

The Misadventures of January McKenna

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The Misadventures of January McKenna

by [LordMcCoveyCove](#)

Summary

Wolf 359: The lone Borg cube, led by former Starfleet captain Jean-Luc Picard, cleaves a path for Earth through a fleet of thirty-nine Starfleet vessels. Not a single one of them survived the attack, and over ten thousand officers and enlisted lost their lives. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, Lieutenant (jg) January McKenna of the late starship *Roosevelt*, survives in an escape pod.

In Earth orbit, the Galaxy-class starship *Enterprise-D*, faces off with the cube. And loses. Attempting to destroy the cube by ramming it, the resulting explosion leaves the cube only half-damaged and fully operational. The famous crew of the *Enterprise* has died, and now it's up to the rest of Starfleet... and the entire Alpha Quadrant... to deal with a frightening fact: The Borg have invaded Earth.

This is the novella that kicked off the popular online multi-player game, [Where No One Has Gone Before](#). From an idea by Todd James.

Winner: "The Choice" Challenge (2010)

Notes

This story was originally published at the classic Ad Astra site on 3 July 2009, however was originally published at FanFiction.net in 2001, under a different name than my current nom-de-plume.

Historian's Note: The events of the first chapter takes place during The Next Generation fourth season episode, "Best of Both Worlds, Part II."

My Ship was Destroyed at Wolf 359 And All I Got Was This T-Shirt

The borrowed clasp in her hair lost control over several strands of her raven black hair every time impacts to the ship jostled her at the flight controls on the main bridge. Blood matted the strands down and prevented itself from dripping down her cheek and distracting her from her duties. She briefly lifted her head up to scan the bridge before returning her attention to the information being displayed. As the battle stations klaxon wailed in the background, she maintained the Federation starship *Roosevelt's* flight as her captain had commanded her to, keeping the ship within weapons' range of the enemy vessel.

Looming before the bridge crew on the main viewscreen was the enemy vessel in all of its horrendous glory: the single Borg cube that had attacked the Federation colony at Jouret IV and destroyed it completely. Starfleet dispatched Lieutenant Commander Elizabeth Shelby to assist the flagship USS *Enterprise* in their investigation and confrontation with the cube, but in response, the Borg abducted Captain Jean-Luc Picard and assimilated him. He became an unwilling participant in the cube's further incursion into Federation space as the new face of the Borg. It was his eerie visage on the viewscreen as the Borg stated their intentions to the United Federation of Planets.

"I am Locutus of Borg," he had said in his accented Standard, implants visible upon the side of his head, with a red laser pointing directly at the video inputs and causing the light to scatter in a circular pattern. He continued to announce the intentions of the Borg, along the lines of destroying the fleet of Federation starships if they did not disarm and escort them to Earth where they would begin assimilating the population.

Starfleet had been charged with the responsibility of defending the Federation, and as such, Vice Admiral J. P. Hanson ordered a thirty-nine ship fleet to form at Wolf 359 to make a stand against the Borg cube. The flagship of the fleet was the starship USS *Kyushu*, and the admiral had made it clear to all ship captains of how dire the circumstances were and what exactly was at stake. No one had ever heard of the Borg prior to this formation, and it was not common knowledge of the sheer destructive force that awaited them at Wolf 359.

Like most Starfleet officers, the crew of the Excelsior-class USS *Roosevelt* held their confidence high just prior to the appearance of the cube on sensors. That confidence wavered almost immediately after the cube laid waste to five ships of the fleet in short fashion.

Another hit impacted against the shields of the *Roosevelt*, and Lieutenant (jg) January McKenna gripped the edge of the console as tightly as she could whilst the ship threatened to throw her from her station. As the ship's helm officer, it was her duty to keep a tight control on the ship's course and speed. In this battle, it was crucial to their survival that she continue in her duty.

To her left, Ensign Kimberly Dawes hung onto the operations console as January did. Like January, Kimberly was a recent arrival aboard the ship. They had formed a fast friendship with one another in the past six months, nearly inseparable. The pair had been regarded as something of a couple, though without the sexual connotation. Within each other they had found a kindred spirit, and as they shared the same bridge duty shifts, they became the premiere team to have at hand. It was their outstanding performance that assured Ensign Dawes a swift promotion in the coming weeks.

Ensign Dawes was trying desperately to reroute power to the shields and adjusted their nutation as the captain had instructed. The engagements the *Enterprise* had with the Borg in the previous days allowed tactical information to be transmitted to try and prepare the fleet as much as possible. However, it seemed that in spite of all the work done to prepare, the Borg adapted. The most recent adaptation allowed the Borg to strike the hull of the *Roosevelt* directly.

The powerful energy coursed through the grid of the ship as multiple nodes delivered overwhelming feedback. The ship's circuit breakers attempted to prevent the delivery, but it was not quick enough. Along with the damage to the ship's superstructure, three of the bridge consoles exploded in fire, killing the personnel manning them. The smell of burning flesh floated through the bridge, causing January to fight off a wave of nausea. Without looking, she knew that her friend had been killed, and instantly rerouted operational control to her console.

The engineering officer reported immediately, "Main energizer is hit; I've lost the impulse engines."

"Captain," January called out, "operations has been rerouted. Your orders?" The flight of the *Roosevelt* was becoming more and more erratic as the vessel's reaction control thrusters struggled to compensate for the loss of the secondary propulsion system. "Sir?" she asked, when there was no response.

"They're dead, sir," said the engineer, of the captain and first officer.

January turned her head to survey the bridge briefly, and discovered the smoking wreck of the captain's chair, along with the badly burned bodies of Captain Sotek and Commander Granger Kim. Tears began to form in her eyes; the smoke coupled with the loss of her friends and colleagues was too much for her to bear. Her voice caught as she asked, "Who has command?"

"I think you do, sir," came the reply.

She swallowed hard, fighting back the desire to shut herself down. Instead, she decided to turn off her emotions for the moment, and requested, "Status?"

The engineer, an ensign, wiped a smudge from his brow onto the sleeve of his uniform. "Powerless, adrift, and blind, sir." The deck below their feet shook once more as the Borg delivered another blow. "Hull breaches across the secondary hull, sir. They're cutting into engineering. I expect a warp core breach any second, now!"

"Abandon ship. All hands to the lifepods," Lieutenant McKenna ordered in a loud voice, making herself heard over the howling of the ship as it was being carved by the cube. She rose from her console and headed for the aft turbolift's portside panel, gesturing to the ensign to follow her.

The engineering ensign entered in his final command upon his console, and immediately made for one of the ten bridge-mounted lifepods

through the hole made by the junior grade lieutenant. The kickout panel was designed to allow the bridge crew access to the lifepods in case of emergency. It was a narrow space to run through, and they had been lucky that the hull had not been seriously breached, though the passage was colder than the heat-filled bridge.

Making certain that the ensign's lifepod was away, she entered one of her own and launched it. The sight of the *Roosevelt*, her hull broken and burning in space was within view of the lifepod's circular ports. A limited view of the battle was also quickly seen as the pod's thrusters pulled itself away from the ship. Within moments, the dying ship's warp core breached; the explosion sent a shockwave that destroyed many of the other pods that had not yet gained a safe distance. As the shockwave advanced toward her pod, January witnessed the Borg cube destroying the *Princeton*, and a tractor beam holding the *Saratoga* in place as its lifepods fled the engagement zone.

She accessed the control panel within the lifepod to adjust her course for Starbase Nine; the prearranged rendezvous in case the retreat order was sounded. Other lifepods would join her en route, no doubt, and they could use the modular nature of the pods to assemble a cube of their own. The limited sensors aboard the pod provided little information of other survivors from the attack, but it was clear that the Borg had the upper hand in this conflict. January keyed in another command, and the pod's homing beacon was activated.

Time passed, and the battle was over. The Borg cube proceeded on course for Earth, leaving a field of broken ships in its wake. Debris and wreckage slowly dwindled to nothing as the pod crept toward its destination. January could barely keep her eyes open, having already wept over the day's events, trying her best to express her grief.

A short time later, she could feel her surroundings change in spite of her slumber, and the silence of the pod was replaced by the chatter of a busy room. She felt the cold press of a hypospray against her neck and her eyes snapped open immediately. The eyes of a female officer stared back at her with gentle concern.

"Lieutenant, can you hear me?" she asked of January in a soft tone.

"Yes," January replied. "Who are you? Where am I?"

The woman introduced herself as a medical officer assigned to the starship *Akagi*, where she had been beamed to. "We just arrived at Wolf 359 to take on survivors."

"The Borg cube?"

The doctor's face betrayed her sadness as she informed the lieutenant, "I'm sorry to have to be the one to tell you, but the Borg destroyed the *Enterprise* in orbit of Earth. We failed."

January felt as though the universe had collapsed atop her. Frantically, she tried to push away the doctor to allow her to sit up and leave the sickbay. The word "failed" continued to ring in her ears as she tried to wrap her mind around the concept of losing Earth. She explained, "There was nothing we could do. They destroyed every ship we sent at them, and killed so many people!" The volume of her voice rose with each sentence, as though she had been directly accused or charged with the failure of the mission. "We did the best we could!"

"Calm down, Lieutenant," said the doctor, keeping her voice as calm as she could manage. The doctor felt every bit as frustrated as January did, but unlike the lieutenant, had no luxury to express it in such a dire situation. She had to remain calm for her staff. "You've understandably been through quite an ordeal."

"No shit, Doc," snapped January.

"You need to rest, Lieutenant," replied the doctor.

Lieutenant (jg) January McKenna froze in her steps as she heard the doctor reply. With an incensed voice, she spat out, "Like hell I do. I'm going up to the bridge, and I'm going to lend a hand. Whatever it takes, and no matter how much it costs, I promise you this: I will not rest until I've sent every single one of those bastards straight to hell!"

The corridor outside sickbay was equally busy as the inside. Starfleet personnel and Federation citizens seemed to be walking up and down with purpose. In their haste, they continued to push the lieutenant aside as they proceeded without further delay while January stood still within the corridor. The design of the ship was unlike her beloved *Excelsior*-class. It was obvious to her that the *Akagi* was of an unfamiliar design thus she would require directions to the bridge.

"Excuse me, Crewman," she said as she began to flag down someone. Instead of replying to her call, he brushed her aside. This was repeated four times before her anger overruled her sense of courtesy. She placed her hand upon the nearest crewmember and pulled the man around to scream at him, "Hey! I need to get to the damned bridge!"

"I beg your pardon, Lieutenant," was the annoyed response.

It was then that she realized that she was addressing an officer two ranks her senior. "I'm sorry, sir. I just wanted to find out what was going on."

"I see," said the lieutenant commander. He was not tall; in fact, she was eye-to-eye with the officer. In spite of her rude arrest, he seemed to smile at her, the skin around his large brown eyes wrinkling slightly. "You must be one of the survivors."

"Yes, sir. Lieutenant January McKenna, USS *Roosevelt*."

"Lieutenant Commander Jetrul Dae, executive officer," he said as he extended his hand to her.

"Nice to meet you," she returned, shaking the man's hand. "May I ask what's going on, please?"

"We've taken on the last of the survivors, and are proceeding to rendezvous at Starbase Nine," explained Dae. "If you'd like, you can follow me and I'll take you to the bridge."

"Thank you, sir," January replied. "What about Earth?" She followed him close aboard while asking.

"Spacedock had sent out a brief distress call, saying they had been boarded, but neither it nor Station McKinley are responding to hails from the other ships," Dae reported. "The general consensus among the surviving admiralty is that the Terran sector will be under complete Borg control within hours. They're trying to evacuate as much of the population as possible, but there's no way those ships can carry off twenty billion people."

January took a deep breath before saying anything further. "Are we going to defend Earth?"

"We don't honestly know, yet. There was an incoming call from the Federation President reported on the bridge," said Dae, as they entered the turbolift. "Bridge," he ordered. The lift moved immediately.

"We cannot abandon Earth," she said with conviction.

"That is not up to us, Lieutenant," he pointed out.

She could not reply, for the doors had parted and he stepped out on the bridge. The bridge of the *Akagi* was no larger than the *Roosevelt's* auxiliary control center. Circular and cramped, there was only room for the captain's chair in the center, with all of the support stations against the bulkheads facing out.

January walked to the starboard side of the bridge, having entered from behind the captain's chair. Because the vessel was classified as a light cruiser, the commanding officer of the *Akagi* was a Commander, rather than a captain in rank. Nevertheless, he was addressed appropriately by the members of the bridge crew, Dae included.

"What's up, Captain?" asked Dae, though he knew the answer.

"Put the message on screen," replied the captain. "Let's all take a look at it."

The viewscreen shifted immediately to that of a Starfleet Admiral, wearing four pips enclosed in an admiral's rectangle upon both lapels of his uniform. His expression was haggard; it was obvious that his demeanor was forced. "This is Starfleet Command to all vessels within range. By the order of the President, all Starfleet vessels not presently operating within the Sol Sector are ordered to maintain their distance and proceed directly to Starbase Three and report to Rear Admiral Daniel Ross for further orders. Do not risk the lives of your crew or your ships in an attempt to defend Earth. We will do everything we can to fight them hand to hand, if we have to." He paused, catching his breath. "Remember your training, people. Starfleet, out."

The screen changed to the broken ships at Wolf 359. It was then that the captain stood from his chair and placed his hand on the helmsman's shoulder, "Take us away from the sector, warp nine. Plot a course for Starbase Three."

Before the helmsman could reply, January walked toward the captain, her rage outweighing her control, "You can't abandon them, Captain. You must plot a course for Earth and add our firepower to theirs."

Dae moved quickly, grabbing January by the arm as she seemed to threaten the captain. "Lieutenant, that's enough. You heard the admiral."

"No, damn it!" she shouted in a shaking voice, shaking Dae's grip from her arm. "You can't just leave them there to die! We have to go in and rescue as many people as we can, even if it's just one person!"

"The admiral's orders were quite clear, Lieutenant," said the captain. "We must proceed to the starbase."

Lieutenant McKenna looked as though she were about to grab hold of the captain's uniform and toss him aside. The bridge crew looked on as the tension thickened before them. January stopped herself long enough to look at the captain in the eye, and call him, "Coward."

The captain froze for a moment, a look of uncertainty crossing his features. It seemed as though for a moment he would do exactly as January suggested. However, his duty and orders bore heavily upon him, and his brow furrowed toward Lieutenant McKenna. "XO," said the captain, "if she refuses to leave my bridge, then throw her in the brig." He turned to the helm officer and repeated his order, "Helm, plot a course for Starbase Three, and execute at warp nine."

Life's a Bitch... and then there's the Borg

As she sat within the confines of one of *Akagi's* detention cells, Lieutenant (jg) January McKenna decided that with recent events and Starfleet's order to retreat, she would find herself behind a forcefield for the duration of her career. Taking a deep breath and blowing her bangs upward, she reached up atop her head and felt for the hair clasp holding her long black hair away from her face. When she removed it, her straight hair fell forward and obscured the cell from view. She scrutinized the clasp as she remembered that just that morning she accepted it from Ensign Kimberly Dawes to wear for her shift. It was a simple clasp made of a silver-colored metal; the end clicked into place when she pressed it into place. January ran her free hand through her hair, feeling how dirty it was. She suddenly wished for a cabin where she could take a shower, instead of the unaccommodating cell. The matted strands of her hair felt sticky to her fingers. Unzipping her wine red uniform jacket, she decided to make use of the water basin accessible within the bulkhead to rinse her hair as best as she could. Her thoughts moved back to her doomed career, as she moved her fingers through the strands of hair, until the blood was no longer detectable by touch.

A court-martial was in store for her without a doubt; she would be hauled up on several charges that, if convicted, would place her in a Federation penal colony or rehabilitation center for a long time. Questioning the orders of a starship commander and charging him with cowardice had to be based in fact before one could even think to open his or her mouth. January could not help but wince as the thought of the penalties crossed her mind. She silently chided herself for acting with pure emotion in stead of logical thought. She envisioned that she would stand before the court and explain that the massive loss drove any sense of logic from her when she spoke, that the disaster made her mentally unbalanced in a temporary fashion.

"Temporary insanity is something I would have to determine before I make my recommendation to the captain, Lieutenant," said a lightly accented female voice from outside the cell.

January pulled her head from the small alcove in the bulkhead and pulled her hair back to peer at the source of the voice. The woman had brown hair, worn in a dancer's bun, and stood facing her on the other side of the forcefield with her hands clasped together before her. It was obvious that she was a medical officer of some sort, wearing a peacock blue Starfleet uniform to denote her specialty as the sciences. Two full silver pips of a Lieutenant resided upon the right lapel of the uniform. The statement the woman made had been pulled right out of January's mind. The evidence of the woman's racial gift of telepathy caused a wave of anger to crash upon the shores of January's mind. "Stay the hell out of my head," January snapped in an angry tone.

"My apologies, Lieutenant McKenna," the woman replied. "My name is Rheanne Kiara, ship's counselor. May I come in and talk to you for a bit?"

"Do I have a choice?" asked January in a hostile tone.

Rheanne smiled at her, "You do, actually. However, if you would like to get out of that cell a little quicker..."

"Fine," January responded with a single beckoning wave of her hand. She returned to the bunk and brought her left leg up to place her hands around her ankle in a seated position.

Lieutenant Kiara nodded to the person seated at the detention lobby control station, and the forcefield was deactivated. She stepped through, and once she was clear, the forcefield snapped in its place again. The counselor approached the woman, and it was then that January got a clear look at her. She wasn't a striking beauty, but in fact, the woman was quite homely. Nevertheless, Kiara smiled at January as she spoke, "The captain was concerned about you."

"Obviously."

Kiara continued, ignoring January's retort, "He felt that because you had suffered such a tremendous loss, you were not thinking clearly. Your actions and words on the bridge could have proven a danger to the ship, and so he had you confined here."

"In other words," said January in a scoffing tone, "the captain thought I'd gone insane and had me thrown in the brig to wait for the resident shrink to declare me so."

"You're not being very fair, Lieutenant," admonished Kiara, choosing to look away at that moment.

January scowled, "Don't talk to me about being fair, Lieutenant. Fair would be me back aboard my ship, with my crew. Fair would be if the Borg never existed in the first place. Fair would be this ship placing itself in harm's way to defend Earth!" She stopped, realizing her voice was beginning to reverberate off of the bulkheads of the cell. "As Starfleet officers, we're sworn to defend those who cannot defend themselves," she said, lowering her tone significantly.

Kiara nodded, "As Starfleet officers, we're also sworn to obey orders. The captain was following the order he received from Starfleet Command."

"There is no more Starfleet Command, and it's because of orders like that."

"And Lieutenant, junior grade, January McKenna is, of course, the logical person to determine which orders are the correct ones to follow," replied Kiara in a neutral tone.

January smiled, "I would hope that each of us is able to determine that."

The counselor appeared to consider January's words in silence for a long moment. Turning to look at the imprisoned officer, she offered, "I realize that you feel that you did the right thing, but I think you have to consider that captain's position. If the positions had been reversed, I'm certain you would understand why he did what he had to."

"Counselor, were I in the captain's position, I would not have abandoned Earth."

"Why?"

"Because," began January, "there might have been something we could do to help them. Because I watched my entire ship get ripped from bow to stern by the Borg, and I had to abandon my ship. I should have stayed on board."

Kiara was astonished by January's admission. "You would have been one more name on the casualty list. You have to realize that sometimes it is best to abandon ship to save lives. Life takes precedence over honor or duty. We do our duty now by following an order to depart the sector in order to regroup and drive an offensive against the Borg."

"It will be too late."

"How do you know we won't be in time to save Earth?"

"Have you ever fought against the Borg, Counselor?"

The counselor shook her head, "No."

January seemed to scoff at the counselor's inexperience, "Until you do, I don't really think you're in any position to talk to me about the odds of surviving an attack by the Borg. We lost every ship that stood before the Borg. Do you know why the fleet was destroyed so quickly?"

"No, I don't."

"Captain Jean-Luc Picard, of the Federation flagship USS *Enterprise*, was guiding them straight through our defenses. He's one of them, now. Locutus of Borg," said January exhaustedly. She could still see the pale visage of the former Starfleet captain on the viewscreen, demanding their surrender. "He even defeated his own ship in Earth orbit. The *Enterprise*, the Federation's ship of miracles, is destroyed with all hands aboard." She paused, trying to prevent herself from breaking down in front of Kiara. Once she had asserted control over her emotions, she told her, "We should have attacked while we had the chance. Even if we regroup, that's enough time for the Borg to entrench themselves in my own home."

In spite of her previous mood, the counselor seemed somber as she replied, "I see."

January nodded, seeing her point being driven home, "Exactly. Do you understand, now?"

"I believe I do," replied Kiara. "I don't see why you should not be released from your cell, Lieutenant. However, I would like to recommend you meet with either myself or perhaps another counselor, if you would like a referral."

Lieutenant McKenna sighed, standing from the bunk and addressing the counselor with her arms folded, "I don't want to see another counselor. The best therapy for me is to return to duty and make a contribution. Get me out of here."

Rear Admiral (lower half) Daniel Ross, the commanding officer of Starbase Three, was in the middle of packing up his office. The Borg had already expanded their influence from Earth and had begun moving towards the nearby Wolf 424 system, where the starbase was constructed. It was the intention of his command staff to evacuate the starbase and destroy it before the Borg assimilated it and incorporated more tactical information about Starfleet that would not already get from the remnants of Starfleet Command itself.

Admiral Quinn's message from Earth had a subtext; the Federation president had decided to remain with the people of Earth during the assimilation, and the decision to destroy the Federation archives, along with Memory Alpha and Starfleet Headquarters was minutes from being carried out. Without the protection of Starfleet or its resources, and the Borg's unique ability to acquire knowledge instantaneously, it was without doubt that several suicides were effected just prior to the Borg's landing, to prevent that knowledge from falling into the wrong hands. The thought of the Federation's greatest minds killing themselves for the greater good gave Admiral Ross a mixed set of emotions.

They were about to do the same thing with the starbase, though he was confident that they would be able to evacuate every single person to safety. However, the determination that Starbase 818 was safe was tentative, given the nature of the Borg's swift movements. His staff worked hard to gather every shred of useful information from the starbase computers and transferred it to portable systems in order to take it to the newer starbase for use. Commodore Wilson had already prepared the base for his arrival and command, where Admiral Ross would act as regional commander.

"Admiral," said his aide, a lieutenant commander who walked in with a stack of pads in his arms, "Lieutenant McKenna is waiting for you in the outer office."

Ross sighed, "Very well, show her in." Lieutenant McKenna was one of two survivors from the USS *Roosevelt*, the other one an ensign who had deserved a promotion and reassignment to another vessel. McKenna's record showed she was an officer of promise, according to the late Captain Sotek and previous commanding officers, and evidently was on the verge of recommending she be assigned to the corvette fleet as an executive officer. However, due to recent events, the corvette fleet was not in need of officers, but ships. Many of their ranks had been reassigned to augment the larger ships that lay in wait of crew for immediate deployment.

"Lieutenant, junior grade, January McKenna, reporting as ordered, sir," she said as she snapped to attention before the admiral.

"At ease, Lieutenant," replied Admiral Ross. He pointed to one of the two seats in front of his desk, "Please make yourself comfortable."

McKenna took the offered seat immediately, sat up and remained attentive, obviously wishing to get down to business. The admiral briefly gave the lieutenant a once-over, trying to determine if she was the right choice for the job he had in mind. He was unaware of the incident that occurred aboard the *Akagi*, as the captain of that ship had decided that there were better things to do with Starfleet's resources than guard this

young officer.

"Lieutenant," began the admiral, "I won't sit here and lie to you. We lost a great many people at Wolf 359 and Earth, not to mention thirty-nine starships. We're short on people, ships, and equipment. Believe it or not, that's actually the good news. The bad news is that the Borg are moving fast, and without the assistance of the Borg Response Team on Earth, we are largely without a critical tactical resource in the midst of this crisis."

"How can I be of help to you, sir?" asked McKenna.

"I am promoting you to full lieutenant, and assigning you to the starship *Malinche*," replied the admiral. "You can be of help by proceeding to the Antares Shipyards and get her ready to leave. I will be sending along her captain, who will most likely make you the executive officer."

McKenna's eyebrows rose in surprise as she heard the ship's name. She waited for the admiral to finish what he was saying to respond, "Sir, the *Malinche* is an Excelsior-class ship. That's a pretty unusual assignment."

"With the Borg around, we're going to need to practice some adaptation of our own. That means we put good people where we can get the best results. For all intents and purposes, Lieutenant, this is war. Now, can I count on you?"

Lieutenant January McKenna rose from her seat, and gave the admiral a firm nod, "You're God-damned right you can, sir."

The Antares Boogie

The shipyards at Antares loomed before her inside of the long-range shuttle. Following the orders to report aboard the *Malinche*, January packed up a few recreated personal items that were lost aboard the Roosevelt and requisitioned the shuttle for personal transportation to her new ship.

Malinche was an older vessel, built a couple of years before she was even born, and with the threat of the Borg, it had halted its refit and rushed back into service as it was. As the refit yard drew closer and closer within the forward viewport of the shuttle, Jan seemed to want to take an exterior tour of the ship by pulling it up and over the top of the saucer and noticing that the nacelles were recently attached to the pylons, and they looked nothing like the nacelles that would typically be found on an Excelsior-class starship. In fact, the nacelles were shorter and stubbier, almost as if they were meant for a Galaxy-class, though not quite as ugly looking.

She frowned for a moment, understanding the need for the ship to be put back into service, but maybe the aesthetics of the ship were not to her satisfaction.

"This is Antares Shipyard Operations to Shuttle *Gonzales*. Please respond on yard approach."

Jan keyed open the communications frequency they wanted her to use, even though they hailed her on the Starfleet guard frequency. "This is Lieutenant McKenna aboard the *Gonzales*. Go ahead, Antares Control."

"Alter course to one-eight-zero mark zero and return to approach lane. Do not alter your course any further. New orders from Starfleet require all yards to be clear of unnecessary traffic."

Well, shit, she thought to herself. "My apologies about that, Antares Control. I am returning to the approach lane." Which she did, taking the long way around and moving underneath the keel of the ship to get as long of a look as permitted despite the orders to leave the yard.

Once approach control seemed to be satisfied with the shuttle's progress and closed the channel, January guided the shuttle into the approach lane and saw exactly why they were uptight: a long line of approaching craft had built up at the entrance of the primary landing bay. With the ships not receiving any direct traffic due to the stepped-up security, it was causing a traffic jam.

"Fuck." That was her only comment to the delay. She punched up a commlink to the *Malinche*, but the ship wasn't responding, alluding to the fact that perhaps the ship's communications system wasn't online or responding. Trying a few more times, she finally gave up on contacting the ship altogether, but not more than five minutes later she was receiving an incoming call from the *Malinche*.

"*Malinche* to *Gonzales*. Do you read us?" asked the speakers within the shuttle's cockpit.

Jan was slightly startled for a moment. "Uh, yes, this is the *Gonzales*. To whom am I addressing?"

"Sorry, this is Lieutenant Tom Donner, chief engineer. Do I have the honor of addressing our new executive officer?"

"Lieutenant Jan McKenna, at your service." She smiled, "I've been making attempts to contact you guys, but I got no response."

"That's probably because our frequency receptors are undergoing replacement. We're speaking through the good folks at Antares Control, presently."

"I see." She noticed that there were a few shuttles moving ahead in the line, and throttling up to maintain her place, she commented, "Well, I'll try and make my personal appearance as soon I can."

"Of course, sir. The new captain hasn't made it to the ship, just yet, but we've received word he's en route and should be here within forty-eight hours."

Jan nodded, although Donner couldn't see her over an audio-only channel. "Very well. Listen, Lieutenant do you think perhaps there would be anyway for me to divert this craft directly to the *Malinche*?"

There was a long pause. "Well, sir, it's sort of a standing order from the yardmaster for all incoming traffic to go through the main landing bay, but uh I think we can arrange something. Could you stand by for a moment, sir?"

"Sure thing."

The channel seemed to crackle as the officer switched frequencies. After a few minutes, the crackle was heard once more and Lieutenant Donner's voice called over the channel. "Sir, you've been cleared for direct approach to the *Malinche*."

It didn't take another word. In fact, once the words 'direct approach' were mentioned, she *Gonzales* went to full throttle on the starboard maneuvering thrusters to weave to the left and toward the shipyard where her ship was being stored. By the time Donner finished the statement, she was well on her way. "Thanks, Lieutenant. What did you say to them?"

"I simply told them you were carrying some vital supplies for the engineering department and it couldn't wait. The approach control officer is an old Academy buddy of mine."

The drydock yard pylons went overhead the shuttle once more, she replied, "Well, thanks, Lieutenant. You sure know how to get on the exec's good side. I'm making my final approach and will be landing in sixty seconds."

"Acknowledged. The bay doors are already open, as we are accepting quite a bit of shuttle traffic ourselves, but we'll clear a window for you." There was a pause; obviously he was opening up a channel to the shuttle bay, marking her as a priority landing. "You're next in line, sir. I'll

meet you at the shuttlebay. *Malinche*, out."

And with that, the channel was closed and she nudged the shuttle forward to get within the doors and set down the craft gently onto the deck.

"Lieutenant, junior grade, Thomas J. Donner, sir. Pleasure to meet you in person, finally. Let me introduce the other senior officers that have been assigned to our fair ship." Donner moved to a man in a marine uniform, he was standing at attention, ramrod straight. "This is First Lieutenant Norman Yamaguchi, he's been assigned here as our security chief, courtesy of the Starfleet Marine Corps."

She nodded toward him, he offered a quick salute, but said nothing. Tom Donner moved to another officer, this one a Vulcan female junior grade lieutenant. "Lieutenant T'Sten, our operations chief." Jan gave her a nod, but avoided a handshake, as was the Vulcan custom.

Donner himself was almost the typical engineer. Reddish blonde hair, a thin stature, and smudges all over his uniform and arms. The arms of the uniform rolled up and showing off the hard work he's put in to getting the *Malinche* into operation. "I'm afraid our other officers haven't shown up just yet, sir."

"Okay," Jan said. "Well then, let's get to work. Lieutenant T'Sten."

T'Sten replied, "Yes, sir?"

"Current crew compliment status. If we were to depart dock right now, would we be short-handed?"

"Yes, sir, we would be short by one hundred if we were to depart at this moment," T'Sten returned quickly.

"I see. Then, I would like to see a timetable over the next forty-eight hours. By the end of the day, I want to know what the arrival times are for every single crewmember with the exception of the captain. Lieutenant Yamaguchi?"

"Yes, sir," said the marine.

"Put out an order to the yardmaster. The captain's shuttle is to be cleared for direct approach to the ship upon his arrival. Find out how he's getting here, and then I don't care who you have to kill, but I don't want him to have to wait any longer than I did to get here. All we need is for him to have his patience tried."

"Aye, aye, sir. You can count on me."

"Good. Mister Donner, I want a ship's status report in two hours. I'd like to know where we stand and exactly how long we have until we're fully operational. Admiral Ross wants this ship battle-ready within three days, and I'd like to shoot for two, if possible."

"I think we can manage that, sir," smiled Donner.

Jan nodded. "Great. Have an ensign get my things from the shuttle and have someone assign me some quarters, please?"

Settled in and with a fresh uniform on, Jan finally reached the bridge through the service crawlways. The turbolift shaft was under heavy maintenance above deck three. She made a mental note to have a talk with the chief engineer about that. By the time she made it to the bridge, she realized exactly how much of a bigger problem they had.

The bridge was nothing as she had pictured it, but then again, under the current state of the ship, she really shouldn't have expected anything less. Pulling herself out of the crawlway entrance and onto the bridge, she noticed that Lieutenant T'Sten was already seated at her station, making computer repairs with an engineering tool. Jan instantly liked her. Unlike some of the other Vulcans she had served with, this one seemed a lot less aristocratic and more grounded.

T'Sten, to her credit, noticed the arrival of the ship's executive officer and gave a small nod before returning to her work. Unfortunately, unlike the operations console, the others were missing. They typically act as input devices, with a multilayered covering by which crewmembers can tap in commands. It also allowed the computer to redisplay consoles in whatever pattern was needed, which made this type of console very useful. If, for example, the helm and operations went inoperable, the other stations could take over by reconfiguring the display using these covers.

Well, those covers were gone, exposing the output and input nodes underneath. Some of the nodes weren't even there, from what she could remember. But the real shock came when she looked for the captain's chair. "Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Three days from now, this bridge has to be ready to go. Why is this bridge looking like... well, *this*?" asked Jan, trying to keep the incredulity out of her voice.

"Before this morning, sir, there was no bridge module installed. The reason for the state of the bridge is because the shipyard crews have not finished installing the module completely," T'Sten said, not moving from her position and continuing to make repairs to her console.

Jan was stunned, wishing there was a captain's chair to fall in to. "Oh."

The first thoughts that ran through her mind while just staring at the brown-haired and dark skinned Vulcan was about what her captain might think of this ship and its crew, to see the bridge in such a state of disrepair. As for chairs, she found the helm position rather available, and turned the seat around to flop down into it. "Please tell me the intercom works."

"The intercom works, sir," said T'Sten.

Jan punched the communications panel at the side of the operations console and called out, "McKenna to Engineering."

There was no response.

She tried once more. "McKenna to Engineering."

Once again, the only sound was the repair tool against the inside of the operations console.

"Why aren't they responding?"

T'Sten replied, "The bridge intercom is offline, sir."

Jan just gaped at her. "But you said it was working."

"You asked me to tell you that it was. I follow orders, sir."

The executive officer just buried her head in her palms. She should have seen that coming. But, instead of dwelling on it, and remembering the literal nature of T'Sten, she tapped her commbadge, instead. "McKenna to Engineering."

"Engineering. This is Donner, sir."

"Donner, I'm sitting on the bridge, and uh well, I'm really hoping someone will be along here and help T'Sten on getting it operational."

"Oh, yes, sir. It's on our list of things to do, sir."

"Let's bump it up to the top, right underneath turbolifts, okay?"

"Uh, yes, sir. My apologies about that, that's our top priority right now."

"Very good. McKenna, out." The commbadge chirped once more, to close the channel.

Lying on top of her bunk in her new stateroom, Jan look at the light baggage taken from the shuttle from Starbase Nine was sitting still packed on the deck near the exit out into the corridor on deck six. Most of the senior officers found their quarters on that deck, although the captain's cabin was down two levels and forward, to give a nice expansive forward view of the *Malinche*. The executive officer's cabin wasn't anything to shake a stick at, either, a lot bigger than what she was used to aboard the *Roosevelt*, but then she was a simple chief helm officer, rather than an exec. With a nice desk from which to work on right next to the exit, moving around the room one would find the dining area right next to it. The replicator was offline, unfortunately, but that was to be expected. She would take her meals in the wardroom with most of the other officers. A small alcove right next to the restroom partitioned her bunk area, which was also offline. In fact, the entire section of deck six had to use the vacant quarters aft to the portside of the corridor until the primary janitorial systems were brought online.

Her hands were stacked atop each other under the mane of hair. It was getting to be something of a bother to her, now that it was getting longer as a few strands from her bangs fell down to touch at her nose. She supposed space duty might've done something to the rate of growth, but pushed it aside, thinking that she would be more apt to lose hair due to the stress of the past few days.

Sitting up suddenly, she walked over to the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror for a moment, while removing the barrette that the late Ensign Kim Dawes had loaned her for that fateful day's duty and placing it upon the small vanity provided there. With a single hand, she shook out the formerly bunched up hair and watched as it fell back behind her all the way down to the small of her back. Wide eyes seemed to not quite understand how or when it got that long. But then again, it just seemed like she had been wearing her hair like that ever since her ships was destroyed.

"Engineering to Lieutenant McKenna." Donner's voice seemed to echo through the quarters. Jan slapped her commbadge immediately.

"McKenna, here."

"Sir, the Borg are en route to Andor. Starfleet is ordering us to retreat from the sector."

January's mouth dropped for a moment, but she recovered. "A-Acknowledged, Lieutenant. What's our status?" Retreat was the last thing she wanted to do. But orders were orders.

"We're taking on as many engineers and other personnel from the shipyards, and that'll help get the warp drive online. The ship should be ready to escape within twenty minutes."

"All right. Is the bridge ready for use?"

"As ready as we can make it, sir."

January reached down for the barrette and drew her black hair back into a barely regulation ponytail, while heading out of her quarters and up to the bridge to take command. "Turbolift is functioning?"

"Yes, sir. Available on all decks."

"Good work. Contact me in fifteen minutes with a status report. McKenna, out." She entered into the nearest turbolift and called out, "Bridge."

The turbolift responded once, and then held still for a moment. She was about to call out her destination once more before the lift shook violently for a moment and then proceeded upward. "Damn," she said to herself, pulling her hand away from the side of the lift.

The bridge was almost a completely different animal than when she first arrived. All of the panels had been replaced and most of the consoles were manned and functioning just like she had wanted out of a ship ready to go into war. Lieutenant T'Sten was seated at the operations console immediately to the right of the flight controller (helm). The marine lieutenant Yamaguchi was seen on the bridge hovering over the tactical station, speaking very clipped-like to the ensign seated there. Everything looked great.

But there was still a hole in the middle of the bridge. January contemplated it for a full minute before just deciding to ignore it. The captain's chair wasn't all that necessary, and she was as capable of a pilot as anyone else. Dismissing the helmsman to one of the secondary stations on the bridge, she took her seat and then opened up the shipwide intercom.

"Attention all hands. This is the executive officer, Lieutenant McKenna. Starfleet has informed us that the Borg are en route, and will arrive within the hour. The *Malinche* is to depart the yards and retreat. I" she stopped, looking around at the bridge. Every single pair of eyes were staring right back at her. She blushed very quickly. "I realize that retreating is the last thing we would want to do. I don't think falling back and letting the Borg run over us is correct. But we have no choice. We would be no match for them." Her voice sounded very thick, she was holding back a lot of things she would like to say, and perhaps she said too much already.

"So we're going to make sure we carry out our orders. In the best interests of the fleet and the Federation. All hands, man your battle stations. Stay sharp. McKenna, out." She tapped the channel closed.

"Engineering to Bridge. Nice speech. Ship's status is reporting at nominal levels. Warp speed is at your disposal but I wouldn't recommend doing too many evasive maneuvers."

McKenna frowned. "Recommended speed?"

"No higher than warp six, sir. These are new engines, and I'm being forced to field test them with very real circumstances. I would've liked at least a week of shakedown, but I guess the Borg are making that very difficult. I'll do what I can to keep her in one piece, just make sure we don't have too many bumps in the road. Engineering, out."

January nodded absently to the engineer who couldn't even see her face. She continued to monitor her console before the hairs on the back of her neck seemed to stand on end for a moment. Everyone was still staring at her waiting for orders. Whoops.

"Uh, prepare to depart dock. Communications, can you get a status report on our captain?" Like, who is it?

The ensign at the communications console nodded with a quick, "Aye, sir," and began to talk to his station. January looked to T'Sten for a moment, "Mister T'Sten, coordinate your efforts with tactical. Find out what our defensive capabilities are and report back to me in two minutes. If we should fall into battle, I want to know exactly how long we could hang in a firefight."

But T'Sten didn't need two minutes. "We would be destroyed, sir."

Jan winced. She walked right into that one. "Thank you, Lieutenant. However, I'm hoping that perhaps that keen Vulcan intellect of yours might be able to produce some options other than simply dying."

T'Sten nodded, and moved toward the tactical monitor to converse with the officer seated there while McKenna just took a deep breath.

"Lieutenant McKenna?" asked communications.

"What is it, Ensign?" McKenna nearly bit off.

"Sir, I have received word from Starfleet Command. The Borg destroyed the ship that met the captain's shuttle en route from Starbase 33. Admiral Ross is ordering you to assume command until they have confirmed the report," the ensign replied. "We're to rendezvous with the Twelfth Fleet at Starbase 147, flagship is the *Venture*."

Jan cleared her throat, quietly thanking the ensign for the report. "Signal all decks, prepare for immediate departure. Clearing all moorings, and sealing the airlock. Secure shuttlebay." She looked around one last time before giving the order. "Ahead thrusters to full."

Vulcan's Cacophony

Ship's Log

USS *Malinche* NCC-38997

Stardate 44004.12

Executive Officer McKenna, recording.

According to the communications relays from Admiral Ross at Starbase Eleven, the Antares Shipyards fell to the Borg some forty minutes ago. Due to the close proximity of the Antares sector to the 40 Erandi and Proxima Centauri systems, the Admiral himself has ordered the complete evacuation and withdrawal of all Federation citizens to Betazed and Ferasa. The unfortunate bit of news is that even the fastest starship in the fleet would not make it to Vulcan in time to be of any use, though the Admiral did report that the Sabre-class USS *Yeager* would carry as many from Vulcan as it could.

The *Malinche* is on course to rendezvous with Captain Hastur, who has formed the Twelfth Tactical Fleet and setup a base of operations at Starbase 147. At our current speed of warp six, we will arrive within twenty-seven hours.

"Twenty-seven hours?" said Captain Hastur. His cold stare from the bridge's forward viewscreen made January's skin crawl. "Lieutenant, the fleet will form up in less than sixteen hours. By the time you arrive here, we will have already left for battle."

January stood in the center of the bridge, where the recently installed trunk for the captain's chair now stood. With her arms at her sides, in a somewhat respectful posture, she expressed her own disappointment. "Admiral, with all due respect, sir, the engineering section is doing what they can. Even the yardbirds we evacuated are lending a hand."

Hastur ran a hand through his light brown hair. For all intents and purposes, he was a "commodore" rather than a captain, as Admiral Ross charged him with command of a fleet of starships. The viewscreen showed a very tired and frustrated commodore on the bridge of the Galaxy-class starship *Venture*. "Do what you can, Lieutenant. I don't have time to deal with this right now. *Venture*, out." The viewscreen blinked, only to show the slowly moving strings of light.

Lieutenant McKenna brought both of her arms up to fold them over her chest, whilst blowing a frustrated stream of air at her bangs. Unable to do anything else, she decided to gingerly sit herself down on the bare stump. With almost a dozen people on the bridge, not a single one would dare speak aloud following the exchange they witnessed. Ten minutes, then thirty, until almost an hour passed before an interruption in her train of thought occurred.

"Lieutenant?" The petty officer seated at the communications station called out.

Glad for a distraction, she leaped from the stump to lean against the railing, "Yes?"

"Another text communications relay from Admiral Ross at Starbase Eleven, sir. It's eyes-only."

"Okay. May I borrow your padd?"

"Sure thing, sir."

Once the message was downloaded from the communications computer, January's eyes scanned over the lines of the message:

TO: LT J.A. McKenna

FR: RADM Daniel Ross

RE: Order to Assume Command of USS *Malinche*

Lieutenant:

You are requested and required to assume command of NCC-38997 (USS *MALINCHE*), effective immediately.

Signed,

Daniel Edward Ross,

Rear Admiral, Starfleet Command

Commanding Officer, Starbase 11

Personal from RADM Ross: *It is my sad and unfortunate duty to inform you that LCDR Jetrul Dae was declared KIA on Stardate 44004.05, along with all hands aboard the Akagi in the attempt to assist the evacuation of Antares. Commander Dae was en route to assume command of the Malinche. Due to his death, I must ask you to rise to the challenge of starship command. End Personal Message.*

January brought her hand up to her mouth in disbelief as she read the name of her intended commanding officer. The realization was brushed aside in light of her new orders, and it was then that she returned her attention to the petty officer and asked him to direct the bridge audio pickups to the first master circuit. She needed to address the crew.

Drawing up the courage to trust her own voice, she said in an uncharacteristic level tone, "All hands, this is Lieutenant McKenna, the executive officer. By the order of Rear Admiral Ross, Starbase Eleven, I am assuming command as of this time and date. Division heads, report to conference room one in one hour for a briefing on our current operational status. Thank you. McKenna, out." She nodded to the petty officer to close the circuit, ending her impromptu speech. In a voice barely above a whisper, she asked, "Will you copy the official order from this file into the ship's log and note the time I assumed command, please?"

"Aye, sir," came the reply.

She moved away from the railing, and surveyed the bridge. It was at that moment that she realized that most of them had their eyes on her. January hesitated, moving to speak to them, but she instead addressed her words to T'Sten. "Lieutenant, would you please accompany me?"

The Vulcan operations officer rose from her console dutifully and followed McKenna into the turbolift with only a nominal phrase of acknowledgement. Once inside the turbolift and away from the staring eyes, the new captain of the *Malinche* closed hers and leaned against the sides. She ordered the lift to take them to the observation deck, and then asked a single question.

"Do you have any objections to my naming you as the new executive officer?"

Lieutenant T'Sten did not hesitate to respond, "No, sir. It is a logical choice."

The lift came to a halt, arriving at the proper deck and parted the doors. January could not help but flinch at the statement her exec made. "You're lucky you're a Vulcan. If a human had said that, he would've sounded like an asshole."

T'Sten said nothing in response. Instead, she followed January's lead off of the turbolift and then through the doors to the observation deck. The O-Deck was an area typically used by members of the crew for recreational purposes, large enough for most ceremonies carried out aboard ship. Looking around, however, the deck was cluttered. In the evacuation of the Antares Shipyards, they had loaded as many of the cargo containers into whatever spaces they could find before leaving the drydocking facility.

January took up a seat upon one of the smaller containers and gestured for T'Sten to make herself as comfortable as possible. T'Sten made no effort to do so, waiting for her captain to begin explaining the reason behind this meeting.

"I'm not sure where to begin, but despite what you might think, I'm really very glad to have you as my first officer," McKenna began, her tone and her expression soft.

T'Sten replied, "I am here to serve, Captain McKenna."

"Of course." McKenna dropped her gaze to the deck, now wanting to meet T'Sten's eyes as her title was used for the first time. She felt like a fraud. "However, before we get down to the serving part, I just wanted to go over a few things with you. About me, that maybe I feel you should know," January said, trying very hard not to stammer. T'Sten was the very model of a Starfleet officer; her face was serene, her stance gave the appearance of being attentive and perceptive. "This is my first command."

"I am aware of that."

"You looked at my service record?"

"Yes, sir."

"Isn't that a little unethical?"

"I do not believe it was, sir. At the time, you were being posted as the executive officer."

January nodded. That meant that the service record was accessibly by the next in the chain of command, which was T'Sten. Now that January was made captain, the access to her record became restricted. "I'm sure, then, that perhaps it did not paint a pretty picture."

"Class of 2362, graduation rank twenty-seven," T'Sten immediately said, reciting the details from memory. "Specialty in command theory and Terran history with a minor in spacecraft navigation. First assignment to the starship..."

"I don't need a refresher course in my personal history, Lieutenant." January's blush was apparent, as was the sharpness of her tone. There was no need to relive the audacious nature of the first year of her career. Especially not with her executive officer so dispassionately reciting it back to her. She became suddenly uncomfortable and insecure, moreso than before. "You may have me at a disadvantage, but I will promise to even that score as soon as possible."

T'Sten gave only the slightest of inclinations of her head, "Of course, Captain."

The irritating nature of the Vulcan's calm exterior grated upon January's nerves, nearly causing an outburst of furious statements. The overriding sense of duty was what prevented that, along with a silent count to ten. She was no longer simply a helmsman anymore. She was now the commanding officer. "The first order of business is the..."

There was no longer any time for policies or mundane orders. The ship's alert status indicator turned crimson, as the *Malinche* sounded red alert. The wailing of the alert klaxon provided them with just enough warning before the officer of the deck on the bridge called down. "Captain, incoming message from the *Venture*. The fleet has gone to battlestations, and is advancing on the Erandi sector."

McKenna looked to T'Sten immediately, asking the question, "Vulcan is under attack?"

"That's what Captain Hastur is reporting, sir," came the reply from the ship's internal communications system.

T'Sten showed a brief flicker of concern before recomposing herself. "At our present speed, we would arrive at Vulcan in eighteen hours."

"That's a bit sooner than the rendezvous," January said. "Bridge, do we have any change in our orders?"

"No, sir. Captain Hastur advised us to continue on to Starbase 147 to deliver the evacuees and supplies."

"Understood," McKenna nodded to the intercom. "I'll be there shortly. Advise the starbase of our position and estimated time of arrival. Keep tabs on the fleet's status. McKenna, out." She did not wait for the acknowledgement of her orders, touching the communications panel to close the connection. Turning to T'Sten, she ordered, "Go down to engineering and lend Tom a hand. We've got to get this ship's engines to full operating capacity before we reach the starbase. At this point, we wouldn't be able to outrun a damn shuttlecraft."

"Aye, Captain. I will see you at the briefing in forty-five minutes. By your leave, sir," T'Sten said, heading for the doors leading back to the corridor.

"T'Sten," McKenna made a vain attempt at consolation, "I'm sure the fleet will prevent the Borg from taking Vulcan, too."

Her executive officer stopped in place, not bothering to turn around to address January. "I understand why you would feel it necessary to express your concern, sir. I believe the most proper response in this instance would be, thank you." Without further comment, she was gone.

The benefit of having evacuated from Antares Shipyards was the amount of engineering talent now residing aboard her ship. T'Sten's presence in engineering notwithstanding, the collective effort of so many minds on the problem brought the *Malinche's* engines to full power less than thirty minutes after the ship went to battlestations. Sailing toward Starbase 147 at warp nine was a welcome change to January; however, the news from the Erandi sector was less so.

Vulcan was falling quickly. Reports from the *Yeager* indicated that the little corvette was already filled to evacuation capacity and was meeting the main fleet. The single Borg cube made short work of the capital city, Shi'Kahr, assimilating millions of Vulcans within an hour of the first attack. Captain Hastur and the Twelfth Tactical would arrive in another hour, but his prognosis did not help the morale of the situation at all. Logically, it would be fruitless to risk more lives to save what could not be saved, said the remaining Vulcan authorities. January thought it somewhat morbid at how calm they could be when faced with the horrors of the Borg. They even calculated the rate of assimilation and placed the figure of seventy-one hours until the planet was assimilated entirely. Less so, if more were evacuated.

It was a difficult choice to make; she decided that she was glad it was not her call. Proceed on course and go in with your guns blazing as the cube shrugs off the hits and claims more Starfleet vessels, or retreat without having tried. She was reminded of her words on the bridge of the *Akagi*, with Commander Dae having to call security to throw her into the brig. Now seated in her recently installed chair, she understood now why discretion was the better part of valor.

Hastur's voice sounded over the tactical frequency, ordering the fleet to hold their current position to wait for the *Yeager's* arrival.

Vulcan would fall without interference from Starfleet.

The Qo'noS Two-Step

Lieutenant (jg) Thomas J. Donner often thought of the engineering section as his home. After all, with his birthplace being Earth, and Earth being a part of the Collective, there was nowhere else for him to go. He didn't much care for the bridge, or the observation deck, not even the ship's lounge. The engineering staff under his command believed that he slept in the adjacent office, not in his quarters on deck five. In the months following the fall of Vulcan and Andor, the *Malinche* was used as a patrol ship run along the Ferasa side of what was now known as the "Borg Hot Zone" (BHZ). A large cube of space was designated as a no-fly zone, for both military and civilian traffic.

In those five months, Tom and the *Malinche* seemed to get to know one another to a large degree. The briefings with Captain McKenna and Lieutenant T'Sten always seemed to indicate his protectiveness over the ship's propulsion systems. When the bridge would call down for emergency speeds to intercept a wayward freighter or a smuggler, who believed he could get away with slipping in and out of the BHZ, the chief engineer would not hesitate to sound off about the strain on the old ship. Though one would not hear any such audible strain, it was Tom's eyes that saw the monitors to show the stress levels at traveling beyond the intended design of the Excelsior-class battlecruiser.

Under any other circumstances, Donner was a pleasant man to deal with; all of his peers agreed on that point. Engaging him in conversation above and beyond engineering was a delight, a characteristic that earned him a great many friends among the officers and enlisted personnel alike. Down to business, it was like watching a transformation between Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde. Tom Donner would become cold and distant, working problems out in his mind, issuing terse orders to those around him and showing his frustration if he felt they were lacking in their enthusiasm to carry them out.

To maintain the ship's engineering efficiency, Tom held a monthly maintenance party across the board. The *Malinche* being over fifty years old made those get-togethers a necessity from his perspective. Captain McKenna supported and even encouraged his intuition, as it paid off more often than not. Despite the complaints from the rest of the crew when certain subsystems would not be available, he continued on in his quest to keep the ship from further deterioration.

"Chief Engineer's Log," said Donner in a casual and tired tone, seated at his desk within the partitioned office near main engineering. "Stardate Four-Four-Four-Nine-Seven-Point-Five. This is Tom Donner, speaking. We have just completed our monthly maintenance cycle, and the results are not exactly up to what I consider to be acceptable. We did make the Starfleet specifications, however, at the current rate of usage, I suspect that the ship will have to put in for a warp coil replacement in less than forty days. This would put us ahead of our intended docking date by three weeks. I am attaching a copy of the maintenance result to this log entry, and marking it for the exec's attention. Thank you." It was his habit to begin and end his log entries with all the pleasantries he would use in conversation. Tom knew that sooner or later, someone was going to read or listen to his logs. He felt it important that whoever that person was, at least left with the impression that he was a real person with real feelings.

Tom leaned back in his chair, running both of his hands over the carrot-colored hair on the top of his head in a gesture of fatigue. He trained both of his blue eyes upon the chronometer on his desktop terminal, noticing that he had only slept three hours out of the past seventy-two, spending most of his time personally overseeing the propulsion maintenance routine. The captain did not like having to drop out of warp for fifteen minutes to perform quick adjustments while on patrol, but it was a necessary evil. While his best assistants and chief petty officers lended their support, he was the one in the gold working jumpsuit directly accessing the control computers and the power transfer conduits to insure against disrepair. His personal touch did not imply that he held little trust within those under his direct authority; it was simply the only way to assure the captain that the task would be done as quickly as possible. It was almost an appeasement to her anger. Serving aboard the *Malinche* for five months gave the entire crew, if not a great majority of it, a true understanding of the nature of January McKenna's temper.

The foil to the captain's temper was the executive officer's Vulcan serenity. Lieutenant T'Sten carried out her duties and responsibilities with a near-perfect efficiency that Tom came to appreciate and even adore. His adoration of T'Sten fell into the area of his heart, and though he was sure no one knew, the engineering crew often gossiped amongst themselves whenever T'Sten would enter the engineering compartment of the ship to hold a technical discussion with Tom. He would blush and stammer from time to time, but when the human pleasantries were pushed aside, he became more confident in his ability to speak once the topic changed to his department. Afterwards, though, Tom was always left with her departure from his general area. She was a beautiful Vulcan woman; anyone with eyes could see that. She held her jet-black hair in a tight bun atop her head when she was on duty and in uniform, but there have been occasions where he had the fortune of seeing her with her long hair down. Along with her coffee-colored complexion, he finally understood the phrase, "Love at first sight."

When the captain announced T'Sten's promotion to full lieutenant over two months ago, they held a small informal gathering in her honor on the observation deck. Though she was stoic, he could tell she was pleased by the promotion. Glimpses of her face at certain times during the party, and he always seemed distracted for the time she was present.

Of course, Tom knew he was not alone in his quiet attraction to T'Sten. In fact, there were many men and women aboard who found T'Sten irresistible. At the same time, she was also very intimidating, and coupled with her position provided a large buffer around her that most people felt was inappropriate to try and penetrate. Though Tom just did not feel his self-confidence was at a point to even begin to think about acting on his feelings.

No, things were fine the way they were.

First Lieutenant Norman Eikichi Yamaguchi, Starfleet Marine Corps, entered into the security operations center at one minute before oh-seven-hundred, as he did every morning without fail. His Gunnery Sergeant, a stocky woman by the name of Ferrer, had a mug of coffee and the shift logs from the evening prior until his entrance for his review. She always greeted him in true marine fashion: a respectful salute and an announcement of his arrival on deck.

As the chief of security, and a member of the Marine Corps, he preferred his unit to be run as efficient as militarily possible. Encompassing many areas of naval and marine discipline, he accepted only the most rigorous of marine discipline from those under his command, naval and

marine alike. The fleet enlisteds enjoyed the strict discipline the lieutenant offered as much as the marines did. In that alone, he was successful in smoothing out any branch rivalry that either side might've burdened themselves with arriving aboard the *Malinche*. To him, it did not matter whether or not they attended the security school or boot camp. They were just cousins in the same family.

"Carry on," Yamaguchi said. "Thank you, Gunny." He accepted the mug from Sergeant Ferrer and she accompanied him into his private office. The morning briefing was always as short as possible. Yamaguchi preferred brevity above all else, and had no penchant for dramatics or those that would employ them.

Ferrer sat herself at Yamaguchi's nod, and began, "Another quiet night at the edge of the BHZ, Lieutenant. Nothing new to report, everything was pretty quiet." She paused, watching him read through the padd while listening.

He gave another nod, without saying anything else. He continued to read every line, and made no move to dismiss her from his office. She remained seated, waiting for him to finish. When he reached the final log entry, he said casually, keeping his eyes upon the padd as he spoke, "I got a message this morning from a friend of mine when I was at the Academy. She made captain, and she's been assigned to the *Iwo Jima* as a company commander. We graduated the same year."

She winced inwardly. This meant that he was passed over during the last promotion review. In this age it was a sign of the times. Despite the fact that Admirals Ross and Keogh were doing everything within their power to maintain the chain of command, because of the lack of flag manpower, a lot of the mundane operational activities often found themselves reorganized behind issues of more pressing or immediate concern. The promotion review board consisted of whatever captains and rear admirals were available, and in some cases, commanders and lieutenant commanders. For the enlisteds, it was senior and master chief petty officers along with lieutenants. Regardless, the oversight did not make one feel any better in spite of the circumstances. She started, "Lieutenant, I'm certain..."

"Spare me, Ferrer. It's of no concern, really," Yamaguchi interrupted her with an open hand and a very sharp tone of voice. Sharper than he had intended. He realized right then and there she was only making an attempt to cheer him up. His reaction was to put a stop to any talk of pity. "When it's my time, it's my time."

"Aye, aye, sir," Ferrer rose from her seat, coming to attention before his desk. "Will there be anything else, then, Lieutenant?"

"No, Gunny. You are dismissed," Lieutenant Yamaguchi replied, waving her off, and ending their morning meeting. Once she left, he turned to his desktop terminal and made his brief morning log entry, going over the official portions of his duties and documenting them for posterity and review by the executive officer.

When the official log entry was completed, he leaned back into his chair and opened a new entry into his personal log.

"Personal Log, Stardate Four-Four-Four-Nine-Eight-Point-One," he began. "This morning, I received a mail from my childhood friend, Nancy Kotobuki. She and I went through Starfleet Academy together, we graduated in the same class. We even dated some through all the years we've known each other. She wrote to inform me that she received an appointment as Captain aboard the marine troop carrier *Iwo Jima*. The other bit of news was a small note about her recent engagement to a fellow marine officer.

"It's... well, reading that made me realize how truly far apart we had grown. As teenagers, our families practically all but betrothed us to each other. Don't get me wrong; it was never a forced association. We were friends from the beginning. She was always there for me, and I tried so hard to return that support to her as much as possible." He leaned forward in his chair, placing his elbows upon his desk as spoke into the audio pickups. "Maybe my feelings for her back then were above and beyond a close friendship. Maybe I was in love with her in high school. Maybe she loved me; it was just something that I kept buried deep inside me, for fear of saying anything. Things were fine just as they were. She and I were good friends, and that was a nice place to be."

As he reminisced, he began to wear a little smile upon his lips and began speaking in a wistful tone, "In our senior year, we dated off and on. Never in any of those outings did I ever feel as though we were any more intimate than we had been before. It wasn't so much of a date as it was just hanging out with your best friend. Spending quality time with that person, just enjoying their company. I always waited for her to say something, or maybe admit that she held me a higher esteem than I thought. It never got said, and it was never even discussed. So, I continued to harbor it.

"Academy regulations were pretty strict on fraternizing between the officer cadets and midshipmen. Even at the trainee level, the instructors often discouraged that kind of activity. Nancy and I didn't have that problem. The status of our friendship was hardly ever brought into doubt. We were as close as we had always been. Of course, we were the subjects of many rumors, but these were all kids growing up into adults at the Academy. They teased us, said we were very sly about our affairs. Truth told, right now, I would give anything to have had those rumors be true."

Looking at the door leading out to the operations center, he sighed, "Gayle Ferrer probably thinks I'm upset over her promotion. That's fine. I would rather her believe that than have to listen to this sob story from the beginning. That's the last thing I need. I know she means well, but the one thing they teach you at the command college is that command is a lonely duty. Personal boundaries are to be maintained in order to be an effective commanding officer. If it were possible, if I had a close friend besides Nancy with whom I could speak to candidly about this, I would. Since I don't, this personal log is all I have, now."

"I wish you the very best of luck, Nancy," Yamaguchi ended the log entry. He did not move from his desk, frozen in that thought. Then, as an afterthought, he reopened the file and appended three words to his entry.

"And my love."

"It is fortunate that you and your family were off planet when the Borg attacked. Both of my parents found themselves without any means of escaping," T'Sten said to the viewscreen. "I must admit to some surprise at receiving your communication from Betazed. I was not aware you had knowledge of my whereabouts." While her tone was calm and even, inwardly she detested this man.

Setik replied matter-of-factly, "It was not a task without challenge. Federation communications not being at their former glory, Starfleet channels are even more difficult to use. It was a fortunate circumstance that the Vulcan Embassy was able to provide me with assistance in locating and making contact with you."

T'Sten nodded. "As you say. What is the purpose of this communication?" It was a tactic to stall the truth. She, of course, knew exactly why he had come calling upon her. She felt it, within her mind.

"I should think my purpose clear, T'Sten. It is time for the *Koon-ut-kal-if-fee*. My family has made all of the necessary arrangements with regard to the ceremony. You must proceed immediately to Betazed," her fiancé said.

Lieutenant T'Sten again nodded. "That is unfortunate, Setik. The *Malinche* will not be rotated out of the patrol cycle for seven-point-one months. As her executive officer, I cannot abandon my post."

"Your post and position are irrelevant."

"My oath to Starfleet--"

"Does not supercede your betrothal to me, T'Sten," Setik interrupted, a characteristic not shared by Vulcans in the general sense.

She allowed the act of disrespect to pass, making her decision easier. "Very well. I will then inform you that I shall be severing the bond." His slight apprehension to that alternative played out exactly as it had in her mind. The bond being severed would release her from any obligation to become Setik's wife. Becoming Setik's wife would mean she would need to abandon her career in Starfleet and assume the responsibility of maintaining his house, bearing his children and raising them according to his policies. In essence, she would cease being the executive officer of the *Malinche* and become executive officer of the house of Setik.

"I see no reason to act in such haste. I would be willing to discuss a postponement of the ceremony."

"I would not."

A long pause followed that statement. It was T'Sten who spoke first.

"There is no other option than to find another suitable Vulcan woman to suit your needs," she said.

"T'Sten..."

"That is no longer my name," she countered, her tone turning cold. "As I am no longer a betrothed female, by tradition, I must drop the appropriate prefix. You will address me as Sten." Before he could get in another word, she continued on, "I will be severing the bond, and I suggest you do the same."

Again, Setik remained speechless. It was apparent that he had not expected this outcome prior to having this conversation. Sten realized he had no reason to. They had simply grown apart, and she desired to remain in Starfleet. Not leaving all that she had accomplished to suddenly be a subservient and dutiful wife. With her family dead, there was no one left to reproach her for her decision to abandon her engagement. Right now, as Setik realized in that moment, Sten was living for Sten and Sten alone.

He acquiesced, "As you wish, Sten." Raising a hand on screen, and parting his fingers in the Vulcan sign, he said his goodbye. "Peace and long life."

She returned the farewell, "Live long and prosper."

The screen shifted from Setik's face to the Starfleet insignia, with the words, "End Communication," and "Stardate 44500.54" along the bottom half.

January held a wide grin upon her face, seated in the center seat on the bridge. As usual, she had her steaming mug of coffee upon the edge of the arm, with her legs crossed at the knee while reading her padd. Every so often, she would giggle out loud, and even chortle from time to time. No one knew what she was reading, but one thing was clear; she was in a good mood.

The captain's good moods were as rare as a Tribble on a Klingon ship. It was not that she often expressed the opposite very often, either, but in that she seemed to maintain a tight hold upon her moods very well, since her assumption of command. Prior to that, she was a kaleidoscope of moods and mood swings, often expressing joy in the same minute as upbraiding an officer on the bridge for a detail or duty overlooked.

Lieutenant January Andrea McKenna, holding the title of master and commander of the *Malinche* for over six months, found herself the command style that suited her ship and her crew. While not all agreed with that style, it did not matter to her. It was she who held the position, and she who dictated policy. Lieutenant Sten saw to the execution of those policies and did so with a kind of efficiency that made January feel so confident that she believed she would be lost without it. Having heard a part of the story with her fiancé, she realized how close she came to facing that possibility.

In this morning, however, after she had finished reading the very amusing text sent over by the captain of the *Shrike*, another patrol vessel assigned to the same side of the BHZ. She replied with a personal communication, and handed her padd to the communications NCO manning it for immediate transmission. In the middle of his duties, however, he turned and announced that there was a multifrequency transmission emanating from Qo'noS, addressed for every Federation, Romulan, and Cardassian citizen.

Her curiosity was shared by every officer and enlisted on the bridge. Qo'noS had been silent since the Borg arrived. Even though they had promised ships, they did not transfer enough to make a difference. It was an expected move, however, as they were no doubt concerned for their territory. "On screen, if you please."

The main viewscreen flickered and then showed the Chancellor of the Klingon High Council, K'mpec. K'mpec was an old man, but he was a very respected old man. His awards and decorations lined his ceremonial robe, as he sat down on his throne in the council chambers on his home world and addressed the quadrant.

"The remnants of the Federation and the brilliant military minds at Starfleet have come to an agreement with the Klingon Empire. Today is a glorious day, for us all. The Klingon Empire and the United Federation of Planets have agreed to a full political and military alliance that shall work together for the honor of us all. We will beat back the honorless Borg from the Alpha Quadrant. We will be victorious. Not as the United Federation of Planets, nor as the Klingon Empire. We will be known to all as the Galaxy Alliance." K'mpec wore a threatening smile, though all Klingon smiles has a tendency to look rather threatening, even when they were not.

"We also invite the governments of the Rihannsu and the Cardassians, to join this alliance with open arms. This galaxy alliance will be your only line of defense against an encroachment upon your territories. It would be in your best interests to sign this alliance immediately and join the fight!"

There was a large amount of open discussion on the bridge while January listened. The volume got to be too much for her, until a single word silenced every voice quickly. "Quiet!"

"The approval of the remaining Federation members makes this a unanimous decision. I am now the Chancellor of the Galaxy Alliance High Council. We shall maintain a Starfleet, in honor of those brave warriors who gave their lives in glorious combat against the Borg at Wolf 359. Klingon Defense Force personnel will report in immediately, as will Starfleet personnel. Let us begin this fight. Qapla'!"

The viewscreen returned to show the streaking stars of warpflight. McKenna turned around, looking at her chair and opening up the shipwide circuit to address the crew. She recounted the message and made it available to anyone who wished to view it firsthand themselves, then requested another meeting of the senior staff in the conference room thirty minutes from then. After a moment, she settled into her chair with a quiet slump.

"Contact the *Venture*, tell them we're standing by for new orders."

Tango with the Collective

The new Galaxy Alliance proved to be a very interesting organization. In the weeks following the announcement from Chancellor K'mpec, the Rihannsu, the Cardassians, and even the Ferengi signed the new Qo'noS Accords, forming a much more powerful military force in Starfleet. Former enemies and estranged neighbors were suddenly thrust together, serving alongside one another. Many of those who held rank in the Galae, the Klingon Defense Force, and the Cardassian Military Command received transferred commissions or ratings within Starfleet. The most surprising and impressive display of alliance and trust came in the form of the appointment of a socially and governmentally prominent Rihannsu flag officer as the Commander-in-Chief of all Starfleet forces. K'mpec, in his wisdom, put down any opposition to his selection, citing that the enemy of his enemy was his friend.

Signing the Qo'noS Accords required those signatories and the governments they represented to adhere to new rules and regulations. The Cardassian Union was ordered by the Chancellor to uphold the stipulation that any race of beings held in captivity for the express purposes of exploitation of that government were to be delivered from such treatment. Following debate and stalling, a month after the Cardassians joined the Alliance, the planet Bajor and its people were recognized by the Alliance as a sovereign power. The Bajorans enjoyed their long-fought-for freedom, forming a provisional government and establishing a military defense force to protect themselves. The Bajoran government voted two months later, to send an ambassador to Qo'noS to apply Bajor to the Alliance as a full member. Following their quick acceptance, Terok Nor, the Cardassian station in orbit of Bajor, was reallocated as an Alliance Starbase, and received technological upgrades to assist in fighting the Borg. The short-lived Bajoran Military Forces was absorbed into Starfleet.

With the Treaty of Algeron nullified by the Qo'noS Accords, all Starfleet vessels received cloaking devices as a means of defense against Borg tracking devices and sensors. Former Federation, Klingon, Rihannsu, Cardassian, and Bajoran scientists and researchers began to produce better starship hulls, more effective weapons, and shield generators able to withstand the effect of the Borg cutting beams. Starships with the highest priority for upgrades turned out to be the patrol vessels along the Borg Hot Zone (BHZ), and the *Malinche* was ordered to proceed to the drydocking facility at Starbase 818 in the Narendra star system for defense system upgrades.

It had been over a year since the battle at Wolf 359, and six months since the formation of the Alliance. January McKenna and the crew of the *Malinche* had the fortune of not encountering a single Borg vessel in all of that time spent patrolling the zone's border. The theory aboard ship was the sheer number of planets within the zone that required protection. When the Borg invaded the Alpha Quadrant, it was with a single cube and the complete knowledge of Starfleet operations and tactics belonging to the late Captain Jean-Luc Picard to assist them in their plans. Starfleet Intelligence believed that the consumption of those resources required the Borg time to, for lack of a better word, assimilate it all.

Less than five days on patrol after leaving Starbase 818, the patrol cruiser *Malinche* made its first contact with a Borg vessel. It was one of the vessels of a spherical design, meaning that it was less armed than a cube, but just as deadly. The shock at seeing the new design was quickly overcome as the message was sent to the Alliance. The Borg were not about to stay silent for much longer.

"Shields at eighty-five percent and holding," reported the Vulcan executive officer Lieutenant Sten, raising her voice over the battle-stations alert siren, and gripping the side of the operations console in an effort to maintain her balance. The ship took a direct hit from the sphere's tractor beam followed by the immediate presence of the cutting beam making an attempt to slice through the upgraded shields.

Captain McKenna replied, her voice tense, "Continue to shift shield nutation at per-second intervals. Unload quantum torpedoes and load uni-cobalt devices into the forward torpedo tubes." The torpedo barrage was minimally effective, causing some damage to the sphere's hull and secondary systems. However, in true Borg fashion, they adapted to the quantum torpedos within minutes, making them ineffective weapons to fight with any longer.

"Aye, sir. It'll take about forty-five seconds to load the cobalt devices up," said First Lieutenant Yamaguchi. "Shall I return fire with the phasers, Captain?"

Another hit struck the *Malinche* as the Borg fire a projectile at the ship. The shields visibly flickered through the sensor output on the main viewscreen. The Excelsior-class vessel rocked from side-to-side as the ship's inertial dampening systems were interrupted within that moment. McKenna's knuckles turned white as she kept herself from being thrown to the ground from the force of the impact.

Sten assisted the helmsman maintain his balance by gripping him and the console to steady him. The information flashed before her on her console, and she turned her head to tell the captain that the Borg was now employing the use of energy draining torpedos. "Shield efficiency is dropping to fifty percent, and the generators are unable to keep up with the energy drain, Captain."

"Norm?" asked McKenna.

"Twenty seconds, Captain," Yamaguchi replied. "Do I have permission to open fire with the phasers, sir?"

McKenna sighed. There had been no real advances in phaser technology as of yet, and use of the beam weaponry was nothing more than a gesture against the Borg. "Be my guest," she said to the marine officer sitting at the tactical station.

He needed no further comment following her invitation. The phasers lanced outward toward the sphere, scoring a direct hit against the hull of the Borg ship. The sustained hit lasted no more than seven seconds and did no visible damage. Sten confirmed the lack of damage with her sensor report, and McKenna just gave a shrug to Yamaguchi.

"Uni-cobalt devices have completed loading. Ready to fire at your command, sir." Yamaguchi held his hand over the firing control in anticipation.

"Target their primary power source, and then fire the devices in pairs."

"Target locked. Firing."

The blue-green cobalt devices sped on their way to their intended destination. The first pair slammed into the hull of the sphere with tremendous force, causing a shockwave to wash over the *Malinche* and threw nearly everyone from their stations. Energy feedback from the shields caused the science station to explode, sparking and erupting into flame. The ship's internal fire suppression grid sprung into action, suffocating the fire. It was clear to everyone that the science officer was dead, killed instantly at his port.

By the time the second pair of cobalt devices destroyed the sphere, the damage reports were flooding the bridge in a loud cacophony of voices and computer alerts. Sten reported the destruction of the sphere, and secured from battle-stations, ending the siren's wail.

Captain January McKenna coughed as her lungs rejected the smoke within the bridge. "I want a full crew casualty and ship damage report." She heard her own voice in a rasp. "Get someone from sickbay up here to tend to injuries and take Ensign Kevlin below."

Donner's voice sounded over the bridge's speakers, "Engineering to Bridge. Next time we fire those things, perhaps we should do it from a safe distance."

"Noted, Tom. Report."

"It's not good, Captain. The cloaking device is junk, the tractor beam emitters you can kiss goodbye, and the communications systems are offline until we figure out if we can remove the fused circuits to replace them. The worst part is that the port nacelle took the brunt of that shockwave and isn't responding to our inquiries. We've got a team traveling over there to give us a first-hand look at how bad the damage is."

McKenna looked over at Sten, merely inclining her head toward the turbolift. No words were exchanged, but it was clear that she was just ordered to assist Lieutenant Donner in engineering. By the time the lift doors closed behind Sten, the captain informed, "Sten is on her way down to lend you a hand, Tom. Sounds like you're going to need it."

"No kidding. If you can give me a little more time to pick up some more pieces, I'll have a better idea of how extensive the damage is," Donner said, his voice conveying the high degree of stress he was feeling.

January took a look around the bridge to stall for time before responding to Donner's request. "All right. What about the impulse engines and the sensors? Are they functioning?"

The chief engineer replied, "For the moment, Skipper, but we may have to take the lateral sensor array offline to do a full damage assessment."

"Okay. They're working, though. Right now, you realize we're less than a hundred thousand clicks from the border and just close enough to crippled to make another encounter with the Borg our last one. I'd like to be able to see them coming," she said, trying to keep a little humor in her voice to cover the worry. If the Borg were to make a capture or if the situation appeared so that the Borg would make a successful capture of the *Malinche*, she was under direct orders to self-destruct the ship, to prevent assimilation. It was an order she was unable to inform her senior staff about, but it was one she would see through.

"Understood, sir. I'll have a better idea in fifteen minutes. Engineering, out." The circuit closed without any further sound.

She found herself standing over the body of Ensign Kevlin, a tall young Cardassian man who had recently matriculated through the officer candidacy school on Betazed and was earned himself this assignment. His head and chest suffered the shock of the explosion at such a close distance that his oddly colored blood was forced to the surface through many lacerations across his skin. Unable to do anything for him, January removed her uniform jacket, wearing nothing but a sweat-soaked gray tank top underneath. She placed the jacket over Kevlin's face and said a few kind words on his behalf, her voice so low that she was sure that no one else heard.

Norman Yamaguchi replied with a cliché, "He died doing what he wanted to do, sir." He was standing right behind her, to try and provide the captain with a little friendly support.

"Spare me the sentiment, Lieutenant," McKenna said, suddenly angry and wondering why. She had lost officers and enlisted under her command before. In the past year of patrols, and engagements with armed smugglers and pirates trying to take their chances with the Borg, she had lost eleven people to injuries sustained in the line of duty. Why, all of a sudden, was she angry about Kevlin's death?

Kevlin was among some of the first products of the new Starfleet, the new unified Starfleet. He was the first and so far the only Cardassian she ever served with. Even though he had only been aboard for a month and a half, he was starting to fit in with the rest of the wardroom. She was looking forward to seeing him earn his junior grade lieutenant's pip in the coming months.

Though she felt remorse about that fact, the real anger lie in the simple fact that it was the backlash from their own weapon that caused his death. Whereas the other deaths were the result of enemy fire, Kevlin died by friendly fire.

The marine lieutenant stepped back, blanching at his misstep. "My apologies, Captain."

Jan turned around, with her hazel eyes staring at Yamaguchi coldly at first before softening her expression out of guilt at seeing him move back. "No, I'm sorry I snapped at you, Norm." The bridge doors opened and the medical team arrived on the bridge with their equipment, including a stretcher for the ensign's corpse. She moved out of their way, as did Yamaguchi. "Weapons status?" she asked.

Norm replied, "The torpedo systems are still functioning, but the last shockwave caused enough damage along the primary power grid to affect the phasers, sir."

"Not that the phasers were doing any good."

"No, sir. I guess not. This just means that if it comes down to another round, and we use the cobalts again..."

Captain McKenna nodded, "Right, no need to go into it." She moved to her chair, "Helm, plot us a return course for Starbase 818, and ahead full impulse. We'll limp along at sublight until Tom and Sten can get the warp engines back online."

As he slipped back into the tactical position, the proximity alarm sounded. Yamaguchi reported, "Captain, sensors indicate a second Borg sphere closing in on our position. It'll arrive in nine minutes if it maintains its present speed."

McKenna ordered, "Sound battle stations." The bridge was doused in the crimson glow once more, and she felt the tension level on the ship rise. Trying to sound nonchalant about the new enemy vessel, she said in a very causal tone, "All right, then. Load aft torpedo tubes with uni-cobalt devices and prepare to fire as soon as they get within the range of our latest and greatest."

"Loading now, sir. It'll take a minute."

"Take two, Lieutenant," January smiled. "We'll fire them as far away from the ship as possible, try to take them out."

Yamaguchi warned, "We have two tubes facing aft, sir. We had four facing forward, so I'm not positive we'll be able to destroy that sphere like we did the first one."

She nodded, "Understood. How fast can you load those things?"

"We'll have another salvo to fire in under fifteen seconds, Captain."

Let's hope they can't adapt sooner than fifteen seconds, then, Lieutenant. Redirect as much power from the forward shield generators to the aft generators," she said.

"But, Captain, after that second shot, we will be fresh out of cobalt devices."

She opened her mouth to respond to that fact, but the bridge's speakers crackled to life.

"Engineering to Bridge. Captain, we got more trouble?" Donner's voice returned to the bridge, filled with worry and concern.

McKenna nodded to the disembodied voice. "Another sphere is going to intercept us in less than eight minutes. Can you spare Sten?"

"Captain, I believe I would be of more use to Lieutenant Donner in shoring up the damaged systems at this time," Sten joined the conversation from near Donner.

"Okay, Exec. We'll just try to make do without you up here." January now fixed her gaze upon the arm of the chair, "Tom, patch up whatever you can, I'm going to try and evade, but we'll have to fire those cobalts again if it comes down to trading blows."

"I hear you, sir. I wish I could say we'll hold things together."

"Spit and bubble-gum?" the captain mused.

"Sir?"

"I said, spit and... oh, never mind. I understand what you're saying. Do what you can. Bridge, out."

Yamaguchi spoke up once more, "Borg sphere increasing speed, updated ETA of three minutes. They'll be within cruising range of the cobalt devices in thirty seconds."

"Lock on target, and then fire both tubes," McKenna said immediately.

"Target locked, aye," he worked his board quickly. "Firing tubes five and six, aye, sir. Reloading tubes."

She counted to fifteen in her head and then ordered the reloaded tubes to be fired once more. Despite Norman's warning that the devices would be out of range it didn't matter to her. The viewscreen provided the aftward perspective from the *Malinche*, showing the sets of twin blue-green points of light angling toward the sphere.

"Sir, we are out of cobalt devices," reported Yamaguchi.

"Call out the distance between the sphere and the devices," McKenna watched the screen intently.

He returned his attention to his board, "Calling out the distance, aye, sir. Forty clicks. Thirty-five clicks."

January calculated the distance between the first sphere and the *Malinche*. The shockwave was powerful, powerful enough to cause serious damage to an Excelsior-class, then perhaps it would do the same to a sphere. Once the distance was within her calculated distance, she ordered, "Detonate the first set of devices."

"Aye, sir."

The first set of devices erupted on the screen, causing a large shockwave to appear and slamming into the sphere. The Borg vessel took the hit in stride, with visible damage appearing under magnification along the surface of the hemisphere facing the detonation. The second set of devices slammed into the sphere, punching clear through the hull and out the other side, continuing on course. Damage done by the shockwave was already being repaired.

"What the hell just happened?" she asked angrily.

"I'm not sure, sir," Yamaguchi reported in a confused tone.

"Detonate the second set, hurry!"

"Detonating, aye."

The operations officer filling in for Sten reported, "Only minor damage to the sphere, sir."

McKenna's eyes widened. "Oh, hell." She turned her chair around to ask, "Status of the aft shield generators."

Norm said aloud, "We can hold our own for a while, but obviously not indefinitely, Captain."

"Incoming fire from the sphere, Captain," said the operations officer.

The ship rocked once more under the fire of the Borg weapons. This time, however, there was a higher degree of pitch as the weapons attacking the *Malinche* were of a higher degree of power.

"Aft shields down to sixty percent, falling fast!"

McKenna ordered, "Set quantum torpedoes for overloaded charges and then load them into the aft torpedo tubes."

"Sir..." began Yamaguchi.

"*Do it!*" January's tone indicated that she was not in any mood to hold a debate.

"Resetting quantum torpedoes for overload status, aye, sir." Norman said it as quickly as possible as he issued the orders down to the torpedo deck. Overloading the charges on the torpedoes was the quickest way to get the largest bang as possible for that class of warhead; however, it also had a high percentage chance of doing damage to the tubes themselves. It was a risky move, considering that the quantum torpedoes were proven ineffective earlier.

Meanwhile, the ship continued to endure the sphere's attacks on the shields. Soon, the shield generators would overload and cause another feedback spike in the power grid; failing outright and allowing the Borg to carve the *Malinche* up like a turkey at Thanksgiving dinner.

Damage reports began to fill the bridge once more. Donner reported that there had been a superstructure collapse in the stardrive section, trapping a few crewmembers on two decks.

"Hold on a moment, Captain. I'm getting some strange readings, here," Yamaguchi said.

"Confirmed, sir," said operations. "I'm showing two subspace anomalies moving at warp nine on our position. Pretty big, too."

The captain lifted out of her seat to peer over the shoulder of the operations officer at the information being displayed on his console. "Those look like cloaked ships."

"Whatever they are, sir, they'll be here in forty seconds," Norman said. "Torpedoes loading now, sir."

The captain barely got a nod in to acknowledge Lieutenant Yamaguchi before the operations officer screamed out loud, "Sir! I hold two ships decloaking off our forward bow. Range is twenty clicks."

"Can you identify them?" she asked.

When the viewscreen was shifted to show the two ships in a state of decloaking, there was no need to identify them. January made out the silhouette of a Cardassian Galor-class battlecruiser alongside a Rihannsu-built d'Deridex-class heavy cruiser. As soon as the cloaking field no longer prevented them from using their weapons, both ships presented tremendous opposition to the Borg sphere with a fierce volley of compressor beams, disruptors, and cobalt devices.

The sphere was torn away, piece by piece, until the two ships struck the central power core of their common foe. Watching the display made McKenna's heart leap within her chest, and with a closed fist, she cheered the destruction of the sphere with the rest of the bridge crew.

"Not that I'm not glad to see them, sir, but where the hell did they come from?" Yamaguchi commented, once he was sure he could be heard.

January admitted, "Without communications, we're not going to find out much. I'm sure they'll run scans on us and figure out why we're not responding to their hails right now. We're not even sure they're sending hails."

"It looks as though the d'Deridex is moving into position for towing, sir."

The ship shuddered slightly at that moment as the hypothesis was proven correct. The Rihannsu warbird was aiding them, and McKenna folded her arms across her chest and said out loud.

"You know, I never thought I would live to see the day when a Federation starship, a Cardassian battlecruiser, and Romulan warbird would fight side-by-side. If I were Klingon, I think I would vomit," she said with a wide smile.

Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, Something Blue

It was one of those moments where one's eyes seemed to glaze over after staring at something for a long while. Most people referred to it as "zoning out." Others referred to it as reaching a state of inner peace, allowing the subconscious to take over and the freedom of thought prevailing over the conscious mind. Whatever it was, Lieutenant January McKenna was experiencing it when the commanding admiral of Starbase 818 sent for her.

The object of her attention was a bluish point of light in the distance from the vantage on the main commerce deck of the starbase. She had stood upon the deck, in that position for over an hour, enjoying the simplicity in not thinking about anything. Despite the noise of the commerce area, and the foot traffic behind her, she simply tuned everything out except for that single point of light. When the ensign sent down from the admiral's office touched his hand to her shoulder, she jumped at having been surprised.

"I-I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to startle you, sir. I just, I mean, I tried to reach you on your communicator, sir, but you didn't respond." It was clear he thought January was going to scold him for the action.

Once January's heartbeats returned to a normal pace, she laughed. "That's all right, Ensign. I take it by your presence that the admiral wishes to speak with me."

"Yes, sir. If you would please follow me?"

She did not give a response other than to nod her head. Once the ensign announced her presence from the admiral's reception office, January walked into the private office and made her report just as a Starfleet officer should.

"Lieutenant January McKenna, reporting as ordered, Admiral," she stood at an attentive stance, with her feet spread even with the width of her shoulders.

Rear Admiral (upper half) Daniel Ross gave her a dismissing wave, asking her to stand at ease and conduct herself to a seat in front of his desk. "When Captain tr'Khellian contacted us here to inform us that he was towing the *Malinche* in from a skirmish with a Borg sphere, a skirmish that resulted in your victory no less..." he let his voice trail off, shaking his head at her with a smile on his face. "Lieutenant, you've far exceeded my expectations. You've exceeded a great many of Starfleet's expectations in a time when exceptional officers are needed more than ever before."

McKenna's face began to burn. "With all due respect, sir, my crew deserves just as much of the accolades, if not all of them." She heard herself speak the words before she even thought about them. Time was, there would have been a far more arrogant January simply nodding along with the praise being received. That time seemed so much further away than a year. In a year, she felt she had aged over ten years.

The rear admiral continued to smile, "I can assure you that your crew will be sharing in the glory of your victory. Out of thousands and thousands of patrols, the *Malinche* is the only ship to encounter a Borg vessel. And out of that single encounter, you have the honor of being the first surviving ship of a conflict with the Borg." He paused, letting that fact sink in, before continuing on, "You should know that both Chancellor K'mpec and Grand Admiral Mandukar'us were made aware of your battle, and they personally wish to convey their thanks and commendation for your crew, with the Unit Commendation, and for you, the Bronze Star."

Her eyes widened at the mention of the medal. This particular medal was awarded to those individuals who distinguished themselves with heroic actions while engaged in combat during a time of war. It was one of the higher medals Starfleet had to give, and while she thought about the honor of receiving that award, her thoughts went to the fact that she was probably the only officer from this war that did not receive this medal posthumously. "Admiral, I really don't think that..."

Ross interrupted her, "I'm not finished, Lieutenant. In large part due to the extraordinary circumstances by which you had to assume command of a battlecruiser at such a junior rank, Starfleet has deemed you fit for a battlefield promotion to the rank of Lieutenant Commander. Congratulations."

"A promotion? But, sir, I..."

"Commander McKenna, you have a really funny way of celebrating."

She stopped, looking up at the admiral, trying to determine the best course of action in this situation. Not that in her wildest dreams did she ever think she would actually refuse a promotion based entirely on her lucky streak. Once more, just as she did when she assumed command of the *Malinche*, the sense of guilt overrode any kind of joy she would normally feel at being promoted so quickly through the ranks. "My apologies for not seeming too happy about this, sir, but if you would just listen..."

Ross sighed loudly. "This is bigger than you realize, Commander. Your victory was broadcast all over the Intergalactic NewsWire. It's being used as a morale booster to all of the Starfleet bases and ships involved. The medals, the promotion, the assignment..."

"Assignment?"

"Yes, the assignment." Admiral Ross leaned back in his chair, while his hand reached over to tap at his desktop terminal, pulling up the proper information about Jan's next assignment. "The drydock chief has reported that the *Malinche* is to be transferred to Eisen Fleetyards as soon as possible for a complete refit. The hit you sustained buckled several superstructure points along the engineering hull, it was really a wonder that it held out through the trip back here."

"I know, sir." Then it dawned on her; she was being relieved. "Am I to understand then that I have been relieved of my command?"

"Of the *Malinche*, yes."

She felt her blood beginning to rise within her, getting more and more agitated with the admiral's flagrant use of dramatics. He was an absolute master of theatrics. "May I respectfully inquire as to my next job, Admiral?"

"That all depends on you."

"I beg your pardon?"

"You have your choice of assignments, Commander. However, it would seem that everyone wants you. Captain Keogh of the *Odyssey* extends an invitation to join his new ship as executive officer. We have several new corvettes and frigates available for your leadership. Even Admiral Mandukar'us has provided a transfer order for you to join his general staff at the temporary headquarters on Qo'noS," Ross explained. "As I said, it all depends on you."

Without any warning, January shot up out of the seat and began to pace. "Permission to speak candidly, Admiral?"

"Go ahead."

"With all due respect, sir. I don't deserve any of this. The *Malinche* took that hit from the feedback of the cobalt device that I ordered fired. Ensign Kevlin died as a result of friendly fire," she spoke in almost a rapid-fire speed, trying to get the truth out and off her shoulders. "I don't deserve the medal, the promotion, or having Starfleet literally at my fingertips!"

Following her last word, Admiral Ross waited a few moments before asking, "Are you finished, Commander?"

McKenna's anger began to rise, and with each word, her voice dripped with a little more annoyance, "I suppose so, sir."

"Good. Because once in a while, I like to finish explaining everything before you fly off the handle." His own annoyance was made known with a pointed finger at the chair, and a quiet order to sit down. "As I was saying, your victory is being used to boost morale. I am aware of the circumstances and details of the encounter with the spheres. If Starfleet felt you acted improperly, you would be in the brig, not here in my office."

She nodded, understanding that much. "It just seems as though if Starfleet wanted a victory so badly, then perhaps they would bury the truth about what really happened in order to give everyone something to emulate, sir."

"I can appreciate that perspective. However, I would hope that you would at least trust me enough to tell you with all honesty that this is not the case. Whatever regrets or unjust burden you feel it necessary to carry, Starfleet has seen fit to do what it has done." Ross continued, "Yes, we're proud of you. Yes, we want everyone to know that the Borg can be beaten."

"Yes, you want to parade me around the fleet so everyone can get a look at the new battle horse," she said, in a tone far more sarcastic than she intended.

"That was uncalled for, Commander," the rear admiral snapped back.

She did not say anything. In the silence of the office, she made her decision within a full minute of her last statement. "If I can have any assignment I want, then I want command again. You mentioned frigates and corvettes. I want another Excelsior-class."

It was a rather brazen command to make of a rear admiral, even if she had the position and reputation to make it. Ross wiped at his upper lip before responding, "You're still too junior of rank to be able to accommodate that request. With the influx of the other governments and their defense forces, we're far beyond Starfleet's original size. Unlike the situation after Antares, we've no need to ask you to put yourself back in such an extraordinary position. My recommendation is to take Admiral Mandukar'us' offer to join his general staff."

She felt insulted by his recommendation, but she held herself from saying so. "I want command, Admiral. I don't want to be stuck behind a desk, making sure that an admiral's public relations machine is working properly. I am not a trophy officer. If I truly have earned everything that's coming to me, then let me go back out and do my job. Please."

Rear Admiral Ross now felt his temper flaring slightly at the barb she inadvertently threw at him. The admiral was a career desk officer, rising through the ranks on various staffs instead of on the deck of a starship. The only time he ever put in on a ship was whenever the admiral he served under wanted some space duty. After thinking about it, he realized she did not intend to slight his career, and instead of reacting to the perceived insult, he took a deep breath, and eyed January long enough to come to a decision. "Very well. Give me a few minutes to see if there are any Excelsior-class vessels available."

"I want the same command crew, too."

He looked at her, a furious expression on his face. "And while I'm at it, how about a fleet for you to command?"

"This isn't about my ego, sir," she said, having been properly cowed by the admiral's anger. "I just wouldn't feel right to accept another command without them."

Ross was not yet ready to let go of his fury. "I'll see what I can do, Commander. You're dismissed."

Clearing the office doors, she found herself back in the reception area, where the ensign who startled her was sitting at his desk. He looked up, and immediately went to his feet, holding a padd. "Oh, Commander. I have some papers for you to go over, and the schedule for the awards ceremony for you and the crew of the *Malinche*."

She was not in the mood for paperwork, or to even be in the admiral's general vicinity for any longer than she had to be. "Can we go over that later, Ensign? No, wait a minute. Instead, just send all of that to me by mail and I'll go over it and return whatever needs to be returned to you later." Without waiting for him to respond, Lieutenant Commander January McKenna mumbled to herself as she made quick strides for the

exit, "I think I need a drink."

The dress uniform worn by members of the Starfleet Marine Corps was a distinctive and more extravagant uniform than that of their fleet counterparts. Unlike the fleet dress uniform, the marine version carried with it the ceremonial saber attached to the sash worn over the left shoulder. The collar was more flared and unbroken around the neck of the wearer, and the space black color was a contrast to the maroon, gold, and blue-green of the fleet uniforms.

First Lieutenant Norman E. Yamaguchi wore his with pride, even if the event he wore it to gave him no personal joy. In fact, the event he attended could be contorted into one of the most painful experiences of his life. His childhood friend and fellow marine officer, Captain Nancy Kotobuki, was getting married. Traditionally, and because of their close families, he attended on her behalf. The most painful part of the ceremony came when he was asked to give her away.

With the pair dressed in their dress uniforms, she took his arm for the very last time as they walked up to the aisle. Both sides were filled with shipmates, old friends, and whatever surviving family there was. Her younger brother, Geoffrey, now a marine sergeant, was amongst the groomsmen, standing next to the groom.

Norman met the groom only a few days prior, once the *Malinche's* crew was ordered to seek guest quarters aboard the starbase. At first, he appeared a bit young to Norman, but it was simply the nature of his youthful face. Clean-shaven and with his hair kept in a marine fashion, he was every inch the infantry commander. A major aboard the *Iwo Jima*, he was in the same battalion as Nancy. He wanted so much to resent the man, but he remembered that if that was what Nancy wanted, then who was he to stand in the way?

Nancy and Norman walked down the aisle until it was time. Nancy turned to Norman and applied a gentle kiss to his cheek before walking away from him and toward the major, her future husband. The starbase chaplain held open his book and began the ceremony.

Hours later, with the reception held in the starbase's observation lounge, he was asked to sit at the main table with the bride and groom, but he declined and sat with the rest of the guests. Though even then, he grew tired of the conversation at the table and left to seek out a permanent berth at the bar. He broke away to dance with a few of the more attractive female guests, some of whom pulled him away from the drinks he was throwing down his gullet with staggered regularity.

There would be no honeymoon for the newly wedded couple, however, he found out much later in the reception through the gossiping guests. In fact, both of them had marching orders within the next three days. The *Iwo Jima* would depart Starbase 818 in less than seventy-two hours to perform reconnaissance a few light-years away from the colony at Cirrius Prime. Rumor had it that Starfleet would make a push into the Borg Hot Zone (BHZ), in an attempt to push the Borg back. The victory of the *Malinche* seemed to be like a battle cry to everyone around him. Even through the overriding nature of being at a wedding reception, a lot of the buzz was about what the *Malinche* did and about January McKenna.

When it became known that he was on the bridge of the *Malinche* during that battle, it generated more interest in him. That interest and sudden rise in questions rose to a degree where it was becoming very apparent that his presence was about to take away from Nancy's special day. He did the only thing he could think of. He left the reception and walked the quiet state of the commerce decks during the starbase's nighttime hours.

Along the outer ring of the upper deck, there was a little hole in the bulkhead known simply as the Starshiner. He never would have described it as a restaurant or even a bar; it was a long counter inset against the bulkhead, with a transparent rack of bottles and six stools for customers to sit in. The view from the stools was the expanse of space outside of the starbase. Norman found it just eight hours after moving his things from the ship, and wandering around for a bite to eat. Instead of dinner, he enjoyed the view with bowls of pretzels and nuts, and a tall glass of light blue Romulan Ale.

With the imposition of the trade embargo removed, now that the Rihannsu Stelam Empire had joined the Galaxy Alliance, a great many of the Romulan products were now freely available. Once considered a contraband item, a bottle of Romulan Ale was now a mundane item to see behind the bar of a Starfleet space station like Starbase 818.

Tonight, there was only one other person sitting at the Starshiner, and that person was none other than his former commanding officer, January McKenna. She had a bowl of pretzels in front of her that went undisturbed, and a glass of a clear liquid to match it. Her eyes were focused upon the stars, and on the other side of the counter, the bartender continued to wipe down the counter without offering any sort of conversation to her. Yamaguchi froze in stride, seeing her there and wondering if he should come back later. Did she want to be alone tonight? Would he be intruding?

"The answer to your question, Lieutenant, is that this is an open establishment. Who am I to dictate whether or not you can have a drink or not?" McKenna responded, not even turning around to look at him.

His expression was one of fear, as though perhaps the captain had always been telepathic but never let on. How many times on the bridge did his mind wander from time to time during those long shifts? How many times did he disagree with her in his mind during briefings or perhaps in the assignment of duties? What about all of the times he thought she was just a snot-nosed little kid playing captain at the very beginning of their tour together? All of these thoughts weighed in upon his mind, and before he could come up with a stammering response, she interrupted his personal little moment of terror.

"Christ, Lieutenant, calm down." January finally turned around, her left elbow atop the counter, and one of the most evil and sadistic grins plastered upon her face, "I saw you in the reflection of the damn viewport."

Norman's relief overwhelmed him. Without saying anything else, he settled into the stool on her right side, raising a finger to the bartender to order himself a drink. "I'll have whatever the captain's having."

The bartender was amused. "Captain?" He looked over at her, "What, you got two more promotions?"

McKenna shook it off, "No, no. He's one of my officers from the *Malinche*." She suggested to Norman, "Unless you want a water, I suggest you get something stronger."

"Make mine a Romulan Ale, then." Norman looked back at her, "Promotion?"

"They made me a light commander," she replied, as the bartender moved to go get the most popular drink on the station. "They want me to join the admiralty. As a staff officer, I mean."

Lieutenant Yamaguchi looked at Lieutenant Commander McKenna for a long moment, trying to decide whether or not to take her seriously. After his glass of ale arrived and he took a long quaff from it, allowing it to run down his throat, scraping the cells along the way. "I'm very happy for you, sir," he said, deciding that false happiness was better than the truth. He was passed over for promotion again.

January sighed. "I didn't mean to rub that in your face, Lieutenant. It's just that I, myself, feel that I didn't really do anything to deserve it. You were there, you know just as well as I do."

"I was there, yes, sir." Norman nodded, taking another sip of his drink. "I know that all of us were there together. I also know that heroes tend to be whatever people want them to be. I know that right now, we need a hero. Why shouldn't it be you?"

She stopped looking out at the stars to turn toward him. Through all of the conversation and soul-searching she had put herself through after the morning meeting in Admiral Ross' office, that thought never occurred to her. If Starfleet needed a hero, why was she being so obstinate about not performing that duty? She wondered immediately if the legends of Starfleet history ever had this same self-worrying period in their lives, when the realization of being referred to as a hero dawned upon them. Did Captain Kirk ever fight away those opportunities? Did he come to expect them? Did he allow any of that to distract him from his duty?

McKenna changed the subject, "What brings you down to the bar, tonight?"

"There was a wedding," he didn't hesitate to tell her. "Old friend, a captain with the Fourth Marines. She got engaged about six months ago, they decided to tie the knot as soon as I was available to give the bride away."

"A captain, huh?" Jan thought aloud, "Captain... captain... captain... Captain Nancy Kotobuki?"

"You know her?"

"No, not really."

"Oh."

"The wedding announcement was all over the starbase's bulletin board."

"Oh."

"Old friends?"

"Yeah."

"Lovers?"

He hesitated. "Uh, no."

"That sounds like an interesting story," McKenna smiled, unable to keep from teasing.

He said nothing, not wanting to go into it.

She nodded, "Understood, Lieutenant."

"Sir?"

She finished her water, pushing away from the bar and standing on her feet again. "Never mind, Lieutenant. Finish your drink, enjoy the view." Raising a finger to the bartender, "Settle me out later?"

"Sure thing, Commander," the bartender replied.

Norman went to his feet, as well, "Captain, I..."

Jan paused as he began to speak. "Lieutenant, whatever it is that's eating at you, that's between you and her. I can listen to what you have to say, if you want me to."

He went silent again, looking away from her and down at the deck.

"I think you need the view more than I do, right now. If I stay, you'll feel obligated to talk to me," she said. Jan looked at the barkeep, "Put that ale on my tab."

"No, Captain, I..."

"That's an order."

"I... uh... thank you, Captain."

Jan smiled. "Good night, Lieutenant."

The walk back from the Starshiner to her guest suite was deliberately long. She decided that it was time to know the station a little better. With the limited availability of the class of ship she wanted, it was a safe bet to assume she would remain on board for a long while. Going to the bar every night to drink a glass of water could get rather boring, she mused to herself. As she passed by the other restaurants on the main commerce deck, she looked into the closed storefronts to see what kind of food they might offer.

One of the most popular choices of cuisine on the commerce deck, by the number of restaurants that appeared to serve it, was Klingon. Counting in her head as she passed by, she realized that the Narendra system housed a Klingon colony. The starbase itself used to be an old Klingon base, with Federation and Romulan advances installed. All of the computer monitors and displays along the bulkheads held the ever-familiar Library Computer Access and Retrieval System (LCARS) style; with the important information every civilian visitor to the base should know.

When she passed by one, her communicator gave the small chirp. "Ross to McKenna."

Giving her communicator an acknowledging touch, she responded, "Yes, Admiral?"

"I have your orders, Commander. Recall key personnel and report with them to docking port four for transport to your new assignment."

The Pride of Qo'noS

The collective techno-wizardry of the Galaxy Alliance brought forth some startling advances in the face of the Borg threat to the Alpha Quadrant. Commander McKenna and the crew of the *Malinche* had seen first-hand what the might of this new force could deal out in the form of the cobalt device. The Starfleet Corps of Engineers were recalling older ships to receive weapons and shielding upgrades. However, beyond the upgraded contemporary weapons found aboard Starfleet vessels, the Starfleet Advanced Starship Design Bureau (ASDB) had provided for several new starship designs. The very first of these designs lay in the natural evolution of the Sabre-class corvette, which was the Defiant-class corvette.

A Defiant-class vessel was smaller than the elder Sabre, with four decks and the crew capacity of fifty people. The most interesting technological advance was included on the standard model, was the anti-proton cannon. Unlike the shipmounted phasers, an anti-proton cannon required a tremendous output of power, which the Defiant-class was designed to carry with it. But due to the size of the hull and necessary length of the first anti-proton cannon, a smaller scaled version of the cannon had to be designed and duplicated. Thus, the Defiant-class corvette carried on it, twin quarter-rate anti-proton cannons, and had the power potential to deal out half the damage of a fully-rated cannon. However, even with the combined talent of the Alliance working on the new class of ship, the *Defiant* itself had several power distribution problems that went unforeseen in the application of the design. The first prototype was very nearly annihilated in testing, with power nodes overloading throughout the little vessel, killing three. Were it not for the intervention of Chancellor K'mpec, the Defiant-class project would have been shelved. Instead, he ordered that Starfleet pursue the technology further and overcome those problems. Despite his command, the Defiant-class and the prototype vessel *Defiant*, had to be returned to the shipyards for redesigning. While the *Defiant* sat in dock, the ASDB turned its attention to the production of the Kyuushu-class Warbird.

Size and strength were an obvious factor in the design of this gargantuan starship. Unlike the duel nacelle design of the Constitution, Excelsior, and Galaxy-class starships, the Kyuushu-class would employ a dual core, tri-nacelle configuration to assist the massive vessel to enter subspace and provide enough energy for the very formidable weapons systems. Federation and Romulan technology combined to mount advanced phaser and disruptors, along with a Klingon hull compound, and Cardassian-designed energy and shield grids. The hull reached over twelve hundred meters in length, and spanned almost five hundred meters in width. A Kyuushu-class would carry over three thousand in crew, and a light marine division. It was the tangible result and the very symbol of effective collaboration between the major powers. Though it was a Federation hull design, incorporating the gull-like look of most pre-Alliance Starfleet vessels, due to the heavy weaponry and power, it was classified as a dreadnaught battleship, and then later as a warbird.

The first of this class was named the *Kyuushu*, for the name of the first starship to fall at the battle of Wolf 359. In the time it took to complete her and shake down all of the operational problems combining all those technologies presented, there were already three ships completed and four other hulls under construction. Within a year of the design's invocation, there were twenty-five Kyuushu-class warbirds in service or ready for commissioning. The second product of this class, following the beginning of construction on the *Kyuushu* herself, was the USS *Pride of Qo'noS*. She was immediately assigned to the Bajoran sector the day after her commission, on Stardate 45396.

Lieutenant Commander January A. McKenna held the honor of serving as the first captain of the *Pride of Qo'noS*.

Remembering what he had said upon reading the blueprints for the ship, he realized that while the engineering aspect of this class of ship was above and beyond any other power system he had ever worked on, the nature of the dual warp core design did not convey extravagance so much as it did necessity. The power requirements of the *Pride of Qo'noS* made Lieutenant Thomas Donner very aware of why those cores existed. In a state of battle, the ship would enjoy full power to weapons and shields, but a reduction in the maximum attainable warp speed, without redirecting power from other systems.

The weapons systems of the Kyuushu-class comprised of fifteen Federation phaser cannons along with nine Romulan disruptors and eight torpedo tubes. Coupled with a deflector grid that had the power output a fifth of that of a starbase, and the ship was a formidable opponent on the pre-Borg playing field. The true test of its firepower would come when either the *Pride of Qo'noS* or a sister ship were to come into contact with a Borg cube. It was proven well enough that the spheres were merely the light cruisers of the Borg's fleet, but the cube itself was a frightening shape to see on any viewscreen of any ship in Starfleet.

Power allocation problems aside, he felt a secret pleasure at the opportunity of working on the latest in advanced starship design. From the start of his career, he had been relatively entrusted with the engineering duties aboard older vessels. His first assignment as an ensign was aboard one of the aging Ambassador-class cruisers, where he learned from the school of hard knocks. Tom knew in his heart that while learning in a classroom and in starship simulators was a good beginning, it was the practice in the real universe that allowed an engineer to gain experience and wisdom in his field. He felt as though he were an ensign again with the *Pride*, donning a working jumpsuit and crawling through the Jeffries tubes on every deck until he was sure he knew the ship as well as he had known his previous assignments.

When Commander McKenna sent word for him to report for his next assignment on Starbase 818, there was a lot of speculation between the four of them as to what that assignment would be. Rear Admiral Ross, the admiral in command of the Seventh Tactical Fleet, had no other Excelsior-class vessels under his authority to accommodate January's request. Instead, they were ordered to report to Terok Nor, under the command of Lieutenant Commander Ruao Sarjanna. Once they arrived at the old Cardassian mining station-turned-Alliance starbase, the four of them had transferred from the Seventh and into the Third Tactical Fleet, where Rear Admiral Aerv'us i-Ihhliae tr'Kheriov held command over the fleet defending Bajor. McKenna, Sten, Yamaguchi, and Donner were given a status as officers of detached status from Terok Nor. Commander Ruao, in turn, provided them with the Excelsior-class USS *Berlin*. The *Berlin* was the station's guardian entity, assigned to the station, and used only in times where it was necessary for Terok Nor's authority to be mobile.

The assignment to the *Berlin* lasted for a few months before Admiral tr'Kheriov offered command of the *Pride of Qo'noS* and McKenna accepted. Since the transfer to the new ship, seven months had already passed, and the New Year was only weeks away. In that time, Tom saw himself promoted to a full lieutenant, and Norman finally earned his promotion to Captain. At first, it was a very confusing thing to have happen, with Norman and January on the bridge at the same time. It was very quickly and quietly adopted that while January was referred to as "Captain," the addition of Norman's last name would be used on the bridge to get his attention.

"Captain Yamaguchi," called McKenna, seated at the head of the observation lounge's long conference table. "I would like for you to act as a liaison officer between the bridge crew and the marine division, once more. It's imperative that we keep an active and open line of communication for this operation to work successfully."

Norm gave a quick nod, which was an acceptable way to respond to the captain's briefings. He sat next to Lieutenant Sten, on the captain's left side. The viewscreen behind the captain showed the massive fleet operation into the heart of the Borg Hot Zone (BHZ), to be launched from Cirrius Prime. McKenna had only recently returned to the ship, having attended a briefing aboard Terok Nor along with several other captains of Kyuushu-class ships.

January rose from her chair, "Let's review the operation." She called up the start of the information, going over the highlights. "After the completion of the Hornet and the Ael, all twenty-five of the Kyuushu-class vessels are directed to assemble in the Cirrius Prime system. We will form a task force, as illustrated here." The screen's display zoomed outward, to present the formation of all of the ships. "Our objective from this assembly is to warp into the Proxima Centauri system and setup a base of operations for future advances into Borg territory. Commodore Hastur will command the task force from the *William T. Riker*. Any questions?"

"Captain, approximately when does this operation take place?" asked Sten.

"The orders were to assemble the fleet no later than tomorrow morning at oh-three-hundred."

Yamaguchi voiced his question, "Is Starfleet Intelligence expecting heavy resistance, sir?"

McKenna replied, "Light to moderate resistance, Captain. However, with the new technology built on board these battleships, Starfleet Command is confident even if we meet heavy or fierce resistance, we will have the upper hand." Once she had finished answering the question, she looked out over the senior officers and asked for more questions.

No one said anything, most of them looking at the screen. She could see the fear mixed with excitement in their eyes, with the exception of Sten. Her Vulcan first officer remained silent and attentive. Even if she had objections, she would never speak them aloud in front of the rest of the officers. The captain's ready room was a far more appropriate locale in which to discuss her reservations. However, though she had one of the best poker faces January had ever seen, after serving alongside each other for two years, the captain had learned to read Sten.

"Very well," January said. "Dismissed." All of the officers rose, with the exception of Sten. The captain waited for everyone to leave the lounge before turning her attention to the lieutenant. Without saying a word, she leaned back in the high-backed chair and waited.

Sten's fingers made an appearance on the lounge table, gently folding in atop one another as both hands clasped together. "Captain, I wish to voice some reservations about the lack of proper reconnaissance on Proxima Centauri." She inclined her head to the viewscreen, to indicate the hole in the strategy.

"Go on."

"The Kyuushu-class warbird has been kept away from the Borg Hot Zone in a deliberate attempt to prevent the Borg from gaining advance knowledge of the design and payloads of these ships. While I agree with that strategy, I also find it to be as equally a disadvantage as it is an advantage." The Vulcan paused, either as an attempt at dramatics or to find the proper words with which to continue. "We do not have a plausible theory as to the outcome of this operation."

McKenna replied, "No, we don't. But that doesn't mean that things will always turn out for the worst. Perhaps we won't lose a single ship; maybe this will be one of the most effortless operations we've carried out since Wolf 359. We don't know. I don't think that should mean we shouldn't go."

"I am certain there is another option besides a frontal assault," Sten said with a determined tone.

This drew a shrug from January, "Maybe there is. Until then, we go with the orders in hand, of course." She lifted herself out of her chair and began to head for the exit out to the corridor leading to the bridge. "This doesn't mean that I don't want options, though. You keep working in it, let me know if you come up with anything."

"Aye, sir."

McKenna nodded, satisfied with the end of the conversation. She left Sten alone in the observation lounge and walked onto the main bridge. "Helm," she said, relaxing in the center seat, "prepare to leave dock. Signal Ops for permission to depart."

The officers and crewmen manning their bridge stations sprung into action; each station came to life as the ship switched from external to internal power. The operations crewman reported the clearance from the starbase's operations center, while the engineering officer reported that the cruise mode power allocations were now in place. Following the helm's report that all preparations to get underway were complete, Captain McKenna gave her order, "Disengage docking clamps, and move us away from the station at one-quarter impulse power."

She couldn't hear the docking clamps, but she could definitely feel the lag of the ship's powerful inertial dampening field as the massive vessel released its hold upon Terok Nor. The *Pride of Qo'noS* powered up its twin impulse engines and moved away from Bajor at one-sixteenth the power it would take for the ship to reach warp one.

"Now entering the Cirrius Prime system, sir," reported the helmsman. The viewscreen slowed the stars down until they returned to being tiny points of light, rather than the long streaks from the effects of traveling faster than the speed of light.

Cirrius Prime could be seen from the vantage, in the distance. The fourth planet within the system played host to over three hundred million Alliance citizens, one of the larger colonies so close to the BHZ. It was only a matter of time before the Borg would expand to assimilate the

planet, and Starfleet felt it prudent to begin construction of an orbital facility around the colony. It was not yet completed, however, the docking facilities were online and ready to accommodate the transfer of whatever supplies were needed for the task force to accomplish their mission.

Captain Yamaguchi reported from his station, "I'm reading twenty ships so far, sir. Five Kyuushu-class, the rest are Ambassadors, Excelsiors, and Galaxys."

McKenna nodded her acknowledgement. "The support fleet. They've assembled what they could for defensive purposes only. If we should fall, then the task of defending the system would fall to the defense fleet of those ships."

Norman shook his head, "But sir, if twenty-five warbirds can't handle this operation, then..."

"Fifteen ships of lesser firepower wouldn't stand much of a chance," she finished the thought out loud. "It's better than no ships."

"I guess so, sir."

January asked herself if the rest of the crew felt the same way. Did they believe they were being asked to sacrifice themselves on a hunch? Since the briefing and the conversation with Sten last night, she had begun to suspect that their enthusiasm was not at the level it should be. She thought it over for a moment, but shook her head. She had to do something about that, but now was not the time. "Bring us into formation with the other ships, standard orbit."

"Standard orbit, aye."

"Captain Yamaguchi, you have the bridge. I'll be in my ready room." She moved away from her chair as Norman walked from the tactical station to the center seat and took the conn. Shortly thereafter, she was reseated behind her desk in the ready room, pulling up whatever technical information on the Borg she could use. Was she just blindly following orders, or was there something more she could do than simply be another ship on the line, firing everything she had?

With a quick glance, she noticed that it was two hours before the fleet would get underway. She wondered if all of the ships would arrive on time, or if they would have to postpone their departure. On that thought, she leaned into her comfortable chair and closed her eyes. Within seconds, she fell asleep.

A little over an hour later, the ship's intercom roused her from a deep sleep. Sten's voice was heard, "Captain, are you there?"

McKenna cleared her throat, wiping at her eyes, "I'm here, Lieutenant. My apologies." She tried as much as she could to prevent from sounding as though she just woke up. Being caught sleeping in the ready room was not a memory she wished to take with her after the battle.

"Signal from the *Riker*, sir. The fleet is ready to get underway," Sten continued.

McKenna was already up and on her feet, which were moving her to the bridge. She answered her executive officer there, "Understood. Helm, prepare to break orbit and follow fleet course."

As Sten looked over to January, seated in the auxiliary station, she shook her head. The captain frowned. She was unable to provide any options that might provide a better chance. In response, McKenna gave Sten a very slight, but understanding nod.

Norman's console began to alert. "Captain, proximity alert. I'm showing a vessel on an inbound course. Speed: warp nine-point-nine-nine-nine-nine-nine." There was really only one thing that had ever been tracked at moving at such a speed: a Borg cube.

Sten reported, "Incoming message from the *Riker*."

"Red alert. Put the message on main viewer."

Commodore Hastur's features appeared, replacing the planet's edge and the fleet. "Hastur to fleet. Looks like the Borg are going to take the fight to us. The task force will break orbit and follow course two-one-seven Mark zero-zero-three, full impulse to clear the planet, and then increase to warp nine to intercept the cube." It was a broadcast message, one way. He could not hear or see the bridge of the *Pride*, nor the alert klaxon wailing in the background.

"Signal flagship, acknowledge those orders. Helm, you heard the man," Captain McKenna took her seat. "Captain Yamaguchi, put me on shipwide, please."

Norman replied, "Aye, sir." A few commands later, he nodded, "You're on, sir."

January spoke to the crew of three thousand people, "Attention crew of the *Pride of Qo'noS*. This is the captain, speaking. The fleet is assembled and ready to go, but it looks like the Borg wanted to get a jump on us. A cube has been spotted heading straight for the Cirrius Prime system, and Commodore Hastur has ordered that we make our stand right here." She looked down at her hands briefly, trying to come up with the best way to raise their spirits. Whatever time they thought they had was just snatched away from the Borg. Even she felt the anxiety level rise aboard ship, and she had no telepathic or empathic ability. "I have confidence in this crew. I believe that every single one of you is well-trained, and ready to fight to death to protect this system from assimilation. The Borg may have the ability to adapt, but so do we. This ship is new, and its weapons may be powerful, but never forget one thing: we cannot win without you. The Borg have never seen what the *Pride of Qo'noS* is capable of. Let's show them. McKenna, out."

The ship was already at warp, moving with the other twenty-four ships to intercept the Borg. The viewscreen increased its magnification to spot the cube moving straight for them. Suddenly, the fear of Wolf 359, and the death all around her overwhelmed her. Her hands shook as they wrung one another. As the cube loomed closer, she spotted the minute characteristics along the hull that plagued her slumber every other night without fail since the loss of the *Roosevelt*. Fear was pushed to the side as the desire for revenge now took hold of her. The opportunity

for payback was finally at hand, and all of the grief and tears shed for those who died at her side would finally come to fruition.

"Helm," she said, "increase speed to warp nine-point-nine-nine-seven-five."

The helmsman turned, "But fleet speed is..."

"That's an order, mister," her voice dripped with menace, though not directed at the helmsman. Sten turned her head from her station, her brow creased with as much worry as her Vulcan demeanor would allow.

Her helmsman decided not to quibble any longer, not wanting to have to deal with the captain's anger. Not at this crucial juncture. "Aye, sir. Increasing speed." On the viewscreen, the other ships began to slide back and away from the *Pride* as she willed the ship to be the first one to fire everything she had.

January stood up, not wanting to sit down any longer. She folded her arms across her chest and stared hard at the cube. It was only a matter of minutes, now. She would stand there and wait. She would wait until Norman would inform her that the cube was within range of the most powerful starship Starfleet had ever known. She would wait to shove every bit of that power, every phaser, every disruptor, every bi-cobalt device, and even every quantum and photon torpedo she could call upon, right through the side of that cube.

It was only a matter of minutes, now.

The Cirrius Prime Symphony (in D minor)

It was only a matter of minutes, now. The *Pride of Qo'noS* sailed ahead of the fleet of twenty-five Kyuushu-class battleships, the need to be the first to strike overriding January's sense of duty or honor. The chance to avenge those she lost at Wolf 359 that seemed to be her only drive at the moment.

Lost in a moment of remembrance, she felt as though she were back on the bridge of the *Roosevelt*, sitting at the helm console. Captain Sotek was behind her, sitting at his chair, just like he always was. Commander Granger Kim breathing down her neck as he had one foot on the edge of the helm console, reading over her shoulder at the console's displays. And right next to her at the operations station, Ensign Kimberly Dawes. Out of memory, she reached up to touch the two-year-old headband she had borrowed from Kim just prior to their shift on the bridge.

Sharing the intimate details of Kim's date for New Year's Eve the previous night in the wardroom, Jan recalled fondly about how excited the ensign had been at being assigned to the *Roosevelt*. Ensign Dawes had been aboard no more than six months and she had become a fast friend to Lieutenant (junior grade) McKenna. They often proved themselves as a very hard-working team at the forefront of the bridge, and shared duty scheduled on a regular basis. She remembered that her hair was unexpectedly unruly the morning that Admiral Hansen assembled the fleet at Wolf 359, and Kim was thoughtful enough to smile and offer her the piece on her own head. "Here," she had said. "Take it. I think you need it more than I do." Jan promised to return it at the end of their shift. But it was never meant to be, and now January kept that headband with her, everywhere she went.

Now standing on the bridge of her own command, Commander McKenna waited for the first strike to be hers. Norman looked worriedly toward the captain, before he passed a message that the *Riker* was signaling to maintain fleet formation. Commodore Hastur was requesting to be informed of why the *Pride* increased speed to advance ahead of the fleet. January did not respond. Either she did not hear him or she did not care to respond to the commodore.

"Captain?" Sten called. "Commodore Hastur is ordering us to keep fleet formation."

Jan was now obviously ignoring the first officer's report of the communication. "Mister Yamaguchi, as soon as we're within weapons range, open fire with everything we've got. All weapons are cleared to fire at will."

Yamaguchi replied, carrying his order, "Aye, sir." He gave a sidelong glance to Sten, as though he were ready to support her if necessary.

Sten repeated, "Captain, Commodore Hastur is signaling again."

Jan shook her head, "XO, I heard you the first time. Maintain course and speed. No reply. How long until we're within range?"

Norman rose from his seat behind January, but Sten raised her hand in his direction, indicating that he could keep his seat. Instead, she rose and walked to her to deal with the situation. "Captain, we will be within range in ninety seconds," the Vulcan lieutenant replied. "Sir, fleet speed is warp nine."

McKenna nodded without reply. "Maintain speed, Lieutenant."

Sten whispered, "Sir, I applaud your bravery, however, your actions would constitute insubordination. I would be within my rights to relieve you of command."

January turned to look at Sten directly, and from behind them Norman read from the expression on the captain's face that Sten did indeed threaten what he would have. In the same low whisper, January looked at Sten and gave her response, "Sten, I have no intention of slowing this ship down. I want the honor of first strike. Can you understand that?"

"Sir, we are pulling away from the fleet. We will be without support for up to two minutes, that interval grows larger every second we advance." Sten continued, "How many lives do you intend to put at an unnecessary risk for the sake of that honor?"

Norman pulled his attention away from the captain and executive officer to look at his console. "Sirs, fleet speed has increased to match ours. Commodore Hastur has ceased his signal and rescinded his order."

It was a moot point, now, though she was sure to hear about it later from the Commodore. At that point, though, January did not care. She merely gave Sten a look of expectance, silently asking her for further comment. But before any words were exchanged between the two of them, she called to the helm, "Decrease speed to bring us within lead formation on the fleet, but make certain we're the first to come within range of those bastards."

The helmsman responded with a quick "Aye, sir," and the cube was not speeding toward as quickly. Sten returned to the auxiliary console that she customarily resided at, and January remained standing before the viewscreen. "Time to target is now sixty seconds," she reported to the captain.

"Understood," said the captain. She continued to fix her gaze upon the cube displayed before her. The sixty seconds counting down in her head, she relished the anticipation of the sight of her powerful vessel lancing forth and ripping the heart out of the cube. She would pay the Borg back in spades for what they took away from her that morning. When January's count passed fifty, she turned around to face the tactical station and ordered that the assault commence.

The *Pride of Qo'noS* had every forward-facing weapon open fire. Fifteen phaser cannons and nine banks of Romulan disruptors, accompanied by six bi-cobalt devices; every single shot hit upon the cube as a direct hit. Evidence of the strike was visible along the cube as scores showed and the devices punctured the hull enough to eat away at the sides. Members of the bridge crew cheered as they watched sensor feed on the main viewscreen. January remained unusually quiet, ordering the helm to "Reduce speed, let's let the other partygoers have a shot at this piñata."

To its credit, the Borg cube began to show signs of repairing, even as the other vessels brought their weapons to bear and echoed the performance of the *Pride*. However, the cheers on the bridge showing the onslaught of twenty-five vessels combating the Borg was short-lived as they realized that the cube had adapted to the technology in a very short amount of time. The *Aen v'Stelam* and the *Yamato* were the first two vessels to feel the brunt of the cube's counterattack. Tractor beams with the ever-present Borg cutting beam made fruitless attempts to pierce the advanced shielding of the two warbirds. Both ships made valiant efforts to fight back, while the rest of the fleet quickly regrouped to bring their best weaponry online.

"Message from the *Riker*. Upgrade status to *allegretto*," said Lieutenant Sten. The codeword was the authorization to begin preparation to board the Borg cube with the marine boarding shuttles.

January tossed a quick nod to Norman, who was already looking for the order. Once it was understood, the light marine division in the bowels of the *Kyuushu*-class ship made ready to begin combat boarding maneuvers. Meanwhile, the tactical systems aboard the ship were readying the more powerful tri-cobalt devices. The step up in the attack meant that they would be releasing their secret technology to the Borg months ahead of schedule. But then, the battle was not going as planned. If they fell here, then the defense fleet in orbit of the colony would face a superior adversary than anticipated.

On the viewscreen, the scene shifted to show that the Borg's tractor beam successfully penetrated the shields of the *Yamato*. The Borg's cutting beam made contact with the engineering section of the ship and was slicing into the hull. A frightening prospect as the assimilation of the hull technology would all but finish the fleet. Knifing through the vacuum to provide assistance, the *Wasp* placed itself in between the tractor beam and the deadly and refine cutting beam. Within seconds, the tractor beam began reworking itself to take hold of the new target, without immediate success. The *Yamato* disengaged from the attack on the order of the *Riker*.

The second round of attacks came shortly thereafter, with the *Aen v'Stelam* leading the way. Sensor inputs started to show massive amounts of interference as the combined might of the fleet produced high amounts of particle radiation, preventing the viewscreen from giving a clear picture.

"Switch the display to tactical," McKenna ordered. Instead of the image of the ships floating about, the screen shifted to show small dots, each one representing an Alliance starship, with a large block in the center. The formation of the fleet looked like a broken circle, with each ship striking at different parts of the cube. Moderate damage was seen on the display, but as soon as the damage was done, the Borg made quick repairs. From her vantage, it looked like an accelerated version of how cells make repairs to themselves. Slowly, the points of puncture along the side of the cube would simply reform to a thicker hide.

Sten turned from her station to report that the commodore ordered the execution of the operation they held at. The marine boarding shuttles from every ship but the *Yamato* began to show up on the tactical display. Rather than focusing its energy on the battleships, the Borg cube was now attacking the shuttles directly. Unlike the shielding and armor of the *Kyuushu*-class, the shuttles presented very little opposition to the Borg weaponry. With a single sweep of its main battery, ten and twenty shuttles carrying a company of marines each disappeared from the display.

"Helm, plot us a course to lead those shuttles to their destination. Get us ahead of the largest group and prepare to extend shield around them," January ordered. The *Pride* changed its course and moved inward to guide the shuttles in, providing protection from the cutting beam. It was a valiant move, everyone thought, but when the cutting beam hit the shields, the entire ship shook from the direct and sustained hit.

McKenna was thrown back into her chair from where she was standing. The rest of the bridge either fought the shaking to hold on or were removed from their seats. "Hold on, everyone!" she shouted over the whining of the hull. Though the deflector grid protected the hull, the vibration had an effect. Before long, the tractor beam of the cube gripped the ship. The cutter lashed out at the saucer section of the ship, and the hull was breached. A second beam began to attack the engineering section.

"Norm! Are those tri-cobalt devices locked and loaded?" January called, not bothering to turn her head to look at him.

"Aye, sir. Ready to fire at your command."

"Target the beam emitters, and fire."

The tactical display showed six of the devices on the way to their target. Tri-cobalt devices were exponentially more powerful than their lesser counterpart, providing more punch for the same size. Their effect on the cube was made known immediately. The cutters ceased, and the tractor beam released its hold on the ship. The boarding shuttles sped the rest of the way, no longer having the protection of the battleship to cover their entry, but the job was done. Marine tactical frequencies were expressing successful entries into twenty-nine different points along the hull of the cube.

"Okay, helm, plot us a retreat course. Engage at full impulse, and hurry up," the captain ordered.

"Engineering reports that the impulse engines are offline, sir," the officer at the helm reported.

Sten nodded, "Confirmed. Reports of massive injuries and deaths being reported by Lieutenant Donner. Request permission to assist him."

Jan nodded, "Go." Sten's engineering expertise was recognized by many aboard ship to be on par with Tom Donner's. Her presence in engineering was a valued one, especially by those serving in that department.

Sten ran to the turbolift as another officer moved to take her position.

"Can I get a full damage report on all systems?" January asked.

The new operations officer ran down his list, which included a hit to hull integrity, sublight propulsion and the shield generators. A casualty list showed that over twenty people were dead with twice that injured or missing, not including two of the *Pride*'s shuttles that were destroyed when the Borg began to redirect its attack.

"Continue to fire tri-cobalt devices and all beam weapons," the captain ordered. "Keep the attack going."

By the time Sten reached the main engineering compartment, the starboard warp core was already offline. The portside warp core was glowing and working properly. Donner gave her a brief overview of the current situation, and the damage done to the ship. The impulse engines or one of the related subsystems somehow suffered critical hits between the hull vibration and the intensity of the cutting beam upon the hull. He was already wearing the working jumpsuit, with his toolkit in one hand.

Sten walked with him, trying to find the quickest way from the engineering deck to the impulse deck, to effect repairs. It would only be a matter of time before the cube was able to repair the damage done to it by the captain and while the *Pride* sat without means of evading, that tractor beam would return and begin slicing into the hull again.

They didn't have much time.

"Marine Commander reports they have made a successful entry into the inner nodes, however, they are meeting heavy resistance from the Borg," reported Norman from the tactical station.

McKenna could only nod. As more and more marines made their entry, it was now up to them. Commodore Hastur ordered some of the fleet to retreat to allow the marines to accomplish their mission to destroy the cube and make a speedy departure. Charges were to be placed through the heavy energy transfer nodes along the inner and central core of the cube. With enough nodes destroyed, a high percentage of the cube would be without power, and open to an assault without any further resistance. But as the marines were now onboard, it was imperative that the fleet limit casualties by friendly fire. They had to pull their punches.

The effect of that order had deadly consequences. Without the firepower necessary to deter the cube from attacking, two of the battleships fell to the Borg. One, the *Wasp*, as the cutting beam punctured the dual warp cores. The subsequent explosion caused critical damage to the *Saratoga*, and the captain of that ship ordered his crew to abandon ship. When the lifepods were clear, the *Saratoga* mustered whatever it could and made an attempt to ram the cube. However, with the tractor beam back online, it held the ship at bay until the self-destruct sequence completed.

January tried not to think about it, but she was afraid once more. She was afraid that the mission would fail and that the battle of Cirrius Prime would be likened to Wolf 359. Another twenty-five starships to add to the total number of starships lost. There was still another ace up their sleeve, but to use it would cost them so much more than a simple twenty-five starships. All of those marines on board the cube would suffer the same fate, not just the fleet crews outside, trying to keep the cube from advancing into the Cirrius Prime system.

Each Kyuushu-class warbird carried with it the brand new quad-cobalt device. Another leap in exponent firepower, with a price; the shockwave from the impact of this device would cause a grand amount of destruction in its path. With two more ships being held by the cube, and the *Pride* next in line, it was clear that if they made use of this weapon, three more ships would be destroyed due to friendly fire. The shockwave's range was just as theoretical as the damage proposed. It was sure to cause enough damage to destroy the cube, but perhaps half the fleet. And if not, the cube could weather the attack, and only the fleet would suffer.

When the commodore called in to stand by at the allegro status, she closed her eyes for a moment. "Load all quad-cobalt devices into the torpedo tubes and stand by the fire at my order," January said.

"Aye, sir," said Captain Yamaguchi, entering in the command at his station and holding the devices in a standby mode to fire. He began searching for a better-localized target on the cube's hull to target.

The silent moment on the bridge was broken when the Borg's tractor beam seized the ship. The *Pride of Qo'noS* shuddered to such a degree that it pitched the ship over some twenty degree before the gravity and inertial dampening systems recovered and righted everyone aboard.

"Sir, the cutting beam is now slicing into the engineering section of the ship again. It's a matter of time until they breach the warp cores," reported operations.

"Just like the *Wasp*." She breathed a silent prayer to Tom Donner.

Tom Donner read the situation with the Borg from the corner of his eye as he made repairs to the fusion reactors. They had scrambled, shutting down and returning to a cold state. Without fusion power, the impulse engines were as good as useless. Without those engines, they would have no means to propel themselves away from the cube. The end result of that was something Tom had no need to think about.

The ship shuddered once more, and his eyes went to the damage report being updated in real time. The deck above engineering was now exposed to space. People were dying, and he was moving as fast as he could, with Sten on the lower section of the reactor's control panel. The both of them were working as a team to bring the team of reactors back online and then restore its connection to the impulse engine.

Once more, the ship pitched over again as another hit landed against the hull directly. The Borg were not trying to assimilate, it looked as though they were trying to destroy the ship. It was unlike anything he had seen in his limited encounters with cubes and spheres. He looked at the damage display again and more systems appeared on the percentages reported to him. It did not look good.

He finished what he could, and closed the access panel to the reactor he was working on. Closing his kit and throwing it to the bottom level with a loud clatter, he grabbed both sides of the access ladder and slid down it until his boots slammed against the grates. Looking over Sten's shoulder he asked her if she was ready to restart the reactors.

"I am ready," she replied, rising from her haunches and standing upright again.

Tom nodded, "All right." He looked at the command console for the entire system and hovered a finger over the initiation subroutine. Closing

one eye, he kept the other one on her. "If this doesn't work, Sten..."

"Yes, Lieutenant?" she asked, keeping her eyes on the console.

He smiled, "I just wanted to tell you that I'm in love with you." He hit the button.

Outside, the *Pride's* impulse engines lit up immediately as the reactors came online and began feeding power properly. The connections between the two subsystems maintained the energy transfer under normal operating conditions and within seconds, the ship's sublight propulsion was restored.

Inside, the bridge crew were already making preparations to get underway as quickly as possible. The Borg still held the ship in place with its tractor beam and attacked the skin of the hull with the cutter. January called in for assistance with the fleet, the impulse engines repaired, someone had to go in a make a rescue attempt to cut the *Pride* away from the cube's attack.

The flagship of the attack fleet, the *William T. Riker*, made it its personal objective to rescue the *Pride of Qo'noS* from certain destruction. Moving itself as close as possible, its phasers danced across the hull of the cube until the tractor beam began to be affected. As soon as it seemed as though the *Riker* would succeed, the tractor beam from the cube reestablished itself as the damage done by the phasers were nullified by adapting to the attack.

Captain McKenna slumped only slightly in her seat, looking toward Norman for ideas. He shook his head, and the answer was obvious. The only option to save the ship might be to fire a single quad-cobalt device at the cube. While Commodore Hastur had not authorized their use, with the ship at stake, January could argue that she had little choice but to open fire.

Just as opened her mouth to issue the order to fire the cobalt device, Captain Yamaguchi excitedly reported that the marines had completed the first phaser of their mission and was about to detonate their charges along the inner areas, across twenty-five different power distribution nodes. On the viewscreen, the scene shifted immediately to show the various tractor and cutting beams fall silent, including the one on the *Pride*.

"Full impulse power," ordered January. "Plot us a course toward the rest of the fleet and take us out of range of their tractor beam."

"Aye, sir. Approaching fleet rendezvous, now."

Norman reported, "The marines have laid the central nexus charges now, they are departing the cube in two minutes." The marine tactical frequencies were alive and kicking as he redirected some of the more interesting communications chatter to the bridge speaker system. She could hear the battalion commanders issuing orders to their troops and the passing of those orders down to the platoon level. Within those two minutes, the boarding shuttles began to liftoff from the cube.

Scattered internal explosions were making appearances on the sensors readouts. The cube was without energy within seconds, and the Borg's defenses were now silent. The recovery of the boarding shuttles took a few minutes, and the colonel in command of the marines assigned to the *Pride of Qo'noS* made his initial report to the bridge.

The order to open fire on the cube came from Commodore Hastur only moment after it was certain that the boarding shuttles were within the protective company of the fleet. The fleet of the twenty remaining Kyuushu-class warbirds made short work of the cube, destroying it outright.

Starfleet had its first major victory in the Borg War.

not with a bang...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Following the victory at the Battle of Cirrius Prime, it was made known to the public that Chancellor K'mpec passed away. He had passed while listening to the tactical frequency communications traffic between the fleet, and it was as close to dying in battle that he could come. The new leader of the Alliance High Council was already in line for the choosing. In the dawn of the year of 2368, Gowron, an ambitious and young Klingon man, ascended to power through the rites that Klingon tradition demanded. With the new Chancellor reveling in the glory of victorious combat, he made his first public appearance in his new capacity and delivered a speech to the citizens of the Galaxy Alliance.

While the battle had been won, the war was not yet over. The victory at Cirrius Prime appeared to be a reminder to those serving that it was possible to make a stand against the Borg and survive. The fleet of the twenty remaining warbirds would be spread through the reaches of the Galaxy Alliance, many of them used as fleet flagships. They were more than ships; they were symbols. For the lack of a flag flying, they were the ensigns by which Starfleet rallied behind in the course of the war. But by the time the war ended over three years later, only three of them would survive.

The *Pride of Qo'noS* fell at the engagement near the border of the Borg Hot Zone (BHZ) closest to the Narendra side in 2370. Defending Starbase 818, it was leading the engagement against two cubes and assorted support vessels. Due to the overwhelming nature of the attack, the Borg destroyed the *Pride* and the starbase. Rear Admiral Ross was among the dead, as was several of the original members of the crew that fought at Cirrius Prime. However, none of the senior officers were aboard her at that time. For January McKenna, Sten, Norman Yamaguchi, and Thomas Donner would all find their fates in very different circumstances.

Norm smiled to himself, satisfied with having made his decision. The door to the captain's ready room on the bridge of the *Pride of Qo'noS* slid aside to admit him, and he entered. "My apologies," he started, "I can come back later if you're busy, sir."

January was grateful for the distraction, "Not at all. Have a seat." She proffered the chair in front of her desk, rising from hers to get herself a drink. "Can I offer you some coffee?"

"Uh, no, thanks, sir. I had actually not planned on staying too long," he admitted, the smile now gone from his face as he realized the dilemma of trying to break the news to her.

The captain gave a slight shrug as she requested a mug of coffee from her personal replicator and returned to her seat. "What's up?" she asked, expressing her curiosity.

"I have a request to make of you, sir."

"Let's hear it," she replied, looking for the packet of sweetener to upend into her mug.

Yamaguchi shifted in his seat, and after going through several versions of his request in his mind, he decided to be as direct as possible. "I would like to transfer to a marine division, Captain."

She looked up at him suddenly, unable to believe her ears, "I beg your pardon?"

"I would like to transfer to a marine division," he repeated, trying not to sound too belligerent.

"You mean to the marine division aboard ship?"

"No, sir. To the *Iwo Jima*." There, it was all said, now. He looked at his captain, waiting for her response.

Lieutenant Commander McKenna frowned. "I see. May I ask why you've decided to request this transfer?"

It was the question he had been waiting to answer. This was the one topic he had realized in the middle of the battle, taking orders on the bridge, growing furious with his ability to be with his friends on the Borg cube, setting the charges, risking their lives in a more real capacity than the safety and comfort of a starship bridge. He wanted to tell her exactly what he thought of her as an officer, and why he very nearly relieved her of command, had Sten not intervened. There was no more respect for her within him. He needed to be somewhere else, as soon as possible.

Watching her peer at him, though, he felt that need to be so cruelly honest fading away. What good would it do either of them to lay it out on the line? With her recent choice to hide in her ready room, it was probably her way of doing penance for letting her personal emotions overrule her duty to the ship in such a public fashion. She had not been seen sitting in the center seat since Cirrius Prime, and that was over a week ago. For all intents and purposes, it appeared that Sten was the de facto captain. Though Norman had intruded upon her ready room easily, he was the first officer besides Sten to see her for more than a few minutes, in the corridors below deck, or on her way to the bridge or her quarters.

"I would like to be as useful as possible to Starfleet, sir," he finally decided to say, averting his eyes for fear of being seen through. "My friend Nancy is extending an invitation to join her battalion."

McKenna understood, "I see no reason why not, Captain. Have Sten send the order to me, and I'll sign it and transmit it to the Bureau as fast as subspace will carry it." She smiled, believing he was just wanting to be near Nancy. "I wish you the very best, Norman." She stood from her chair, extending a hand out to shake his.

This was yet another moment he envisioned, swearing to himself that when the time came to shake her hand, he would simply turn his back on

her. Yet again, he did not have it in his heart to be that disrespectful. Instead, he reached out with his own, shook her hand a couple of times before releasing it and returning her best wishes with a few of his own.

He parted company with January McKenna, and put her behind him as he walked through the ready room door and into his future.

Norman Eikichi Yamaguchi decided to further his career by requesting a transfer to a marine infantry unit immediately following the engagement at Cirrius Prime. Issuing orders to the marine division for such an important boarding made him realize that his true place was in the battle with a phaser rifle in his hands, not sitting at a station on the bridge of a fleet vessel. He wanted to serve alongside his fellow marines. His transfer to the Fourth Marines earned him a promotion to major within six months, and his battalion would be the first to make planet fall on Earth three years later, when Starfleet would take it back from the Borg. For his courageous actions during the Borg war, Starfleet decorated him with several high commendations. Among which were the Silver and Bronze Stars, the Starfleet Cross, and four Purple Hearts.

When Colonel Nancy Kotobuki's husband was killed while attempting an evacuation of Bajor when Terok Nor fell, she turned back to her old friend Norman for emotional support. Eventually, the two married, and took up residence on Bajor. Nancy took time off to give birth to two children, one in 2371 and the other in 2373, but returned to the Corps as soon as she possibly could, and finally retired as a Major General at Marine Corps Headquarters on Bajor in 2384. Both of their children have plans to join Starfleet.

Brigadier General-select Norman Yamaguchi is the current barracks commander at Starfleet Academy's marine training facility on Bajor.

Thomas James Donner departed the *Pride of Qo'noS* less than six months later. As he and Sten spent more time in each other's company, he confessed the true nature of his emotions to her. She reacted in true Vulcan fashion, but he never gave up hope. He requested a transfer from starship duty to teach engineering courses at the new Starfleet Academy facility on Spacedock in orbit of Qo'noS. Finding the taste of combat growing stale upon his palette, he would spend the next twenty years making certain that the next generations of Starfleet officers would absorb his experiences and take that knowledge with them out to the stars.

His experiences aboard the *Malinche*, *Berlin*, and the *Pride of Qo'noS* were recorded and written of in a book of accounts relating to the Borg War, published a year after Earth was retaken. The proceeds from that book were shared with him and others who contributed, and with that money he purchased a home for himself and his wife on Betazed. Professor Donner is the current head of the engineering department at the University of Betazed. They have no children, as of 2386.

Following the outburst he made to her in the engineering compartment of the *Pride*, she always assumed he would take it back or try to play down the magnitude of his confession. It would not be the first time it had happened, nor would it be the first time the subject person would retract his words to her. Tom Donner continued to talk to her and paid a great deal more attention to her in his off-duty hours. For months after, he would invite her to spend time with him in the holodecks, or the crew lounge. They would discuss many topics of mutual interest, and she taught him how to play Kal'Toh.

Then, it happened one evening, as they played alone within his quarters. The set was one she replicated for him, so that he would learn how to play and build his skill level up to a point of presenting a challenge to Sten.

"Sten?" Donner asked.

"Yes, Tom?"

"Where do you see yourself in twenty years?"

There was no hesitation as she kept her eyes and most of her concentration on the game. It was not beneath Tom to use a distraction tactic to try and win. However, it was never successful. "I assume I would continue to serve in Starfleet, barring any unfortunate circumstances." She picked up a metal stick and replaced it. The shape moved slightly, but not entirely.

Donner made his move after asking another question, "Aboard a starship?"

She repeated her motion with another stick. The shape changed again and she replied, "Of course."

He fell silent, feigning concentration on the game for thought on the subject he was about to broach. She wanted to serve on a starship, but he had other options presented to him. It was like that old song he once heard, does he stay or does he go? They were friends, close friends, but friends nonetheless. He cared very deeply for her, but she gave no indication of reciprocation beyond enjoying his company; as much as her training would allow her to express that enjoyment, at least. He never once regretted confessing his feelings, even in such a stressful situation as that. Tom tried to think of something else to say, another way to say what it was he needed to say.

Picking up another metal stick at random, he replaced it and said at the same time, "I've been offered a teaching position at Starfleet Academy's engineering college." The Kal'toh sphere changed into a hideous shape immediately after the stick landed and his finished his statement.

Sten fixed her gaze upon him and said, "An honorable profession. Is it what you desire?"

Tom tried not to smile under the weight of the question. There was an expressed need to tell her again what he truly desired. He gave into it. "What I desire is to be near you, Sten."

She expected that response, given his behavior since Cirrius Prime. The Vulcan woman returned her attention to the game, and asked Tom, "Is that wise?"

He snorted a little, "Probably not. My emotional state has never been wise, Sten."

The shape returned to a more healthy-looking sphere than before, as Sten made her move. "I would not presume to debate you on that point, Tom."

He was unable to hold back a chuckle. "Even though you probably don't intend to, you always put a smile on my face."

Sten did not react. Instead, she said, "It would be unwise for you to make career choices with me in mind, Tom. I am a Vulcan. I am unable to return your emotions. There would be no logic in pursuing a relationship with me, as there would be no reciprocation."

"I sincerely doubt that," Tom replied, his smile now gone. He stood up, unable to play any further. She had never openly rejected him; instead allowing him to get close to her, spend all that time with her. This was, to him, as close to a rejection as Sten would get. "You suppress your emotions, Sten, and you refuse to allow yourself to be governed by them. You still possess them."

"That may be true, however, you cannot assume that I would change who I am," Sten said, her voice the same dispassionate tone she always used with him and others. Sure, she addressed him by his first name, but that was out of respect for his desire that she do so. Had he not, he was sure she would still call him "Lieutenant," or "Mister Donner."

Tom did not face her. He spoke to the bulkhead, "I like you just the way you are." Was that a lie? Something said to convince her of his emotional state, or did he honestly believe that? He sighed, "That's not true. Sometimes, I do wish you were able to feel as freely as I do. It drives me a up a wall to look at you and feel the way I do, hoping and wishing that you would smile at me."

"You are infatuated with me," Sten concluded.

"Maybe that's it," Tom admitted. He returned to his seat, folding his arms over his midsection and thinking about the decision he had to make. "Would you answer a question for me?"

Sten nodded, "Of course, Tom."

He asked, "If I were to take the teaching position at the Academy for a few years, and if in that time, I still felt as strongly as I do now toward you, would you reconsider a more intimate relationship with me at that time?"

"Tom, I do not believe it would be wise to..."

He raised a hand, "Sten, if I was to care as deeply for you in five or ten years as I do right now, would you accept those feelings? Would you understand and maybe even, I don't know, just let me be with you?" He looked away, a blush settling on his cheeks, "Maybe for the rest of my life?"

"You are speaking of marriage?" Sten asked, her tone changing for the first time that entire evening. "Is this a proposal?"

Tom stammered, "N-Not exactly. I'm not proposing we get married. I was asking a hypothetical question, really."

"Hypothetically, then, I can only answer that it is a possibility," Sten replied.

He thought over her response, trying to figure out if there was another meaning behind it. But her tone was so level; he failed to detect any hidden messages. Tom took it at face value, "That's good enough, then. I will transfer to the Academy. Until then, may I correspond with you?"

"I would welcome your mail, Tom," she said. Gesturing toward the table, with the misshapen sphere atop it, she asked, "Now, may we finish the game?"

Sten remained aboard the *Pride of Qo'noS* until January left at the end of 2368, accepting the invitation to continue to serve as her executive officer aboard a new command. In 2369, Sten received a promotion to the rank of Lieutenant Commander, and had earned herself two letters of commendation from Commander McKenna for outstanding service in the line of duty. Though Sten outwardly held no affection for McKenna, it was clear to many who served under them that they had grown to being as close as friends that a Vulcan would allow.

However, their professional association came to an end when Sten was offered command of the Shutsugun-class USS *Kearsarge* in 2370. Following the end of the Borg War in 2371, Sten's time in grade and promotion to Commander was confirmed. She took the *Kearsarge* on a five-year exploration mission into the Beta Quadrant, attached to Deep Space Five. Throughout the years of the mission, Sten maintained frequent correspondence with January and Tom Donner, though the relationship between Sten and Donner grew to an intimate level despite the distance between them. She found logic in Donner's request to marry her in 2376, and upon her return to the Alpha Quadrant, she and Thomas Donner became husband and wife in the spring of 2377 on Betazed.

Captain Sten is currently the commanding officer of the Sovereign-class battlecruiser USS *Aphrodite*, assigned to the Rigellian Defense Fleet at Starbase 12.

The Battle of Wolf 359 Memorial Ribbon was distributed to all those who served at the Battle, or was within Starfleet at the time that the battle occurred. Most of the Borg War veterans wore it as a way to remind others of the sacrifice of so many people. Since the end of the Borg War and the beginning of this new war with the Breen, January McKenna had often visited the physical memorial that was constructed on Qo'noS in the last year of the Borg War. All of the names of her shipmates were placed underneath the heading "USS Roosevelt." Captain Sotek. Commander Granger Kim. Ensign Kimberly Dawes. She visited this list several times out of every year. Prior to each assignment since the wall was constructed, to would stand before the names and speak to them.

"Well, Captain, sir," she said, looking at Sotek's name. "They finally promoted me up, gave me a carrier. Her name is the *Ark Royal*; she's one of those new model Akira-class ships I told you about last time."

Jan allowed her eyes to drift down to the first officer's name. He was killed while standing over her when the bridge superstructure gave way. She always believed he saved her life. "We've got a new enemy, now. The Breen. Those helmeted people that you never really cared for, Commander. They attacked the Venture some time ago, and now the High Council's up in arms again. We're all being ordered to move out as soon as possible."

By the time her eyes moved downward to her friend's name, the operations ensign who had lent her the headband that morning before shift. January cradled the now faded headband in her hand, worn and old from years of use. "Kim..." She was unable to say anything further, her eyes welling up and her throat constricting. She coughed to try and clear her voice for use, but it was pointless to try and continue.

Reaching up with her hand, she placed the headband on her head and smoothed her hair back into a more manageable position. She brought her hand up in a salute to the list, and then activated her communications implant. "McKenna to *Ark Royal*. One to beam up."

Captain January A. McKenna dematerialized within the transporter beam, fading from view until it was if though she never existed in the first place.

Lieutenant Commander January A. McKenna relinquished command of the *Pride of Qo'noS* to accept command of the Nebula-class heavy cruiser USS *Phoenix* on New Year's Day, 2369. Three years after the Battle of Wolf 359, and one year after the victory at Cirrius Prime, January proved herself as a capable starship captain for over twenty years after. She remained close with Sten, following her choice to pursue her career to its logical end. She lost touch with Norman after Cirrius Prime, and kept in touch with Thomas Donner from time to time.

Though she did attain the rank of Commander by the time the Borg War ended, due to a lack of time in grade as a Lieutenant, the Bureau of Personnel reduced her one grade back to Lieutenant Commander. She was relieved of command of the *Phoenix* and offered the opportunity to retire her commission, along with a great many officers who wished to put down their arms and return to their families. January had no other family beyond Starfleet, and elected to remain an officer. She was assigned as a staff officer on Admiral Mandukar'us' and then Admiral Sanuk's staff on Qo'noS and Spacedock for three years, until she returned back in favor with the Bureau as a Commander once more in 2374. While she worked at a desk on Spacedock, her accounts and logs were made a part of the same book that Donner collaborated on. That book was entitled *Perseverance Overcomes Adversity: A Study of the Borg War*. The proceeds from the successful sale of the book provided her with a comfortable account at the Intergalactic Bank; however, she declined to retire outright.

In 2377, Commander McKenna was Captain Sten's maid of honor, and it was during a conversation at the reception that January was convinced to return to active duty. Captain Sten had invited her aboard her ship as executive officer, but out of respect, January declined the offer. Instead, she reapplied for command status with Starfleet, and six months later, was assigned as the commanding officer of the Intrepid-class light cruiser *Constitution* and accepted a three-year mission to patrol the Alliance borders.

When the Breen attacked Beerax in 2380, and war was declared, Commander McKenna was promoted to the rank of Captain and given command of the Nadesico-class escort carrier USS *Ark Royal*. On Sunday, February 26, 2381, Captain January McKenna, after having given the order to abandon ship, piloted the *Ark Royal* into a Breen heavy cruiser in a vain attempt to prevent the Breen from capturing the Brethrax Colony. She did not survive. Posthumously, she was the recipient of the Medal of Valor for her actions in battle.

Chapter End Notes

This novella is the product of a brainstorm session held back in February of 1996, when my closest friend on this planet said he had an idea for a fictional story set in the Star Trek universe. Having been a longtime aficionado of the series, and also having established myself as an amateur writer in the past, he held the contention that I should be the one to write that story. Though, as with all things, his ideas of what would happen and mine were a little different. If I recall correctly, his idea was to simply write a retrospective on the deaths of the *Enterprise-D* characters, remarking that their attempt was a successful one. Riker simply did not wait for Data and rammed the cube, thus destroying it. From there, it was his notion that an exploration of an *Enterprise-less* Starfleet would be in order.

I disagreed, citing that while the *Enterprise* probably would have done damage, the Cube would have survived. Instead of a slightly more status quo story, I chose to turn the Trek universe on its ear and examine a Borg-infested Alpha Quadrant. This idea led to the creation of an online role-playing game, which is thriving very well as of this writing, called *Where No One Has Gone Before*. The game started a little over six months later, in November of the same year. As the story on that game progressed, it did not actually begin until two or three years following the destruction of the cube at Sector Zero-Zero-One, when the *Kyuushu-class* warbirds were very common.

A few players had always brought the pre-history of the game, or the "Lost Years" between *Best of Both Worlds, Part II* and the moment when the timer began into question from time to time. There was an eagerness to understand how this all came to be in a dramatic setting, and then as I often do, I began to go over it in my head. The first chapter was completed on August 22, 1997, and the second and third chapters followed within a month. But then, due to personal emergencies, I was no longer able to really spend any more time on the series of stories like I used to. It was not until July of this year that I began revisiting this project and decided to write it out to its end.

With that explanation out of the way, let's start thanking all the people who made this little piece of fiction possible:

- First and foremost, I have to thank Todd James. Without him, there wouldn't have been a story, and of course, due to his ability to pre-read everything before publishing, he brought a certain amount of pressure to bear on getting this project completed. Not to mention that a lot of his personality was thinly visible on one of the four main characters, and that helped me to understand how to write that character solidly.
- I would also like to include Todd's little sister Teriann, for whom January was founded upon. She provided a base for the

character's personality from the first chapter. It's akin to using a little Teri template and then moving on. I'm trying to soften this little revelation because I often described January as a very disturbed individual.

- Further, there are the administrators and players of Where No One Has Gone Before, such as the ones I mentioned by name within the story (Mandukar'us, tr'Kheriov, Ruao), and also those who were reading immediately following an update and providing some good comments, or even just an acknowledgement of the work done.
- Lastly, I'd like to thank a certain Coast Guard chief petty officer who often provides me with hours of entertainment in helping me to understand how the inner workings of the maritime military work. Without that assistance, the true limits of my knowledge would begin and end with what I've seen in Star Trek. It has always been my intention to bring a certain level of contemporary realism to my work, and keeping with the military traditions we all have come to know and love is a big part of that.

This novella is dedicated to the memory of SSgt Daniel O. Valencia, United States Army Air Corps (ret).

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