttered, a second before the reactor detonated, annihilating the oncoming Borg vessels and sending a shock wave down the transwarp conduit, collapsing it as it went.

"Now would be a good time, Lieutenant," called out Alenis, watching the dark energy

shockwave approaching.

"Aye, Captain." Jason said activating the reconfigured deflector.

"Now!" she called out, watching the shockwave approach. As she spoke, she reached for her seat belts. "All hands, brace for--"

Jason gripped his console and braced himself for what was going to come.

Ash had sat and watched in stunned silence as the hopeless situation they had found themselves in unfolded to reveal a glimmer of hope. As if waking from sleep Ash jolted to grasp his console tightly, looking around to ensure everyone else was secure as well.

Having lost his seat to a Borg disruptor, there wasn't much left for Kahnir to brace himself with. He adjusted their trajectory until the last second, tried to keep them facing the shock wave head-on to their strongest shields, then wrapped his arms around the CONN tightly. The moment the first impact hit though made him lose his grip and the pilot went flying before the gravity caught up, hit his head hard on the ground when it did. Kahnir had a vague notion that there were sparks and explosions around him, but couldn't be sure it wasn't his own vision that was making him see stars, and he didn't get up again any time soon.

The sudden intensity of the vibrations beneath the deck plating literally threw Arthur off his feet and into a nearby bulkhead. The explosion from his console no doubt exacerbated the effect. When it was over, or at least by the time he hit the ground, he realized he wouldn't be getting up without some kind of exoskeleton. He'd broken several ribs and probably fractured part of his spine, which should have killed him any other day. In any case, he found any attempt at movement, especially as the ship continued to buckle like the frequent earthquakes experienced on Rigel VII, impossible at this point. Pain flooded his every nerve, and he was forced to close his eyes and hope he would either wake up in sickbay or back home as a child.

The shockwave slammed into the Portland with an incredible force, tossing the small ship around like a rag doll.

Escape pod #25

When the Portland and her crew were fighting for their survival while trying to rescue the entire quadrant from the Borg, Andrew James Rouse was born, named after his father and grandfather. After a quick check up he was handed to his mother's arms where his cries slowly changed in soft wails. Tim couldn't stop looking at his son, except to wipe his eyes dry with his sleeve. He was glad that Maria had remembered to take some pictures, even with everything going on. Andy would certainly have a big story to tell later about the day he was born.

The new family was so focused on each other that they had no idea how many time had passed. "Tim," Maria said while touching his shoulder. "We're approaching the fleet." Tim

blinked a few times while he mentally came back to the reality.

=/\= Portland crew, this is Admiral Washington, please stand by while we transport you to various ships in the fleet. =/\= The Admiral's voice sounded over the intercom system. He quickly went to the closest console and replied. "Admiral, here Commander Rouse. Please wait with transporting us, we have some special circumstances." Before Tim could explain Andy gave out a loud cry from his mother's arms.

=/\=Is that?=/\= the Admiral's voice sounded. Tim wished he could see the Admiral's face right now.

"Yes, it is, sir." Tim said.

=/\=Please stand by,=/\= another voice sounded, =/\=We'll transport the five of you directly to sickbay.=/\=

And Unto the Beach, Part XIII

Various Locations

Authors:

Endeavour: Cmdr. Marcus Byrne, Lt. Cmdr. Eahar R'Soll, Lt. Miracle Swiftpaws, Lt. Farkas Vanth, Lt. Yvette Beauvoir, Lt. JG Rebecca McKinnon, Ensign Dima Reda, Captain Kate Banninga

Other: Locasta of Borg

Bridge, USS Endeavour

As soon as Marcus heard that his crew had boarded with Locasta, he took a look at the display. He saw that the Portland had entered the transwarp gate, with the overloading dark energy reactor aboard.. Standing up, he commanded, "Lieutenant Swiftpaws, get us out of here. Now!"

Miracle got the ship aligned with clear space before her through the Unicomplex and went straight to warp for the fastest exit out of the area once the announcement that the away team was on back on board the Endeavour with their prisoner. "Squeeeeeee-Ahhh!" as the viewscreen showed a slowly building red haze of the shielding being sandblasted away, then it began to fade when the Endeavour cleared the Nebula

"Signalling the remainder of the fleet with our status," called out Eahar. "We have what we came for, I suggest all vessels commence with a fighting retreat. And may the creator bless the Portland." A tear came to the eye of the normally stoic executive officer; the Portland crew had sacrificed themselves to save the quadrant. He could only hope that that sacrifice was not in vain.

"Aye sir," replied the operations officer on duty, his fingers frantically running across his console.

"Captain," called out Eahar, staring down at the small viewscreen on his armrest. "The Canterbury is detecting a massive dark energy buildup emanating from the transwarp gate. I'm putting their sensor readings on our auxiliary screen. If I had to guess..."

Looking up at the auxiliary screen, Eahar saw the transwarp gate twist and begin to collapse in on itself. A number of small explosions ripped through the structure and the swirling gate before the stresses of the dark energy explosion rippling through the transwarp gate broke the structure of the gate in half and sucked it into the transwarp conduit. Imploding in on itself, the conduit and its structure almost disappeared into subspace before exploding in a bright blue flash of light.

"The conduit has been destroyed," said Eahar, stating the obvious. "The Portland... the fleet isn't detecting any sign of them."

Sickbay, USS Endeavour

Vanth looked back to Locasta, and noticed the stump for the first time. S/he deftly flipped open his tricorder with one hand while leaning in to have a closer look and sniff. "Hmm, smells almost rotten." S/he scanned the appendage, and inhaled through his teeth sharply. "I was afraid of this..."

At that moment, Locasta sprang to life again, bounding up from the bed and grabbing Vanth by the throat with her one good hand. She moved her stump towards his neck before realizing that those assimilation tubules had disappeared. She was alone; something was jamming her link to the collective.

Or, was she? Another voice, faint at first, echoed through her head, but she blocked it out. "We are Borg!" she shouted, overpowering the other voice for now. "You will reconnect Locasta to the collective!" she added, tightening her grip around Vanth's neck.

Vanth gasped, his eyes widening. S/he felt the cold deck-plating begin to fall away from his bare feet ever so slightly. S/he wasn't being lifted off the floor per-se, just ever-so-slightly lifted just enough to cause his neck distress.

"Erk!" Instinctively Vanth reached up to try and free himself. For missing a hand, Locasta's remaining one was remarkably strong. At the same time, s/he latched onto the stub that was held in front of his face with his fangs. S/he had more power in his jaw, than his hands.

"Noooo," a scream and cry in one was uttered from the same mouth that ordered the doctor around. Kate didn't know exactly what was going on, but she had felt the urge to fight back as soon as she got the ability to do so. "Get her out of me!" She cried.

She tried to move her body, her arms, her legs, but it was all hopeless. The other was still too strong.

"We are Borg," countered Locasta, gritting her teeth as she held Vanth by the throat, slowly choking off his air supply. "Lower the force field!"

Vanth was fighting for his life, everything began shifting to red. S/he bared his teeth, and tried to snarl, his fur stood on end, instinctively trying to look bigger and more intimidating. S/he needed to find a pressure point. Part of him told him to go for the remaining good eye, but the doctor part of him fought against that.

The nose! s/he thought.

S/he shoved his fingers, with claws out, up Locasta's nostrils, and began to pull with greater and greater intensity. At least if s/he came out of this, and Kate persevered, s/he could repair any damage there might be if s/he had to later.

Dima immediately gripped her phaser rifle a bit tighter and raised it. The dampening field in the isolation chamber would prevent her or a phaser blast from going through, but she was ready in the event that the forcefield would fall. The last thing any of them needed was to have Sickbay assimilated. "The forcefield stays up," Dima replied to the Borg.

Bleeding, Locasta threw Vanth against the force field, hard. "A level six force field," she mused, kicking Vanth for good measure to prevent him from coming back up. "Adapting..."

Vanth gasped, trying to catch his breath, his ribs hurt, but at least s/he was alive.

Knowing they couldn't let the Borg escape, Yvette jury-rigged her rifle to have it fire a phaser pulse at the frequency of the force field. The problem was if it worked she'd exhaust the power cell and fry all the circuitry, turning it into a lump of slag. Taking aim, she fired. The pulse passed through the forcefield and hit the former starship captain full in the chest, knocking her from her feet. As her rifle glowed hot, Yvette discarded it. She gritted her teeth from the pain of her burning flesh, and hoped she'd bought the others a little time.

On the ground, a gaping hole in her ablative armour, Locasta stared off into the distance, her lips curving into a slight smile. "I can hear them..." she whispered, her transceiver having partially adapted to the Federation force field around her. "Cube 739-Alpha, assimilate this vessel."

"NOOO," Kate managed to shout, gaining more control over her own body.

Becca tapped a flurry of commands into her own datapad creating a level seven modulated subspace EM field around the first one and letting the first drop in the process. She also hard cut all of the ships comm. relays leaving it suddenly silent which would no doubt bring a fleet's attention in short order.

She walked around where Kate stood keeping herself well out of reach of any arms or assorted tubules. "You need to fight this, Captain. Try to concentrate on where you are. Your ship, your vessel, your life. Don't let the Borg think they can take that from you. By the way, I

am Rebecca McKinnon, your new communic... erm Operations officer, reporting for duty, sir. I know I'm late with that but there were circumstances."

"So my last three ships were destroyed and I was kind of hoping this one wouldn't be." She continued rattling on as she often did but this time it seems to be distracting the Captain, hopefully the Borg would switch enough concentration to her that the human parts could reassert themselves. She began broadcasting the portion of her fractal datapile she had currently uploaded to her datapad, partially to occupy the Borg processing elements still resident in the Captain but also to try and drown out any nascent signal sneaking past her EM field. "Oh, um, two ships. I'm not supposed to mention the Athena, its still very classified. Oh, and forget that name, Athena. I wasn't supposed to say that."

Becca reached back and grabbed a hypospray from the table with her free hand while she continued to talk. "So I'm looking forward to serving onboard the Endeavor and very much hoping it isn't obliterated or anything,..."

"We are Borg!" insisted Locasta, staring coldly at Becca. But there was some desperation in her voice. She could hear the collective, but even as she spoke, one voice was getting louder, and there was nothing she could do to block it out. "You will be assimilated."

Becca shook her head while glancing down at the datapadd and re-modulating the EM blocking field with one hand, the other still concealing a hypospray. "I can't be assimilated, I was given special dispensation by the collective." She lied, smiling at the Captain pleasantly.

Meanwhile Dr. Vanth managed to get to hir paws, though hir ribs still ached, when s/he tried to breath too deeply. S/he stood behind Becca, and wished s/he could use hir telepathy with the non-telepath to communicate, but s/he hadn't the permission. S/he could work with Becca to distract the Borg, and use the hypospray again to re-sedate her. Instead all s/he could do is place hir hand-paw on her shoulder to indicate hir proximity to Becca. "Yeah, <cough> me too, got a stamped, signed, notarized and sealed letter of authenticity from Her-Majesty herself." Vanth held a hand behind hir back, fingers crossed.

Raising her head Kate said "No one will be assimilated!" She was slowly gaining control over body back. That small sentence how ever had cost her much energy and she let her head rest on the biobed soon after, accompanied with a big sigh.

"No," gasped Locasta, her voice getting weaker. "The collective..."

"The collective can screw itself" Kate let out, raising her good arm. Not that there was any point in physically fighting an entity inside herself. But she so much wished she could. She opened her eyes looking from one face to another with a desperate plea in her eyes to tell her what to do to get the Queen out of her.

"Resistance... is..." gasped Locasta, as her voice faded out.

"She is fading," Kate said when she noticed the other presence in her mind dissipating. "She is fading!"

The ship shuddered from weapons fire. The Borg were making one last desperate attack run on the Endeavour to save their queen.

Vanth could sense the emotional turmoil inside of Kate/Locasta. "She's right, it's Captain Banninga talking not Locasta. It's not a trick."

Yvette walked forward, stifling the pain of her burnt hands and asked. "Captain Banninga, are you still connected to the collective? And if so, can you tell the Borg to power down and return to their regeneration alcoves?"

Right, how do you do that she thought. Was she suppose to say that out loud or was thinking it enough. It felt like the collective was in her mind so she chose the latter. *<i>Stand down everyone and recharge.</i>* Kate ordered the collective. "And?" She immediately asked out loud, hoping she did it the right way.

At that moment the ship stopped shuddering under weapons fire. An apprehensive calm came over sickbay.

Vanth looked around as if confused by the sudden lapse of the attack on the ship. Hir ears perked and nose twitched as if s/he was trying to hear or smell for trouble.

M'Jart, her throat still felt sore, made her way to a nearby console and powered it up. Patching through to the sensors, she brought up the latest data. "The Borg appear to hove powered down." She reported.

Just after Kate heard her actions had worked the world around her became blurred, quickly followed by black. She collapsed on the biobed.

And Unto the Beach, Part XIV

Various Locations

Authors:

Portland: Capt. Alenis Meru, Lt. Arthur Reynolds, Lt. Jason Beauvoir, Lt. JG Sera Williams, Ensign Kahn'r Dai

Endeavour: Cmdr. Marcus Byrne, Lt. Cmdr. Eahar R'Soll, Lt. Miracle Swiftpaws

Other:

Bridge, USS Portland

Wincing in pain as she climbed back into her chair, Alenis tried to get her bearings. As she was shouting out orders, she didn't have time to fasten her seat belt before the shockwave hit and found herself thrown forwards against the flight control station. One arm was in severe pain, she figured likely due to a fracture, and she felt a warm liquid on her forehead, likely her own blood. She knew that unless the afterlife was the bridge of the Portland, they were alive, which meant that they were presumably successful at something.

"Report!" shouted Alenis, over the sound of a screaming Andorian. One of Shras' antennae was bent, an injury notorious for causing severe pain among Andorians.

Having avoided any serious injury, Jason said. "Captain, sensors are patchy, but we appear to have been thrown clear of the wormhole and transwarp gate." He then took a medkit from one of the wall compartments and began examining and treating the injured.

"You mean... we made it?" asked Alenis in a tone that mixed incredulity and caution. A hint of a smile came to her face; they had beaten the odds once more. "Damage Report! Operations, signal the fleet. Let them know we're alive. Somehow."

Arthur lied there, still unconscious from the beating the ship took. With the injuries he sustained, he'd be out of action for some time.

Sera sat up from her new found position on the floor of Engineering. She had a pounding headache, presumably from the bulkhead just beside her. She gave a quick glance around Engineering to assess the situation. She tapped her communicator and said, "Engineering reporting, heavy damage. We can give you low warp and will probably keep Sickbay busy for awhile. All glad to be alive, Captain."

From down near the damaged helm, amidst the jumble of slagged chair and console, came a groan. Then a grimy hand followed, grasping up in the air for something to hang on to before finally gripping a corner of the CONN that hadn't been vapourized by the Borg disruptor. An even more dirty helmsman followed suit a moment later, eyes glazed and stunned, that tried to follow through on the orders he'd vaguely heard given. Kahn'r got up to his knees, blinked a few times to try to bring his panel into focus, then laid his head down on top of it instead, "Propulsion..." He tried again, big shoulders heaving as he took a breath. "Propulsion offline. Maybe...thrusters."

Alenis let out a sigh of relief. "Engineering, take charge of damage control. Life support and main power are your priorities. We'll hold position and wait for help if we have to." She took a deep breath. "Everyone else, take care of casualties. Use the internal sensors to find the injured if you have to. I won't have anyone else dying on this ship today." Her fingers on her one good arm tapped across the controls on her armrest. "I'm hailing the fleet, requesting assistance..."

Bridge, USS Endeavour

"Captain," called out Eahar, a hint of excitement in his voice as he stared at the touchscreen on his armrest.. "All ships are reporting that the remaining Borg have received Locasta's orders and are powering down. The Canterbury and the Tol'dar are recovering the escape pods, while the fleet is re-forming at 206 mark--"

Eahar's eyes nearly bulged out of his skull as he saw the next thing appear on his screen. "Incoming transmission. This is impossible, sir, it's from the Portland.

Marcus suddenly found it difficult to hold back his emotions. He stood from Captain's chair, his fingers hurting from gripping the armrest of the chair so tightly. "They made it..." he whispered to himself. "Respond back and offer any assistance we can offer," the Commander responded.

Miracle swung the Endeavour back around to assist the other ship's in rescuing escape pods. It was weird to flying amongst the Borg Cubes that one second they was trying to kill her and the crew. Now flying amongst them to rescue Fleet, Klingon and Cardassian alike. Hearing Eahar's comment about the Portland, she quickly maneuvered the Endeavour to be the closest ship to render assistance. Seeing the badly torn ship of the Portland, she was thankful she didn't have to take the Endeavour into the Transwarp Conduit, Even though she would've liked the challenge. She would've made the dash to the opposite end of the Transwarp Conduit collapsing behind her.

On the main viewscreen, the bridge of the Portland appeared, with the injured and bloodied Bajoran captain in the center chair. The video feed was choppy, cutting in and out, as the power on the Portland's bridge flickered. "Endeavour, this is the Portland," said Alenis, "We're mostly in one piece, but could use any damage control teams and medical assistance the fleet can spare. What is the status of the Borg?"

"Captain Banninga has been recovered, and the Borg have powered down," replied Marcus, breathing a sigh of relief. "The quadrant is safe from any Borg incursion, thanks to you and your crew, and damage control and medial teams are headed your way. It was a pleasure serving with you, Captain."

Alenis smiled slightly, still wincing in pain from her injuries. "You as well, commander," she added, thanking the Endeavour crew for doing their part. "The escape pods from the Portland..."

"They've all been recovered," replied Marcus. He paused for a moment to offer his counterpart on the Portland a smile, as he had pretty much the only bright news of the day. "And I'm told one of them had a healthy, newborn baby boy on board."

"Andy..." whispered Alenis, her eyes lighting up at the mention of the baby. "Thank you, Commander. May the prophets smile upon you and your crew."

"And yours as well, Captain. Yours as well."

What will become of us?

A few hours after the battle

Holo-lab, USS Portland

Authors: Lt. (JG) Marcus Kallan, Ensign Nikki Barclay

As she strolled through the corridors of the USS Portland, Nikki took in all the damage. It seemed like every few steps she came across another damaged bulkhead, pile of rubble, or

blown conduit. Not to mention the hole she cut in the ship's hull, or the battle damage to the exterior. As an engineer, she knew how much it would take to repair the ship, and it wasn't pretty. Starfleet would probably scrap her, she figured, and order an Anubis or Intrepid to replace the old girl.

A tear came to her eye at the thought of the Portland, having survived the battle with the Borg and saving her and all her friends meeting an undignified end at the hands of the chop saws and laser cutters in some scrapyard.

Without thinking about where she was going, her feet brought her towards the holo-lab, where Marcus was no doubt hard at work. She paused for a moment outside the door before stepping inside the dark room. "Marcus?" she called out, cautiously stepping inside "are you there?"

There was the rustle of loose ODN fiber and the hollow, plastic clank of something banging against destroyed computer equipment. "Computer, ugh, lights, 50%," came Marcus' voice. The lights slowly came up, and most of the holographics lab was in complete disarray. Marcus, it seemed, had fallen asleep sorting through the debris looking for anything of value. The fading adrenaline and several days' worth of work finally caught up to the man, whose normally frail constitution finally gave way. "Oh, hi," he said, eyes blinking blearily and finally coming to focus on Nikki. He clambered to his feet, junk scattering this way and that. "What, uh, time is it?"

"It's... it's..." In truth, Nikki wasn't sure either. She had been focusing so much on repairs that she didn't know if she was in engineering for minutes or days. "I think it's time for you to catch some sleep," she replied, stifling a yawn as well. "We can clean this up later," she added, kicking a broken PADD aside into a pile of debris.

"Yeah, sure," he muttered, and crossed the room to her. "You know, I wasn't sure that holodeck trick would work on the Borg. Seems they always fall for it, once. I just hope all of this was worth it, between Captain Banninga and the dark energy nexus and ... and ..." He let out a big yawn. He was almost kidlike-cute with his defenses down and his pretense missing.

Nikki smiled and wrapped her arms around him. "You know, you're kind of cute when you're tired," she said, kissing him on the cheek. "I just hope, with all the damage to the Portland..." she continued, her voice beginning to tense up.

He hugged her, but he was equally as tense. His opinion would likely not be taken well. "She served Starfleet well, Nikki," Marcus replied. "She's outdated and long past her retire date." He swallowed. "I'm sorry."

"But we can't let them haul her away for scrap!" protested Nikki as she released Marcus from the hug. "She deserves better than this. And the crew..." a tear came to her eye, "they'll just split us all up, send us to different postings all over the quadrant..."

"That's part of the service, I'm afraid," Marcus replied, looking down at his feet. He shrugged again. "It sucks, I know." A third shrug. "Maybe they won't split us up. Maybe they will. We

go where our expertise is needed. I mean, hell, I might as well get reassigned back to Daystrom, or wherever the Portland's holomatrix core gets moved to. You know, to supervise further study of Nerys."

Nikki tried to blink the tears away, but it was no use. "This is the first place I've ever felt welcome," she cried, all her angst seemingly spilling out at once. "The first place where I've had true friends, and where people accept me for who I am." She bounded forward, wrapping her arms around Marcus tightly and crying onto her shoulder. "I can't leave this place... or you..."

"Nikki..." Marcus couldn't do anything but pat her back and try to console her. He knew anything he said would just exacerbate things, so he remained silent.

After a few moments, Nikki released Marcus from the hug and wiped her tears away. "You know," she said, her voice quivering, "my uncle has some friends at the Daystrom Institute. Maybe he can get me reassigned there..."

"I could use the company," Marcus said, managing a small smile. Despite not really showing much in the way of emotion regarding the Portland or the potential break-up of the crew, he had gotten used to Nikki's idiosyncrasies, and had developed feelings for her. "If I can break free of Washington's grasp, I'm sure Captain Maddox would be happy to have an engineer of your caliber hanging around."

"Really?" replied Nikki, a smile beginning to break through. She took Marcus by the hand. "Thanks," she said. "Now, let's get you some sleep and a sonic shower. You look like you really need it..."

Meeting Junior

Location: USS Canterbury - Sickbay

Time: Few hours before the party

Authors: Captain Alenis Meru, Cmdr. Timothy Rouse

It was a few hours after the battle when the Portland finally rendezvoused with the rest of the fleet. All the crew on the escape pods had been picked up by various ships and most had been returned to the Portland. Damage control teams were busy cleaning up the messes that the Borg made of the ship and getting the warp engines back online, but Captain Alenis had someone special that she had to visit.

Entering the sickbay of the USS Canterbury, she immediately smiled as soon as she saw Tim holding a little bundle in a blanket.

Tim looked up from his son when he heard someone approach. Seeing Meru he put his finger for his lip and nodded in the direction of Ellen, who was asleep.

"Can I see the baby?" whispered Alenis, taking a seat next to Tim.

"Of course" he whispered and nodded for her to come closer. "May I introduce you to your godchild Andrew James Rouse." He held Andy so she could see him a little better.

Alenis leaned in and smiled at the baby. "He's so cute and peaceful, and..." She paused for a moment, realizing what Tim had said. "Godchild? You mean..."

She was surprised. She had never been in charge of taking care of a baby before. She had always put off having a family until later and later, with her career getting in the way. "I'm honoured," she replied, "but I haven't the foggiest idea how to change a diaper."

Tim grinned, "And you think I do?" he chuckled. "I might have a niece but I don't even think I held her before she could walk."

"I'm sure together, we can figure it out," replied Alenis. "Like we always do." Staring down at Andy, she was taken aback by his innocence and tranquillity. They had just been through a violent battle, but somehow, despite all the death and destruction, new life was brought into the galaxy. It was a small miracle, and it put into perspective the loss of all the brave souls who died that day in order to make the galaxy safe for Andy and everyone else.

"May I hold him?" asked Alenis, a little sheepishly. "That is, if your arms are starting to get tired."

He stood up from the seat he had been sitting in. "Take a seat, although I don't think I could ever get tired of holding him." When she sat down he handed his son to her

Alenis smiled and carefully cradled Andy, making sure to be gentle and trying not to wake him. But in the transfer to her arms, Andy began to stir. "Oh," whispered Alenis, surprised.

"Waaaaaaaaah!" Andy immediately cried out.

"Shhhhhhhh..." Whispered Alenis, gently rocking him back and forth and holding him close to her chest. "Daddy and Auntie Meru are here. Everything is all right."

Andy let out a couple more cries, each one softer than the last, and then closed his eyes again. "I think he likes me," whispered Alenis.

"Hi Captain," Ellen said with a soft voice, waking up after her sons cries. Tim smiled at her and sat on the edge of her bed, resting his hand on her leg.

"Ellen," whispered Alenis, just loud enough to be heard. "I just came by to visit my new godson. I take it the doctors have given him a clean bill of health?"

"Yes, they have. All the commotion around him didn't affect him one bit. All he does is sleep and drink." She carefully sat up straight. Everything was still very sore. "We'll be going back to the Portland in a few hours. I can't wait to sleep in my own bed."

"I hope it's in good condition. The ship..." Alenis stared off into the distance as she thought

about the Portland. It was more than just a ship to her; there was a feeling of genuine fondness for the old cruiser. "She took quite a beating. I can't guarantee your quarters are intact."

"I'm sure we can arrange something," Tim quickly said, not wanting Ellen to worry.

Focusing her attention back on the baby, Alenis gently rocked him back and forth as he went back to sleep. "It's amazing," she said softly, "That in all the chaos and violence of the battle, there is new life. He's got his whole life ahead of him, and a big galaxy to explore."

"It definitely is," Tim and Ellen said simultaneously.

"And he's got a great family to explore it with," added Alenis, transfixed by the little man.

USS Portland; Outside of the Captains Office
Just after leaving the meeting with the Captain
AUTHORS: [20 Tylrai Zade](#); [MCPO Gregory Paladin](#)

Gregory's mind was busy thinking on the future conflict with the Borg that Captain Meru had mentioned at the end of their conversation. For all intents and purposes, Gregory saw that the introductory meeting had gone well. If there was any indication it had not, he had not picked up on it. With head down as he walked out, he briefly made a survey of his surroundings and to ensure a clear path, going left towards the Turbolift in a presumption that he was still on the Nautilus. When a passing crewman prompted him from his stupor, and he realized he was on the Portland instead, he thought back to his instructions to see the ships XO.

That was when he turned around, he was to accidentally bump into someone. "Oh geeze!" he said in surprise, "Oh I'm so-..."

And his words caught as he recognized the face.

Tylrai had been focusing on her flute and missed the approaching crewman as she stepped out of the lift. It had turned out that the ancient Trill instrument required more attention than she had anticipated. She stepped back and looked at an oddly familiar figure. She couldn't quite place him and struggled with the notion for a while. He was human and here in the present so it was someone she had met, or Eledzar perhaps. She shook her head and gave him a puzzled look at matched his last syllable, "sooo, you would be?"

The extension in wording was perfect. Where he had fumbled his "Sorry", she had continued and changed it to an elongated, "Soooo". It had taken the elder enlisted officer by surprise. That, and the realization at whom he was looking at was none other than the younger girl he had watched over less than a decade and a few years prior. He was sure of it. Though it didn't surprise him that she wouldn't recognize him. Why should she? Why would she? Gregory was in the background of ships operations on purpose, not to be in the forefront of any action or media.

Recovering from his fumble, he cleared his throat, giving his best smile. The MCPO adjusted his uniform, straightening it as he gave her a nod. She had grown, and she was quite healthy and just happened to be stationed as a crewmember on his new ship - and one of prestigious rank nonetheless! On the inside, it warmed his heart to see something from his past produce a fruitful outcome.

"I'm Master Chief Petty Officer Gregory Paladin, Ma'am," Gregory introduced himself as. "I'm the new Chief of the Boat. Um...I apologize for bumping into you so rudely. I should watch where I am going from now on."

She remembered momentarily what she had come to the bridge for but also how they generally assigned Chief of the Boat. It was usually long term individuals familiar with the ship design or timeframe of the design. Which was good because she needed someone familiar with the wasted spaces in a Miranda

"Hmmm, Mister Master Paladin, that sounds familiar. Where have I heard that before? Can't quite place it, no worries this happens after twenty or so lifetimes they tend to blend in with each other. What do you know about Miranda class ships, Mister Master Paladin?"

There was that nickname again. A subtle, "D'aww", moment passed over Gregory. He smiled at her, doubting then she remembered way back when. That was okay, he had the memories.

"Quite a bit," he admitted. "Serving on one for over a decade, one can't help but explore. Anything in particular you wanted to know?"

Tyrlai stepped over to a wall console tapping a few commands in with a swift blur of fingers tipped in non regulation shimmering purple. A video played of the internal sensors in cabin five-delta-twelve, she had false-colored the entity that was unscannable. A shimmery blue outline of something tentacled reaching for the screaming crewman, something that by all limits of scanning technology was not actually there. "So what I need is an expert in the parts of the ship where a something of the nature of nothing could be lurking about. Something that seemingly has no issue cohabiting the exact same space-time as say, a crew cabin wall. Bonus points for theories on how to contain it."

The Diplomatic Officer looked over at him evaluatingly. They were about the same height and she couldn't place the name yet, but he still seemed familiar.

"Is that-" Gregory did a double-take, blinking. "Is that real?"

He had to lean close, eyes a bit wide at not only the screaming crewman, but the abomination that was beside him. Then again, this looked awfully like a Federation species he had seen before. Something that had tentacles and that wasn't particularly humanoid, and had to use hand signals to communicate that were translated by a universal translator. I mean, there were several possibilities for what was transpiring before his eyes, and a cultural misunderstanding was one. However due to the line of questioning, and due to the

fact that she was looking at him in an inquisitive - if questioning - manner, he figured he'd better think of it as an actual problem.

But seriously, was this a real image?!

Gregory blinked, still not able to get over whether it was real or not. He cleared his throat, leaning back straight as he let out a sigh. "I don't think I've ever encountered an issue like this before," he said, honestly. "The most....erm....fluidic event I've ever encountered was a miniture sub-space rupture on deck seven of the Nautilus. We had a hard time deciphering its origin and what it was at first with our own scanners, and I almost lost a good crewman to a discharge from it, but in the end we managed to isolate the event with a directed shield bubble from engineering, and the science chief induced anti-matter which closed the rupture - you know, canceled it out."

"But this?" He said, gesturing towards the recording, "I'm not even sure. If it has a physical manifestation, which I assume is true by the reaction of the crewman, then an isolation wall could be in order. Scanner or no, you can still use many different methods to eliminate the threat - if any - posed by the entity. Then again I'm honestly questioning this as real. I mean, is it real?"

He looked at the image a moment longer, as if still debating whether he was being played or not. She was somewhat of a trickster. "But um, yeah, if the science chief wasn't already on this, I'd probably assume you're describing some sort of ghost, or phantom entity. In that case, you'd need something energy based to counter-act it. I'm not a scientist ma'am, but I'd find crewman who were, and we'd sort it out somehow. Maybe by using a beam of neutron particles to, say, counteract its manifestation. I mean, I dunno, I really don't."

"Hmmm, well that wall it came out of is bristling with neutrons so that probably is not the answer." Tyrlai considered the notion and let her mind sort through the answers. "Energy seems promising, at least that can go through walls, perhaps the basics, electromagnetism, nuclear and gravity." The tall Trill wrinkled her nose, "this does sound sciency. Jason Bouvier, we could use him, but he's busy. Borg things, most people are busy. So we will have to do this ourselves." She leaned over the science console her hands pressing keys in a blur when she paused and turned her head looking at the COB sidelong.

Tyrlai was tall, even for a Trill and height made all the difference, leaning over the console had shifted her perspective. Back to when she was fourteen, newly joined and trying to avoid going home and about five-six or so. "Mister Master Paladin, it is nice to see you again." She finished keying in her commands and set the internal sensors to cycle through a wide variety of scans. "I assure you, it is real. The two crewman who 'saw' it are unresponsive psychologically speaking. Whatever it is contact with it or the sight of it causes a profound loss of sanity. I would have this thing off the ship before we mess with the Borg, to do that I need to find out where it is hiding.

"So, otherwise how have you been?"

"That sounds like a problem for a ghost-buster," Gregory said, sighing in defeat. His

expression bewildered for a bit, until he managed a glimpse at Tyrlai in her position. She had grown, he noted, into a full woman. In some ways he was proud. The memories of the two in the Garden Room of the Nautilus brought back some fond experiences, and the time Gregory spent after as her chaperon additionally heart-warming. In another light, he might look upon her feminine form with a bit of infatuation, but as it were, he couldn't. Instead, it was with a bit of parental pride, none of which well earned on his part considering his small inclusion in her life, but nevertheless it was there. He was proud of her.

"I've been good," Gregory replied, brandishing a warm smile he hadn't noticed he worn till then, "been good. After you left the Nautilus things returned to normal, I guess. Oh!"

His eyes wide for a brief instant as he remembered something, a gesture then; one hand up, finger pointing up, as if halting time itself with the revelation he just remembered. "I remember that mountain cat you made that one day, do you remember that - the alien looking one? Turns out it was a crew favorite and, as far as I'm aware, it's still there. I took care of it like I told you I would."

He stood, brandishing, yet again, a full smile. Hands on hips, tilting to and fro briefly, as a boy would who had just informed his parents of a good deed. He relaxed in his posture a bit, evidently proud that he managed to remember that one, brief, if important, moment. "Yeah, but, other than that I spent ten more years on the Nautilus, took two at Starfleet to teach, then I came here."

Gregory cleared his throat, awkwardly. "Came here to work out some things, yeah. To forget some things. But, uh-" he looked down, tilting in his posture a bit, nervousness showing for that brief instant. He worked out that slight kink, however, as he resumed a proper standing position beside Tyrlai "-I'm glad you remember me, young miss."

"Starkiller. He must be sleek and strong by now. We need to request his program for the Portland. And of course I remember you. In fact if it weren't for the twenty other lifetimes rattling about I would have remembered straight away." She leaned back against the console and smoothed back her brown and black highlighted mane and smiled remembering a few weeks she had spent with the silly holo-kit using Eledzars connections to get her into the Academy early entrance program.

"I got a degree in psychology and quick placement back aboard the Sovereign. I was happy there, except for all of the listening to people whine about their feelings. Some people have way too many feelings. I fell backwards into diplomacy and have been able to apply myself to unique situations in very creative ways. It infuriates my assistant, he's got this weird theory that there should be consequences to our choices and actions and that things can be rigidly controlled. His name is Thosk, he likes to file formal complaints about a lot of things so you will be meeting him soon.."

The console whistled at her and she turned around to see what it had found. "Gravitons, clustering like signatures. Nothing on the other scans, no strong or weak signatures and nothing electromagnetic. So we have a nothing that cant be scanned and interacts only with gravitons. Dark matter and by extension, dark energy. And guess what we have down in

engineering?" She smirked at mister Paladin, wondering if he had read his technical briefings.

"The experimental dark energy core, right?" He checked, "I think that's what the report detailed. I'll be honest, I'm not-"

And then, an expression of enlightenment. "So we can trap it in the reactor?"

Then he thought about it.

"Kinda sounds....bad though. Maybe....direct the energy to trapping it?"

"Something crazy like that." Tyrlai smiled and led the way to engineering.

Miranda-class USS Nautilus; Deep Space, near the Ivorian System
Assisting the Sovereign-class USS Sovereign after a fateful pirate encounter...
December 14th, 2380; (Stardate 57952.31)
AUTHORS: 20 Tyrlai Zade; MCPO Gregory Paladin

Just eleven days ago Master Chief Petty Officer Gregory Paladin had returned to the USS Nautilus from his one-year tenure in Starfleet Command School. He had personally met and talked in length with Captain John Arrow, the newest Captain of the Nautilus, and the two had hit it off wonderfully from the start. Their assignment had taken them north of Sol, heading for a routine patrol mission around Starbase 241 when Captain Arrow had recieved a distress call from the USS Sovereign several sectors to the galactic west. Preliminary information was sparse, but after a briefing from Starfleet on the information, the Captain had shared what details he could on the matter.

Gregory was in his office in the lower decks, reviewing the information a second time before their arrival on scene. As he had looked over before, the USS Sovereign had engaged - or was engaged - by a band of Orion Pirate ships. The Sovereign had been heavily damaged, but managed to fight off every single attacker, and even went further in saving captured slaves from the clutches of the degenerate pirates. Along with the Nautilus, six other ships had been dispatched to the scene to assist in recovery and repair operations; two other Miranda-class Starships: the USS Trail and the USS Beuford, an Exclesior-class: the USS Atlantis, and three Constellation-class Starships: the USS Victory, the USS Hathaway, and the USS Gettysburg. The majority of the relief fleet would assist with recovery of captured slaves, criminals, and assist in the repair and medical efforts. The USS Nautilus along with the USS Beuford had been assigned to perimeter security. There was a few attachment details for Gregory from the Captain as well, particularly a security assignment.

Simple enough. Gregory had already formulated how he wanted his enlisted personnel to function through this mission. The majority of them needn't any instructions other than, "Do your job". A few would need guidance, such as the newer Crewman Recruits that had been picked up eleven days ago. For that, however, he had someone to assist with. He swiftly tapped his comm-badge.

"Petty Officer Vladinchi, please report to my office." He requested, which was followed by, "Right away, Chief, through the badges small speaker. Moments later, the requested appeared through Gregory's doors; a chime signaled request to entry, granted by a brief statement of permission to enter from the Master Chief.

"Oscar, good," Gregory said as he looked up from his chair to the Petty Officer Third Class. Oscar Vladinchi had been one of the crew Gregory had saved during the Dominion War, a crises that had thrust Gregory into the position of authority he was in at present. Needless to mention, Oscar was a devoted enlisted officer. When Gregory met eye contact with his subordinate, he continued. "I need you to look after Crewman Akutto and Mo'Lan for me. I'll be busy with some of the superior enlisted as we'll be overseeing extended security operations on the Sovereign. Sound good?"

A nod from Oscar, "Perfectly, Chief. I don't see any problems out of them. I'll handle things here."

"Great," Gregory replied with a smile, "you are dismissed."

As Oscar left, Gregory looked at his terminal screen for a final time. The notice that the Nautilus had arrived had been sent out, and the word to commence operations was given. He was about to leave his desk when his comm-badge chirped.

"Master Chief Paladin, report to transporter room one"

Tyrlai beamed over with her honor guard of lightly wounded. They filed out of the room towards sickbay. She had been instructed to wait for her escort, she wanted to run, but her two escape attempts aboard Sovereign had been easily foiled and the new ship didn't seem to be in nearly as much chaos as the last one. Still the doors were open,...

"Don't even think of it, missy." The security crewman they had sent with her had noticed her wistful look. That was another reason she couldn't make a break for it. She was being watched by a security crewman until the new ships security arrived.

"That's ambassador missy to you, young man." The tall coltish fourteen year old said trying to sound imperious and realizing her voice didn't do that deep resonant gravelly thing it used to do, up till the day before yesterday. Everything was new and familiar all at once, scary and yet she had not been safer in a couple years, she was just so used to running, it was second nature. It was everything she could muster to not dart through the exit.

Gregory had traversed the gap between Deck 6 and the transporter room quite easily. His assignment had been to report to Transporter Room 1, which was on Deck 7, adjacent to the Medical Bay. Why one of the nurses hadn't reported to whom he needed to take charge of was beyond him, though he figured it showed how busy the Nautilus was with medical treatment at the moment. In the place of various older jefferies tubes, turbo lifts had been mounted. One such went directly from Deck 6 to Deck 7, whereupon Gregory was to exit and head straight for his new charge.

When he entered, he noted several security personnel surrounding a younger girl. He quickly took stock of his present predicament, noting that some of the security crewman looked worse for wear. He gave the men a nod, "Welcome aboard the Nautilus, gentlemen, young miss. I'm Master Chief Petty Officer Paladin, and due to the emergency situation we have on our hands, I've been assigned to relieve you of your security detail temporarily. If you'll follow me, we'll head to sickbay."

Prompt and direct. He waited to see them move, before turning to head toward sickbay.

Tyrlai looked suspiciously at the corridor beyond where she stood. The others walked through quickly except for her own guard who was waiting to return to the Sovereign. "I've been to sickbay for the better part of the last nine days. Can we see something else. The shuttle bay for instance, or the bridge or torpedo control. Something like that would be nice. Mister Master Paladin was it? I think we need to explore this ship, does it go to Earth, that would be a good first choice." She sidled towards the door facing the Chief every step of the way.

"What is that panel behind you there, what does that do?"

"That?" Gregory asked, pointing at what the child was inquiring about. "That's a security station. They're placed around the ship to help with crew reports to the bridge."

When he turned to point she made a break for it, but the door whooshed closed having determined she wasn't moving sufficiently outwards, making her halt her flight suddenly and turn in a small circle exactly back to where she was before her aborted escape attempt.

He smiled, he could not help but be in love with how adorable this kid was. She was very inquisitive, which was healthy. Her nickname for him was quite cute too, something he'd doubt he'd forget.

"Well I suppose we can do some other things," he mused out loud, "Say, we can check the arboretum! You like walks in a miniature park, right?"

"A park? Like with trees? I used to like trees, haven't seen one in a couple years. I expect they haven't changed much." The door whooshed back open as if taunting her, she stepped into the corridor and awaited Mister Master Paladin to lead them to an Arboretum.

Gregory smiled, looking at the door briefly and noting the lack of security personnel. They must have beamed back over to wherever they had come from. He looked back to Tyrlai, reaching down to gently take her hand into his own, saying, "If you'll follow me young miss," and proceeded to guide her through the corridor.

Unlike other Miranda-class vessels, the Nautilus was not equipped with a holo-deck. Its refit had been basic, and it had been intended to fulfill the role of destroyer escort for internal shipping lanes and the like. The war-time efforts it had endured, and the present situation it was involved in with its larger Sovereign-class cousin, were completely unintentional for its

mission. To that end, its decks were primarily the same as an older refit model, and the Arboretum was located on the other side of deck six, right past the general offices and meeting rooms.

Walking up to the first door of the Arboretum - it had two entrances - Gregory guided his guest inside, letting her hand go. As the doors slid open for them, then closed behind them, a wash of fresh and pure air flowed over the duo. Around them various species of native birds (or what passed for avians) flew away from the entrance. The sky was clearly holo-generated, as was the vast scene beyond the walls of glorious snow-capped mountains. The room itself had live trees - some earth species, some alien, but all compatible with each other. There was a walking path that twined through the trees, and it was clear to a casual, experience observer as to where the holo-generation began and where the actual Arboretum ended.

The Arboretum on the Nautilus was around two compartments long, and was equipped with standard holo-emitters to fill in the gaps for the background scenery and the native wildlife. The only things real in the room were the fauna, flora, the dirt and grass, the walking path that seemed to go from one end to the other, and the small river that seemed to extend further than it should. Beyond this, the emitters filled in the rest. There was several park benches as well, Gregory motioning towards one.

"This is what we call the 'Garden Room' around here," Gregory said, relaxing a bit as he breathed in the real, fresh oxygen. "Don't have a holo-deck, so we settle for this. I say it's better. You can generally find any type of forest animal here too, and we've named a few, befriended many. The computers fill those in, you know, including the mountains. You like it?"

"I like the notion," she said belying the years hidden within her lanky youthful frame, "the smell and taste of the air mixes with the holoprojection to make it all seem much more real." Tyrlai turned slowly in a circle looking at all the odd plants. Her hands held in front of her, fingers interlaced. Trill was a cool temperate world with mountains and tall trees, and she would often run through the trees at first light, before school. Mornings were a fresh start, the previous day whisked away with the fog. Generally the only part of the day she hadn't yet disappointed her parents too badly. She hadn't thought of them recently. It had been nine days since her rescue, surely they would have heard she'd been rescued by now. "Do you have any garl-cats?" She asked after the shy, snowy pelted felines that would hunt the valley with the morning mists.

"Garl-cats?" Gregory mused, questionably. He had never heard of the things, honestly. He watched the smaller Tyrlai seemed to touch some favinit plants, a flora native to Vulcan.

"Well I'm not really sure," he replied, "but we can see. Computer-" his voice raising a decibel "-do you have any fauna under the name of 'garl-cat' in your banks?"

There was a soft, affirmative chime. Gregory seemed to relax a bit, obviously pleased with the computers answer. A smile played at the corner of his lips. "Alright then, can you produce one for the young miss here? Thank you, computer."

Another soft, affirmative chime, this time elongated and responsive. The air temperature seemed to cool a bit, a breeze wafting over the two. Gregory knelt beside Tyrlai, watching her as a minute ticked by without any sighting. The meantime produced a variety of relaxing scenes and soothing sounds in the Garden Room; the scenery a true representation of a peaceful, if fluid, place. A heavy fog drifted over the larger mountains in the distance, and further down the slopes one could note the trees being swayed by a heavier breeze than the one that was felt nearest to the two. There was a soft rustling in the bushes behind them, and at first Gregory thought this the computers way of introducing his request. He looked, and his eyes widened a bit, and his expression softened.

A kitten, no older than a few weeks, sprung forth from the foliage nearby. Its pelt was of a white coloration, and although it looked nothing specifically like an earth-feline, it still maintained some of the features. If Gregory could describe its shape, it was similar to that of a snow leopard., except, well, cuter. It mewled softly, a noise that easily broke the defenses of any hardened man; Gregory included. Its eyes, so alien, yet so familiar, trained on the young miss, and it approached cautiously, almost exactly.

"I think this is your garl-cat," Gregory said, smiling widely, looking toward Tyrlai for her response. "We have a habit of naming any animal we make here. Don't worry, if and when you go back to your ship, I'll take good care of her or him."

Tyrlai stepped forward, on Trill a lone cub as playful as this one would be nowhere far from a very dangerous mother. But this was a ship in a nebula sectors from her home and this one was less likely to get her killed. She was about to kneel when a chime went off and a holocommunication kicked in. She turned to see a stern looking Trill woman with ice blue eyes, dark black hair tied in an efficient bun and a similar tone of coppery golden skin as she had.

"There you are." She glared and Tyrlai suddenly felt very small and frightened once more. Almost as if the pirate captain she'd escaped from had suddenly come back to life.

"Mother?"

"How dare you!! You just had to create a scene, didn't you. It wasn't enough to embarrass us with your disappearance you had to go and steal a symbiont!! You will not bury this family in scandal, and we will not bear the expense when the commission correct this mistake and place Zade elsewhere."

"But,..." She started, the avalanche of a thousand lectures roaring down upon her.

"Quiet. I don't have to listen to your excuses any longer and I am very happy for the respite. We have had you legally and formally disavowed. You are not to attempt to contact any member of this family ever again or you will be censured. You wanted your precious freedom so badly, well you have it. We will not respond to any further communication, we have already applied for a new child, you will not be missed."

There was a terse shimmer and the holocomm channel closed. Tyrlai blinked and her hands curled into fists for a few moments. She breathed and then turned and knelt before the cub, ruffling her hands through its downy scruff. "I give you the name I no longer need little garl-kit. I name you Starkiller." The kit cooed and turned in a circle seemingly approving of its unnecessarily provocative moniker.

She glanced over at Mister Master Paladin who seemed concerned. "That was my name on the pirate ship. I was hoping to sound fierce and powerful so the others wouldn't mess with me so much." She stood and smoothed the tunic she had gotten after her surgery, a plain blue starfleet civilian tunic. She talked in a low and measured tone, as much to herself as to her Starfleet escort. "I no longer need to try to puff up my feathers. I have twenty lifetimes of knowledge now."

Gregory was agast at what he had seen transpire. After seeing her resolution on the matter, however, he managed a weak smile.

"That's a nice name," he said. "We'll take good care of Starkiller."

Victory Party, Part I

After the battle

IKC Grethor

Authors:

Portland Crew: Captain Alenis Meru, Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Maj. Judith Rouse (played by Timothy Rouse), Esnign Malbi Tai-Konjah

Endeavour Crew: Captain Marcus Byrne, Commander Eahar R'Soll, Lieutenant Yvette Beauvoir, Lieutenant T'Ana Mitchell

Others: Captain T'Lisa Anderson and the crew of the Canterbury, General Mar'dok

Strolling through the damaged corridors of the Portland, Alenis and Tim surveyed the damage before them. There were ruptured conduits, collapsed bulkheads, and piles of scorched rubble everywhere. Somehow, it didn't seem right for them to leave someone else in charge of the massive repair efforts while they celebrated on another ship in full dress uniform, but they both knew that declining Mar'dok's invitation or his barrels of bloodwine would likely cause a diplomatic incident.

Alenis sighed as she stepped over yet another pile of debris. "We took a beating yesterday..." she said in a somber tone. What was implied, but left unsaid, was that this may have been the Portland's last mission. With a ship this old, and having taken this much damage, it was likely that Starfleet would strip her for parts and tow her hulk to a scrapyard; a rather undignified end for a little ship that put up such a fight.

And then, her crew would be scattered all over Starfleet. She might get a newer ship to replace a retiring CO, Tim might get his own command, and the rest of her officers would be on to bigger and better things. Though she had never had any qualms about moving to a new assignment, the idea of breaking up the family that was the Portland disturbed her greatly.

"It was more than a beating," Tim said. "The ship was almost destroyed, with most of its crew still on board." He hated how close they had been to total disaster. Way too close to his liking.

As they entered the transporter room, there was another woman already there.

"Judith," said Alenis, looking the other woman in the eye, "are you sure this is a good idea? Your ex-husband will be there..."

"First of all, I'm not letting myself be scared away from a function I have just as much a right to as any other." Judith said. "And second, he isn't my ex-husband yet. Something I plan on taking care of as soon as I can." She was nervous because of the latter. "Without avoiding him I can't get a divorce," she continued with a soft laugh.

"Oh?" asked Alenis, raising an eyebrow. "I'm not familiar with the Klingon customs surrounding divorce. I hope there are no swordfights involved..."

Judith looked at the Captain for a few seconds, deciding if she was joking or not. "I don't have any idea either."

"Well then," replied Alenis, stepping onto the transporter pad, "Let's head over. I, for one, hope that their Heart of Targ and Rokeg blood pie is as good as Mar'dok says it is."

Tim let out a big breath. He wanted to say anything about the Mar'dok subject, but as his sister had pointed out to him, he needed to stay out of it and let her fix it herself. Didn't she understand he just wanted to fix it for her. "Yes, let's go. There is more than enough to celebrate."

"Computer," called out Alenis, straightening her uniform. "Three to beam directly to the main lounge of the IKC Gre'thor."

USS Canterbury

"Captain, are you certain about leaving Drusa in charge, while we visit the Gre'thor?" Commander Gar'Rel asked.

"Well, old friend, it is probably a better idea than taking her onto a vessel filled with Klingons." Captain Anderson replied.

"True, but I still do not trust her, ma'am." The Security Chief confessed.

"I am unsure of her myself, so I have asked Commander Muller and Sergeant Sorensen to keep an eye on her." Anderson said.

As they neared the transporter room, they were met by Doctor Emily Dalziel.

"Captain, Commander, do you mind if I join you? I've never been on a Klingon vessel before."
Asked the blonde-haired CMO.

"I have no objections, Doctor. Commander, how about you?" The Captain said.

"I am happy for you to join us, Doctor." Said the Ursinoid.

"Thank you, ma'am, sir." Emily said.

They entered the transporter room, stepped on to the pads and the Captain said to the operator, "Three to beam to the IKC Gre'thor."

USS Endeavour, Transporter Room 1

Marcus stepped through the door into the Transporter Room. He had taken enough time to get cleaned up after the battle, survey the damage, and to check on the crew. He wore his standard black open duty uniform with the Commander's red, he knew better than to wear a dress uniform aboard a Klingon starship. He gave a smile to his XO, Chief Counselor, and Chief of Intelligence as he said, "Let's try not to cause any international incidents."

T'Ana looked at the Captain. "Of course not, why would we want to?"

"Does that mean, I should accept or refuse a challenge?" Yvette asked.

"If you accept, you better win," the Commander quipped. He had been working on his bat'leth skills for just such an occasion.

The comment of the Endeavour's Intelligence Chief made T'Ana realize that she once again hadn't picked up on sarcasm. She simply said "Ah," and walked on the transporter pad.

"Well then, let's head over," replied Eahar. "I assume we've all taken our alcohol inhibitor injections," he added, sensitive to the fact that his physiology didn't react well to liquor and the Klingons enjoy sharing their bloodwine at these sort of things.

The four officers stepped onto the transport pad. With a nod towards the Transporter Chief, Marcus said, "Four to beam over."

With that the four of them were dematerialized in the blue sparkle of Federation transport technology.

IKC Gre'thor

The Klingon ship looked as all Klingon ship's do on the inside, barely spaceworthy with spotty lighting. Inside the main gathering hall were what seemed like the entirety of the Gre'thor's crew as well as representatives of the other Bird-of-Prey ships that had followed Mar'dok into battle. Barrels of bloodwine littered the area and the sounds of Klingons enjoying themselves. Fights were breaking out, bloodwine was flowing, and the sounds of joking and boasting rang through the hall.

General Mar'dok laughed loudly and slapped the Klingon beside him on the back. It had been a very funny joke. He didn't necessarily relish the idea of Starfleet officers scampering through his ship and they were always the buzzkill, but they did fight with bravery and honor. They deserved to be part of this party as much as the...Cardassians.

As the blue transporter beams began to materialize the arrivals from the Federation ships and the gold of the Cardassians, the General shoved his mug into the nearest crewman's chest and ordered, "More bloodwine!"

The staggering Klingon made his way over to a barrel of bloodwine, where he bumped into yet another staggering Klingon by the name of Malbi. Amongst the inebriated Klingons, her inebriated self was right at home. She and the Klingon who'd run into her let out a laugh and a cheer, then drank to each other's health. Malbi's own crew was probably astounded by her new outgoing attitude, but she didn't mind. She was relishing the opportunity to be around her own kind again, and to drink excessively.

After materializing on the Klingon vessel Judith needed a moment to take in her surroundings. It *obviously* wasn't her first time on a Klingon vessel. Hell, her latest accident where she lost her last chance at being a Marine was on a Klingon vessel. The noise and smell were overwhelming. As she looked around she notices Mar'dok, and he had seen her too. She quickly walked to the barrels of bloodwine and took a cup. She needed some extra courage when she would face him.

"He's at three o'clock," whispered Alenis into Judith's ear as she took a mug in her hand as well.

"I'm aware of that," Judith sneered taking a large sip of the drink. "Do me a favor and keep Tim away from him, I need to do this by myself." she looked at her brother who was standing on the opposite of the room, glaring at her soon to be ex-husband.

"Ah, Judith. Have you finally come to see your husband?" came the boisterous voice of Mar'dok, filled with confidence from the bloodwine and the victory over the Borg. He didn't yet walk towards his estranged wife, he had to keep up appearances after all.

She looked at him, seriously trying to remember what she ever saw in him. "Do you have a moment?" she asked. Not wanting their personal stuff to be overheard by the whole damn ship.

The General downed his mug of bloodwine and made his way over to Judith. He gave the

nearest group of Klingons a look that moved them over a couple more meters. "Yes, what did you want to talk about?" he asked in his gruff and raspy voice.

Annoyed by the tone he spoke with she replied to him in annoyance. "What do you think? Oh, wait. Maybe we need to discuss a little thing called our marriage, especially how we are going to end it."

All the Klingons around Mar'dok gasped. Divorce was not difficult to get under the Klingon legal system if both parties consented, but the fact that his wife was demanding one called into question Mar'dok's honour. If it was another man, the General would be duty-bound to challenge him to the death. With a swift motion, the General drew his mek'leth. "It is time for the ritual of the Kal'tak"

Victory Party, Part II

After the battle

IKC Grethor

Authors:

Portland Crew: Captain Alenis Meru, Cmdr. Timothy Rouse, Lieutenant Jason Beauvoir, Maj. Judith Rouse (played by Timothy Rouse)

Endeavour Crew: Captain Marcus Byrne, Lieutenant Yvette Beauvoir,

Others: General Mar'dok, a bunch of boisterous Klingons, Gul Jatok

"You honourless petaQ." K'MaQ, son of Al'Ren screamed drawing his bat'leth. He'd just found out that the Starfleet officer standing in front of him was the same Beauvoir who had attacked his brother and cousin, without honour, on a Federation station nearly 10 years ago.

Jason dodged the blow that attempted to relieve him of his head, causing the blade to impact the bulkhead instead.

As the Klingon readied the weapon for another blow, Jason looked around for something with which to defend himself.

Picking up an ornate candle holder, he held it up in front of him, only for it to be cleaved in half by K'MaQ's next blow.

The large Klingon howled and charged at Jason swinging.

The bat'leth was within millimetres of his head, when it was stopped by another blade.

He turned to see his sister, Yvette, with her Romulan honour blade locked with K'MaQ's bat'leth.

Staring the Klingon down, Yvette said. "K'MaQ, son of Al'Ren, you will not reclaim your family's honour by slaying by unarmed brother. Now, stand down, before lose what honour you still possess."

The Klingon bared his teeth, but backed off. He was however unable to prevent himself from say. "Keep your brother away from me, little warrior, or he may just lose his head."

"Merci, ma petite soeur." Jason said.

"Pas de problem, mon grand frère." Yvette replied returning her honour blade to its scabbard. "So, how is my niece?"

"She seems to be acclimatizing well." Jason replied as he caught his breath.

Almost interrupting, Commander Byrne walked up to the gathered Beauvoirs. He knew better than to offer someone with a hint of Vulcan blood a handshake, so he simply said, "So, you must be the famous Jason Beauvoir. Your sister has shared a few stories about you."

"And after hearing these stories, you still wanted to meet me, Commander?" Jason joked.

The Commander gave a sly smile then quickly remarked, "Well, I had to see if they were true." He turned to Yvette before playfully asking, "What was the story about the tribble and a warp core breach?"

"That was not a normal tribble, it had been altered to feed on warp plasma and caused a warp core breach." Jason explained.

Yvette let a smile cross her lips at the thought of such an incident.

"Warp core breaches and tribbles, you know they are a sworn enemy to the Empire?" Marcus replied, imagining the Klingon crew scrambling if they thought a tribble capable of causing warp core breaches was aboard. "What made it such a special tribble?"

"Well-meaning scientists, trying prevent tribble-related food shortages, genetically altered some tribbles to feed on solar energy. Unfortunately another mutation caused one of its descendants to develop a taste for warp energy."

Hanging back, Alenis sipped her bloodwine, surveying the room, but keeping a careful eye on the unfolding scene between Judith and Mar'dok, when she felt a presence next to her.

"Captain Alenis," said a Cardassian voice which could only be Gul Jatok. "I thought you were killed on Gamia III. Is this some sort of Federation trickery?"

"I was dead," replied Alenis in a dismissive tone. She had read reports of the Cardassians' valiant efforts to hold off the tactical cube and protect the Endeavour while it accomplished its part of the mission. But even one act of bravery couldn't erase what the Cardassians did to her, to her people, and to her family. She still hated Cardassians, and part of her still

wanted revenge for what they had done to Bajor. But she had had enough fighting for today. "It's a long story. If you'll excuse me," she added, dismissively as she took a step away from him, "I need to freshen my drink."

As she turned away from Jatok, Alenis saw and heard voices being raised and a commotion happening around Mar'dok and Judith. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tim swiftly walking over towards the gathering throng, a look of anger on his face. Remembering Judith's request, Alenis swiftly darted next to him and grabbed him by the arm. "Tim," she said, looking up at her executive officer, "leave them be."

"But," he said before realising there was no point in mentioning what he wanted to do. "I'm really going to kill that guy."

"I don't think that will help. Besides, Judith can take care of herself," replied Meru. Even though she was an only child, she could imagine what it was like for Tim to want to protect his little sister. "It's Klingon stuff; honour and all. Best if you just let her handle it."

The conversation was interrupted by Mar'dok's booming voice. "Choose your champion!" he shouted, brandishing his mek'leth, when his eyes caught those of Tim's. The crowd between Tim and Mar'dok parted as the General pointed his blade directly at Tim. "Commander Rouse," he said, with fire in his eyes. He did not particularly care for Rouse, and would enjoy going toe to toe with him. "Will you fight for your sister?"

Tim stepped forward to challenge Mar'dok, but stopped when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Glancing over, he saw Judith pulling him back.

"No," she said, stepping in front of Tim, her step shorter than before and her face wincing in pain as her back was acting up again. "I can choose anyone I want as my champion, and I choose myself."

A collective gasp emanated from the Klingons surrounding the three of them. For a woman to choose one's self as one champion was almost unheard of, but there was a precedent in Klingon mythology. Only a few decades after the Age of Kahless, one of his great-granddaughters, Adjur, chose herself as her champion and fought her husband for a divorce, winning and choosing to spare his life, but not his name, which was lost to history and never spoken again.

"If I must fight for my freedom from you, I will," said Judith, with a fire in her eyes as she stared down her husband. "But ask yourself this: how much honour is there in killing your wife, a woman who has been almost crippled in battle, a woman you had vowed to protect?"

Mar'dok swung his Mek'leth around, flashing the finely polished blade and pointing it at Judith before smirking and re-sheathing it. "rIn ngoS tlhogh cha!*" he exclaimed, before bowing in front of Judith. "Q'apla!"

Judith blinked a few times before she let out the breath she apparently been holding.

When Mar'dok had walked away she looked at Tim and before she knew it his arms were around her. "Bravo, sis," He said with a huge grin on his face.

****Our marriage is over**

Victory Party, Part III

After the battle

IKC Grethor

Authors:

Portland Crew: Captain Alenis Meru, Ensign Nikki Barclay (played by Alenis Meru)

Endeavour Crew: Captain Marcus Byrne, Lieutenant Miracle Swiftpaws

Others: Captain T'Lisa Anderson (played by Jason Beauvoir), Gul Jatok

Doors whooshed open, Miracle shot through them in full flight, her eyes were wide, ear fully flat and her tail windmilling behind her for balance. "Squelp! Squealies squawk! Squillies squek! Sqilons squawzy!" As she careened into anyone in her path into room full of Officers from various ships that partook in the raid against the Borg Complex. A few seconds later the doors whooshed open as a herd of Klingons rushed in and coming to a stop really quick. From the rear of the group of Klingons, "I know that oversized Tribble came in..." Realizing where they was at.

"Tribble?" asked Nikki, approaching the Mousian, and forgetting about how Klingons felt about the furry creatures. "Where? I love tribbles! They're so cute!" In truth, she had loved tribbles a little too much. During her time at the academy, she had adopted a couple tribbles, and of course, was responsible for no less than two tribble infestations in her dorm.

Seeing Miracle enter, T'Lisa raised an eyebrow, she'd never encountered a Mousian before. Excusing herself from her group, she approached women. "Good evening, Lieutenant, Ensign, I am Captain T'Lisa Anderson of the Canterbury, and you are?"

"Iz Miracle Swiftpaws, CFO of Endeavour!" She stands up to her full 5 foot height. "Itz a pleasure to meet yooz. Could someone please tell them Ridgeheads, Iz mean Klingon. Iz am not a tribble?!" She points to the Klingons at the entrance after seeing few more Klingons in the room with the Senior Officers.

"I will endeavour to do so, Lieutenant, but I know from personal experience, that Klingons can be quite stubborn when it comes to first impressions." T'Lisa replied.

"It should be obvious that Iz am not one! These tribbles, Iz presume, don't wear uniforms?" Miracle calming down. "Mez Lady Captain T'Lisa."

T'Lisa understood Miracle's outburst, but decided to change the subject. "Lieutenant, you said, you were on the Endeavour, then you must know my daughter, Lieutenant Yvette Beauvoir?"

"Squeak! Iz ran across her a few times." Miracle smiled warmly. "Wez rescued Lieutenant Beauvoir from Nova Colony during a Borg attack on the place. Iz was at the helm. Then wez lost Captain Banninga to them. Wez went and got her back. Iz am glad wez was able to reunite her with yooz."

"I am glad that you were able to save Captain Banninga, and my daughter." T'Lisa replied.

"All inna dayz work. Yooz involved in the fight against the Borg Unicomplex?" Miracle relaxing, as she looked at T'Lisa. She was enjoying the moment.

"Yes, my ship and crew provided support during and in the aftermath of the battle." T'Lisa replied.

"Squeak." Miracle nodded her approval. "Yooz participation was much appreciated, Mez Lady Captain T'Lisa."

After partaking in the celebrations and watching all the hubbub, Gul Jatok decided to try once more. Seeing the Bajoran captain polish off a glass of blood wine, he figured that she might be a little more willing to talk now than she had been earlier in the evening.

"Captain Alenis," he said softly as he approached her from behind. "I'm afraid it's been a long time since we've talked. I must say I'm both surprised and relieved to see you alive."

"Not quite long enough," shot back Alenis, before sighing deeply and turning towards Jatok. But, whether it was the influence of the liquor or the fact that Jatok was shorter and less intimidating in person, she didn't feel quite the same level of fear and hatred as she usually did when face to face with a Cardassian. And she had questions that she wanted answered... mostly about her half-sister. "My apologies, Gul," she replied, remembering all the self-restraint that she had learned in her diplomatic courses, "being born on Bajor has given me a certain... wariness... around Cardassians. I'm sure you understand..."

"Yes..." Jatok stared into her eyes for a moment, but instead of trying intimidate her, he offered her a faint smile before glancing over his shoulder to check for eavesdroppers. "I suppose my people have much to apologize for. Please, allow me to refill your drink."

Alenis was taken aback. She had never seen a Cardassian show remorse for the occupation, or for their role in the Dominion War. As her mind was attempting to process what she had just heard, Jatok had time to snatch the mug from her hand and refill both his and hers from a large barrel. As he pressed the mug into Alenis' hand, he tried again to disarm her. "A Bajoran drinking with a Cardassian... I suppose fate can make strange bedfellows."

"Indeed," replied Alenis, her eyes narrowing as she examined Jatok's face closely for signs of deceit, faint sneers, or anything like that. But they weren't there. "I'm sorry, did you just..."

Jatok held his hand up and interrupted her. "Not all of us are remorseless killers," he said. "I joined the military during the occupation, and I did things on Bajor that I'm not proud of. We all did. Cardassia needs to atone for what we did on Bajor; if we do not confront our past, we can not move forward."

After taking a big swig of her drink, Alenis looked back at Jatok. "Fascinating, but I'm not sure what that has to do with--"

"I just thought you might be curious as to why I arranged your sister's escape," replied Jatok.

"And you think that this somehow makes up for what you did to Bajor?" shot back Alenis, incredulously. "That this makes up for the horrors of the occupation?"

"No," replied Jatok, glancing out the window out at the stars. "No, I don't."
