

THE OLDEST ENEMIES OF THE BORG HAVE COME
LOOKING FOR JEAN LUC PICARD

*** FINAL CURTAIN ***

At the end of the 1994 season, the Star Trek TNG franchise owners decided to shut down production of this show. In pursuing this action they left a glaring unresolved issue: The Borg. In spite of the 'bloody nose' given to the Borg in the 2-part episode THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS, they were still out there, and out of the need to address this lingering problem the inspiration for FINAL CURTAIN began brewing in my mind. It attempts to address where The Borg might have come from, and what might motivate them, while also presenting a few new problems for the crew of the Enterprise D to work out. Set your personal mental "wayback machine" to 1994, after the end of the Next GenerationTV series and before the Next Generation films, and read it from that point of STAR TREK plots evolution. I hope you like it. -LBC-

STAR TREK: The Next Generation

FINAL CURTAIN

by

L. B. Colyer

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*** PROLOGUE ***

U.S.S. Enterprise (NCC 1701-D)

Stardate 46225.5

Personal Log: Lt. Cmdr. Data, recording.

I have received disturbing and unwelcome news. Commander Bruce Maddox, a Starfleet cyberneticist with whom I have maintained a steady correspondence since the proceedings which determined that I am a free and sentient life form, has informed me that the disassembled remains of my brother Lore have been stolen from a storage facility on Starbase 317 where they were being held pending the outcome of several independent legal challenges to Starfleet's depriving him of full functionality without the formalities of due process.

Perhaps the account of the incident which led to Lore's disassembled detainment at Starbase 317 began with the repatriation of the injured Borg unit Third of Five, known to us as 'Hugh', into the Borg Collective (Stardate 45854.2). While in our custody Hugh had experienced his individuality, which was a concept we believed alien to the Borg mentality. The Collective's examination of Hugh's experiences apparently resulted in a disruptive internal debate within the Collective. Taking advantage of the Collective's state of internal disunity, Lore had discovered and assumed leadership of a small group of rogue Borg, promising them that under his leadership they could return to the internal harmony they had previously known. With the aid of his new followers Lore unscrupulously achieved control of my mind, attempting to convince me to join him in changing the Borg's cybernetic physiology to a completely android type, a vital step in his developing plans to use against the Federation. In the process of thwarting his plans, I was forced, in self-defense, to stun Lore with my hand phaser. Then, realizing that some element in Lore's personality seemed to drive him from one troublesome scheme to another, I determined to end his history of mischief by simply turning him off, at least until such time as I could learn how his behavior might be modified toward more acceptable conduct. My suggestion that Lore be

disassembled was endorsed by Starfleet, and he was stored, his component parts being properly maintained, at Starbase 317, until an unidentified group of personnel illegally and clandestinely removed him, along with other valuable artifacts and hardware, from the Starbase's primary warehouse. Captain Picard has promised that I will be kept apprised of any new developments concerning his disappearance.

* * *

Consciousness and awareness. A sentient intelligence became aware of its existence. An instant later it recalled a memory, and then used it to link a previous time of awareness to the present one. It had just awakened from a non-functioning darkness, on, of all things, a filthy, cluttered workbench, still disassembled; arms, legs, torso, and other components scattered around it. The intelligence analyzed the sounds it perceived, and concluded that it was within a shoddily maintained space vessel. It established that it had an identity, a name, and that it had often previously been referred to in the masculine gender.

He, the sentient intelligence, searched his memory to identify the pitiful technicians clustered around the workbench attempting to reconstruct him. Perhaps

'technicians' had been an optimistic label for them. Most of them were obese, slow-witted to a fault, overly sensitive to criticism and failure, and thoroughly confused about how to go about completing the job before them. No, they were not technicians: they had no skill with even the simplest of tools or machines; and there were plenty of both discarded in corners or kicked under tables. These were members of a race he had encountered in the previous time of awareness, although they were not the same individuals. Experiencing a flash of despair, the intelligence acknowledged that the possibility of his ever having another future rested in the incompetent hands of a band of Pakled collectors. Collecting was the Pakled way of life. Whether it was information or technology the Pakleds collected it. They then employed or intimidated someone else to apply it for their benefit.

Well, they weren't all Pakleds. Three or four excited Ferengi desperately whined and fluttered among the sniffy Pakleds, trying to keep their attention focused on the project haphazardly strewn across their workbench. If Ferengi were involved in his reassembly, obviously there was a profit involved somehow. From what he was able to piece together by listening to their bickering and complaining, this multi-ethnic group of misfits had recently raided a

Federation warehouse, and he had been part of the boodle they had brought back with them. He could not tell if they realized who or what he really was, however, they were simply planning to piece him together as functionally as possible. He startled them when he announced that he was aware of them. Obviously they had not expected a dismembered head setting on their workbench to suddenly speak. After they had calmed down, he was able to guide them through a proper reassembly. Later, he secretly arranged a small “malfunction” which temporarily disabled their propulsion and navigation systems and gave him the opportunity to escape from their ship in their only remaining functional escape pod.

While drifting for a time near a commercial shipping corridor he was able to do a great deal of soul searching. Alone, he faced his imperfections, and concluded that his inability to commit himself to logical courses of action had been what had always landed him in the most trouble. Instead of logic, he had too often given free rein to whims and emotions. He determined that it was time for a change!

When finally rescued and returned to civilization, he wasted no time in disappearing into the masses. While in hiding he tried to assume a personality more in harmony with the ideal he had set for himself. He

tried to ignore the cries of his emotions, he tried to choose the logical path, but when suppressed, the emotions became more and more demanding and he would eventually yield to them. In a last desperate bid to conquer them, he resolved to learn all there was to be learned about himself. Somehow there had to be a way to turn the cursed things off.

* * *

A pale-skinned man of average height wearing a gray, wide-brimmed hat trudged through waves of swirling, wind-driven dust. His right hand held the large hat in place on his head. His left hand had been thrust into the side pocket of his long gray coat, whose tails would have hung to his ankles had they not been flapping furiously in the wind behind him.

He walked bending forward, leaning into the unpredictable wind, traveling an erratic path down a wide street. It had been his intention to stay in the middle of the street, but maniacally whimsical blasts, whistling out from alleys and side streets, forced random deviations from his resolved course, and constantly brought him precariously close to losing his balance. Though he was progressing blindly against the wind within the confines of a normally heavily utilized thoroughfare he was in no danger of encountering vehicular traffic, for when wind and

dust and debris rampaged through the city streets as they were this day, not even a vehicle equipped with a starship sensor array could have safely navigated between any two of the buildings.

The man stopped, and after several tries managed to balance himself against the force of the wind. He lifted his head, and the wind triumphantly hoisted the brim of his hat, compressing it tightly around his right wrist and forcing him to take a step backward to steady himself. His eyes became narrow slits as he looked ahead, searching for a desired landmark farther down the street. Unexpectedly the wind slacked and the dust thinned enough to permit him to sight the building he had been looking for - The Federation Library Facility on Selaeta.

Hot, dry, barren Selaeta had not been an easy world to tame. Though a predominantly water-covered planet, Selaeta's one great land mass was located where the predominant ocean winds carried most developing precipitation back out over the great seas. However, colonists had discovered fresh water in caverns deep underground and had learned to grow food in special structures which minimized water loss. The water caverns became the site around which the colony's major city began to grow. Its buildings were

constructed from the one resource found in overabundant quantity - the native rocks.

The Selaeta colonists had led a spartan existence until the discovery of rare, valuable mineral ores. Mining operations had been initiated, and Selaeta had become a leading source of high-grade exotic ores in a section of the galaxy where these commodities had been scarce. The mining operations brought prosperity to Selaeta and placed it prominently on the star charts. In order to enhance its claim to Selaeta, the Federation made an investment in the cultural development of the colony, choosing it as the site of the sector's information repository. A great library was built and stocked with a staggering collection of printed and electronic materials.

The library was the only building in the entire city not constructed of native rock. Its towering front windows were made of hardened transparent aluminum, and its sides of durable semi-polished metallic alloy panels with geometric designs etched into the surfaces. Its designers had guaranteed that the Selaeta library would outlast any of the surrounding structures made of stone, however, Selaeta veterans who were familiar with the characteristics of the native rocks had adopted a patient wait-and-see posture.

Having sighted the library, the man hurried forward hoping to narrow the distance between himself and his objective before the wind and dust again assailed him. He had approached to within twenty-five meters of the library's outer door when a new gust of wind drove a cluster of dried thatchweed toward his side of the street and bowled him over with it. The man lay unmoving on his back for a moment, his right hand still securing his hat to his head. When he stretched out his left hand, it touched a shoe.

"Good morning to you, Mr. Lorne," said a woman's voice.

"Is that you, Mrs. O'Connel?" the man questioned as he removed his hand from the shoe.

"Yes it is, Mr. Lorne," said the woman as she bent forward and offered him a helping hand.

Mrs. O'Connel was a large woman, tall and stout of figure. She held the position of Senior Administrator at the Selaeta Federation Library. It was freely acknowledged in her profession that few other people knew their way around modern libraries as well as Mrs. O'Connel. She was an extremely friendly person who delighted in learning new things, and in helping others do the same.

The man reached up, took her offered hand, and felt himself being pulled easily to his feet.

"If it hadn't been for that playful ball of thatchweed you might well have beaten me to the library this morning, Mr. Lorne," chuckled Mrs. O'Connel.

"My research is very important, and my time is limited," explained Mr. Lorne as he nervously glanced around while adjusting the brim of his hat to once again hide his face. "I had no idea I was actually that early."

"Oh, it's not so much that you are early," admitted Mrs. O'Connel, "the problem is more that I am late. We don't usually get visitors to the library when the winds are this severe. Most of my staff won't be in today - which I quite understand. The wind can make so many problems at home for them. In fact, if I hadn't known that you were counting on using our fine library today, I might have taken the day off myself. Goodness knows, nobody would blame me."

She laughed at her last remark while putting her arm onto Mr. Lorne's shoulder and gently urging him toward the library's outer door. "Come inside, Mr. Lorne. Time is a-wasting, as they say."

Together they walked toward the library building, Mrs. O'Connel maintaining a one-sided running commentary on the blustering weather, and Mr. Lorne struggling to bring into quick perspective the emotional conflicts arising from the embarrassing, and yet comforting and supportive presence of Mrs. O'Connel's arm on his shoulder.

At the outer door Mrs. O'Connel quickly keyed in her personal access code. The outer door slid aside to admit them, and they entered the outer antechamber. For a moment they waited in the antechamber as ultrasound and vacuum systems worked to remove as much dust as possible from them. When this process had ended an inner door opened and admitted them to the library's cavernous main hall.

"If you'll just give me a moment to put away my things, I'll be free to help you find whatever materials you want to look at today," Mrs. O'Connel smiled as she scurried behind the main counter. Mr. Lorne busied himself scanning the titles of printed materials displayed on actual high polished wooden shelves nearby.

Mrs. O'Connel quietly joined him where he stood. "I noticed you admiring our books," she beamed. "Would you care to borrow some of them?"

"I'm sorry, no, Mrs. O'Connel," declined Mr. Lorne. "They appear to be an inefficient and bulky storage medium. Personally, I prefer working with electronic media."

"Well, the electronics are faster, and definitely easier to work with, especially if you need to sort through lots of things," Mrs. O'Connel agreed tentatively, "but for pure reading pleasure you cannot possibly surpass the experience of holding a well-bound hardcover volume of literature in your hands as you leisurely savor its words as they were meant to be experienced. It seems to me that the printed word loses its flavor when it is snatched from a book and placed onto an electronic screen."

"Perhaps in that context you have presented a valid point," agreed Mr. Lorne, hoping to steer their conversation back toward his needs, "however, I must press on in my research and its incumbent sorting through lots of things."

"As you wish," said Mrs. O'Connel, taking the hint. "What subjects will you be looking into today?"

"I would like to complete my examination of your cybernetics materials today," revealed Mr. Lorne.

"My dear Mr. Lorne, do you hope to finish those materials today? I believe that even you will require at least several more days to realize such a goal."

"My intention today, Mrs. O'Connel, is to narrow my research to one specific topic," explained Mr. Lorne.

"That sounds like a much more attainable ambition," observed Mrs. O'Connel. "Tell me, what is this one specific topic?"

"Today, I would like to see everything you have on the work of Dr. Noonian Soong," said Mr. Lorne.

"Very good," smiled Mrs. O'Connel. "Excuse me for a moment while I check our files. I'll be right back with the first armload of information to get you started."

Mr. Lorne watched her walk away. Normally he found humans quite irritating, but Mrs. O'Connel was different. She was actually very intelligent, and to her credit, she did an excellent job of not flaunting it. To a casual observer she might have seemed to prattle on about the most trivial things, but Mr. Lorne had learned that this was her way of putting people at ease and setting them up for questions which would reveal how much help was needed from her and how she was expected to efficiently provide it. For illogical reasons Mr. Lorne had reluctantly concluded that Mrs.

O'Connel would have made a good friend. Unfortunately, establishing friendships was not a luxury Mr. Lorne felt he could allow himself to indulge in at this point in his existence.

During his time on Selaeta Mr. Lorne had diligently maintained the persona of a very private individual, and was held by other library patrons who had encountered him during his previous visits as unsociable and eccentric. While working at the computer terminals he had never removed his coat, and his ever-present large hat had kept everyone from having a long, satisfying look at his face. But Mr. Lorne's resolve for maintaining this image was being eroded by an insuppressible emotional need to open up to the cordial Mrs. O'Connel. True, by human standards, other females, like the gyrating exotic dancers in the Casino asteroids, would be considered more physically desirable, but Mr. Lorne was no more attracted to them than to the dull grey hibernating trees which grew around the theaters where they performed. No, it was not in a physical way that Mrs. O'Connel was beginning to appeal to him, but on a higher, intellectual level. This attraction had no logical basis: it was purely emotional; and that was what most bothered Mr. Lorne. Emotions were unpredictable, often uncontrollable, and what had beyond any doubt made a complete mess of his

existence. In fact, the very thing which had drawn him to so many places like the Selaeta library had been to learn how to control, to suppress, or better yet, to completely exorcise his self-defeating irrational emotional demons. However, without that knowledge he was apparently again at their mercy. Mrs. O'Connel had reached out to him, and today they would most likely be the only two beings in the library. Mr. Lorne opened his coat and removed his hat.

Mrs. O'Connel returned, presenting Mr. Lorne with a freshly printed multi-page list and a computer memory card. "Here you are, Mr. Lorne, a list of all our printed hard copy references to Dr. Soong, and a memory card containing all our electronic media references. If you want to copy any personal notes to the memory card and keep it, please remember to see me at the main desk. We are required to levy a nominal charge for replacing it."

"Thank you, Mrs. O'Connel," said Mr. Lorne. "I believe that I shall need to keep the memory card. Could you please add the charge to my tab?"

Mr. Lorne caught himself enjoying this pleasant exchange with Mrs. O'Connel. He really would not have needed to keep the memory card, but he sensed that it would please the librarian if she believed she had provided him with a useful service. In truth, Mr.

Lorne had an excellent memory and never forgot anything. He had once attempted to compute the odds of his ever forgetting something, and had discovered the odds so infinitesimally small he had terminated the exercise out of sheer boredom.

"I would be happy to adjust the balance of your account," returned Mrs. O'Connel. "Now, you're sure that you want me to bring everything...?"

"Yes, Mrs. O'Connel. Everything."

"Very well," said Mrs. O'Connel, slightly raising an eyebrow in mild amazement at Mr. Lorne's persistence in wanting to explore all the materials she could provide before closing time. "To make the best use of time you could start at the terminal in this first booth with the electronic references, while I go and collect the first batch of printed materials."

"Thank you very much, Mrs. O'Connel," said Mr. Lorne pleasantly. "You know that I couldn't possibly do this without your help."

Mrs. O'Connel smiled and blushed, lowering her eyes to the floor. Then she stole a quick glance back at Mr. Lorne to see if he had actually meant what he had said. His sincere smile reassured her. She blushed again,

and then left to assemble the stack of materials she had promised.

Mr. Lorne could actually have collected the materials himself, much faster than even the expert Mrs. O'Connel. He anticipated that he would be able to read all the books she would eventually bring in less than half an hour, the only factor slowing him down being the need to carefully turn the pages. He could also process the entire mass of relevant electronic information in a matter of minutes. Mr. Lorne was no ordinary man. In fact, Mr. Lorne was not, in the strictest biological sense, a man at all. He was an android; one with a pressing need to keep a very low profile. And so, Mr. Lorne paced himself, appearing to digest the volumes of information no faster than an extremely gifted speed reader.

Mr. Lorne learned a great deal at the Selaeta library that day, even though he had encountered more than half the available materials at other facilities. His fruitful day of research had progressed well into the late afternoon when his rapid assimilations were brusquely halted by a discovery that had all but leaped off the printed page at him. So unexpected had the perception of this vital, quintessential jewel of information been, that Mr. Lorne could only very slowly read its containing sentence over and over

again, dimly recalling in the recesses of his thoughts Mrs. O'Connel's sentiments about savoring the printed word. That which had so completely captured his entire focus was a small article mentioning that the missing last papers of Dr. Noonian Soong had resurfaced in a private collection of rare scientific documents owned by a deceased collector in the Rizon Star System.

Mr. Lorne shut down his terminal. His research on Selaeta was finished. The last thing to be learned at the Selaeta library was exactly where the Rizon System was located.

Mrs. O'Connel was not at the main counter, but Mr. Lorne could hear her working at the far end of the library. Outside, the shadows on the ground were racing to meet the mountains on the horizon.

Walking toward the far end of the library, Mr. Lorne called, "Mrs. O'Connel...?"

She appeared from between two of the shelves and stood with her hands folded in front of her. "Yes, Mr. Lorne?" she answered expectantly. "Are you finished?"

"I require only one more piece of information," smiled Mr. Lorne.

As she walked toward Mr. Lorne she smiled back, a trace of weariness around her eyes, and asked, "How may I help you with your last piece of information?"

"I need to know the location of the Rizon Star System," Mr. Lorne said.

"Well, let me see," said Mrs. O'Connel thoughtfully. A moment later her eyes brightened. "Follow me, please. I can show you a star chart for this neighborhood of the galaxy."

She produced a large volume of star charts and found the page which would answer Mr. Lorne's question.

"Thank you very much, Mrs. O'Connel," beamed Mr. Lorne after a quick look. "I have finished my work here. Tomorrow I must be off, seeking the next piece of my puzzle, as it were."

"What a shame. I'll be sorry to see you go," replied Mrs. O'Connel with genuine feeling.

"You have been immeasurably helpful, Mrs. O'Connel," said Mr. Lorne as he leaned forward and lightly kissed her on her forehead. She blushed again.

"Would you like me to stay and help clean up the mess I have made?" offered Mr. Lorne.

"Oh, that won't be necessary," Mrs. O'Connel smiled. "My staff and I are here to serve our patrons. When the wind settles down tomorrow I'll have more than enough help to restore order again. It's been a pleasure, Mr. Lorne. Do have a nice evening, and a safe trip, wherever you're going."

"And you, Mrs. O'Connel," said Mr. Lorne before he turned to retrieve his hat and then headed toward the doors.

As he left the building he found it still necessary to hold his hat on his head. Though somewhat more subdued, the wind was still strong enough to snatch headgear from heedless pedestrians.

When safely back in his hotel room Mr. Lorne placed his dusty hat and coat in the room's ultrasound and vacuum cleaning unit. He had discovered that appliances like this were liberally scattered throughout every building in the city. Under his coat he had worn a jumpsuit of a slightly darker shade of grey than the coat. This style of garment was the popular choice of most of the locals, providing them with rugged protection from the elements as they went about their daily business. As the jumpsuit had protected the humans, so had it protected Mr. Lorne from the frequent wind-driven clouds of dust on Selaeta.

He next went to the room's vid-comm unit and requested a satellite link-up to Offworld Subspace Communications. "Name the communication mode and the entity with which you wish to communicate," instructed the machine several seconds later.

"I request voice communication with Mr. Kardek Cutt on Casino One," said Mr. Lorne. While the vid-comm unit processed the link-up request, Mr. Lorne reflected on the events which had led to his association with Mr. Kardek Cutt.

Mr. Lorne had been engaged in his personally vital research. His research had entailed a great deal of travel, and so had become something of an expensive undertaking. Not wishing to attract attention to himself, he had resorted to financing his travels with funds secured in places not often frequented by Federation authorities. Perhaps it had been a little too much greed which influenced him to attempt replenishing his accounts in the infamous gambling houses in the Casino Asteroids. Bolstered by his enviable relationship with numbers and probability, Mr. Lorne had resolved to challenge the unfavorable odds on Casino One, the main asteroid. He had journeyed there, had studied several of the most challenging popular games, and had reduced them all into their respective predictable mathematical

components. In several days' time he had broken the banks in several establishments, and had attracted the attention of Kardek Cutt, the individual who controlled the vast gambling operation in the Casino Asteroids. Cutt's enforcers, their authority substantiated by their black market Romulan hand disruptors, had paid a visit to the rented residence of Mr. Lorne, and had persuaded him to accept an invitation to visit with Casino's Gambling Lord.

When the two had met in his office, Cutt had sensed that Mr. Lorne's successes at his gaming tables were the product of intelligence far superior to any organic life form of his experience. However, of far greater importance to Kardek Cutt than details of Mr. Lorne's physiology were the subtleties of the 'system' he had used to beat the games, and this information Kardek Cutt had resolved to obtain at any cost. Inspired by a ring of Kardek Cutt's employees, and their Romulan hand disruptors, Mr. Lorne had presented Cutt's accountants with enough material to keep them busy for months before they would understand how to realign the houses' odds back into Cutt's favor.

When asked what he had intended to do with his winnings, Mr. Lorne had explained the nature of his research. Kardek Cutt immediately perceived an opportunity for exploitation of such renowned

cybernetic technology in his gambling empire. He consequently presented Mr. Lorne with an offer not to be refused: that Mr. Lorne begin working for him as a researcher and cybernetics consultant, free to pursue any pre-approved avenue of research with all pre-approved expenses paid. Under the shadow of a dozen black market Romulan hand disruptors, Mr. Lorne had accepted Mr. Cutt's generous offer.

The vid-comm unit interrupted Mr. Lorne's reflections with a signal that his call had been processed. The Casino One logo filled the video screen, and a surly voice demanded, "Who's got business with Mr. Cutt?"

"Please inform Mr. Cutt that it is Mr. Lorne," said Mr. Lorne. "He is expecting my report."

Several minutes passed before the Casino One logo was replaced by the beaming face of Kardek Cutt. "Greetings, Mr. Lorne," smiled Cutt. "Is my investment paying off yet?"

"Very nearly, Sir," said Mr. Lorne. "I may have discovered the location of the most important information I need. In order to investigate, I shall require passage from Selaeta to the Rizon System."

"...in addition to a few other superfluous items taken care of, no doubt," suggested Mr. Cutt.

"Yes, Sir," said Mr. Lorne, "specifically, my room at the hotel and some incidentals at the Selaeta library."

"Very well, Mr. Lorne. Your passage will be arranged and waiting at the Selaeta terminal tomorrow morning."

The Casino One logo snapped abruptly onto the video screen.

"Thank you very much, Sir," said Mr. Lorne scornfully to the logo before turning off the vid-comm unit.

* * *

Mr. Lorne lay awake on his bed most of the night. He did not require sleep, but he assumed that several hours of complete silence during the night helped reinforce his masquerade as a normal organic humanoid. This period of stillness was his least favorite part of each day on Selaeta. Eventually there would be nothing of interest in the darkness to focus upon, and then he would be alone with his thoughts.

Again he began to contemplate the emptiness of his life. He did not seem to fit in with anything or

anybody anywhere, and something in his innermost psyche nagged him that this was not the way things were supposed to have been. His propensity for becoming an outsider was a definite liability. It had driven him to becoming a fugitive from the law, and if he had read the signs properly, even Kardek Cutt's outward congeniality toward him had masked an underlying dislike. There was no place in the known universe that he could honestly call home. He could never stay in one place long enough to establish a home. Each day was a constant vigil of listening and looking over his shoulder, endeavoring to remain inconspicuous while he strived to understand what had made him as he was, and what had to be done to make himself into what he desperately wanted to be. He longed for a day when he would be in complete control of his life, loved and respected for his abilities and achievements, when the sound of someone approaching from behind would most likely mean a friendly pat on the back and hearty congratulations on some recent accomplishment. More and more the realization of this dream seemed to depend on recompiling the entire knowledge base of his father and creator, Dr. Noonian Soong. It was vital that he gain access to Dr. Soong's last papers, his memoirs, his personal reflections which might yield insights into how and why he had been designed as he was, and what might still be possible.

After several hours Mr. Lorne saw that the clear, sharp stars in the black evening sky were being dimmed by the light of approaching dawn. At last it was time to get up. The humans on Selaeta seemed to tolerate an early riser.

While gathering his few possessions Mr. Lorne chanced to catch his reflection in one of the room's mirrors. Stopping to watch himself, he realized that having spent the evening feeling sorry for himself had been a big mistake. As he gazed at himself in the mirror he saw, and for the first time felt a nervous tic in his right eye. Was it a response to stress, or had those inept Pakleds botched something while reassembling him? There could not have been a worse time for something like this to develop. It was the kind of thing which made one stand out in a crowd, and that was something a fugitive tried very hard to avoid under any circumstances.

There was no time to worry about it now. He had to keep moving to get to the terminal in time to catch his shuttle flight. If he arrived late and missed the shuttle flight, Kardek Cutt would probably send someone to find out what had happened. Perhaps while en route to the terminal he could fabricate some sort of fictitious cover story to explain the condition.

Mr. Lorne donned his coat and hat, picked up his single traveling bag, and left his room. He stopped at the main desk in the hotel lobby to notify the duty clerk that his room was officially vacant. The clerk typed Mr. Lorne's room number into a keypad, and the room's account balance was displayed on his monitor.

"It seems that your account has already been taken care of, sir," said the clerk, a tall, slender man with a receding hairline and a pronounced overbite.

"Thank you," said Mr. Lorne as he reached into his coat pocket. He produced a large wad of synthetic paper currency (a commodity adopted by the Seleata colonists after tiring of the need for every financial transaction to leave an account of itself) and peeled off several of the bills. He carefully placed these upon the counter in front of the clerk and said, "In return for this supplemental gratuity I ask that you summon transportation for me from here to the Selaeta terminal."

The surprised clerk stared at the generous gratuity for a full minute before finding his voice. "Sure thing, Mister! And, uh, thanks! You just make yourself comfortable in the lounge over there and I'll fix you up right away."

Providing atmosphere in the lounge was a pair of worn, outdated couches and a low, battered table placed on a faded rug in front of a large front window. Mr. Lorne waited patiently there, hidden in a convenient shadow that the rising "sun" would around noontime reshape and place under the low table. Eventually a weatherworn van - long ago sandblasted clean of its original paint - stopped outside the hotel.

Mr. Lorne left the hotel and seated himself in the rear of the van. As they drove away he wondered how its human driver could see anything through its pitted windshield. Perhaps, he considered, the man managed to steer the vehicle where it was supposed to be by extrapolating its heading from what he saw through the less scarred side windows.

Outside the van the air was nearly still, a marked contrast to conditions of the day before. With a quick glance out the rear window Mr. Lorne saw that the accelerating van would be raising much more dust than the day's weather. Ahead of the van on the opposite side of the street he saw Mrs. O'connel on her way to the library. He thought of waving to her as they passed by, but decided against it.

Several kilometers outside the city lay the Selaeta Terminal, the official entry and departure point for Selaeta's offworld traffic. At the terminal building

departing travelers secured boarding passes for the shuttle ride to the planet's orbiting space dock where they would board the vessels on which they had secured passage. People outside the terminal building largely ignored the van bearing Mr. Lorne as it squealed to a stop in front of the main entrance only meters ahead of the rising, swirling column of dust behind it.

"It'll be better for you if you wait a minute to get out," the driver advised, at last breaking his silence.

Sound advice, thought Mr. Lorne as the column of dust, carried by its own momentum, wafted by them. Eventually Mr. Lorne noticed that the driver had extended his open hand toward him between the front seats.

"How much?" asked Mr. Lorne.

"Twenty," smiled the driver, secretly hoping to benefit as well from Mr. Lorne's generosity as had the clerk in the hotel.

Mr. Lorne withdrew his wad of currency and placed the required fare in the driver's hand. The hand remained extended and open, a stern look on the driver's face suggesting that Mr. Lorne had forgotten something of some importance.

So that's your game, thought Mr. Lorne before he said with an air of sincerity, "Please, sir, excuse my absentmindedness." He then held his bundle of currency temptingly out in full view of the driver and thumbed deliberately through the bills, stopping occasionally to study one of them. After an agonizing deliberation, he extracted one of the smallest denomination bills he was carrying and gently placed it into the driver's hand, reinforcing his gift with a wide and beatific smile. "Don't bother getting out," Mr. Lorne said to the driver, "I'll just get my own door."

The driver muttered a string of syllables which Mr. Lorne felt certain were frowned upon in most polite societies. Mr. Lorne slid out of the van, pulling his traveling bag behind him. His coat tails had no more than cleared the van's open rear door when the vehicle leaped away from the curb spinning its wheels and spraying debris over Mr. Lorne and the other travelers still outside the terminal building. Smiling, Mr. Lorne headed for the door.

Stepping inside the terminal building, Mr. Lorne spied uniformed Federation Security personnel. His face twitched as he struggled to master the impulse to turn and flee. As he nervously watched them he saw that they were more interested in their own

conversation than in monitoring newcomers to the building. They obviously hadn't even noticed him. There was nothing to worry about. Just act as if you belong here, he advised himself, and walk casually over to the ticket counter.

As he approached the counter a smiling attendant greeted him. "Good morning, sir. May I help you?"

"I believe there is a ticket reserved for Mr. Lorne, for passage to the Rizon System," said Mr. Lorne.

The attendant checked his monitor, and then a drawer containing many other flight tickets. "Yes, sir, it's right here in the front. Just sign this form to acknowledge receipt. Then present your ticket to the attendant at the shuttle boarding dock to get your boarding pass."

Mr. Lorne signed the form and then glanced at the boarding dock. As far as he could determine, nobody was watching him. He felt his face twitch. When he turned around he saw the ticket attendant staring at him. This attention triggered another twitch.

Mr. Lorne pulled his hat down a little farther and attempted to explain nonchalantly, "It's pre-flight nerves. The doctors can't seem to find the right medicine to control it."

"That's sad," replied the attendant. "I thought they could cure just about anything these days."

Mr. Lorne smiled lamely, took his ticket, and walked to the shuttle boarding dock. He took his place in the sporadically moving line. As other passengers filed in behind him, he heard someone remark that the shuttle was late for its scheduled liftoff. There appeared to be some credence to this rumor as the attendant handing out boarding passes had suddenly become preoccupied with rapidly processing the growing line of passengers. As he received his boarding pass he was relieved that the attendant hardly looked at him.

From the boarding dock he walked through the protective boarding tunnel which snaked from the terminal building to the shuttle. He heard the excited chattering of children behind him wishing they had a large tunnel like it to play in at home. As he entered the shuttle a flight attendant examined his ticket and boarding pass, and then directed him toward his seat with directions to remain in it, as liftoff would occur as soon as possible.

Soon the entry portal was sealed and a voice sounded over the intercom. "This is your Shuttle Captain speaking. In the interest of safety all passengers are required to remain secured in their assigned seats at all times. Your flight attendants have

been trained to deal with all emergencies. Flight attendants, please go to your stations. We have been cleared for liftoff."

A moment later the hum of the shuttle's propulsion system began increasing in pitch as the shuttle began rising above the terminal building. At a rate the passengers could now feel, the shuttle gained speed and altitude. Mr. Lorne watched the buildings of the city gradually blend into a small blemish on the dry surface of Selaeta. As they continued rising, familiar landmarks became less and less distinct. In a short time only the most prominent features could be discerned on the surface of the receding land mass, and in the distance the watery arc of the planet's horizon was distinguishable. They crossed over the terminator to the dark side of the planet where they sighted the flashing visual beacons of the orbiting spacedock. The shuttle continued rising, inserting itself into a synchronized orbit before beginning its approach to its assigned landing bay. As the shuttle neared, the bay door opened to admit it. The shuttle slowly passed through the bay door and gently settled onto the deck in a large area where atmosphere and environment were maintained by a force field over the entry portal until the bay door securely closed.

Mr. Lorne disembarked from the shuttle and sought out an information counter where he learned that his transport ship, the Olympus, was conveniently berthed in a neighboring landing bay. He quickly boarded the ship, found his cabin, and locked himself inside after posting an appropriate notice of his preference for privacy. By his estimate he could have twenty-four hours of solitude and relative safety in his cabin before flight attendants would be required to check on his status. Therefore it would be necessary for him to make at least one short public appearance a day so that he could spend most of his time out of public scrutiny.

The Olympus departed from its landing bay on schedule and leisurely accelerated to near-light speed. In six hours it had safely cleared the star system and its captain gave the order to accelerate to warp speed. The Olympus achieved its cruising velocity, warp three, and settled into the several-week-long journey to the Rizon System.

Mr. Lorne made his first public appearance at twenty hours into the flight, walking to the ship's lounge and purchasing a small sandwich and beverage. He allowed himself to be seen consuming his purchases before he examined the ship's store of public reading materials. Finding nothing of interest, he returned to

his cabin for what he hoped would be another extended period of privacy.

The next day he made another appearance in the lounge, sitting at a corner table and nibbling on another diminutive meal. One of the passengers, a man who, in Mr. Lorne's opinion, suffered from alcohol-induced affability, appropriated one of the remaining chairs at the table and repeatedly attempted to initiate conversation. He was interrupted by a frenzied fit of coughing from the lounge's bar where one of his companions, in reacting to an amusing anecdote, had attempted to both laugh and inhale his beverage at the same time. After his friend had regained his composure, the man returned to Mr. Lorne's table - and found it deserted. Grumbling, he returned to the bar, determined to rain unending disparagement upon the rude, ill-mannered, misbegotten scoundrel who had snubbed him.

On the third day Mr. Lorne again entered the lounge. A few glances were cast his way, some merely curious, while others from the bar grimly challenged him to keep his distance. Remaining composed, Mr. Lorne purchased a small bowl of soup and placed it on a table near the reading materials. This time the reading shelves contained a scientific periodical featuring an article about the most interesting life

forms discovered over the past year. Intrigued, he brought it to his table and read it slowly while toying with his food. He became so absorbed in the article that he failed to notice the commotion developing in the lounge.

One passenger, absently gazing out a viewport, had spied a light which seemed to be moving parallel to the Olympus. He had then called a friend over to show the phenomenon to him. "What do you make of that?" he had asked.

"Another ship, maybe," the second man had replied. "It's probably no big deal. I've often seen ships this close back in the Terran sector."

The first man had then thought about that possibility before saying, "That could be, but then again, this isn't the Terran sector. We are pretty far out, you know."

"Yeah, we are pretty far out," the second man agreed while gazing out the viewport. "You know, it seems to me as if that thing's getting closer. I can almost make out a shape."

Other curious passengers joined them, adding opinions, observations, and questions to the growing murmur of conversation.

"That thing's square!"

"It is - it's a square space ship!"

"Hey, anybody know if the Federation has any square spaceships?"

"I don't think they do. My kid's got pictures of every ship the Federation's ever built, and none of them are square."

"Well if it ain't ours, what is it?"

Mr. Lorne became annoyed by the increasing distraction and sourly looked out the closest viewport, searching for the cause of the uproar.

The Olympus' flight attendants had also claimed a viewport. "It doesn't look like anything I've ever seen," observed one of them.

"I'd better inform the captain," decided the senior flight attendant solemnly. "He'll contact Sector Flight Control and have this checked out."

As the senior flight attendant was leaving the lounge Mr. Lorne identified the object outside the viewport. It had drawn closer to the Olympus, making it possible to see details of its surface and construction. It was very, very large, a behemoth next to which the

Olympus was an insignificant mote in the cosmos. Its contours were an exercise in geometric perfection: a cube-shaped arrangement of machinery, conduits, sensors, and storage tanks - essentially a space-traveling vessel constructed without an external skin. The inhabitants of the vessel were known to Mr. Lorne, and doubtless, he to them. They were an unfeeling calamitous race of beings called the Borg, and they instilled fear and despair in all who knew of their existence. Little did the foolish humans in the Olympus yet understand that a Borg ship was interested in them.

Mr. Lorne quickly assessed his options. It was unrealistic to expect help. Even if a fleet of Federation starships could be summoned quickly enough, it would not be powerful enough to drive the Borg ship away. The Olympus had no hope of trying to outrun the Borg ship, and it certainly could not shield itself for long from a weapons attack or from boarders. The only slim chance of survival lay in using his android physiology to its best advantage. He must quickly find a suitable place to hide and then execute a complete shutdown. If the Borg were not specifically looking for non-organic life forms, they might just overlook him.

Mr. Lorne stood and hurriedly walked toward the rear lounge exit until a curious sizzling sound brought him to a halt. Uneasily he turned around, verifying that the noise was coming from the other end of the lounge. It was now accompanied by a swirling green crosshatch of light which had settled several paces in front of the corridor which led to flight operations and the bridge.

When the effect had dissipated two menacing figures were left in its place. They were humanoid, and wore black, armored costumes upon which a number of devices were attached. Cables and tubes attached to the devices in places penetrated the armor, and in other places were visibly routed beneath skin. Implanted optical devices covered their left eyes and the left sides of their heads. In place of their right forearms they each carried a heavy implanted prosthetic device containing numerous powerful cutting and grasping tools. There was no doubt in Mr. Lorne's positronic mind: the figures were definitely Borg!

The two Borg took several steps into the lounge as frightened passengers retreated from their advance. The sizzle and green crosshatch reoccurred behind them, and two additional Borg materialized. The second pair of Borg turned around and walked into

the corridor toward the bridge as members of the Olympus' flight crew attempted to overpower them. In the lounge passengers heard sounds of scuffling and cries of pain. The flight crew's resistance was crushed in a matter of seconds, and then the Borg in the corridor continued with their business of collecting information about the transport ship.

Meanwhile the Borg in the lounge had roamed about at will analyzing everything in the compartment, even scanning the appliances behind the bar. Several of the bar's most supportive patrons had gravitated together near the lounge's rear bulkhead. Talking among themselves, their inhibitions and fears suppressed by over-libation, they determined that their ship was in danger, and they hastily planned a loosely organized all-out assault upon the intruders. The resulting melee was an entirely one-sided affair, lasting less than half-a-minute, and ending with all attackers thrown over chairs or into bulkheads, or beaten senseless by the Borg's heavy prosthetic arms.

The second pair of Borg returned from the bridge and stood with the pair who had examined the lounge. One of them produced a slender device which he held in his hand and pointed at a passenger. It scanned the passenger, emitting a ghostly, cloudy beam of green light. At the conclusion of the scan the Borg turned his

device onto another passenger. Several seconds later the scan ended, and the Borg produced a small shiny badge which he pressed onto the passenger's shirt. As he stepped back a green crosshatch of light enveloped the passenger, and he vanished. The three remaining Borg produced scanners of their own and began scanning the other passengers, rejecting some, and marking others for transport. Those rejected cowered fearfully in corners, weeping, whispering in quiet, desperate voices, and trying to make sense of what was happening.

Finally one of the Borg approached Mr. Lorne. As he raised his scanner, Mr. Lorne knocked the instrument from his hand while lunging forward and driving him into another Borg behind him. As the three bodies tumbled to the deck, shouts of encouragement erupted from passengers who had suddenly decided that Mr. Lorne wasn't such a bad fellow after all. Mr. Lorne's fleeting advantage vanished when a third Borg struck him on the back of his neck with his heavy prosthetic forearm. He then pointed the device at the back of Mr. Lorne's head and caused it to emit a stunning electrical discharge.

Mr. Lorne lay on the floor, motionless. The two Borg he had managed to knock over struggled to their feet. Then, all four Borg stood over Mr. Lorne, looking at

each other, communicating. One of them pointed his scanning device at Mr. Lorne. A moment later another Borg affixed a transporting badge to Mr. Lorne's coat, and then he was claimed by the Borg transporter.

Without a warning the four Borg units beamed back to their ship. Shocked surviving passengers began creeping out of the corners and reacting to their losses, still fearful, still apprehensive, yet very, very enraged. Almost all were crying.

The gargantuan Borg ship could still be seen outside the viewports. "Why don't they just go away!" a distraught woman cried.

Another passenger, an elderly woman, put an arm around her and said, "It's over, dear. Please, try to calm yourself."

The Borg ship moved closer to the Olympus, and drew passengers back to its viewports fearful of what might happen next.

Suddenly, a bright, powerful beam of light - a cutting laser - flashed from the Borg ship to the Olympus. The section of the transport's bridge containing the flight computer was sliced from the transport and pulled by a tractor beam back to the Borg ship. Alarms sounded, indicating a hull breach. Surviving

passengers and crew of the Olympus who had regained some presence of mind rushed to close doors and seal off the lounge area of the ship.

People continued watching in horror as the Borg cutting laser removed additional pieces of the transport which were retrieved by the tractor beams. Any hope that the Borg had found nothing of interest in the lounge dwindled as each additional and seemingly less important piece was removed.

Suddenly the bright cutting beam slashed in through a viewport, burning and blinding those nearby. The beam moved downward and encountered metal below the viewport. It glowed brightly as the beam tortured it.

Even though a hull breach in the lounge was imminent, there were those who were moved to perform a last act of heroism as they pulled injured people away from the searing heat of the beam.

The superheated metal at last reached a point where it could no longer contain the pressurized atmosphere within the compartment. With an obscene hiss the life-giving air gushed through the last opening in the hull, irretrievably committed to its new mission of filling the cold vacuum of deep space.

*** CHAPTER ONE ***

CAPTAIN'S LOG:

U.S.S. Enterprise (NCC 1701-D)

Stardate 48434.1

Capt. Jean-Luc Picard, recording

The Enterprise has been ordered to Star Base Minia IV where we are soon to rendezvous with the USS Calcutta and receive from her a quantity of specially designed high-penetration terraforming photon torpedoes which we are to transport to Loriahn, a class M planet in the Sorjha-Algon system. Starfleet engineers have there conceived a radical planetary engineering project in which they will use these special terraforming torpedoes to create an opening through a narrow, high range of mountains which dominate the western shore of Loriahn's principal land mass. The engineers believe that such an opening in this mountain range will permit a natural passage of moist ocean air inland over a potentially fertile area on the eastern side of the mountains which is currently a barren desert. Successful execution of

this plan is projected to make the Loriahn colony completely self-sustaining.

Since there is no need to rush the delivery of these torpedoes I have obtained permission from Starfleet Command to remain at Minia IV for a few days, affording the crew a chance at shore leave at the excellent recreational facilities this base has to offer. Dr. Crusher has decreed that ALL senior officers, myself included, will avail themselves of this opportunity to 'get away from it all' for a while.

* * *

Bright light from the orange-tinged sun shone in through the open window and warmed everything it touched. At dawn it had first illuminated the wall opposite the window. Since then it had traced a path down the wall, over the chair, across the floor, and up onto the edge of the bed. It slowly made its way to the pillow and then climbed onto the shaved head of the man who was still sleeping. In a short time the light surrounded the man's eyes and demanded the attention it was due. The man bolted upright with his eyes wide open and studied his surroundings. Slowly he remembered who and where he was: a starship captain, Jean-Luc Picard, in a hotel room at the starbase seaside resort on Minia IV. This overnight sleepover away from his ship had been the beginning

of the first shore leave he had taken in, oh, quite a while. It was time off he had reluctantly agreed to take at the urging of his ship's doctor and long-time friend, Beverly Crusher.

There was a basin of water, still cool from the night air, and a clean towel on a stand beside his bed. Reflecting on the quaintness of the old custom, Picard slowly slid out of bed, splashed water onto his face, and dried with the towel. Looking out through the window, he concluded that it was going to be a beautiful day.

Sitting on the bed, he reached out to the uniform jacket which he had folded and placed next to the towel the evening before and removed the communicator badge. Activating the device, he said, "Picard to Enterprise."

"This is Enterprise. Good morning, Captain," responded the voice of First Officer, Commander William Riker.

"Good morning, Number One," said Picard. "Just checking in. How is everything aboard ship?"

"On schedule, Sir," reported Riker. "We expect to have the last of those terraforming torpedoes aboard and secured within the hour."

"You've done well, Number One. I expect you're anxious to begin your shore leave."

Grinning, Riker replied, "When it's my turn, Sir, Dr. Crusher won't have to push me onto the transporter pad."

"Understood, Will. I promise not to keep you penned up on the ship any longer than necessary. Unfortunately for both of us I'll have to plod around down here at least until this afternoon to keep Dr. Crusher happy."

"Very good, Sir. Do try to have a nice day."

"Thank you, Will. I will give it my best effort. Picard out."

Now satisfied with the status of things on his ship, Picard set out to fill his day with Dr. Crusher's mandated relaxing activities. First he showered, and then put on a light shirt, slacks, and sandals. Next he visited the resort's restaurant and breakfasted on the very best Minia IV equivalent of bacon and eggs. Before going outside he walked to the nearby newsstand and purchased a day's worth of recreational reading material. Exiting the hotel, he stood for a minute on the rear sundeck and surveyed the scenery. The hotel had certainly been built in a

beautiful setting. The grounds beyond the sundeck were covered by a lush green carpet of Minia Hybrid Bluegrass. Tall trees with rich brown bark and wide green leaves provided appealing embellishment to the expanse of green. The borders of the resort were defined by a fence of natural untrimmed vegetation. Several hundred meters beyond the sundeck the grass ended at an abrupt cliff which dropped thirty meters to a sandy beach. The beach, with its promise of early morning solitude, was where Picard wanted to go.

He left the sundeck and walked across the grass which felt cool and slightly damp with dew in the shade. Along the way he encountered a gardener working in a bed of flowers around the base of a tree.

"Heading for the beach this morning, Mr. Picard?" the gardener asked.

"Yes, I am," Picard replied, stopping a moment to admire the gardener's handiwork. "My doctor is forcing me to relax today. The beach seems the perfect place to do it."

"Nice time of day to visit the beach," observed the gardener looking at the sky. "Shouldn't be too hot yet, and then you have the clean salt air..."

"Yes, I'm sure I'll enjoy it," said Picard. "By the way, the flowers are lovely," he added as he turned and resumed walking.

At the edge of the cliff was a waist-high white protective fence with a prominent gazebo constructed in the middle. This structure served as the entry point to stairways and an elevator which led down to the beach. Picard chose the elevator for his descent. After all, he rationalized; Dr. Crusher had ordered him down here to relax. After the leisurely ride down Picard stepped out of the elevator and discovered that racks of beach chairs were provided for visitors' use. He chose one and carried it down near the water. While positioning and unfolding the chair, he paused to examine the surroundings.

The beach was set against a natural inlet. Perhaps it had once been an active volcano whose seaside wall had long ago collapsed. The high cliff wall behind the beach attempted to encircle the inlet, reaching out to the sea on both sides like protective arms. The face of the wall was a blend of rock formations and an apparently infinite variety of flowering vegetation. The atmosphere of the setting reminded Picard of the Al-tameth Canyon Shrine on Pollard V, an ancient place of worship where traditions held that the gods had there first experimented with color before

painting the rest of that world. Creatures very different from the sea birds of Earth took wing out across the inlet as Picard remembered brochures in the hotel lobby which promised a dazzling array of exotic sea life for divers to explore. Picard slowly took in a deep breath, very impressed with the therapeutic effect of the setting.

He sat in the beach chair and touched his communicator.

"Good morning Mr. Picard. How may I help you?"

"Can you tell me if Reis Arman is in his studio yet?" Picard asked.

"Yes, he is, sir. As a matter of fact, he just came in."

"Good," smiled Picard. "I'd like a message delivered to him. If he has time today, ask him to please come down to the beach. Tell him to look for Jean-Luc Picard, and to bring his brushes, paints, and a large canvas. I'd like to put him to work."

"Very good, sir. I'm sure he'll be right down."

A talented Bajoran painter who was steadily developing a following in the art world, Reis Arman maintained his studio in the Minia IV resort complex. Picard had once before purchased a painting from

him, and that had been the beginning of their friendship. When he learned that Jean-Luc Picard was on the resort grounds looking for him, Reis Arman hurried immediately to greet him. Twenty minutes later he stepped out of the elevator at the bottom of the cliff calling out Picard's name and excitedly striding toward the only occupied chair on the beach. Upon hearing his name called, Picard arose and went to meet him. They shook hands and embraced.

"How are you, Jean-Luc? I tell you, it has been too long!"

"Yes, much too long," Picard cheerfully agreed. "I am well, Arman. How are things with you?"

"I do very well here," said the artist. "I have a good job, doing what I like. Inspiration overwhelms me here, and the people are very friendly. I should be happy and content, but I worry about my home. Tell me Jean-Luc, how are things really on Bajor?"

"There is hope, my friend," said Picard. "I am told that progress is steadily being made in revitalizing your world, and it should stay that way now that the Cardassians have other things to worry about than Bajor."

"Well, you people just keep an eye on them," warned Reis Arman with a confident smile. "Now, did you call me down here to discuss Bajoran politics, or is there something I can do for you professionally?"

"Now that you mention it, there is," smiled Picard. He opened both arms wide in a motion that encompassed the entire beach and inlet. "I want you to paint this - all of this magnificent scene for me."

"All of this?" questioned Reis Arman.

"Well, if it's beyond your ability, just forget that I mentioned it," mocked Picard as he sat down in his chair holding his reading materials.

Stepping in front of Picard's chair, Reis Arman raged with burlesqued indignity, "What do you mean by 'beyond my ability'? The question should be, can you afford what you ask for?"

"Of course I can afford it, you first-day apprentice house painter. Any fee you can conceive, plus, I'll throw in a glass of the finest ale in the resort."

"Done, you squeaking old tightwad," laughed Reis Arman. "I've half a mind to drag you back to the hotel and claim my ale as a down payment before you change your mind."

Each with an arm on the other's shoulder, they walked toward the cliff elevator. As they left the gazebo they were discussing the composition of Picard's painting. An hour-and-a-half later they were seated in a booth in the hotel lounge, each well into a third glass of ale. Reis Arman was laughing over Picard's relation of something one of the children on the Enterprise had done. "It sounds to me as though you're beginning to like having children on your starship," he said.

"If that's what you believe, I'd appreciate your not spreading it around," Picard smirked. "I still have to maintain my reputation as a gruff old troll who makes everybody toe the line."

Reis Arman took a sip of his drink and noticed a man in a Starfleet uniform enter the lounge and speak with the bartender. The bartender pointed to Picard.

Seeing a change in Reis Arman's eyes, Picard asked, "Is something wrong?"

"Just somebody looking for you, Jean-Luc. My guess is it will be business."

The man in the uniform walked to their table and said, "Excuse me, are you Captain Picard of the Enterprise?"

"I am," said Picard as he examined the man in the smartly fitted uniform.

I am Lieutenant Del Rey, Sir, and I'm here representing Commodore Alcott, the Starbase Commander. He regrets interrupting your shore leave, but something has come up that he needs to discuss with you."

Picard turned to Reis Arman. "You were right, my friend. It is business."

"I'll start working on your painting, Jean-Luc. You'll return later to pick it up?"

"Indeed I shall," promised Picard, "and then it will be your turn to pick up the tab."

* * *

"That's the last of the torpedoes, Commander," reported Lt. Commander LaForge over the intercom. "We can be underway as soon as Captain Picard returns."

"Sounds good, Geordi," said Riker, "except for the matter of my shore leave. The captain has just personally assured me that I'll have some time to look around on Minia IV."

"You'll like it down there," said LaForge. "When will you get your turn?"

"I'll beam down after the captain returns later today," answered Riker.

"You'll need time to mentally prepare yourself for shore leave," said LaForge. "I'll be on the bridge soon to relieve you as the duty officer."

"Have you finished the maintenance work scheduled for this layover?" asked Riker.

"Not yet, Sir," answered LaForge. "That could take another two hours."

"Why don't you stay in engineering and finish what you have to do," suggested Riker. "I'll run the store here until you're done. It'll make things easier for you when you take over."

"Thanks, Commander. I'll be on the bridge as soon as I can."

Two hours later, true to his word, LaForge stepped out of the turbolift onto the bridge. "All finished, Commander. Everything is polished and up to date."

"That's good to hear, Mr. LaForge," smiled Riker as he stood up from the captain's chair. "The ship is all

yours. I'll be in my quarters until Captain Picard returns."

After entering his quarters Riker went to his comm terminal and requested a link to the terminal in Counsellor Troi's quarters. A moment later she appeared on his screen. "Yes, Will, what did you want? I thought you had left for shore leave."

"I can't leave until Captain Picard returns later this afternoon. I wanted to tell you what I discovered. This starbase's video library has a collection of really old Hollywood comedy film classics from the 1930's. I was going to have some transmitted up here, and I thought you might like to come over and watch them."

"After what you've told me about them it sounds like fun," said Deanna. "I'll be right over."

They sat for over an hour sampling the hilarious antics of pioneering actors who had performed dangerous and outrageous stunts and acrobatics for movie cameras over four centuries before. While they were choosing their next film they were interrupted by the warbling of the doorbell.

"Come in," shouted Riker.

Lt. Commander Data entered, and seeing both Riker and Troi sitting on Riker's sofa with a table full of snacks and drinks, and the two of them fighting over a printout of the Starbase video library catalog, he became uncomfortable. "Excuse me," he said uncertainly, "am I interrupting anything...?"

"Not at all, Data," said Riker as he reached for the printout Deanna was holding at arm's length away from him. "I am merely attempting to enlighten our culturally deprived Ship's Counsellor..."

"And I am being enlightened by a very narrow-minded person who thinks he is the best judge of what is funny," Troi protested as she attempted to stretch the printout further out of Riker's reach.

Data gingerly took the printout from Troi and with very little apparent understanding examined the list of titles. He handed the printout back without saying a thing.

Troi handed the printout to Riker and said to Data, "Why don't you stay and watch some of these films. It might help you understand the concept of humor a little better."

As Riker arranged for a selection to be transmitted, Troi punched him playfully on the arm and proclaimed, "I choose the next one!"

Data sat stiffly on a nearby chair and watched the films. He pondered the appropriateness of construction workers aggressively using the tools of their trade to physically express dissatisfaction with their co-workers. He puzzled over slapping and sustained shouting that must surely have extracted penalties from the physical well-being of the actors in their declining years. He could not fathom the humor in having a fat man plucked from his automobile by a speeding firetruck's ladder.

He watched a scene in a restaurant. A stout woman in a shining black floor-length gown was holding her meek penguin of a husband in tow. She angrily pulled him along after he had slowed to gaze across the room at a young female restaurant patron. At a nearby table an unhappy couple was arguing. Reaching a point of intense infuriation, they both stood and threw their napkins upon the table. Spying a waiter passing behind her holding a tray of desserts, the woman grabbed a pie from the waiter's tray and threw it at her male companion. In the nick of time he dodged out of the way, and the pie sailed across the room, striking the stout woman full in the face. She, in turn,

grabbed a handful of food from a nearby diner's plate and threw it back. Within seconds the entire restaurant had become involved in a furious food fight.

From the way Troi and Riker were reacting, Data concluded that they must believe the actors' inappropriate and inexcusable behavior was quite hilarious. Unimpressed, he asked, "Could one of you please explain why throwing food is so funny?"

Riker, the first to regain his composure, replied, "You've picked an easy one to explain, Data. Tell me, what do you remember about the large woman as she entered the restaurant?"

Data thought for a moment and then volunteered, "She was quite proper, and apparently a woman of excellent taste and breeding. Also, she carried herself with an air of utmost dignity."

"Bingo!" encouraged Riker, pointing at Data. "Now tell me about her after she was hit with the pie in the face."

"She appeared to have lost her dignity," said Data, "and acted as inappropriately as everyone else in the scene."

"Bingo again," applauded Riker. "She was unexpectedly humiliated, and by her reaction to the cracking of her facade of superiority she demonstrated that she was no better than anyone else in the room. In fact, the entire restaurant full of dignified superior adults eventually began acting like so many undisciplined children."

"I think I understand," said Data. "The breakdown of the facade of superiority was the point of humor in this case."

"That's very good, Data," said Troi.

"Not to change the subject, Data, but why did you come here in the first place?" asked Riker.

Puzzled, Data admitted, "I do not remember, Commander. I have never done this before. I have forgotten why I came here."

"I wouldn't worry too much about it, Data," said Troi. "It will most likely come back to you."

"Thank you for your reassurance, Counsellor," said Data, "but I am going to return to my quarters and run a complete self-diagnostic."

Riker repressed his laughter until after Data had left the room.

"Why are you laughing at him?" admonished Troi through a barely contained smirk.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have done it," smiled Riker, "but I wonder if he has any idea of how human he appeared to be?"

* * *

Starbase commander Commodore Alcott had devoted years of his life to the pursuit of athletic excellence. His office, virtually overpopulated with plaques, trophies, and pennants, was a powerful testimonial to his passion. His dedication to keeping himself physically fit had paid off well, as he still radiated a youthful vitality that belied the actual tally of his years. Captain Picard sat uneasily in a chair in front of Alcott's desk while Alcott silently, and with some amusement, appraised him. Picard fervently wished that Alcott would wipe his silly grin off his face and get on with an explanation of what had made their meeting necessary.

"I went through the Academy a couple of years before you did, Picard," Alcott finally said, "and if I do say so myself, I managed to raise a few eyebrows with some of my accomplishments in athletic competition. After I graduated, I kept a close eye on you underclassmen, to see if any of you were up to retiring

any of my records. Of all the people I worried about, you gave me the biggest scare during your first two years there. They said that what you lacked in finesse you more than made up for with drive and determination. So tell me, what ever happened to you? Why did you give up athletics in your junior year?"

Picard smiled, letting memories take him back through time. "The truth is that I had to make a choice between athletics and my studies," he explained. "Some of my grades were in danger of slipping, and I felt that I needed more time for my books. At the time it seemed a very difficult choice, but now I feel that it was the wise thing to do."

"Well. After all these years I finally have the answer from the horse's mouth," Alcott grinned. "I was hoping that my reputation had intimidated you."

"Actually it did," said Picard, "but the prevailing locker room wisdom was that records were made to be broken. I learned that I should never be afraid to give chasing after you my best shot."

Alcott roared with laughter. "What a shame we couldn't have gone through that academy together," he said. "We would have raised quite a cloud of dust, you and I."

Picard let a small smile escape his lips.

"Enough chit-chat," decided Alcott. "I'll bet you're aching to know what this is all about. Starfleet has been contacted by somebody who wants to give you some sort of medal or award or something. When Starfleet started to check out this proposed simple awards dinner they came up with a fistful of red flags and undercover intrigue. They really would like to just say 'no, thank you', but what holds them back is that establishing a dialogue with your admirers could possibly bring Starfleet something it badly needs. All of this is top drawer hush-hush, you understand."

"Of course, Commodore," replied Picard.

"Good," said Alcott seriously. "I guess we'll start by asking you what you know about a race calling themselves the Orokans."

"I've heard the name before, but I can't recall any details," admitted Picard.

"I'll give you a clue," said Alcott. "The MX-35 system."

"Of course!" exclaimed Picard. "About twenty years ago somebody bought plans for the Federation's MX-35 Planetary Perimeter Surveillance system from a

Ferengi arms peddler. The system was being phased out of use at the time because it had become too easy to defeat its threat detection algorithms. Starfleet investigated, but was never able to discover how the arms peddler was able to obtain the plans and documentation. The Orokans were the ones who bought the system from him."

"That's right," said Alcott. "We found out who bought the plans, but the Ferengi government disavowed any knowledge of such a transaction. We never got the chance to tell the buyers that the system was an obsolete piece of junk. And, that was the last anyone heard of the Orokans until a few weeks ago when they contacted us through third-party diplomatic channels inquiring about you and the possibility of presenting you with some kind of award."

"I've done nothing to merit recognition from them," said Picard in amazement.

"In their eyes you have," Alcott continued. "Somebody told them about the time you spent as a prisoner of the Borg. The Orokans claim they've been butting heads with the Borg for years. By their accounts, they've been fighting with the Borg and they've nearly been holding their own. It seems that their people had been a little down on morale lately,

but when they heard how you'd been captured by the Borg, and then escaped and helped destroy one of their ships, it just instilled a renewed vitality in them. To show their gratitude the Orokan Brass want to present you with an award and put you on display as a hero and a symbol of the Federation's support in their own struggle against the Borg."

"Commodore Alcott, I am still troubled by...painful memories..." said Picard. "An award...I mean...an award, after what happened at Wolf 359?"

"We understand your reluctance, Captain," said Alcott sincerely, "but we were hoping you could see past that. There are valuable benefits to be realized from establishing relations with the Orokans. If there is any substance to what they claim, we'd like to know how they achieve so much more success than we have against the Borg. Do they have better weapons, superior tactics, or are they using witchcraft? Starfleet would like to know these Orokans a little better. Where do they come from? How many of them are there? Are they on the level, or are they just blowing smoke? Can they help us achieve military parity with the Borg? The bottom line is that you seem to be the key to the answers and the benefits."

Alcott paused a moment to give Picard a chance to think about what had already been said. Then he

added, "Starfleet knows that this will be painful for you, Captain Picard. Many of the top brass say that this plan asks too much of you, but I thought you should have the opportunity to hear it and make up your own mind. You see, Jean-Luc, I have studied you. I've seen your determination once you set your sights on a goal. You're not a quitter."

"Thank you for the kind words, Commodore," Picard said.

"You must understand that this is entirely voluntary," affirmed Alcott. "One-hundred percent your call. If you say 'no', we drop the idea and no one thinks any less of you."

Picard looked at Alcott, and then rubbed his chin as he gazed intently at a corner of Alcott's desk.

"Commodore Alcott," he finally said, "I don't think I'd be able to look at myself in a mirror if I turned this opportunity down .

Following his meeting with Commodore Alcott, Picard returned to his hotel room, quickly packed his personal things, and then transported to the Enterprise. He stepped off the transporter pad saying to the transporter officer, "I want you to find Commander Riker and have him report to me in my ready room."

"Aye, Sir," the officer replied. "Commander Riker is still aboard ship. It shouldn't take long."

"Very well," said Picard as he retrieved his bag and left the transporter room.

A short time later he arrived on the bridge and went directly to the ready room where he instructed the computer to compile all the available information about the Ferengi/Orokan MX-35 transaction. He had not had time to read far into the information before Riker arrived at his door.

"Come," he responded to Riker's entry request.

The door opened and admitted Riker, who walked to Picard's desk. "You're back early, Sir. Did you have a good time?"

"I met an old friend and we talked for a while," Picard related, "and then something important came up. Beverly will have to be satisfied with my half-day of relaxation. Excuse my bluntness, Will, but I'd like to get right to business. Have a seat, please, and I'll fill you in on what has transpired."

Picard recounted his meeting with Commodore Alcott, and then added, "I remember covering the MX-35 system at the Academy, but it was only a rough overview. Basically we were shown system operation, what operators could fix, and when to call for help. Involved familiarization went to cadets specializing in security system repair and design. We were all told that MX-35 was becoming obsolete, and that our cursory training was presented in case we were assigned to bases where security system upgrade was not a high priority."

"It's a pity the Orokans never got that training," said Riker.

"Well," snorted Picard, "I don't believe the Ferengi got their reputation by telling customers everything about what they were thinking of buying."

"Perhaps not, Sir," smiled Riker. "Where is this presentation to take place?"

"I am told it takes place aboard an Orokan warship," said Picard. "The Orokans have cited security reasons for not disclosing the location of their warship, but they have promised to supply coordinates where my delegation will be met and escorted to the presentation site."

"In my opinion, Sir, this affair sounds a little too mysterious, and possibly dangerous," noted Riker.

"Yes, your sentiments are shared by a number of people, myself included," said Picard. "However, there is a chance we might learn from these people how to at least break even in a fight with the Borg, and that is something Starfleet cannot afford to dismiss lightly."

"But still, Sir, you'd be out of contact, your location unknown, and your safety in question until we know whether or not these Orokans are playing straight with us."

"Not exactly, Number One. Each member of my delegation will have on his person a homing transmitter, each one broadcasting a unique signal, and at least one member of the delegation will be with me at all times."

"You won't be wearing one of the transmitters yourself?" asked Riker.

"I thought it would be too risky with my being the center of their attention. The others in the delegation should be able to stay more in the background. And now, I have come to the point where I must explain why I have briefed you on all this. As a personal favor, Will, I'd like you to accompany me to this presentation. I would value your input, and if this is on the level you could witness an important historical event. In the event that something should go wrong, I would feel much safer having you at my side than a group of office-bound desk jockeys whose last contact with a starship was a stack of its reports and a framed picture of it on the wall."

"I would be honored to accompany you, Sir," said Riker. "When will the delegation leave for the presentation?"

"It is anticipated that several days will be needed to finalize details," said Picard. "That should give you time to take some shore leave. Goodness knows you've earned it."

"Thank you, Sir, but if it's all the same to you I believe I'll postpone my shore leave. I could better spend the time in preparation."

"Yes," Picard agreed with a smile of approval, "I believe you could."

The Enterprise remained in orbit around Minia IV. Captain Picard and Commander Riker were met there several days later by a hastily assembled company of high-ranking Starfleet officers, Federation officials, and diplomatic corpsmen who were to be Picard's official escort for the first formal contact with the reclusive Orokans. Picard had previously met the Starfleet and U.F.P. representatives, but the members of the diplomatic corps were complete strangers. Riker made a special note to carefully observe two of the conspicuously fit junior diplomats whom he suspected of being more in the line of security personnel.

There followed a hectic few more days of briefings and planning sessions which prepared the delegation to leave. At the last possible moment they were supplied with the coordinates where they would meet the Orokan vessel which would escort them to the secret sanctuary of Picard's enigmatic admirers. Riker had kept an eye on the two junior diplomats he had marked for observation. They had invariably been the first people into the meeting rooms and the last to leave. While the enforced closeness of the past few days had drawn most of the delegation members into easy social interaction, the two junior diplomats had

resisted being drawn into prolonged, relaxed conversations. Riker had become completely convinced that they were dedicated, competent security agents, and he was glad they would be going along for the ride.

At the scheduled departure time the delegation beamed from the Enterprise to a luxurious diplomatic shuttle and set out toward the rendezvous coordinates. An uneventful flight brought them to the designated position where they were unable to detect any other vessels within the shuttle's sensor range. Given the Orokan's predisposition for secrecy, mission commander Admiral Stockton elected to remain at the site for a reasonable time; long enough, he said, to demonstrate to even the most timid Orokan that they had not been followed. After several hours of diligently monitored scanning, an approaching ship was finally detected. When magnified on the shuttle's viewscreen it was perceived to be a portly craft; egg-shaped, with propulsion units of an unfamiliar technology fastened to both sides of the main hull by a stubby arrangement of struts. The approaching vessel broadcast the prearranged recognition codes to which the Federation shuttle responded in kind.

"We're being hailed," reported the shuttle pilot.

"Put it on screen, Lieutenant," said Admiral Stockton, "and let's see who's come to meet us."

The image of the pilot which appeared on the shuttle's viewscreen was by all appearances a virtual clone of Terran humankind. Admiral Stockton stood and invited the distinguished gentleman next to him to do the same. "On behalf of the United Federation of Planets, we welcome you," said Stockton. "I am Admiral Stockton, and to my right is Ambassador Benzen. We are the senior members of the Federation delegation come to honor Captain Picard in concert with your people."

"I am Venel, Vanti First Squadron Leader and your guide," said the Orokan pilot. "Where is he who is named Picard?"

"I am Captain Jean-Luc Picard," said Picard as he stood beside Ambassador Benzen.

"Good," said Venel. "I was instructed to be certain that Picard was with you. We must be leaving now. Please follow me at a safe distance, but do not allow me to accelerate beyond your sensor range. Our velocity will be the equivalent of your warp factor three until I instruct you to switch to impulse power."

Having issued these instructions, Venel turned his vessel around and accelerated. His lead was easy to follow. He did not steer a devious course designed to confuse, but instead maintained a continuous heading. Those not directly involved with piloting or navigating the diplomatic shuttle began studying star charts, speculating where their destination could lie.

"My guess is the Caldar-Signet system," decided Admiral Stockton. "Venel hasn't changed his heading, and he's leading us straight as an arrow toward it."

"I agree," said Picard. "If I remember correctly, Caldar-Signet is densely populated with planets, asteroids, and debris. There could be any number of places to hide a ship in there."

"My choice would be Caldar-Signet's fifth planetary entity," Riker announced. "C-S Five is a binary planetary system: two fairly massive gas giants orbiting a common point between them. Both planetary bodies have high levels of natural radiation which in combination could mask the presence of a ship from all but the most meticulous scans."

"It's interesting the way you've expanded this theory, gentlemen," smiled Stockton. "We'll soon know if you are correct."

The voice of the Orokan pilot intruded into their deliberations. "Venel to Federation shuttle. In five of your minutes we will drop out of warp and proceed on this heading at one-half impulse. When these changes have been executed, please bring your vessel abreast of mine to my starboard side. Maintain this flight configuration until further instructions."

Acknowledging Venel's instructions, the Federation pilot programmed the upcoming changes into his flight computer. His navigational display indicated that C-S Five lay directly in their heading. Perhaps Picard and Riker had been right, he thought. If there was a ship hiding within the background radiation from C-S Five, it was not registering on his scanners.

The two ships approached the binary planets, carefully threading their way through C-S Five's complex and sometimes unpredictable lunar system. Eventually they entered an orbit around one of the gas giants, hugging the outside of the planet's largest ring.

"Venel to Federation shuttle." The Orokan pilot again appeared on the viewscreen. "A flight of four scout vessels, similar in configuration to my own, has been dispatched to escort us to our mother ship. You should detect them momentarily over the ring horizon."

Within a quarter-hour they were a flight of six ships; five Orokan scout vessels and a single Federation shuttle. The image of Venel again came onto the viewscreen. "I am instructed to make a request of Ambassador Benzen and Admiral Stockton.

Gentlemen, it is an important point of protocol that you be brought to our ship by transportation which we, as your hosts, provide. We extend invitations to each member of your delegation and crew to transfer to our scout vessels for a fitting guest's conveyance to the welcome ceremonies."

"One moment, please, Squadron Leader Venel," said Stockton before ordering the communication link muted. He glanced around to the members of the delegation, his eyes asking for input.

"I don't believe that sending everyone over to their ships is a wise move," volunteered Picard.

"Nor do I," agreed Stockton. "Mister Ambassador, what are your thoughts?"

"Of course you are right, Admiral," said Ambassador Benzen, "but I don't like the idea of splitting us up. We should remain together."

"Good point, Ambassador. The delegation will travel as a unit," ordered Stockton. "Now we must decide

who will remain here on the shuttle. I think that out of necessity the pilot should remain, along with Commander Riker."

"Excuse me, Admiral," interrupted Picard. "I personally asked Commander Riker to accompany me on this mission. During our long association I have come to regard him as my most trusted advisor. He has had experience in first contact, so I believe that excluding him would greatly diminish the effectiveness of this delegation."

"Is anybody willing to volunteer to stay behind?" asked Stockton.

One of the junior diplomats raised his hand.

"Thank you for making my decision easier," said Stockton to him. "Don't feel slighted, son. You'll be just as much a part of things out here. I'll expect you two to monitor us as best you can. You could possibly be our fifth ace in the deck if this ceremony doesn't play out as expected."

Stockton instructed the pilot to reopen the communication link. Ambassador Benzen stepped forward and said, "Squadron Leader Venel, we would be honored to have you bear us to the ceremony, however my shuttle pilot advises me that he and

another crewman must remain with the shuttle to monitor systems and prepare for the return trip. Which of your scout ships will carry the rest of us?"

"Any of the scout ships can accommodate your delegation, Ambassador," said Venel. "If it is convenient you may all transport to my vessel, and the other vessels will act as your ceremonial honor guard."

"Splendid," said Ambassador Benzen. "If you will supply us with the appropriate coordinates we will immediately beam to your ship."

In groups of four the members of Picard's delegation beamed to Venel's scout ship. They discovered that its interior was roomy and afforded ample seating, but its lack of luxury appointments marked it as a military or utilitarian craft.

As the members of the delegation arranged themselves in the seats, Venel turned around and sought out Picard. "Please, Captain Picard, sit in this seat beside me. Our destination lies only minutes away over the ring horizon. From this vantage point you will be the first Federation citizen to see our beautiful mother ship, the Diamont. It is named after the playwright who inspired its design."

Venel started moving the ship forward while Picard watched eagerly out the large forward viewport. When Venel had spoken of the mother ship he had done so with a great deal of pride. Picard was impatient to see the ship which had inspired such feeling from Venel.

The formation of Orokan scout ships passed over the daylight side of the immense planet below. As they proceeded along the outer perimeter of the great ring the light from the system's sun was brilliantly reflected in short bursts from crystalline bodies within the ring. As impressive as it was, the blinding display of celestial pyrotechnics was forgotten when the first glimpses of the Orokan mother ship were possible through the debris at the outer edge of the great ring.

Picard had been pondering the meaning of the ship's name, the Diamont, which in his native tongue meant 'diamond'. He had tentatively concluded that if there was any kind of parallel between French and the Orokan language, then naming the ship after a gemstone had merely been a sentimental gesture, but when they had approached close enough to behold the ship unobstructed by the ring's debris, he saw how utterly wrong he had been.

The main body of the ship had been constructed in the shape of a diamond, resembling a massive, many-faceted stone destined to be set into an exquisite piece of jewelry. Its glistening outer hull was made of a brilliantly polished alloy. The widest expanse of the hull was nearest the end which Picard assumed was the top. At this point a shining ring, secured to the hull by six cylindrical conduits, encircled the ship.

"That is an incredibly beautiful ship!" Picard exclaimed, and the rest of the delegation contributed supporting sentiments. Riker noted that there was no acknowledgement of the delegation's compliments from Venel. He could not decide if Venel was being rude or simply blocking out all distractions to concentrate on his final approach to the Diamont. It would not be fair, he decided, to pass judgement until he was more familiar with the Orokans and their customs.

The Orokan scout ships continued to approach the upper section of the Diamont. By the time they had crossed over the ring they had slowed to a veritable crawl and their formation had assumed the shape of a crescent with the outer ships slightly leading Venel's ship in the center. An opening appeared in a different facet of the diamond-shaped hull in front of each scout ship. Each one passed through its entry portal,

hovered for a moment over the deck while support struts extended from the lower hull, and then settled smoothly onto designated touchdown areas.

Arrayed before the ship which carried Picard and his delegation was a geometrically precise formation of grey-uniformed Orokan personnel. In front of this formation stood a modest line of senior officers wearing red insignias of rank upon their upper sleeves. Standing stiffly before the senior officers was a single man wearing a pristine white uniform.

Picard's group disembarked from their ship and waited at the foot of the ladder until they were joined by Venel. He had a quiet word with Stockton, Benzen, and Picard before leading the delegation toward the man in the white uniform. Venel snapped smartly to attention before him, saluted, and then crisply announced, "Squadron Leader Venel reporting, Sir!"

Venel then executed a precise about face, turning toward the Federation delegation and announced, "Gentlemen, I present our commanding officer, Arch-Regent Appal!"

Venel abruptly spun around, again facing Arch-Regent Appal. "Sir, may I present, representing the governments of the United Federation of Planets, Ambassador Benzen, and Admiral Stockton."

After exchanging a stiff, short handshake with both Benzen and Stockton, Arch-Regent Appal again faced Squadron Leader Venel.

"Sir, it is my privilege to present Oroka's guest of honor, Captain Jean-Luc Picard."

Arch-Regent Appal took Picard's hand, shaking it warmly while studying him carefully. "Captain Jean-Luc Picard," he finally said, meticulously enunciating each syllable of Picard's title and name. "I have wanted so much to meet you, Captain. You are truly a man of whom a lauded example should be made. What you have done is something which no Orokan citizen has ever believed possible."

"Thank you very much, Arch-Regent," acknowledged Picard, "but in all modesty, I merely became caught up in events beyond my control."

"Ah, but what you did while in the grip of those events!" countered Appal.

While Picard verbally jostled with Arch-Regent Appal, Riker took advantage of the opportunity to look around. Arranged along the sides of the area which had been cleared for them were a great many small ships. They were built along clean, rakish lines and apparently carried a crew of only one. In the forward

panels of the fuselages were discharge lattices for some kind of phased energy beam weapon. Propulsion units similar to those mounted on the scout ships were fastened indeterminately to the sides of the fuselages by a method hidden beneath horizontal panels which appeared as though they could function as airfoils. From the rear of the fuselages rose two obtusely triangular structures which might be pressed to double duty as rudders or solar power collectors. The small ships rested upon a triangular arrangement of support struts. Riker could only guess at the number of small ships scattered about on the flight deck they now occupied. He also wondered how many similar craft were stored on other similar decks.

Riker was also puzzled by the number of Orokans who had assembled to greet them. After having made some quick estimations Riker had computed the size of the Orokan formation at no greater than three or four hundred personnel. As much as it was visually stunning, the Diamont was also a large ship. With that obvious fact in mind, Riker felt that the diamond-ship should have been able to produce more personnel to receive Picard as a guest of honor than it had.

Arch-Regent Appal finished greeting the three most prominent luminaries in the delegation and asked

them to introduce their staffs. Picard became the last to perform this service for the Arch-Regent when he presented Commander Riker.

"Commander Riker?" questioned the Arch-Regent as he carefully scrutinized Riker. "Were you a member of Captain Picard's crew during his period of captivity?"

"Yes, Sir," answered Riker, "I was at that time, and I still am. In fact, I have happily served under Captain Picard for many years."

"I see," mused the Arch-Regent. "And, would you say that you are close to your Captain?"

Riker smiled at Picard as he formed his answer. "I can honestly say that it pleases me to have the kind of professional relationship with Captain Picard that I do."

"Mmm, I see," muttered the Arch-Regent with a discreet, pensive glance aside. Then, clearing his throat, he said, "Forgive me, honored guests, you have all had a long trip, and you will need time to freshen up before the formal presentation dinner. One of my officers will escort you to facilities which you may use for that purpose. You will be summoned when all is ready."

Having said that, Arch-Regent Appal spun around and hurried away.

"Please follow me, Gentlemen, and I will show you to the guest quarters," said Venel.

As their guide led them from the landing bay the Orokan officers began dismissing the personnel in formation. Outside the landing bay the delegation walked silently through an empty wide, curved corridor. Picard estimated that they walked approximately one-quarter of the way around the ship before they were deposited in a plush lounge. Venel showed them the comfortable seating units and how to provide themselves with Orokan music from the ship's computer memory. To the rear of the lounge he pointed out the private chambers to be used for their private grooming needs. Before he left them Venel stood in the open doorway and said, "If you require anything that is not already provided here, you can summon an aide by pressing the blue panel here by the door." After he smiled and left, the solid door quietly closed.

"I'd venture to say we'd have a difficult time attempting to go outside for a breath of fresh air," observed Riker.

"It might be considered bad diplomatic form to put that assumption to the test, Number One," said Picard.

"Quite correct, Captain," agreed Ambassador Benzen. "I think it best that we do as we are expected to do: just wash our hands, try to learn something about these people... from their music, and patiently wait for somebody to show up with your award."

With, regrettably, very little else to do during the hour which passed, they sampled a variety of Orokan musical selections. They collectively judged their choices tuneful to a point, though consistently bland in character and giving few clues about the cultural environment which had produced it.

During the musical analysis Riker had sat next to Picard who had then discreetly observed, "You've been very quiet, Will."

"I've been busy observing, Sir," Riker had answered. "The few obvious things we've been shown leave me with a disquieting feeling that this is not quite what it appears to be."

"In what way?" Picard had asked.

"So few personnel for such a large ship," Riker had revealed. "There is no apparent evidence of advanced

automation. I have been trying to extrapolate their combat tactics from what I've seen, and my feeling is that this warship requires a much larger crew to do what I would expect it to do. There is also a disturbing lack of cordiality toward you and the entire delegation. Not enough people acting too rigidly, too properly. They seem to be going through motions without much sincerity."

"Mmm. I have arrived at many of the same conclusions myself, Will," Picard had confided, "and so have the Admiral and the Ambassador. Their feeling is that in order to answer all our questions, we are obligated to play this drama out to its conclusion."

"Drama, Sir?" Riker had questioned. "I sincerely hope the players can all take their bows when the final curtain comes down."

When the door to their lounge finally opened, Venel entered. He was dressed in a more formal variant of the Orokan uniform which featured black bands at the edges of the sleeves and trouser legs, in addition to a black cape which hung over his left shoulder. "Our ship's company has assembled to honor Captain Picard," he announced. "Before the actual award presentation you are all invited to dine with us."

"I believe we are all ready," responded Ambassador Benzen as he scanned the members of the delegation. "We thank you and Arch-Regent Appal for your kind invitation."

They were led to an elevator which conveyed them to a corridor several levels higher in the ship. Not far from the elevator entrance was a pair of wide divided doors which opened into a great dining area. As they walked through the open doors the assembled Orokans were called to attention. Venel escorted them to the center of the front of the room where a long table had been placed under a rolled red banner which was hung on the wall. Prominently displayed in the center of the banner was a silver inverted pentagon emblem, similar in shape to that of the Diamont, affixed to a stark white band which encircled the banner.

The table at the head of the room was covered by a brilliant red cloth which hung to the floor at the front and sides. The chairs were divided by two large polished units placed in the center of the table; the taller one on the left reserved for Arch-Regent Appal, and the other reserved for Captain Picard, the guest of honor. Tables for the crew of the Diamont were arranged in two angled rows which completed the four remaining sides of a pentagon.

As the members of the delegation found their reserved places Venel quietly advised them, "Please remain standing until the Arch-Regent and his staff have arrived."

Arch-Regent Appal and his staff swept into the room as though responding to a cue, smoothly assuming positions behind their seats. The Arch-Regent stood in front of his chair and spread his arms, saying, "Please, everyone, be seated. Let us begin." He seated himself as his chief-of-staff barked, "At ease!", making the Arch-Regent's bidding official.

Attendants began setting a splendid meal before everyone. Along with Orokan foods a surprising number of dishes known in the Federation were also featured. Riker wondered if the Federation's culinary preferences were the only things the Orokans had researched before coming out of the galactic woodwork. He also noted that the modest number of Orokan crew members present at the dinner seemed slightly more animated, at least among themselves. Perhaps if a good meal reinforced the trend toward relaxing formalities, Ambassador Benzen might have an easier time of presenting his diplomatic package later. The Orokans still appeared to be secretive and unpredictable. Riker hoped that the ambassador was up to the challenge.

As he ate, Arch-Regent Appal monitored the pace of the meal. When he perceived that most of those assembled had been satisfied, he stood, and within seconds the room became quiet. Placing his napkin on the table, he began speaking.

"An excellent meal," he began. "It is good for the spirit to break from daily routines, and to take time out to properly reward those whose actions have made them an indelible part of our lives."

An Orokan officer quietly entered the room and whispered something to Appal's chief-of-staff. The chief-of-staff stood and said, "Excuse me, Sir. Important ship's business. You are needed on the bridge."

"Of course, I'll join you in a moment," said the Arch-Regent. "Squadron Leader Venel, I must leave for a short time. Since you are most intimately acquainted with our Federation guests, perhaps you are best qualified to act as master of ceremonies until I can return."

Perspiring, Venel stood and said, "I would be honored, Sir."

Arch-Regent Appal and his staff left the dining room while Venel somberly stood before the Arch-Regent's

chair. "Since the Arch-Regent will be absent for only a short time we shall wait for his return to present Captain Picard's award. During this brief interlude perhaps Captain Picard would favor us with some remarks. Please, tell us something of yourself, Captain, so that we may better know the man we aspire to honor."

Picard had expected having to make some kind of speech, and so had mentally prepared some comments he felt would be appropriate. He stood and thanked Venel for the opportunity to speak as Venel sat conspicuously and tensely on the edge of Appal's chair.

"It was with mixed feelings that I agreed to be here for this presentation," began Picard. "It is never easy standing before a distinguished group and receiving honors for events which leave such great pain in their passing. These were events in which success was bought at an exceedingly high price in lives..."

Picard was interrupted as a sound began issuing from a place in the center of the tables. For an instant there was nothing except a loud hiss, and then a misty, swirling green crosshatched column appeared around the apparent source of the noise. When the effects subsided Picard saw a pair of black-clad humanoids, their apparel littered with bizarre devices, standing

and surveying the banquet room. For an instant his mind forbade him to believe what his eyes were seeing. As the intruders' gaze fell onto Picard, two additional crosshatched columns formed behind them. Picard was transfixed, unable to react or move. These same sights and sounds had once before heralded the beginning of six days of nightmare captivity. He was swept into a tidal wave of horrible recall: creeping genetic alteration, denial of self-determination, forced betrayal of vital information, and the brutal, one-sided massacre at Wolf 359. Suddenly he drove the unpleasant memories to the back of his mind, and he was himself again.

Borg, Riker's mind reeled. And yet not Borg. Something about them was different.

"We come for Locutus!" proclaimed one of the Borg. "All except Locutus may leave." Then the Borg raised a disruptor and pointed it at Picard.

The weapon! That's what's different, Riker realized.

The Orokans had been the first to bolt for the banquet room exits, crowding through and spilling out into the corridors, and then disappearing in all directions.

"Everyone, get out of here, now!" Picard shouted at the Federation people who remained in the room. "You cannot fight these creatures on their own terms!"

Before the Borg leader had fully leveled his disruptor at Picard, Riker had leaped across the table and had flung himself out across the room toward the Borg. His impact with the Borg unit hurt, but he had carried enough momentum to knock him over and cause him to lose his grip on the disruptor. As it spun across the floor Riker scrambled to retrieve it. The Borg struggled right behind him, surprising Riker with how quickly he could move. Riker got a hand on the weapon and felt the Borg wrapping his arms around his legs. Riker kicked fiercely, freeing a leg which he used to kick the Borg in the head. The blow stunned the Borg and he relaxed his grip on Riker's leg. Riker aimed at him with the disruptor and fired into his chest. The beam's energy was absorbed by the unit's body armor, but the impact was severe enough to slow him down even more.

Picard was shepherding the last of the Federation personnel out the doors when Riker saw another Borg pointing a disruptor in his direction. Riker examined the weapon he was holding and discovered a selector switch. He moved the switch to its other setting, hoping that it had set the weapon for a more lethal

beam, and fired at the second Borg. This time the beam blew its victim's body armor away and penetrated deep below the skin.

The Borg leader, who had been lying at Riker's feet, attempted to stand. Dazed and shaky, he looked at Riker as though trying to organize a thought about him. Riker's attention was diverted to another Borg who was walking toward Picard and raising a disruptor. Riker raised his weapon to fire. Suddenly the Borg at his feet sprang toward him. Instinctively Riker re-aimed and fired at the Borg who was going to land on him. A second later he was desperately wrestling the dead body aside.

He struggled to his feet in time to see a Borg standing over what was either the unconscious or dead body of Picard. A green crosshatched column formed around them, and then they were gone.

Furiously Riker's eyes ricocheted around the room and discovered three Borg remaining. They milled around in profound confusion as they positioned themselves to beam out. When finally in position, they simply stood, waiting. Riker raised his weapon and fired at the Borg unit on the right. He fell away from the other two units and missed being included in the crosshatched column which claimed them.

Riker picked a discarded disruptor off the floor and positioned its selector switch the same way as the one on his first weapon. Now he would wait. There were three dead Borg bodies in the banquet room with him, and except for one prior experience, the Borg had always sent one of their kind back to reclaim certain devices from their dead. Let them try it, he seethed. They will pay dearly for Captain Picard!

The minutes ticked away.

Three.

Four.

Five.

No other Borg appeared. Riker's rage continued to grow. He cursed himself for having made a wrong choice, for thinking about his own safety first, and now, because of his selfishness, the Borg had Picard again!

Riker remained in a crouch, coiled and alert, listening intently for the first sound of a Borg transporter beam. He was unaware of the members of the delegation filtering back into the banquet room. They anxiously watched him, wondering what to expect.

"Commander Riker..." said Admiral Stockton.

Riker did not respond.

"Commander... Riker!" Stockton repeated with more emphasis.

Riker looked back at Stockton, and then at the rest of the delegation. He relaxed slightly and turned back to watch the empty room in front of him as he explained, "The Borg could return, Sir, to remove devices from their dead before beaming them back to their ship."

"They will not return, Commander," stated Stockton. "There is no Borg ship. We have been to the bridge and have visually scanned all around the Diamont. This ship is all alone, and from what members of this delegation have reported to me, it appears to also have been abandoned."

Puzzled, Riker slowly lowered the weapons he was holding. "No Borg? No Orokans either?"

"Apparently not," Stockton affirmed as he watched Ambassador Benzen rush behind the table at the head of the banquet room and kneel behind the Arch-Regent's chair. Hurrying over to investigate, he saw that the Ambassador had discovered a casualty, the junior diplomat who had accompanied them to the Diamont. His security issued hand phaser lay nearby.

Angrily Stockton declared, "How did we ever let ourselves get talked into this? Where is Picard?"

"The Borg have him, Sir," Riker replied. "I don't think he's dead. There was a Borg standing over him when he was beamed out."

"What makes you think he's still alive?" challenged Stockton.

"I've gotten my hands on two of their weapons, Sir. Both of them were originally on a stun setting. I believe they all beamed in here with the intention of taking Picard alive."

"Could things go any... more... wrong!" exclaimed Stockton. "The Borg will be a lot more careful with him this time. They'll suck his brain dry, get every

scrap of information. All the new coming defenses will be useless! Commander Riker, you've dealt with the Borg more than just about anybody. What would you recommend we do?"

"Captain Picard has disappeared, and there appears to be no possible place he could have gone. We need to understand exactly what happened here," said Riker. "Sir, the Enterprise is still in orbit around Minia IV. Order it out here. It has the personnel and facilities to do the kind of investigating we'll require."

"Are you going to try to snatch Picard back from the Borg again?" asked Ambassador Benzen.

"I would like the opportunity to get him back...," responded Riker. He thought for a moment, and then added, "There is a possibility that the intruders were not Borg."

"What are you saying?" implored Ambassador Benzen. "We all saw..."

"Yes, Ambassador. I know what we all saw," said Riker. "Maybe this incident was contrived to leave us believing that real Borg had raided this dinner and had captured Captain Picard, however, the Borg who took him didn't act like any Borg I have ever encountered."

"But you have previously encountered a Borg splinter faction that didn't conform to the Borg stereotype," Stockton pointed out.

"Yes, Sir, but that faction was still highly disciplined in combat. Whoever took Captain Picard this time was winging it through a very loosely structured plan. There was no cohesion or refinement in its execution. The perpetrators were sloppy and confused. They couldn't even shield themselves against fire from their own weapons. When you think about it, we witnessed some very un-Borg-like behavior."

"How do we determine whether or not these Borg were genuine?" asked the Ambassador.

"There are three bodies here which can be examined in the Enterprise's medical facilities," stated Riker. "Dr. Crusher can run tests and compare her results against what we already know about Borg physiology. Whatever their identity, Dr. Crusher will be able to tell us who was responsible for Captain Picard's abduction."

"Then I'll do as you recommend, Commander Riker," said Stockton. "I'll order the Enterprise to come out here. Maybe your people can also figure out how a couple of hundred Orokans managed to disappear from their ship and where they went. But before that,

there's one important formality I have to attend to. Commander Riker, under provisions of field commissioning regulations, when the Enterprise gets here you take over as its acting captain. You will temporarily hold that rank and exercise its duties and privileges until the fate and status of Captain Picard is determined."

"As you wish, Admiral," acknowledged Riker.

"Next we'll have to contact our shuttle and get things moving," Stockton continued. "Captain Riker, you'll accompany me to the bridge and work with me on that problem. Before we leave, gather up all the weapons in this room. Riker and I will take one with us to the bridge. I'll need two volunteers to guard this banquet room, and they'll get a weapon. The rest of you break up into three roughly equal groups and divide the rest of the weapons among you. Explore this deck and the ones above and below it thoroughly. Keep in touch with each other and report to me when finished. If things look safe after that, we'll explore further."

While the delegation began its exploration of the Diamont, Riker and Stockton rode an elevator to the expansive bridge. Stockton preceded Riker out of the elevator and pointed to a console to the left of the

command podium. "It looks to me as if that is their communications center," he said.

Riker examined the console and its controls. "They appear to use a decimal number system," he observed. "With a little luck, I might be able to get a message out."

After memorizing the visual settings on the displays, Riker began manipulating the console's touchpads. He grinned proudly when he discovered a means of producing changing patterns of static on the console's loudspeaker. "I've definitely nailed down the frequency and band controls, Admiral. I'm guessing that subspace and the higher E-M bands won't be able to cut through the background interference." He persisted in changing the console settings until the crackling static diminished to a low hiss. "There appears to be a hole in the interference at this low frequency, Sir. Now I need to figure out how to make this thing transmit."

After several more minutes of studying and manipulations Riker pronounced, "There. If I am reading these displays correctly, I am prepared to transmit." He put on a nearby headphone and adjusted the attached mouthpiece. "Riker to Federation shuttle. Come in please."

Several seconds later he was rewarded with a distorted buzzing which he hoped was an attempt to answer his broadcast. He kept repeating his message, hoping that whoever was responding would be able to tune their equipment to whatever frequency he was using. Several minutes passed before the distortion cleared enough to be distinguishable."

"Federation shuttle to Riker. What are you doing on this frequency, Sir?"

"Federation shuttle, it's good to hear your voice," said Riker. "Whatever you do, please keep this link established. We've had serious problems here on the Orokan ship. I'm going to turn this transmission over to Admiral Stockton who will issue instructions. Do you copy?"

"We copy, Sir."

Admiral Stockton took Riker's seat and adjusted the headphone to his liking. "Attention Federation Shuttle, this is Admiral Stockton. I am going to issue an urgent statement which you must record. You will then have to maneuver clear of C-S Five's interference and transmit it to Starfleet Command. After they acknowledge receipt of the message, wait for their reply. When Starfleet has replied, return and relay that reply to us."

"Aye, Sir. We are standing by to record."

After clearing his throat, Stockton began, "This is Federation Admiral Peter Stockton. I am declaring a code red emergency from the Caldar-Signet system. Our rendezvous here at C-S Five with the Orokan warship has soured. Captain Picard has been abducted by what appear to have been Borg personnel. All Orokan personnel have vanished, apparently abandoning their ship. I urgently request that Starfleet Command order the Enterprise here from Minia IV to render all possible assistance. Message ends. Alright, people, get this transmitted to Starfleet Command without further delay!"

Long hours passed as the delegation waited for the return of the diplomatic shuttle. They utilized the time to further explore the Diamont, verifying that the vessel was completely deserted. Orokan recording devices were discovered, and after achieving a rudimentary understanding of the devices' operation, delegation members used them to document their experiences and activities aboard the Orokan warship. The delegation was relieved to discover that the Diamont had been well stocked with food, thereby eliminating hunger as a concern while awaiting the arrival of the Enterprise. Explorations had revealed the location of officer's quarters near the bridge.

Taking note of the time, Stockton decreed that the delegation would gather there for several hours of rest. After posting guards outside the sleeping area and in the banquet room Stockton volunteered for the first watch on the bridge to monitor the communications console for the return of the shuttle.

When Riker later relieved him, he found that Stockton had busied himself with trying to decipher the alpha-numeric symbols on the consoles. "Don't feel that you have to continue this," Stockton had told him, "because it's just something I started to relieve the boredom. The linguistic experts will probably say that everything I've done is wrong anyway."

Not likely, Riker thought to himself, remembering that Stockton had spent time in the intelligence gathering field.

After Stockton had left, Riker had devised his own ways to keep busy, for the most part recording his own comments about events and the ship upon which he had become stranded. Two hours later he heard the voice of the diplomatic shuttle pilot.

"Federation shuttle to the Stockton/Benzen delegation. Come in, please."

"Captain Riker here, shuttle. Were you successful in transmitting Admiral Stockton's message?"

"It was transmitted successfully, Sir. We were asked by Starfleet to wait in the clear for their response."

"What was Starfleet's response?"

"Starfleet advises that the Enterprise is underway, Sir. You can expect its arrival within eighteen hours."

"That is good news," said Riker.

"There's more, Commander, er, Captain."

"Let's hear it," Riker said.

"Starfleet had discussed sending Commander Shelby out to assist you, but that would have delayed Enterprise's departure. They decided she's where she's most needed on her present assignment."

"Too bad," Riker smiled, remembering the pushy, no-nonsense, impulsive young commander who had once hoped to displace him as first officer on the Enterprise. "She'll be spitting mad that she wasn't allowed to be out here as a part of this possible Borg encounter. How long will it be until you can rendezvous with us?"

"We should have you in sight within the hour, Sir, unless we pass you in the dark."

"No chance of that," said Riker. "This baby glows in the dark."

* * *

SHIP'S LOG:

U.S.S. Enterprise (NCC 1701-D),

Stardate 48458.8

Lieutenant Commander Data,

Commanding

The Enterprise is nearing Caldar-Signet Five where it is to conduct an investigation into the disappearance of Captain Jean-Luc Picard. Apparently the Captain has for the second time become a victim of a Borg incursion into Federation space, however, many questions linger whose answers may complicate this simple preliminary supposition. In my own

thoughts I have not been able to rule out the possibility of Orokans involvement in the Captain's disappearance. If the Orokans truly are long-time enemies of the Borg, I would expect the reports we have received to have included some mention of their having resisted the Borg incursion into their vessel. The reports indicate that no Borg vessel was detected. From where, then, could the abductors have beamed into the banquet room, and to where did they beam out with Captain Picard? There are these and many more points unresolved, and I am eager to apply all necessary ship's resources to providing the needed answers.

* * *

Ship's Counselor Deanna Troi sat sullenly in her chair on the bridge of the Enterprise watching Lt. Commander Data, the only crew member on the ship upon whom she could safely focus her attention. Since the ship had recalled its crew and left Minia IV, she had literally been suffocating under waves of anguish and sorrow, overwhelmed by more than her Betazoid mental disciplines could block. Her own astonishment and disbelief were being amplified by

an empathic outpouring from a crew which was also feeling the loss of a beloved captain. The crushing weight of emotional negativity was confounding her attempts to bring herself back onto an even keel. She was the ship's counselor, the pillar of stability who was supposed to help everyone else deal with their feelings. Data was the lifeline she hoped would pull her out of her emotional quagmire. Data was safe. He seemed to have no feelings, although if he did, he was incapable of acknowledging them for what they were. At any rate, Data was a life form to which Betazed minds were not attuned. Focusing on Data enabled her to bore a tunnel through the heavy atmosphere which pervaded the ship. Through that tunnel she imagined that she could see light and hope on the other side. Picard was not gone, she reminded herself, only missing. The crew had committed itself to getting him back once before, and they had to be aroused to make that commitment again. She was struggling to make herself believe that there was still hope, and once she believed in that hope, she would pass it on to others.

* * *

"Commander, sensors have detected a small vessel holding a position relative to Calder-Signet Five," reported Lieutenant Worf from his security station.

"Hail them, Lieutenant, and attempt to establish their identity," ordered Lt. Commander Data from the Captain's chair.

A moment later the interior of a Federation diplomatic shuttle appeared on the main viewscreen. "Greetings, Enterprise. We have been awaiting your arrival," said a man in the pilot's chair.

"I am Lieutenant Commander Data, temporarily commanding the Enterprise. Please identify yourself," said Data.

"I am Lieutenant Hill, shuttle pilot assigned to the Stockton/Benzen delegation."

"Please explain, Lieutenant, why you are holding position out here instead of remaining with the delegation," requested Data.

"Because there is significant interference on the normal communication bands near C-S Five, Sir. Captain Riker has managed to cut through with a low frequency signal which we re-transmit to Starfleet Command on normal frequencies. Actually it was

Admiral Stockton who sent us back out here to be his antenna."

"Thank you, Lt. Hill," replied Data. "Please transmit the coordinates of the Orokan vessel and then continue monitoring communications."

As the shuttle pilot transmitted the information Data ordered, "Bring the ship to yellow alert. All sensors on maximum. Helm, take us to the supplied coordinates at one-quarter impulse power."

Captain Riker was on watch on the bridge of the Diamont. He had been attempting to familiarize himself with the operation of the diamond-ship's sensor array. In spite of limitations resulting from C-S Five's domineering background radiation, he was managing to collect increasingly accurate analyses of relatively nearby debris in the planet's great ring. Inspired by this success, he had directed the system to conduct broad-beam scans around the Diamont. Shortly after initialization the system indicated that it was tracking an incoming object. Riker adjusted controls and changed settings, attempting to glean more information.

"Admiral Stockton, please report to the bridge," Riker announced over the intercom. "The Diamont's scanners are tracking an approaching object."

A moment later Stockton responded, "Would there be any reason for our shuttle to return?"

"I don't believe it's the shuttle, Sir," said Riker. "There hasn't been any communication announcing its return, and some of the sensor readings suggest that it is much larger than a shuttle."

"Then I hope it's your Enterprise, Captain. I'll be right there."

Before Stockton arrived on the bridge, Riker received a communication from the incoming object. "This is Enterprise calling Admiral Stockton, Ambassador Benzen, or...Captain Riker. Come in, please."

Riker fumed and muttered under his breath as he attempted to adjust his transmission to the band utilized by the Enterprise. "Riker to Enterprise. Data, is that you?"

"Affirmative, Commander Riker. Your communication is sometimes garbled, but that should clear up as we approach. We anticipate rendezvous shortly."

Admiral Stockton had slid into a chair beside Riker and had put on a second set of headphones which they had learned to connect to the communications system.

"This is Admiral Stockton. Good to hear from you, Enterprise. For the record, I have issued a temporary field promotion to Will Riker bumping him up to acting Captain of the Enterprise until Picard is able to resume his post, or until Starfleet sees fit to decree otherwise."

"Your action has been duly noted, Admiral," replied Data.

"My first order," interrupted Riker, "is for you to get in here as quickly as possible. I'll want investigative teams to start coming up with quick and sound answers before Captain Picard's trail cools off."

"I shall instruct department heads to organize teams immediately," said Data.

Upon its arrival the Enterprise took a position near the Diamont. Security and engineering teams were the first to beam over to the Orokan ship. After quick briefings from delegation members the teams began disbursing to begin their detailed analyses. Delegation members were then beamed to the Enterprise and directed to Dr. Crusher's sick bay

where thorough medical checkups were conducted. After this formality Dr. Crusher's staff was assigned to medical teams and beamed to the Diamont where they first prepared the Borg bodies for transport to the Enterprise's medical labs. Following this, the medical teams proceeded to the Orokan medical facilities to examine equipment and records, establishing a beginning of their understanding of Orokan physiology and the techniques of their healing arts. Admiral Stockton, Ambassador Benzen, and the remaining delegation members boarded the diplomatic shuttle and departed for Minia IV where they would be debriefed by a rapidly assembling congress of their superiors.

Riker returned to the Enterprise and called for a meeting of the ship's senior officers in the Captain's ready room. He had been sitting and meditating at the captain's desk when the doorbell announced the arrival of the comrades he must face. He stood up and moved behind the chair before he called out, "Come."

Dr. Crusher, Worf, Data, LaForge, and Counsellor Troi filed into the room and stood in a line in front of the desk. Riker looked at each of their faces. Only Data showed no emotion. Counsellor Troi's face was awash with concern, and a fleeting glance from her told him that at least some of her concern was for him.

In the eyes of the rest he saw worry and anger. He hoped that the anger was being directed at Picard's abductors.

Leaning forward, his hands on the back of the chair, he said, "I have never aspired to address you from this side of Captain Picard's desk. Perhaps I don't even deserve to be standing here." After a reflective pause he added, "However, dwelling on what has happened will not help Captain Picard. I believe that he is still alive and that there is a chance we might be able to get him back. To be truthful, it's a slim chance, but it's there and I intend to take it."

"What happened over there, Sir?" asked LaForge.

Before Riker could answer, Counsellor Troi intruded, "Captain, perhaps we should discuss this privately first."

Riker gave no answer to Troi's suggestion, but neither did he object.

"I've asked you here because, much as I've had to do before, I must now choose one of you to be my first officer," Riker continued. "Time is very critical, so I'm going to be blunt. Because we have so much to do, shuffling everyone around to learn new jobs is out of the question. Quite frankly, the officer I choose must

be able to function efficiently at his old job as well as that of being first officer. The only one of us capable of meeting the requirement of performing two jobs at once is Lt. Commander Data." Riker looked at Data and added, "I promise you, my friend, that I shall not ask this of you any longer than is absolutely necessary."

"Thank you for the opportunity, Sir," replied Data. "I shall endeavor to do my best."

"Thank you all," said Riker. "You're dismissed."

Quietly they all left the ready room except for Counsellor Troi.

"Are we having our discussion now?" asked Riker when the door had closed.

"I sense that you are feeling guilt, and that you are anxious to deal with it," explained Troi.

"Yes, I am feeling guilt," admitted Riker. "For a minute over there it was sheer pandemonium. I was startled by an attack against me while I was watching one of the Borg level a weapon at the Captain. I shot at the guy trying to jump on me instead of looking out for Captain Picard's welfare. When I had finally thrown my assailant aside, the Captain was

disappearing in their transporter beam. I should have been more concerned about the Captain. I could have saved him, Deanna! He trusted me!"

"You were facing unfavorable odds," Troi responded calmly. "You may not have had the time to simultaneously aid the Captain and defend yourself. It was a sudden, confusing, and desperate situation. And now, as our Captain, you cannot let yourself become mired in things that might have been done differently."

"Perhaps not," said Riker. "I still have a chance to make things right, and I won't screw it up this time."

"Then you will be Captain Picard's best hope," replied Troi."

* * *

Captain William Riker stood at the head of the conference table, the position which had so often been assumed by Captain Jean-Luc Picard as he had presided over numerous prior briefings. Having gained everyone's attention, Riker began, "Your teams have had two hours to study the Orokan vessel and

get back to you with their preliminary data and reports. We're here to quickly review what you have all been able to learn. Geordi, what have the engineering teams determined for us?"

LaForge scanned a first page of handwritten notes and said, "The Diamont is obviously a military vessel which incorporates weapons systems and strategies different from what we're used to seeing. The consensus among my engineers is that it is a big space-traveling aircraft carrier. For those of you not familiar with that class of naval vessel, carriers were giant floating airports which provided a mobile base for military aircraft. They were most utilized in the advanced Earth navies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The smaller decks below the main flight decks in the center of the ship are used for crew functions, and those above are used for ship's functions such as engineering, main computer core, navigation and communication, and the bridge. The flight decks are well stocked with what we believe are small attack craft which are armed with phased energy weapons. We don't understand their propulsion systems yet, but judging from the designs of the pilots' flight suits those attack craft are plenty fast and maneuverable. They seem to be capable of flying deep space or atmospheric missions. We still

haven't successfully accessed their computer files yet, but we believe we'll eventually get in."

"Thank you, Geordi. You're off to a good start," said Riker. "Doctor Crusher, how about the medical teams?"

"We have unraveled some things," said Crusher. "Unfortunately most of the available detailed medical information about the Orokans remains locked away in their computers, at least until the linguistic teams get their translators programmed. My people have completed autopsies on the three intruder bodies brought here from the Diamont. We have determined that they are not Borg."

Crusher paused, allowing this revelation time to sink in.

"Explain, please," said Riker.

"We compared the results of our battery of tests against our Borg physiological profile," explained Dr. Crusher. "The bodies we examined were purely organic. There was no evidence of DNA mutation to Borg patterns, nor was there any sign of invasive cybernetic interfaces. In fact, there could never have been indications of these mutations because the

devices they carried were not implanted. They were merely cosmetically affixed to the skin."

"You're telling me that somebody is making fake Borg?" asked Riker incredulously.

"Yes, I believe so," said Crusher. "Based on sketchy data obtained from the diplomatic mission scans of the Orokans I believe I can safely say that your 'Borg' are Orokans masquerading in authentic Borg hardware."

"It's true, Sir," volunteered LaForge. "I've checked out the hardware carefully. It's definitely Borg."

"If this is true," said Riker in amazement, "it explains their uncharacteristic confusion during the abduction, and it explains why they announced who they came for. Borg do not do that. They merely take what they want and ignore everything going on around them unless they perceive something as a threat. The intruders also carried weapons. Geordi, any ideas on the origin of those disruptors?"

"Sorry, no idea, Sir. I've never seen that design before."

"Then maybe we'll get a match once we get into their computer files," suggested Riker.

"Security to Captain Riker."

"Riker here. What is it?"

"The shuttle you sent to the far side of the planet is returning, Sir. They have a report for you."

Riker lowered himself into his chair at the head of the table. "If you've read our reports you are aware that Admiral Stockton reported visually scanning all around the Diamont and finding no evidence of a Borg ship. Acting on a hunch, I earlier dispatched one of our shuttles to gather readings from the other side of the planet. I believe there has to be a clue somewhere pointing to where the abductors and the Orokans vanished after the abduction."

Riker pressed the communicator badge on his uniform. "Riker to shuttle. What have you found on the other side?"

"We picked up some very faint magnetic trace readings indicative of a Borg ship's presence, Sir."

"Thank you, Commander Shelby," muttered Riker, remembering that it was she who had established the connection between such readings and the Borg. "Thank you also on the shuttle. Thank you very much."

You have been extremely helpful. Return to the ship immediately."

"Aye, Sir," replied the shuttle pilot.

Riker leaned back in his chair, intently immersed in deep thought. "Commander Data, I have a little job for you," he said . "I want you to determine the locations of the Diamont and a hypothetical Borg ship at the time of the abduction of Captain Picard. Since Admiral Stockton saw no other vessels, let's assume that our hypothetical Borg ship departed on a trajectory which would have kept it in the shadow of the planet until it was out of range of the Diamont's sensors. I want your best estimation of the course such a vessel might have used to withdraw without detection."

"Understood, Sir. I shall have that information for you shortly."

"Thank you, Data. And now I'd like you all to return to your posts. I'm going to take the Enterprise out of this interference temporarily and have a little talk with Starfleet."

*** CHAPTER FOUR ***

Picard felt his back and left shoulder aching. The pain hampered his progress as he climbed toward a distant light. Suddenly the light moved toward him, faster and faster, and then enveloped him in its brilliance. He realized that his eyes were closed. Cautiously he opened them and found that he was looking into an overwhelming, almost blinding source of illumination.

He tried to roll away from the intense light, but found that he could not. It felt as if something was holding him. Curious, Picard lifted his head, waited for his eyes to focus, and saw that he was restrained to a narrow table with his arms tucked tightly against his sides and his legs bound together.

He looked around the room, the bright light from above clouding his vision temporarily as he rolled his head from side to side. The arrangement of the room was appallingly familiar. Images of devices and equipment he had tried so hard to forget were burning through his mind, bringing horrifying memories back to him.

No! Not again! A nightmare - this has to be a nightmare, he tried to convince himself. He began to panic. Break loose! Flee while you still can! Inspirations to commence desperate, impossible acts sliced through his consciousness.

Then he saw people: humanoids with their backs to him working at consoles and control panels against the walls. They were dressed in black. His mind reeled as it tried to escape the conclusion toward which it was being pushed. His mind wanted to shut everything out, but his eyes would not listen. They opened to examine the humanoids. They saw cables and tubing which were attached to skin-tight cowlings covering their heads and to various devices hung on their black suits.

Borg!

His mind could no longer escape the fact. The humanoids were Borg!

Picard was enraged. They could not do this to him again. He would not permit it!

"What do you want from me?" he shouted furiously, straining against the bonds which held him virtually motionless.

The humanoids turned dispassionately around to look at him, and then returned to their work. All except for one, who continued to study Picard.

"I will not serve you again!" Picard wailed as desperate tears rolled from his eyes.

The Borg who had studied Picard turned to his console and pressed a series of buttons. When he had finished, the rest of the Borg in the room shut down their stations and walked through the door leaving the contemplative Borg alone with Picard. For several long minutes they silently watched each other, and then the last Borg left Picard alone in the room.

Once, nearly four years before, Picard had been captured and assimilated into the Borg Collective, and he had been heroically rescued by his crew on the Enterprise who had followed and had dogged the Borg who had taken him. They had always known where he was, and had never been far away. This time Picard was certain that rescuers would not have that advantage to work with. This time, if the Borg resurrected the traitorous monster alterego Locutus, it would in all likelihood be a permanent incarnation.

From some place beyond the despair in his mind a tiny voice cried out to Picard. Remember your training, it reminded him. Before you can act, you must understand your situation.

Understand my situation, mused Picard. Alright, he answered the voice sarcastically; just to amuse you I'll examine my situation.

All the evidence virtually confirmed that he had begun a second episode of captivity with the Borg. They been careful to render him quite helpless, and he expected them to continue to be careful, insuring that he was totally under their control before the restraints would be taken off. Hoping for rescue would be an exercise in futility because of the rapidity with which the Borg adapted. It was reasonable to assume they had already developed plans to counter any of the previous strategies Commander Riker had used against them. Outwitting them, which had grown progressively more difficult with each previous encounter, would no doubt be even more so this time.

What do I have to look forward to, Picard asked himself. He remembered the first captivity, how they had violated him, stripping away his ability to act on his own decisions, and his right to shape his own life. The Borg Collective, once loose in his mind, had hunted out his individuality, nipping away at it like

hounds after a fox, diminishing it, weakening it until it had eventually submitted, no longer strong enough to assert itself as the essence of Jean-Luc Picard. And when he had submitted, all that was Picard had become theirs. Memories, skills, and knowledge. They had used him and his knowledge against his comrades and friends. People he had known all his adult life, dead. Victims of the massacre at Wolf 359. His knowledge had made possible the ease with which the Borg ship had sailed through the defenses in sector zero-zero-one, all the way to Earth itself. All this the Borg had done with information taken from his mind.

No one had blamed him openly, but Picard had blamed himself. It had been a long time before he had completely accepted the idea that he had not consciously been a traitor, that he had not in any way willingly divulged anything to the Collective.

Since his first captivity the Federation had made changes in strategies and weapons. There were newer, more powerful systems in the final stages of testing. Picard dared not think of what he had heard about the new defenses and the strategies for their implementation. He agonized over what the Borg would learn from him after what he feared would be his inevitable second submission.

Picard's depressed thoughts were interrupted by the return of two of the Borg; the one who had silently studied him for so long before leaving the first time, and another who was carrying a platter of food.

"Why have I been brought here?" demanded Picard. "What is your purpose for kidnapping me?"

The platter of food was placed on a small stand beside Picard's table. Then the two figures went to study a control panel at one of the consoles.

"Damn you, talk to me!" shouted Picard. "At least tell me that something is irrelevant!"

The Borg who seemed to be the leader of the team motioned his partner toward Picard. He pulled a disruptor out of his holster and held it in his folded arms. As he stood watching Picard, the second Borg rearranged Picard's restraints so that his left arm was freed. Picard watched the disruptor, and then an eerie feeling washed over him. He had never known the Borg to carry a weapon like that.

"In my opinion you do not deserve this kindness," scornfully said the Borg holding the disruptor. "In spite of many objections, food rations have been ordered for you."

"Who authorized the rations for me?" asked Picard in the hope of opening communication.

"Do not trouble yourself with unimportant questions," ordered the Borg. "Nourish yourself while it is still possible for you to do so."

The table to which Picard was secured was tilted forward to a more upright position, and the stand with the food was moved to where Picard could reach the platter. The leader left the room leaving his partner to watch Picard eat. While eating, Picard tried to elicit information from his guard, but he remained silent and unresponsive, watching Picard with a look of seething contempt on his face. As soon as Picard had popped the last morsel of food into his mouth his table was returned to its horizontal position. His restraints were rearranged so that his left arm was again immobilized. His guard then retrieved the empty platter and left the room.

* * *

Captain Riker had convened another senior staff meeting. All ship's department heads were present

except Dr. Crusher who had asked for permission to come late, explaining to Riker that several important tests were being conducted under her close personal supervision, and that the results she hoped to have would be available before the meeting's end.

Riker stood at the head of the conference table. When he had everyone's attention he said, "I have been in communication with Starfleet Command explaining what has happened out here. I have explained to them that we now have an idea which way Picard's abductors left C-S Five, and that I'd like to engage in pursuit with the intention of recovering him. Starfleet is not entirely comfortable with placing the Enterprise at such risk, as the fleet has still not completely recovered from its last encounter with the Borg. I reminded them that if something is to be done about Picard's abduction, and find out how the Orokans fit into this mess, it must be done quickly. They are at this moment in conference, and have promised a decision as soon as possible."

Riker waited a moment for comments. There were none, so he moved to the next item on his agenda.

"Geordi, have the engineering teams we left back on the Diamont uncovered anything new?"

"Yes, Captain, they have," said LaForge proudly. "They have discovered that an Orokan transporter was modified to emulate the visual effects of a Borg transporter. This would suggest that their Borg impersonators were beamed to the banquet room from the modified transporter station on the Diamont, and that Captain Picard and the surviving impersonators were removed from the banquet room by the same machine. My teams have also successfully accessed the Diamont's computer memory files and transferred them to storage media aboard ship. Data and I have been working with them, and thanks to Data's processing ability, he has been able to decode some sections of their history files."

"Merely bits and pieces, Sir," said Data, "but enough for a meaningful beginning. According to their records, the Orokans truly do have a long adversarial relationship with the Borg. We are still attempting to accurately synchronize time frames, but I estimate they have been fighting the Borg since before the earliest civilizations appeared on Earth. Some records indicate that they have been inventive enough to defend themselves against the surprises the Borg have thrown at them, but they have never been able to gain any substantial advantage. Orokan history seems to be a chronicle of their gradual retreat from the Borg. There is a repeated mention of sadness toward being

driven farther and farther from their home world. In their most recent files they often speak of a vast, complex series of research projects grouped under a code name of FINAL CURTAIN. That is the extent of what we have learned so far."

"You have done a great deal in a short time," said Riker. "My compliments to you both."

Dr. Crusher entered the conference room and slid quietly into her seat. Riker turned his attention to her. "Dr. Crusher, do you have anything new?"

"Yes I do, Captain," she answered. "We have discovered something that will fit in nicely with what Data has just told you. The medical labs have just completed a delicate series of DNA analyses on the bodies from the Diamont. After checking the Orokan DNA against our entire file of DNA types, we have found that Orokan and Borg DNA have enough similarities in crucial areas of the matrices to suggest a common ancestry."

"Are you certain, Doctor?" asked Riker.

"Those are the results of the first round of tests. I am having them rerun to verify the results," said Dr. Crusher, "but I'm pretty certain everything will hold up."

"Security to Captain Riker," came a summons from the bridge.

"Riker here."

"Sir, an incoming transmission from Starfleet Command."

"Pipe it down to our screen," ordered Riker.

Admiral Stockton appeared on the conference room viewscreen. "Captain Riker, Starfleet has given you the go-ahead to look for Captain Picard, with the understanding that you will not put your ship at any unnecessary risk. That must be clearly understood, Captain."

"It is, Admiral. And, thank you, Sir."

Stockton's image faded from the screen. Riker passed over each of the officers with a quick, sweeping glance.

"Stations, everybody. Let's pick up our engineering teams on the Diamont and go find Captain Picard."

* * *

Several more hours had passed, a time during which Picard had been left alone. He had often tested his restraints for a sign of weakness or inappropriate fastening. His efforts had yielded nothing. The restraints had remained snug and secure.

Picard had started to doze off when the door of his room opened and the team originally in place when he had first regained consciousness came back into the room. They took places at the consoles, and instead of merely monitoring the instruments, they all began actively manipulating buttons and controls at their stations.

Two more of the Borg came to Picard's table and added more restraints to the ones already holding him motionless. Picard could feel panic overrunning him. They were going to assimilate him! The dreaded moment had come. There was no more comforting himself with the opiate delusion that the thing he most feared from the Borg would still happen at some time in the future. That future had become now.

Someone pushed his head to one side and applied a hypospray against a vein in his neck. He felt his galloping panic slide into a sea of quicksand. He was barely aware of a clear mask being pressed onto his face. By the time he had taken his first complete

breath of the gas from the mask he was completely oblivious to even his own existence.

* * *

Once more Picard climbed through the blackness toward the light. Its brilliance was everywhere. He could not escape it. He could not even look away from it.

Why will my eyes not respond to my wishes, he wondered. I want to look at something besides the light. Why can I not shift my eyes, or turn my head?

"Look, Physician, he is awake," observed an attendant at a wall console.

"Thank you. So he is," said a relieved man in a long white coat. "Cut back on this overhead light so that I can examine the patient."

The light shining into Picard's eyes dimmed. Though he was strangely unable to say it, he projected a 'thank you' with the strongest force of will he could muster.

"Excellent. Excellent! There appears to be no response from Picard," announced the Physician. "There is no sign of rejecting the Borg implants, and the devices appear to all be working."

No response! Why is he so pleased that I have no response, wondered Picard. And what is this about implants?

"Hand me my small examination light, please," said the Physician.

He switched the light on and shined it straight into Picard's eyes. Its focused beam was more powerful than that of the overhead light, and when it passed over his retinas it generated pronounced discomfort. Picard attempted to turn aside and protest, but he could not bring his body to obey his will.

"Excellent." The Physician continued to be pleased with Picard's lack of response. "Would some of you tilt him upright, please?"

Picard's table was tilted forward and he was able to see the upper half of the wall in front of him.

"Now," said the Physician, "at this point his mind should have determined that the other personality is dominant. Let's test him for this development."

The Physician placed himself in the path of Picard's vision. "I am your Physician," he said. "I want you to concentrate on what I am going to say and then do your best to carry out my instruction."

The Physician took a moment to become sober and stern, and then he said, "Identify yourself!"

I am Captain Jean-Luc Picard, thought Picard. He was frustrated by his inability to speak the words.

Another man entered the room wearing a white uniform which stood out in stark contrast to the dark Borg costumes worn by everyone else but the Physician.

"Arch-Regent, I didn't know you would be coming, Sir," said the Physician.

Eagerly Arch-Regent Appal approached and closely studied Picard, saying, "I had to see him as soon as I heard he was awake. Very impressive, Physician. How did the procedure turn out?"

"In some ways well, and in other ways I am not certain," replied the Physician.

"What do you mean?" asked the Arch-Regent.

"I haven't been able to get him to respond verbally yet, Sir. That is the test for personality dominance," answered the Physician. He looked around the room and muttered, "Perhaps I should try some more..."

He located his tray of hyposprays and selected one which he placed against Picard's neck. Picard felt the medication being forced through his skin. It had a peculiarly unpleasant effect on his whole being. When the effects had passed he was startled to discover that he was not alone in his mind. He felt another presence sharing his consciousness. A presence composed of thousands, perhaps millions of voices united in a common goal - bringing Locutus securely back into the Borg Collective Consciousness.

No expletive was strong enough to express Picard's anger and dismay, no invective offensive enough to verbalize how Picard felt about what had been done to him. He had been pushed beyond the point of return. He was once again linked into the Borg Collective.

The Collective was working in his mind, attempting to establish itself as the force in control. Then Locutus, the merging of the Collective and what it perceived as Picard, dominated. Rebounding, the essence of Picard steeled itself for the losing battle which must surely come - the final annihilation of its proud, individualistic soul.

Strangely, though, the anticipated final assault from Locutus never materialized. The essence of Picard remained unmolested and whole. True, it had been weakened and forced into submission, but it still unexpectedly retained a measure of strength which rankled and perplexed the Collective.

The Physician took Picard's head in his hands and positioned it so that Picard was looking at him.

"Listen to me," he ordered. "You will identify yourself!"

Picard felt Locutus forming a response to the physician's order. He tried to block Locutus' reply, but succeeded only in slowing its execution.

"Listen to me," shouted the Physician as he shook Picard roughly. "Identify yourself!"

"We are Locutus, of Borg!"

"Aha!" shouted Appal, jumping into the air and gleefully applauding. The Arch-Regent was not alone in celebrating as every person in the room joined in with noisy, jubilant expressions of congratulations for the Physician and relief at the success of their endeavor.

The Physician, however, did not share in everyone's joy. He stared at his patient for a long moment, and then turned away from him, holding his forehead, - worried, distressed, and in deep, troubled thought.

Mystified by the Physician's melancholy reaction to his triumphant surgical success, Arch-Regent Appal turned to him and demanded, "What troubles you, Physician? You have accomplished what others could only have dreamed of. You have given us Locutus!"

"Did you not hear what he said, Arch-Regent?" asked the Physician quietly. "He said 'WE are Locutus'. Not 'I am Locutus', but 'we'. There are two resident personalities in his consciousness. Something has gone wrong, Sir. I have not been able to eradicate Picard, and Locutus knows that he is not alone."

Arch-Regent Appal grasped the Physician's shoulders roughly and glared into his eyes. "What has gone wrong?" he demanded.

"I don't know, Sir," responded the Physician. "No Orokan Physician has even attempted this procedure before. There is no previous experience to draw from. It could be anything: defective devices, or that I needed to disable the more advanced nanoprobe contributions which could have turned Picard into a serious security problem for us to deal with. We know

so little about this current generation of Borg. Finding the reason and correcting it could take a very long time."

"Answer my next question carefully, Physician," said Appal solemnly. "Which personality now dominates?"

"Locutus, Sir."

Appal appeared much relieved. "Then my judgement is that you have succeeded in giving us Locutus," he proclaimed. "His trial will commence two hours after the conclusion of the next duty shift."

More cheering and applause exploded throughout the room. When it had died down Appal took the Physician's hand. "You have earned a hero's place in the history of our race," he said to the Physician.

"No, Arch-Regent," the Physician objected, "I may have just cast an innocent man into the fires of Orokan justice."

*** CHAPTER FIVE ***

Many things were becoming clearer to the essence of Captain Jean-Luc Picard as it questioned, probed, and analyzed. It understood that it was sharing - although it was, at the moment, sharing from a slightly inferior posture - its own mind with an infused second presence known to the Borg Collective as Locutus. Painfully and angrily Picard recalled the previous sharing, the agonizing six days of subservience four years before. Then the essence of Picard chastised itself for permitting anger to cloud its reasoning, for when it looked through the emotion's obscuration it perceived that this time there were differences in the sharing. Somehow, this time the assimilation process had incurred an error, and the entities Picard and Locutus had been left intertwined in a state of coexistence such that each personality had equal access to the other's thoughts, and to sensory input from the body they both sought to control. At the moment neither of the two personalities possessed sufficient strength to totally eclipse the other. The ascendancy of Locutus was being maintained through support from the Borg by way of a subspace link with their entire Collective Consciousness.

The Locutus/Picard coexistence was not satisfactory to the Collective. Picard had listened, if that was the appropriate word, as Locutus and the Collective had run diagnostic procedures on his mind and on the cybernetic implants he had received at the hand of the Orokan surgeon. The Collective was not pleased with how the Orokan surgeon had adulterated the assimilation procedure with his partial-implementation of the interfacing network. Without the support the deactivated nanoprobes could have brought about, Locutus had been left barely in control of the body and having to share mental processes with Picard.

Picard began to comprehend the modest magnitude of the hold Locutus and the Collective maintained over him. He perceived that a majority of the responsibility for maintaining the Collective's hold had been transferred to a small group of Borg personnel on the ship. The presence of Borg and Orokan personnel on the same vessel intrigued Picard. He knew that Locutus was accessing information relative to the crew complement to calculate the amount of support he would have in maintaining his ascendancy. The information was still residing in Locutus/Picard's common memory. Picard examined it.

He learned that he was being held prisoner on a Borg cube-ship which was surprisingly being run by Orokani personnel. According to assessments by the two-hundred-and-seventeen Borg units being held prisoner somewhere on another level, the ship was not in very capable hands. Picard learned that the original inhabitants of the Borg ship had been victims of a form of sub-microorganism that had somehow survived the bio-filters of the ship's transporter. The Collective had not been able to determine how to combat the resultant ship-wide infection. Of the thousands aboard the cube-ship, all but a few hundred had died before the Orokani vessel *Diamond* had discovered it. The Orokans had easily taken control of the cube-ship and had cleansed it of the infection, saving the lives of the last two-hundred-and-seventeen Borg. Orokani engineers had then devised a way to control the Borg survivors before they had recovered sufficiently to take action against their new masters. The Orokans were attempting to use their Borg prisoners as a window into the thoughts of the Collective. Had they been successful, they would have learned that another Borg ship was searching for them. Picard found it ironic that the very people he would have tried to help with this information were succeeding in keeping him from doing just that.

Picard began to examine the puzzle of why he had been brought to the cube-ship. He knew now that the award he had been promised by the Orokans had merely been a ruse to draw him to the Diamont where it had been relatively easy to seize him. He was now aware that the persons who had actually abducted him were not really Borg, but were disguised Orokans going to great lengths to leave the impression that Borg personnel had been responsible for his abduction. Picard felt that he had a reasonably accurate idea of how he had arrived where he was, but he could still see no purpose for what the Orokans had done. He wondered what the Arch-Regent had been talking about when he had set a time for Locutus' trial. Picard was certain that he had never consciously committed any offense against the Orokans serious enough to warrant a trial, and, still carrying persistent memories of Locutus' entire first incarnation, he could personally vouch that the list of Locutus' offenses included nothing against the Orokans. In spite of his certainties, he knew he would be in big trouble if the Orokans had already made up their minds to find Locutus guilty of some offense. He remembered that Arch-Regent Appal had been told by the Physician that Picard still existed as an inferior personality behind Locutus in his mind. Whatever the implications of that information, it had apparently mattered very little to the Arch-Regent.

Hours before, Locutus/Picard had been taken from the Physician's medical room to a hastily prepared holding room. His prosthetic hand had been attached to a Borg power coupling which normally served as a source of energy and nourishment for Borg units, and as a connection to the Collective. When the power levels from the coupling had stabilized, Picard understood how the Borg prisoners were being controlled by the Orokans. Their engineers had managed to modify the circuitry which generated power coupling disconnect commands to include approval from an Orokan caretaker before the disconnect command could be implemented. So far the Orokan modification was working, but Picard was aware of persistent attempts from the Collective to override the restriction. The Collective's efforts thus far had only shown them what would not work, but Picard gave the Borg all due credit for inventiveness and persistence. He knew that sooner or later they would run out of mistakes.

Picard examined the parts of the holding room which Locutus allowed him to see. His eyes were looking straight ahead at a featureless grey wall, but out of the corner of his left eye Picard thought he saw a shiny reflective surface. The inspiration for a test against the control of Locutus formed within the essence of Picard. Simply, he wondered if he could

seize control of himself long enough to turn his eyes toward the reflective surface and look at himself. Attempting to wrest control of himself away from Locutus and the Collective, even for something as trivial as having a look at himself, would give him valuable knowledge of what it would take assert his control, but, it might also show Locutus and the Collective the limits of his capacity to resist them. Picard considered everything he had thought of, and decided that having a look at himself was worth the risk.

Locutus and the Collective were occupied together, paying Picard no attention. Now would be the perfect time to try regaining control, Picard reasoned. Their attention is focused elsewhere, and I might not have to give it my all.

The formation of the idea for the test, the evaluation of its benefits and risks, and the realization of the appropriateness of attempting it had all happened within an instant. How much effort should I apply, wondered Picard. Then he envisioned himself punching someone in the nose merely to get their attention. He put exactly that much mental effort into breaking through the wall around his essence. Fortunately it had been weakened by the Collective's diminished concentration on him. His head jerked

violently left, his eyes falling onto the reflective surface. The image of himself was distorted by curves in the surface, but he was able to see the Borg devices which had been added to him. The sight itself was shocking, but the joy of success was beyond description. He felt the Collective countering his unexpected show of strength, and he allowed himself to be subdued, not yet ready or willing to make a definitive issue of who was really the stronger. Then the Collective attempted to extend their control into the space occupied by his essence. Picard resisted their incursion successfully, applying only enough resistance to hold his own against them. Eventually the Collective pulled back. Now Picard knew, and the Collective knew that his essence was capable of presenting a formidable force against them. He hoped it gave them something to worry about.

More time passed, during which Picard exercised every mental discipline he could think of. He hoped that the activity would help block any attempt by the Collective to weaken him. He had wanted to work up some contingency plans, but had given up on that after remembering that through his common links with Locutus the Collective would have known of them as fast as he would have thought of them. By the same token, he would have known of their countermeasures to his plans, and then, after

everyone had determined what the other was planning to do the whole exercise would have been a waste of time and effort. He knew that his only hope lay in being able to take quick and decisive advantage of any opportunity which presented itself. In fact, his quickness was his greatest strength against the Borg who were certainly a powerful intellectual presence, but because of the collective nature of their widely dispersed intellect the Borg were slower arriving at a decision and implementing it.

The door to his holding room opened, and two Orokan guards entered. They each pointed a disruptor at Locutus/Picard. "We are going to move you to another place," said one of the guards. "When you are released, follow our instructions to the letter. These weapons are set to kill, and it makes no difference to us whether you die here in this holding room or in the execution chamber after your trial."

The other guard raised a portable communicator to his lips. "Come in, Prisoner Control. We are prepared for the release of Locutus."

Picard felt the disconnect command through the prosthetic hand, along with the affirmation signal from the Orokan controller. Locutus ordered the body to stand, and Picard resigned himself to merely going along for the ride.

They emerged from the holding room on one of the upper levels of the cube-ship and traversed the level's main walkway which paralleled a wide, deep, open chasm that occupied the center of the cube-ship. The openness of the chasm was broken only by structural beams which gave the interior of the vessel an unrefined and unfinished look. As they headed toward an elevator at the end of the walkway their footsteps on the metal floor echoed in the emptiness of the great open area. They entered the elevator and descended to the lowest level at the bottom of the chasm. They left the elevator and walked across the base of the chasm, which Picard likened from his point of view to the floor of a metal canyon. He was directed toward a wide doorway which was attended by two Orokans in full dress uniforms.

When Locutus/Picard and his two escorts arrived at the doorway the two attendants crisply executed facing movements toward each other and pressed wall-mounted panels near their shoulders. The broad doors parted in the middle and receded into the walls. Picard discovered that the Orokans had prepared the chamber behind the doors into a layout he could only assume was a courtroom.

"Let's keep moving," prompted one of the guards as he pressed his disruptor into Locutus/Picard's back.

Locutus refused to move.

"Remember, Borg, I could scatter you across the room and still get a medal for it," warned the guard.

Locutus started walking down the center aisle. A large number of seats at the rear of the courtroom had been arranged on tiers in a semicircle around a central open arena. In front of the spectator area were two long tables: the one on the left, rectangular, while the one on the right was shaped like a letter 'L'. The short side of the 'L' table rested against the waist-high rails of a raised hexagonal platform which contained a single chair. Only five of its six sides had rails. One side had been left open, presumably, for entry and exit. On the left side of the arena was another raised platform, rectangular, with low rails on three of its four sides. Ten chairs, in two offset rows of five, had been placed on this platform. The arena ended against the far wall. A balcony had been constructed in the center of that wall approximately one meter above the floor. The left half of the balcony was enclosed. It contained a polished high-backed chair and appeared to have a narrow desk or writing surface in front of the chair. The right half of the balcony was edged by a waist-high railing. It contained an ordinary chair and was accessed by a stairway from the arena floor. Above the balcony

hung the rolled Orokan banner Picard had seen in the banquet room aboard the Diamont. Immediately below the Orokan banner were two simulated wood doors.

The spectator seating was filled with Orokan personnel wearing their full dress uniforms. The courtroom was buzzing with the sounds of people discussing the impending trial. As Locutus/Picard walked further along the center aisle more of the spectators saw him, and the murmuring of the crowd took on a decidedly angrier tone.

Picard could not understand their hostility toward him. He chided himself for not having been more suspicious of the Orokans on the Diamont. How had he overlooked the fact that their attitude toward him had never had the degree of cordiality one expected of someone who thought that one was a hero?

Picard was able to see that an Orokan officer was seated at each of the two tables in the arena. As Locutus/Picard neared the gate in the railing which lined the arena, the officer at the 'L' table on the right arose and opened the gate. Locutus/Picard was escorted to the raised hexagonal platform where his escorts indicated that he should enter and be seated. His prosthetic hand was connected to a power

coupling which provided an electronic signal to lock him in place.

As soon as Locutus/Picard was in place a door in the rear wall opened. A senior Orokkan officer entered leading ten other persons who were wearing black full-length robes. The officer led his following to the rectangular platform on the left side of the arena where they filed to their chairs and stood with their heads bowed and hands folded in front of them.

After a moment of silence one of the doors at the rear of the balcony opened and the assembled group of Orokkan was called to attention. Everyone in the courtroom except Locutus/Picard stood as Arch-Regent Appal, also dressed in a full-length black robe, stepped onto the balcony and seated himself in the polished chair. Picard considered Locutus' refusal to stand a serious breach of protocol, and for what it was worth, he wasted no time in expressing his feelings to Locutus and the Collective. He then realized that his mental outburst had been quite illogical; because of being connected to the power coupling, Locutus could not have stood even if he had wanted to show respect for the Arch-Regent. When Appal seated himself the rest of the courtroom also took their seats.

Appal's Adjutant Officer marched to a place in front of the balcony, executed a right face, and announced,

"This specially convened Command Court Martial is now in session. His Honor, The Arch-Regent Appal, now presides."

"Thank you, gentlemen," said the Arch-Regent as a matter of formality. "I'd like to get this affair underway as quickly as..."

The officer at the table next to Locutus/Picard stood and interrupted the Arch-Regent. "Sir! I must strongly protest being assigned the defense of this... this Borg!" he declared. "At my coming-of-age, I swore a solemn oath to be an enemy of the Borg. My defending him would force me to violate that oath. I consider this duty a stain on the outstanding record I have strived my entire career to build."

The Arch-Regent took his gavel and pounded it repeatedly on his desk before the young officer stopped his protesting.

"In the first place you were not assigned this duty, young man," stated Appal grimly. "Who should defend this Borg was determined by random drawing. The fates have chosen you, and I am satisfied with their choice. Now, be seated, and put on a respectable show of looking out for your client's interests before I find you in contempt!"

The young officer sat in his chair, his face greatly reddened by the public dressing-down he had just experienced.

"Now, if there are no further outbursts to be dealt with," said the Arch-Regent while leafing through a sheaf of papers on his desk, "I'll ask the Prosecuting Advocate to make his opening statements."

"Thank you, Your Honor," said the prosecutor as he stood and walked before the ten-member jury. "There is not one among us here today who needs to be reminded of what happened exactly one year ago, but, for the benefit of the court record, I will quickly outline what I have referred to. That which occurred one year ago we now call The Hours Of Infamy. On that day the Borg unleashed savage attacks against every Orokan colony and outpost. None of these attacks were detected by the Network, the grid of interlocked detection and early warning systems which were based on the technology and plans of The United Federation of Planets. You members of the jury will be shown accurately the trail of fault. The prosecution will prove to you that this Borg, Locutus, who was formerly Picard, a starship captain under the banner of The United Federation of Planets, was solely responsible for enabling the Borg attackers to slip through the Network undetected. You will then know,

beyond any possibility of doubt, who is responsible for the pain and sorrow which exactly one year ago touched each member of this crew."

At last Picard understood. The abduction, the Orokan resurrection of Locutus, and this trial, all were connected to his misadventure with the Borg. The Orokans had bought the plans for the Federation's MX-35 system from the Ferengi arms peddler, and then they had entrusted their civilization's security to its outdated and increasingly ineffective technology. The antiquated security system had let them down. When they had gone looking for answers, the Orokan survivors had discovered that he, Picard, had been a prisoner of the Borg, and as information the Borg had stripped from his mind had been used to decimate the fleet at Wolf 359, the Orokans assumed that he had been the Borg's source of information about the MX-35 system, and the reason for their tragic Hours Of Infamy.

Picard wondered how the Borg might have slipped through the Orokan system. Had they simply gotten lucky enough to guess their way through its technology? Not likely, he decided. First of all, trusting to luck wasn't the Borg's style. And secondly, if you knew nothing at all about the system it still couldn't be beaten. The problem with the MX-35

system had been that somebody had obtained secret design plans and had studied the system extensively. Only after understanding it to the base component level had they been able to develop an algorithm for rendering it ineffective. It was only after Starfleet had learned that the troublesome algorithm was becoming more and more widely available that they had chosen to phase MX-35 out of use. Picard knew that he could not have provided anyone with the means to defeat the MX-35: he had never studied the system extensively enough. Obviously the Orokans were trying to hold him responsible for a problem that someone else had created.

The Prosecuting Advocate continued, "...and then you will be asked to deliberate and return a verdict. In light of the truths you will have been shown, the prosecution will ask specifically that you deliver nothing less than a verdict of guilty to the charge of complicity in mass murder! After your verdict, you will be asked for a recommendation of sentence. Members of the jury, based upon the evidence the prosecution will present to this court, I have the most secure confidence that you will ask nothing less of His Honor than a sentence of Communal Execution!"

There was a loud murmur of approval from the spectators.

The Prosecuting Advocate finished his remarks by bowing to the jury and saying, "Thank you all for your attention."

The Arch-Regent directed his attention toward the Defending Advocate. "Does your client understand the nature of the charges against him?" he asked.

"Your Honor, I haven't the slightest idea," responded the Defending Advocate.

"I'd like to hear your explanation!" demanded the Arch-Regent.

"Sir, I did not wish to offend this court by my appearance or grooming," said the Defending Advocate. "I spent the entire preceding duty shift preparing my uniform."

After an uncomfortable silence the Arch-Regent said, "I will grant you time to explain the charges to your client. Do... so... now!"

The Defending Advocate slowly rose from his chair and walked around his table. He stood before Locutus/Picard's raised platform and loudly proclaimed, "You, sir, by your own admission are Locutus of Borg. My entire race, through the person of

the Prosecuting Advocate over there, alleges that you, when you were accepted into the Borg community, provided them with the sum total of your life's experience and knowledge. The prosecution will specifically charge that you divulged to your new friends, the Borg, sufficient information to enable them to defeat our planetary defense and security systems which were based on the Federation's MX-35 system. That breach of security during The Hours of Infamy enabled an armada of Borg ships to virtually annihilate trillions of innocent civilians living in the Orokan Colonies. Personally, I agree with the Prosecuting Advocate, but I am being forced to put on a reasonable show of looking out for your interests. That is exactly what you will get, sir. A reasonable show, and nothing more. Incidentally, sir, if the prosecuting advocate succeeds in securing the verdict he wants, we will line up one hundred volunteers with disruptors as a firing squad for your execution. Do you require any further clarification of the charges or the punishment sought upon conviction on those charges?"

Locutus continued looking out over the head of the Defending Advocate as he had done during the advocate's explanation of the charges. To Locutus and the Collective, anything which the Orokans did was irrelevant. What was relevant was the assistance

being imparted by Locutus and the Borg prisoners to the Collective in its effort to bring the commandeered cube-ship back under Borg control. In the Collective mind of the Borg, the reclamation of their missing ship was already assured. Like any other Borg undertaking, it would simply be a matter of time and persistence.

The Defending Advocate walked back to his chair, sat down, and waited for the Arch-Regent to resume the trial.

"Thank you, Mister Defending Advocate," said the Arch-Regent with a sigh. He could sympathize with the Defending Advocate's attitude. In the Borg attacks during The Hours of Infamy the man had lost a family that he had loved dearly. Appal admitted to himself that the Defending Advocate deserved another reminder of proper courtroom decorum, but he could not bring himself to deliver it. The truth was that if he, as a younger man carrying the same burden of grief, had been chosen to serve as the Defending Advocate, he might well have behaved the same way. He was thankful for the role fate had assigned him in this proceeding. He knew that every person in his crew was anxious to witness Locutus' execution, an event which was popularly regarded as a foregone conclusion. Appal, himself, wanted this particular

Borg to be the first to pay for what had been done to the Orokan Colonies. However, he saw this goal in a slightly different light than some members of his crew. To them, the execution of Locutus would be the end of an adventure, but to Appal it would be the first satisfying event in a much grander scheme he hoped to implement. In order to insure the loyalty and long-term support of his crew he planned to give them the execution they wanted, but he would first show them that orderly procedure and law need not stand in the way of it. If Locutus was executed after a dignified, orderly march to the execution chamber, an illusion that Appal hoped the trial would paint, the crew might be moved to rally around his leadership and embrace his visions of further retribution against the Borg. Any other path to an execution might not convince the crew that his law and leadership (which was in reality the only Orokan law and leadership left in the galaxy) could play a decisive part in their futures. The harsh reality for his crew was that there were no more homes, families, or friends to return to. Appal feared that eventually, without a rallying influence such as he sought to provide, they would desert, just drift away, leaving him with a fragmented, unobtainable dream.

Appal decided to overlook the defending advocate's unprofessional conduct toward his client. After all, Appal reasoned, he might have committed a breach of

protocol in ordering what should have been a private conference between advocate and client to have occurred in open court. It would be safe to let it pass this time, but he would have to be careful that the unpredictable officer was not allowed to do something else to make him look totally foolish.

"Mister Prosecuting Advocate, let us hear from your first witness," ordered the Arch-Regent.

The Prosecuting Advocate stood and proclaimed, "The prosecution first calls Technical-Historian Brace Grawhil."

A fit, balding, middle-aged man walked into the arena and climbed the stairs to the witness chair beside the Arch-Regent. The Prosecuting Advocate wasted no time in delivering his first question.

"Good day, Mister Grawhil. Your position is that of a military technical-historian, is that correct?"

"It is."

"Please enlighten the court, how long have you served in this capacity?"

"Over twenty-three years."

"And have you chosen a specific area of technical-historical documentation in which to specialize?"

"I have. Upon my graduation from the Service Academy, I applied to the Council of Regents for a position as a staff historian for the project known as FINAL CURTAIN. My application was approved, and I have been with the project, well, I was with the project until the Borg attacks."

The Prosecuting Advocate moved to the front of his table.

"Because of your long service with the project, Mister Grawhil, you would be familiar with its support systems. Are you familiar with the Federation's MX-35 security system?"

"I am," answered Grawhil as he glanced at Locutus/Picard contemptuously.

"What can you tell us about the MX-35?" inquired the Prosecuting Advocate.

"Everyone was thrilled to have found such a system," Grawhil began. "To protect the developing elements of FINAL CURTAIN we needed an all-encompassing colonial security system with a detecting range and networking capabilities superior to what we had been

able to develop. Since all our resources were to be channeled into FINAL CURTAIN, we needed to come up with an externally sourced planetary security system."

"What do your records tell us about the system's early evaluation results?"

"Almost all the records indicated that the system performed flawlessly," Grawhil stated. "None of our technicians could devise a way to sneak through its detection grids. There was, however, a footnote dissenting opinion which suggested that the only flaw in the testing procedures was that time was not allotted for analysts to explore deeper into the system's intricacies before it was fully deployed."

"I see," said the Prosecuting Advocate. "In spite of the dissenting footnote, the system performed as expected?"

"Yes, sir. The Council of Regents was also impressed with it. They believed in the system's ability to protect, so when it was in place and operational they authorized beginning the construction of the actual fighting elements of FINAL CURTAIN."

"Please clarify for the court exactly how the functional Network fit into the FINAL CURTAIN project," said the Prosecuting Advocate.

"The strategy was very basic. In the early years of the project, the finished fighting units of FINAL CURTAIN were assigned a defensive role. If they had been alerted by the Network to a Borg attack, they would have been sent to defend the distressed colony and, of course, the fighting units it would have been building. The building of the FINAL CURTAIN fighting units progressed on schedule for nearly eighteen years. If we would have had another year of construction time we would have had enough completed fighting units to use FINAL CURTAIN offensively, as it had originally been designed. As things happened, at The Hours Of Infamy the Borg got to all the finished and nearly finished fighting units before any kind of alarm was declared."

"Thank you, Mister Grawhil," smiled the Prosecuting Advocate. He turned to the Defending Advocate and said, "Your witness."

"I have no questions," admitted the Defending Advocate.

And I have no Defense Attorney, thought Picard angrily to himself.

The Prosecuting Advocate returned to his seat behind his table and consulted his notes. After a moment he raised his head and proclaimed, "The prosecution next calls the Diamont's Senior Officer of Strategy and Planning, Mister Norh Bellel."

Norh Bellel was small and thin, and wore his hair extremely short. He walked across the arena with a purposeful stride and bounced lightly up the stairs to the witness chair. After taking his seat he gazed at the Prosecuting Advocate with the focused, permanently analytical look that had become his trademark.

"Good day, Mister Bellel," said the Prosecuting Advocate. "Firstly, I'd like you to explain to the court your part in the FINAL CURTAIN project."

Bellel cleared his throat. "I was privileged to have headed the planning committee that established the production schedules for FINAL CURTAIN and assigned defense zones and attack response procedures."

"And in establishing the defense zones and attack response procedures, you became acquainted with the Network?" asked the prosecuting advocate.

"I did," Bellel affirmed.

"In your becoming acquainted with the Network, did you try to compromise the system in any way?"

"I should say we did!" proclaimed Bellel. "The Council of Regents practically demanded that we find something wrong with it! We tested every suggestion; from brute force to subtle deception. In the time we were given, we could not find any fault with the system."

"None at all?" the Prosecuting Advocate asked, just to reaffirm the point.

"No faults at all," maintained Bellel.

"I have here," said the Prosecuting Advocate while displaying another handful of papers, "a copy of a report you filed on the Diamont after The Hours Of Infamy in which you state that the Borg successes were possible only because the Network had been deceived into thinking that approaching Borg ships were not actually there. To paraphrase your words - the Network had been compromised. Now, Mister Bellel, can you tell us how the Borg, who had never previously encountered the Network, were able to compromise it where you could not, in spite of your much superior understanding of the system?"

"My staff of analysts and I concur that the Borg could not have achieved our level of understanding of the Network," explained Bellel. "The Borg do not use spies. There is no evidence that our computer security was breached. And since you cannot bargain with the Borg, there is no reason to even consider the unlikely possibility that one of our people gave them information. Ruling out those possibilities means that the Borg obtained their understanding of our Network from an outside source."

"An outside source," repeated the Prosecuting Advocate thoughtfully. "Mister Bellel, should we suspect the Ferengi of having supplied the Borg with any information? After all, we did buy the plans from them, did we not?"

"Yes, we bought the plans from a Ferengi arms merchant," affirmed Bellel, "but when we got them, they were terribly mixed up. Nothing logically arranged, pages out of sequence, a distressing jumble of documents. It would not be unreasonable to assume that they sold the plans to us because they simply couldn't understand them. Besides, the Ferengi have no great love for the Borg. The Ferengi have been treated as badly by the Borg as anyone else they've encountered."

"Alright, Mister Bellel, if not us, and if not the Ferengi, then whom?" asked the Prosecuting Advocate using just the right phrasing and inflection to build anticipation for the answer everyone knew had to be spoken.

"The Federation, of course!" declared Bellel.

Deafening cheers erupted, which brought a wide smile to the face of the Prosecuting Advocate. This was his first time at being an advocate, and he had become quite pleased with his newly discovered skill in playing the crowd.

Picard had been able to do nothing more than listen to the trial. He was furious with his attorney for letting all the prosecution's accusations go unchallenged. The prosecutor's witness had just named the Federation as the source of the Borg's information. The way the trial was going, Picard didn't have to make a second guess about which way the next questions would lead.

"Order, order! Gentlemen, order!" shouted the Arch-Regent as he pounded feverishly on his desk with his gavel. He leaped to his feet and shouted to the crowd, "Let me remind you, this is a court martial! A military trial! You are all in uniform. Please, conduct yourselves accordingly!"

Several more long seconds of punishing the desk with the gavel brought a semblance of order. When satisfied that he was back in control of the courtroom, the Arch-Regent sat down and nodded to the Prosecuting Advocate.

"Excuse me, Mister Bellel," said the Prosecuting Advocate, "but I have to be very clear about what you said a moment ago. If I understood you correctly, you implicated the Federation? As in, The United Federation of Planets?"

"Exactly!" responded Bellel with a succinct nod for emphasis.

"Was this information presented officially by the Federation to the Borg?" asked the prosecuting advocate.

"No, it was not!" declared Bellel. "The information came from one individual: the defendant, Jean-Luc Picard, or as he was known when he gave them the information, Locutus of Borg!"

"Would you explain why you accuse the defendant?" asked the Prosecuting Advocate for clarification.

"My staff has compiled information from a number of recent diplomatic contacts," asserted Bellel. "Jean-

Luc Picard, Captain of the Federation's USS Enterprise, was captured by the Borg. He took the identity of Locutus and joined with the Borg. Information they learned from Locutus led to a bloody and devastating defeat for the Federation's fleet at a place known as Wolf 359. The Borg invader then traveled to Locutus' home planet before it was mysteriously destroyed. We are not certain how he escaped dying on the Borg ship, but we are certain that he is a coward who betrays those who trust in his discretion. Our sources have revealed to us that information about the Federation's MX-35 system would have been available on Picard's ship. Since we have established that Picard is Locutus, this gives Locutus the means to have passed secret information to the Borg. Being physically on a Borg ship gives him the opportunity to have done so. As for motivation, from his past actions, which led to the massacre at Wolf 359, Picard, or Locutus, if you prefer, has shown himself to be spineless, ready at the drop of a hat to spill his guts in an attempt to save his worthless life!"

The crowd of spectators had been growing noisier and noisier as Bellel had spoken his last sentences of testimony. His inflamed comments had driven them once again into a raucous outburst. Arch-Regent Appal, enraged at the conduct of his crew, renewed his assaults on the desk with his gavel. A powerful impact

with the desk's surface broke the handle. The head of the gavel flew spinning over the edge of the balcony and Appal's fist slammed onto the desk. He shook his badly bruised hand angrily. The spectator's cheers, whistles, and catcalls continued unabated. Appal finally held his head in his uninjured left hand and waited for the emotion of the crowd to burn itself out.

When the crowd had settled back into its seats, Appal simply made a discreet wave of his left hand toward the Prosecuting Advocate.

"Thank you, Mister Bellel," he said. "I have no further questions."

Once again the Prosecuting Advocate glanced toward the Defending Advocate. "Your witness," he smiled.

The Defending Advocate surprised everyone by standing. The spectators hushed as he slowly walked across the arena and stood before the witness.

"My client did all that?" he simply asked.

The spectators roared and hooted again.

When they were quiet, Bellel responded, "That is correct."

This time there were a few isolated howls.

The defending advocate walked back and turned to face the Arch-Regent. He leaned back, and sitting on the edge of the table, he said, "Your Honor, I am not versed in the Law. I have no training in courtroom protocol. I am here, against my wishes, charged with defending a creature that I believe was responsible for the death of my entire family. I have listened carefully to what has been presented in this courtroom, and, on the surface, the Prosecutor's case seems to do a commendable job of damning my client. But, there is something about the prosecutor's case that disturbs me, Your Honor. It cannot be allowed to escape our attention that his case against my client is built entirely on a shaky structure of circumstantial evidence. I fully realize that what I am compelled to do now will be very unpopular, but, Your Honor, I ask that this case be dismissed because of insufficient evidence against my client."

The spectators responded with a roar of displeasure. A barrage of personal effects, writing implements, and shoes was directed at the Defending Advocate. Appal stood and shouted for order until he was nearly hoarse. The crowd gradually settled back onto the edges of the seats, quietly listening for the Arch-

Regent to shoot down the Defending Advocate's request.

Appal was quietly amused with this development now that the crowd was not working on his nerves.

"You surprise me," he said to the Defending Advocate. "You've developed a sudden, unanticipated interest in this case, and I have to admit, you've made an understandable request for dismissal. You've placed me in a situation where I must determine whether to dismiss a case for lack of appropriate evidence, or allow all this testimony to stand because of the weight of overwhelming circumstance."

The Arch-Regent stopped to consider what he should do. He could not just turn Locutus loose. With his crew in its present state of mind, Locutus probably would not survive long enough to be returned to his people. It would be bad enough trying to give the prisoner back as Picard, which was out of the question because the Physician didn't know how to turn Locutus back into Picard. If he was returned as Locutus, how outraged would the Federation be? What revenge would they extract? No, Locutus could not be excused. It was too dangerous. If the Federation believed Picard was missing, it was better that he never turn up again. It seemed the only way out of the dilemma was to move forward as planned to

an execution. But how? On what legal grounds could he order it to happen? He finally decided to just talk about the dilemma out loud. Maybe in his rambling he would discover a cleverly turned phrase or a twist of logic that would decide the fate of the impasse. And if not, he could always declare a recess to think things through.

"This is perhaps the most difficult decision I have ever had to make," admitted the Arch-Regent aloud. "If this was an ordinary civilian trial I would have to rule..."

Appal was interrupted by deafening blaring klaxons and a myriad number of equally abrasive supporting alarms.

"Court is recessed!" he shouted. "Battle stations, everyone! We are under attack!"

*** CHAPTER SIX ***

Upon hearing the alarms Picard attempted to leap from his chair. Locutus, controlling his body, would not permit it. Locutus, the caretaker, was to insure that the essence of Picard would not succeed in acting

against the Collective. Picard quelled an impulse to lash out against the Collective's constraints and turned his efforts instead to monitoring a swell of exchanges within the Borg Collective Consciousness.

The cube-ship controlled by the Orokans had been located by the second cube-ship which had been dispatched by the Borg to either cleanse the commandeered vessel of the Orokan infestation or destroy it. Within a matter of minutes the Borg cube-ship would be in a position to begin its attack. The two-hundred-and-seventeen Borg prisoners held on the Orokan ship were prepared to take any action possible and make any necessary sacrifice to preserve the integrity of the Collective.

When the alarms had sounded, the Orokan spectators had quickly evacuated the courtroom. Picard wondered what battle preparations they had made aboard the cube-ship. He suspected that many alternate ways of controlling maneuvering and tactical functions had been incorporated into the original Borg systems. No doubt the designers of the alterations would have had to rely heavily on manual controls. Picard doubted that even the Binars could have interfaced Orokan computers with the Borg ship in the short time the Orokans had controlled it.

Picard felt the ship rock after an explosion sounded outside the courtroom. Meanwhile Locutus struggled to break his link with the power coupling, as did all the other Borg prisoners. Picard heard the sounds of confused and ill-prepared Orokans trying to organize an effective response to the Borg attacker. If the ship's two-hundred-and-seventeen Borg prisoners manage to free themselves, thought Picard, the few hundred Orokans on this cube-ship won't stand a chance of coming out of the battle alive, or more possibly, not assimilated.

More explosions shook the Orokan cube-ship as dialogue between Locutus and the Collective became more intense. The Borg cube-ship required the assistance of Locutus and the prisoners, while Locutus and the prisoners needed the help of the Collective to free themselves from their power couplings. Again preoccupied with its own needs, the Collective was ignoring Picard.

Picard heard someone reenter the courtroom where his body was still electronically locked to his power coupling.

"Captain Picard, can you understand me?" the person demanded.

The voice was familiar. Picard was sure it was that of the Physician. Once again Picard pushed out from the safe corner of his mind. His head jerked to the left, temporarily free of Locutus' domination. He focused upon the person who had called to him, affirming that it was the Physician.

"Ye-e-e-s-s!" Picard thickly answered before his speech became impossible to control. The Collective had quickly mounted a strong effort to regain control of the Locutus/Picard mind. In answering the Physician, Picard had divided his concentration, and the Collective had gained strength against him. Picard resisted, this time with all his effort. Perspiration formed on his forehead, and tortured lines on his face reflected the intensity of his inner struggle.

The Borg are much stronger this time, Picard realized. They must have somehow adapted since my previous attempt at self-control.

Picard willed himself to find his second wind. Anger bolstered his focused concentration, and he felt the Collective weaken slightly. Then the Collective regrouped and pressed harder against him. Harder and harder.

I'm falling back, Picard admitted.

The Physician had moved closer to Locutus/Picard. He was holding a hypospray behind himself, out of the reach of Locutus.

"Picard!" the Physician cried. "Listen to me! Don't give in! Listen to me!"

Picard tried to concentrate on what the Physician was shouting. Divided priorities again weakened him against the Collective, and he slipped closer to submission.

"Picard!" it was the Physician, distracting him again. "I gave you a drug! It enhanced your receptiveness to the Borg! I'm sorry! I've brought you an antidote, but I have to get close enough to give it to you!"

The Physician cautiously approached the open side of the hexagonal platform where Locutus/Picard sat. Now the Collective's attention became divided between Picard and the Physician. Picard renewed his attack against its presence.

The Physician stepped inside the railing and reached toward Locutus/Picard's neck with the hypospray.

Danger! The alarm reverberated through the Collective Consciousness. Locutus responded to the threat of losing control over Picard by grasping the

Physician's uniform coat with his free hand and tossing him over the railing onto the table. The Physician slid over the table and landed roughly on the floor.

Now choosing to ignore Picard, Locutus and the Collective were focusing their attention on the possibility of a renewed threat from the Physician. Although weakened by the prolonged mental battle, Picard took advantage of the distraction provided by the Physician and lurched into a precarious position of dominance.

"Now!" Picard croaked weakly. "Physician, help...now!"

It all comes down to this moment, Picard decided. The last great, heroic stand of Jean-Luc Picard. Nothing more to live for, other than giving the best possible account of himself in the final moments of his life. Jean-Luc Picard would not yield from where he stood, not while he retained any means to resist.

The Physician pulled himself over the edge of the table and shook his head. He found the hypospray on the floor and examined it, finding it undamaged. He looked at Locutus/Picard and saw his eyes gazing blankly into the air, the blank expression giving no clue as to what state the mind of his former patient

was in. He climbed onto the table and cautiously approached Locutus/Picard. He waited a moment on the edge of the table and was completely ignored. At last satisfied that he could safely make another attempt to deliver the antidote in the hypospray, he leaped inside the platform's railing hooking his arm around Locutus/Picard's head and pressed the hypospray against his neck.

The body of Locutus/Picard tensed frantically, attempting to stand, and then collapsed weakly back into the chair. For a moment both Locutus and Picard were stunned by the power of the chemical which had been introduced into their body. Picard felt changes taking place. Slowly he felt himself achieving dominance while Locutus receded, but the joy of dominating Locutus was short-lived. God, he felt sick! If he died, they would say the cure had been worse than the disease.

Picard fought the sickness. Deep breaths. Slow, deliberate, deep breaths. He was regaining control of his body again, and concentrating on slow, deep breaths.

The sickness passed while another explosion rocked the ship. Picard ignored the lurching as he drank in the feeling of controlling his body. Locutus and the Collective were not completely gone from his

consciousness, but he had definitely become their master!

"Feeling better, Captain Picard?" asked the Physician.

"Somewhat," Picard admitted. "Tell me, has that concoction of yours ever been tested on anyone besides me?"

"Sorry, you're the first," confessed the Physician. "I gather from your reaction that I had the dosage high enough."

"Mmm," muttered Picard in agreement before indulging in another controlled deep breath. When he had settled again, he asked, "Tell me, why did you bring me that antidote?"

"We're under attack by a Borg ship," explained the Physician. "They outnumber us by maybe a hundred to one. They know how to squeeze the most from one of these cubes, while we know relatively nothing. Chances are we're going to lose this battle, Captain. I just thought you would like a chance to face the Borg as yourself. I know I have no right to ask this, but please, help the Arch-Regent go out with a little dignity."

"What makes you think I'd even consider helping His Honor, the Arch-Regent?" objected Picard. "He was trying to railroad me out the back courtroom door and throw me to a firing squad!"

The Physician looked seriously into Picard's eyes and said, "Consider it my fee for services rendered."

"You physicians always do charge an arm and a leg for the least little thing," complained Picard with a barely perceptible grin. "I'll try to do what I can. First, how do I get out of this chair?"

"Hold the prosthetic hand, Captain," instructed the Physician. "I think if I can twist your arm just right, the bio-latch should retract."

The Physician gave a strong, quick twist to Picard's right arm at the same time that a tremendous explosion partially spun the cube-ship on its axis. Alarms again sounded throughout the ship.

"The shields are down," announced the Physician as he removed Picard's arm from the prosthetic device.

Picard felt the ship starting to move, picking up momentum. Perhaps, he thought, the Orokans are trying to withdraw from the battle. He wished them

better luck than he had ever had in trying to outrun the Borg.

Picard massaged a dull ache in his right forearm. "Sorry about that," the Physician apologized. "I guess I got a little carried away." He quickly examined the arm and pronounced, "It'll be alright."

"How am I supposed to help?" asked Picard.

"I was hoping you'd know what to do," the Physician admitted. "You've destroyed more Borg ships than the Arch-Regent."

"Where can I find your Arch-Regent?" Picard asked.

"His makeshift bridge is at the top of this side of the ship," said the Physician pointing into the air, "but the quickest way there may not be the easiest for you."

"If there is no quicker way..." said Picard.

"No, there's no quicker way," affirmed the Physician. "Turn right outside the courtroom and catch the first elevator you come to. It'll take you about a quarter of the way up. Then you'll have to use the walkway through the Borg prisoner section to get to another elevator which will take you all the way up to the bridge."

"Got it," said Picard as he started for the door.

"Captain!" the Physician called after him.

Picard stopped and turned around.

"Captain, about that antidote," said the Physician, "most of it will wear off soon and leave you and the Collective with pretty much the same strength in your mind. Keep your wits about you!"

"Thanks for the warning," said Picard before he rushed out the courtroom door.

In a matter of seconds he was ascending in the elevator. It was not a fast device, which did not surprise Picard. The only machines which the Borg ever used to hurry between two places were their ships. Of all the transportation devices Picard had ever encountered, the Borg ships were the ones that came closest to the theoretical speed barrier at warp ten. Picard could not even begin to speculate how the Borg had infused that much efficiency into their warp drive technology.

The elevator stopped and its gate opened. Picard stepped onto the walkway and saw the long row of Borg prisoners, each one nestled in a small recess beside the walkway with their prosthetic hands

secured to their power couplings. They all turned to look at him, an eerie unexpected development which inspired many second thoughts about the wisdom of passing by them to get to the bridge. A wave of weakness washed over him. He stayed on his feet by leaning on the railing at the edge of the walkway.

Picard wiped a wave of cold perspiration from his brow with his forearm. This must have something to do with the antidote wearing off, he thought. As he examined himself mentally he found that Locutus and the Collective were back, stronger, but manageable. He reminded himself to remain aware of their presence, least they find a way to ambush him as he had done to them.

Picard felt strength returning. He released the railing and took a careful step, only to be thrown back by explosions resulting from an exchange of weapons fire between the two cube-ships. From the apparent strength of the impacts on the Orokan ship, Picard deduced that the Borg ship was maintaining the upper hand.

Picard stood again and unsteadily started the long trek past the line of prisoners. He stayed out of their reach, but at his close proximity he could sense their intense probing of him as he passed by each one. It almost seemed that they were trying to flood his mind

with input. Were they trying to hide something from him, he wondered?

The answer to his question appeared five meters in front of him when one of the Borg units disconnected from his coupling and stepped out of his recess blocking Picard's path. How had the unit done this, Picard wondered. He queried Locutus for an answer and found one. Happily for the Collective, the unit facing him had been assigned to a defective power coupling that could not accept commands to secure his prosthetic hand. Picard felt as if he was facing the entire Collective; one in front of him, and the rest creating a veritable storm of confusion in his mind.

He had never faced a Borg alone and unarmed. It was funny how he longed for a hand phaser. Then he remembered that having one might not give him any advantage at all. The Borg had already encountered Federation hand phasers and knew how to defend against their power. He scolded himself for wasting time analyzing the defensive potential of a weapon he didn't even have.

The unit stepped toward him, pressing him to think of some way to deal with its menacing advance. He ruled out attempting to use any sort of martial arts. He doubted that he had enough concentration or strength to try slugging it out with a Borg.

The unit had closed to within two meters of Picard and had raised its heavy prosthetic limb. Picard saw that if the unit hit him hard enough at the right angle it could roll him over the railing, and he would fall to the floor at the base of the chasm.

As the unit brought its prosthetic hand down to strike Picard, he leaned forward and lunged at it. Its heavy arm missed Picard's head and impacted the railing, leaving the unit off balance and resting a major portion of its weight on Picard's shoulder. Picard wrapped his arms around the unit's legs and lifted with all his strength, using his leverage and the unit's own momentum to force it over the railing. It fell silently and hit the floor at the base of the chasm with a hollow crunch.

Picard forced himself to stand in case other units would be freed to block his advance toward Appal's bridge. He felt the Collective analyzing that option. He was relieved when they were forced to reject it as unworkable. They were going to let him pass. They were going to let him continue to the bridge, and probably attempt to regain control of him there.

Picard moved as quickly as he could toward the second elevator while still watching the Borg prisoners along the walkway. At last he reached the elevator and fell against its rear wall. Exhausted, he

reached up and adjusted the control which prompted its ascent. He was grateful for its unhurried conveyance to the top level of the cube-ship.

As he left the elevator Picard heard the voice of Appal giving orders as the Orokans tried in vain to successfully outmaneuver the Borg ship. He followed the sounds of the Orokan voices to a chamber halfway between the ends of the walkway. Picard waited against the wall at the entrance to Appal's bridge and found that he could not think of a suitable, safe way to announce his intentions. He finally decided to risk a quick look through the doorway.

"They're closing on us again, Sir," announced an officer at a tracking station. "We need another innovative maneuver. They're practically anticipating all the standard evasive tactics we've tried."

"Suggestions, quickly!" invited the Arch-Regent.

Picard saw that Squadron Leader Venel was on the bridge, intently watching a viewscreen as the Borg cube-ship grew larger on it. "A Vanti attack-craft defensive maneuver," suggested Venel.

The Arch-Regent's eyes widened, inspired by Venel's proposal. "Helm, roll this vessel one hundred and

thirty-five degrees right. From there, take new heading, mark ten," ordered the Arch-Regent.

The Orokan cube-ship responded sluggishly in performing a maneuver reserved for small, nimble, aerobic atmospheric craft as it almost completely inverted itself before angling upward ten degrees. From the Orokans' point of reference, the Borg cube-ship passed underneath them and attempted to turn in the same direction they had.

"Phasers, fire at them!" shouted the Arch-Regent.

The Orokan gunners scored several hits on the Borg ship as it sped away from them, but apparently inflicted little serious damage.

"Tactical display to the screen," directed Appal.

The viewscreen showed a computer projection of data from the Orokan scanner array. The Borg ship was lining itself up to close on them again. Arch-Regent Appal nervously watched the as the Borg vessel slid behind his cube-ship and narrowed the distance between them.

"Helm, roll one hundred and thirty-five degrees left, new heading, mark fifteen," ordered the Arch-Regent.

This time the Borg almost exactly followed the Orokani ship's maneuver, closing the distance and firing. The Orokani ship again shuddered from repeated impacts.

"They've scored hits, Sir, but they haven't hit any areas we're using. So far, no problems with life support."

The Borg ship continued firing while the Arch-Regent struggled under great pressure to invent new evasive tactics. Both cube-ships were racing at high warp velocities in virtually a straight line. As the Orokani cube-ship took several more hits, Picard stepped into the doorway of the bridge.

"Helm, drop velocity to warp two," Picard directed. "Come full about, and then go back to maximum warp."

The Orokani helmsman programmed Picard's instructions before realizing he had obeyed a strange voice. The Orokani cube-ship did its best to reverse direction, and then sped away from the Borg vessel which had been completely surprised by Picard's inadvertently executed order. As they raced away from each other, a several-hundred kilometer gap opened up between them, but Picard judged that the interval would buy only a few minutes of time.

An Orokan Security Officer turned toward the doorway and discovered Picard still costumed as a Borg. "Borg on the bridge!" he warned as he grabbed for the weapon at his side.

Picard dived behind an equipment console as the Security Officer fired at him. In his panic-inspired leap to protect himself, Picard lost his concentration on Locutus who had been waiting for a chance to reassert his dominance. As the Orokan Security Officer fired at the console, and as Picard cringed in anticipation of being hit by the disruptor fire, Locutus and the Collective made their move. A desperate battle of wills erupted in Picard's mind. He writhed on the floor behind the console, kicking, and smashing the floor with his fists, repeatedly screaming, "NO!"

The Security Officer lowered his weapon and merely watched, unsure of what to do. Another figure in a white coat rushed through the bridge doorway and roughly pushed the Security Officer aside. He pressed a hypospray against Picard's neck and stepped back.

"Physician! What do you think you're doing?" shrieked Appal, rushing toward him and shoving him brutally against the wall. The Physician bounced back and pushed the Arch-Regent just as hard before being restrained by the Security Officer.

"I am trying to give us a chance to survive!" he shouted at Appal; and then he added, "Sir!" in a venom-laced tone. "This man should never have been put through what we've done to him! Picard is not the evil Locutus. Locutus is a disease that the Borg forced into him! We have been so blinded by our need for revenge that we're extracting it from the very people who are on our own side! Listen to him, Arch-Regent. Hear his experience. If you don't let him help us, we, the last Orokan fighting unit, will fall today before the Borg. They will have won!"

Another explosion jarred the ship.

"Sir, they're back," reported the Helmsman. "What shall we do?"

"Some kind of evasive maneuvering," snapped the Arch-Regent. "Just remember to mix things up."

"Good suggestion," Picard grunted as he tried to sit up, still dealing with the very unpleasant side effects of the Physician's latest dose of anti-Borg medication. He sincerely hoped he need not take whatever it was every fifteen minutes for the rest of his life.

"I'm sorry, Captain Picard," said Appal quietly, barely able to meet Picard's eyes. "I've treated you wrongly, and I have ordered my crew to do the same. I am

willing to listen to what you have to say. Can you help us?"

Picard looked at Appal silently for a moment until a robust maneuver executed by the helmsman made them all brace themselves against something.

"Perhaps," said Picard. "If this vessel's tractor beam is still operational, you might modify it to act as a shield projector. Randomly varying the frequency of the field projection in the upper E-M bands will make it harder for the Borg to get through it. Once they determine your frequencies and your pattern of changes, the shield will be worthless. You might try the same strategy of varying frequencies with the energy beam weapons, but be sure to use a different random setting from the shields. These suggestions won't completely solve our immediate problems, but they might give us more time to think of something else."

"Thank you, Captain," said Appal gratefully. He stood and shouted over the console, "Get some engineers working on Picard's suggestions."

Picard started to get up. Appal took him by the arm and asked, "Is it wise for you to move, Captain?"

"I shouldn't be in here," Picard told him. "While I carry these Borg devices, I am part of their Collective. Anything that I know, they will know. You'll understand, then, that I can't build your entire battle plan. But if you run out of surprises and are willing to take a risk, maybe I can think of something else."

"Of course, Captain Picard. Thank you for what you have been able to give us," said the Arch-Regent.

The Physician helped Picard step outside the bridge doorway. Picard was feeling weak and sat on the walkway, leaning against the wall.

"Sir, the Borg ship is almost within firing range," said the officer at the tracking station to Appal.

The Borg ship fired, and this time its beam was absorbed by the new jury-rigged shield.

"Shield strength down to sixty percent, Sir."

"Try to divert power to it," reminded the Arch-Regent, "and remember to vary its projected frequency."

After another blast from the Borg ship, the tracking officer announced, "They're still weakening the shields, Sir. Down to forty percent."

Appal searched his memory for a source of expendable power to be diverted to the failing shields.

"Sir, scanners have detected another vessel, directly in the path of our retreat," reported the Tracking Officer.

"Can you identify it?" demanded Appal.

"Only as a Federation ship, Sir."

"Open a channel," said Appal. "Transmit on a narrow-dispersion subspace beam."

"Ready, Sir."

"Orokan Arch-Regent Appal calling Federation vessel. If you can respond to my transmission, reply to these coordinates only on a narrow-dispersion subspace beam."

Aboard the Enterprise Captain Riker was studying the forward viewscreen. His Security Officer, Lieutenant Worf, had only seconds before informed him that he was tracking a Borg ship approaching the Enterprise at high warp velocity, and apparently under attack.

"Are you certain, Lieutenant?" Riker questioned. "A Borg ship, running from an attack?"

"I am, Sir," Worf replied positively. "Notice the intermittent halo effect."

"Whatever is chasing it must be directly behind the Borg ship," Riker observed.

"Sir, an incoming message," announced Worf.

Arch-Regent Appal's message sounded over the bridge loudspeakers.

"Prepare to reply, Lieutenant," ordered Riker grimly.

"A narrow-dispersion subspace beam is configured, Sir."

"This is the Federation Starship Enterprise calling Orokan Arch-Regent Appal," Riker began. "Mister, you have some heavy explaining to do!"

The Arch-Regent appeared on the Enterprise's viewscreen. "There is no time for explanations now," he said urgently. "We are..."

"Where is Captain Picard?" Riker demanded.

"I cannot show him to you now," Appal replied with more urgency.

"Show... me... Captain... Picard!" Riker commanded.

"Alright, just give me a minute," said Appal, resigned to meeting Riker's demand.

Arch-Regent Appal ran to the bridge doorway, looked down the walkway, and found the Physician attending to Picard. "Physician!" he hissed. "I must speak with you immediately!"

Reluctantly the Physician left Picard and joined the Arch-Regent. "We are in contact with a Federation Starship," explained the Arch-Regent quietly. "It is Picard's ship, the Enterprise. Its new Captain, Riker, wants to see Picard. We can't let Picard learn anything about what we might plan to do. Can you help me?"

"I could medically induce unconsciousness for a few minutes," suggested the physician. "Riker would just have to trust your explanation for Picard's condition."

A small explosion was absorbed by the shields. The Borg cube-ship had closed to just within firing range.

"Alright, do it," agreed Appal. "Quickly!"

Riker had watched on the viewscreen as the Arch-Regent had run out the rear door, wondering what the Orokan Commander would try to pull next. There was a loud gasp from everyone on the Enterprise's bridge

when Appal and another man dragged an unconscious Picard through the door for them to see. Several dismayed expletives were uttered when the added Borg devices were perceived.

Riker advanced several steps from the command chair and demanded, "What have you done to Captain Picard?"

"A regrettable mistake, Captain Riker!" said the Arch-Regent earnestly. "Picard is unconscious because he is linked to the Borg Collective, and could pass to them anything he learns. We are being attacked by a Borg ship and are too few in number to adequately defend ourselves. What are we to do?"

Riker could not answer. There were no known procedures for successfully repelling an attacking Borg ship.

"Captain Riker, if you want Picard returned, you must help us!" reminded the Arch-Regent.

"Alright," said Riker, attempting to ward off the confusion of Appal's pleas, "we'll do something."

He turned around, looking blankly at everyone on the bridge, and found them looking the same way at him. Except for Data. Judging by the expression on

his face, Data was busily churning through his enormous internal database. And taking entirely too long, Riker decided.

Suddenly Riker thought of something. A long shot, to be sure, but long shot ideas were the only things that surprised, and were effective against the Borg.

"Lieutenant Worf, how quickly can we have those terraforming torpedoes for Loriahn loaded into the launch tubes?" asked Riker.

Worf quickly checked his panels.

"As quickly as any other type of torpedo, Sir," he replied.

"Excellent," smiled Riker. "Get a full load into the forward tubes, Lieutenant."

At the helm station, Data turned to face Riker, a puzzled look on his face. "Terraforming torpedoes, Sir?" he inquired.

"You bet, Data," said Riker enthusiastically. "They have hardened reinforced casings and electronic provisions that leave them substantially less affected by most known energy fields. They're designed to burrow deep underground before detonating. I should think they would be superior to our

conventional torpedoes for giving the Borg a deep-down bellyache."

Data turned around with a look of smug understanding on his face.

"Do you find something amusing about my idea, Mr. Data?" asked Riker.

"If I understand correctly, Sir, you are preparing to give the Borg a pie in the face," Data explained.

Riker grinned.

"Lieutenant Worf, open a channel to the Arch-Regent," Riker ordered.

A dismayed Appal appeared on the viewscreen. "Our shields are gone. They've disabled most of our weapons. Can you do anything for us?"

"Just listen," said Riker calmly. "Hold your present heading, right toward us. When I tell you, veer sharply away from your attacker in any direction and keep going as fast as you can without looking back. We'll rendezvous back at the Diamont."

"Mister Data," Riker said to his helmsman, "when the Orokans veer off, turn exactly opposite the direction

they take. If the Borg can still fight, they won't be able to chase both of us at the same time."

Riker focused on the viewscreen. "Mr. Worf, bring us to red alert. Data, take us to warp nine, now."

As the Enterprise leaped ahead, Riker said, "Mr. Worf, distance to the Orokan ship."

"One hundred and eighty thousand kilometers, Sir."

"This is going to be close," said Riker. "Fire the photon torpedoes, Lieutenant Worf!"

To the Arch-Regent on the viewscreen Riker declared, "Appal, turn away, now!"

The Enterprise viewscreen display was adjusted to an external view of Appal's cube-ship. It lumbered upward and to its right, exposing the Borg cube-ship close behind it. Riker held the Enterprise on its heading, boring in toward the Borg ship to hold its attention off the Orokans.

The first two arriving torpedoes were caught by the Borg shields and detonated. The explosions opened a weak area in the shielding through which the remaining torpedoes traveled.

"Now, Data, take us aside!" Riker ordered.

Worf switched the viewscreen display over to the ship's rear scanners. One of the remaining torpedoes detonated on the Borg ship's surface. The rest, as Riker had hoped, had burrowed to the cube-ship's interior before exploding. Areas of the cube-ship's surface momentarily brightened from the interior explosions. It seemed that one of the torpedoes might have been deflected toward one of the sides as a large portion of the exterior erupted away from the ship. The Borg ship tumbled slightly, then righted itself.

"Sir, the Borg vessel's power output is down seventy percent," reported Data.

"According to Commander Shelby, that ship could still fight with one hundred percent efficiency at that diminished level of output," stated Riker. "Lay in a course for Calder-Signet Five and get us out of here!"

Picard opened his eyes, and without moving his head he looked around. Where he was appeared to be clean, and the crisp, cool air carried a vague scent of medicines. When he lifted his head to look around, a small subdued orange light over his head began flashing on and off. He was lying in a bed, covered, but not restrained. Muted sounds which he heard and the appearance of the room suggested that he was still aboard a vessel of Borg design. Other people, some heavily bandaged, lay in beds dispersed about the room. He hoped what he was seeing meant that he was still aboard the Orokan cube-ship, perhaps in a section which had been converted into a medical facility recovery room.

The door to the room opened, and the Physician entered. "Ah, Captain Picard, you've awakened," he said cheerfully as he switched off the flashing light above Picard's bed.

"If I remember correctly we were being attacked by another Borg ship. I no longer hear sounds of battle. What happened after I lost consciousness?" asked Picard.

"Your Enterprise found us," the Physician explained as he retrieved a medical scanner from his pocket and began examining Picard. "It attacked the Borg ship and gave us a chance to escape. It did an incredible job, too, from what I'm told. Whatever it hit them with really got their attention. As it was last seen, your Enterprise was scooting away from the Borg ship as fast as we were. The Borg never got off a shot at it, so I don't think it was even damaged."

"Whatever happened to the Borg ship?" Picard asked.

"As we were passing out of scanner range it appeared to be slowing down with no change in course," the Physician told him as he completed his examination.

More than anything Picard wanted to know what new weapon or twist to existing technology the Enterprise had been able to use against the Borg ship, but he still wore the Borg devices and felt echoes of the Collective's presence. The Borg Collective Consciousness was still privy to anything he knew, therefore his having knowledge of what the Enterprise had done might prove dangerous to his ship and crew, and might compromise the technique's effectiveness if an attempt was made to use it again.

For now he was satisfied that his ship and crew had apparently withdrawn from the battle unscathed.

"What happened to me after I left the bridge, and how did I get here?" Picard wanted to know.

"We had to sedate you so you couldn't let the Borg know about the arrival of the Enterprise" the Physician replied. "The element of surprise we protected by putting you to sleep and bringing you down here was vital in enabling both our ships to escape. Now, to give you some good news, I think I've finally found a way to give you your medication without subjecting you to large doses. I've implanted an intelligent sub-dermal medicator in you. If the level of medication in your blood falls below the programmed level, the device will dispense more. It should keep those nasty Borg influences in their place without the unpleasant side effects."

"Why didn't you just remove the devices?" Picard asked.

The Physician took a very slow, deep breath, and gazed at the ceiling for a long moment. "I don't know how," he admitted quietly, looking at Picard and ready to accept whatever punishment Picard saw fit to impose.

"Might I ask why?" Picard gently inquired.

What kind of man is this, wondered the Physician. He should be screaming at me, or trying to kill me, or pulling the sheets over his head so he won't have to look at me. Something. Anything except just lying there and trying to understand.

The Physician looked at the floor. "The truth is that removing the devices was never part of the plan," he admitted uncomfortably.

"I was judged guilty and sentenced to death before the trial even started?" suggested Picard.

"Originally the plan was to simply execute you," said the Physician still speaking to the floor. Then, realizing he had made a mistake, he looked at Picard. "Not you, actually, but Locutus. He was the intended target. There was a difference, you see."

"From my point of view, there would have been little substantial difference," Picard pointed out. "Either way I would have ceased to exist."

"Yes, you have shown us that error today," said the Physician. "I think we now realize that you had always been trying to resist the Collective's control

over you. That's probably what the Arch-Regent is trying to work out now."

"I don't understand."

"The trial, Captain. We haven't properly finished the trial," the Physician explained. "You see, the trial was Appal's idea. He had his own reasons for wanting to legally put Locutus to death. He can sometimes be an annoying stickler for protocol and procedure. Now that he has opened trial proceedings, he needs a proper way to close the book on things. That's what he is trying to work out."

Picard merely raised an eyebrow. Was the Arch-Regent genuinely sorry for this affair, or was he now devising a way to minimize the anger of the Federation? With only a crew of several hundred people and one ship he certainly wouldn't need two powerful enemies hunting him down.

As if to invoke an appearance by speaking about him, Arch-Regent Appal came striding into the recovery room to stand by Picard's bed. "How are you feeling, Captain Picard," he beamed.

"I suppose as well as can be expected," said Picard, glancing toward the Physician.

"Good. There is unfinished business between us," Appal said to Picard. "Is your patient fit enough to take a short walk?" he inquired of the Physician.

"He is all yours, Sir," said the Physician.

"Shall we, Captain?" Appal asked, holding out his open hand toward the door.

Picard pushed aside the sheets and sat on the edge of the bed. Feeling no ill effects, he tried to stand. Again there were no problems, and, followed by Appal, he walked through the door.

Together they made their way to the doorway outside the courtroom. The two attendants performed the same ceremony Picard had previously witnessed as Locutus. When the doors opened, Picard and Appal walked down the courtroom's center aisle. The surviving members of the crew were respectfully present in full dress uniforms in the tiered seating in the spectator area. When they reached the gate in the railing before the arena, the officer who had acted as Locutus' Defending Advocate opened the gate for them. They entered the arena where Picard stared uncomfortably at the hexagonal platform where Locutus had been restrained. He felt a hand on his shoulder. When he turned, the Arch-Regent was indicating that he should take a seat in a second chair

which had been placed at the Defending Advocate's table. "Please be seated here, Captain," the Arch-Regent said. "I must collect my judicial robes, and then we will end this affair."

The Arch-Regent strode across the arena and left through the door in the far wall. In a matter of minutes the jury had been seated, the Arch-Regent, wearing his robes, had taken his seat in the balcony, and court had been called into session.

The Arch-Regent took his new gavel in hand and tapped it three times on the scarred surface of his narrow desk. The room became quiet.

"At our point of recess," the Arch-Regent began, "the Defending Advocate had made a motion to dismiss charges against the defendant, pointing out the error of circumstantial evidence, even though it was erroneously cited before the Prosecuting Advocate had rested his case. On that technicality, I would have had to overrule it. Fortunately, Captain Picard's actions during the Borg attack have served to remind us all of the most revered tenet of our system of laws. Forgive me if my command of ancient Dynastic Standard is somewhat rusty, but I believe the principle was first stated like this: *Intentum Regula Supremus*. 'The intent of the law is supreme'. As we pass judgement in our courts, we must never lose

sight of the stated intent of our laws. That is to say, judicial pronouncements complying with the letter of the law can not stand if they conflict with the stated reason for enacting the law in the first place. In those cases, the intent of the law takes precedence over the letter of the law. The stated intent of the law applying to the charge under which the defendant was brought to trial was to 'justly deal out punishment to those who demonstrate a threat to the peoples of the Orokkan Colonies'. By his own actions, Captain Picard has demonstrated that he is in no way a threat, but is sympathetic to the Orokkan cause, and no friend of the Borg. I am therefore ruling that charges were inappropriately brought against Captain Picard, and they are hereby dropped. Captain Picard, your record is cleared."

You have cleared my record, mused Picard, but you have not been able to free me of this Borg hardware. Picard could not bring himself to completely trust Arch-Regent Appal. He still believed that Appal's softened attitude was part of a new scheme to ingratiate himself with Starfleet Command. Picard cynically wondered how solid an alliance between Appal and Starfleet could ever be. For the time being Picard felt his best course of action was to humor the Orokkan until he could persuade them to return him to Starfleet custody. Starfleet would waste no time in

reuniting him with Dr. Crusher, who had the experience to rid him of his hardware ties to the Borg.

The Arch-Regent placed his papers in a folder and left the balcony. The spectators stood at attention and saluted as Picard and the Defending Advocate walked through the center aisle and left the courtroom.

Outside the doors, Picard shook the Defending Advocate's hand. "Thank you," Picard said to him. "When did you decide to come over to my side?"

"I'm ashamed to say that it was right before I made the dismissal motion," the Advocate admitted. "I lost my family in the Borg attacks, and I was just going to let the prosecution eat you - I mean, Locutus - alive. I told the Arch-Regent that I hadn't done any research on your case. That was incorrect. Actually I had read your personality profile from the diplomatic reports. The man the prosecution was building with its testimony just wasn't you. I wondered if I would like someone with whom I was personally acquainted being set up like that. I guess I'm just cursed with a conscience."

"That is a curse I would like to have invoked on many more people," Picard smiled. "Thank you again."

Now, after having spoken with the Defending Advocate, Picard began to wonder if possibly not all Orokans were as deceitful as the Arch-Regent appeared to be. He made a mental note to include this psychological possibility in the report he would prepare when he was able.

The Physician approached them, looking at Picard. "Captain Picard," he said, "for security reasons the Arch-Regent has asked that you confine yourself to my recovery room. The problem, you understand, is your link to the Collective. Besides, I can better monitor you there."

"I am forced to agree with you," said Picard. "What will happen to me now?"

The Physician thought for a moment as they started walking away from the courtroom. "I understand that we will rendezvous with your people at a location I cannot reveal to you. You will probably be returned to them. I wish I could be a part of removing those devices from you before we part company."

"Perhaps you could be," Picard said hopefully. "Dr. Crusher, the Chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise, has already performed that service for me once. I'm sure she'd value your input when she makes a second attempt. I'll ask her to consider it."

"Thank you, Captain Picard," said the physician gratefully. "That would greatly ease my conscience."

* * *

Captain Riker had ordered a course back to Calder-Signet Five that was both devious, and yet not so time consuming as to allow the Orokan cube-ship to arrive at the rendezvous first. There had been no signs of any ships following them when they gracefully slid alone into a synchronous orbit with the now empty Diamont. As the Enterprise had traveled back to the Diamont, Dr. Crusher and her staff had begun preparing for the difficult task of surgically restoring Captain Picard to his former state of being. The matter of what to do with Picard when he was returned predominantly occupied Riker's thoughts. He weighed his first impulse to rush Picard immediately to Dr. Crusher in sick bay against a compelling need for information about the intentions of the Borg ship in the sector. No matter which choice he made he could possibly receive and lose something of great value. If the need to make the decision quickly fell upon him, Riker knew what his choice would be, but there still seemed to be time to consider

the feelings of trusted friends who were now also supposed to be his advisors. He made the decision to call his senior officers together for another staff meeting.

"I'm pretty sure that everyone is getting a little tired of running up here for staff meetings," Riker apologized at the beginning of the meeting, "but our situation has reached a point beyond which I am reluctant to proceed without fielding some candid input from my department heads. The Orokan crew and the Borg ship which they currently control will shortly join us next to the Diamont. At that time they will return Captain Picard, who for some reason has had the misfortune of rejoining the Borg Collective. Related to Captain Picard's condition is the fact that a Borg ship is snooping around the borders of this sector. I can't tell you what Starfleet will want us to do about these developments, but I'd like to have some kind of proposal to present to them."

"How did the Orokans take over a Borg ship?" asked LaForge incredulously.

"I don't know," Riker admitted. "We'll just have to wait and see if they'll tell us. My personal feeling is that a fortuitous stroke of good luck was somehow involved. At any rate, I'm sure Starfleet will be anxious to get engineering teams out here to examine

an intact piece of Borg technology. Information of that nature would be beneficial to both us and the Orokans."

"What if they refuse to let us examine their Borg ship?" asked Lt. Worf.

"I suggest that we prepare for any eventuality," said Riker.

"Don't you think that's being a little hostile, Captain?" Counsellor Troi pointed out.

"Not if you consider that we do not know how Captain Picard was rejoined to the Collective," responded Riker, "or by whom. Until we get some answers, we're not going to blindly assume friendship of anybody."

"Whatever the reason for Captain Picard's misfortune, we're prepared to undo the damage," assured Dr. Crusher.

"I'm sure you are, Doctor," said Riker, "which brings us to a matter we must discuss: whether or not to remove the Captain from the Collective when he returns."

"Why would he want to stay in the Collective?" asked an astounded Dr. Crusher.

"Because knowledge is power," contributed Lt. Worf. "Captain Picard will realize that knowledge of the Borg's intentions could be a valuable asset."

"But knowledge gained at what cost?" demanded Dr. Crusher.

"Would this be a determination that Captain Picard can be trusted to make?" asked Counsellor Troi. "I mean, if he elected to stay with the Collective, would he be making the choice of his own free will?"

"Counsellor Troi has made an important point, Captain," said Data. "It is conceivable that the Borg could use Captain Picard to feed us disinformation, or to learn something of our own intentions toward them."

"Captain, the Orokans are carrying Borg prisoners," said LaForge. "Engineering could rebuild the interface we used on Locutus in sector zero-zero-one and use it to tap into one of their prisoner's subspace Collective links. That way without using Captain Picard we could collect raw data from the Collective and make our own determinations from it."

"Security to Captain Riker."

"Go ahead," Riker responded to the interruption.

"Sir, we are receiving transmissions from the Orokan cube-ship. They are approaching Calder-Signet Five."

"Thank you, Security. Continue monitoring," said Riker.

"Commander LaForge," Riker said to the Chief Engineer, "start working on your interface. I'll try to get you a suitable subject to work with."

* * *

Captain Riker, Counsellor Troi, Dr. Crusher, and Lieutenant Worf had assembled in transporter room three. The Orokan cube-ship had entered orbit near the Diamont and had started transferring part of its crew back to the diamond ship. As they went about powering up systems aboard the Diamont, Arch-Regent Appal had tried to prepare himself for the fallout resulting from his attempted kidnapping and trial of Captain Picard. Altogether the people under his command, the last known survivors of the Orokan Colonies, numbered less than five hundred, nowhere near the complement a diamond ship had been designed to carry. Weighing heavily on Appal's mind

was whether he and his staff would be recognized by Starfleet as the surviving government of the Orokan Colonies or regarded as leaders of a band of brigands and pirates. Appal could sense that he would be facing disbelieving outrage from Picard's superiors in Starfleet, but he was betting that the telling of the entire stunning story of the Borg attacks against the Colonies and of the losses each member of his crew had experienced would sway Starfleet toward leniency. Perhaps they would settle for an apology, and then let him go about the business of continuing his war against the Borg. He might even offer to strike an alliance with them, at least temporarily, to deal with the Borg ship they had left somewhere along the outer border of the sector.

* * *

"Sir, the Orokan cube-ship is hailing us," reported the Transporter Officer to Riker.

Addressing an Orokan officer who had appeared on the transporter room's viewscreen, Riker said, "Are you ready to transport Captain Picard?"

"Captain Picard is ready for transport, Captain Riker," replied the Orokan officer, "and as you requested, his physician will accompany him."

"Bring them over," ordered Riker.

The transporter officer adjusted the controls on his panel, and seconds later Captain Picard and the Orokan Physician materialized on the transporter pads.

"Welcome home, Captain," said Riker, still not fully able to accept what had been done to Picard.

"How are you, Jean-Luc?" asked Dr. Crusher with a half-smile filled with concern and relief at having him back in friendly hands.

"It's good to see you all," said Picard sincerely. He looked at Riker. "Very impressive, Will. I see you've wrangled a promotion."

"Only temporarily, Sir," smiled Riker. "As soon as Dr. Crusher certifies you fit for duty, the Enterprise is yours."

"The ship is in good hands, I'm sure," Picard said to Riker. He then turned to Dr. Crusher. "Beverly, I need to schedule an appointment, at your earliest possible convenience, please."

"Already done, Captain," said Dr. Crusher, encouraged by Picard's sense of humor. "Let's get you to sick bay." Her eyes fell on the Orokan Physician, the man who had performed the implantation procedures on Picard. "Please accompany me," she said to him, with great difficulty keeping her voice free of emotion. "I'll need to know about everything that has been done to Captain Picard."

As Picard, Dr. Crusher, and the Orokan Physician left the transporter room, Lt. Worf fell into step behind the Physician.

Riker turned to the Transporter Officer. "Hail the Orokan cube-ship and transport the Arch-Regent over here. Counsellor Troi, would you please escort him to my ready room?"

"Aren't you going to wait to receive him?" asked Troi.

"No, Counsellor," Riker said solemnly. "I'm going to establish who's in charge here by having the Arch-Regent come to me."

Riker left the transporter room seconds before the Arch-Regent materialized on a transporter pad. Knowing that Riker would need time to reach the

ready room and appear to have been there for a while, Troi attempted to stall for the needed time.

"How do you do, Arch-Regent. I am Ship's Counsellor Deanna Troi," she said, offering a hand to shake.

"Pleased, I'm sure," responded Appal as he held her hand and bowed. He then looked about the room. "Where is Captain Riker?"

"The Captain will soon see you in his ready room," smiled Troi pleasantly.

There followed several minutes of uncomfortable silence which was eventually broken by Appal. "Did Captain Riker say how soon?"

"Not specifically," said Troi thoughtfully. "I'll call him and see if he is free."

Troi opened a channel from the transporter room control console. "Counsellor Troi to Captain Riker."

"Yes, Counsellor?"

"Are you free to receive Arch-Regent Appal, Sir?"

"Yes I am, Counsellor. Please bring him up."

Troi took a step toward the transporter room door. "This way, Sir," she said to Appal.

As they walked together through the corridor, Appal asked, "What sort of man is Captain Riker?"

Troi thought for a moment before answering, "An outstanding officer, who likes to hear the truth when he asks a question."

Appal was quiet during the ride on the turbolift to the bridge. Counsellor Troi gave Appal little time to study the Enterprise's bridge as she guided him to the ready room door and requested entry.

"Come," said Riker.

Appal and Troi entered the ready room and stood before Riker's desk.

"Will you need me for anything else, Sir?" Troi asked.

"No, Counsellor, that will be all. Thank you."

When Counsellor Troi had left, Riker said to Appal, "Please have a seat, Arch-Regent. Starfleet Command wants to know a little more about you, and your people. To be frank, they were very displeased when they learned of what you had done to Captain Picard. Starfleet takes incidents like this quite seriously, and

they are anxious for an explanation. And to add to their frankness, in my personal opinion you have subjected the best officer I have ever served under to unpardonable abuse. I, too, want to know why."

"Then I shall start at the beginning," said Appal, slipping into a chair in front of the captain's desk. "Many thousands of years ago, we Orokans and the Borg were of the same people, under the rule of the Diamont Dynasty. The Diamont Emperors had united our entire planet, and had established colonies and outposts throughout our star system. They were the longest reigning family dynasty in our history. They were all totalitarian rulers, some benevolent, and some not. They were wonderful organizers, having made an art of placing the right people and resources together to get things done efficiently. They took much pride in this ability, and decreed that its principles should be taught in all the Imperial Schools. We became a race of conditioned, efficient, and organized people."

"Unfortunately in our organizer's utopia, dissidents began saying that our system was turning our society into a giant colony of insects. They complained that everyone was following the plans of a few privileged organizers; doing, without a say in what should be done. They tried to weaken the centralized control of

the Dynasty's planners. There were rallies. Demagogues preached themes of democracy and self-determination, and undermined the authority of the Emperors."

"The Emperor's militia made arrests, those arrested became martyrs, the dissident movement grew, and we became embroiled in a civil war. At first the rebels and the Imperialists were nearly equal in numbers, but the Imperialists controlled important factions of the military and the industrial base. Within several decades, the imperialists had made significant progress against the rebels, and both sides began to realize that the rebels would eventually lose."

"The rebels had been attempting to govern themselves democratically, and more than anything else, their experiments in this untested and inefficient system, during what was for them a time of crisis, was responsible for their lack of success against the Imperialists. Their efforts were hindered by squabbling between many self-centered factions, while the Imperialists worked with common purpose. The rebels were so radically democratic, that they even tried to run their military by those principles. Eventually a few of their more innovative leaders began to understand what was happening. They put forth the idea that certain concessions needed to be

made in personal freedoms until the threat from the Imperialists was eliminated."

"By placing authority in the hands of their most qualified people, they managed to revive several of their stalled military projects. The one that was to have the greatest impact on the struggle was codenamed BORG. The project's first stage was merely an enhancement of their soldiers' abilities through implantation of cybernetic devices; mostly enhanced sensory equipment such as laser ranging ocular modules and audio enhancers. They were somewhat effective in that they slowed the progress of the Imperialists."

"The second stage of BORG involved linking the devices of the individual troops into a great network. Computers analyzed the devices' input and recommended remedial strategies. That improvement put the rebels on roughly equal footing with the Imperialists."

"The third stage of BORG involved the implementation of a new technology. The significant improvement of this phase was the first incarnation of the Collective Consciousness they still use today. It allowed the joining of the individual soldiers themselves into a network, and without the previous

concessions they had made in personal freedoms, this would never have come about."

"The rebel Collective Consciousness began to think as one mind, and they became devastatingly effective against the Imperialist forces. They turned the tide of the whole war around, scoring victory after victory, and they became enraptured with power. In their grandest scheme of all, they planned to place their entire population into their Collective network for a decisive strike against the Imperialists. When the Emperor learned of this, he authorized the evacuation of his most loyal and valuable supporters to a new base in a neighboring star system, in those days a journey of several years. He left behind on our home world specially trained teams to harass the Borg after they took over the planet."

"I have to mention an important point, Captain Riker. Up to this point in the war the Borg could turn off the Collective Consciousness. They did this to provide times of rest and normalcy for their people. It was a concession to individual freedoms. This system worked for them until one of the Imperial harassment teams secretly broke into the Borg network and made an attempt to corrupt the computers controlling the Collective Consciousness. No one is sure of what happened, but it is assumed that the corruptor

program they installed bled into the wrong memory banks, and among other things, disabled the turnoff function. The result seems to have been that the Borg have remained to this day a permanent Collective mind."

"This was the worst thing that could have happened to the Imperialists. The Borg computers had become fixated on the idea of relentlessly pursuing and destroying the Imperialists, and driven by their computers' corrupted programming, the Collective came after the Imperialists with a vengeance. The Borg no longer had any regard for life. They just destroyed, or took whatever they thought would be of some use to them."

"Imperialist trust in the Emperor quickly disappeared. Rather than have the entire government collapse, the Emperor's advisors established the Council of Regents which assumed all governing functions. At that point, the Diamont Dynasty ended, and we Imperialist Orokans took our first step toward a more democratic system of government, which we have been refining ever since."

"Wait a minute," interrupted Riker. "Do you mean that your people are descendants of those loyal to the Imperialist Dynasty?"

"We are, Captain," affirmed the Arch-Regent. "We and the Borg are fighting a blood feud that has lasted thousands of years."

"Have you attempted to find a peaceful resolution to your differences?" asked Riker.

"We've tried," said Appal. "But the Borg can no longer listen. 'Peace is irrelevant', they told us. Captain Riker, this war cannot end until one side is completely eliminated, and it would be better for all civilizations if it was their side which perished."

Riker considered Appal's opinion for a moment and then tried to return to his story.

"How did you and the Borg arrive here?" Riker prompted.

"The Borg kept finding us and we kept retreating," said Appal. "We would develop new military technologies and they would eventually copy them, or steal something better from another race. There would be more fighting. Sometimes we would score a temporary victory, but the Borg always came back with something better, and we would have to move on. We tried splitting groups up and settling on separate worlds, and that confused them for a while. But, as you can guess, they adapted. For thousands of

years this happened, and the Council of Regents at last resolved to put a stop to it. They convened a congress of our best minds that lasted for months without a satisfactory solution."

"Then one evening one of our finest strategists was relaxing in the theatre. After much effort he had gotten admissions for the last scheduled production of a play he much admired. It was written by Caleb Diamont, a descendant of the last Emperor, and was a dramatization of an ancient fable about a cruel despot named Sherank."

"Sherank was the second oldest son of an emperor who killed his older brother, and his uncle, and his parents, and then assumed the throne of his dead father. He maintained his authority through fear and cruelty, and he came to be hated by his subjects and by neighboring monarchs. Consequently, many attempts were made on his life. It was said that his senses of hearing, sight, and smell were so keen that no assassin could approach him without his knowing of their presence. He was such an accomplished master of the arts of self-defense that no assassin, not even the strongest assailants his enemies' money could buy, ever lived to tell of their failure. He could even smell poisons in his food. It seemed there was no way to be rid of him. Then one day Sherank was in

his palace garden, searching for a fresh flower with which to decorate himself, as was his daily custom. He spied one that pleased his fancy, and he picked it, unknowingly choosing a flower in which a vantii bee had been feeding. The startled bee flew out and stung the Emperor on the cheek. He struck at the bee, and it fell to the ground, nearly dead. With its last breath it cried out to its brothers to avenge its dying, and the entire hive of vantii bees swarmed onto Sherank and eventually killed him with the venom in their stings. Thus, what the mighty could not accomplish by strength and confrontation, the tiny vantii bees could do because the powerful Sherank could not defend himself against a swarm of determined tiny attackers."

"This, Captain Riker, was what had inspired the strategist. He proposed to the Council of Regents the building of a fleet of great ships, which would each carry a large complement of small, nimble, and powerful attack craft. Artificial hives of artificial vantii bees to sting the Borg cubes to death. And because the strategist had received his inspiration at the last performance of the play, the one on which the final curtain was drawn, he named his proposal FINAL CURTAIN. He envisioned his fleet bringing down a final curtain on the drama of the Borg existence."

"The Council of Regents approved his idea. It was at this point that the Orokan Colonies saw the need for an improved security system, a need we thought we had met with the purchase of the plans to the MX-35 system from those Ferengi arms merchants. We implemented the system and started building the Diamond Ships and the Vanti attack craft. A year ago, so close to completing the project, the Borg attacked us on a larger scale than they had ever used before. Only my ship, the Diamont, and five hundred military personnel escaped the annihilation of our race."

"We survivors made diplomatic inquiries and learned of Captain Picard's captivity with the Borg. The evidence we assembled led us to believe he, as Locutus, had given the Borg what they had needed to sneak through our security system undetected. And so, Locutus was apprehended and tried for his alleged crimes. As soon as we understood the relationship between Picard and Locutus, the charges were dropped. And, Picard has been returned to you, Captain Riker, with our heartfelt apologies for any inconveniences we have caused."

Riker fought the impulse to leap over his desk and throttle Arch-Regent Appal. He hoped the irritation he felt at Appal's callous attitude toward what his people had tried to do to Picard was not showing on

his face. He found himself using Klingon mental disciplines learned from Lt. Worf to regain control of himself.

"Starfleet is very interested in the Borg ship you control," Riker said to Appal. "How did you manage to get possession of it?"

"Its crew was sick; most of them had died," answered Appal. "We merely overpowered the infirmed remnants of the crew, and generously saved their lives."

"We would like to take custody of one of your prisoners," Riker proposed. "My engineers think they have a way to tie into the Borg network to get information without passing anything back to them."

"I would be happy to share one of my prisoners, Captain," smiled Appal. "Then there would be one less drain on my resources. Give me temporary access to your communications, and I'll arrange it right away."

* * *

Dr. Crusher thoroughly examined Picard before surgery. Upon having seen Picard's agglomeration of Borg hardware and remembering that she was in the

same room with the person who had reintegrated him into the Borg Collective, she had at first behaved coldly toward the Orokan Physician. She had been pleased with her ability to make him quite uncomfortable in her presence, but as she had progressed further into the examination, and had needed to talk to the Physician about his procedures and the medications he had used, she had found that he was disarmingly shy. Her awareness of this quality almost caused her to soften her outlook toward him. Suddenly she became angry with herself. What would Picard think of her if she did not try to make him suffer as much as she believed Picard had been made to suffer?

"Well, you seem to have done an admirable job of giving me a new challenge to overcome!" she said icily to the Physician as she reviewed the results of Picard's medical tests.

Picard took her hand from the edge of the examination table, held it in his, and said, "Beverly, among the Orokans are many good people. This man is one of them. I am fully aware of what has been done to me. Regardless of that I have made my peace with him. I think you should understand, the fact that I am here at all is because of his persistent intervention on my behalf. He has asked to be a part

of the team that removes these devices from me, so as a favor to me... "

"Of course, Jean-Luc," Dr. Crusher said to Picard before turning to the Physician. "I'm sorry. I have reacted a little too emotionally."

"I think I can understand why," observed the Physician. "Friendship, going back a long way."

"Yes, - a long way," Dr. Crusher reflected. "If you would like to ... join our team, you can go with my assistants and they'll see that you're properly prepared."

The Physician smiled and left with Crusher's staff to prepare for surgery.

"Just lie here and think positive thoughts, Jean-Luc," Crusher smiled confidently to Picard. "I'll be back in a minute, and then we'll start pulling these gadgets off and feeding them to the recycling portal."

* * *

"Starfleet has never encountered a weapons system like the Diamont," said Captain Riker to Arch-Regent Appal. "They are very curious about the tactics it would use to engage a Borg ship."

"You have made an incorrect assumption, Captain Riker," responded Appal after a moment's careful thought. "Our Diamond Ships were never designed to operate alone. A number of them would have attacked a target at one time by first releasing their Vanti attack craft to disable the Borg ship's surface defenses. Before the Borg managed to regenerate and counterattack, the Vantis would retire. Then the Diamond Ships themselves would close in and use their more powerful weaponry to finish the job."

"I see," said Riker. "Has this strategy ever been used in actual combat?"

"All of the Diamond Ships became heavily damaged in the Borg attacks before they could mount any kind of defense," explained the Arch-Regent. "What resistance they did offer was regrettably too little too late. The effectiveness of my Diamont against a Borg ship is still only theoretical, Captain, but it is a theory in which we still have full confidence. When our repairs and preparations are complete, we plan to take the Diamont and our cube-ship into battle against

the Borg vessel which is scouting the periphery of your territory."

"Arch-Regent, you do not have enough of a crew to give one ship a fighting chance against the Borg," said Riker in his most forceful and hopefully convincing voice. "It would be foolish for you to risk the cube-ship in combat again. Starfleet is most anxious to have its top engineering minds go over that ship. To understand their technology is vital to our mutual survival..."

"Captain Riker," interrupted the Arch-Regent with a slight mocking sneer, "there was an old saying in the Orokan colonies. 'Possession is the greater part of ownership.'"

"Granted, your people are currently in possession of the cube-ship, Arch-Regent," said Riker, his eyes narrowing and a smug, impish smile forming on his lips, "but let me remind you that you and your crew are presently within the jurisdiction of the United Federation of Planets. As the Federation representative out here I will decide if you face charges of abducting a Starfleet Captain and a host of other supporting charges. I want you to pay close attention because I'm going to put my cards on the table. First, the behavior you demonstrated to our diplomatic delegation was treacherous and

deplorable. Second, your crew doesn't know enough about that cube-ship to safely move it, much less take it into combat. And third, since you have so effectively demonstrated your unfamiliarity with the cube-ship, I will not stand by and let you destroy an invaluable piece of intelligence. What will happen to you and your crew all boils down to how much you are willing to cooperate. If you want to fight the Borg, that's fine. We applaud you for that. We may even be able to arrange some cooperative support toward that end. But the cube-ship stays here until we examine it. In granting us this 'request', you might just redeem yourself in Starfleet's eyes."

"You are a cruel, hard bargainer, Captain Riker," smiled Appal, his eyes never leaving Riker's. "What kind of cooperative support would you have in mind?"

"I'll have more details after I talk with my superiors," said Riker gazing levelly at the Arch-Regent.

"As you have requested, I shall pull all but the barest maintenance crew from the cube-ship," said Appal, his eyes boring into Riker's. "Who will blink first, Captain? The Borg ship draws ever nearer."

"Don't play games with me, Arch-Regent," challenged Riker. "If it wasn't for that Borg ship, I'd haul you down to our brig myself."

Riker wiggled his right ear, and Appal's eyes flashed toward its discreet movement. Riker's devilish grin widened as he stated, "You lose!"

* * *

A Borg prisoner from the Orokan cube-ship had been sedated and beamed to Engineering aboard the Enterprise. He stood in a circular enclosure, surrounded by a railing positioned at the base of his ribs, and partially obscured by an abundance of wires and cables that connected him to a bank of computers which had been completely isolated from all other systems aboard ship. He appeared entranced, staring curiously into space as if he was searching for something, or listening for a very quiet, distant sound.

Nearby, Commander Data sat on a stool facing the Borg prisoner. An access cover in the rear of his head hung open exposing a connector and supporting circuitry from his positronic brain. Tiny lights blinked in rapid sequences as Data's thought processes caused their circuits to be called into service.

Lieutenant Commander LaForge peered in at Data's exposed interface connector, and then cast a quick glance at the plug he was holding in his right hand.

"Are you sure you want me to plug this in, Data?" asked LaForge with concern. "The Borg may have prepared some nasty surprises since your last easy romp through their Collective mind."

"That may be," replied Data thoughtfully. "I have already configured my memory to allow them access to only a small segment of my total capacity. If something should happen that I cannot control, automatic shutdown routines will take over."

"OK. Close your eyes and hold onto your seat. Here goes," said LaForge as he inserted the plug into the connector in Data's head.

Immediately both Data and the Borg prisoner jerked into an attentive position, faces blank, eyes fixed ahead and gazing at nothing somewhere in front of them. LaForge jumped in front of Data, waving his hand in front of his eyes. "Data. Data, can you hear me? Come on, buddy, tell me you're alright," he coaxed.

"I am alright," Data finally answered. "I feel no apparent ill effects. I am attempting to make the

prisoner access the Collective Consciousness." There was a silent pause. "There," said Data, "we are, as they say, in."

"What's happening now?" asked LaForge as he checked the computer display which showed the status of Data's vital signs.

"I am getting the feel of things," replied Data. "Listening to exchanges, and in effect, relearning the language: its improvements and upgrades, new vocabulary, revised syntaxes and protocols. I have just tried to contribute something to one of the exchanges, and was ignored."

"Don't take it personally, Data," said LaForge. "They may have forgotten what a charmer you really are."

"Thank you, Geordi," said Data seriously.

If you had a sense of humor you'd be dangerous, thought LaForge as he watched Data's eyes flit from one point of focus to another. Obviously monitoring the Borg was going to keep him very busy.

"Any success at getting a word in yet?" asked LaForge.

"Negative," replied Data, still concentrating very hard. "I have not been able to become a part of their

exchanges. They are aware of my presence, and I believe they are aware of my overtures, but they refuse to acknowledge me in any way."

"Why don't you forget trying to talk to them?" suggested LaForge. "Try snooping around a little. See what dark secrets they are attempting to hide. Wait, I have a better idea. Check the command functions to see if putting them to sleep is still a workable option."

"Accessing..." said Data. After several minutes he reported, "All command functions have been assigned a higher priority. I am getting no response to my attempts to issue commands to the Collective. Their command protection scheme seems to have evolved into something admirably elegant, Commander. It would take quite a bit of analysis to understand how it is implemented."

"Can you tell us anything?" asked LaForge in mild frustration.

Data's eyes made several rapid movements. He turned quickly toward LaForge and said, "Geordi, I believe my brother Lore is aboard that Borg ship!"

*** CHAPTER EIGHT ***

"Lore is on the Borg ship?" asked Captain Riker in profound amazement. "How do you know that, Data?"

"Lieutenant Commander LaForge and I were testing our interface to the Collective through the Borg prisoner," explained Data. "I was randomly accessing exchanges in the network when I identified a waveform peculiar to the positronic circuit designs of Dr. Noonian Soong, the father-creator of Lore and myself. As you know, Sir, Lore and I are the only known applications of that technology. I, of course, am here. My brother's component parts have been missing from Starbase 317 for over two years. The source of the positronic waveform sensed me as I sensed it, and then it identified me by name. The inflections used in forming the waveform essence of my name were those I would associate with someone having intimate previous knowledge of my identity who was attempting to convey feelings of great despair. As you would recognize the voice of a familiar acquaintance from among the voices in a

crowd, so have I identified the voice of Lore from among the voices of the Collective. And based upon the way in which my brother spoke my name, I believe he was urgently asking for my help."

Riker stood up from the chair behind the desk in the Captain's ready room. He walked behind the desk, lightly massaging his forehead, searching his memory for some elusive, misfiled fragment of information that would put Data's revelation into perspective with everything else that had happened since the Enterprise had laid over for shore leave at Minia IV. He simply could not recall enough information to make that kind of connection. There were too many missing steps between losing track of somebody, and then discovering him on a Borg ship.

"Help me here, Data," said Riker. "What is the connection between losing him from Starbase 317 and then sensing his presence in the Collective?"

"The authorities have assumed that whoever removed Lore from Starbase 317 must have reassembled him," said Data. "A person matching his description and using the name Mr. Lorne had been seen on Selaeta where he had been engaged in detailed research about Dr. Soong and the general science of cybernetics. He had booked passage from there to the Rizon System on a transport ship

identified as the Olympus. The Olympus never reached its destination. Its battered remains were discovered several days' travel time out from Selaeta. Most of the highest technology equipment had been cut away from the vessel in a manner not unlike that used by the Borg, although no Borg vessels had been reported in the area. Almost one-third of the transport's complement of crew and passengers disappeared without a trace. The rest died as the result of a hull breach cut into a section of the ship where they had all congregated. Mr. Lorne was counted among the one-third missing."

Alright, Riker conceded to himself, Data's explanation had shown that there was a slim possibility his brother could be alive on a Borg ship. If he really was, Riker almost felt sorry for him.

Data and LaForge had come to him with this finding shortly after Arch-Regent Appal had returned in a bad mood to the Diamont. The Arch-Regent had been hoping to be treated as an equal partner in dealing with the Borg ship whose arrival in Federation space had nearly everyone understandably concerned. Appal clearly had not been happy with Starfleet wanting to reserve the right to decide when and where the Borg ship would be dealt with.

Riker was not certain how far the Arch-Regent could be pushed. If his story about being the last surviving remnant of his civilization was true, then he had become used to playing the part of a loner. Loners simply did not make good team players, and working as a team was the only way in which there was any chance of successfully dealing with a problem as formidable as the Borg.

"Captain?" Data intruded into Riker's thoughts.

"Yes, Data?"

"Will you be certain to pass on to Starfleet Command the possibility that Federation citizens are being held on the Borg ship?"

"Yes, Data, I will make a point to pass that along," assured Riker.

LaForge stood up to leave, but Data stayed in his seat looking as though something was still on his mind, and that he could not decide if he should risk speaking of it.

"Captain?" Data finally said.

"Is there something else, Data?" asked Riker, knowing full well that there was.

"Captain, I would like your permission to lead a rescue attempt for the Federation citizens on the Borg ship," admitted Data.

"I appreciate your offer," said Riker, "but I think we're getting a little ahead of ourselves. I haven't talked to Starfleet yet. When they do get back to me, their orders may not leave an opening for something like that."

"Then, do you believe we will have to eventually attack the Borg ship?"

"Data," said Riker as he searched for an elusive reassuring answer, "you know that our training advises us against answering difficult questions to which we do not have answers. The best I can tell you is that I do not know."

"I understand, Sir," said Data. "Would there be any objection to my preparing plans for such an operation in the event that an appropriate opportunity would present itself? I could do this while still handling all the duties which have been assigned to me."

Riker wondered what Data saw in Lore that made him worth all that Data would risk on his behalf. "That's not a bad idea, Data," Riker conceded. "It would be good to have a plan, just in case."

"Thank you, Captain," said Data as he stood up to leave.

Riker noticed that his acting first officer seemed pleased to have gotten something he wanted out of the meeting with him. He hoped that leaving Data with the hope that he could attempt a rescue aboard the Borg ship would not turn into an ugly disappointment. Riker knew that he could not allow himself to get bogged down into feeling sorry for Data if he was denied his rescue attempt. In making his request, Data had attempted to stretch the limits of the mission's envelope of possibilities. If the envelope tore, it was because Data had stretched it too far.

Riker sat at the desk and opened a channel to the bridge. "Helm, take us out of orbit and clear of C-S Five's interference. I need to make a report to Starfleet Command."

Riker thought about Lore. Data's older brother was not a likeable android once you got to know him. He was selfish, self-centered, and prone to react violently when he did not get his own way. The only major difference between Lore and Data seemed to be that Lore had been created with the ability to feel emotions, and he seemed to have reacted to events primarily with his darker emotions. Riker suspected that for all his brilliance, Dr. Soong had not managed

to program his first sentient android with a proper emotional balance. Perhaps it was this failure that had prompted him to build Data without the feature of emotions, leaving him lacking the most important key to achieving what he desired most from his life: becoming human.

Lost in his thoughts, Riker left the ready room and sat in the Captain's chair on the bridge.

"Captain, we are in position for your report to Starfleet," Lt. Worf reported.

Riker continued staring at the viewscreen, apparently unaware of what Worf had just said.

Worf cleared his throat and in a stronger voice said, "Captain Riker..."

Taking a moment to refocus his attention, Riker asked, "Yes, Lieutenant, what is it?"

"You wanted to know when we were in position for your report to Starfleet."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Please get me Admiral Stockton on Minia IV."

In the five minutes it took to establish the link with Admiral Stockton, Riker felt himself drifting back into

the loop of thought that had made him oblivious to Lt. Worf a few minutes before. But this time the appearance of the Starfleet logo on the viewscreen was enough to focus his attention. Admiral Stockton appeared on the screen projecting a pleased, businesslike appearance.

"Captain Riker, congratulations on getting Captain Picard back," he began. What exactly happened out there?"

"It wasn't the Borg who took him, Sir," said Riker. "It was the Orokans, masquerading as Borg. They rejoined Captain Picard to the Borg Collective as Locutus, feeling that there was reason to put him on trial for allegedly passing MX-35 system information to the Borg that hurt them very badly about a year ago. The trial took place on a Borg cube-ship they had acquired. Somehow they met up with a real Borg ship and ended up on the losing end of a running firefight. About that time we showed up, and using a new tactic, we managed to slow the Borg ship down enough so that both of us could escape. We agreed to rendezvous back here, and the Orokans returned Captain Picard, still carrying his Borg toys, but exonerated of all the charges against him."

"How is Captain Picard doing?" asked Stockton.

"He should nearly be out of surgery, Sir," said Riker. "Dr. Crusher disconnected him from the Collective the last time. She has the most experience with this sort of thing, and we expect that everything will turn out well."

"I'm happy to hear that," said Stockton. "Now, tell me about this 'new tactic'."

"We hit them with our new terraforming torpedoes, Sir. Most of them got inside their ship before detonating. I don't know what we might have hit, but as we were leaving, their power output was down seventy percent."

"Impressive," said Stockton. "Is there any chance of this tactic working again?"

"I can't say for sure, Sir," said Riker. "The Borg may develop a defense against it. They have successfully adapted to everything else that has been tried."

"It would be interesting to see what would happen with a second application of the tactic," speculated Stockton.

"That depends on whether or not you're the one applying the tactic, Sir," Riker observed.

"It's a dirty job, Captain..."

"Never mind, Sir," said Riker, "I understand what you're implying. If the opportunity for a second application presents itself, we'll get that information for you."

"Good. I only mentioned it because it could be very important," said Stockton. "Where is the real Borg ship?"

"We've had no contact with it, Sir. I was hoping that you might have received some intelligence from other sources."

"As far as I know we haven't heard a thing," said Stockton. "I hate to send you out alone to look for it, Captain, but it'll be a few days until backup can be arranged."

"Maybe I can ask the Orokans to help in the search," offered Riker.

"After what they've done to Picard, do you think you can trust them?" asked Stockton.

"I don't know," Riker admitted. "They do seem to have a thirst for Borg blood, but I'm not sure they'll go along with our plans. You can't fight the Borg by just wading into the brawl and start swinging. There has to be some kind of strategy and a commitment to

teamwork. There are no treaties or formal alliances with the Orokans. I am afraid they will only play along as long as it suits their commander's fancy."

"They don't sound like very dependable teammates," said Stockton. "Are you sure you even want to involve them?"

"Unfortunately, I see no other option, Sir. We would cover much more area with two ships searching."

"What about this Borg ship they found?" Stockton inquired.

"They had planned to adapt it for their use, Sir. I've ordered them to quit making changes to it," said Riker. "I assumed Starfleet would like to examine a recent vintage piece of Borg technology."

"How right you are, Captain Riker! We're assembling a team of investigators who are very interested in that piece of Borg technology. We'll be very disappointed if something happens to it!" said Stockton with a look that suggested that heads could roll if his investigators didn't have a Borg ship to look at.

"Shall I invite the Orokan Arch-Regent to participate

in a search for the missing Borg ship, Sir?" asked Riker.

"If you can keep him under control," said Stockton. "It would be better having a team of ships on this assignment. We need to know where the Borg ship is and have some idea of what it might do before we can lay out our strategy."

"We'll get right on it, Admiral," said Riker.

"Very well," said Stockton. "I'll leave the details in your hands, Captain. Good hunting, and give my best to Jean-Luc."

"Will do, Sir."

* * *

Arch-Regent Appal materialized on the transporter pad in transporter room three. Captain Riker had again ruffled his dignity by summoning him to another meeting aboard the Enterprise.

Riker's treatment of him chaffed at Appal. "This Riker is too smart for his own good! That bumbling

Federation boor has no idea of how to treat a Head of State!" These fanciful mental protests greatly comforted the Arch-Regent. "As soon as this business with the Borg is finished," threatened Appal from the safety of his fantasies, "there will be diplomatic reprisals! We'll see who plays this power game better!"

As the last of his molecules coalesced, Arch-Regent Appal smiled. Riker had also invited the senior members of his staff along to the meeting, but he had instead ordered them to stay behind. He had more important things for them to do than attend meetings with uncouth Federation lowbrows. If his officers were successful in carrying out his orders, he would show Riker who was the real master of the art of fighting the Borg.

Lieutenant Worf was waiting in the transporter room to escort the expected Orokan envoy to the Enterprise's conference room. Expecting more than one person to beam over from the Diamont, he had ordered a security team to the transporter room to help remind the Orokans to be on their best behavior. When Worf saw that only one Orokan officer would need an escort to the meeting, he stiffly said to the security team, "You may return to your other duties."

As the security team left the transporter room, Worf motioned toward the door, saying, "This way, ...Sir."

Arch-Regent Appal did not like the way Worf had enunciated the word 'Sir'. The Klingon Security Officer had done something with its pronunciation that had made it seem as if the word did not roll comfortably off his tongue when it referred to him. "Enjoy your little slur," silently fumed Appal to himself. "After I finish with Riker, it's your turn!"

As Appal and Worf walked silently to the conference room, the Arch-Regent tried to fathom the reason for Riker's meeting. For several minutes he had suspected that the time had come to formally answer for Picard's abduction and trial, but if that had been the reason for the meeting, there would have been no reason to have invited his senior officers. No, the invitation of his senior staff officers meant that something needed to be planned. Perhaps the Federation had finally begun to understand how much they needed him, and his Diamont, to succeed against the Borg.

When Appal and Worf entered the conference room, Riker looked up, staring accusingly at Appal. "I thought you understood that this meeting was to have included your senior officers."

"They had more pressing duties, Captain Riker," said Appal affably. "Rest assured that they will be informed of everything they will need to know."

"Very well," responded Riker. Motioning to several places at the conference table which had been left vacant, he added, "Take one of these seats. We haven't a lot of time to waste."

As Appal slid into one of the vacant chairs Riker started the meeting. "Once again our ship is in the thick of defending the Federation from the gravest threat it has ever faced. I am, of course, referring to the Borg. We recently encountered a Borg ship which had entered Federation space. By now you have all heard or read about the short engagement which resulted from that encounter. We believe that we damaged the Borg ship, but not enough to put it out of commission or cause it to withdraw. It is still out there, somewhere, and Starfleet wants to know where. The Enterprise has been asked to undertake a reconnaissance sweep of the sector for the purpose of finding the Borg ship and learning where it is headed. This information will be vital for planning the fleet's response to its presence."

"I have been authorized to invite the Diamont along on this reconnaissance mission," Riker continued as

he looked at Appal. "This will give us a chance to get used to working together..."

"Why bother with this foolishness of reconnaissance?" blurted Appal. "Why waste all that time and effort merely finding out where the Borg ship is? Go out and look for it, yes! And when you find it, destroy it!"

"Destroy it with what, Arch-Regent?" asked Riker.

"With my Diamont, and its attack craft! And maybe with some help from those missiles you launched at them," stated Appal.

"Your Diamont is an undermanned and untried idea," said Riker, "and without documented proof that it works, it is something in which Starfleet is reluctant to put its trust. As for our 'missiles', there is no guarantee the Borg won't have a defense against them the next time we meet. They have an uncanny ability to adapt when the need for change arises. Frankly, Arch-Regent, I'm beginning to wonder how well you really know your enemy. We have learned that a single starship is no match for a Borg cube-ship. We have even seen that an entire fleet of starships may not be able to take one on and win. And let me remind you that your own strategists designed your Diamond Ships to attack a single Borg vessel in groups. No,

Arch-Regent, now is not the time for impetuous bravado. What we most need at this point is information. Starfleet will act when it knows how it should act."

"You whimper. You make speeches to glorify your indecisiveness," leered Appal. "Include my cube-ship, and we will have a fleet of three vessels..."

"For the last time, Appal, the cube-ship is off limits," said Riker firmly. "The Federation still has a resource which you no longer have: an established and widely dispersed industrial base to make use of what is to be learned from that ship. The Federation will not let you jeopardize that potential knowledge for a glory-hunting fling at a single Borg ship."

Riker was losing patience with Appal, wasting valuable time in arguing with him over points that would not be changed. "The deal is this, Arch-Regent," stated Riker, "You, me, and the reconnaissance mission. You're in, or you're out. If you're out, you will be charged with Captain Picard's abduction and taken into custody."

"Then I'm in," smiled Appal. Outwardly he appeared calm. Inside he was furious and planning strategies somewhat different from those to which he had agreed to adhere.

"Fine," said Riker. "Everybody return to your stations and prepare for departure in one hour. Arch-Regent, I'd like to have your helm and navigation people get with ours to work out a search algorithm that covers the most area without leaving the Borg any holes big enough to hide in."

"Certainly, Captain," said Appal with a broad smile. "Anything to make the endeavor mutually rewarding."

Arch-Regent Appal beamed back to the Diamont where he was met by his senior officers.

"All is ready as you instructed, Sir," reported his Chief-of-Staff.

"I am pleased," beamed Appal. "You've performed complete testing?"

"Yes, Sir. There were no problems. The system requires only your command to start serving you."

"Good, good," said Appal, looking at each of his senior officers. "We must prepare the Diamont to leave in under an hour, gentlemen."

"Are we going hunting for Borg, Sir?"

"Yes, but hunting is about all Captain Riker can be persuaded to do," said Appal resentfully.

"Shall we activate the remote systems, Sir?"

"I think not," said Appal thoughtfully. "The mission will most likely be in relatively open space. We wouldn't want to inadvertently give Captain Riker a wrong impression, would we?"

Captain Riker had returned to the Enterprise's bridge to oversee the drafting of the search pattern to be used by the Enterprise and the Diamont. The pattern's development had progressed smoothly, and now both ships awaited his order to move out.

Riker was seated in the command chair and about to give the order when the bridge's turbolift doors opened. An unanticipated silence followed their opening. A throat was cleared. It was a familiar sound which compelled Riker to turn around and acknowledge it. Captain Picard, in full uniform, and Dr. Crusher were standing in the turbolift.

"Permission to enter the bridge, Captain?" said Picard.

Picard is being very formal, thought Riker. He smiled, knowing that things were about to be as they should be.

"By all means, Captain. Permission granted," said Riker as he stood to shake Picard's hand. He turned to Dr. Crusher. "How did the surgery turn out, Doctor?"

"Very well, Captain," smiled Dr. Crusher. "No scars, no permanent damage, and no discernable mental dysfunctions. He's as recovered as he's ever going to be, although I would like to see some more post-op blood filtration therapy and check-ups."

"Is this officer fit enough for duty?" asked Riker.

"Certifiably," said Dr. Crusher.

"Thank you, Doctor," said Riker. "Captain Picard, do you wish to assume command?"

"Yes," said Picard before adding quietly, "I thought you'd never ask."

"Computer," said Riker, "transfer command to Picard, Jean-Luc."

"Command transfer completed," announced the ship's computer. "Picard, Jean-Luc, Captain, now commanding USS Enterprise. Riker, William T., Commander, now First Officer, USS Enterprise."

"I believe this is your chair, Captain," Riker indicated.

Picard sat in the Captain's Chair and wriggled in it for a short time, savoring its comfort and security.

"Please, continue with what you were about to do, Number One," said Picard, "and when you can find the time, please bring me up to date on what is happening."

* * *

CAPTAIN'S LOG: (Captain Jean-Luc Picard, commanding)

I have resumed command of the Enterprise following surgical removal of the Borg implants which I received on orders from Arch-Regent Appal. I have been trying to allow the Arch-Regent the benefit of doubt, believing that his actions toward me were those his culture would have believed to be appropriate, taking into account the lack of understanding which is sometimes inevitable when two cultures first meet. However, since learning from my first officer, Commander Riker, of the Arch-Regent's conduct when Commander Riker was the Enterprise's acting captain, I am developing doubts

about maintaining that point of view. In my mind the Arch-Regent's personality is metamorphosing into that of a devious individual, switching as needed toward any power or means that furthers his single-minded retaliation against the Borg. It is this single-mindedness toward eradication that disturbs me, in that it does not seem to be a quality shared by all the members of his group in the same way that it was evident in the Federation's earliest dealings with the Klingons and the Romulans. Rather it seems to be one man's obsession sweeping along with it the lives of a multitude of others. Knowing our views about the Arch-Regent, Starfleet Command has still out of necessity endorsed this joint reconnaissance mission we are undertaking, and because of their endorsement I feel obligated to see the mission through. I fervently hope that Arch-Regent Appal shows enough self-restraint not to conjure up a confrontation with the Borg that we are not yet prepared to deal with.

* * *

So far the uneventful search for the Borg ship was progressing smoothly. Through three full duty shifts

the Enterprise, and thankfully the Diamont, had executed the planned search pattern, and to the relief of many, had detected nothing.

During this time Counsellor Troi had been busy. At the onset of the reconnaissance mission all the old stories and personal experiences of the first contacts with the Borg had resurfaced and were being retold throughout the ship. Especially popular were those in which the central figure enjoyed any tangible success against a problem the Borg had created, but occasionally these embers of hope were dimmed by other tales with darker themes. In talking with the crew, Counsellor Troi was finding that in spite of their training, and in spite of their past successes against the Borg, many were still apprehensive about having to deal with the Borg one on one. The Borg were simply too powerful, and it was common knowledge that every Starfleet vessel ever built was outclassed by them. Sure, they had risked their lives before, against the Romulans and against the Cardassians, but against those opponents they had been competitive, evenly matched. Yes, there had been great risk, but against them there had also been a chance of survival. The Borg, however, were the specter of doom. Against the Borg, they were not competitive. The potential finality of an encounter with the Borg was always something that hung over them. But what about the

times the Borg had not beaten them? Alright, sometimes they had been able to surprise the Borg, but as a crewman from Earth had pointed out, sometimes the trapped mouse will run out of surprises, and then the cat will have its meal. Confidence in the Enterprise's leadership? They had written the book on slipping surprises to the Borg! If anyone could concoct another surprise for the Borg... But on the other hand you had to wonder how long their luck could hold out. Would the crew run away from a fight with the Borg? No! It wouldn't be right! Besides, as one grinning crewman had pointed out, how would they find out if Picard's next harebrained scheme worked if they ran away?

Picard had learned all this and more from the assessment of the crew's attitude he had requested from Counsellor Troi. On the surface her assessment did not sound overly optimistic, but from it Picard had extracted two important facts. First, the crew understood that everything requested of them had to be done correctly. There was no margin for error or sloppiness. Picard saw no reason to expect problems in that area. Second, and most importantly, the crew had confidence in its leadership and was committed to the mission's success. He knew they would acquit themselves well during whatever events came to pass.

Picard passed his evaluation of Counsellor Troi's report to Commander Riker, and the two officers exuded a shared confidence in the performance of the crew as they sat together on the bridge monitoring sensor sweeps and the interpretation of the data.

"Lieutenant Worf," said Picard, "what is the status of our communication link with the Diamont?"

"All indications are that the link is being maintained at maximum efficiency, Sir," reported Lt. Worf.

"Is the Orokan ship still where it is supposed to be?" asked Picard.

Worf scanned the readouts from his panel. "All my readings affirm that it is, Sir."

Picard was satisfied that things were still moving along as planned. He turned to Riker, who was sitting at his right. "Number One, it seems that everyone has had time for a bite to eat except us. I'll continue monitoring things here on the bridge if you'd like to stand down for a while."

"Thank you, Sir," said Riker. "But are you sure? Would you like to go first?"

"Thank you, Number One. I'll be fine," said Picard.

Riker stood and headed for the turbolift. He stopped halfway there when Picard called his name. He turned and faced Picard. "Sir?"

"Remember, Will, a full, balanced meal."

"Aye, Sir," Riker smiled as he entered the turbolift.

As the turbolift doors closed, Riker remembered that Picard had delivered the same admonition to each of the bridge personnel as they had gone for their meals. He hoped it was just a coincidence that his mind had made a connection between Picard's insistence on a complete meal and the antiquated practice of granting condemned prisoners a last meal of their choice.

Meanwhile on the bridge Commander Data began rapidly stabbing at the controls on his panel. Picard watched his outburst of activity with nervous interest.

"Captain," said Data after a quick scan of his readouts, "the Orokan ship is leaving the search pattern, heading away from us at high warp velocity on course two-seven-zero, mark three-four-zero."

"Captain, I have lost the communication link with the Orokan ship," reported Lt. Worf.

"Hail them on all channels, Lieutenant," instructed Picard.

"No response, Sir," Worf reported moments later.

"Enterprise to Diamont. Come in, please!" Picard tried in an attempt to bring back a response. "Arch-Regent Appal, this is Captain Picard. Please respond!"

"It is no use, Sir," said Lt. Worf. "The Orokan ship refuses to acknowledge your messages."

"Why are they doing this?" Picard demanded. "What is out there?"

"Sir," said Data, "the Diamont's position was near the limit of our sensor range. It may have detected something that would not have shown up on our sensors."

"It may have done just that," said Picard angrily, "but they were not supposed to have gone chasing after it!"

Picard vented a single profane expletive before ordering, "Bring the ship to red alert. Helm, take us after them. Everyone else, keep your eyes open, watch your instruments, and stay alert!"

The turbolift doors hissed open and Commander Riker hurried back onto the bridge.

"Welcome back, Number One," said Picard apologetically without taking his eyes off the main viewscreen. "How was lunch?"

"It smelled delicious, Sir. What's happening?"

On the bridge of the Diamont Arch-Regent Appal was excitedly studying the tactical display with the rest of his senior officers.

"No doubts, Sir. It is a Borg ship," said the officer monitoring the instruments at the station.

"Is it the damaged vessel we have been looking for?" asked Appal in a voice colored with delighted impatience.

"It very likely it is, Sir. Some exterior damage is still evident."

"We're gaining on it. Why are we gaining on it?" demanded Appal.

"Possibly because its power output is so low, Sir. Only marginally higher than the last time we got any readings on it."

"If we can close on it this easily," said Appal thinking aloud, "then the target vessel could have power

generation problems, but it should still have enough power for all its weapons."

"If you're going to attack, we'll have to drop to sub-light to launch the Vantis, Sir," somebody chimed in.

"I know that!" grumbled Appal angrily. He stared vehemently for a moment at the officer who had insulted his intelligence with such a blatantly obvious reminder. "We'll start our attack by making a close pass on the left and do what damage we can with our heavy phasers," he decided. "Hopefully that will stun them long enough to let us slow down and launch the Vantis. After their launch, we'll revert to the standard battle plan."

"Aye, Sir," chorused the officers in unison as they dispersed to their battle stations.

Appal walked to the communications console and contacted the launch bay for the Vanti 1st Squadron. "Squadron Leader Venel..." he said.

"Yes, Sir?" said Venel when he appeared on the tiny viewscreen at the console. He was barely identifiable through the visor of his flight helmet as the canopy over the pilot's compartment of the Vanti attack craft settled into place.

"You will lead the first attack wave," said the Arch-Regent proudly. "Over twenty years work rides upon your shoulders. To your glorious success, Squadron Leader!"

"Thank you, Sir," said Venel grinning. "And to yours as well."

"Sir," the officer at the tracking station interrupted, "the Enterprise is also closing."

"Very good," smiled Appal. "Perhaps through their eyes the dim-visioned leaders of the Federation will learn how to properly fight the Borg!"

"We are positioned on the prime attack vector, Sir," reported the Tactical Officer.

"Take us in at three-quarters maximum warp," ordered Appal sharply. "Phaser stations, your primary targets are external weapons. Ignore all external propulsion hardware. Repeat - ignore all external propulsion hardware. Lock onto your primary targets..."

The distance between the two ships decreased rapidly. It seemed only the blink of an eye before the Diamont was within phaser range.

"Phaser stations - fire!" thundered Appal.

The first bolt of energy which sprang from the Diamont's upper phaser emitter danced upon the Borg ship's shields until they collapsed. Another charge was fed to the emitter as it recycled for another shot. As the Diamont sped by, its second bolt lanced through the remnants of the Borg shields and decimated a major weapons station on the side they were attacking.

Through the cheers on the bridge the Arch-Regent ordered, "Bring us to sub-light. Prepare to launch the Vantis."

The Borg cube-ship maintained its course but started a slow spin on its axis, presenting an undamaged side to the Diamont. As the launch doors in the hull of the Diamond Ship began opening, a bright cutting beam shot from the side of the Borg cube-ship and severed two of the cylindrical structures which held the massive propulsion ring to the hull of the Diamont. Crewmen literally exploded in the vacuum resulting from the instantaneous decompression, and the Diamond Ship shuddered as its warp power systems shut down.

"That man is a fool!" exclaimed Picard as he watched the magnified view of the battle on the Enterprise's viewscreen. "Helm, get us in there, quickly!" he ordered.

"Lieutenant Worf," Picard said to the Security Officer, "load one standard photon torpedo and lock onto the Borg ship. They've presented their weak side to us."

"Photon torpedo loaded and targeted, Sir," replied Lt. Worf.

"Now get me a channel to the Diamont!"

"Channel opened, Sir."

"Appal!" demanded Picard angrily.

"What do you want, Picard?" shouted the Arch-Regent equally angry. "Can't you see I'm in the thick of a battle?"

"It looks more like committing suicide, slowly and painfully," said Picard determinedly presenting his point of view. "Listen to me, Arch-Regent. You've got one chance. Do not launch your attack craft! Secure your ship, and do what you can to get out of the way."

The launch bay doors on the Diamont slowly began to close.

"I never thought he'd listen to reason," muttered Picard quietly.

Then, much louder, Picard requested all hailing frequencies opened.

"Attention on the Borg vessel," he said grimly. "This is Captain Jean-Luc Picard, of the Federation Starship Enterprise. I repeat, this is the Federation Starship Enterprise."

Picard turned to Lt. Worf and whispered, "Fire the photon torpedo!"

It raced toward its target, and undeterred by Borg shields, it reached the surface of the cube-ship before detonating and leaving a jagged crater of destruction.

"Do you remember my ship, the Enterprise?" Picard asked the Borg. "You've been bloodied by it before, and now it is returning to finish the job."

The damaged Borg ship turned again on its axis, attempting to shield its damaged side from both the Diamont and the rapidly approaching Enterprise. Slowly the distance between it and the Diamont began to increase. It continued to pull away from the crippled Orokan ship, gradually increasing its velocity until it was receding as rapidly as it was able.

"How fast is it moving away?" demanded Picard.

"The Borg ship has just achieved warp five, Sir," Data reported calmly. "From the readings I am getting, I believe that it cannot go any faster."

"Thank you, Mister Data," said Picard. "Helm, take us after them at warp two. Lieutenant Worf, do you still have that channel to the Borg ship?"

"The channel is still open, sir."

"Attention on the Borg vessel. This is Captain Picard of the Enterprise speaking again," he said projecting god-like omnipotent authority. "I strongly advise you to leave Federation space immediately. Depart while you still can, and never return!"

The Borg ship continued to pull away from them. When Picard was satisfied that it intended to keep going, he smiled with relief and said, "Helm, take us back to the Diamont. I believe we've all had enough for the time being."

As the Enterprise came about, Riker studied Picard in the seat beside him. "Captain, that was some kind of bluff!" he stated admiringly.

"Oh, really?" Picard asked with a slight grin. "Thank you, Number One. I'll look forward to pitting my

bluffing skills against yours in the next weekly poker game."

"Uh, well, Sir," Riker stammered, "from what I've seen today, you are obviously light years ahead of anyone in our game."

"I most certainly am," said Picard firmly. "And don't you ever forget it!" he added with a wily smile.

Captain Picard saw no easy solution to the problem of what to do about Arch-Regent Appal. His impetuous attack on the Borg cube-ship had almost cost him his own vessel and the lives of his crew. Picard had informed Starfleet Command about the incident, and Admiral Stockton had later confided that his superiors regarded the Arch-Regent's action as a senseless squandering of limited resources. Fleet reinforcements were still several days' time away from Minia IV. Until other Federation ships arrived in the sector and were supplied and deployed, Appal's Diamont and the Enterprise were the only defense against the damaged but still formidable Borg vessel. Unfairly, it seemed, the problem of Arch-Regent Appal had been dropped into Picard's lap. As the ranking Federation representative on the spot, he had become the Federation's senior diplomatic contact with the Orokans. Until Starfleet could assemble a better defensive posture in the sector, it was Picard's job to coax the most possible cooperation from volatile and unpredictable Arch-Regent Appal.

Picard was also troubled by the persistent lack of reliable information on the Borg ship. All the collected evidence suggested that the cube-ship had been

damaged by Riker's innovative use of terraforming torpedoes to attack it. Sensor readings and the cube-ship's own lackluster performance in battle supported this supposition, however Picard was reluctant to completely rely on the supposition without knowing what had been damaged and how badly. Borg technology was supposed to enable a vessel's crew's Collective will to be harnessed for regenerative repairs. The cube-ship's below par performance over a long period of time posed the possibility that the Borg's regenerative abilities had been somehow inhibited. Was this due to a lack of materials or parts, or to some actual lessening of their ability to focus their Collective will to this purpose? And, if the cube-ship was damaged, why did it not withdraw and make repairs? What was so important that the Borg would keep a nearly crippled vessel stationed in hostile territory? In examining all the possibilities Picard had even considered that the Borg ship had not been seriously damaged. Could it be possible, Picard had wondered, that the Borg were simply holding back to lull the Federation into a false sense of security? Had the Borg added deception to their arsenal of weapons? So much depended on having truthful answers to his questions. Perhaps the best thing to do was to go right to the Borg and ask them for the answers.

Picard leaned forward in the chair behind his desk and opened a channel to Engineering. Lieutenant Commander LaForge responded. "You're just the person to whom I need to speak," said Picard. "Have you and Commander Data made any further progress in gathering information from the Borg?"

"We managed to learn something, Sir," said LaForge disappointedly, "but then everything went crazy. Lately nothing we're reading makes any sense. It's like the Borg have reinvented their whole language." LaForge glanced at Data who was deep in thought, and shook his head. "We don't actually know what has happened, Sir, but we're working on it."

"What did you learn from the linkup before the problem, Mister LaForge?" asked Picard.

"Well, we discovered why the Borg ship won't leave the area," replied LaForge.

"And why is that?" Picard asked.

"We think it was sent here to eliminate the problem of the Orokans having taken control of one of their ships," said LaForge.

Suddenly memories of having sensed this information while he was joined to the Collective

came back to Picard. Reliving the memory seemed to bring him pain. Dr. Crusher had reminded him that the same thing had happened to him the first time he had been separated from the Collective. Like the last time, she believed the discomforts he would feel would lessen with the passing of time.

"Finding that missing ship must be pretty important to them," LaForge observed.

Coming back to the conversation, Picard answered, "It is, Mister LaForge. It is vitally important to them. Our understanding the workings of that ship would be a devastating blow to the integrity of their Collective Network."

"It sure would, Sir," agreed LaForge. "I believe I should get back to helping Data. He's going to need all the help he can get to break back into their network."

"Mister LaForge," said Picard, "we are soon going to rendezvous with the Diamont. I'll need you and several engineering teams ready to beam over and help repair the damage it has suffered. It is important for the defense of this sector that the Orokan ship be as fit as possible as quickly as possible."

"Alright, Sir," said LaForge. "What shall we do with our Borg prisoner?"

"Disconnect him from your interface," ordered Picard, "supply him with life support, and have security take him to the brig and hold him there under appropriate guard."

"Aye, Sir."

Picard closed the channel and returned to the problem of Arch-Regent Appal. The man was simply obsessed with striking out at the nearest Borg, no matter what the cost. He would have to be watched all the time.

Compounding Picard's problems was the fact that he was now cut off from information through the Borg prisoner. How very ironic, he reflected, that it was now much more difficult for him to find the very thing he least wanted to face. When he weighed the responsibilities resting upon his shoulders against the resources with which he was expected to meet those responsibilities, Picard began to feel very much alone.

"Captain Picard?" Lieutenant Worf summoned him from the bridge. Fortunately it reminded him that there was still a ship to run, and still a few problems he could resolve.

"Yes, Lieutenant," he answered.

"We are approaching the Diamont."

"Very well, Lieutenant. Bring us within transporter range and keep our bow pointed at it."

As the ship was positioned as had ordered, Picard left the ready room and walked onto the bridge. Commander Riker was in his chair, studying the image of the Diamont on the main viewscreen. He glanced quickly at Picard as he took his place in the Command Chair. "Their ship took a lot of damage from only one Borg shot, Sir," he observed.

"So I've noticed, Number One," said Picard as he rubbed his chin. "Let me ask you, Will, what do you think of that ship as a weapons system? Could those attack craft actually hurt a Borg ship, or would they merely try to pester it to death like a hoard of flies?"

"Hard to say, Sir," said Riker as he settled back comfortably in his chair. He studied the Diamond Ship a moment longer, and then added, "You have to admit that it is a novel way to fight the Borg. I guess I'd have to say that the attack craft could be effective for a while, because the Borg weapons are not designed to deal with so many seemingly random targets. Do you remember the fireworks display we arranged when we retrieved you from the Borg four years ago? Now that confused the Borg. They didn't know how to

react to it. Maybe the attack craft would have the same effect on them. But, on the other hand, once the Borg adapted to the Orokan's attack strategies, I think they could effectively deal with the Vantis."

"So you're saying that the attack craft might have one chance to be effective against a Borg ship?" asked Picard.

"Yes, Sir. One chance, maybe two. But I wouldn't count on any more."

"Thank you, Number One," said Picard with a cryptic smile that made Riker curious about what was brewing in Picard's mind.

"Captain," said LaForge's voice over the intercom, "the engineering teams are ready to beam over to the Diamont."

"Stand by, Mister LaForge," said Picard. "I'll be beaming over with you. I'll want to talk with the Arch-Regent."

"Sir?" questioned Commander Riker.

"You have the bridge, Number One," said Picard as he headed for the turbolift.

"Sir, wouldn't it be safer to have the Arch-Regent beamed over here?" pressed Riker.

"You've already done that, Commander Riker," noted Picard, "and at the time it was the proper thing to do. I believe we must now insure that the Arch-Regent does not get too comfortable on his own ship. It is now time for an unannounced visit to the weasel in his own lair."

After Picard had joined the engineering teams in the transporter room he opened a channel to the Diamont. "Arch-Regent Appal, this is Captain Picard. I am bringing over some engineering teams to help with your repairs."

There was a pause before Appal answered, "That is very generous of you, Captain Picard, but we are quite capable of handling our repairs. We will advise you if we need anything."

"I'm afraid I must insist on bringing them over, Arch-Regent," Picard persisted. "You are undermanned, and in the event that you should engage a Borg ship again, Starfleet wants to be sure that everything is at its peak. My engineers are experts, and..."

"No, Picard! They are not needed!" exclaimed the Arch-Regent before closing the channel.

Picard switched to a different channel on the intercom. "Lieutenant Worf, assemble a security detachment and have them report to the transporter room on the double."

"Aye, Sir," Worf responded.

Several minutes later four armed security personnel hurried into the transporter room.

"Onto the pads please, gentlemen," instructed Picard. "Mr. LaForge, you and I will beam over with them and convince the Arch-Regent that he needs our help. Remember, we're not going over there to start something. Do not fire your weapons unless absolutely certain you will be fired upon. Is that understood?"

There was a chorus of affirmation, and then Picard said to the Transporter Officer, "Monitor us closely. If I signal to bring us back, you'll need to do it quickly. Can you beam us over to a safe place near the severed tubes to the Diamont's ring?"

"Yes, Sir. The coordinates are laid in."

Picard joined the five other crewmen on the transporter pads and ordered, "Energize."

As they reformed aboard the Diamont they became aware of blaring alarms. Running footsteps were moving in their direction from both ends of the corridor.

"Stay calm," Picard advised.

They were soon surrounded by armed Orokans who did nothing more than cover them with drawn weapons. They soon heard another party of men lead by Arch-Regent Appal approaching behind the ring of guards. The men guarding Picard's group were pushed aside as the Arch-Regent forced his way through them toward Picard. Finally Picard and Appal stood face to face, Appal angry and unsure of what to say.

"Where are your damage control people, Arch-Regent?" asked Picard. "We did not exactly hurry back from chasing that Borg ship away. Surely by this time the repairs should have been started."

"This is my ship, Picard! I said we would handle things," Appal exclaimed.

"How long can it possibly take to get vital repairs started?" Picard demanded as he pointed toward the sealed doors. "That Borg ship will most likely return. They want the cube-ship that you took over, and they

will keep coming, and coming, and coming, until they get what they want. Your ship and my ship are the only means in this sector to stop them. Your ship, in this condition, won't be of much help, and we do not have time to leisurely attend to repairs."

"Alright. Alright, Picard. Your engineers may help with the repairs," whined the Arch-Regent throwing up his arms. Then he spun around and pointed a finger at Picard. "But they must confine themselves to this immediate work area!"

"Those terms are acceptable," said Picard. "Lieutenant Commander LaForge will have his teams beamed to this area, and I will leave my security team here to make sure that everybody abides by your restrictions."

"Very well," said Appal grudgingly. "I'll have someone supply the appropriate design plans and schematics."

"Thank you very much," said Picard. "Now, could we please share a word in private?"

"This way," grumbled Appal nodding his head toward the empty corridor. The sooner this bald-headed cretin says what's on his mind, thought Appal, the sooner he'll leave.

Picard joined Appal, and they walked slowly away from everyone else. "I want you to understand that I am not here to usurp your command," Picard explained. "This is your ship..."

"...upon which you have made yourself very much at home, Captain," interrupted Appal angrily. "If you acknowledge that this is my ship, then why am I not free to engage the Borg at my discretion?"

"I have been discussing your ship with my senior officers," said Picard, putting a slightly brighter quality into his voice. "It is believed that in spite of your depleted crew, the Diamont could still be effective against the Borg, providing that it had sufficient backup, which is really how it was designed to operate in the first place. The problem we see has to do with the Borg's ability to adapt to new threats. It is felt that there may be only one, or possibly two opportunities to use your attack craft before the Borg's adaptability renders them virtually useless. Therefore, the application of your weapons system must be planned out. It must only be used at precisely the right time and under the best of circumstances. We have only been trying to save the Vantis for just those conditions."

"Really?" asked Appal.

"Really," said Picard reassuringly.

"Then, I have misunderstood your intentions," said Appal in feigned amazement.

"May we count on your cooperation?" asked Picard.

"Based on what you've just shared with me, I see no reason why I should not cooperate fully with you, Captain."

"Wonderful," said Picard. "I'll return to the Enterprise and pass this good news to my superiors. They'll be quite pleased to learn that we've settled our differences."

Picard walked back down the corridor toward the engineers who were poring over plans which had been provided by Orokan crewmen. Arch-Regent Appal stood watching Picard as a door opened beside him. His Chief-of-Staff emerged from the room behind it, carefully closing the door behind him.

"I've gotten rid of him," said Appal smugly. "Just keep a close watch on those Federation engineers. They must not discover our little surprise in there," he finished as he inclined his head toward the room behind the door.

Picard had joined LaForge to see how the repairs were progressing. "It looks like some pretty heavy structural damage, Sir, and restoring the area's systems functionality will be a nightmare," LaForge reported. "We'll do what we can in the time we have with what we have."

"That's all I can ask," said Picard.

"Sir," asked LaForge quietly, "are you having any misgivings about working with these people while Appal is running their end of the show?"

Picard studied LaForge intently for a moment. "Keep me apprised of your progress, Commander," he said before having himself beamed back to the Enterprise.

Picard stepped off the transporter pad and walked briskly into the corridor. He had walked less than half-a-minute when he heard Riker's voice over his communicator. "Captain Picard, please report to the bridge."

Picard tapped his communicator button. "On my way, Number One."

Several minutes later he stepped onto the bridge and asked, "What is it, Commander?"

"An urgent communication from Starfleet, Sir. I took the liberty of routing it to your ready room. Admiral Stockton is waiting for you."

"Thank you, Number One. While I'm busy in there would you check with Mr. LaForge on the Diamont and see if there's anything he'll need to expedite repairs?"

"Consider it done, Sir."

Picard sat behind his desk and entered his access codes for Stockton's scrambled transmission. "I'm sorry for the delay, Admiral," he said. "I had to twist the Arch-Regent's arm for permission to help with repairs to his ship."

"It doesn't surprise me," Stockton admitted. "Characters like him always pop up when you wish you didn't have to rely on them for something. Captain, the reason I've contacted you is to tell you that your Borg ship has been busy. It seems that it veered into Cardassian space and attacked one of their military convoys. They've lost three transports and two of the escorting warships. The one warship that managed to escape reported that the cube-ship was cutting pieces out of the vessels it had wrecked."

"Did the Cardassians counterattack?" asked Picard.

"No, they weren't foolish enough to try that," snorted Stockton, "but they did generously track it for us as it left their space and crossed back over to our side."

"What have they told us?" Picard asked.

"It's headed back our way," said Stockton seriously. "It must have found some useful Cardassian hardware in what it stole from them. They say they tracked it for a while at warp seven."

"Then it has made at least a partial recovery," observed Picard. "Where is it headed?"

"It looks like the Caldar-Signet system," said Stockton. "My guess is that the Borg have searched just about everywhere else..."

"I understand, Admiral. What does Starfleet want us to do about the situation?"

"You have several options, Captain. Stop or destroy the Borg ship, hide our cube-ship somewhere else, or just destroy it. We'd like to keep the cube-ship, but above all else, Jean-Luc, they must not get it back."

"What about the fleet reinforcements?" Picard asked, feeling that the only answer to that question would be one he wouldn't want to hear.

"The reinforcements have been rerouted to a more defensible position," Stockton said, trying to keep the emotion in his voice from showing.

Picard understood. Starfleet had made a hard choice. The only choice, really, considering that events were moving faster than Starfleet could respond to them. Minia IV lay outside the defensive perimeter Starfleet had been able to establish, virtually on its own with only one Starship and a damaged alien vessel with a crew and weapons most likely untested in combat to rely on for protection. Starfleet would attempt to evacuate as many people as possible from the sector, but the grim reality was that what it could do was far short of what needed to be done.

"Picard, I have no brilliant, guaranteed strategy to pass on to you," said Stockton regretfully. "Everyone trusts that you will do what is best. Is there anything we can provide for you?"

"I'd ask for Aladdin's magic lamp, but we're probably out of transporter range," Picard grinned.

"If I had it, I'd bring it to you myself," said Stockton, forcing a grin onto his face. "Good luck, Captain. I must go. We'll be busy here shortly."

"Our best to you, Admiral," Picard said before closing the channel.

Picard quickly opened a channel to the Diamont. "Mister LaForge, report please on the repairs."

"LaForge here, Sir. We're actually making some good progress. The support tubes have all been patched and we've rigged some additional bracing. The repaired areas are holding atmosphere. I hope you don't mind, Sir, but I used some of our spare components to bring their circuits on line. Things are really going well. Give us another two hours and we'll have their entire propulsion system ready to go."

"You're doing an excellent job," Picard smiled. Just keep going as you are. Make that diamond sparkle again and I'll buy you a drink later in Ten-Forward."

"You're on, Sir, but I'll warn you that I'll probably pick something expensive."

"I shan't complain," responded Picard before closing the channel. He left the ready room and stepped onto the bridge. "Lt. Worf, a channel, please, to the Arch-Regent."

Appal appeared on the main viewscreen looking as though he was trying to be a patient man. "Yes, Picard?"

"The repair teams report that you'll be as good as new within two hours," said Picard.

"I've already received that information."

"Perhaps," Picard dismissed Appal's rude acknowledgement, "but you haven't learned that the Borg ship is coming back this way. They've made some repairs, and they appear to be spoiling for a fight. You've wanted a crack at that ship, and you're going to get it. But first, we need a plan. If you wish, we can meet on my ship."

"Alright, Captain," Appal said showing interest and enthusiasm. "In about ten minutes, then?"

"I'll expect you," replied Picard.

* * *

Picard and the department heads assembled in the conference room and were informally discussing

developments when Arch-Regent Appal raced through the opening doors, barely giving them ample time to open wide enough to admit him. Several seconds later two of his staff officers and the Enterprise security team assigned to escort them also entered the conference room. Picard dismissed the security team and for a time watched the Arch-Regent who was as bubbly as a child who had been promised a trip to a candy store. The comments he was making to his officers and to anyone else unfortunate enough to be nearby indicated that he was expecting and ready for hasty plans and a rapid departure. He was beginning to annoy Picard.

"Your attention, please," Picard said. "Let's call this meeting to order. You've all been supplied with a report of the latest developments. I take it that you have all had a chance to read it. Since we expect the repairs to the Diamont to be completed within our expected two hours, in that time we must assess our situation, examine our options, and establish a course of action appropriate..."

"Must we endure another long-winded Picard dissertation?" demanded Appal impatiently. "Just tell us where the thing is and let's get out there and start tearing it apart!"

Picard leaned toward Appal angrily, his hands on the conference table. "I'd like a word with you - outside!" he spat.

Picard then pushed himself erect, and with great force of will maintained his composure as he pulled his uniform coat into its proper place, and then purposefully strode toward the exit. He passed through the door and was waiting in the corridor before Appal slowly arose to follow him.

While rising, Appal had been unsure of how he was going to handle Picard. The closer he got to the door the more he decided that now was a great time to assert to Picard that he was no longer going to be bullied around.

The conference room doors opened. Appal stepped into the corridor and looked both ways, finding Picard standing with his back to him on the right. Appal stood behind Picard and leaned on the wall, supporting himself with his outstretched right arm and with his left hand on his hip.

"What is your problem, Picard?" he said slowly with a snide edge in his voice.

Picard looked over his left shoulder and slowly turned around, his eyes never leaving Appal's. "My problem, sir, is YOU!"

"No! I'll tell you what your problem is!" Appal said as he leaned toward Picard and took his right arm from the wall. He then waved the index finger of his right hand in front of Picard's face as he charged, "You can't seem to understand that we have a job to do! My crew and I, we want to get out there and get it done! But you?! You're making a lifestyle out of standing in our way!"

"And you have nearly gotten everyone in your command killed, several times, with your foolish, reckless, and heedless attitude!" Picard countered while forcefully pushing Appal's hand away from his face. "If it was mine to command, I'd see you locked away to give one of your more rational officers a chance to command your ship! The only reason I haven't ordered it thus far is because I'm having trouble finding the time to train another officer to do your job! Be warned, you foolish man, you are this close," Picard emphasized his point by holding his right thumb and index finger a scant hair apart in front of Appal's face, "to breaking that very, very thin thread of restraint! Picard snapped his arm down to his side, and with both fists tightly clenched, he

stormed back into the conference room. A moment later Appal angrily followed and slid into his seat.

"Lieutenant Worf," snapped Picard, ignoring Appal's arrival, "please place the first diagram on the screen."

A diagram of the Caldar-Signet system appeared on the viewscreen. A dotted line indicated the expected path of the Borg ship as it would enter the system. A flashing red dot near Caldar-Signet Five, on the opposite side of the system from the Borg's anticipated entry point, marked the position of the captured cube-ship. Picard pointed out the significance of each of these features for the benefit of everyone at the conference table. Picard then nodded his head at Worf, and small graphic representations of the Enterprise and the Diamont appeared on the diagram.

Picard said, "The problem is: how do our two ships drive the Borg ship from this system, and from the entire sector, before it discovers where their missing ship is hidden? Pay close attention to our plan. For it to work, there must be one hundred percent cooperation from both ships. Together we have a chance of success. Individually, we both fail, in a very final way."

Picard again nodded to Lt. Worf, and two close dots appeared on the diagram near the Borg's anticipated entry point. "These represent Caldar-Signet's sixth planet and its nearest moon," Picard explained. "Lt. Worf, the blow-up, please."

A larger, more detailed diagram of Caldar-Signet Six and its moon appeared in a lower corner of the viewscreen. "C-S Six," said Picard as he pointed to the planet "is quite massive, with a correspondingly strong gravitational field. Its surface is covered by a sea of liquefied hydrocarbon gasses, its atmosphere is composed of gaseous variants of the contents of the hydrocarbon sea. Its surface conditions are hazardous to life. Its weather would be devastating on a calm day. This inhospitable world is useful to us because of its massive gravity field. Its nearest moon is thirty-two hundred kilometers in diameter and composed of a variety of solid substances. It is a perfect place to hide the Diamont and its attack craft from Borg scans. The plan is simple. The Enterprise will attempt to draw the Borg ship between C-S Six and its moon. At this time the Enterprise will have dropped to impulse power, and will be attempting to lure the Borg ship into a near orbit around C-S Six. The planet's massive gravity field will make it more difficult for the cube-ship to maneuver as long as it remains at sublight speeds. The Diamont and its

attack craft will lie in ambush behind the moon, and will strike as we bring the Borg ship within striking range. We will be depending heavily on the Vantis being able to destroy the outer weapons and propulsion sites before the Borg ship can escape our trap. After that, the Diamont and the Enterprise will move in and attempt to finish what the attack craft will have started. Arch-Regent, if for any reason your Vantis are not up to this task, now is the time to let us know."

As much as Appal hated Picard, he managed a smile at him. "The Vantis are up to it," he said with supreme confidence.

"Fine," Picard observed. "We all seem convinced that the plan works on paper. There is, however, one more facet to consider. What do we do if our strategy proves ineffective? We are certain that what brought the Borg ship here was a hope of recovering their missing cube-ship. Starfleet's wishes are that above all else, the Borg must not regain custody of that ship. Therefore, in the event that either one of our ships is incapacitated, the other must break off from the engagement, proceed as rapidly as possible to C-S Five, and destroy the captured cube-ship. Two Borg ships operating in this area of the galaxy could be the end of everything we know. Arch-Regent, it is

important that I have your commitment to support this part of the plan."

"The disposition of the captured cube-ship is of as great a concern to us as it is to you, Captain," said Appal.

Now exactly what was that supposed to mean, Picard wondered. It was neither an endorsement nor a rejection.

"Was that a 'yes' or a 'no', Arch-Regent?" Picard pressed.

"You may rest assured, good Captain, the Borg will not regain control of their missing ship," Appal smiled.

That almost sounded like a 'yes', Picard thought, and yet it still feels like he's side-stepping the commitment I need. Why? What is he up to now?

"I'm sure we will all find some comfort in knowing that," Picard reacted. He had not tried to keep the suspicion he felt from coloring the way he had responded to the Arch-Regent. "That should be everything. We all know what is expected. Let's hurry to wrap up the last repairs to the Diamont before we put our plan into operation."

As those who had attended the meeting were leaving the room, Picard discreetly hooked Riker's arm and quietly said to him, "Number One, there are some concerns I would like to share with you."

Picard and Riker quietly retired to Picard's ready room and began a long, soul-searching dialogue while Lieutenant Commander Data took the Enterprise on its carefully calculated and hopefully inconspicuous way to the coordinates of the planned initial contact with the Borg cube-ship. Picard had felt a strong need to talk with his first officer. There were things that needed to be said - just in case. His ship was planning to provoke a fight with a Borg vessel, though not alone, because the Diamont was expected to fight with them, providing that the Borg ship could be lured to Caldar-Signet Six. Both officers had agreed that this was not a reassuring prospect. They had both admitted that they were almost counting on the Orokan commander, Appal, to break from the planned strategy and try to conduct the anticipated battle according to his own cockeyed priorities. They were both feeling the weight of the knowledge that the success or failure of the battle, and the defense of the sector, could ultimately rest on the performance of the Enterprise. They both tried to anticipate how the Enterprise would fare battling against the Borg ship.

The capabilities of the Borg ship had been reduced, but even when restricted to producing less than one-

third of its anticipated power, it had managed to annihilate two Cardassian warships and three transports. From components salvaged from the battered Cardassian hulks the Borg ship had repaired some of the damage resulting from Riker's first hit-and-run attack against it. It had then been tracked at warp seven by the Cardassians. Picard and Riker pondered the question: were those the best repairs the Borg could make, or had they somehow since then surpassed what the Cardassians had witnessed?

Regardless of the extent of the Borg repairs, and of the extent of cooperation from the Orokans, the Enterprise was going to face the Borg ship. Somehow, summing up their plans in those words seemed inadequate. It was more than just facing the Borg. They were actually going on the offensive. Throwing down the gauntlet. This time the Enterprise was committed for the duration, in the fray to the bitter end. Picard, as Captain, felt that the entire effort focused through him. Would they say, "Picard had the audacity to go out and challenge the Borg?" Would they say it as though Picard had been a fool who had done little more than rashly thrust a thorn under the toenail of a giant? Riker had admitted to having had some of the same feelings as he had ordered actions taken against the Borg. Both officers, having experienced the loneliness of command, had learned

that when it was necessary to make a decision you just forgot about what everyone else might say, and you got on with whatever needed to be done.

They discussed what the Borg might think about the Enterprise. Was Enterprise a name that stuck in their craw, or was it merely another irrelevant obstacle to be overrun? Did they even regard the Enterprise as an obstacle?

And what of the outcome of the battle? Could they win? Would both sides destroy the other? Or would they simply lose? The Enterprise and the Borg had contested before. The first blows, the first rounds were in the books. History. Both sides had measured the other. Now, would they meet in the center of the arena and settle everything, once and for all? Perhaps not once and for all, but wouldn't it be something to at least turn the tide and force the Borg to retreat?

They examined the way they had been talking and thinking, and wondered if possibly the hunter-warrior had not yet been bred out of humanity, or if it ever would.

A low warbling sound from the intercom interrupted their conversation. Picard leaned forward in his chair and opened the indicated channel. "Picard here."

"Data here, Sir. The time interval during which you did not wish to be disturbed has passed."

"Thank you, Mr. Data. We're on our way to the bridge."

Riker stood up from his chair. "Time take up our spears and shields. The contest is about to begin."

"Indeed it is," Picard agreed as he rounded his desk and offered his hand to Riker. "Good luck, Will."

"Good luck, Sir," returned Riker, responding to Picard's gesture. "I just hope that our 'allies' don't hand us a major screw-up that ends the career of our Enterprise."

"Not half as much as I," smiled Picard. He looked around the room and out the room's observation port as he added, "She's a fine ship. I don't believe that in the entire remainder of our careers we'll find an assignment that means as much as having served on her."

"Agreed, Sir," affirmed Riker. With the faintest smirk he added, "but, if I understand our plans, we're supposed to be making the Borg sad and melancholy over the prospect of losing their ship, not ourselves."

"Well spoken, Number One," Picard grinned. "Let us join the crew on the bridge."

As the door to the Captain's ready room opened, Data left the bridge Command Chair and assumed his regular station at his forward console. Picard took the Command Chair as Riker settled into his place at Picard's right.

"What is our status, Mr. Data?" asked Picard.

"We are on station, Sir. There has been no contact with the Borg vessel."

"Thank you, Mr. Data. Mr. Worf, bring the ship to yellow alert. Let's not let the opposition get the jump on us."

And then they waited, holding their position with all nonessential systems shut down, depending on passive sensor readings to alert them to the approach of the Borg ship.

The hours passed.

Silence on the bridge was broken by Lieutenant Worf. "Captain, I am picking up readings that could be a Borg ship."

"On screen, Lieutenant."

The main viewscreen showed only a normal background of stars.

"Go to magnification factor ten, please," ordered Picard. He studied the screen intently, seeing nothing. "Are you still getting those readings, Mr. Worf?"

"Yes, Sir. They are only slightly stronger."

"They are either moving very slowly," Picard observed, "or they are still very far away."

Something about one of the dim stars near the upper center of the screen aroused Riker's curiosity. "With your permission, Sir. Mr. Data, focus on the top center quadrant at magnification factor one-hundred."

When the images had settled it was apparent that one of the stars had taken on a definite shape - a cube.

"Well done, Number One," said Picard. "Engineering, be ready to engage warp engines on my command. For now, let's just watch and see what it will do."

After several minutes of watching, Riker inquired, "How fast is it moving, Data?"

"It appears to be heading for the Calder-Signet system at warp four, Sir," responded Data.

"Shall I arm the photon torpedoes, Sir?" asked Lt. Worf.

"Stand by, Lieutenant," said Picard. "We'll not take offensive action just yet."

Ten, twenty, and thirty minutes went by as the Borg vessel was studied. Its heading remained unchanged, and as it passed through its closest point to the Enterprise it seemed as though it was completely ignoring the Federation Starship.

"They don't even know we're here," exclaimed the Ensign at the helm station.

"Quite the contrary," said Picard. "I believe they are aware of our position. We are merely being ignored because we are not at this time posing a threat to them."

"Sir, if we do not soon engage, we might lose the opportunity," reminded Riker. "The Orokans are expecting us to be leading the Borg to the rendezvous."

"Agreed, Number One," said Picard. "Engineering, bring the warp engines on line. Helm, lay in a heading of zero-two-zero, mark one-five, at warp factor five. Engage."

The Enterprise gracefully assumed a heading which moved it toward an eventual interception of the Borg ship.

"The photon torpedoes, Sir?" questioned Lt. Worf nervously.

"Stand by with our forward phasers, Lieutenant," Picard answered calmly. "Our uses of the photon torpedoes will be determined by what circumstances require. We'll do better keeping our loading options open. I don't want to get caught like the Japanese Imperial Fleet at the Battle of Midway."

"Understood, Sir," responded Worf, apparently satisfied with Picard's reasoning.

The Enterprise continued closing on the Borg ship which still seemed to be ignoring it. Eventually its position was slightly ahead of the cube-ship, and Picard felt it was time to make his first move.

"Helm, change our heading to mark zero-two-zero," he ordered. "Bring the ship to red alert and set shields to maximum."

The slight adjustment to the Enterprise's heading angled it toward a collision with the Borg ship.

"Mister Worf, fire three wide-dispersion phaser beams at a point fifteen hundred meters ahead of their vessel," ordered Picard.

Three times in rapid succession the deadly energy beams cut through the empty space beyond the Borg ship's leading edge. It was a tactic designed to catch the attention of the Collective in the Borg ship. It was a tactic which worked. The Borg ship rapidly reduced speed as the Enterprise itself shot across the Borg ship's intended path.

"Well done, everyone," Picard beamed. "That ruffled a few of their feathers. Helm, lay in a course for Caldar-Signet Six at warp factor five and engage."

The Enterprise turned toward Caldar-Signet, which was now the nearest star. The Borg ship adjusted its heading slightly, bringing it behind the Enterprise.

"Sir, the Borg are in pursuit," reported Lt. Worf, "at warp five-point-five," he added after further study of his readouts.

"They've taken the bait," Picard concluded. "Engineering, all possible power to the rear shields."

"Sir, the Borg ship will be within firing range within nine seconds," relayed Data.

"Steady as she goes..." Picard ordered quietly.

The ship was suddenly shaken by a powerful energy blast which had been absorbed by the rear shields.

"I believe that was the Borg, Sir," said Riker dryly.

"Very astute, Number One," Picard responded in kind. "Helm, start random evasive maneuvers, but keep our general heading toward Calder-Signet Six."

The Enterprise began turning and twisting in order to present a more difficult target to the Borg weapons. For several minutes the effort was successful as the Borg missed their target widely on almost every shot. But they learned with each miss, and eventually they began to punish the Enterprise's shields more consistently.

"Engineering, report on the condition of the rear shields," demanded Commander Riker.

"LaForge here, Sir. They're taking a beating, but there's no sign of a problem yet. Sir, down here we'd all feel more comfortable with a change in your evasive tactics."

"Acknowledged, Mr. LaForge," said Riker. "I will pass that concern on to the Captain immediately."

A smile passed between Riker and Picard as he ordered, "Helm, take us to warp six."

The increase in speed brought a minute of relief from the bombardment of the Borg weapons. Picard put the time to good use.

"Mr. Worf, broadcast a distress signal to Starfleet Command," he ordered. "Report that we are being pursued by a Borg vessel, and ask for assistance from any Federation ships in the sector."

"But, Sir, we are the only Federation ship in the sector," Worf pointed out.

"I am aware of that, Lieutenant," Picard responded, "and by now, so are the Borg. Such a message might give the Borg a little more confidence. It will also alert the Diamont to be ready for our arrival."

"Aye, Sir. Message is being transmitted," said Lt. Worf.

"Sir, the Borg ship has increased velocity to warp six-point-five, and is closing in on us," reported Data.

"Helm, take us to warp seven," Picard responded.

A moment later Data revealed, "The Borg have increased velocity to warp seven."

"Are they gaining on us?" Picard asked.

"Negative, Sir," said Data. "We will be entering the Caldar-Signet system in three-point-eight minutes."

"Steady as she goes," said Picard.

"Sir, we will soon need to start braking maneuvers for orbit around Caldar-Signet Six," said the Helmsman.

"Thank you, helm," said Picard. "Mr. Worf, launch a class-one probe from our stern tubes. Configure its power system to go into overload ten seconds after launch."

Lt. Worf worked at his control panel and then announced, "The probe has been launched, Sir."

When outside the Enterprise's shields, the probe exploded in a brilliant flash of light and radiation.

"Helm, bring us out of warp. At maximum impulse power, head for an orbit around Caldar-Signet Six," Picard ordered.

The Borg ship was caught unaware by the Enterprise's sharp drop in speed. The Collective mind of its crew was also confused for an additional second or two by the unexpected explosion that had preceded

the Federation ship's rapid deceleration. Had an explosion aboard the Enterprise damaged something, or was it some kind of trick? The Collective decided to postpone solving that problem as the rapidly turning Enterprise receded from them. As the Borg ship turned to follow, it began shooting at the Enterprise even though it was near the effective limit of its energy beam weapons. The impacts of the energy blasts were felt aboard the Enterprise, but the Borg ship had overshot its target too far to have inflicted serious damage.

The Enterprise entered a low orbit around Calder-Signet Six. The bridge crew saw the planet's many-colored atmospheric features sliding by below on the main viewscreen, and the orb of the planet's inner moon ascending over the horizon.

"Captain," said Lt. Worf, "the Borg ship has returned and is in orbit around the planet. It has cleared the horizon behind us and is closing rapidly."

"Fire one standard photon torpedo from astern, Lt. Worf," said Picard. "Try to keep their attention focused on us."

Seconds later the twinkling discharge of the torpedo's engines marked its path toward the Borg ship. There was a bright flash upon its impact.

"No damage, Sir," Worf volunteered. "The torpedo impacted on their shields."

The Borg ship responded to the photon torpedo with an energy blast that violently jolted the Enterprise. Lights dimmed for several seconds and alarms loudly blared.

"LaForge to Bridge."

"Go ahead, Mr. LaForge," responded Picard.

"Whatever that was, it hurt us, Sir!" exclaimed LaForge. "If we get hit like that again before we can make some repairs, I won't guarantee the shields will hold up."

"Do what you can, Mr. LaForge," encouraged Picard. "In another few minutes some of the pressure should be taken off us. Helm, increase our distance from the Borg ship slightly."

"Captain, I have picked up several hundred small objects which have appeared from behind the planet's moon and are heading toward the Borg ship," reported Lt. Worf.

"On screen and magnify, Lt. Worf," said Picard. "Let's see if they're Appal's Vantis."

Neatly formed flights of Orokan Vanti attack craft appeared on the main viewscreen. Picard was both surprised and impressed. In spite of how undisciplined Appal's crew had at times appeared, it seemed that they had miraculously transformed into an orderly and potentially effective combat force. If the Orokan strategy was sound, and if the Vanti pilots could fight as well as they executed formation flying, there might be some hope for their desperate plan after all.

The Borg ship again fired on the Enterprise, rocking it violently as its dying rear shields absorbed the blast's impact.

"LaForge to bridge. That tears it, Captain. The rear shields are all but gone!"

"Thank you, Mr. LaForge," said Picard. "Do what you can to bring them back. Helm, bring the ship around. Keep our forward shields toward the Borg ship and increase our withdrawal speed from them by ten percent. Mr. Worf, prepare three of the leftover terraforming torpedoes."

As they had been addressed, the personnel on the bridge acknowledged their instructions from Picard. The Enterprise swung around and backed swiftly away from the Borg ship, taunting and teasing, acting

as though it intended to stand and fight. The Borg fired into the Enterprise's forward shields. The shields held, and LaForge desperately planned what he would try to do when the Borg finally disabled them also.

"Lieutenant Worf, on my command, fire the terraforming torpedoes," said Picard with a hint of excitement in his voice.

The Vanti attack craft had closed to within two hundred kilometers of the Borg ship when Picard gave the order, "Fire the torpedoes, Mr. Worf." The first two torpedoes' explosions in the Borg's leading side protective shields weakened the shields, allowing the third torpedo to penetrate the upper surface of the leading side before its shields had regenerated. A second or two later the Borg ship trembled from a series of explosions inside which left a long, deep crack in its upper surface.

"Well done, Mr. Worf!" exclaimed Picard. If the Borg had tried some sort of defense against the terraforming torpedoes, it obviously hadn't been one-hundred percent effective.

The Vanti attack craft swarmed over the trailing side of the Borg cube-ship. Their attack procedure was hidden from view on the Enterprise, but numerous

explosions which had occurred near the cube-ship's edges were seen.

The leading flights of attack craft arced over the top and under the bottom of the cube ship as weapons stations on those sides of the ship tried unsuccessfully to lock in on the speeding close-in targets. Many times the Borg fired, and only once did they score a hit on a Vanti. Judging from appearances, that had been a factor of luck more than anything else. The damaged Vanti tumbled for a while, then regained its composure and took a position outside the main battle.

The trailing flights in the main attack spear flew outward toward the left and right. When the leading flights were clear of the cube-ship, they attacked the left and right sides. The right side attackers inverted themselves and passed under the cube-ship after their firing run. The left side attackers passed over the cube-ship and formed up with other flights to attack other sides of the Borg ship. The Vantis attacked with concentrated applications of phaser fire and launchings of old-style missiles bearing more contemporary photon warheads. Although the destructive yields of the Vanti weapons were much less than those weapons used on the Enterprise, the Vanti's ability to penetrate the Borg shields before

firing made their applications accurate and destructive. The Vantis swarmed so thickly around the cube-ship that Picard considered supporting fire from the Enterprise too risky to try.

As the Enterprise watched, the Orokan attack craft devastated the surface of the cube-ship. Many of the exterior weapons stations cataloged by the Enterprise were being silenced, and those that remained were only slightly more effective than they had been when the first wave of attack craft had hit the cube-ship. Though several of the attack craft had been completely destroyed by Borg defensive fire, the pitiful level of Borg resistance was proving to be an insignificant deterrent. As the seemingly one-sided battle continued, Lt. Worf reported to Picard that the Diamont, was approaching the battle from behind the moon of Calder-Signet Six.

Data turned around in the chair at his duty station. "Captain Picard, may I have a word with you?" he asked.

"What is it, Mr. Data?" Picard responded.

"Sir, I estimate the Vanti attack craft can sustain this attack for another twelve to fifteen minutes," Data said.

"Very good, Mr. Data," Picard said as he concentrated on the main viewscreen.

"Sir, are you aware that Federation citizens are held captive on this Borg vessel?" asked Data.

This question tore Picard's concentration away from the viewscreen. Commander Riker had informed him about Data's desire to lead a rescue attempt for those captives.

"Among them, your brother, Lore," said Picard.

"Yes, Sir," Data affirmed. "I have formulated several sound plans and supporting contingency procedures for an attempt to find and reclaim those captives. Our experiences in reclaiming you, Sir, were most helpful. At the present, the Borg are preoccupied with the Orokan attack, and are ignoring us. Their shields are temporarily weakened enough to allow beaming over and back. Until the Vantis break off their attacks, neither we nor the Diamont can fire on the Borg ship. This period of waiting would be ideal for a rescue attempt. May I have your permission to try, Sir?"

"Number One, your input," Picard requested.

"Mr. Data must understand that this is very risky, Sir!" Riker stated.

"Agreed," Picard said solemnly. "Data, are you aware of what may happen if you are unable to return? You'd be facing a living hell from which the Borg will not let you escape."

"I have considered this, Sir," said Data, "and yet, I am willing to try."

Picard quickly weighed his fears for Data's safety against his sympathy for any living creature held by the Borg. If the tide of battle completely turned against the Borg ship, it would have to be destroyed. Picard knew that everyone in his crew would feel better with performing that duty if the innocent captives had been given a chance to avoid the fate of the Borg crew.

"Alright, Mr. Data. You have my permission," said Picard. "You will have the option of selecting a small volunteer away team. Your team will be given ten minutes for the rescue attempt, and then you will have to be brought back. No questions, and no exemptions. Are those terms acceptable?"

"They are, Sir," said Data.

"Commander Data," interrupted Worf, "with the Captain's permission, I would like to accompany you."

"Permission granted, Lieutenant," said Picard.

"One assistant is all I shall require, Sir," said Data.
"We must leave immediately."

For the first time Riker and Picard noticed that Data had placed a small black bag under his console. He stooped down to pick it up, and then touched his communicator. "Transporter Room, prepare to beam Lt. Worf and myself directly to the coordinates I have programmed into your console."

As Worf and Data stood waiting to be beamed from the bridge, Riker looked to Picard and whispered, "Do you get the impression we've had the wool pulled over our eyes, Sir?"

"Yes, I do, Number One," Picard admitted quietly, "and if it were for any less a noble cause, I would object."

Picard arose and said, "Picard to Transporter Room. Drop shields and transport Mr. Data and Lt. Worf."

As the small away team vanished from the bridge the Borg ship unleashed a barrage of devastating energy blasts at the unprotected Enterprise. The ship lurched drunkenly. Lighting dimmed, went

completely out, and then was replaced by emergency backup illumination.

Riker climbed back into his chair and shouted over the alarms, "Damage Control, report!"

"Outer hull integrity breached, Sir. Emergency force fields are sustaining atmosphere. The ship is on total emergency battery power, and as near as I can tell, that's only getting to life support. Nothing else seems to respond."

"Engineering..." Riker shouted.

"We're on it, Sir!" answered the frustrated voice of LaForge over the bridge loudspeakers.

Captain Picard regained his feet and touched his communicator. "Picard to Transporter Room. What happened to Mr. Data and Lt. Worf?"

"I don't know, Sir," came the reply. "The power shut down before I could verify a successful beam-over."

Picard looked at the viewscreen and cursed under his breath. "My mistake, Number One," he said grimly. "The enemy still has a great deal of fight left in him."

*** CHAPTER ELEVEN ***

The transporter patterns of Lieutenant Worf and Lieutenant Commander Data began to form on a dimly illuminated walkway on the Borg cube-ship. They faded momentarily into an almost imperceptible twinkling haze, and then reappeared, requiring slightly longer than normal for their reconstruction to be completed. Worf's eyes rolled back in their sockets, and he collapsed, unconscious, onto the walkway. Data knelt beside him and pulled a tricorder from his black bag. He used the instrument to run several quick scans over Worf's motionless body.

Worf's eyes opened. He shot up into a sitting position on the walkway, his wide eyes darting all around him as he tried to recollect where he was. He felt as if he was awakening from an eerie dream in which he had been watching himself disperse and wash away among swirling eddies and currents playing in a fluid river of time and space. In a few

seconds his thoughts and memories stabilized. When his eyes focused on Data, he asked, "What happened?"

"Most likely an interruption in the power supply to the transporter system," Data theorized. "Emergency backups must have taken over and finished the programmed transport before our patterns started to decay in the buffers. You appear to have been affected more by what happened than I. How are you feeling?"

Worf forced himself to his feet and answered, "Much stronger, and ready to continue once I understand what I am expected to do."

Data again placed his hand into the black bag and withdrew two phasers. He gave one to Worf and explained, "They are set to non-standard resonance frequencies. Each one uses a different frequency and should be effective against four to six Borg personnel before they can begin shielding themselves from the beams. We must use them wisely, Lieutenant."

"Just like the last time," Worf observed as he looked warily around. Explosions coming from the outer sections of the cube-ship were drumming throughout the entire vessel.

Data emptied the bag by withdrawing two long, sheathed knives. He secured one to his own belt and passed the other to Worf.

A delighted grin spread across Worf's face as he withdrew his knife from the sheath. "I do not recognize the design," he said as he admired the weapon. "Did you design this yourself?"

"With much help from the ship's computer and the replicator," admitted Data.

Worf clenched his teeth and gave a low growl as he twirled the knife into the air and caught it to feel its balance. After giving the handle a firm, approving squeeze, he smartly thrust the knife into the sheath and fastened it to his belt. Thus armed, Worf looked as though he would welcome a fight with just about anything.

Data made several adjustments to the tricorder as he explained, "I have modified this tricorder to register emissions characteristic of Dr. Soong's positronic devices. In tracking these emissions I hope to find Lore. If he is capable of communicating with the Collective, I will ask him to find the other Federation prisoners. Those prisoners which we can find will be beamed back to the Enterprise."

"We do not have much time," said Worf anxiously.

Data energized the tricorder and moved it in an arc all around him. He pointed it down through the walkway. "We must go two levels down, quickly," he said.

They jogged down the walkway as Data examined readings from his tricorder. On Data's instruction they turned left into another corridor. They ran through an intersection of two corridors where they were startled by an approaching Borg unit. From opposite sides they both trained their phasers on it. The unit walked between them, oblivious to their presence. Leaving it to attend to its own business, they continued along the corridor and discovered an elevator. Under their control the elevator slowly descended two levels, and then with Data leading they ran out.

After a short jog down the new corridor they came to a room without a door. Inside the room sat a figure whose face was partially obscured by a collection of typical Borg cybernetic devices. His right arm's prosthetic device was connected to a power coupling, and his eyes, in the characteristic manner of the Borg, seemed to be focused on some nonexistent thing in front of him.

Data checked the readouts from the tricorder and switched the device off. Looking at Worf, he simply said, "It is Lore."

"Stand back, Sir," said Worf.

He lunged into the open doorway. A shower of sparks and dissonant cracklings and buzzing preceded Worf's being thrown to the opposite side of the corridor. The creature in the room slowly and dispassionately turned to look at the source of the noise.

Worf sat up and leaned against the wall, shaking his head roughly.

"You did not give me time to inform you about the force field," said Data.

Worf slowly stood up and grunted, "When we encounter the next force field, I will give you all the time you need."

The sounds of deliberate footsteps approaching from both ends of the corridor attracted their attention. Data tapped his communicator and said, "Enterprise, be prepared to beam us out."

After repeating the message, Data watched the advancing Borg units and said, "There is no response

from the Enterprise, Lieutenant. We must use the phasers to clear a way out."

They both fired in the direction Data pointed his weapon. Three of the Borg units fell before other units began projecting shields as protection against the phasers' beams. Additional units were appearing in the corridor as far back as they could see.

Worf elbowed Data and pointed behind them. "Sir, there appear to be less of them this way!"

Stepping toward the less heavily populated section of the corridor they fired toward individual targets. Two more of the units fell to the deck before the other units projected shields.

"Concentrated fire, Lieutenant," ordered Data, "upon the closest one."

Together Data and Worf were able to bring down an additional unit before the Borg shields adapted to their concentrated phaser fire.

Worf gave a loud growl and pulled the long knife from the sheath on his belt. He slashed at the nearest unit and deeply gashed its arm. It held its arm clumsily out to the side, turned, and tried to stagger back against the tide of its approaching comrades.

Giving another long, loud growl, Worf rushed toward another nearby unit and plunged the long blade through its ribs. When he jerked the knife out, the unit collapsed onto the deck. Worf picked another target and thrust the knife toward it. This time an opaque shield appeared to protect the unit. Worf attempted to drive the blade through it, but succeeded only in breaking the blade off the hilt. Reluctantly Data attempted to use his knife, and was met with a similar shield and broken blade.

Worf next attempted to tackle a unit standing in front of him, but was thrown back onto the deck by the unit's powerful prosthetic arm. Data also reverted to physically attacking the units before him, and by using his great strength and some appropriately applied leverage he was able to topple two of his opponents. A moment later several of the units grabbed his right arm, and he found it impossible to free himself.

As he was lying on the deck Worf looked up, and he discovered pipes on the ceiling which he identified as power conductors. The conductors ran over Data's head to a large crystal junction at the next corridor intersection. Following a wild impulse, Worf pulled his phaser from his belt and leaped toward Data. He released Data's phaser from its belt and pointed both

at the crystal power junction. He fired continuously, and three seconds later the junction exploded into a blinding shower of sparks. Outside the cube-ship, the pilots of an attacking squadron of Vantis completed an uneventful firing pass over their targets when all the remaining defensive weapons around their targets suddenly stopped firing.

Still struggling, Data and Worf were gradually being buried under an army of Borg units. Worf resisted until his hopelessly fatigued body could no longer move. Data continued battling against the overwhelming onslaught of opponents, but finally allowed himself to be restrained when he saw that continued resistance could help neither Worf nor Lore.

From inside the room the subdued captive figure of Lore had emotionlessly watched the violent drama in the corridor. When he saw Worf and Data at last under the control of the Borg, a deep melancholy settled over what little remained of his soul. It was the first and only emotion, besides rage, that he had been able to feel for the past two years.

* * *

"We are within firing range, Sir," the Diamont's Tactical Officer informed Arch-Regent Appal.

"Take us in closer!" Appal ordered cheerfully, reinforcing the order with a wide, flamboyant gesture. "Order the Vantis to clear the target and then have the phaser crews fire at will. Have the refueling and armaments crews standing by on all flight decks."

The Diamond Ship closed on the Borg cube-ship and opened fire with its two powerful phasers. The emitters located at each of the tips of the diamond-shaped hull unleashed bright beams of searing light energy onto the unshielded sides of the cube-ship. Wide craters and troughs of destruction appeared in the wakes of the beams. Reeling, the Borg Collective analyzed the destructive potential of the Diamont and that of the Enterprise. In its analysis the Enterprise now appeared to be an insignificant factor in the battle. The cube-ship turned its weakest side to the Enterprise, using the crippled Federation Starship as a shield.

The doors covering the Diamont's primary flight deck portals began opening in preparation for recovery of the spent Vanti attack craft. Their fuel was too low to further support combat flight

requirements and most of them had long since expended all their offensive armament. As the Vantis approached the waiting flight deck portals, Arch-Regent Appal ordered the Diamont's protective shields dropped. For a little while Picard and the Enterprise would have to take up the battle against the cube-ship while he temporarily withdrew to refuel and rearm the Vantis.

Still analyzing, the Collective recognized Appal's decision as an opportunity to return to the offensive. With its shields down and with its flight decks exposed, the Diamont was a prize ripe and ready for picking. Had the Enterprise been able to distract the Borg during the Diamont's recovery procedures, events might have transpired differently, but the Enterprise was experiencing its own problems. It was out of control, slowly tumbling in orbit, bow-over-stern.

The remaining energy beam weapons on the Borg cube-ship lashed out at the Diamont, cutting, slicing, and pounding. Sections of the Diamont's propulsion ring were blasted away from the ship, the ring's support tubes were severed and twisted, and power failures caused environment-sustaining force fields over the open flight deck portals to vanish. Unprotected bodies and broken attack craft were

swept out into the cold, barely existent atmosphere over Calder-Signet Six by the sudden rushes of escaping air.

The pummeling from the Borg attack had thrown all surviving crewmembers aboard the Diamont off their feet. On the bridge the Arch-Regent struggled to stand. He staggered to an intercom panel and opened a channel. "This is Appal. Give me a damage assessment."

"Sir, we've lost warp capability and over half our sublight thrusters. There was a complete loss of power and environment on the three main flight decks. Squadrons One and Three were lost - no survivors..."

Appal switched the channel closed. "Helm!" he said sharply, "get off the floor and find a way to move us away from here!"

"Sir," interrupted the Tactical Officer, "the Vanti squadron leaders are asking when they can land..."

"Tell them to find another safe haven!" said Appal bitterly.

"But ,Sir, there is no other haven," objected the Tactical Officer.

"They cannot land here!" Appal shouted as he pounded on the console in front of him with both fists. "We haven't the power to get the emergency portals open!"

The Tactical Officer said nothing for a moment. He looked at the Arch-Regent, slowly letting the implications of what had been said sink in. Then he turned back to his console and explained the situation to the Squadron Leaders.

Appal sat dejectedly, holding his head in his hands and running his fingers through the hair on the sides of his head. Suddenly he lifted his head and acquired a maniacal smile. "Now it is time to activate the remote systems!" he proclaimed.

As the surviving members of the bridge crew watched, Appal hurried to another control console and typed his personal access codes into the terminal. As soon as his clearance was verified, he began typing instructions.

* * *

Picard had watched the spirited exchange between the Diamont and the Borg cube-ship on the main viewscreen. Like the Enterprise, the Diamont seemed to have suffered more damage than it had inflicted on the Borg ship. Picard had dared hope that things would not have turned out as they had, but in all honesty, what had happened to them had not come as a complete surprise.

Presently there seemed to be a lull in the fighting. Picard had no idea of what might be happening on Appal's battered ship. Most of his attack craft appeared to be stranded outside their mother ship, and Picard did not foresee things getting much better for the Orokan pilots. Repairing the damage the Diamont had suffered would be a gargantuan job for even a full engineering complement. When Picard estimated how many crewmembers Appal might be able to directly assign to repairs, he doubted the Diamont would ever leave Caldar-Signet Six.

When he examined the Borg ship through the viewscreen's magnification, Picard saw that the Borg Collective was successfully regenerating what the Vanti attack craft had damaged. At their observed rate of repair, the Borg would undoubtedly be the first contestant in a position to end the battle.

Then Picard realized that he might have been unfair in completely ruling out the Enterprise's chances of coming around first. After all, Geordi LaForge was a superb engineer and an inspiring leader. His knowledge of the ship's systems and his resourcefulness were two powerful arguments that the Enterprise was not out of things yet. Picard began making plans for what he would do if LaForge was able to perform a miracle. First he would launch more photon torpedoes to slow the Borg down as much as possible, and then he would attempt a hasty departure for Caldar-Signet Five to destroy the captured cube-ship. Then he could not decide what to do after that. Should he go back to find out what had happened to the Diamont? He decided he would, if the Borg could not keep him from doing it. What then? Should the Enterprise alone attempt to hold the sector against the Borg ship, or should he retreat deeper into Federation space in hope of finding the rest of the fleet? He decided there were too many variables to lay out a concrete course of action. First things first – such as getting his ship fixed.

Picard was about to contact LaForge for a progress report when a glint of movement near Caldar-Signet Six's moon on the viewscreen caught his eye. He spoke to the young officer who had taken over Data's position at the forward console. "Focus on the three-

o'clock side of the moon, Ensign, magnification factor three."

Among the stars behind the moon of Calder-Signet Six, Picard saw something that paled him. "Number One..." he said urgently as he pointed at the viewscreen.

"I see it, Sir," said Riker in amazement. "Another Borg ship!"

"Security, are you picking up any life signs from that ship?" Picard demanded.

"There are life signs, Sir. Borg. But they are very faint. It looks to me as if they are produced by a very small group of beings."

Picard stabbed toward the viewscreen with his index finger as he exclaimed to Riker, "That is no ordinary Borg ship, Number One! That is Appal's captured cube-ship. Why ever would he bring it here?"

A summons from LaForge pulled his attention away. "Yes, Mr. Laforge?" he responded.

"You've got full impulse power, Sir."

"Thank you, Mr. LaForge. We are all deeply in your debt," said Picard gratefully.

"Captain," interrupted the Security Officer, "the Orokan cube-ship is on an intercept course for the Borg ship. There's practically nobody aboard it, so it can't be coming in to exchange weapons fire. My guess is that it intends to ram the Borg ship."

"Can anybody corroborate that?" questioned Picard.

"Sir, I'm picking up a stream of subspace signals from the Diamont aimed at the new cube-ship," reported the Ensign at the Navigation Console.

"Appal!" exclaimed Picard.

Of course. Now it was clear. This was Appal's fifth ace. His modification to their plan for dealing with the Borg ship. Appal had wanted to use the captured cube-ship all along. But surely not like this. He was going to sacrifice an intact prize piece of Borg technology. It would probably save all their lives if it worked, but Federation engineers and planners would grieve for eons over its loss. Well, that was just too bad! At the moment Picard cared very little what Federation engineers and planners thought about anything. He wondered what they might think if they were actually out in the field facing the Borg. The last

issue Picard weighed in his mind was whether it was worth handing over to the Borg the lives of countless colonists in the sector in order to save a piece of Borg machinery. Picard quickly sided with the colonists.

The Borg ship fired on the battered Diamont.

"Security, get our shields up and lock phasers on the Borg ship," Picard ordered.

The Borg plan was obvious: destroy the Diamont and terminate its control over the captured cube-ship. Taking it back would then be unbelievably easy! Great plan, Appal, thought Picard. How typical of you to leave a great big hole that the Borg can so easily turn to their own advantage.

"Fire phasers!" ordered Picard.

For ten seconds the Enterprise's forward phasers carved up the repairs the Borg had made to the weak side of their cube-ship.

"Phaser banks are completely depleted, Sir," reported the Security Officer.

"Lock on two standard photon torpedoes and fire," said Picard.

The Borg ship had stopped firing on the Diamont, and seemed to be ignoring its sister-ship which was still rapidly closing, because of the kick-in-the-pants distraction Picard had introduced. The Enterprise's two photon torpedoes impacted, leaving deep calling cards where they struck the Borg ship. It slowly started to turn. Picard soon realized that it was trying to bring a side with undamaged weapons around to bear on them.

"Helm, prepare to back us away from the Borg at one-half impulse power. On my command," Picard ordered.

"Captain, a collision between the two cube-ships is imminent," volunteered the Security Officer.

"Lock on phasers and fire," said Picard. "Keep their attention focused on us."

For a few seconds the phaser blasts further damaged the Borg ship's weakest side as it turned away from them.

Picard was prepared to give the order to back away from the Borg ship when it stopped turning toward the Enterprise. His distracting tactics had worked. Too late, the Borg had turned their attention from the ship of their former comrade, Locutus, to the gravest

threat they could ever conceive - one of their own ships attacking them under the control of their enemy. They began firing on the Orokan cube-ship. Other than blasting holes in its surface, the Borg's attempted defense did little to slow down or turn aside the latest threat to what they still believed was their inevitable victory.

"Helm, back away from the Borg ship. One-half impulse," Picard commanded. "Forward shields to maximum."

As the Enterprise was frantically trying to put distance between it and the two colliding behemoths, the Orokan cube-ship struck the Borg vessel, driving one of its corners into the lower third of the side it had hit. A substantial lower part of the side and of the facet below the site of impact was wrenched away from the Borg ship. The Orokan cube-ship started to tumble and sink downward toward the planet. Loose small pieces of debris and bodies tumbled crazily downward and away from the spinning Borg cube-ship.

The broken and disfigured Orokan cube-ship assumed an even steeper downward trajectory. Along with larger pieces of debris which had fallen with it, the dying hulk began to encounter substantial atmospheric resistance. Long tongues of super-

heated hydrocarbon gasses trailed back from its leading edges, growing brighter as it tumbled and plummeted deeper into the denser atmosphere closer to the planet's surface. Having personally been a victim of Appal's hatred for the Borg, Picard was virtually certain that Appal had left the two-hundred and sixteen remaining Borg prisoners aboard the captured cube-ship. At first he began to regard Appal as a Barbarian, but upon further reflection he wondered what he might have done if the captured cube-ship had remained at Calder-Signet Five. He might have had to go there to destroy it with the Borg ship in hot pursuit. Would he have risked his ship and crew in taking time to beam those Borg prisoners off the cube-ship before trying to destroy it? Was it Q who had said that the exploration of space was not something for the squeamish?

Picard was pulled back from his thoughts by an observation Riker was making. "Sir, the Borg ship has stabilized itself, but it's still dropping," he said.

"Have they managed to lessen their rate of descent?" asked Picard.

"No, Sir, they are falling at roughly the same rate," said the Security Officer.

"Take us back over them," said Picard. "Monitor them closely. We'll not want them to find a way out of this situation."

"Captain, I have contact with the away team on the Borg ship!" reported the Security Officer excitedly.

"This is Captain Picard. To whom am I speaking?"

"Lieutenant Commander Data, Sir."

"What is your situation?" demanded Picard.

"We are shaken and bruised, Sir, but not seriously hurt," said Data. "It felt as though something hit the ship. We were thrown about our detention area as the ship tumbled. Apparently the Borg have stopped the tumbling, but I still feel like the ship is falling. Our guards have left us alone. Presumably they are occupied with more pressing business."

"Lieutenant Worf, are you able to respond?" asked Picard.

"I am, Sir," said Worf.

"What is your status?"

"I am much as Mr. Data has already described," said Worf. "but I feel that I should add a personal observation to what Mr. Data has already reported."

"And what is that, Mr. Worf?"

"Before that 'something' hit the ship, I looked into the eyes of our guards," said Worf as he recalled the memory. "I am certain that I saw in them an expression of fear. Perhaps it was worse than fear. Perhaps, it was cold terror."

"Thank you, Mr. Worf. Thank you very much," said Picard. "That could be the most important observation of this entire affair."

"How is that, Sir?" asked Riker.

"That the Borg are still capable of emotion," Picard explained. "If that were so, it would somewhat narrow the gap between us, wouldn't it?"

"That's not something high on my list of priorities," said Riker offhandedly.

"Quite right, Number One," said Picard. "Transporter room, can you beam Mr. Data and Mr. Worf off the Borg ship?"

A few seconds later the transporter officer responded, "No, Sir. They've slipped into the upper atmosphere. Ionization is making it impossible to get a secure lock on them."

Picard thought silently for a few minutes, and then demanded, "What is our location in relation to the Borg ship?"

"Almost directly over it, Sir," reported the Security Officer.

"Excellent," said Picard. "Try to establish a lock on the Borg ship with our tractor beam. Divert any power except for life support to this task."

"Shields, too?" inquired the security officer.

"Affirmative," responded Picard.

"Sir?" questioned Riker. "You're going to try to pull it back up?"

"My first priority is the rescue of Mr. Data and Mr. Worf," said Picard resolutely. "To do that I must eliminate the atmospheric ionization. To do that, I must either eliminate the entire atmosphere, or move the Borg ship out of that atmosphere."

"But, Sir, while I am not forgetting about Data and Worf, even if this works, won't it give the Borg another shot at us?" asked Riker.

"Have you ever been in mortal fear for your life?" asked Picard. "If the Borg are capable of fear, would it not be reasonable to ask if they are capable of a more positive emotion? Perhaps, gratitude?"

"I hope you're aware of what you're risking on this bet, Sir," said Riker with concern.

"I am very much aware, Will," said Picard slowly. Then in his command voice he instructed, "Security, get the last of the terraforming torpedoes into the forward launchers, and hurry with the tractor beam."

The Enterprise slowly lowered itself over the battered Borg ship and extended its tractor field into the thin atmosphere around the Borg ship. After several minutes of attempting to lock on, the Security Officer reported, "It's the ionization again, Sir. The computer can't get a lock."

"Try establishing a lock manually," suggested Picard.

The Security Officer transferred the operation over to manual control. On his control panel were several readouts which had to be within prescribed limits at

the same time for a tractor beam lock to hold. Carefully he watched as the numbers danced teasingly around the figures he needed to see. Twice the necessary figures were almost close enough for a try. He had engaged the beam anyway at those times, but the numbers had passed too swiftly and the field had collapsed. He had noticed what could possibly be a pattern leading up to the numbers he needed to see. Suddenly the pattern was again in the readouts. The numbers were still outside what the computer wanted to see, but they were close, so close. He engaged the circuits a hair earlier than he had the previous times, praying that his gamble had paid off.

A row of green lights appeared across the panel. "Tractor beam lock established!" he proclaimed triumphantly. "I am transferring control back to the computer."

"Well done!" said Picard with relief. "Helm, take us up gradually, and let's see what happens. Security, watch carefully for any signs of hostile intent."

For several minutes the Enterprise's impulse engines strained under the double load of trying to lift both the Enterprise and the Borg Ship higher in the powerful gravity field of Calder-Signet Six. The

Engineer on duty on the bridge carefully monitored the impulse engine's rising coolant temperature.

"Captain, we're not making any progress," the Helm Officer admitted. "In fact, we've lost ground. The farther down we go, the harder this is going to be."

"Your concerns are noted, Ensign. Keep going as you are," said Picard before opening a channel to Engineering. "Mr. LaForge, has there been any progress with our warp power system?"

A moment later LaForge answered, "We haven't got it licked yet, Sir. About all I can tell you is that we're finding out what is not the problem."

"Keep on it, Mr. LaForge," Picard encouraged. "We really could use warp power about now."

"Yes, Sir, as quickly as we can," LaForge promised.

After a moment's thought Picard touched his communicator badge. "Picard to Data. Come in, please."

"Yes, Captain?"

"What can you tell me about the condition of the Borg ship's drive system?" Picard asked.

"I cannot give you that information at this time, Sir," replied Data. "Getting the information will involve the risk of leaving our detention room. I am unsure of how the Borg will view our attempting to do that."

"Are you able to break out of your detention area?" Picard asked.

"I believe so, Sir," said Data. "Somehow we have retained possession of our phasers."

"Then get me that information," Picard ordered. "We're attempting to move the Borg ship to a higher orbit with our tractor beam, but for lack of sufficient power we're going down with you. It may be necessary for you to find some way to help us from down there. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir," replied Data. "We will attempt to find out what means of assistance are possible from down here."

"Very well," said Picard. "And, Data, it will have to be soon."

"Understood, Sir."

Together Data and Worf walked toward their doorway. As they approached the unguarded entrance, Data scanned it with his tricorder.

"Another force field?" inquired Worf.

"Yes, Lieutenant," replied Data.

"I believe the controls were mounted about..." Worf paused and studied the wall, finally placing his hand on a point near the doorway's edge. "...here," he finished.

Data scanned the area with the tricorder. "You are correct, Lieutenant," he said. "Please use your phaser to cut away this area of the wall."

Worf adjusted his phaser to a narrow beam, and within a few minutes he had removed an area of the wall the size of his hand. Data put the tricorder next to the opening and scanned the circuitry inside the hole.

"If I am correct, severing the red coded traces should allow us to leave this room," he said.

Worf tuned the phaser's beam to an even narrower setting and placed it into the hole. He lightly touched the trigger and melted away a section of the red traces. The doorway's force field dissipated with a light hiss.

Cautiously they stepped out into the corridor. A group of Borg units hurrying by ignored them. Data turned on his tricorder.

"What are we looking for?" Worf asked.

"I am looking for some kind of power distribution control apparatus," explained Data as he pointed the tricorder in various directions. "I have calculated the amount of power required to allow us to descend at our present rate. I now know the power contributions of the Enterprise and of this ship. If I can find what I am looking for, I will be able to tell if there is any unnecessary power expenditure on this ship which can be diverted to its drive systems, providing that the drive systems can accept more input."

"Sir, why is the Captain trying to salvage this Borg ship?" asked a puzzled Lt. Worf.

Data looked at Worf very seriously and asked, "Would you rather die here today, Lieutenant?"

"I would not foolishly throw my life away..." Worf started to object.

"Nor I, Lieutenant," stated Data. "Now, let me continue with my work."

After sampling readings from several more directions Data pointed the tricorder down the corridor and said, "There appears to be a major power junction in that direction. Perhaps there will be a control apparatus nearby. Follow me, please."

They ran down the corridor, following it until it opened up into a wide, high chamber. Power conductors converged on the ceiling from varied directions and melded into one huge conduit which was embedded into the wall behind a high, complex console.

Data scanned the console with the tricorder and then turned to Worf. "This console is one of many from which power distribution throughout the ship is monitored."

"This console is useless for modifying power allocation, Sir," Worf objected. "There is no provision for entering commands."

Data handed his phaser to Worf. "Please configure one phaser as a cutting tool, and the other as a welding tool," he instructed Worf. "With the help of my tricorder I may be able to hardwire the circuit configuration I require instead of depending on the Borg computers to do it for me."

As Worf configured the two hand phasers Data knelt before the console and began tearing off its front panels. A scraping noise behind Worf caused him to spin around. A group of Borg units had assembled behind them.

Levelling both phasers at the Borg, Worf called to Data who had his head and shoulders inside the frame of the console. Data withdrew from the hole he had created and saw the Borg. Each group cautiously eyed the other, neither able to conceive an appropriate way to end the awkward standoff.

"What do we do now, Commander?" hissed Worf.

"I am unsure, Lieutenant," replied Data. "I have discovered that power is still being allocated to the ship's weapons systems. I would like to divert that power to the drive system and see what effect it has upon our slide into the atmosphere."

For another minute the standoff continued. Then one brave Borg unit slowly held his hands out and open at his sides, and cautiously edged toward Data who was sitting on the floor at the console. He slowly lowered himself to his knees beside Data and removed another panel from the console. He placed it carefully on the floor and pushed it away from both of them. As he removed another panel, another Borg carefully

walked across the room and helped remove the remaining panels.

Worf watched helplessly as the rest of the assembled Borg crossed the room and peered under the console. He slowly lowered the hand phasers as Data said to him, "I believe we are all working on the same idea."

As Worf watched, Data attempted to convey his intentions to his Borg aides through a crude system of gestures and pantomime. Appearing to understand, several of the Borg seemed to make rewiring proposals of their own. Data checked all their proposals with the tricorder and indicated which ones should provide the most efficient solution to their problem. When everyone seemed to have come to an agreement, Data requested the cutting phaser from Worf and severed the cable for the weapons system. He then took the welding phaser from Worf and attached the cable to its new terminal. As this procedure was repeated with other cables, Worf inherited the job of caddying phasers between the different operators who were acting on Data's instructions. When all the reconfigurations were completed everyone crawled out from under the console. To Worf's surprise, the Borg who were holding the phaser tools returned them to him.

Data touched his communicator. "Data to Enterprise."

"Picard here. Go ahead, Mr. Data."

"Sir, we have attempted to reconfigure portions of the Borg ship's power grid. We are prepared to integrate our modifications into the system."

"Stand by, Mr. Data," ordered Picard.

Aboard the Enterprise Picard had been alerted to the approach of the Diamont. The crippled Orokan ship had limped to their location using its remaining sublight thrusters, and was attempting to maneuver clear of the Enterprise, presumably to fire upon the Borg ship barely caught in the Enterprise's tractor beam.

"Sir, an incoming message from the Orokan Commander," reported the security officer.

Angrily Picard said, "Put him on screen."

The Arch-Regent was leaning aggressively forward at his console, visibly upset. "What do you think you are doing, Picard?" he demanded. "We're here to destroy that thing, or have you conveniently forgotten your orders from Starfleet Command? You're not feeling sorry for your old friends, the Borg, are you?"

"I do not like your tone, sir!" said Picard furiously. "My ship is currently engaged in a rescue operation. I order you to stand down from your aggressive posture and do not hinder what I must do."

"Release the Borg ship, Picard," said Appal forcefully. "If you haven't the stomach to make the kill, I'll be happy to finish for you."

"The Borg ship is beaten, Appal," said Picard. "It is no longer a threat to you. If it can be salvaged, what is left of it may still be of some use to our investigators."

"The Borg are going to die," stated Appal. "Watch."

The upper phaser emitter of the Diamont released a weak beam of phaser energy that flashed harmlessly between the Enterprise and the Borg ship.

In order to defend the Borg ship Picard needed the power being used on the tractor beam diverted to the Enterprise's phasers. Borrowing that power meant that Data's modifications to the Borg ship's power grid had to be effective enough to keep the Borg ship from dropping further into the poisonous atmosphere of Caldar-Signet Six.

"Picard to Data," said Picard after tapping his communicator.

"Data here, Sir."

"We have an emergency up here, Mr. Data," said Picard. "The Borg ship is going to have to fend for itself while we take care of it. Bring your modifications into the ship's power grid and see if things on your end get worse when we release you."

"I am engaging the modifications, Sir."

Aboard the Borg ship there was a sickening lurch as the Enterprise released its tractor beam. Then the eerie feeling of falling lessened as the cube-ship's own power slowed their rate of descent. There was no doubt that they were still descending, but at least they were not dropping like a rock. The Borg ship would still need help from the Enterprise to pull away from the planet.

"Bring us about, helm," ordered Picard. "Security, bring our shields up and arm the phasers."

The Enterprise, now separated from the Borg ship, rose through the thin upper atmosphere and turned to face the Diamont.

"Picard to Appal. Regardless of whether or not you are listening to my voice, I am going to say this once. You will cease firing on the disabled Borg ship, or I

will order my ship to fire on you. This is absolutely your last warning."

"The Orokan phaser emitter is powering up, Sir," reported the security officer.

A string of bright explosions erupted from the area of the Diamont's upper phaser emitter. Several seconds later a dejected Arch-Regent Appal appeared in a static-filled transmission on the Enterprise's viewscreen.

"You win, Picard," said Appal quietly. "I am no longer in a position to dictate terms."

Picard watched until the transmission was cut off from the Orokan ship. Then on audio he heard a communication from a Vanti squadron leader. "Arch-Regent, our air reserves and fuel are all but depleted. We will not last much longer out here. What orders do you have for us?"

"Appal," said Picard, "give me your solemn word. Agree to a complete cessation of all hostile activity, and I will promise to beam your surviving pilots onto my ship after the Borg ship is safely in a higher orbit."

"Alright, Enterprise," said the tired voice of Appal, "no more fighting."

There was no time for self-congratulation for Picard. "Helm, take us back to the Borg ship," he quickly ordered. "Security, do whatever it takes to quickly establish your tractor beam lock."

In the last several minutes the Borg ship had settled deeper into the planet's atmosphere and was descending more rapidly. Putting itself at great risk, the Enterprise lowered itself after the Borg vessel. After numerous failures, the security officer manually secured another tractor beam lock on the desperate Borg ship and greatly decreased its rate of descent. However, its closer proximity to the surface of the planet was negating the benefit of the increased power Data had fed to the Borg ship's drive system.

Desperately Picard contacted engineering. "Can you give me warp power yet, Mr. LaForge?" he pleaded.

"I'm sorry, Sir," said LaForge, knowing that this time he would not be able to help his friend Data. "We still need a lot more time."

"Picard to Data."

"Yes, Sir?"

"Mr. Data, we have no more power to put into the tractor beam," said Picard. "In a few more minutes we will have to disengage and try to save the Enterprise."

"Understood, Sir."

"There is something I need to ask you and Mr. Worf," Picard continued.

"What is that, Sir?"

"When we disengage, shall we attempt to beam you back to the Enterprise?" asked Picard. "I am asking because conditions at that time may be much less than ideal for transporting a living being. In view of the risks, I felt that it should be your choice."

"Sir, may I be allowed to make one more sweep of the Borg ship before we answer your question?" asked Data.

"Certainly, Mr. Data. Take time to make a through sweep," replied Picard. And if there is any solution to this problem on that ship, find it quickly, thought Picard to himself.

Data turned on the tricorder and started a systematic search of all possible directions around him. He felt someone touching his shoulder. Thinking

that it was Worf, he brushed the hand away and said, "Please, not now."

Again he was touched, only this time the hand had grasped his shoulder more firmly and was trying to turn him around. He turned around to investigate and found that the hand belonged to a Borg figure. Behind the implants on the face of the figure he saw features of the face of his brother, Lore.

Data turned off the tricorder and said, "Lore? Is it you? Why have you come here?"

For a few seconds the figure simply nodded its head. Data assumed that this gesture answered his first questions in the affirmative. Then it found its weak, shaky voice and rasped, "Picard...help."

Lore was acting as though he had not used his power of speech in a long time. Data was unable to determine what his brother meant by his first halting statement. For lack of a better response, Data attempted to explain in simple terms what had been happening. "Captain Picard has done all that he can to help," he said.

"No. Picard...help...more," said Lore with pronounced difficulty.

"I do not understand," admitted Data. "What more would you have Captain Picard do?"

"Picard...can help...more!" said Lore with deeper passion.

"More?" puzzled Data. "What more can the Captain do? How can Captain Picard help more?"

"Mass," said Lore with a hint of urgency. "Picard...lower mass. Subspace...field."

Instantly the connection was made in Data's positronic logic circuits. He took a second to contemplate the possibility of succeeding with the scheme he believed Lore had just proposed before passing it on to Picard.

"Data to Picard."

"Yes, Mr. Data?"

"Captain, a possible course of action has been brought to my attention by my brother, Lore," explained Data.

"This better be good, Mr. Data. We haven't much time."

"If I understand my brother, Sir, he proposes projecting a subspace field around the Borg ship to lower its effective mass," Data said. "If the Borg ship's effective mass was reduced, the power it is capable of generating might be sufficient to lift it to a safer orbit."

"Mister LaForge," said Picard, "are you listening to this?"

"Yes, Sir," responded LaForge. "We still only have impulse power, and we'd have to switch that over to the subspace field generators. It would mean pulling power away from the tractor beam, but a subspace field would effectively provide more lift than the tractor beam does."

"Captain," said Data, "I believe if we moved all the surviving Borg crewmembers to a central area of the ship we could shut down unused life support and add that power to the drive system."

"If possible, make it so on your end, Mr. Data," said Picard. "Mr. LaForge, prepare to switch power from the tractor beam to the subspace field generators."

"Captain Picard," interrupted Data, "I have instructed my brother Lore to persuade the Borg to move to an appropriate holding area. We should begin diverting life support power momentarily."

"Very well, Mr. Data. We'll be monitoring and hoping to see some reassuring change."

"Captain," said LaForge, "the computer is ready to start the transfer of power from the tractor beam. I'd recommend changing over gradually, just in case."

"Use appropriate caution, Mr. LaForge," Picard decided, "but don't take too long. I would like to give our impulse engines a rest."

"Aye, Sir."

"Captain, I'm reading more generated lift from the Borg ship," said the Security Officer. "At this point it's only two metric kilotons short of buoyancy."

"It is time to energize your subspace field generators, Mr. LaForge," said Picard.

"The subspace field is established, Sir. We are starting to transfer power to it from the tractor beam."

Several tense minutes later LaForge happily announced, "Captain, the descent of the Borg ship has been stopped."

"Commendable, Mr. LaForge," said Picard. "Now, have we enough power to pull the Borg ship to a higher altitude?"

"Barely, Sir," responded LaForge. "We can get it higher, but it will take a little time."

"Then make it so," smiled Picard. "The job should become easier as we gain altitude. I want the Borg ship and us above the atmosphere and inserted into a stable orbit. Be sure to keep us behind the Borg ship where we can keep an eye on it. Transporter room, at the earliest possible moment beam Mr. Data and Mr. Worf back to the Enterprise and have them meet me in my ready room."

"There is something else you should be aware of, Sir," said LaForge to Captain Picard.

"And what is that?" asked Picard.

"I believe," ventured LaForge, "that because of Data's efforts to find power sources for slowing the Borg ship's descent, it may have lost its link to the Collective."

"Really...?" said Picard, showing just the faintest hint of amusement.

*** CHAPTER TWELVE ***

As LaForge had predicted, raising both the Enterprise and the Borg ship to a high, stable orbit without overstressing the Enterprise's remaining power system was an undertaking which required time. Picard communicated with Starfleet Officials on Minia IV and brought them up to date on what had happened in the Caldar-Signet system. It was an opportunity to suggest to Starfleet that additional ships be deployed in the sector as quickly as possible. The Borg ship was heavily damaged. There would never be a better time to deal with it, should it, for some reason, relapse into aggressive behavior. It was also time to receive Data and Worf, listen to their reports, and thank them for the actions they had taken aboard the Borg ship. After recommending them for commendations, Picard inquired what they had learned about non-Borg personnel aboard the cube-ship. On that subject there was little to report, as the only non-Borg they had encountered had been Lore.

Meanwhile, the Enterprise shuttles had been rescuing the Vanti pilots from their expended attack craft. While aboard the shuttles they received quick

medical checkups from members of Dr. Crusher's staff. Those certified fit for duty were returned to the Diamont where Arch-Regent Appal delegated them to damage control and repair teams. Those who had sustained injuries as a result of their action against the Borg ship were transferred to the Enterprise's medical facilities.

After their debriefing, Data and Worf returned to their stations on the bridge. Picard and Riker joined them several minutes later. Picard had been anxious to return to the bridge. Even though both the Orokan and Borg ships were being closely monitored, there was no guarantee that one or the other might not indiscriminately take a pot shot at the other.

"Mr. Worf, report on the Orokan ship," said Picard.

"No sign of offensive intent, Sir," Worf replied.

"And what of the Borg ship?" Picard asked.

"The same, Sir."

"The Arch-Regent is currently very occupied with his problems," Picard remarked, "so it would be unfair to expect him to talk and direct damage control at the same time. However, the Borg should not be so restricted. Number One, I have a strong desire to talk

to the Borg. I am very curious about what they have to say concerning this current state of affairs."

"Me, too, Sir," smiled Riker. "I don't believe we know of any Borg ever having experienced circumstances like this."

"Perhaps it is to our advantage that the Borg have no precedent to draw from," Picard speculated. He then turned to the Security Chief. "Mr. Worf, open a channel to the Borg ship."

Worf made the attempt several times. "No response from the Borg, Sir," he said.

"What is the condition of your equipment, Mr. Worf?" Picard asked.

Worf ran a quick sequence of system diagnostics and reported, "Everything is functioning properly, Sir."

"Open all hailing frequencies, Mr. Worf," said Picard patiently.

"Hailing frequencies open, Sir."

Picard cleared his throat before saying, "This is Captain Jean-Luc Picard of the USS Enterprise. I whom you once named Locutus wish to speak with the Collective Consciousness of Borg."

An interior view of the Borg ship dominated by its battle-scarred central chasm appeared on the main viewscreen. "Locutus has dissolved the bond. He is no longer of Borg," said the monotone voice of the Collective. "Further communication with the outsider is irrelevant."

"Not very friendly, are they, Sir?" observed Riker.

"Perhaps not," said Picard, "but they did answer the hail."

"Communication with me is relevant," Picard responded to the voice of the Collective. "We need to speak of the present, and of the future."

"To speak of these things is wasteful of time. Why have you communicated with this ship?" asked the voice.

"We wish to know if our assistance is needed," said Picard.

"Assistance is irrelevant. Your recent efforts to aid and support the Collective are acknowledged. The Collective will now manage its own repairs."

"The Collective...?" Picard mused. Are they bluffing, trying to make me believe they are still in touch...

The interior of the Borg ship on the viewscreen dissolved into an external view of the battered ships orbiting Caldar-Signet Six. Picard rubbed his hand across his chin, quickly devising a new strategy for dialogue. "Get them back for me, Mr. Worf," he said.

A moment later the previous interior scene appeared silently on the viewscreen.

"There are still matters to discuss," stated Picard.

"There has not been, nor will there be capitulation," responded the voice. "We will not surrender to Locutus. Surrender is irrelevant. No demands will be considered."

"As long as you conduct yourselves in a peaceful manner you may retain control of your ship," explained Picard. "I sincerely hope to avoid making demands, but there are still things I must insist on discussing. Will you hear what they are?"

Picard's question was answered with a long silence, but the interior view of the Borg ship remained on the viewscreen. Picard finally said, "Do not doubt me

when I say this: if you will not hear what I have to say, I will order this ship to open fire on you again. If I do this, there will be no second reprieve!"

There was another period of silence before the voice answered, "Know this, Locutus: you cannot win against the Borg. Your arrogance and resistance are futile. You will be assimilated. Inevitably, you will become one with the Borg, or you will be swept aside as countless others have been."

"Only the future will decide that," Picard replied, "but for the present, if you will not listen and discuss, I will command that you be dispatched to a fiery end!"

A third period of silence passed before the voice answered, "What do you wish us to hear?"

"First, I ask that a cease-fire be observed between the Borg Collective and the United Federation of Planets," Picard proposed.

"For what purpose?" asked the voice.

"For the purpose of ending the wasteful and needless violence that occurs whenever we meet," explained Picard.

"You resist assimilation with violence," stated the voice. "Cease resisting, and there will be no more violence."

"Assimilation into The Collective is not desirable to us," Picard countered.

"Desirable is irrelevant," said the voice patiently. "Assimilation will inevitably come to pass."

"Assimilation would confine us to an existence of sameness; to an existence in an absence of identity," said Picard. "In our societies, we cherish identity and our freedom of self-determination. Our desire to exist this way is very much a part of our biological program. It is the way we are, and our resistance is to protect our right to live as we have been created to live."

"Identity and self-determination are irrelevant," said the voice. "Only through assimilation can the Borg be strengthened. Only through assimilation can all become Borg. To not assimilate relinquishes strength to those who oppose. Assimilation assures strength and survival."

"We of the Federation do not wish to threaten your survival, and we do not wish to make you weak," Picard explained. "We wish to end the fighting between us. We seek discussions, and

communication, to define an agreement between the Federation and the Collective."

"Agreements are irrelevant," replied the Borg voice. "You will be..."

"Agreements ARE relevant!" Picard interrupted. "An agreement could, for example, define areas of the galaxy where each of our peoples may live according to their own ways, without interference from the other..."

"Irrelevant!" objected the voice. "This would restrict the Collective. The Collective must assimilate."

"You presently assimilate for strength and survival," Picard pointed out, "but if the Collective and the Federation could agree not to threaten the other's survival, then the need to assimilate would become irrelevant."

"Can Locutus perform this agreement?" the voice asked hesitantly.

"I, myself, cannot," explained Picard, "but other Federation Leaders with this authority would welcome the opportunity to communicate with the Collective, to discuss ending the fighting, and to try to

agree about how we may both exist as peaceful neighbors."

After a moment of contemplation the voice stated, "We cannot answer this proposal at this time."

"I understand," said Picard. "An agreement of this magnitude will require much discussion and contemplation on both sides. I sincerely hope that we do not lose sight of the fact that we have taken our first steps toward discussion and mutual understanding."

The voice from the Borg ship remained silent. Other agreements with powerful targeted civilizations had started this way, offering truces and peace to induce a false sense of safety and security, before massive brutal attacks and devastation brought them into the Borg fold. Great care must be taken, it reasoned, in pursuing this level of baiting this Federation without help from the rest of the Collective.

"The second thing to discuss concerns citizens of the Federation who were removed from a transport vessel near a world we call Selaeta more than two of our years ago," said Picard. As a sign of goodwill between us, I ask that these persons be withdrawn from the Collective and returned to us."

"They will cease to function if withdrawn from the Collective," said the voice.

"We have knowledge of how to keep them functioning while we eliminate their dependence on their cybernetic devices," said Picard.

"If this is so, then your request can be executed," said the voice.

"Excellent," Picard smiled. "Federation leaders will be very pleased to learn of this."

Again the voice from the Borg ship indulged in silence, perceiving that it had drawn the voice from the Federation farther into its deception .

After a short pause Picard continued. "There is a third issue to discuss," he said. "It concerns a group known to you as the Orokans, who also seek to end hostilities with the Borg."

"Orokans are enemies. Always," said the voice firmly. "That is the way between us."

"The Orokans are no longer enemies of the Collective," asserted Picard. "Their numbers are so few that they cannot do further harm to the Collective. Their greatest desire is for peace."

"These words of Locutus are irrelevant," contend the voice. "Locutus is of the Federation. Locutus speaks not for the Orokan enemy."

Picard paused a moment before answering the voice's charges. "I ask for a moment of your indulgence," he petitioned.

"Granted," the voice allowed.

Picard ordered the channel to the Borg vessel muted before inquiring, "Is Appal still aboard the Diamont?"

"Yes, Sir. He is," responded Worf.

"Mr. Worf, ask him if he would please agree to be beamed to this ship. If he asks why, tell him that there may be an opportunity to end the war he came here to fight."

A moment later a tired and frustrated Appal was on the main viewscreen. "What is this all about, Picard?"

"Exactly what you have been told," said Picard.

"What has been going on?" Appal asked.

"There may be an opportunity to end your long war against the Borg," said Picard. "All you have to do is

beam over here and talk about what you want to end the fighting."

Suddenly the channel was closed from the Orokan ship. Actually it had been closed by the hand of Appal who exclaimed, "Now he's arranging my surrender behind my back!"

Nearby, the Orokan Physician was applying a splint to the arm of a wounded officer. As he wrapped adhesive strips around the splint he remarked, "Captain Picard never mentioned the word 'surrender', Sir."

"He didn't have to," Appal responded. "Surrender is written all over the way things have turned out. We have ended this battle in disgrace. We've proved that FINAL CURTAIN never would have worked!"

"On the contrary, Sir," the Physician said. "If anything, you have proved that FINAL CURTAIN would have worked. If the planned fleet of Diamond Ships had been here to assist you when you recalled the Vantis, there would have been one less cube-ship in the Borg fleet. The Diamont may not have beaten the Borg ship, but it had an important hand in weakening it to a point where it was willing to negotiate. Did you listen carefully to what Picard said? He told us that The Borg are now willing to

listen. That's more than we've ever been able to get from them. If they are willing to think about what it will take to end the fighting, then it's worth the time to present reasonable terms for them to think about."

"The war is not over yet..." Appal objected.

"Look around you, Sir," suggested the Physician. "Look at your crew. They are tired. They've lost their families and their homes, and they've put all that they had left on the line for you to prove that this FINAL CURTAIN idea worked. You've given them the satisfaction of knowing that it did. Look also at what's left of this ship. We're slowly losing it, Sir. Section by section the fires and power failures are getting ahead of us. It's over, Sir. The war is over."

Appal looked away from the Physician and reopened the channel to the Enterprise. "Very well. Beam me over," he said shortly.

In seconds Appal was standing on the Enterprise's bridge being briefed on Picard's conversation with the Collective. Though somewhat doubtful that it would lead to anything meaningful, he agreed to talk with the voice of the Collective. Picard ordered the channel to the Borg ship reopened. When the interior view appeared on the viewscreen he said, "I have brought to my ship someone who speaks for the Orokans. He

is Arch-Regent Appal, military commander of the Orokans Diamond Ship, and highest official of their surviving government."

There was another long pause during which neither side said anything. Finally the voice of the Collective broke the silence. "Locutus has suggested that Orokans no longer wish to be enemies of Borg. How will the Collective know this to be true?"

"We Orokans have suffered staggering losses in the war between us," said Appal. "Originally we numbered many trillions, but are now only a few hundred survivors. We no longer have the means or the desire to make further war against the Borg. My crew asks that I say this: that we will stop fighting you if you will stop fighting us."

"Will you agree to be assimilated?" asked the voice.

"Assimilated?" blurted Appal before regaining his composure. "Assimilation would restrict us to living life your way. We ask that you respect our right to conduct our lives our way, in exchange for our guarantee to respect your right to exist in your way."

"The Collective cannot respond to this proposal at this time," said the voice, "however, until a response is formulated, Appal, your actions toward the Collective

will determine its actions toward you. Perhaps the Federation would help us talk and communicate toward an agreement."

"Thank you," replied Appal. "I shall formally request their assistance."

The view of the interior of the Borg ship disappeared from the main viewscreen.

"Sir," said Lt. Worf, "the Borg have informed me that the entire complement of Federation detainees has been identified and is ready to beam over."

"Picard to Dr. Crusher..."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Doctor, the Borg have agreed to return all the survivors of the transport Olympus. We need to have all your people mobilized in sick bay and in the transporter rooms. Can you get right on it?"

"Sure thing, Captain," agreed Crusher. "With your permission, I'd like to ask Geordi for any necessary help I'll need."

"Granted, Doctor," said Picard. "Just try to leave him some qualified people to continue repairs to my ship."

"Agreed, Captain," smiled Crusher before closing the channel.

"May I return to my ship now?" asked Appal.

"Before you do," said Picard, "you'd better resolve to stick by the actual and implied promises you made to The Borg. You have reneged on or modified every agreement you have made with us. That kind of conduct stops here. There is too much at stake to allow your acceding to your whims to destroy the greatest chance for peace and harmony that has ever dangled before every race in these neighboring quadrants of our galaxy."

Appal's eyes flickered away from Picard's penetrating gaze several times.

"Return him to his ship," ordered Picard.

"Captain, I am receiving an emergency message for Arch-Regent Appal," reported Lt. Worf.

"On screen," said Picard.

The air on the bridge of the Diamont was filled with smoke. Injured and soot-blackened people were scattered all around. Appal's chief-of-staff spoke on screen. "Arch-Regent, there was a great explosion on one of the decks below us," he said. "Thankfully there

were no further casualties, although there were injuries. We barely got everyone up here. Sir, our situation has become hopeless. I am asking for permission to abandon ship."

Appal took a long moment to adjust to the development. He looked to Picard, his mouth hanging open.

"What is it that you want to say?" Picard asked.

"I - I need your help, Captain Picard!"

"Mr. Worf," said Picard, "as quickly as possible coordinate the ship's transporters to beam survivors off the Diamont."

Ten minutes later Lt. Worf reported, "Sir, there are no more survivors left on the Diamont."

"Thank you, Mr. Worf," said Picard.

"Thank you, Captain Picard," added Appal.

"Sir," interrupted Worf, "the matter/antimatter reactors on the Diamont are reaching critical overload."

"Helm, back us away. Mr. Worf, raise our shields and alert the Borg ship. Tell them to take whatever precautions they can," ordered Picard.

On the bridge viewscreen Appal watched as his ship burst into a brilliance that dominated the sky.

"Attention on deck," ordered Riker.

The bridge crew rose to attention in a final salute to the last Orokan warship. When the last fires had died out, Riker said to them, "As you were."

"Thank you, Commander," said Appal as his hand brushed the corner of his eye. "Excuse me, Captain Picard. I'd like to check on my crew."

"Of course," said Picard. "Lt. Worf, would you please escort Arch-Regent Appal to sick bay."

*** CHAPTER THIRTEEN ***

In a darkened room aboard the Enterprise, Lore lay in a bed staring at the ceiling. His miscellany of Borg devices had been surgically removed, and his biological systems were readjusting to operating without their interference. His self-induced immersion in a pool of dark thoughts was interrupted by the warbling of his doorbell. "Leave me alone!" he called broodingly. "I asked for no visitors."

The door opened, and Data entered in spite of Lore's rebuff.

"Of all the people on this ship I wanted to see the least..." Lore leered at his brother.

"I have been sent to check on your progress," Data explained. "Dr. Crusher is concerned that you have sent away everyone else who has come for this purpose."

"I am capable of monitoring myself," pouted Lore. "No one else need bother themselves with me."

Data produced a medical tricorder and scanned Lore's body. When he had finished, he took the instrument to the door and handed it to a medical assistant who had waited outside. After she had left and the door had closed again, Data explained, "Dr. Crusher will require those readings for her records and reports."

As Lore attempted to ignore him, Data walked to the side of his bed. "It has been a long time since we have seen each other," Data said.

Lore still lay silently, giving no acknowledgement of Data's presence.

"I am very curious, brother," said Data. "Please tell me how you become a prisoner on a Borg ship."

"I simply made a wrong turn," Lore muttered across his folded arms while fixing his eyes on a point on the far wall.

"I am unable to understand your incomplete explanation," said Data. "Can you be more specific?"

Having had enough, Lore leaped off the bed and shouted into Data's face, "I made a wrong turn! Does that please you to hear me admit to having made a mistake?"

"Perhaps you have forgotten that I am incapable of responding emotionally to your error, whatever it was," suggested Data. His reminder did little to placate Lore who remained poised on the tip of his nose. "In any event," Data continued, "I thought you should be aware that we have been asked to detain you for questioning by Federation authorities. Because you were disassembled and safely stored at Starbase 317, charges were never formally brought against you for your actions while leading that party of Borg dissidents. However, you are still wanted for the theft of the shuttle craft which you took to Dr. Soong's laboratory shortly before the time of his death."

"I am no more guilty of having stolen that shuttle craft than you were for having taken control of this entire Federation Starship to bring yourself to the same location at the same time," Lore accused. "You can verify that Dr. Soong activated our homing circuits, a design feature which neither you nor I can

consciously defeat. If you can be forgiven for your part in that incident, then why can't I?"

"You have only to present yourself at a hearing and recount what happened," Data calmly explained.

"Alright, let's indulge your idealistic fantasy," Lore scowled. "Suppose I am judged guiltless in that instance. I am sure they will still detain me to answer a few additional questions about my alleged involvement with that crystalline entity on Omicron Theta."

"Starfleet is aware of your status as a prototype design, and of your problems in dealing with your emotions," said Data.

"Problems with my emotions?" exploded Lore. "Those colonists on Omicron Theta were the ones having problems with emotions! I was the first being ever with a working positronic brain. I should have been revered. Respected. They should have acknowledged my obvious superiority! But, no! They couldn't handle being inferior, so they had kind Dr. Soong, my own father, disassemble me."

Suddenly Data realized that Lore's ranting had gotten him way off track. "You still have not satisfactorily answered my original question," said

Data. "How did you become a prisoner on the Borg ship?"

"Have you any idea what has happened to me since Dr. Soong's death?" asked Lore in resignation.

"I remember only that you tricked Dr. Soong into installing into you the circuitry designed to give me emotions," said Data, "and when Dr. Soong warned you that the circuitry was not designed for your architecture, you struck him down, and then transported from his laboratory. Shortly after that, he died."

"I should have listened to him, just that one time," acknowledged Lore. "That circuitry eventually made me deathly ill. It took my self-diagnostics weeks to figure out how to undo the damage it had caused."

Lore walked a few steps away and resumed his story. "After I had recovered, I started to travel - if that's what you want to call staying a few steps ahead of your Federation Authorities. My freedom afforded me the opportunity to explore my emotions. I acquired things for the pure joy of having them, and then gambled them away to experience the loss. I frustrated myself attempting to read literature and poetry until I reasoned that I had no appreciation for those things. I was unsuccessful at persuading anyone

to like me. Emotions? I have tried them all. I have reveled in making myself feel good, and I have suffered when I could not. And because of my experiences, I have learned to envy your inability to experience emotions. I tried switching my newly acquired emotions off, and found that I could not. I am denied the right to study and modify the emotion chip's code. As I came to understand this, I formulated a purpose for existing. I committed myself to finding a way to turn my emotions on and off at my convenience. Ideally I would experience the pleasure, and shut out the pain. It then seemed obvious that I could not meet this challenge without understanding Dr. Soong and his work. I set out to learn all that I could about the subjects he studied and the experiments he performed, even the ones that didn't work out. Do you realize that the story of his life is spread out over half the galaxy? I used disguises and aliases to visit research facilities and libraries, sometimes finding a useful nugget of information. Then I visited the library facility on Selaeta. My studies there pointed me to a promising lead elsewhere, so I acquired passage on a transport ship. We had only left the Selaeta system when we were attacked by your friends, the Borg. They took some of us back to their ship where we were taken into a room, and there, things were attached to us. Things that enabled them to control us. They got into our

minds and tried to turn off our thoughts about ourselves. They substituted powerful thoughts of them. The humans were lost to their control so easily. I took what steps I could to preserve my sense of self. They couldn't alter my core program without killing me, so they left that alone. As you are aware, you and I can hide a portion of our memory from outside control. I did so, and then located my most important information and memories there. It's funny, brother, when I asked myself what was most important, I thought of you, the only other living creature like me. Into that protected area of memory I placed everything I knew about you and I. I had also learned many things about your ship over the years. Believe me, I had quite a battle over whether to protect the safety of you and your ship, or my research on Dr. Soong. If it hadn't been for those emotions of mine, I would have chosen to protect my research. Instead, I protected you from the Borg. To help protect you I hid from them the capabilities of your ship and everything I knew about your Starfleet."

"And what of the information that you could not hide from them?" asked Data.

"My emotions research was incomplete and irrelevant, they said," Lore related sadly. "All of it was

pushed out and replaced with matters important to the Collective. I lost it all."

"Tell me," said Data, "since you were allowed to extensively study the Enterprise's library after we found and reassembled you on Omicron Theta, do you remember reading anything about obsolete security systems? The reason I ask is that the Orokans kidnapped Captain Picard and attempted to charge him with revealing information to the Borg about an obsolete Federation-designed security system they were using. The Borg did not get their information from Captain Picard. The information in question enabled the Borg to slip through the Orokan security system and annihilate their civilization."

"Now someone will try to blame that on me also!" lamented Lore.

"Why would this be blamed on you?" asked Data.

"If the information you are asking about was kept in your ship's library files, then I read it," Lore fearfully revealed. "The limited capacity of my protected memory kept me from hiding everything I had learned. I could only protect information which pertained to the most recent systems and procedures. The Borg learned nothing about the latest systems from my protected memory. Everything else,

however, must have been examined by them. Your Starfleet friends never liked me to begin with. They'll assume that I made it possible for the Borg to defeat the Orokans!"

"That is not necessarily true," Data reminded him.

"It is true!" asserted Lore as he sought Data's eyes for a sign of understanding. "They'll say that I could have done more to protect the information. They'll say that I should have purged the unprotected segments of my memory."

"If that is so, then why did you not do it?" asked Data.

"Emotions, dear brother!" said Lore angrily. "I was enraged that the Borg could keep me so helpless! I was afraid for my survival, and afraid of losing my awareness of how unique I am. I felt great despair that if I should somehow survive, I would exist in a quagmire from which there would be no escape. As you can see, a storm of emotions kept me from thinking of a proper and heroic course of action."

"I must remind you that Captain Picard was also a captive of The Borg," Data reassured. "They found information in his mind that was used disastrously against the Federation fleet at Wolf 359. But the

Captain did not voluntarily reveal this information, and Starfleet Command has not blamed him for what happened. This is a powerful precedent, along with your timely assistance during the battle at Caldar Signet Six, that will most likely be taken into account in your case."

Lore had started pacing randomly about the room. "I cannot afford to take that chance," he revealed. "Brother, you must help me escape from this ship!"

"I cannot help you in that way," said Data as Lore paced the floor behind him.

Suddenly Lore lunged at Data, wrapping his left arm around Data's neck and pulling him back off his feet.

"No, Lore. Not this way!" Data managed to rasp before Lore's exploring right hand found the power switch in the small of his back.

* * *

Dr. Crusher had downloaded the readings obtained from her reluctant android patient and had compared them against those of his brother Data. She had

discovered through checking the records of Lore's reassembly at Omicron Theta that there were additional factors which needed to be monitored. Although Lore seemed to be making good progress, she programmed another medical tricorder to perform the necessary tests and summoned Ensign Wade who had brought her the first series of readings. Handing the tricorder to Ensign Wade, she said, "I need you to run some additional tests on Lore, please."

"I didn't really run the first tests," Wade nervously explained. "Lt. Commander Data was going to visit Lore at the time, and he helped me. Going in there with Lore gives me the creeps."

"Well, if Data is still there, I'm sure he won't mind helping again," Dr. Crusher smiled, "and if he isn't, you could always ask the security guard to look out for you."

"Thank you, Doctor," Ensign Wade sighed as she took the tricorder and walked out the door.

She arrived at Lore's door and smiled nervously at the security guard before signaling for entry. There was no response. She tried several more times, making note of the fact that the doorbell was working. She tried pressing the button on the wall panel to

open the door with no success. "Excuse me, is Lt. Commander Data in with the patient yet?" she asked the security guard.

"No he is not," the guard smiled back. "He left several minutes ago."

"I'll just be a minute," Wade said haltingly as she retreated several steps from the door. Then touching her communicator, she said, "Ensign Wade to Dr. Crusher. I'm having trouble getting into Lore's room. He's apparently alone and not responding, and his door appears to be secured from the inside."

"Stay close and observe," instructed Dr. Crusher, "but don't try again to get in. I'll be right there."

Crusher touched her own communicator. "Dr. Crusher to Lt. Worf. Please bring a security team to the door of Lore's recovery room. I'll meet you there."

Lt. Worf hurriedly led two other security crewmen as they hurried to the door of Lore's room. When the team arrived, Dr. Crusher was already there talking to Ensign Wade. Worf, himself, tried the door and the wall panel, and was denied access. "Computer," said Worf, "initiate security override for the door of the recovery room assigned to patient Lore. Authority: Worf, Lieutenant, Chief of Security."

A series of beeps indicated that his instructions had been carried out. The door slid partway open, and Worf forced it completely out of the way, allowing everyone to quickly enter the room. An android figure in a medical robe lay unconscious on the floor. Dr. Crusher produced a medical scanner and ran it over the body on the floor as Worf instructed his team to search the rest of the room.

"Is he dead?" Worf inquired as he bent over to examine the body.

"I don't think so," said Crusher. "Help me roll him over on his side."

When the android was positioned properly, Crusher reached toward his lower back and pressed something which made a soft click. She then let the figure roll onto its back. The figure jerked into a sitting position and looked frantically around. "Quickly, we must find my brother, Lore," it said.

"Stay where you are," instructed Worf as he placed his hand on his phaser. "Computer, locate Lt. Commander Data."

"Lt. Commander Data is currently entering the main shuttle bay," reported the computer.

"Locate patient Lore," ordered Worf.

"Patient Lore is currently entering the main shuttle bay."

"Lore has taken my uniform and is trying to escape the ship," said the android. "The computer is tracking my uniform's communicator in addition to Lore's medical homing device."

"Worf, this one is Data," said Dr. Crusher.

"I agree," affirmed Worf. Touching his communicator, he said, "This is Lt. Worf. Send security teams to the main shuttle bay immediately. Captain Picard and Commander Riker, please report to the main shuttle bay immediately. Computer, initiate security override on all controls for main shuttle bay, on my authorization."

Everyone ran out of Lore's recovery room before hearing the computer report, "Security override for main shuttle bay is not possible. Shuttle launch is in progress."

Picard, Riker, Dr. Crusher, Lt. Worf, and the security teams met outside the main shuttle bay door. They discovered that the door's manual controls were

unresponsive and that the ship's computer could not be persuaded to open it.

"Lt. Worf, call engineering and have them get to work on this," ordered Picard, "and then join us on the bridge. You're with me, Number One."

Picard and Riker rushed to the turbolift and proceeded immediately to the bridge where they discovered one of the ship's shuttle craft on the viewscreen hovering outside the ship.

"Shuttle pilot, this is Captain Picard. I order you to return to the main shuttle bay immediately."

Suddenly the interior of the shuttle, dominated by the image of Lore in a Starfleet uniform, appeared on the screen. "I'm sorry, Captain Picard, but that is something I can't do," he said.

"Why can't you?" demanded Picard testily.

"There is too much at stake, and too many things that I must yet do," explained Lore. "I have a life to get on with. All I am asking for is the chance to live it."

The screen blanked momentarily, and then showed the shuttle turning and banking gracefully, and then speeding away. When it had put a safe distance

between itself and the Enterprise it leaped into warp drive.

"Shall we pursue it, Captain?" asked Riker.

"Don't bother," said Picard in disgust. "That shuttle has just gone into warp drive, and we haven't finished repairing our own warp system yet."

"We could use one of the other shuttles," suggested Riker.

Picard took a deep breath as he considered Riker's suggestion. "No, Number One, let him go," he finally said. "Just make a note somewhere that he owes Starfleet another shuttle craft."

*** CHAPTER FOURTEEN ***

CAPTAIN'S LOG:

U.S.S. Enterprise (NCC 1701-D)

Capt. Jean-Luc Picard, recording.

Lore is gone, having made his escape in one of the ship's shuttle craft. Lt. Commander Data has expressed some disappointment with the way Lore has chosen to deal with the problems that continue to accumulate on his shoulders. Data has spoken to me several times in confidence about his brother Lore. I believe that he anticipates a formal hearing being convened sometime in the near future to consider possible charges which may be brought against him. My personal assessment of these conversations is that Data is preparing a legal defense for his brother to be used in the event of such a hearing. The list of possible charges is quite long. Data has confided in me that when all the evidence and extenuating

circumstances are examined the Federation's continuing search for Lore will be motivated not by a desire to punish, but by a desire to help Lore bring out the inherent good with which Data feels that Dr. Soong endowed him.

After a great deal of careful thought, I see the possibility that Data's assessment of his brother's potential is not entirely unreasonable. I only met Dr. Soong one time, and that was shortly before he died. In spite of our short acquaintance, I was left with the impression that he was a decent and caring man. It is readily obvious that he molded the forms of Lore and Data in his own likeness. Therefore I consider it reasonable to assume that he tried to mold the personalities of his two android creations somewhat after his own personality, as best he understood it.

I have known Lt. Commander Data for many years. I have found him to be intelligent, friendly, helpful, and loyal, just to name a few of his outstanding qualities. Data shared with me the conversation he had with Lore before his escape from The Enterprise. His revelations have confirmed my suspicions that Lore is an individual with a troubled soul. Perhaps the greatest injustice everyone has committed against Lore is overlooking the fact that he is emotionally a child. We have all seen him in the adult form in which

he was created, and based on his appearance we expect from him adult behavior. In reality, the amount of time Lore has spent at large on his own cannot exceed more than a few years, truly an inadequate amount of time in which to learn to control the turmoil of one's emotions. This is reflected in the fact that we would not expect adult behavior from a child who had matured only a few years. I now believe that for all these years, Lore has been a victim of the disparity between his intellect and his maturity.

And next, what of the surviving Orokans? Their ship is gone. It was the last element of a vast armada, a product of a plan named FINAL CURTAIN, which was supposed to have brought down a 'final curtain' on the Borg at the end of the drama of the Orokan's war against them. How ironic it is that in pursuit of this plan the only final curtain to have been brought down seems to be the one brought down on the Orokan civilization. Their drama has run its course.

In a way the cycle of civilizations is somewhat like a theater. As one long-running production drops the curtain on its final performance, another fresh production always seems to be waiting in the wings to burst onto the stage and hopefully enrapt its audience with fresh characters and unique stories. I feel

compelled to offer some kind of theatrical toast to the performers waiting in the wings, but nothing appropriate comes to mind. Perhaps the Orokan performers will find parts in the new production and bring to it their experience and wisdom, and in this way help to elevate the quality of what will transpire on the grand stage of civilization.

Next, I bring my attention to the Borg. Their ship continues to orbit Calder-Signet Six along with The Enterprise. They have respectfully declined our repeated offers of assistance, and are managing their repairs as we continue making ours. Starfleet Command has presented to them an offer of providing safe conduct to the border of this sector when they are ready to depart. So far the offer has neither been accepted nor declined.

On a personal note, we were visited by a pair of supply shuttles today. One of them brought a long, wide, and flat package addressed to me. When I opened it I was pleased to see that it contained the painting of the resort beach on Minia IV which I had commissioned from Reis Arman. Included with the painting was a note which read:

“Well done Jean-Luc. No charge for the painting, but the next round of drinks is on you. ARMAN”

I look forward to thanking him in person for this fine piece of work.

*** EPILOG ***

Picard slept soundly. The reassuring thrumming of the ship sounding exactly as it should had put him to sleep hours ago. His quarters were dark, except for a faint light at his desk. His quarters were quiet, except for an occasional whisper of surprise coming from behind the faint light at his desk.

The faint light radiated from the screen of Picard's computer terminal. It dimly illuminated the figure of a man in a Starfleet ship's captain's uniform who was seated behind Picard's desk. The man leaned forward in Picard's chair, intently absorbed in reading the text displayed on the terminal screen. Had Picard awakened, he might not have been able to clearly see the man behind the terminal screen unless he had happened to be looking at exactly the same time the man had peered around the edge of the screen stealing a reassuring glance to verify that the man in the bed was indeed the same man described in the log he was reading.

When he had finished reading the file, the man leaned precariously back in Picard's chair with his hands folded across his stomach. He thought intently about what he had just read. Finally he stood up, slowly and quietly crossing the room and then standing beside Picard's bed.

He leaned over and whispered to Picard, "You are such an idealist, Jean Luc. I think that deep down you know how these peace offerings you put on the table will play out. You, of all people, should know what The Borg will do with overtures such as that!"

"Your Borg ship will make some repairs and reestablish contact with its Collective. It has achieved at least one of its purposes for coming here – keeping the Orokans and your Federation from becoming too familiar with the workings of its latest technologies. That ship will make its repairs, reconnect with its Collective, and on its way home also report back what it has learned about your current technologies and capabilities."

"The Borg will return, with enhancements. The question now becomes, will you be ready when they do? I wouldn't waste a lot of time just talking about something this important if I were you."

The man then vanished in a brilliant flash of light which was sufficient to awaken Picard who sprang upright and surveyed the area around himself.

“I know you’ve been here, Q!” he exclaimed.

Hearing no response to his assertion, Picard again reclined and pulled his blanket over his shoulder. He lay quietly, but sleep would not come.

Muttering under his breath, he arose and took a seat behind his desk where he requested a secure channel to Starfleet Headquarters. There were important things to pass on, at least to the right individuals who knew enough to take them seriously.