

# STAR TREK SPECTRE

REAL COURAGE IS REQUIRED TO CHALLENGE THE UNKNOWN

## EXTREME MEASURES

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



# ***STAR TREK: SPECTRE***

## **EXTREME MEASURES**

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The *USS Spectre* is a relic of an earlier age. Constructed more than a century earlier it has disappeared twice only to reappear with no sign of its crew or what happened to them and now it has a reputation as being haunted by its lost crews.

Captain Jack Castle has now been given command of the *Spectre* and rapidly finds himself not only battling the ship's history but also one of the Federation's most dangerous foes.

Star Trek: Spectre available to download at:  
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Despite the outwards appearance of the United Federation of Planets as a utopia where hundreds of billions of sentient beings drawn from dozens of species there were still regions where it was not always safe to travel, especially not if a person was displaying any open signs of wealth. Elisa Goodwin was well aware that the place she had come to, a bar located on Earth's moon was one of these more unsavoury places so she was accompanied by a pair of bodyguards. Local laws prohibited the carrying of weapons of any kind but Elisa suspected that many of the locals would be ignoring this so both her bodyguards carried easily concealable phasers under their jackets. Elisa was not in this bar out of chance or any particular desire to experience a side of life that was much different to the one she led on the colony world of Tollas Prime where she lived in luxury, instead she was here to undertake a business detail with one of the locals, a man she had never met before but had exchanged messages with to ensure that what he was offering was what she needed.

Looking around the bar Elisa saw a man sitting alone at a table across the bar that she recognised from the subspace messages that they had exchanged and she walked towards him, her bodyguards following and eyeing up everyone who came close.

"Simon Wolsey?" Elisa said when she reached the table and looked down at him. Then he looked back up at her and smiled.

"Elisa Goodwin?" he responded, "Take a seat." and he indicated the row of padded seats opposite the one he was sat in. Then he glanced at the two bodyguards and added, "I didn't expect you to bring an army with you."

"Two guards are hardly an army. Given the place we are meeting I'm sure that you can appreciate that I want some protection." Elisa said as she sat down and Simon looked at the guards again, paying particular attention to the case that one of them carried.

"I take that that's my latinum?" he said.

"My latinum Mister Wolsey. At least until I have what I'm paying you for. A considerable sum I might add." Elisa replied.

"Well things like this don't come on the market that often, do they?" Simon said, reaching beneath the table and producing a cooler box that he then placed between them.

"May I?" Elisa said, extending her hands towards the box but not yet touching it and Simon nodded.

"Be my guest but it stays on the table until I get paid." he said.

"Fair enough." Elisa said as she opened the box and peered inside, condensation rising as she broke the seal.

"I modified the box to maintain a lower temperature than normal. It should still last until you can get it into a more permanent storage facility though. So is that what you expected?" Simon said.

"Oh yes, very much." Elisa answered as she studied the contents of the box without reaching inside before she closed it again, "Though do you mind me asking how you managed to obtain this? As you said before, such items do not appear often."

"Would you believe that it just fell from the sky?" Simon said, raising his hands for a moment, "That comes from the first ship, the one that self-destructed in Earth orbit. Most of the debris either burned up in Earth's atmosphere or was recovered by Starfleet but I've heard estimates that anywhere from two to five hundred tonnes got flung out into space before being caught up in the moon's gravitational pull and hitting the surface. Luckily no-one was killed but there were places where you could just walk out onto the surface and pick the stuff up. Of course Starfleet sent in its security people to try and secure all the impact sites as fast as they could but by then it was too late and people had already managed to grab some of it. My father included. He kept it hidden for years before he died, afraid to try and sell it just in case he got caught."

"But you aren't so scared of the consequences?" Elisa asked.

"No. I'm more interested in the consequences of what you're paying me than the consequences of getting caught. I've had enough of all this working to better yourself nonsense while other people still manage to get rich. No offence." Simon replied.

"None taken." Elisa said, "You said this comes from the first ship. What about the second?"

Simon snorted.

"Starfleet made sure that none of that went unaccounted for. Remember that they had an armada up there to deal with that one and they were able to enforce a no-fly zone for all traffic until they'd picked up every last piece. They'd learned their lesson from the first one. Now you've seen the goods, what about my latinum?" he said and Elisa signalled for the bodyguard with the case to come closer. In response the man stepped up to the table and set it down beside the holdall before moving back again. Simon then turned the case towards him and opened it just enough to see what was inside.

"Happy now?" Elisa said and Simon grinned.

"I'll be happy when I'm sat relaxing outside a house by a lake full of fish." he said as he closed the case again before he quickly downed what remained of his drink and got to his feet, "It was good doing business with you but now I'll bid you farewell. I have a ship to catch, one that will take me a long way from here."

"Likewise Mister Wolsey." Elisa replied as she also got back to her feet and then she winced.

"Are you okay?" Simon asked when he noticed this.

"Just a slight medical issue Mister Wolsey. I will be fine thanks to you." she answered.

With the cooling box and its contents now in her possession Elisa headed back to the spaceport, still accompanied by her bodyguards. There they boarded her private shuttle that took her back to her starship that waited in space between Earth and Mars. Then as soon as she was aboard the ship turned for deep space and accelerated away, entering warp as soon as it was clear of the gravitational influences of the solar system. The ship was capable of maintaining a high cruising speed and it took just a few days to reach the Tollas system close to the Federation border with the Cardassian Union and once in orbit of Tollas Prime, Elisa took her shuttle again to the surface as she returned to her family estate.

A man just a few years older than Elisa was waiting in the underground hangar as the landing pad descended into it and as soon as Elisa emerged from the shuttle with the cold box in her hand he rushed towards her.

"Elisa darling, let me take that from you." he said, "I wish you'd told me ahead of time that you were leaving. I'd have gone with you."

"You were needed here to run the business Ted and I was fine. Besides, I wouldn't want to leave Jessica and Alex alone here. Who knows what sort of mess we'd come back to if they got to hold a party while we were away?" Elisa said before she wobbled slightly and Ted caught her.

"You're not fine. You need to rest." he told her.

"I need to get this to Doctor Vost. Where is he?" Elisa asked and she lifted the cold box.

"In the guest annex inspecting the modifications." Ted answered.

"Are they complete?" Elias said and Ted nodded.

"Finished just yesterday. Subject to the good doctor's approval of course." he said.

"Then he needs to see this." Elisa said, tapping the box.

"I'll help you." Ted replied as he reached out to take the box from her.

A tunnel large enough for small powered passenger carts to be driven along connected the estate's underground hangar to the main residence and also to the guest annex where Elisa and Ted now made their way, Ted returning the cold box to Elisa while he drove the cart to annex. There were turbolifts to take people up to the half dozen individual apartments above ground but Elisa and Ted instead made their way through an unmarked door into a short service corridor that led to several utility rooms as well as another unmarked door that they went through.

The room on the other side of this was as clean as possible, every surface was either white or silver and appeared recently polished. This included the computers and other scientific instruments that were fitted to walls or standing on work surfaces. Some of this equipment was designed for biological research while other pieces were for more technical sciences instead. Standing out against this background was the figure of a man leant over one of the computer terminals and he looked up when Elisa and Ted entered the room. At first glance the man appeared Vulcan with sloping eyebrows and pointed ears but he smiled when he saw Elisa with the box, revealing his Romulan emotions.

"You have it?" Vost asked.

"Yes doctor I have it." Elisa responded and Vost dashed towards her.

"Good, let me see it. Over here." Vost said, moving to a nearby work bench and watching as Elisa set the box down on it. Vost then opened the box and stared at what was inside, "Fantastic." he said.

"Is that what you need doctor? Can it cure my wife?" Ted said and Vost looked at him.

"As long as everything is present and intact, yes I'm certain of it." he said before reaching into the box, "The Romulan Free State is just as restrictive in studying this technology as your own government but all my research indicates that I can use the nanoprobes from this to undo the damage to your wife's body caused by her condition." he added as he lifted the perfectly preserved arm of a Borg drone from the box.

Stardate 68175.1 *USS Mount Rushmore* NCC-24641, Oberth-class science vessel approaching the Antares Shipyards

Captain Jack Castle was wearing civilian clothing rather than his uniform as he finished packing the last of his belongings. He had commanded the Oberth-class science vessel *USS Mount Rushmore* for seven years but today that had ended and his first officer was taking over from him. The ship was due to take him to the Antares Shipyards where he would instead take command of the Excelsior-class *USS Spectre*. Most of his belongings were already packed and ready to be beamed off the ship with just a few essential items left in

his quarters. Just as he was zipping the bag shut the intercom sounded from the door and he looked around. "Come in." he called out and the door slid open to reveal two Starfleet officers standing in the corridor outside. One was a dark-skinned man in the yellow of the operations division while the other was a fairer skinned woman with dark hair who wore the blue of the science division. Both had rank markings on their necks that indicated they were lieutenant commanders.

"Really? You're wearing that?" the woman said when she saw what Jack was wearing.

"Beth, do come in. Commander Hutchins you too." Castle responded.

"Thank you captain." Hutchins said as he and the woman entered Castle's quarters.

"Seriously Jack, where's your uniform?" the woman asked as she looked around.

"Already packed away. I don't need it to transfer command to Saran." Castle answered.

"Mom will be furious. You know how she feels about things like this. Official occasions are supposed to be marked properly." Beth said.

"Our mother doesn't need to know Beth. Saran took command of the *Mount Rushmore* six hours ago at the end of my last shift. This will just be to remove my command codes from the system. I'd have done it then but he said that it was logical for them to remain valid for as long as possible just in case of an emergency." Castle said, "We even took some pictures to show mom. Not that Saran saw the point."

"Do you two always plan your actions around what your mother would think of them?" Hutchins asked, frowning.

"It's safer." Beth answered.

"Just because we're light years away from Earth doesn't mean that she doesn't think she knows exactly what's in our best interests." Castle added before the ship shuddered slightly.

"Captain Castle please report to the bridge." a calm sounding voice announced over the intercom.

"Saran and we just dropped out of warp. We must be nearing the shipyard." Castle said and he picked up his pack, slinging it over his shoulder, "Come on, let's go."

Taking a turbolift from Castle's quarters to the ship's bridge the trio of officers stepped out together and looked at the main display screen mounted on the front wall while Castle approached the captain's chair.

"As you can see captain, we have arrived at the Antares shipyards." a Vulcan officer sat in the captain's chair said. Despite being the *Mount Rushmore's* new commanding officer Saran only wore the rank badges of a lieutenant commander rather than a captain. Oberth class vessels rarely had someone of high rank in command and although he would be referred to as 'captain' while aboard he did not hold that rank. For his own tour of duty in command of the ship Castle himself had been a commander, his promotion to the rank of captain was thanks to his impending transfer to the Excelsior-class *USS Spectre*.

The image on the main view screen showed the massive Starfleet shipyard that consisted of several individual space stations. A large central station acted as a command and control hub as well as housing dry docks capable of containing several of Starfleet's largest vessels. This station was surrounded by eight smaller stations, each of which had several starships in various stages of construction docked around them. Finally there were dozens of individual construction docks, open frame-like structures that each held a single starship scattered around the main facilities.

"Can you identify the *Spectre* among all of that?" Beth asked and Saran glanced at Castle who nodded at him.

"Ensign Halla, focus the screen on the construction dock in sector six housing *the USS Spectre*." Saran ordered and the image on the screen changed to show one of the smaller construction docks containing an Excelsior-class starship. Significantly larger than the *USS Mount Rushmore*, the *Spectre* had the classic Starfleet structural layout with a circular primary hull at the front of the vessel with a secondary hull extending behind and below this while a pair of warp nacelles were mounted to this. Despite the age of the vessel it still appeared in prime condition.

"Our new home." Castle commented, glancing at Beth and Hutchins.

"One of the block two ships." Hutchins added.

"What?" Beth asked, looking at him and he pointed towards the screen.

"See the secondary hull, where it flares out either side of the main deflector?" he said, "That marks it out as a block two vessel. That additional internal space was where the cloaking device was located back when Starfleet had such things. Of course after the Treaty of Algeron when the Federation gave up that technology the devices were removed and the space used for other systems while newer ships went back to the original hull design."

"Hold on, the Treaty of Algeron was ratified in twenty-three eleven. I know that no new Excelsiors have been built in more than twenty years but I didn't think I'd be serving aboard a ship that was almost a hundred years old." Beth said.

"Older." Hutchins said, "The *Spectre* was one of the first of the block two ships launched."

"Oh great." Beth replied, "There's probably a tank in sickbay to hold leeches."

"Don't worry, the *Spectre* has been fully refitted with the best technology available." Castle reassured her.

"We are already within transporter range captain." Saran said.

"In that case we should get this over with." Castle replied, "Computer deactivate all command codes related to Captain Johnathan Castle. Clearance code Castle Tango Hotel X-ray, one-one-three-eight."

"Confirmed. Access deleted." The computer's voice responded and Castle looked at Saran.

"The ship really is yours now captain." he said and Saran got to his feet.

"It has been a honour to serve with you Captain Castle. Your promotion is well deserved though the Mount Rushmore will be the lesser for it." the Vulcan said before he raised his hand in the V-shaped Vulcan salute, "May you live long and prosper."

Castle smiled and reproduced the gesture with his own hand.

"Peace and long life." He said before Saran lowered his hand and held it out towards Castle. Smiling, Castle took the offered hand and shook it, "Goodbye old friend." he said.

Materialising aboard the *USS Spectre* in one of its transporter rooms Castle, Hutchins and Beth were met by the transporter operator, a single ensign and a security guard by the door.

"Welcome aboard the *USS Spectre* captain." the ensign said.

"Thank you ensign. Have our belongings arrived?" Castle replied as he stepped down from the transporter pad.

"Yes captain, other than your hand luggage your belongings have already been beamed aboard and taken to your quarters. Except for the two vehicles that are registered to yourself. For the time being they have been taken to the number three cargo hold." The ensign replied.

"That's okay. I can sort the bikes out later." Castle replied as he unslung the bag from his shoulder, "Now if someone can just take this to my quarters I'd like to get a look at the bridge."

And I need to inspect engineering. Interfacing modern technology aboard older spaceframes doesn't always go smoothly." Hutchins added.

"And I suppose that I shall go and count the leeches." Beth said with a smile.

"I'm sorry doctor, I don't understand." the ensign said with a confused expression on his face.

"Never mind ensign. Bad joke." Beth replied.



The *Spectre's* bridge was empty when Castle stepped from the turbolift. Many of the control consoles were in a standby mode while those that he could see were active were in a diagnostic mode rather than fully active. Castle knew that the bridge likely represented the most modern section of the entire ship, being a module that plugged into the top of the primary hull but the general layout of bridges had remained almost unchanged since Starfleet was founded prior to the founding of the Federation so it would still have been familiar to the ship's original captain way back in the twenty-third century. A single seat was located in the centre of the bridge for the commanding officer while a pair of forward consoles were the stations for the helm and operations officers. Everyone else from the ship's first officer to the tactical and science officers as well as the junior bridge staff would all sit at consoles around the outside of the bridge.

With the consoles in diagnostic modes Castle reached into his pocket to take out his combadge and, holding it the palm of his hand he tapped it.

"Computer." he said simply.

"On line." the computer's voice said.

"Computer can you identify me?" Castle asked.

"Affirmative. You are Captain Johnathan Castle. Starfleet serial number-" the computer began.

"That's enough." Castle interrupted, "Computer activate my command codes. Authorisation code Tango Hotel X-ray, one-one-three-eight."

"Command codes activated captain." the computer said and Castle smiled.

"Not exactly the ceremony that my mom would have liked." he said.

"Please clarify." the computer said.

"Never mind." Castle said before tapping his combadge again and returning it to his pocket. Then he looked around again before making his way to the centre of the bridge and sitting down in what was now his chair. The chair felt as if it was at a height not suited to Castle so he reached beneath the chair for the adjustment lever, first increasing the height of the chair and then lowering it again to the perfect position, "Chair goes up. Chair goes down." Castle said to himself before he turned around in the chair, rotating it fully to see how much of the bridge he could see while still seated. Then he relaxed in the chair, looking towards the front of the bridge before he heard the sound of a door sliding open behind him and a woman's voice spoke out.

"You can't be in here." she said and Castle turned his chair to face her.

The woman appeared relatively young but she wore the uniform of a Starfleet command division officer and had the rank markings of a lieutenant commander. From this Castle knew exactly who she was, there was only one person in the senior staff that he had selected who matched that profile.

"Ah Lieutenant Commander Armstrong. Amy isn't it?" he said, getting to his feet but the woman scowled at him.

"Who do you think you are addressing me like that?" she said sternly and then before Castle could answer she tapped her combadge, "Armstrong to security. Lieutenant K'Ran come in."

"K'Ran here commander." a gruff sounding voice said.

"We have an intruder on the bridge. Probably one of the shipyard workers." Armstrong said, glaring at Castle.

"I'm on my way commander." K'Ran replied before the channel was closed and Armstrong smirked at Castle.

"Look, there's obviously been a misunderstanding here." Castle said.

"A misunderstanding?" Armstrong replied, "All the work crews are supposed to have left and yet you're lounging about on the bridge of a Starfleet starship with no right to be here. I'm having you taken down to the brig until we can figure out who you are and what you're doing here."

"Look commander-" Castle began before the door to one of the turbolifts slid open and a pair of the ship's security department emerged. One was human and from his rank markings was an enlisted security guard while the other was Caitian, a humanoid feline who in this case was covered in thick black fur.

"Ah Lieutenant K'Ran, excellent timing. Kindly remove this man from the bridge and take him down to the brig. I'll contact station security to come and remove him." Armstrong said, glancing at the Caitian.

The human security guard began to advance towards Castle but K'Ran placed a hand on his shoulder for him to stop.

"Captain Castle?" he said, looking at Castle.

"Yes Lieutenant K'Ran? You recognise me?" Castle responded as he took his combadge from his pocket again and fixed it to his jacket.

"Yes sir. I was informed of your arrival as soon as the *Mount Rushmore* requested permission to beam you aboard." K'Ran said. Then he looked at Armstrong and added, "The alert was sent to your PADD as well."

"Captain?" Armstrong said with a look of horror on her face and she looked at the PADD she carried, searching for the message K'Ran had mentioned, "Oh no." she said when she found it listed near the top of her inbox.

"You know for a first officer to try and have their captain removed from the bridge of their ship without good reason could be considered mutiny. Perhaps I ought to have you taken to the brig." Castle said with a smile.

"Captain I am so sorry. It's just that there's so much to do and I-" Armstrong began.

"Commander it's fine. Like I said, it's just a misunderstanding. Lieutenant K'Ran you may return to your duties." Castle said.

"Yes captain." K'Ran replied before he and the other security guard turned to leave. Castle then pointed to a door at the rear of the bridge.

"I believe that my ready room is that way, just down the hall?" he said and Armstrong nodded.

"Yes captain." she said.

"Good. Then let's go and talk in there." Castle said and he headed for the door.

Armstrong followed Castle through the doorway and along the short corridor that led to doors both for the ship's conference room and also the captain's private ready room and this door slid open automatically for Castle, allowing them both to enter.

"If you have any preferences for how you'd like this room decorated captain-" Armstrong began.

"I'll speak to Lieutenant Commander Hutchins about that. That's an issue for the engineering department rather than my XO." Castle interrupted before walking around the desk and sitting down behind it, "Now take a seat."

"Captain I really am so sorry about what happened. I didn't mean to disrespect you, it's just that I've been snowed under getting things ready for our launch." Armstrong said as she sat down.

"Amy, may I call you Amy?" Castle said and Armstrong nodded, "Amy it's okay, like I said, a misunderstanding. Now what's our status?"

Armstrong sighed.

"Frankly captain we're a shambles. I've done everything I can to get us ready for launch but there was just so much left to do by the shipyard staff when I arrived a week ago and they handed over to me." she said.

"The shipyard crew didn't finish the refit?" Castle said curiously. Under normal circumstances the work crews from the shipyard would have installed all of the key systems and run basic functional tests before the ship's own crew arrived to take over and complete the finer details of making the ship ready for use.

"They have been some issues. Odd things that they say prevented them from finishing. Everything's installed but only the primary systems are tested. Secondary systems such as replicators have been malfunctioning. Plus there have been other issues. Strange ones that I'm not sure how to describe." Armstrong told him.

"Try. I'm the captain of this ship. If there's something wrong with it then I need to know." Castle said and Armstrong sighed again.

"There have been malfunctions with lighting and temperature control. Door controls as well. Nothing too serious but the settings can suddenly change without warning or anyone's input and doors can just suddenly open or close. Thankfully only internal ones it seems. There haven't been any pressure losses There have been faults reported with the ship's internal communications as well." Armstrong said.

"Hence the reason you didn't get the notification that I'd arrived in time." Castle said.

"No captain, that was my fault. I was distracted by everything else I've got on my plate at the moment." Armstrong said, "Messages that are sent are always arriving but there have been reports of additional communications that don't seem to have come from anywhere. Audio only that must be coming from a nearby panel but that can't be isolated. Then when the system is checked there's no record of them."

"People are hearing voices?" Castle said and Armstrong nodded.

"Yes captain."

"And what are they saying?" Castle asked.

"There's nothing specific captain, just the sound of voices just too far away to make out what's being said. Some have said that it sounds like singing or chanting. Then there are a few who have said it sounds like-" Armstrong said before she hesitated.

"Sounds like what commander?" Castle said.

"Well some have said that it sounds like screaming captain. Some areas of the ship are worse for it than others. No-one wants to go to deck thirteen alone and everyone that was assigned quarters on that deck requested a transfer to another one. They slept on the floor of the shuttlebay until it was sorted out." Armstrong replied.

"Deck thirteen? This is a joke, right?" Castle said.

"No joke captain. I have the requests on file. The shipyard crews also refused to work on that deck alone despite no faults being found anywhere." Armstrong told him.

"Are you trying to tell me that this ship is haunted?" Castle said and Armstrong smiled nervously.

"That word has been used captain. You have to admit that this is a very old ship." she said.

"That point has been made to me already but the idea that this is some sort of ghost ship is ridiculous." Castle said.

"I agree captain but there is definitely something wrong on that deck." Armstrong replied and Castle sighed. "Then I suppose I should check it out for myself. Come along commander, let's go ghost hunting." he said as he got up from his chair again.

Hutchins scrolled down the list of reported faults shown on the PADD that had been handed to him by one of the *Spectre's* engineers. Each one was marked to indicate whether or not it had been resolved and although most of them had Hutchins noted that in many cases the problem had been dismissed without any fault being discovered before the affected component or system returned to full functionality.

"This is a lot of faults that simply solved themselves lieutenant." he said to the woman.

"Yes commander." the other engineer replied, "Our current thinking is that there's an older component somewhere that is causing a compatibility issue with some of the newer systems. That's why only minor systems have been affected, all the major ones and anything safety critical like air locks or the warp core itself."

"That sounds like a reasonable theory. The part is probably wearing out and will eventually fail completely. All these faults probably occurred when there was some excessive demand on it and when that dropped the affected systems returned to normal." Hutchins said and the lieutenant smiled.

"Thank you sir, it's a relief to hear that." she said and Hutchins looked at her.

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Well it's just that Lieutenant Commander Armstrong, the XO, has been rather demanding, insisting that we find and fix the problem quickly but at the same time we're having to run everything past her." the woman replied.

"Ah, you mean she micromanages." Hutchins said and the woman nodded.

"Frankly I've never been so glad to be so short. It meant I could easily hide in the Jefferies Tubes when she came down here." she said and Hutchins smiled back at her.

"Well don't worry, from now on this department is being run by an actual engineer who trusts his staff to use their initiative." he said, "So what's your plan to find the damaged part Ferro?"

"I wanted to run a stress test to see if we could trigger the fault while we were actually looking for it." Ferro said.

"Very good. Push it hard enough and you could even trigger that failure which would make the fault easy to find, but let me guess Armstrong said 'no'?" Hutchins said and Ferro nodded again.

"She wanted an impact assessment first." she answered and Hutchins tapped his combadge.

"Hutchins to Captain Castle." he said.

"Castle here." Castle's voice responded.

"Captain I'm in engineering looking at a list of reported faults that reads like War and Peace. I want to run a stress test on the secondary systems to see if we can find the cause. It may cause some outages to the lights, replicators and internal comms." Hutchins said.

"I'm actually on my way to deck thirteen to investigate some of the faults with Commander Armstrong. How long will it take to set up your test?" Castle asked.

"Deck thirteen?" Ferro commented when she heard this.

"Maybe ten to twenty minutes. I need to find enough loading in the control system to trigger the fault. I'll issue a ship-wide warning before I start it." Hutchins told Castle, ignoring Ferro's reaction.

"Understood commander. You may proceed. Castle out." Castle replied before he closed the channel and Hutchins looked at Ferro.

"That's how it should be done lieutenant. Now let's see what we can do to break something." he said.

Castle noticed the frown on Armstrong's face when he shut off his combadge.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"I ordered engineering to bring me an impact assessment before running a stress test captain." she answered.

"You don't need a full assessment just for a stress test. I'm sure that our engineers know exactly what they're doing. Hutchins has been teaching engineering at the academy for over twenty years." Castle said before the turbolift came to a halt and the door slid open.

"Here it is captain, deck thirteen." Armstrong said as she and Castle stepped from the turbolift on the deck located within the *Spectre's* neck, connecting the primary and secondary hulls together, "Two personnel transporter rooms, waste recycling and crew quarters for a dozen people."

"Well I don't hear anything unusual yet." Castle commented, looking around.

"Which is exactly what the engineers who investigated the problem said. No noise from the communication system or elsewhere." Armstrong replied.

"Did they suggest anything that could possibly cause the noise?" Castle said and Armstrong pointed towards the front of the ship.

"The only equipment running would be the waste recycling unit and I've never heard of one of them speaking, let alone singing." she said.

"Sounds like a reasonable place to start." Castle said and the pair of them made their way forwards along the corridor until they came to a section of wall where a panel had been removed to grant access to the machinery behind it. Behind the wall a cluster of pipes about five centimetres in diameter were visible, all running to what looked like a control box that had several ports running along the lower edge of the front face. There was a touchscreen on the front of the box but this was currently blank, leaving no indication of its function or status.

"Typical. The last work crew must have left it open." Armstrong said.

"Unless our ghosts have now become poltergeists." Castle commented.

"Our new chief engineer is going to have to start getting strict with his staff." Armstrong added and she reached into the wall and tapped the screen.

"Perhaps you shouldn't-" Castle began but all of a sudden there was the hiss of releasing pressure and a jet of a foul smelling goo erupted from one of the ports.

Armstrong let out a scream as she recoiled away from this but the jet still caught the side of her head, covering a large portion of her hair in the substance. She then stood frozen to the spot with her eyes and mouth open in horror at the nature of the substance that now covered a significant portion of the side of her head.

"No, it can't be." she said as she lifted a hand to the side of her head.

"Amy wait." Castle exclaimed and then he looked back down the corridor to where there was a door leading to some of the crew quarters on this level, "You just go in there and clean it off. I'll wait here." He said, pointing to the door and Armstrong nodded her head before she ran towards the door and disappeared inside. Castle then looked at the mess that had been left where the bulk of the liquid ejected from the port had landed on the floor and wall of corridor, wincing at the smell. Then he tapped his combadge, "Captain Castle to engineering. We're going to need a cleaning crew on deck thirteen."

In engineering Hutchins studied the main console carefully.

"Are we ready?" he asked.

"Yes commander." Ferro responded, "When you start the test the intercom will activate shipwide to broadcast music and every personal replicator will be set to produce a ten centimetre steel cube."

"So what did you pick lieutenant?" Hutchins said.

"Pick sir?" Ferro said.

"The music lieutenant. Exactly what will our crew mates be enjoying as they work and relax?" Hutchins said and Ferro smiled.

"Oh right. I thought I'd go with the William Tell Overture sir." she said.

"The finale?" Hutchins said, smiling back at her and Ferro nodded, "You know the definition of an intellectual lieutenant? Someone who can listen to that music without thinking of the Lone Ranger." he added before he activated the intercom on the panel in front of him, selected a ship wide broadcast, "This is engineering to all decks. Stand by for a systems test. While this is underway you will all be treated to some music and replicators will produce a test object. There may be some disruption to environmental and door systems. If you witness any of these then please report them to engineering." he announced before he closed the channel and signalled to Ferro. In response she reached for the console she was standing at.

"Beginning system stress test now." she said as she pressed one of the controls before there was a sudden fanfare from the ship's communication system.

"Hi-ho Silver, away." Hutchins said.

### 3.

The crew cabins on deck thirteen had been emptied when their occupants were reassigned to alternate quarters and each contained only some basic furniture and a bare mattress. However, the sonic showers in each of them still functioned so Armstrong was able to make use of one of these to remove the unpleasant fluid from her hair. Since the sonic cleaning process did not use any water she did not need to worry about having to dry off afterwards and so did not have to replicate a towel and could instead get right to cleaning herself. This was not an easy process though, the substance was matted in her hair and she had to pull the strands apart to allow the sonic waves to get to it. She paused the process of cleaning herself when Hutchins' announcement came over the intercom and groaned when the music began to play just as she was getting the last of her hair clean before all of a sudden the lights in the tiny bathroom went out and she was plunged into darkness.

"Oh great. I knew something like this would happen without an impact assessment." She said to herself as she stepped from the shower to turn the lights back on, feeling her way along the wall towards the door. As she stepped from the shower though there was a sudden 'hiss' and the door slid open. This allowed some light from the bedroom to enter the bathroom and Armstrong peered through to double check that she was still alone. Just as she did this there was a shudder as the gravity plating adjusted itself and she stumbled forwards through the door into the bedroom before the gravity stabilised, "Some disruption to environmental systems indeed." she muttered to herself as she turned to re-enter the bathroom but the door promptly slid shut right in front of her.

Armstrong jabbed at the control panel beside the door only for it to produce an error tone and when she glanced at the panel she saw that it indicated that the door was locked.

In the corridor Castle felt the shudder of the artificial gravity adjusting and steadied himself against a nearby wall as the lights flickered and the music played. The he heard another sound over that of the music and he considered the possibility that this was another of the mysterious voices that had been reported on this level. However, when the music then stopped and the lighting and gravity returned to normal he could hear that the additional voice he could hear was that of Armstrong.

"Why won't you open?" he heard her shouting and he frowned, walking towards the door she had gone through. As soon as he reached the door he opened it and stepped into the cabin on the other side.

"Commander are you-" he began before he saw Armstrong standing by the door to the bathroom completely naked.

"Oh captain it's this door it's jammed and-" Armstrong responded, turning towards Castle before remembering that all of her clothes were still on the bathroom floor and she gasped as she quickly moved her hands to try and cover herself up, "Captain I- I-" she said, "The door, it's locked."

"What happened?" Castle asked.

"The lights went out and the door opened. Then something happened to the gravity and I fell through. Then the door closed again and locked me out. All my clothes are in the bathroom and I can't get in." Armstrong said and Castle sighed. Then he removed his jacket and approached Armstrong.

"Here, I can't have my first officer walking around naked." he said as he wrapped the jacket around her, "Did you lock the door from the inside?"

"Yes, when I went into the bathroom." Armstrong replied.

"Then obviously it's returned to that state." Castle said, removing his combadge from the jacket and fixing it to his shirt instead before he tapped it, "Computer, captain's override. Unlock this door." he said.

"Door unlocked." the computer responded and the panel beside the door changed to show that it was no longer locked. Castle then reached out to open the door and it slid aside to reveal Armstrong's uniform on the bathroom floor, "I'll let you get dressed." he told her before turning to head back to the corridor.

In engineering Hutchins watched as the computer ran a diagnostic of the ship's data network, searching for errors.

"We've got reports from all over about minor faults commander. Lighting, doors, gravity and some replicators produced test objects that were deformed." Ferro told him.

"Yes and here's the cause." Hutchins said, "There's a cluster of isolinear chips that aren't registering on the diagnostic any more. They must have blown during the test. Send someone to fix them."

"Sir we've got a signal coming in from the shipyard." Another engineer announced.

"Isn't there anyone on the bridge to answer it?" Hutchins asked.

"No commander. Right now all the operations staff have been seconded to us." the other engineer replied.

"In that case see what they want and pass it on to whoever needs to know." Hutchins ordered.

"Yes commander." the other engineer responded.

Castle was waiting in the corridor while Armstrong got dressed when his combadge activated.

"Captain Castle we've just received a message from the shipyard." a voice told him.

"What did they have to say? Are they aware that we aren't ready to launch yet?" Castle responded.

"Yes captain. The message is that the *USS Academy* has arrived and Admiral Tyler is expecting you in the main officers' lounge."

"In that case inform the station that the doctor and I will be beaming over shortly. Castle out." Castle said before he closed the channel. Then he tapped his combadge again and added, "Castle to sickbay. Beth we've been invited to meet Admiral Tyler. Fancy a quick trip?"

Castle changed into his duty uniform before he and Beth both beamed over to the shipyard's central space station and made their way to the main officers' lounge. Here they saw a grey haired man in the uniform of a Starfleet admiral sitting alone at a table by one of the large viewports that looked out into space. Outside the window the Nebula-class *USS Academy* could be seen in a position that kept it stationary relative to the station.

"That's a fine looking ship admiral." Castle said as he and Beth walked over to the table.

"Ah Jack, finally got that fourth pip on your collar." Admiral Tyler responded as he got to his feet and he shook Castle's hand. Then he smiled at Beth, "And what about you? A lieutenant commander. The last time we met in person I was a captain myself and you'd just sent your application to Starfleet."

"It's good to see you again admiral." Beth replied and she embraced the admiral briefly.

"Take a seat. I ordered drinks for you both." Tyler said, indicating the drinks on the table in front of them.

"Thank you admiral." Castle said as he and Beth sat down, "So what brings you all the way out here? The *Academy* isn't being refit is she?"

"No I'm not here about the *Academy*. I'm here about the pair of you." Tyler replied.

"Us?" Beth asked, "What's wrong with us?"

"Nothing's wrong with either of you. I was Jack's first commanding officer and I've followed his career since then. I must admit that I was rather disappointed when he got landed with the *Mount Rushmore*." Tyler said.

"There was nothing wrong with the *Mount Rushmore*." Castle said and Tyler smiled.

"Of course there was Jack. She's an Oberth-class ship. She can handle her intended role just fine but even the lowliest ensign in the fleet knows that the Oberths should all have been retired more than twenty years ago. They're old, slow and vulnerable. You may as well take a freighter commission. That's why I was so happy to hear that you'd still managed to impress Starfleet enough while commanding one to get yourself promoted. Even happier when I heard who you'd picked as your chief medical officer." he said and he looked at Beth, "I followed your career too Beth. I was tempted to try and get you transferred to the *Academy* but you deserve to be a chief medical officer and need my existing doctor. He's got years of experience keeping this old body of mine together and working, more or less." then turning back towards Castle he added, "So what are your thoughts so far Jack? About the ship and its crew."

"The ship still needs some work to be fully operational but we'll be ready to launch soon. As for the crew, well those that I've met seem to match the information in their files pretty well. Though I think that my first officer needs to relax." Castle said.

"How much do you know about the *Spectre*'s history, either of you?" Tyler asked, leaning forwards and looking back and forth between Castle and Beth.

"She's old. Very old." Beth replied.

"But she's been continually refitted. She may not be state of the art but she's no antique." Castle added and Tyler produced a PADD that he looked at as he started to read from the screen.

"The *USS Spectre* was commissioned back in twenty-two ninety-four. She had a cloaking device at that time so of course she had to be recalled and refit following the Treaty of Algeron in twenty-three eleven but she stayed in service along with other ships of the class until twenty-three fifty-six when she was part of the forces deployed against the Cardassians. The crew reported detecting what looked like a Cardassian raiding ship, they thought it was probably just a destroyer so nothing that they couldn't handle but they still called for reinforcements while they investigated just in case it was a scout for a larger assault force. When those reinforcements arrived four days later all contact with the *Spectre* had been lost and it was assumed that she'd been ambushed by the Cardassian force thought to be hiding nearby. The commander of the Starfleet squadron had his ships begin a thorough search of the area and although they failed to turn up any signs of any Cardassians they did find the *Spectre* adrift and empty. Every system was powered down and not one of its crew were still aboard." Tyler said.

"They abandoned ship? Why?" Castle asked.

"That's just it, the ship was in deep space, too far for the crew to have beamed to a planet and all of the ship's shuttles and escape pods were still present. The crew had just vanished. There were no signs of a fight but it was assumed that for some reason the Cardassians had captured the crew but left the *Spectre*

behind, possibly scared off by the approaching task force before they could either salvage or destroy the ship." Tyler said, "Starfleet wasn't just going to put the ship back into service though so she was shipped off to a reserve yard where she stayed until after the Battle of Wolf three-five-nine. Starfleet needed all the ships we could get so she was pulled out of reserve and refitted before being put back into service. After that she served until just before the Dominion War when the crew reported observing an unidentified vessel at the limit of sensor range that appeared to be shadowing them. Then all contact was lost again and a search was undertaken."

"Let me guess, the ship was found abandoned." Beth said and Tyler smiled.

"Exactly, just like the first time. No damage, no log reports of what happened and no crew to tell the tale. On the other hand all of the shuttles and escape pods were right where they should have been." he replied.

"And after finding nothing wrong with the ship, Starfleet just stuck her back in a reserve fleet again." Castle commented, "Until they gave her to me."

"Until they gave her to you." Tyler replied, nodding his head in agreement.

"Admiral are you saying that someone in Starfleet is setting us up to, what? Disappear?" Beth asked.

"No of course not. Whatever faults it may have, Starfleet does not send crews out intending for them to just disappear but there are those of us who think that there is something wrong with the *USS Spectre*." Tyler answered.

"You're sounding like some of my crew. According to my first officer some of them think that the ship is haunted." Castle said.

"I heard the same thing in sickbay." Beth added.

"Deck thirteen?" Castle said, looking at her and she nodded.

"Yes, apparently strange things go on there." she replied, "My staff said that people have heard voices there and one or two claim to have seen things they couldn't explain."

Castle smiled when he heard this.

"Well I was on deck thirteen myself before coming here and nothing I saw could be described as unpleasant." he said, "Maybe I should ask Starfleet to perform an exorcism."

"I don't think we have anyone qualified to do that but I'm sure we could bring in someone who is. Assuming that we can get Starfleet to start believing in ghosts." Tyler said, "More seriously though I and a few others think that there could be something seriously wrong aboard the *Spectre*. Something that all our usual tests and inspections can't pick up."

"You think that there is a connection between the two incidents? That the supposed Cardassian ship detected during the war could have been the same as the unidentified vessel detected the second time." Castle said.

"I do and I'd rather not have to hear about a third encounter resulting in the loss of a crew." Tyler said.

"Admiral Tyler, are you telling me to refuse to launch?" Castle asked.

"No but I am warning you that you need to keep a very careful watch on what's going on aboard that ship. Have your engineers keep an eye on even the tiniest variation from normal system operating procedures. Hell, have them realign the entire warp drive to adjust its signature if you can. Maybe whatever happened to those other crews was because something could target the ship because of that. You should have your science officer take a look at the engineering logs as well." Tyler said.

"We don't have a science officer yet." Beth told him.

"We collect our chief operations and science officers from the outpost on Tollas Prime." Castle added.

"Assuming that we don't just vanish into empty space before we get there." Beth said.

Tyler then handed his PADD to Castle.

"This contains everything I've found. Starfleet replaced the *Spectre's* computer as part of the refits when she was brought back into service and didn't transfer any of the log data over but the investigative teams made copies of everything. I pulled everything that seemed related to the periods when the ship was out of contact. I don't know whether it will help shed any light on what happened but I thought you should have it just in case." Tyler said.

"Just in case what?" Beth asked.

"Just in case that mysterious ship comes back." Castle told her. Then he looked at Tyler and added, "Thank you for this admiral. Maybe this conversation is just the equivalent of sitting around a campfire and telling ghost stories while we toast marshmallows but if there's even a chance that my ship is in danger then this could make all the difference."

"I suggest that you study that carefully. When do you launch?" Tyler said.

"Oh-seven hundred tomorrow morning. Assuming nothing goes wrong." Castle told him.

"Then don't let me hold you up any longer. You've got a lot to do even without studying what's on that PADD. If you find anything then be sure to let me know." Tyler said.

"Oh don't worry admiral you'll be the first person I tell." Castle responded as he finished his drink.

"Oh and it was good to see you both again. I'm happy that you've done well." Tyler said, getting to his feet.

"It was good to see you again too admiral." Castle replied as he and Beth also stood up.

“Hopefully we’ll meet again soon. Eleven years was too long.” Beth added and she embraced Tyler once again.

“Once the Spectre is fully up and running you must take a tour. Check out the source of the ghost stories for yourself.” Castle said as he and Tyler shook hands again.

“I’ll hold you to that captain.” Tyler responded before Castle and Beth made their way back towards the turbolift.

“So what do you make of all that Jack?” Beth asked as they walked.

“I don’t know. Something obviously happened to those crews but whether we’ll ever find out is another matter. I certainly don’t buy into any of the supernatural explanations that some people have attributed to them.” Castle answered.

“Even if they were true what could we do about it?” Beth said.

“Quite. If we encounter a hostile species we can send for reinforcements. Arrest a criminal we can hand them over to a federal marshal, discover a new civilisation and we bring in diplomats but encounter a ghost? Who would you call?” Castle replied, “What about you? What do you think?”

“I think that after you brought up campfires I’m hungry for marshmallows.” Beth said and they smiled at one another.



Stepping onto the *Spectre's* bridge the next morning Castle found most of its stations now manned. Both the operations and science consoles were manned by junior officers until their department heads could be brought aboard the ship. K'Ran sat at the tactical console near the front of the bridge and a second Caitian, Lieutenant N'Riss sat at the helm. Castle knew from their personnel files that N'Riss and K'Ran were married and given the closeness of Caitian matings their applications for the posts aboard the *Spectre* had been on the basis of both being approved together. Given that Castle had already decided that he would be making his sister the ship's chief medical officer this was something that he could not refuse and so he had agreed to have both serving aboard.

"Captain on the bridge." Armstrong announced from the console just beside the turbolift where she sat.

"As you were." Castle said as he walked to the vacant seat in the centre of the bridge and sat down,

"Lieutenant N'Riss are we prepared to leave spacedock?"

"Yes captain." N'Riss responded, "A course for the Tollas system has been laid in. At warp nine point four we should be there in about sixteen hours."

"Excellent." Castle said as he sat down and he activated the intercom set into his chair, "Bridge to engineering." he said.

"Engineering here captain." Hutchins' voice responded.

"Commander we will be leaving spacedock shortly and then going to warp after that. Is everything set in engineering?" Castle told him.

"Yes captain, everything is in order down here. You have full warp power available." Hutchins replied and Castle smiled.

"Thank you commander. Bridge out." Castle said before turning off the intercom, "Ensign Kent, release all moorings." he ordered.

"Aye captain. Releasing moorings." the officer sat at the operations console said.

"We are disengaged from the station captain." Armstrong announced.

"Helm engaged thrusters, take us out." Castle said.

"Yes captain. Engaging thrusters." N'Riss said and she fired the *Spectre's* thrusters, propelling the ship slowly forwards, "Now clear of spacedock." N'Riss added when the ship was far enough away from the frame structure of the spacedock that its impulse drive could be engaged without risking damage.

"Engage at one half impulse power." Castle ordered.

"Yes captain, one half impulse power." N'Riss said and the *Spectre* accelerated rapidly, speeding away from the shipyard and into open space. Already located on the outer edge of the solar system, it did not take long for the *Spectre* to clear the system entirely and reach open space where its warp drive could be used safely, "Now cleared for warp captain." N'Riss said and Castle smiled.

"Engage at warp nine point four." Castle ordered.

"Engaging warp drive now." N'Riss said and the stars shown on the main viewscreen suddenly began to speed by as the *Spectre* accelerated to faster than light speed, rapidly reaching the ship's maximum cruising speed as it headed towards the Tollas system, "Now at warp nine point four captain." N'Riss added.

"Excellent and well done everyone. Ops are we reading any system errors?" Castle said.

"Negative captain, all systems appear to be functioning within specified parameters." Kent replied.

"Good. Monitor all systems closely. I want to know if there are any significant changes at all, even if they stay within tolerances. This ship hasn't flown in more than a decade and as good as Lieutenant Commander Hutchins is there could still be some issues that won't show themselves until later. Lieutenant Commander Armstrong you have the conn, I'll be in my ready room." Castle said before he stood up again and left the bridge, heading for his ready room.

Dinner was over when Elisa was heading back to the lounge. Ted, Jessica and Alex were all already there and she could hear them talking as they discussed the upcoming school event that Jessica was preparing for.

"You still have three weeks to go." she said as she entered the room, "I don't know what-" she added before without warning she collapsed.

"Mom!" Jessica exclaimed while Alex just gasped and Ted rushed to his wife's side.

"Elisa can you hear me?" he asked but she just stared up at him without speaking. Quickly he determined that she was still breathing and that he could feel a pulse.

"Dad is she alive?" Alex asked.

"Yes, she's alive. Call Doctor Vost, tell him that your mother's collapsed and he needs to come to the house now." Ted responded and his son rushed to a communications panel while Jessica hurried towards her parents.

"What happened?" Elisa said weakly.

"You fell, here let me help you to the couch." Ted answered and he lifted Elisa back to her feet, supporting her as they walked together to the nearest couch before helping her sit down.

"Doctor Vost is coming." Alex said as he joined the others at the couch.

"I'll be fine." Elisa said.

"You're not fine. Doctor Vost needs to examine you. Now sit still and he'll be here soon." Ted told her.

Vost arrived just a few minutes later, carrying a medical kit with him as he hurried into the room.

"Tell me exactly what happened." he said as he set the kit down and took out a tricorder that he used to begin scanning Elisa.

"We'd just had dinner and she collapsed in the doorway." Jessica replied.

"Is she getting worse?" Alex added.

"I'm picking up degradation of the nerves in the spinal column. It looks like your condition is moving on the next stage." Vost said.

"The next stage? You mean when I become paralysed?" Elisa asked.

"So stop it. Inject those nanites. Replicate a million more if you have to." Alex said, looking at Vost.

"Haven't you listened to anything I've said boy? If just replicating the nanites was effective then I could have used any of the commercially available types. I need the adaptive capabilities of original Borg nanoprobes to be able to respond instantly to the changing pattern of your mother's condition and that is something that Federation and Romulan science has never been able to replicate." Vost snapped at him.

"How much longer until you can begin the treatment doctor?" Ted said.

"Soon I hope. Maybe two or three more months." Vost replied.

"Three months? But what does mom do until then?" Jessica said.

"Doctor Vost I don't like the idea of being paralysed even for a few days, let alone a few months. Is there nothing you can do to speed up the process?" Elisa asked.

"No, not with my current level of knowledge. As well as adjusting the nanoprobes' assimilation routines to simply repair your body's damaged cells I need to disable their ability to self-replicate with compromising their ability to adapt. I need more time." Vost answered.

"Time is something that my wife does not have doctor. We have invested a considerable amount of resources in giving you everything you said that you need and so far we have nothing to show for it." Ted said sternly.

Vost sighed.

"Very well, I do have several thousand nanoprobes already modified. They won't be enough to eliminate Elisa's condition but they may slow its progress. However, I should warn you that by using these now may make delay a final cure. I will need to monitor their status daily and this will take me away from other necessary work." he said and Elias and Ted looked at one another before they looked back at Vost.

"Proceed doctor. I can wait a while longer for a full cure if it means limiting my symptoms now." Elisa said.

"Very well. Let's get you to the laboratory." Vost told her.

Castle looked up from his desk as the door to his ready room slid open and his sister entered.

"Ah Beth, is everything okay down in sickbay?" he asked.

"Everything's fine down there. If there was a problem then I'd use the intercom." Beth answered as she sat down.

"So what brings you up here to my office then?" Castle replied.

"I just came to ask about dinner. Are we still planning to eat together?" Beth said.

"Yes, we won't reach the Tollas system until tomorrow so there shouldn't be anything that would get in our way. So far our systems are all functioning as intended though I'm still waiting to here whether the cleaning crew on deck thirteen report anything unusual going on. I want to hold a staff meeting in about an hour and after that we can eat." Castle said.

"Casual dress?" Beth said.

"Of course. We agreed that they'd be a chance to talk as family rather than officers." Castle said.

"So what are you looking at now? Surely Starfleet haven't changed our orders already." Beth said, looking at the display Castle had been reading from when she entered the room.

"No, I wanted to take a look at the material Admiral Tyler gave us." Castle said and Beth smiled.

"Ghost stories Jack?" she said.

"Take a listen to this. It's the last entry recorded in the captain's log before the second time contact with the *Spectre* was lost." Castle said and he began the playback of the entry he had been studying when Beth arrived.

"Captain's log, stardate five-oh-five-six-one point one." the voice of the *Spectre's* previous captain began, "Our sensors are still reading the presence of an object that is shadowing our course. Although its position can be plotted that is the extent of the information we have been able to gather about it. My science officer has been unable to determine the object's size, shape or mass. We only know that it is there from the subspace signature that it is emitting, however this has not translated into anything we can use to gain further information. Even at maximum magnification we cannot see the object on a visual scan yet we know that it is there. I would dismiss the contact as an echo of the *Spectre* itself but there is a noticeable delay between any manoeuvre we make and the object reacting in kind so for a brief period our courses are different. However, there is no change to the object's emissions when we change course, indicating that it can match us without expending any energy, something that we cannot explain. We have tried hailing the object but it does not respond and I am reluctant to order an intercept course be laid in without more information. Although there has been no response to our scans or attempts at communication I do not want to take any actions that could be seen as more hostile and escalate the situation. Instead we will remain on our intended course and within Federation space while monitoring and continuing to hail the object. Hopefully it will eventually choose to respond."

"That's it. The log was never updated to explain what happened next and by the time the ship was found there was no-one around to tell their story." Castle said.

"The obvious answer seems to be that the mystery object was a vessel of some kind and that the *Spectre's* crew were taken aboard it. The same the first time around. That so-called mystery Cardassian raider could have been this ship." Beth said.

"Yes but the same ship intercepting the *Spectre* twice almost twenty years apart and without anyone else seeing it during the meantime or since. Considering the history of this region of space how likely do you think that is? It's been littered with sensor buoys and heavily patrolled by both Starfleet and the Cardassians. Not to mention all the fighting that went on here during the war." Castle said.

"The war was after contact was lost with the *Spectre* though. Perhaps all the fighting scared our mystery ship off. Or maybe either the Dominion or one of their allies did see it and destroyed it." Beth suggested.

"That's certainly possible. A lot was destroyed during the war so it would surprise me if the Cardassians had had information about whatever the *Spectre's* last crew saw before they vanished but that still leaves the question of where it came from." Castle replied.

"And if there are more?" Beth added.

"Yes, if there are more." Castle agreed, nodding his head.

"So what are you going to tell the rest of the crew?" Beth said and Castle paused to think.

"For now nothing." he said, "Starfleet investigated the disappearances of both crews and found nothing. The unidentified ship hasn't been seen since and the *Spectre* has been refitted, our systems are far superior to what they were. If we do encounter the ship again we'll be ready."

"You'll fight?" Beth said.

"Hell no. I'll run. I'll order maximum warp away from it." Castle replied before the intercom activated.

"Captain?" Armstrong's voice said.

"Yes commander?" Castle responded.

"Captain you asked us to keep an eye on any changes in system status." Armstrong said, "Well there was just a minor surge in the warp core. Lieutenant Commander Hutchins said it was nothing to worry about but I thought that you should know."

"Very good commander. Tell Hutchins to have someone recheck the system log to try and identify the cause but if he's happy for us to continue on our way then we will keep going. In the meantime I want all department heads to meet me in the briefing room in ten minutes. The doctor is here with me now so you just need to alert the others." Castle said.

"We don't have our chief operations or science officers aboard yet captain." Armstrong pointed out.

"Yes commander, I'm aware of that." Castle said.

"Would you like me to fill in for them?" Armstrong added.

"No, I can catch up with them when they come aboard. Just have everyone in the briefing room in ten minutes." Castle told her before he closed the channel.

Ted and Vost both assisted Elisa into the laboratory and Vost pointed to a biobed.

"Get her on there. Face down." he said and the two men took her to the bed and lay her down on it. Vost then activated the biobed and looked at the readouts on the screen mounted above it, "Yes it's just as I thought. Parts of Elisa's nervous system are starting to shut down. You can see the reduction in activity here in the spine. Elisa how do your legs feel?"

"Cold and numb." Elisa responded.

"I'm going to inject the modified Borg nanoprobe directly into the top of your spine. They should attack the parasites almost immediately. There aren't enough to eliminate the infection entirely from your body but they

should be able to clean out your spine before they expire.” Vost said.

“How long will that take?” Ted asked.

“I don’t know.” Vost admitted, “Remember that this has never been done before.”

“I suppose you don’t know long the protection will last either then.” Elisa added from the biobed.

“Probably two or three months given the number of parasites existing elsewhere in your body. They will have to multiply and migrate back into your spine. For a while you’ll be protected by the nanoprobes that will destroy them but when their power is depleted the parasites will be able to take over and start feeding on your spinal fluid again. By that time hopefully I’ll have adapted enough of the remaining nanoprobes that they will be able to cleanse your entire body of the parasites.” Vost said.

“If not can a second smaller dose be used?” Ted said.

“I wouldn’t want to risk it. We have only a limited number of nanoprobes. I can’t risk letting them replicate themselves or we risk a loss of containment and them spreading uncontrollably. This dose I’m about to give your wife will use up about half of the reserve I estimate that we have. A second dose would put us right on the limit and if anything went wrong then we’d be right back where we started, looking for more nanoprobes for sale before her condition kills her.” Vost explained. He then went to another of the work benches where there were several containers within cylindrical forcefields and he deactivated one of these to remove the container inside and load it into a hypospray device. Returning to the biobed he then pressed the injection nozzle of this against the base of Elisa’s skull ready to inject the contents into her spine, “Ready?” he asked. “Ready.” Elisa responded without moving and Vost triggered the hypospray.

## 5.

Hutchins was the last of the *Spectre's* senior officers to arrive in the briefing room, carrying with him a PADD and a small plastic bag that obviously contained something. All of the other department heads who were aboard were already sat around the table that dominated the room as well as Armstrong and Castle himself. "Ah commander, take a seat and we can begin." Castle said.

"Sorry I took so long but I wanted to bring this." Hutchins replied and he held up the plastic bag.

"What is it?" Beth asked.

"I think that it's the root cause of all the weird things that have been happening aboard." Hutchins answered and after he sat down and placed his PADD on the table he tipped the contents of the bag into his hand. This turned out to be a small electronic module that had numerous ports on one side for standard isolinear chips.

"This is a basic isolinear data module. There are literally hundreds of these aboard the ship used to keep our data network running. This one holds up to a dozen isolinear chips that manage the flow of that data.

Somehow though this one became corrupted and in turn it corrupted all of the chips that were plugged into it, disrupting the subroutines that they were programmed with. It made them prone to crosstalk of data and a signal intended for one of the systems controlled through this could also end up being passed to another one that was inactive. That's why a message sent over the intercom would always reach its destination but when the intercom wasn't being actively controlled people might report hearing it activate." he explained.

"Why did it sound like screaming?" N'Riss said.

"Just random data that was then interpreted by whoever overheard it as a scream probably." Hutchins suggested.

"That sounds likely. All sentient species have a predisposition to see and hear things in terms of faces and words. Our brains fill in the blanks." Beth added.

"So the ship was haunted by a faulty isolinear module." K'Ran said.

"It looks that way, yes." Hutchins said.

"So what caused the corruption?" Castle said.

"Ah, now there I am at a loss." Hutchins said as he set down the module and picked up his PADD instead, "I've lectured at the academy on pretty much everything that can go wrong on a starship for twenty years and I've never heard of anything like this. Somehow this module was subjected to a burst of subspace energy that triggered a lasting resonating energy pattern even when the ship was completely powered down while in reserve. It was that that then corrupted any isolinear chip that was plugged into it. Initial tests when the chips were installed probably showed no errors because it needed power flowing through to trigger the resonance. When we ran the stress test we put far more energy through the module than usual and the resonance became so strong that it didn't just corrupt the isolinear chips plugged into the module it fried them."

"But you can't say how the module was corrupted to begin with?" N'Riss said and Hutchins shook his head.

"No, this is an entirely new error to me. I can't tell you how or when the module was corrupted and I can't explain how the resonance persisted when the module was powered down for years on end." Hutchins said, "I've given orders for maintenance crews to start checking for unexplained subspace resonance in other parts of the ship."

"Other than that what is your assessment of the ship commander?" Castle asked.

"She's in perfect condition. Impressive for a ship that's the best part of a century old. Structurally she's sound and the new and old systems are working together exactly as intended." Hutchins said before he looked at his PADD again and smiled, "One interesting thing to note though is that the engineering teams who carried out all the refits since this ship was first launched cut a couple of corners here and there."

"You mean there are systems that aren't up to regulation? But I thought you were satisfied that everything was working." Armstrong said.

"Oh everything is as far as I can tell. The corners were cut elsewhere." Hutchins said.

"Where?" Beth asked.

"The main computer core." Hutchins replied, "Each time the ship was refit the computer was updated with a more modern one, one more powerful than the last and rather than going through the contents of the previous cores to determine what was needed and what wasn't the engineers responsible just cloned the drives across to the new one."

"What does that mean in practical terms commander?" Castle asked.

"Well it means that we have all of the ship's original engineering files. If we wanted to then we could recreate any of the systems installed when the ship was first launched." Hutchins answered and then after a moment's pause he added, "Including the cloaking device."

The other officers sat around the table exchange nervous glances for a moment before Beth broke the silence.

"You mean that we could cloak the ship?" she said.

"The Treaty of Algeron forbids the use of a cloaking device by a Starfleet vessel doctor." Armstrong said.

"I know, I meant is it technically feasible?" Beth responded and Hutchins smiled and shook his head.

"Sadly no." he said, "Treaty obligations aside recreating the cloaking device that was installed when this ship was constructed wouldn't do us any good. For starters the design of the cloak is as old as this ship and sensor technology has moved on, modern sensors would see right through it. Secondly this ship's engines have been significantly improved. The power they are outputting is well beyond what the cloaking device was designed to conceal. Even if we were confronted by someone with sensors that lag behind ours by about a century we'd have to dial back on our power output to prevent them from detecting us and given how energy hungry some of our new systems are then we wouldn't be able to use them."

"Then it's a good job we won't be replacing the cloak. What about logs? Do we have a full set of system and crew logs going all the way back to when the ship was built?" Castle said to Hutchins but the engineer shook his head.

"No. That's an interesting point actually, although all of the system files were copied across everything else has been discarded. Again it doesn't look like there was any attempt to filter what was removed and what was kept. Nothing was copied." he said.

"I take it that there's no way to know whether or not those files were deleted before the refit though?" Castle commented.

"None captain. The computer core itself is brand new so those files were never stored on it. Why, is there something you were wanting to read? The Starfleet Corps of Engineers probably still have the old core backed up." Hutchins said.

"No there's nothing specific. No need to be bothering the corps of engineers." Castle replied before he looked around the table, "As you all know we're heading for the Tollas system where we will collect our chief science officer Lieutenant Commander Katherine Baker and chief operations officer Lieutenant Carl Ashton. We'll spend a couple of days in orbit around the colony but after that we're heading further out. Starfleet wants us to chart the systems close to Cardassian space. We've got copies of all of the intelligence reports and long-range scans of these but the area is unexplored by Starfleet ships thanks to the dangers of attack by Cardassian vessels previously. Now that the Cardassians seem to have become less belligerent though Starfleet Command has decided that the time is right to head out and actually take a look at what's there."

"Are there any indications of civilisations?" Armstrong asked.

"Nothing has been detected within twenty light years of the border so it's unlikely that we'll encounter any advanced civilisations though there could be some pre-industrial societies that can't be detected by long range scans." Castle replied.

"Or we could run into someone else's exploration craft from further away." Beth commented and Castle looked at her for a moment.

"Quite." he said eventually, "Now although Lieutenant Commander Hutchins and his department believe that they have solved the issues behind our ghost stories I want all departments to continue to monitor for any malfunctions, no matter how minor they may be. If there is anything else that the refit team missed on this ship then I want it caught before it causes us real trouble."

"My people are already checking the logs to find the cause of the surge in the warp core." Hutchins added, "They should have an answer by the time we reach Tollas."

"Okay so our engines are operating and I already know that sickbay is in order so what about our tactical status?" Castle said and he looked at K'Ran.

"I'd like to carry out some drills and a live fire test if we can captain, just to be certain, but everything appears in order with our weapons and shields. I've carried out several computer simulations and whatever faults were present in some of the secondary systems didn't affect our defences." the Caitian replied.

"I'm glad to hear it. I wouldn't want photon torpedoes arming themselves as if they were just doors opening at random." Beth commented.

"Captain there is a testing range in the Tollas system. We could arrange with the outpost there to make use of it on our arrival." Armstrong suggested.

"Thank you commander and with that I'll just add that I look forward to getting to know each of you beyond what I read in your files when I picked each of you for your roles and I hope that serving aboard the Spectre is something that all of us will remember fondly. Dismissed." Castle said, bringing the meeting to a close and the gathered officers got up to leave.

"Captain may I have a word?" Armstrong asked softly and Castle nodded.

"Of course commander." he replied, stepping back to allow other officers past them.

"I'll see you at six Jack." Beth said as she walked past him and he nodded.

"Yes see you then." he said before he turned to Armstrong, "So what can I do for you commander?" he asked and Armstrong sighed.

"Captain I just wanted to apologise." she said and Castle frowned.

"Apologise for what?" he said.

"The engineering department wanted to run the stress test that revealed the problem with the isolinear module before you arrived and I wouldn't let them without a full impact assessment.. The whole mess could have been cleared up before you came aboard." Armstrong said and Castle sighed.

"Amy as well as some data given to me by Admiral Tyler I've been reviewing the logs from before I came aboard and it's clear that you are trying to do too much. The science and operations departments can take care of themselves just fine until their heads come aboard and you don't need to keep looking over everyone's shoulder. Just be ready for if someone brings you a problem they need help with." he said.

"I just don't want anything to go wrong that could jeopardise my career." Armstrong said.

"Getting to the point where you're the first officer aboard a cruiser at twenty-eight is no mean feat Amy. You've already proven yourself capable and Starfleet isn't going to throw you out for just one or two minor mishaps. On the other hand if you push yourself too far you could end up burning out." Castle said, "I tell you what you should join Beth and I for dinner this evening. Eighteen hundred hours in my quarters, casual dress."

"I wouldn't want to intrude captain." Armstrong said.

"You wouldn't be but it would give you the chance to relax. When was the last time you sat down for a meal in a social setting?" Castle said.

"About two months ago when I last visited my family to tell them about my promotion." Armstrong said.

"Then you're about due for another one. Beth and I have agreed that we're going to aim to eat dinner together twice a week and I'm inviting you to join us. Inviting, not ordering." Castle said.

"Thank you captain. I'll be there." Armstrong replied with a smile.

Following the injection of the Borg nanoprobes into Elisa's spine Vost monitored her condition carefully. The biobed provided him with detailed information about the activity within her nervous system and after just a short time he started to see this increasing as the nanoprobes spread.

"It's working faster than I projected." Vost said.

"That's good isn't it?" Ted asked.

"I don't feel any different yet." Elisa added, still lying face down on the biobed.

"You will soon. The nanoprobes are locating the parasites and attempting to assimilate them. The modifications that I've made mean that this is fatal for the parasites though. The feeling will return to your legs and you'll regain your strength in them. For now though lie still. If you try to move too soon then there could be complications." Vost told her.

"What sort of complications?" Ted asked.

"The parasites feed off the energy of your wife's nervous system, if she moves then she will just feed them more and they'll reproduce faster. That will make the nanoprobes' job harder. Remember that there are only a limited number of them. That number may be in the thousands but there are already millions of parasites just within her spine. I'd use a nerve blocking agent to prevent her moving while the nanoprobes work but I want to be able to monitor the state of her spinal chord and an agent would interfere with the readings." Vost said.

"But the process is working?" Ted said.

"Definitely. I can see that the increasing nervous activity in the upper spine where the nanoprobes are clearing it of parasites and then nesting to block reinfection. Their rate of progression appears to be increasing as well. That's their adaptive capability at work. They're learning to pick out the differences between Elisa's cells and the parasites. This shouldn't take much longer." Vost replied.

Elisa suddenly let out a gasp and kicked her legs.

"I felt something." she said.

"Lie still." Vost told her, reaching for one of the consoles on the side of the biobed.

"Have the nanoprobes removed the parasites from her spine?" Ted asked.

"Not yet but the nerves are working again. Some of the nanoprobes, just a few hundred it looks like, have moved further down her spine to the base and these readings indicate that there has been a significant increase in their emissions." Vost said.

"What does that mean doctor?" Elisa said.

"I think it means that the nanoprobes are creating an alternative nervous system within your body. They've moved beyond the parasitic infection, tapped into your nerves and are using their wireless link to the others to get around the section of your spine that is infected." Vost told her.

"Are they supposed to do that?" Ted said and Vost shook his head.

"No, my modifications to their instructions were supposed to limit them to identifying the parasites and eliminating them. This is unexpected and frankly concerning." he said.

"Why? As long as they're doing their job, what does it matter what else they do?" Ted responded.

"Because if the nanoprobes can adjust their programming to fill in for parts of Elisa's body that are currently not functioning as they should then there's no telling what else they could adjust themselves to do. Making such adjustments will also cause them to consume more power and expire more quickly, possibly before

they can complete their work. I need to remove some of them to examine them more closely.” Vost said and he walked back across the laboratory to collect a small medical instrument that featured a tiny transparent cylinder. Returning with this to the biobed he pressed it to the base of Elisa’s spine.

“I’m just going to draw a sample of your spinal fluid.” he said before he activated the device.

“Ow!” she exclaimed and she twitched, knocking the device from Vost’s grip onto the biobed. Luckily he then caught it before it could fall onto the floor and break and when he looked at the device the cylinder now contained a fluid.

“That should do. Now to see what the nanoprobes are up to.” he said.

Vost took the device and the fluid sample that it contained to a workstation where he plugged the device in. Immediately the computer began to analyse the sample of fluid inside the cylinder, identifying the impurities within it. As was to be expected the sample included what looked like a high level of glucose but Vost knew that the parasites that Elisa was infected with appeared as glucose themselves thanks to their structure, more significant though were the Borg nanoprobes present within the sample. These appeared to be moving through the fluid and latching onto the glucose molecules before inserting a physical probe. In the case of the actual glucose molecules this had no effect but the probe was lethal to the parasites and once they had been killed the nanoprobes moved on in search of further prey. All of this was as Vost expected but he had not expected them to have moved so quickly to the base of Elisa’s spine and in order to try and determine why he focused the computer’s analysis on a single nanoprobe.

“How long will this take doctor?” Elisa asked and Vost turned.

“The analysis? I don’t know. Perhaps you should return to your bedroom and rest there. I’ll fetch a chair for you to limit your activity.” he replied and then he got up and went to fetch a lightweight wheel chair that was on hand should Elisa’s condition require it. He and Ted then helped her from the biobed into to the chair and pushed her from the laboratory, heading towards her bedroom. Once they were out of the laboratory though none of them were able to see as the displays on the biobed briefly changed to show lines of Borg computer code scrolling across them.



Armstrong hesitated outside the door to Castle's quarters before she pressed the intercom. As instructed she was wearing civilian clothing rather than her Starfleet uniform and she held the jacket that Castle had given her earlier in her arms. She pressed the intercom and moments later the door slid open to reveal Beth, also in civilian clothing.

"Amy, come on in." she said with a smile, "Jack's just laying out the table."

"Captain I brought your jacket back." Armstrong said, looking to where Castle was setting out three places at a dinner table. The crew quarters aboard the *Spectre* was not as spacious as aboard more modern vessels but the captain's quarters had been expanded considerably since the ship was first launched, growing from a basic cabin with a single bunk into a room large enough to accommodate a small dining table and chairs.

"Jack." Castle responded, "No ranks at dinner Amy. You can leave the jacket on the chair over there. I'll put it away later."

"How did you end up with Jack's jacket?" Beth asked, puzzled.

"Oh, er." Armstrong said, uncertain of what to say.

"Amy needed it after she was sprayed by something unpleasant on deck thirteen." Castle said and Armstrong smiled.

"Yes, that was it." she said.

"My brother the gentleman. Well take a seat." Beth said and she pointed to the table as Castle finished laying it out.

Armstrong and Beth both made their way to the table and sat down while Castle headed for the replicator, initially replicating just two meals and carrying them to the table.

"Here you, it's nothing special. The point is more to relax than indulge in gourmet dining." He said as he put the plates down in front of the two women. Then he returned to the replicator to get a meal for himself while Beth reached for the bottle of wine in the middle of the table and poured herself a drink.

"So Amy, how did you wind up in Starfleet?" she asked.

"I wanted to see things that no-one had seen before. Starfleet offered me that." Armstrong replied, "What about you?"

"Oh I visited Jack when he was a lieutenant aboard the *USS Europa*. I'd just qualified as a doctor and I was looking for a position." Beth told her.

"She was so enamoured by space travel that she practically signed up on the spot." Castle added as he sat down with his own meal.

"I spoke with Admiral Tyler, Captain back then of course and I put in my application before I even left the ship." Beth said.

"On the other hand I always wanted to join Starfleet." Castle said.

"Have you served together before?" Armstrong said and Beth shook her head.

"No. My postings before now have been aboard dedicated medical ships. We always knew that we wanted to serve together though." she said.

"Have you always been close?" Armstrong added.

"Always. Even before dad died Jack was looking out for me. It was kind of useful that people knew that if they messed with me then Jack and his friends would back me up." Beth said.

"I'm sorry I didn't know that your father was dead." Armstrong commented.

"It happened a long time ago. I was just about to go to Starfleet Academy and Beth was still in school. One day the police just came to the door and said that he'd had a heart attack while driving. Luckily no-one else was in the vehicle or hit by it." Jack said, "So what about you Amy? Do you have brothers or sisters?"

"A younger sister but we're not close. In fact we're pretty much opposites. I worked hard to get where I am now but she always found some way of getting into trouble. Mind you right now she's the one who's our parents' favourite since she stayed on Earth to work for the family business whereas according to them I'm the one who turned my back on what generations of Armstrongs worked to build." Armstrong told him.

"So your parents just ignored her behaviour then?" Beth asked.

"Oh no, they punished her but she just kept finding new ways to get into trouble. I keep waiting to hear that she's gone to jail for something but even when my parents had to go and bail her out she always got away without a custodial sentence." Armstrong said.

Castle then raised his glass.

"Here's to family then. The ones we're glad to have close to us and the ones we're glad to be far away from." he said before the intercom activated.

"Bridge to Captain Castle." N'Riss's voice said and with his combadge on his bunk Castle got up to walk to the intercom panel and activate it.

"Castle here." he said.

"Captain sensors are picking up an odd subspace signal. I thought you ought to know." N'Riss told him.

"A ship?" Castle asked.

"It's hard to tell captain. The signal is coming from the Tollas system." N'Riss answered.

"Tollas? Have you contacted the outpost?" Castle said.

"Not yet captain. I wanted to check with you just in case it was another system fault." N'Riss said.

"What's so unusual about it?" Castle said.

"It's the frequency captain. It isn't used by any communication or sensor system in our databanks. That's why it's so easy to detect." N'Riss said.

"Contact the outpost in the Tollas system and see if they're picking it up too. If not then get Lieutenant Commander Hutchins to check it out. If our subspace antenna fails then we're in trouble. Castle out." Castle ordered before he turned off the communication system and returned to the table, "Hopefully it's not another false alarm. I'd rather not be chasing system faults when we're about to head out beyond Federation space." he said as he sat down.

Vost frowned when he heard the strange sound coming from all around him. It sounded as if every piece of equipment that was capable of generating sound was doing so. The exact sound varied depending on the capability of the device generating it so rather than one constant pattern of sound there was a mixture. Devices with similar audio capabilities did seem to produce the same pattern though, an almost musical sound that consisted of an ongoing series of tones that began quietly and then grew louder before dying off again before the next cycle began. Vost tried to cancel the sound on the computer that he was sat right in front of but there did not seem to be any programs running that would generate the sound.

"What the hell? Will nothing shut this thing up?" he said, continuing to jab at the console while all around him the sound continued. Frustrated at the continuing noise he got up and strode to the main power distribution point in the laboratory. Opening the housing revealed a number of circuit breakers and rather than go through switching off individual circuits he just switched the master circuit breaker, plunging the laboratory into darkness as the lights went out.

Without power the sound from the laboratory equipment instantly ceased and Vost breathed a sigh of relief. He then waited a few seconds before he turned the breaker back to restore power and was relieved when the sound did not reoccur. However, he let out a gasp when he saw one of the computers in the room starting to reboot and rather than the standard Federation screen configuration he saw that the symbols displayed were of a Borg pattern.

The planet's otherwise barren surface featured vast structures that covered about a third of its total surface area and housed billions of beings while in the space around it were numerous orbital platforms that were in the process of being expanded in an operation that was the primary focus of the system's inhabitants. However, when a signal was received from far away the response was rapid.

"Interplexing transponder beacon detected in grid seven-seven-four-two-six reference Alpha Quadrant. No vessels known to be present at that location. Despatch single probe vessel to investigate. Assimilation will commence if considered beneficial." a voice spoke, addressing every Borg drone present on the surface and in space.

A vessel then broke from orbit around the planet. This was not one of the two massive cube shaped craft though, instead it was a relatively tiny craft less than two hundred metres long with an elongated hull shape. The probe vessel sped away from the planet towards a cluster of five massive hexagonal frames that were connected together by a central structure located far from the nearest planet. Three of the frames were inactive and space could be seen through them but the other two appeared to hold glowing portals that provided access to a tunnel of some sort that led through another dimension and it was through one of these that the probe ship flew. Taken into the transwarp conduit the probe ship continued to fly onwards, travelling the equivalent of thousands of light years in the material universe every minute until just a few minutes later it returned to the real universe with a flash of light. There was no obvious entrance to the conduit at this end, just empty space that gave no indication of what lurked at that location just within subspace.

The transwarp aperture was the closest to the source of the signal that had been detected but it was still located several light years away from the Tollas system where it had been sent from and the first thing that the Borg vessel did upon exiting the conduit was scan for the beacon. This revealed nothing though, the signal having been terminated while the probe ship had been travelling. The orders to investigate the source of the signal were still valid though so the ship turned towards the Tollas system and went to warp.

Ted looked around when he entered the laboratory to see Vost hurrying about from one workstation to another.

"I came as soon as I got your message. What's going on?" he asked.

"We've had a containment breach, that's what's happened." Vost answered as he reached another computer terminal and began to check it, "This one looks clear." he commented.

"Clear? Clear of what?" Ted said.

"Borg nanoprobes, that's what." Vost replied, "Some of them must have got loose when I gave your wife that injection. I tracked the source of the probes to the biobed but they managed to spread around the lab."

Ted looked around in horror, expecting to see clusters of black machinery suddenly start sprouting from anywhere.

"Then we need to get out of here. We need to contact the authorities." he said.

"Don't be so weak." Vost scolded him, "I can handle this. Remember that the probes that I injected into Elisa were modified to prevent self replication. They can move and spread but they can't increase in number so the chances of them suddenly assimilating even this room are almost non-existent but still I need to destroy them before they can spread beyond this room and start interfacing with planetary control systems."

"What do you need?" Ted said.

"Time. I need to check every workstation to see how far the nanoprobes have been able to spread but I need this building to remain as isolated as possible. Can you have a forcefield generator brought in? I need something bigger than the small units I've been using for my work." Vost responded.

"A forcefield generator? That could take some time and raise some questions. There are no large predators on Tollas Prime that would warrant the use of-" Ted began.

"I don't care about that. I just need a forcefield generator here quickly. The nanoprobes may still be able to pass through it but at I ought to be able to detect them as they do." Vost interrupted.

"I'll see what I can do. What about everyone else in the house? Should I send them away?" Ted asked.

"No. No-one should leave the grounds. When you have obtained the forcefield generator have it beamed here rather than flown. I don't want to risk nanoprobes clinging onto anyone or anything to get out." Vost said.

"What if you can't find them? Do we stay cooped up here forever?" Ted said.

"Of course not. The nanoprobes will run out of power eventually. They have reserves that will last them no more than a week. Less if they do anything to expend their energy more rapidly. But a week is a long time in which they can cause problems for us. I doubt they'll be able to cause any real damage but they could draw attention to what we're doing here and then we'll all have some rather awkward questions to answer." Vost told him.

Castle made sure that he was on the bridge when the *Spectre* dropped out of warp in the Tollas system. By approaching from off the orbital plane of the system the ship was able to get close to Tollas Prime before dropping to sublight speed. Hutchins' investigation had revealed that the energy spike within the warp core was due to nothing more than circuits switching so there was no fault to correct, meaning that as the *Spectre* approached its destination it was fully functional.

While there were small outposts scattered throughout the Tollas system, Tollas Prime was the only class-M planet present and so it was the centre of civilisation in the system and was orbited by a Starfleet outpost as well as several other space stations and a network of communication and navigation satellites. Not as large or capable as a full starbase, the outpost was nevertheless capable of defending the planet against pirates and even military starships providing they were not too great in number.

"Captain, we're being hailed. It's the outpost." the officer sat at the operations console announced and Castle nodded.

"On screen." he said and the image on the main viewscreen at the front of the bridge changed from showing the space around Tollas Prime to the interior of the operations centre of the orbiting outpost where the camera was focused on a man in a Starfleet uniform from the command division with the rank of commander.

"*USS Spectre* welcome to Tollas. I'm Commander Trent, the commanding officer of this outpost." the man said.

"Thank you commander. Hopefully we won't be troubling you for too long." Castle replied.

"It's always a pleasure to have a starship visit us captain but right now you've caught us in a somewhat confused state. It relates to that subspace signal that I've been told you also detected." Trent said.

"Ah so you did detect it. We've had a few system issues so I wanted to make sure. So what do you make of it commander?" Castle asked.

"Right now very little. It was broadcast from Tollas' own planetary communication network. There was an outage that lasted just over four minutes during which the only signal that could get through was that one. Fortunately our communications weren't affected at all which suggests that it was a network issue but so far neither my people nor the local network staff have been able to identify where it came from. The disruption was so strong that we can't even tell if it originated from Tollas Prime or if the signal was transmitted in from elsewhere and then amplified by our network." Trent answered.

"Where else could it have come from commander?" Castle said.

"Our planetary network serves the entire system captain. Every ship, probe and outpost is connected to it

and any of them could have uploaded the signal using an in system transmitter. We don't monitor civilian communications so there's no way of us knowing what is being sent. Right now there are engineers studying every access request to the network for the last twenty-four hours. I'm not taking the chance that it wasn't a live broadcast signal but there's only so much information that people can sift through at once. If nothing's found then we'll go back further." Trent explained.

"Okay, while you're studying the network issue I'll have my science department take a look at the signal itself. Maybe knowing something more about it will help. I plan on being in orbit for a day or two before we head out." Castle said.

"Thank you captain, the help is appreciated. In the meantime you are cleared to enter orbit and we have someone to beam over to you, a Lieutenant Ashton." Trent said.

"No Lieutenant Commander Baker?" Castle asked.

"No, she beamed down to the surface last night and hasn't returned. I believe that she was going out to celebrate her new posting. If she'd returned then I'd have probably asked her to take a look at the signal myself. It's a shame to be losing her." Trent said.

"Can you give me details of her combadge? I'll see about beaming her straight up to the *Spectre*." Castle said.

"Of course, I'll send the information over straight away." Trent replied.

"Thank you commander. Spectre out." Castle said before he closed the channel and turned to look at Armstrong, "Commander when we receive the code for Lieutenant Commander Baker's combadge could you contact her and advise her that she is needed aboard the Spectre?" he said and Armstrong nodded.

"Of course captain." she replied.

"Thank you. Helm take us into a standard orbit within transporter range of the Starfleet outpost and await further orders." Castle added.

"Yes captain. Standard orbit. N'Riss responded as she guided the *Spectre* into orbit around Tollas Prime.

"Captain I have the data for Lieutenant Commander Baker's combadge and I have a lock on it but I can't establish communication with it." Armstrong said from her console.

"You're definitely using the right identification?" Castle said and Armstrong nodded.

"Definitely captain. Copied directly from the message sent by Tollas control." Armstrong replied and she pointed to a display that showed a map with a glowing white at the centre of the image, "This is where the combadge is located. Looks like a commercial district on the surface below us. A hotel to be precise."

"What's the local time?" Castle asked.

"A little after nine in the morning." Armstrong replied.

"Then our science officer may have just overslept after enjoying herself last night." Castle said and he looked toward K'Ran, "Lieutenant K'Ran please join me in transporter room one. If Commander Baker isn't coming to us then I think that we ought to go and pay her a visit instead. Commander Armstrong, you'll have the conn until I get back." he said.

"Captain perhaps I should go instead." Armstrong suggested.

"No I want you to liaise with the crew of the outpost. Make sure that the information we have about the subspace signal is complete, including any details they may have about how it progressed through their communication network. Perhaps an analysis of the signal will give us some clues to its origin as well as its purpose." Castle said while K'Ran got up and approached him. The two officers then made their way to the nearest turbolift and left the bridge.

## 7.

Although the planet that Castle and K'Ran were beaming down to was a Federation world and considered safe both men still carried phasers as a precaution when they entered the transporter room just as the transporter was being energised and there was a cluster of glowing lights on the pad as a figure materialised.

"Just beaming someone over from the station now captain." The transporter operator said as the two officers entered the room.

"Must be Lieutenant Ashton." Castle said, glancing at K'Ran and moments later the lights on the transporter coalesced into the form of a Starfleet officer in the uniform of the operations division. The man looked down from the pad and when he saw Castle he smiled.

"Captain Castle, Lieutenant Ashton reporting for duty sir." he said, stepping off the transporter pad, "I didn't expect you to meet me in person."

"Pleased to meet you lieutenant. Though my being here is a coincidence. Lieutenant K'Ran and I were just about to beam down to the surface to try and find our science officer. If you head to the bridge then Lieutenant Commander Armstrong will be able to direct you to your quarters so you can get settled in." Castle told him.

"Hopefully not on deck thirteen." K'Ran commented and Castle glanced at him.

"He's only just come aboard and already you're telling him about the ghosts?" he said.

"Ghosts? Seriously?" Ashton said.

"Ghosts, apparitions. I wasn't going to mention it." Castle said.

"He needs to know sometime captain. Better now than waiting for him to flee the deck as well." K'Ran said and Castle sighed.

"I suppose so." He said and then he looked at Ashton again, "We'll catch up when I get back. In the meantime welcome aboard the *USS Spectre* lieutenant."

"Thank you captain." Ashton said and Castle and K'Ran waited for him to leave the room before Castle tapped his combadge.

"Castle to Armstrong." he said.

"Yes captain?" Armstrong's voice responded.

"Lieutenant Ashton has beamed aboard and I've sent him up to you. Could you let him think that he has quarters on deck thirteen?" Castle told her.

"Deck thirteen captain? But I've assigned him-" Armstrong began.

"The lieutenant has just been informed of some of the unusual goings on on deck thirteen commander." Castle interrupted.

"Oh I see. Very good captain. I'll see to it." Armstrong said.

"Thank you commander. Castle out." Castle said before tapping his combadge again. Then he turned to the transporter operator who had remained silent while Castle and K'Ran spoke to Ashton and was still smiling, "Crewman do you have the co-ordinates for Lieutenant Commander Baker's combadge?" he asked.

"Yes captain. The system indicates that it's a hotel. I can put you down in the lobby." the crewman answered.

"That will do fine crewman." Castle said and he and K'Ran both stepped onto the transporter pad,

"Energise." Castle ordered.

Castle and K'Ran materialised in the lobby of the hotel just as intended. Having someone beam into the lobby was not that unusual in itself but the fact that a pair of armed Starfleet officers had just appeared did provoke a few concerned glances from others present. The two men promptly walked up to the desk where there was a nervous looking receptionist.

"May I help you?" the young woman asked.

"There is a Katherine Baker here. She's a Starfleet officer and we need to speak with her." Castle said.

The woman then looked at her computer.

"We do have a Katherine Baker listed. I can call her room though there is a do not disturb marker on it." the woman behind the desk said.

"If you could." Castle said and the woman reached for her intercom, keying in the room number. The intercom chimed, indicating that the other end was sounding in the hotel room but there was no response to the call.

"I'm sorry but the room isn't responding." the receptionist said.

"Perhaps we should go and knock." K'Ran suggested and Castle nodded.

"What's the room number?" he asked the receptionist, "Don't worry, we won't break the door down unless it's absolutely necessary."

"Room B-seven." the woman replied.

"Thank you." Castle replied before he and K'Ran headed for a nearby turbolift.

The turbolift took them to the floor where all the rooms had the 'B' prefix and they quickly located the one that they were after. A small display beside the door showed the words 'DO NOT DISTURB' but Castle pressed the intercom anyway and waited. However, once again there was no response.

"Allow me captain." K'Ran said, stepping towards the door and he knocked with his fist, "Open up, Starfleet security." he called out as he knocked.

"Hold on I'm coming, I'm coming." a woman's voice called out from within the room.

"Looks like you got her attention." Castle commented before the door was opened by a woman struggling to fasten the back of her dress. Looking out of her room she immediately saw the captain's rank marking on Castle's collar and realised who he was.

"Captain Castle?" she said.

"Lieutenant Commander Baker?" Castle replied.

"Yes captain. I'm so sorry. I was celebrating at a bar just across the street last night and after I'd had a lot to drink I decided to stay here rather than go back to the outpost. I guess I overslept." Baker said, "Am I in a lot of trouble?"

"Don't worry commander, you're not AWOL yet. Just grab your things and we can get up to the ship. There's something I need you to take a look at." Castle told her.

"Of course. Could I just ask you to zip me up?" Baker said, turning around and Castle smiled.

"As you wish." He said before zipping up the dress.

"I'll just get my bag and shoes." Baker added, dashing back into the room and then reappearing with a small bag and her shoes in her hands as well as her combadge fixed to the front of her dress, "Okay, I'm ready. Though do you mind if I call in at sickbay when we get aboard the ship? My head is pounding."

Baker used one of the replicators in sickbay to produce a fresh uniform while Beth checked the results of the scan she had run of the science officer.

"How much did you have to drink last night?" Beth asked and Baker hesitated as she was putting on her boots.

"It all gets a bit blurry later on." she said, "I started out with just a few synthehol based drinks but then decided to celebrate with a bottle of something real."

"Was it paint remover?" Beth commented.

"It was blue so it might have been Romulan Ale. Or maybe Andorian." Baker replied.

"All that just to celebrate a promotion to lieutenant commander?" Beth said.

"Mainly to celebrate my divorce being finalised. I never have to speak to that creep again. The promotion also pretty much guarantees that I won't need to see him and his new girlfriend either." Baker said.

"Oh I see." Beth responded, "I'm sorry to hear about that. Jack's divorced as well but he's on good terms with his wife."

"Jack? You mean the captain? Of course, you're his sister aren't you?" Baker said and Beth nodded.

"Yes, I'm his sister." she said.

"And you're happy about serving with him?" Baker added.

"Of course. I wouldn't have accepted the post if I wasn't." Beth said, "It was always our intention to try and get a posting together and the *Spectre* gave us that."

"So what can you tell me about the rest of the senior staff?" Baker asked.

"The only ones I've really spoken with are our chief engineer and first officer." Beth answered, "Our engineer has come from a lecturing position at Starfleet Academy. He wants to complete one last tour before he retires. As for our first officer she's a real high flyer apparently. Young, talented, pretty."

"Sounds just like the woman my ex-husband left me for. I think I hate her already." Baker commented.

"She's actually quite nice." Beth said as she got up and walked to a nearby replicator just as a large glass of water and three small tablets materialised, "Though if she doesn't learn to relax she's going to have a complete breakdown. Now you take these and drink this entire glass. They'll solve your headache, get some fluids back into you and make you less sensitive to sudden noises and bright lights. I should warn you though I don't make a habit of curing hangovers." Beth added as she took the water and tablets from the replicator and handed them to Baker.

"Don't worry I'm not in the habit of getting so drunk that I have one." Baker said as she took them, placed the tablets in her mouth and then washed them down with the water, "Well time for me to go and demonstrate to the captain that I'm not just some lush." she added.

The mood in the bridge when Baker entered was generally light hearted, with jokes being made about Ashton's living quarter assignment and when Baker entered he looked at her and called out.

"If you haven't been assigned quarters yet commander then don't let them tell you that you're on deck thirteen with the ghosts." he said.

"Ghosts?" Baker commented.

"Long story commander." Castle replied, "Right now there's a subspace signal that I want you to take a look at. All the details have been passed to your station. There are the readings we took as well as additional data from the outpost."

"Yes captain." Baker said, nodding her head as she made her way to the science station and sat down. Exactly as Castle had told her there were already two sets of data available to her, the first a log recorded by the *Spectre's* own sensors while the other had been provided by the outpost. Both of these contained information about the mysterious subspace signal that had been broadcast from Tollas Prime's own network and Baker frowned when she looked at this.

"Something wrong commander?" Castle asked when he noticed this.

"These readings are most unusual captain. They appeared to indicate that there was an incredibly powerful release of subspace energy from the planet's satellite network." Baker said.

"That much we know. The outpost crew are trying to determine the source. I'd like you to tell me what the signal was." Castle replied.

"Captain from these readings it doesn't look like the signal could have served any useful purpose. The energy output seems to have been directed far deeper into subspace than any ordinary communication or active sensor signal." Baker explained and Castle got up and walked across the bridge towards her, looking at the displays on her console.

"So there's nothing that deep in subspace that anyone could be interested in?" he asked.

"There could be something there captain but with our technology we can't detect it. This energy is going too deep." Baker told him.

"Captain there have been some warnings about a hostile alien species within subspace who were attracted by a modified sensor signal beamed deeper into subspace than normal." K'Ran commented and Castle nodded.

"Yes, I saw the same report before the Dominion War." he replied before turning back towards Baker, "Is there any benefit to sending a signal so deep into subspace?" he said.

"In theory a communication signal beamed deeper into subspace would reach its destination much faster. However, it would require a receiver that could see equally deep at the other end. Nothing used by the Federation even comes close." Baker told him.

"Nothing by the Federation? What about anyone else?" Castle said.

"The only species known to use such deep subspace communications are the Borg captain and there are no Borg in this system." Baker answered before Ashton looked up from his console.

"Captain the outpost just went to red alert. They've raised their shields." he said.

"They are powering weapons as well captain. Phasers and torpedoes." Armstrong added as she checked her own console.

"What the hell is going on?" Castle said.

"They aren't running any targeting sweeps captain but they're definitely getting ready to engage something." Ashton added.

"Captain should we go to red alert as well?" K'Ran asked.

"Just yellow alert for now. Raise shields but don't arm weapons yet. Lieutenant Ashton hail them, I want to know what's going on now." Castle ordered.

"Captain the outpost is hailing us now." Ashton responded.

"On screen." Castle said and the face of Commander Trent appeared on the main viewscreen once again.

"Commander what's happening?" Castle asked.

"Our long-range sensors have picked up a vessel approaching the system at warp nine from outside Federation territory. We aren't expecting any vessels from that heading and the closest match for the warp signature that we can find in the Starfleet database is Borg." Trent said.

"Captain, Lieutenant Commander Baker must have been right about the signal." Armstrong said.

"Right about the signal?" Trent said.

"Yes commander, it looks like the mysterious subspace signal that your communication network emitted was some sort of Borg broadcast. I wouldn't be surprised if the approaching ship is coming to investigate it." Castle said and Trent frowned.

"But that would mean that someone summoned them here. Who would do something like that?" he said.

"A question for later. Right now we have to worry about that Borg ship. Even the combined firepower of the *Spectre* and your outpost might not be enough to stop it so the first order of business has to be getting reinforcements. I suggest that you send a distress call to all ships in the sector and have them come here at maximum warp." Castle said.

"Already done captain. Though I don't hold out any hope of reinforcements arriving before the Borg do.

They'll be here in just under four hours and the closest starship other than the *Spectre* is still more than a day away at maximum warp." Trent said.

"In that case we'll just have to try and hold the Borg off until they get here. When the Borg approach I expect that they'll head directly for you. You're the biggest target in orbit and the only one capable of putting up a fight. I'll position the *Spectre* in the shadow of Tollas Prime's moon. Hopefully the Borg won't notice us and will fly right by on their way towards you. Then we'll catch them from behind while you hit them with everything you have from the front." Castle said.

"I was considering requisitioning commercial ships to assist with the defence as well. There are some in the system that carry some defensive weapons. Pulse cannons and light phasers but better than nothing." Trent said but Castle shook his head.

"No, they'd be sitting ducks for Borg weapons." he pointed out, "Have them take on as many passengers as they can carry and get out of here. Even if we can't save the entire system then maybe we can save a few thousand of its inhabitants. The same goes for any other warp capable ship. Tell them to leave."

"Very well captain, I'll give the order immediately." Trent replied.

"One more thing commander, if we're going to be using your moon for cover then we'll need a tactical feed from your station." Castle added and Trent nodded.

"Of course. I'll have it set up immediately." he said.

"Thank you commander. Hopefully we'll be able to get through this together. *Spectre* out." Castle said before he closed the channel and looked around the bridge, "Okay I know that this wasn't what any of us were expecting but this ship and the outpost are all that is standing between the Borg and tens of thousands of Federation citizens. We have a plan and we're going to carry it out. Lieutenant N'Riss, position us in a low orbit over the moon so that we're hidden from view from anyone approaching the planet from the direction of the border. Be ready to come to full impulse on my command. Lieutenant Ashton I want you liaise with the outpost. Make sure that our tactical feed remains up. Lieutenant K'Ran arm all weapons. I want phasers and photon torpedoes ready to fire at a moment's notice. Set the phasers to adjust their frequencies at random after each shot to limit the Borg's ability to adapt. Also deploy armed security teams to all decks. The Borg may board us so we need to be ready to respond. Any other crewman who wants a phaser may carry one as well. Lieutenant Commander Baker I need you to study every sensor reading we get about the Borg vessel. Look for any signs of weakness." Castle added, knowing that even with the help of the outpost the *USS Spectre* was no match for a Borg cube or sphere. Fleeing was not an option either though, even without resorting to the use of their transwarp conduits Borg cubes and spheres could outrun an Excelsior-class starship like the *Spectre*. The best he could hope for was that they would be able to hold out long enough for reinforcements to arrive.

**B.**

Vost was in the process of setting up the forcefield generator in the basement of the building that contained his laboratory that Ted had supplied when the intercom activated and Vost walked over to the panel.

"Is this important?" Vost said into it.

"Haven't you seen the news?" Ted's voice responded and Vost sighed.

"Of course not, I've been trying to contain these nanoprobes." he said.

"Well nanoprobes are about to be the least of our worries. It's just been announced that there is a Borg ship on its way here. Starfleet is getting ready to engage it but it's doubtful that they'll be able to hold the Borg for long. Other ships are leaving orbit now before the Borg can get here. Those that can are fleeing the system entirely, others are just heading into the outer system to try and hide there." Ted told him and Vost hesitated, suspecting that it was his work that had drawn the Borg here. The escaped nanoprobes had obviously used the network connection that they had established to contact what remained of the Borg Collective and given the speed with which they had responded it seemed that the Collective was not the spent force some hoped that it was.

"Do you want to leave?" he asked eventually.

"Want, yes, but the ship isn't ready for launch. We're stuck here." Ted answered.

"I'm going to finish setting up the forcefield generator. Get everyone into the laboratory, it might provide us with some protection. Bring whatever weapons you have. If the Borg start beaming down then the forcefield might hold them back for a while." Vost told him.

"But what about the escaped nanoprobes?" Ted pointed out.

"Don't worry about them. There aren't enough of them to harm us. It's drones beaming down that we need to worry about." Vost replied.

Normal Starfleet doctrine called for phasers to be set to 'stun' when issued but stun settings were ineffective against Borg drones so the weapons now issued to the Spectre's crew were set to fire lethal blasts instead. The phasers were also set to adjust the precise frequency of their beams after each firing to limit the effectiveness of the Borg drones' personal shielding but even with this not guaranteed to maintain their effectiveness for long. In previous encounters between Starfleet and the Borg they had proven adept at determining the algorithms used to adjust the beams and modifying their shields to compensate.

"Bridge this is sickbay." Beth's voice said over the intercom suddenly.

"Go ahead doctor." Castle responded, keeping his words formal even to his sister.

"We're as ready as we can be down here to treat the sorts of injuries that can be expected in ship-to-ship combat but I wanted to remind you that there's nothing that I can do about Borg nanoprobes. Everyone needs to be reminded to avoid close contact with drones at all costs." Beth said.

"Hopefully we won't be boarded at all but I can't make any promises about that Beth." Castle replied.

"I'd like to deploy medical teams to different areas of the ship. Where is the best place for them?" Beth asked and Castle glanced towards the tactical station.

"Co-ordinate with security. They have response teams around the ship already so it's probably best for your people and theirs to work together." he told Beth.

"Okay, I'll see what K'Ran has to say. Thanks. Sickbay out." she responded before she closed the channel. Castle then reactivated the intercom.

"Bridge to engineering." he said into it.

"Engineering here." Hutchins' voice responded.

"Commander what's your status?" Castle asked.

"All set down here captain, though I hope it doesn't become necessary to start firing the phasers everyone's carrying near the warp core." Hutchins replied.

"Clearly. As I told the good doctor I'm not planning on us being boarded but it's something that we have to be prepared for." Castle said, "What about the core itself? Have there been any more disruptions since that last spike?"

"No captain, it was just an isolated incident. You've got full warp and impulse power available on your command captain." Hutchins told him.

"Very good, we'll probably need it." Castle said, "I take that you have already organised damage control parties?"

"Yes, I've got a dozen teams of six put together using my people and extras drafted in from the operations department. They're on standby to respond to any damage and are armed, just in case we do get any uninvited visitors." Hutchins told him.

“Excellent. Then it looks like we’re as ready as we can be. Bridge out.” Castle replied before he turned off the intercom again.

“Captain, we’re getting a tactical feed from the outpost. The Borg vessel has come close enough for them to get a better look at.” Ashton announced.

“On screen.” Castle ordered and the main viewscreen changed to show the approaching Borg ship.

“What is that?” Armstrong said as she looked at the elongated vessel, “I’ve never heard of a Borg ship like that.”

“Vessel measures only one hundred and eighty metres in length captain.” Ashton said.

“Interesting. Not a cube and not a sphere. Some kind of scout ship perhaps?” Castle commented.

“Captain there is a vessel such as this in our database.” Baker said from the science station.

“Really?” Armstrong said and Baker nodded.

“Yes commander. Encountered only once in the Delta Quadrant by the *USS Voyager*. They believed that it was some sort of probe craft intended to search for targets to assimilate though quite capable of carrying out assimilation on its own if the target was small enough.” she said.

“Does the database indicate whether the *Voyager* was able to get any information about its tactical capability?” Castle asked.

“Yes captain. Their scans indicated that the ship had firepower roughly equal to that of an Intrepid-class ship.” Baker answered.

“Then we outgun them.” K’Ran said and Castle looked at Baker.

“Yes captain, we outgun them significantly.” she said.

“The Borg can adapt.” Armstrong pointed out.

“Yes but our desperate last stand just became a whole lot less desperate.” Castle replied, “Lieutenant Commander Baker go over the records in the database and see whether they mention any vulnerabilities that the class had when encountered by the *Voyager*.”

“Yes captain.” Baker said.

“Lieutenant K’Ran be prepared to target any co-ordinates given to you by Commander Baker. If this is just a scout and we outgun them then hopefully we can destroy their ship with a single volley.” Castle said.

“Without giving them the chance to adapt to our weapons.” Ashton commented and Castle smiled at him.

“Exactly lieutenant.” he replied.

“Captain the Borg vessel has dropped out of warp.” Armstrong said when the feed from the outpost indicated that the Borg ship had decelerated to sublight speed.

“Think they know we’re here?” Ashton commented.

“Unlikely. The moon should be concealing us.” K’Ran responded.

“However, if the ship is responded to the signal sent from Tollas Prime then there may already be Borg on the surface who could be in contact with them. We are visible from the surface and that information could be relayed to the Borg ship.” Baker pointed out.

“Are we picking up any signals from the surface?” Castle asked.

“Lots captain. The planetary communication network is running at capacity.” Ashton said.

“People who can’t leave are perhaps trying to contact loved ones in other systems.” Armstrong suggested.

“The planetary government should have killed all interstellar links when the Borg ship was detected.” Castle said, “Oh well, too late for that now.”

“Captain the Borg ship has just stopped.” Ashton said suddenly.

“Where?” Castle asked.

“Two light minutes from the planet captain.” Ashton answered.

“Outside weapons range.” K’Ran pointed out.

“Captain the emissions from the Borg ship indicate that they are scanning the space around the planet.” Baker said.

“Maybe they realise that they’ve bitten off more than they can chew.” Castle commented.

“Captain I’m picking up a transmission. Looks like it’s coming from the Borg ship but is bouncing off every communication satellite in orbit. Audio only.” Ashton said.

“Let’s hear it lieutenant.” Castle said and Ashton played the transmission over the bridge speakers.

“We are the Borg. Lower your shields and surrender your ships. We will add your biological and technological distinctiveness to our own. Your culture will adapt to service us. Resistance is futile.”

“As friendly as ever I see.” Castle said, “Is the Borg ship doing anything now?”

“No captain, she’s just waiting.” Ashton said.

“Captain do you want to intercept the ship?” N’Riss asked.

“No, stick with the plan. Let them come to us first.” Castle replied.

“Captain the Borg ship is moving.” Ashton announced.

“Coming towards us?” Armstrong said but Ashton shook his head.

“No they are coming towards the planet but their course will take them around it.” he told her.

“They know that they don’t have the weapons to take on the outpost and win.” Castle said.

"But if they move over the planetary horizon then they can beam drones down to the surface to begin assimilating the population." Armstrong pointed out.

"And they can construct the weapons they need to destroy the outpost." K'Ran added.

"Helm stand by to come to full impulse. As soon as the Borg ship moves within lunar orbit we move. Tactical you may fire as soon as a target presents itself." Castle ordered.

"Aye captain. Phasers and photon torpedoes ready to fire." K'Ran said.

Based off the sensor data being relayed by the outpost K'Riss turned the *Spectre* so that it would be facing directly towards the Borg vessel when it moved past the moon that the Starfleet cruiser was using for concealment. The moon also served to hide the Borg probe ship for a short time as it passed behind the natural satellite and disappeared from the outpost's sensors. This lasted for only a few seconds though before the ship reappeared directly ahead of the *Spectre*.

"Now!" Castle exclaimed and N'Riss engaged the *Spectre's* impulse drive at full power, rapidly sending the cruiser towards the Borg ship. At the same time K'Ran locked the *Spectre's* weapons onto the vessel and released a volley of four photon torpedoes straight at it.

The four torpedoes sped towards the Borg ship but it opened fire with its beam weapons as they closed and one of them was hit, causing it to explode far short of its target. A second torpedo went wide, its guidance confused by jamming from the Borg vessel but the other two both hit their target in rapid succession. The Borg shields absorbed a significant portion of the energy released by the first torpedo detonation but the second hit before the shields could fully regenerate and most of the torpedo's energy was absorbed by the hull, blasting a large hole in it and sending debris, including a number of Borg drones flying out into space. K'Ran followed the torpedo strike with blasts from the *Spectre's* phaser banks and three rapid shots cut yet more from the Borg ship's hull. The Borg ship then returned fire with its own weapons and the *Spectre* shook as a pair of particle beams struck its shields.

"Shields down to eighty-five percent captain." Ashton reported before a third beam hit the *Spectre*, "Shields holding." Ashton added.

"The Borg don't seem to have adapted to our shield frequency rotation." Baker commented.

"Hopefully they won't get the chance." Castle said as K'Ran fired the ship's phasers again, three banks firing one after another and two more holes were cut into the Borg ship's hull before the third beam was absorbed entirely by the Borg shields.

"Captain the Borg have adapted to our phasers." K'Ran said.

"Try our torpedoes." Armstrong responded and K'Ran fired another pair of photon torpedoes, both of which struck the Borg ship and produced large explosions as they detonated, leaving behind obvious damage to the ship's hull.

"At least our torpedoes still work." Castle said, "Maintain fire with torpedoes. Lieutenant Commander Baker see if you can find us a target to aim for."

"I'll try captain but Borg ships are far more generalised than our own." Baker replied.

"The thing has to have a warp core somewhere." Castle commented.

Two more torpedoes sped towards the Borg ship and in response it turned sharply, using its electronic jamming to disrupt the torpedo guidance and preventing them from keeping their lock. Then as both torpedoes flew past the Borg ship harmlessly it returned fire again and a Borg beam struck the *Spectre's* secondary hull.

"Captain that beam cut right through our shields." Armstrong said as her console registered damage to the *Spectre*.

"Decompression on deck nineteen." Ashton announced, "Casualties have been reported. Engineering and medical teams are en route."

"Bridge to engineering. We have hull damage." Castle said into the intercom.

"Yes captain, I've sent a team to assess the damage now. It doesn't look like any critical systems have been hit though." Hutchins responded.

"Very good. Keep me informed. Bridge out." Castle said, turning off the intercom and looking towards Baker,

"Baker what can you tell me about the Borg vessel? Is she badly damaged?"

"Difficult to say exactly captain." Baker responded, "Overall power output from the vessel has decreased by twelve percent but more appears to be being directed towards internal systems rather than propulsion, shields and weapons."

"Using power to conduct repairs?" Armstrong suggested.

"That would be my guess, yes." Baker agreed.

"Then let's see if we can press our advantage before they can make full repairs." Castle said, "Baker can you adjust our phasers to a new frequency band to make them more effective?"

"It may be possible captain." Baker responded.

"Good. Give it your best. In the meantime K'Ran maintain fire with torpedoes." Castle ordered.

"Torpedoes away captain." K'Ran responded as four more photon torpedoes shot from the *Spectre's* launchers and the Borg ship accelerated away from the torpedo salvo headed towards it. This did nothing to

disrupt the targeting of the torpedoes though and there was a series of explosions as the weapons all struck their target, the fourth being significantly larger as something volatile inside the Borg ship also exploded, producing a brief plume of green flame. The Borg ship returned fire again but this time the beam weapon it fired failed to penetrate the *Spectre's* shields.

"Looks like they're heading for the atmosphere captain." Ashton said.

"Captain if they make it to low altitude then there's a significant risk of surface collateral damage from firing torpedoes at them." Armstrong pointed out, well aware of the destructive potential of a torpedo detonation within a planet's atmosphere.

"Captain I'm not sure that the Borg vessel would survive entry into the atmosphere without decelerating significantly." Baker added, "Our sensor readings indicate that they are directing an increasing amount of power to internal systems."

"Maybe not but even if they break up in the upper atmosphere some debris might survive to impact the surface. Where are we with phasers?" Castle replied.

"I have calculated an adjusted frequency band based on the Borg's current energy signature that ought to be effective captain." Baker told him and he nodded.

"Good. Lieutenant K'Ran, continue to favour torpedoes but fire all phasers if it looks like the Borg are going to try entering the atmosphere." he ordered.

"Yes captain." K'Ran responded.

"Borg vessel is now within two hundred kilometres of the atmosphere captain." Ashton reported.

"What are they doing if they can't enter it though?" N'Riss said.

"Just stay on them lieutenant." Castle said.

"Maybe they're out of control." Armstrong suggested.

"Doesn't sound like the Borg to me commander. I thought control was what they did." Ashton replied before he added, "One hundred kilometres to atmosphere."

"Fire all weapons. Phasers and torpedoes." Castle ordered.

"Aye captain." K'Ran said as he launched another volley of torpedoes and this time followed them up with successive blasts from the *Spectre's* phaser banks.

Already heavily damaged, the shields surrounding the Borg vessel collapsed entirely under the torpedo onslaught, leaving the *Spectre's* phasers able to directly strike the structure of the ship. Baker's retuning of the phaser frequencies proved successful and each hit bored deep into the Borg ship's core until the main warp core was breached and there was a massive explosion that consumed the entire vessel.

"Target destroyed captain." K'Ran said with a smile.

"Excellent shooting Lieutenant K'Ran. Commander Baker, analysis." Castle said.

"Sensors suggest a warp core containment failure captain." Baker replied.

"Think there's anything left to salvage?" Armstrong added.

"Possibly. Though given how close we are to the atmosphere I recommend using a tractor beam to pull debris into a more stable orbit while we gather it." Baker suggested and Castle nodded.

"See to it Lieutenant Ashton." he ordered before activating the intercom, "Bridge to engineering." he said into it.

"Engineering here captain." Hutchins replied.

"Commander we've destroyed the Borg vessel. What's our status?" Castle asked.

"Good captain. We have only one hull breach and none of our systems are compromised." Hutchins answered.

"I'm glad to hear it commander. Does that mean that you have some people to spare for a little analysis?" Castle said.

"Debris from the Borg ship captain?" Hutchins said.

"Correct commander. There may not be much left but I want whatever there is securing and cataloguing. Maybe we'll get lucky and something useful will have survived the explosion." Castle told him.

"Understood captain. I'll start putting a team together now." Hutchins said.

"I'll have the debris brought into cargo bay two. A science and security team will meet you there commander." Castle told him.

"Security?" Hutchins commented.

"I'd rather not take any chances. Bridge out." Castle replied before he closed the channel and looked around the bridge, "Lieutenant Ashton, direct debris to cargo bay two. Baker, K'Ran, both of you need to put together your own teams to assist in the analysis of the debris and to make sure that anything that turns out to still be active is properly contained." he ordered.

"Message coming in from the outpost captain." Ashton announced and Castle nodded.

"On screen." he said and Commander Trent's image appeared on the main view screen again, "Commander I'm happy to report that the Borg vessel has been destroyed." Castle told him

"Yes captain, we saw it on our sensors, relayed via the planet's satellite network. Congratulations on a confirmed kill. We don't have any other Borg vessels on our sensors but just in case I've ordered a number

of probes be launched, seven in total. One will track back the route that we think the Borg ship took to get here while the others will be spaced out around it equally just in case there is anything significant waiting just off the route." Trent responded.

"That sounds like a good idea. If this probe was the just vanguard of an invading force then we need to know. It may be a bit soon to cancel the request for reinforcements. In the meantime the *Spectre* is going to carry out an analysis of the debris to see whether there is anything useful. We'll enforce a no-fly zone around the area as well just to make sure that no souvenir hunters decide to try their luck." Castle said.

"Excellent idea captain. Let me know if you need anything. The resources of the outpost are at your disposal." Trent told him.

"Thank you commander, I'll bear that in mind." Castle replied.

## 3.

Although the Borg probe ship had been able to keep clear of the orbiting Starfleet outpost and its weapons it had been observed by numerous other satellites and footage of the battle had been broadcast by civilian news services to everyone on the planet able to watch and there was great celebration at the sight of the Borg ship exploding just beyond the atmosphere. This included the Goodwin household where the Goodwins and Vost witnessed the Borg probe's destruction on a viewscreen.

"Fortunately it appeared to have only been a small vessel. Something that the local Starfleet forces could handle." Vost said.

"So that's it then? No more Borg?" Jessica asked.

"It's impossible to say. The Borg have previously given up following the destruction of their vessels but this was only a scout ship of some kind." Vost said.

"What about the nanoprobes that escaped?" Ted added.

"They are contained within this building at least. Now that the Borg in space have been dealt with I ought to be able to-" Vost began before the lights in the laboratory flickered briefly.

"What happened?" Alex said.

"A problem with the power?" Elisa suggested.

"No, the generators you have here should be more than capable of keeping everything powered, even with the drain from the shield." Vost responded and he dashed to a nearby console, "I'm accessing your security system." he said.

"The security system, why?" Ted said.

"Because I want to make sure that-" Vost began before he stopped speaking suddenly.

"Doctor Vost, what's wrong?" Elisa asked.

"Your estate's perimeter sensors have detected a transporter signature close by." Vost said, "About twenty individuals beamed down a few minutes ago, though I'm not sure that calling them individuals is correct."

Vost answered and Alex frowned.

"What does that even mean?" he said.

"It means that they are Borg drones," Vost told him, "and I suspect that they are trying to get here."

Ted immediately ran towards a long equipment case that was among the supplies brought to the laboratory from the house and opened it to reveal a phaser rifle. The weapon was not the latest generation of phaser used by Starfleet or any of the Federation's various military forces but it was functional and capable of firing lethal blasts.

It had been obvious to the collective intelligence driving the Borg probe ship that its destruction was imminent. The presence of a Starfleet cruiser lurking behind the planet's moon had prevented any chance of simply travelling around to the side of the planet facing away from the orbiting outpost to begin the process of assimilation there. However, there was still a chance to begin the process of assimilating the planet and its population and so the ship beamed down the few remaining drones not needed for its basic operation to the surface. Ideally the location from which the signal that had prompted this mission would have been used for beam down co-ordinates but an energy field surrounding the location prevented this so instead the drones were beamed down in an area of woodland a few hundred metres beyond the shield. From here both the origin of the signal as well as another small settlement were within walking distance and the Borg drones split into two groups with the smaller one heading towards the shielded area while the larger one that contained roughly twice as many drones began to make its way towards the settlement.

The population of Tollas Prime that had been unable to leave the system had been advised by the planetary government to take shelter but as soon as the Borg ship was destroyed people began to emerge. The Borg had not directly bombarded the surface so there was no physical damage to be repaired but equipment or facilities that had been secured needed to be reactivated and this need had brought a pair of technicians out to a communication substation on the edge of the settlement close to where, unknown to the local population, the Borg drones had beamed down to when they evacuated their ship. The substation had been shut down to try and make the settlement look less tempting as a target to the Borg. With it offline the available communication bandwidth was cut by more than ninety percent, leaving the settlement still able to communicate with the outside world if necessary while massively reducing the electromagnetic signature it produced. Had the Borg begun a more conventional process of assimilating the planet then reducing such emissions may have delayed their attention being drawn to here but unfortunately the settlement happened to be the closest to the source of the signal that drew them to the planet in the first place.

The substation had reactivated as soon as power was restored to the main computer and while one of the technicians was running a diagnostic to make sure that the shutdown had not caused any system corruption the other technician returned to the vehicle that had brought them here, a simple electrically powered van that contained an array of spare parts and tools for repairing damaged communication or computer systems. The van also contained a box that the technicians stored food and drink in and the technician who went to the van opened this up to remove his flask of coffee and pour himself a cup. As he took a sip though he was interrupted by the sound of a scream coming from inside the substation and he recognised it as coming from the other technician.

"Allat are you okay in there?" he called out, thinking that perhaps his comrade had had an accident but there was no response. For a moment the technician considered just going to investigate the sound but then he reconsidered, suddenly wondering whether something more suspicious may have befallen the other technician, "Allat?" he called out again as he set down his drink and instead took a heavy wrench from a rack on the wall of the van. With the improvised weapon in his hand he was about to go back inside the substation to investigate when he heard the sound of footsteps and he turned around to see a trio of Borg drones marching around the side of the substation. The technician gasped as he dropped his wrench and then quickly leapt into the front of the van and jabbed at the control panel to activate the engine. Placing his hands on the steering wheel he looked over his shoulder at the Borg approaching from behind and then sped away. The van was not designed for high speed travel but the technician pushed the vehicle as hard as he could, repeatedly checking his rear view mirror to see if he was being followed. Luckily for him though the three Borg behind him did not appear interested in giving chase and he reached for the communicator built into the van's control console, "This is Greg calling control, Greg calling control." he said into it, "You need to get someone down to-" he continued before all of a sudden another Borg drone stepped out of the undergrowth into the road ahead of the van.

Rather than swerve to try and avoid the drone Greg drove straight at the figure and ran right into it, knocking it aside as the van carried on. However, Greg could now hear the sound of something banging against the side of the van and in one of its mirrors he saw that the drone was still clinging on as it was dragged along the road. This continued for just a few more metres though before the drone finally fell free and tumbled for a short distance.

"Greg are you there? Greg what's happening?" a voice asked over the van's communicator but before Greg could respond the vehicle suddenly seemed to lose all power and began to drift to a stop. Then to Greg's horror the touch screens of the control console went blank before alien code appeared and all around the vehicle small blocks of black machinery began to sprout.

The floor of the cargo hold was strewn with pieces of metal and other composite materials that had all been part of the Borg vessel. At the side of the hold a number of cargo containers stood open and were slowly filling with pieces of the gathered debris as more of them were determined to be of no further interest. These were largely inert pieces of the hull or superstructure where the only benefit could come from the materials that they were made of but there were also some more complicated components that were already known to Starfleet and as such did not require further immediate study. With these cleared away there was more room to move in the hold as the remaining components were examined by teams drawn from the Spectre's science and engineering departments overseen by both Baker and Hutchins. Just in case there was anything among the debris that was not quite lifeless yet there were also several security guards present and everyone working in the hold was armed with a phaser.

"Take a look at this." Hutchins said, beckoning Baker towards him as he spotted something among the debris.

"What is it?" Baker asked as she walked over to him.

"An antenna?" Hutchins answered as he lifted the component that had caught his attention.

"It certainly looks like one, but an antenna for what?" Baker responded and she began to scan the object with her tricorder, "There's an interesting subspace resonance that indicates the frequency that it is designed around is unconventional for either communication or sensor use. I would have said that it was related to the interplexing communication used by the Borg if it wasn't for its size. It's clearly far too small."

"Could it network with other antennas perhaps?" Hutchins suggested, "We know that the Borg decentralise their systems, perhaps this is an example of that."

"That does make sense. Plus in a smaller vessel like the one that this came from there isn't going to be a lot of room for a larger single antenna." Baker said.

"So definitely worth further study then?" Hutchins said and Baker smiled.

"Definitely." she replied before the door to the hold opened and Beth entered.

"Doctor, is something wrong? We didn't send for you." Hutchins said to her as she approached him and Baker.

"I was just wondering whether you'd recovered much in the way of organic remains among this stuff." Beth replied.

"Anything that looked like it came from a body was shipped straight to you." Baker told Beth and she sighed. "I was afraid of that." she said.

"Afraid of what?" Hutchins asked.

"Well the amount of drone parts I've been sent to analyse will only make up about two dozen bodies, thirty at the most and that seems like far too small to be the crew of this ship. Even assuming that two thirds of the bodies were totally destroyed in the explosion that still only leaves us with a crew of about ninety drones and I was under the impression that Borg ships tended to carry large numbers of them." Beth explained.

"That has been Starfleet's experience so far. Though our intelligence about the exact status of the collective over the past few years is almost non-existent." Baker pointed out.

"That Borg ship looped around a fair portion of the planet. It could have got a transporter lock on any number of satellites and space stations along the way." Hutchins said.

"You mean that Borg could have been beamed to them?" Beth said and Hutchins nodded.

"That exactly what I'm thinking." he replied.

"The electromagnetic field that surrounded the Borg ship would have prevented them from beaming away." Baker said before she frowned.

"Something wrong?" Hutchins said when he saw this.

"The Borg ship was protected by an electromagnetic field, similar to our own defensive shields that block transporter operations but that field collapsed under the final series of torpedo strikes from the Spectre. Lieutenant K'Ran then used our phasers to destroy the ship but there was a gap of several seconds between the collapse of the EM field and the destruction of the ship. For an ordinary crew I wouldn't expect that to be enough time to beam anyone off the ship but considering that the arrangement of Borg vessels allows for their transporters to beam drones directly to and from their positions it's far more likely that some of them could have been evacuated at the last moment." Baker explained.

"So where did they go?" Beth asked.

"I know that our shields were up so they couldn't have come here. They could have beamed aboard one of the planet's orbital facilities." Hutchins said.

"There is another possibility, they could have beamed down to the surface." Baker added.

Baker raced across the bridge as soon as the turbolift door opened.

"Late for an appointment commander?" Castle commented.

"I need to check our sensor logs and run a scan of the surface captain, it's possible that the Borg may have been able to beam down at the last moment." Baker replied and Castle got up to approach her station.

"What makes you think that?" he asked.

"According to Doctor Castle the components recovered that appeared to be pieces of Borg drones aren't enough to account for the number we'd expect to be aboard a ship like the one we destroyed. I'm looking for evidence that they were beamed away just before the ship exploded." Baker said.

"Captain if the Borg are on the surface then they may have already begun the process of assimilation." Armstrong pointed out and Castle nodded.

"Lieutenant Ashton see if there is anything on any of the planetary communication networks that might suggest the presence of the Borg on the surface. Look for unexplained disruptions or outages of power and data distribution." he said.

"Yes captain, checking now." Ashton said and Castle turned back towards Baker.

"Is there anything obvious?" he asked.

"Possibly. Our sensors did detect a sudden burst of encoded energy right after the Borg shields collapsed that could have been a transporter beam engaging." Baker answered.

"Can you tell where they went?" Castle said but Baker shook her head.

"Not from these readings, no captain. The Borg vessel was directly over the ocean when it exploded so the drones won't have been beamed directly down." she replied.

"Are there any ocean vessels in the area that could have been a target?" Armstrong suggested.

"No commander. There isn't much in the way of oceangoing traffic on Tollas Prime. On the other hand there are more than three hundred settlements within the surface area directly visible to the Borg ship before it exploded. Not counting private estates." Baker said.

"That is a lot of ground to cover." N'Riss commented.

"If the Borg chose a major population centre then they may be able to remain hidden for some time. Their numbers could increase significantly." K'Ran added.

"Well hopefully they won't be able to remain hidden for long." Castle said and he looked at Ashton, "Picking up anything obvious lieutenant?" he asked.

"Nothing yet captain. Most of the population is just emerging from emergency shelters so there's a lot of chatter about status updates, most of which seem to be saying that everything's fine. The only damage reports I'm receiving seem to be a result of accidents caused by equipment not being properly secured before it was abandoned." Ashton answered.

"Keep looking. There could be something there." Castle ordered before he turned back towards Baker, "What about you commander? Any ideas?" he added.

"Nothing definitive captain. The Borg could have chosen a larger settlement to hide in while they established a strong hold or they could have targeted a smaller one on the basis that they could secure it more easily. I will have to conduct a general scanning pattern." Baker responded.

"Very well. Carry on lieutenant commander." Castle said.

"Captain perhaps we should alert the planetary authorities now that we have evidence that the Borg used their transporters before their ship was destroyed." Armstrong suggested and Castle nodded.

"Yes, alert the outpost and the local government that there could still be Borg drones active on the surface. I think we should avoid a general announcement to the public for now though. Let's see if we can find out exactly what we're dealing with here first." he said.

The Borg drone that had been Greg continued to drive his vehicle towards the centre of the settlement where the administration building was located. This combined the civil administration functions of the settlement with the office of the local sheriff and as such was key to its assimilation. Now though most of the equipment that had been stored in the back of the vehicle had been removed, replaced by half a dozen drones whose function it would be to assimilate the administration building and its occupants to establish a functional hive. There were few people around to notice as the vehicle drove along the streets of the settlement so the vehicle that had clusters of Borg technology now visible on the outside where the nanoprobes had begun to modify it. As the vehicle approached the administration building though there were two people standing outside beside a sheriff's patrol vehicle. One of these was the controller that Greg had been attempting to contact earlier while the other was the sheriff himself.

"His signal was just cut off sheriff, I've tried raising him and Allat since but neither of them are replying." the controller said and the sheriff nodded.

"It won't take me long to get out there and find out what's happening. If there's been an accident then I'll send for medical support." he said before he noticed the vehicle approaching them, "Or maybe we can just ask now. Look, here they come." he added, pointing towards the vehicle and the controller also looked towards the vehicle. Being familiar with its appearance though he quickly noticed the changes brought about by the Borg.

"What's happened to it?" he said.

"What do you mean?" the sheriff responded.

"The van, there's something wrong with it. Extra stuff on the outside." the controller told him.

The vehicle came to a halt a short distance away and rather than the side door sliding open the entire rear section now unfolded to reveal the Borg drones it carried and the controller gasped. The sheriff realised the danger that they were in immediately and drew his phaser, firing it at one of the Borg only for it to have no effect. No shield activated but the sheriff had inadvertently left his weapon on its stun setting.

"Get inside!" the sheriff exclaimed as he adjusted his weapon and fired again, this time cutting down one of the drones, but when he fired the phaser for a third time the beam was blocked by the drone's shield.

Both men then turned and ran towards the entrance to the building while the Borg drones calmly followed at a walking pace. Rushing inside, the controller slammed his hand on the door controls to lock the main entrance behind them while several startled members of staff looked on.

"What's happening? Why did you fire your phaser?" one of them asked the sheriff.

"The Borg are here." The sheriff responded so that everyone could hear, "We need to barricade all the entrances to this building and warn-" he continued before the Borg drones outside reached the door and one of them injected nanoprobes into the control panel. This overrode the lock almost immediately and the door slid open, permitting the drones to enter the building unimpeded.



While the larger group of Borg was entering the settlement the smaller one continued towards the Goodwin estate. The drones in this group saw the shield barrier ahead of them, made all the more visible by the damage that it had caused to the vegetation and there was a line of charred plants running along the ground where the deflector shield had burned them.

The Borg halted at the shield, their enhanced optics and other implants studying the energy patterns within it for a short time until one of them suddenly stepped forwards into the shield. Random patterns of light appeared in the air around the drone as the shield reacted to its presence and the drone remained stationary as the energy washed over it. This lasted for just a few seconds though before there was a flash of light as the Borg's own shield activated, set to a frequency that negated the deflector shield protecting the estate and the Borg was able to step through to the other side. The other Borg drones all followed suit, stepping into the shield and passing through it now that the correct neutralising frequency had been determined.

The passage of the Borg through the shield did not go undetected though and an alarm sounded in the laboratory where the Goodwin family and Vost waited.

"They're coming." Ted said.

"What do we do?" Jessica asked.

"We should move to the sleeping quarters." Vost said, "This room will be a priority target for the Borg because of the equipment here. If all of them focus on it though it might give us the chance to slip away."

"What about the main house?" Alex asked.

"No, thanks to all the devices that you've filled your home with the Borg may stop there before coming here. The rooms in this building aren't quite so extensively equipped with electronics though." Vost explained before he looked at Elisa, "There is one problem though."

"The nanoprobes in my body." Elisa said and Vost nodded.

"Yes. I don't know whether or not the Borg will be able to sense them." he said.

"Then leave me behind." Elisa said.

"Mom, no." Jessica responded.

"We aren't leaving you behind. We go together or not at all." Ted said and he looked at Vost and added, "Is there anything you can rig to block the nanoprobes from communicating with the other Borg?"

"No, not in the amount of time we have available. We'll just have to hope that they can't communicate over anything more than a few metres." Vost replied.

"You mean you don't know?" Alex asked.

"That wasn't what I came here to do." Vost pointed out.

"Alex just help Doctor Vost with your mother. I'm going to make sure that the way is clear." Ted said.

"Wait." Vost said suddenly and he dashed across the laboratory.

"What are you doing?" Ted asked.

"Shutting down the deflector shield." Vost told him, "The Borg are already inside so all it's doing now is cutting us off from any escape."

"Very well, but let's hurry." Ted replied.

"Captain I think I might have something here." Baker said as she continued to scan the surface.

"Borg?" Castle asked.

"Not specifically but there is a part of the surface that is protected by a deflector shield. Not a very large or powerful one but it is there." Baker answered.

"Are there any surface military installations there that would be shielded?" Castle asked but Baker shook her head.

"No captain. Although Tollas Prime does maintain a standing army it has only around three thousand permanent members who are all deployed close to the capital. There shouldn't be anything so remote that requires a deflector shield." Baker replied.

"So someone has a private shield all of their own." Castle commented.

"Maybe a security feature that they activated to try and keep the Borg at bay." Ashton suggested.

"That sounds likely to me captain." Baker added.

"Wouldn't the shield attract the attention of the Borg?" Armstrong said.

"Yes, though any structure able to house a shield generator would also stand out as a target. The shield itself might buy time for the occupants to escape." K'Ran replied.

"But did they activate the shield while the Borg were still in space or because they saw Borg drones beam down?" Armstrong commented.

"Captain our sensors are picking up a disruption in the shield." Baker said suddenly, "I think that it is under attack."

"Are you reading any weapons fire?" K'Ran asked.

"No, but the shield's energy signature is being disrupted by something." Baker answered.

"Like Borg drones using their own shields to cancel it out as they pass through?" Castle said and he turned around, "Armstrong, K'Ran. I want an away team putting together now to investigate. A well-armed away team." he ordered and both Armstrong and K'Ran got up from their seats and hurried to the turbolift.

"Captain the shield just shut down." Baker said as her console showed the shield abruptly dissipating.

"Can you tell me what's down there?" Castle asked.

"It looks like a private estate captain." Baker told him.

"Nice to know someone takes home security seriously." Ashton commented.

"Captain now that the shield is down I'm picking up approximately twenty life signs making their way towards the structures that had been protected by the shield. They appear to be Borg." Baker added.

"What about the people inside?" Castle asked.

"I'm picking up five life signs inside captain. Four human and one Vulcan." Baker said.

"Can we beam them out of there before the Borg get to them?" N'Riss said.

"Now that the shield is down, yes." Baker responded and Castle tapped his combadge.

"Bridge to transporter room. We're going to send you a set of co-ordinates. There are five people there that need to be beamed aboard immediately."

As Armstrong and K'Ran entered the transporter room with a unit of six security guards they found the operator already in the process of activating the system, patterns of lights already forming on the transporter pad.

"What's going on chief?" Armstrong asked.

"Orders from the bridge to beam up individuals from the surface commander." the transporter operator replied. Then he added, "One of them is armed commander."

"With what?" K'Ran asked.

"A phaser sir. It looks like a civilian pattern." the transporter operator answered.

"Deactivate it anyway, just in case." Armstrong said and the transporter operator nodded his head.

"Yes commander. Discharging energy pack. Proceeding with materialisation process." he said before the lights on the transporter pad began to coalesce into people, two of whom were obviously supporting a third.

"Armstrong to sickbay. Medical team to transporter room one." Armstrong said, tapping her combadge.

"I'm on my way commander." Beth responded as the security team moved to help the people from the transporter pad.

"I'll take that from you sir." one of the guards told Ted, placing a hand on his phaser rifle and Ted released his grip on the weapon.

"What's going on?" Jessica asked as she looked around.

"This is a starship." Alex added.

"Yes it is." Armstrong replied, "Welcome to the *USS Spectre*. We detected your shield and were going to investigate."

"There were Borg down there." Ted said as the door to the transporter room slid open and Beth rushed in and saw Elisa.

"I'm Doctor Castle, chief medical officer." she said, introducing herself to Elisa as she opened her tricorder,

"Were you injured in the attack?"

"No, my weakness is caused by a medical condition. Doctor Vost has been treating me." Elisa replied.

"Vost? That's not a Vulcan name." K'Ran commented.

"Romulan." Vost said, "Though you have no need to worry, I'm a doctor not a spy."

"We'll get you to sickbay and take a look at you. All of you should come with us, just in case." Beth said.

"I would rather continue to treat my patient privately." Vost said.

"Perhaps, but aboard this ship all medical matters are my responsibility." Beth told him.

"Doctor Vost, I don't think that there's any need to-" Elisa began before Vost leant in closer to her and began to whisper in her ear, "Of course, yes. I would rather that Doctor Vost managed all of my treatment. He has had experience with it."

"If that's your wish." Beth responded.

"Is there somewhere that we can rest? I would like to examine my patient." Vost said.

"Doctor can you organise quarters for our guests? We have to deal with the Borg on the surface." Armstrong said and Beth nodded.

"Yes, I'll see to it." she replied as the security team stepped up onto the transporter pad.

"Okay chief, beam us down." Armstrong said as she drew her phaser.

"Energising now commander." the transporter operator responded and he activated the transporter again, this time to send the security team down to the surface.

"If you'd like to come with me I'll find you somewhere to stay until we can return you to the surface." Beth then told the Goodwins and Vost, "Unfortunately the quarters here are a bit cramped compared to other ships but they're comfortable at least."

The security team materialised just outside the Goodwin's house and immediately looked around, their weapons raised in anticipation of attack. The Borg were not yet in sight though and Armstrong took a tricorder from her belt and opened it.

"I'm picking up Borg energy signatures fifty metres that way, just beyond those trees." she said, pointing towards a cluster of trees.

"Spread out and get ready." K'Ran told the security guard with them and the away team spread themselves out, using whatever cover they could find before taking aim towards the trees.

The Borg were in no hurry to reach the house, their process of assimilating a world was well practiced and methodical so when they emerged from the trees they were moving at a walking pace. The Borg saw the Starfleet security team ahead of them but were unmoved by the weapons being pointed towards them, the lives of individual drones being meaningless to them.

"Hold your fire. Give them all chance to appear." Armstrong said.

"Commander I recommend volley fire. It will give us the best chance of inflicting casualties on the Borg before they can adapt to our phasers." K'Ran said and Armstrong nodded.

"Okay everyone mark your targets now. Mine is that drone at the front with what looks like an antenna array coming out of the side of his head." Armstrong said and she pointed her phaser towards the Borg she had selected as a target.

The rest of the away team were armed with phaser rifles the featured optical sights and laser targeting units so as they also took aim at the Borg it was easy for them to see that they were targeting drones not already picked out by another member of the team from the tiny glowing dots visible through their sights. Even as they were being targeted the Borg continued to advance at their slow but steady pace until Armstrong was satisfied that all of them were now out in the open.

"Open fire." she ordered and a volley of phaser beams shot from the away team's weapons towards the Borg, cutting eight of them down in an instant.

The Borg were unconcerned by losing more than a third of their number in a single volley and continued to advance towards the away team who nevertheless held their position and fired again. This time the away team's shooting was less co-ordinated though and while five blasts were fired these were aimed at just three of the drones who all fell dead.

Armstrong then fired her phaser again, cutting down yet another Borg before one of the security guards in the away team fired his rifle only for the beam to be blocked by a shield. Another guard then fired his phaser and this too was stopped short of its target by a shield that activated right as the beam reached its target.

"They've adapted." K'Ran said.

"We need time to retune the phasers. Fall back and see if we can find a way into the house." Armstrong ordered.

"I've got another idea." K'Ran responded as he adjusted the setting on his phaser rifle to its maximum and took aim. The Caitian was not aiming at the Borg drones though, knowing that their shields would be highly resilient even to the maximum setting of his weapon. Instead he pointed the muzzle of his rifle down at an angle before he fired a sustained beam at the ground under the Borg's feet. While the phaser was currently unable to penetrate the Borg's personal shields it was still more than capable of rapidly boring through the ground and as K'Ran shifted his point of aim he dug a wide and deep trench right beneath the drones' feet. Three of the drones were unable to stop themselves falling into the trench where one landed on top of another and there was a shower of sparks as the blow inflicted serious damage to the drone underneath. Meanwhile the remaining four drones halted and examined the trench to assess their chances of crossing it. "Good thinking lieutenant. An old-fashioned pit trap. If only we'd brought along a few grenades to add." Armstrong said, "Now everyone adjust your phaser frequency bands. Everyone just pick their own to get a decent spread."

On the far side of the newly created trench the Borg drones turned and began to walk around it while the two surviving drones who had fallen in began to drag themselves out. Meanwhile the away team hurried to adjust their weapons so that they would regain their effectiveness but when one of the security guards fired again the beam from his weapon was still absorbed by one of the Borg's shields.

"Armstrong to *Spectre*." Armstrong said, activating her combadge.

"*Spectre* here commander." Castle's voice responded from the orbiting starship.

"We're under attack by Borg drones. There aren't many of them but they are adapting to our weapons fast. We may need an emergency beam out." Armstrong said.

"Understood commander. We'll lock onto your position and extract you as soon as you request it." Castle said before another security guard fired his rifle at a Borg. This time the modification he had made to the

weapon was enough that the beam struck the Borg itself and it shook for a moment before it toppled into the trench at its feet.

K'Ran then fired his weapon again and although he had adjusted the beam's frequency profile he had left the weapon set to its maximum output level and when the beam struck the Borg he aimed at it simply disintegrated. Realising his mistake he snarled and reached to adjust the setting just as the other security guards were finishing the adjustments to their own weapons and firing again. The results of this were mixed, with two more drones falling while the third's shield absorbed the energy directed at it. Armstrong then noticed a cybernetic hand reach up out of the trench as one of the Borg inside it reached the top and she fired her phaser just as the Borg's head and chest became visible. The beam hit the Borg and it slumped forwards before sliding back out of sight.

"Concentrate your fire." K'Ran called out and as the away team all aimed their rifles towards the last Borg walking around the trench he exclaimed, "Now!"

Firing in unison, the multiple phaser beams struck the Borg together and although its shield held for a few moments the interaction of the multiple beams operating at slightly different frequencies eventually disrupted it enough that it failed and one of the beams was able to slice through, killing the drone instantly.

"Are we clear?" Armstrong asked, looking around but K'Ran heard the sound of something mechanical from within the trench.

"Not quite commander." he said as he rushed forwards and looked down into the trench just as the last surviving Borg drone was nearing the top. K'Ran let out a low growl as the Borg drone looked back up at him then he reached down and grabbed hold of the cluster of tubes that were embedded in the side of the drone's head and ripped them free. This produced a shower of sparks from some while a strange dark fluid erupted from the others and the drone began to convulse, lost its footing and slid back down to the bottom of the trench, "Clear." K'Ran said loudly.

To assign temporary quarters to the Goodwins and Vost, Beth met with Ashton and the operations officer was quick to find them accommodation.

"Deck thirteen." he said as he joined them in the turbolift and Beth winced for a moment as it began to move. Then a few moments later the turbolift car stopped and he stepped out into the corridor, "Here we go, all of the cabins on this level are unoccupied and the transporter rooms are currently not in use so you'll have plenty of privacy while you're aboard." he announced.

"So which quarters are ours?" Elisa asked as Ted helped her from the turbolift.

"These four cabins along this hallway." Ashton answered, "The first is for your self and your husband, the next is for Doctor Vost and then your son and daughter get the next two. I've also got these for you." he added and he opened a small box that he had brought with him. Inside this were five Starfleet combadges and he took each one out in turn and handed it to one of the group, "These will allow you to access parts of the ship that are open to you. That's limited to this deck, sickbay and in the case of the adults the officers' lounge as well. If you get lost you can also use them to ask for help wherever you are. They work very easily, you just tap them to turn them on and then tap them again to turn them off."

"So why can't we go to the officers' lounge?" Alex commented.

"Because you're fifteen and your sister is seventeen." Ted told him.

"You can go in if you're accompanied by one of your parents though you won't be able to order intoxicating liquor or synthehol. The replicators in your quarters have the same restriction in place on them also." Ashton explained and Alex and Jessica exchanged looks and smiled at one another.

Elisa suddenly wobbled and as Ted steadied her both Beth and Vost leapt forwards to help.

"We should get you to sickbay." Beth said.

"I have my medical kit with me. If I need anything else then I can call you." Vost said.

"I just need to lie down and Doctor Vost can take care of me." Elisa added.

"If you say so." Beth replied and she stood back as Ted and Vost helped Elisa towards her quarters, "Don't hesitate to contact sickbay if there's anything you need though. I can have a medical team here in two minutes."

"We will bear that in mind doctor. Thank you." Ted responded as he and Vost carried Elisa into their quarters.

"Let's go." Beth said to Ashton and she placed a hand on his arm to guide him back to the turbolift, "Deck six." she said as soon as the door slid shut and Ashton turned to look at her.

"Doctor, are you really just going to let that guy keep her out of sickbay? Even I can tell she's seriously ill. She can barely stand." he said.

"She has the right to refuse treatment lieutenant." Beth pointed out.

"Maybe but aren't you at least going to monitor her condition?" Ashton asked.

"I want to know what her condition is first," Beth answered and then she patted the medical tricorder on her belt, "and for that I need to examine the readings I took earlier."

"So you were just going along with what they said?" Ashton said with a smile.

“Of course. If I pressed the matter further then they’d have just become even more stubborn about keeping Elisa Goodwin away from sickbay but if I can show that there is a specific reason to have her taken there then I can act. Even if she does refuse actual treatment.” Beth responded. Then she smiled as well and added, “But deck thirteen? Why put them there?” she said.

“Like I told them, it’s private. I thought they might like being able to rest without feeling that there are Starfleet crewmen looking over their shoulders at all times.” Ashton told her.

“You can get privacy just by shutting a door. You don’t have to put them on a deck that’s-“ Beth began.

“Haunted?” Ashton interrupted, “As a doctor I’d have thought you wouldn’t be so superstitious.”

“I was going to say empty.” Beth said before the turbolift came to a stop again and the doors slid open, “Now if you don’t mind I have a set of tricorder readings to examine.” she added before she exited the turbolift.

“Bridge.” Ashton then said and the doors slid shut again.



In the quarters assigned to Elisa and Ted, Vost scanned Elisa using a medical tricorder of his own while she lay on the bed.

"Is my condition deteriorating Vost?" Elisa asked.

"No, in fact it's improving slightly. The nanoprobes inside your body are stimulating the regeneration of damaged tissue. That's why you've been feeling so weak, your body is burning energy far more rapidly than normal. You need to eat. I recommend foods rich in iron and protein." Vost answered.

"What about the parasites?" Ted added.

"Still present of course. We're still a long way from clearing them all from your wife's body but all the signs are promising." Vost said before Elisa suddenly rolled over and vomited onto the floor beside the bed.

"We should get Doctor Castle." Ted said.

"No!" Vost snapped, "Just get something to clean this mess up and then replicate a meal. Your wife will be fine. She needs rest and food, that is all."

The Borg moved efficiently through the administration building. The handful of weapons possessed by the sheriffs' deputies and security guards present were ineffective at stopping them and the only loss the Borg suffered was when one of the building's occupants swung a fire extinguisher like a club and struck a drone on the side of its head hard enough to produce a shower of sparks as the drone collapsed with vital implants smashed. Other than that one minor success though the building and its occupants were soon entirely controlled by the Borg.

In addition to the occupants the Borg drones also quickly set to work assimilating the building itself. The main computer that controlled all of the building's systems was the primary target of this assimilation but the nanoprobes injected into it quickly multiplied and spread not only through the core but out into the rest of the building's data and power network. Before long distinctive Borg machinery had begun to sprout from the surfaces inside the building and while alcoves to house drones started to form the Borg turned their attention to the rest of the settlement.

In sickbay Beth had a number of her regular duties to attend to before she was able to turn her attention to the tricorder she had used to briefly scan Elisa. Although she had not had the time to conduct a detailed scan of the woman Beth did have a basic physical profile for her and after loading this into her computer she began to study it, looking for variations between the readings she had taken and the baseline for a human woman of Elisa's age range.

Even from the basic scan data it was clear that Elisa was seriously ill, the level of activity within her nervous system was significantly lower than it ought to have been and there was a chemical imbalance in her blood as well as her overall body temperature being noticeably elevated. There were any number of medical conditions that could explain these symptoms though and on their own they were not enough to allow Beth to determine exactly what was wrong with her. However, as Beth studied the data she noticed something else that had been recorded by her tricorder. Amongst all of the biological data gathered there was an energy pattern that was obviously not organic in nature. The signature had a structured look to it, ruling out radioactive contamination but there were no signs of any medical implants that would explain such a pattern.

"Doctor Castle to Lieutenant Commander Hutchins." she said, tapping her combadge.

"Hutchins here doctor." Hutchins responded.

"Could you meet me in sickbay commander? There's something I'd like you to take a look at." Beth told him.

"Problem with some of your equipment?" Hutchins asked.

"More of a medical issue that I need your professional input on." Beth answered.

"I'm on my way doctor. Hutchins out." Hutchins said before he closed the channel and a short time later he was walking in through the doorway to her office.

"Ah commander, thanks for coming so quickly." Beth said.

"My pleasure doctor. So what's your problem?" Hutchins said.

"This." Beth replied, turning the display of her computer so that he could see it as well, "This is a scan I took of a woman we beamed aboard before she and her family could be assimilated by the Borg. She's obviously sick but she has her own doctor with her who seems rather keen to prevent me from examining her more closely. He won't even bring her to sickbay and since she's agreed with him there isn't much I can do to force her here."

"So if you're not treating her why are you studying these readings?" Hutchins said.

"Because if her condition deteriorates and her family do finally bring her here and I'd like a head start on finding out what I need to treat her for." Beth said, "I know, I know it sounds obsessive but I just don't like the

idea of someone aboard this ship being sick without me knowing what's wrong with them." Beth said and Hutchins smiled.

"Just be careful about micromanaging things doctor. Our first officer already has a reputation for that. Now what's bothering you about your scan?" he said.

"There's an energy signature that makes it look like there's some sort of implant running in Elisa Goodwin's body but there's nothing there to be creating it. I thought maybe there's some other technology at work that you could identify." Beth explained.

"You think that this doctor they've brought with them might be using some sort of technological means to treat her rather than medicinal?" Hutchins said.

"The thought had crossed my mind. The problem is that I don't actually know what's wrong with her. I know her symptoms and they look serious but without a more detailed scan I can't be certain of the cause." Beth said.

"So why not order her to sickbay? You have the authority." Hutchins pointed out.

"But not to conduct scans, tests or treatment without consent. I couldn't even hold her here. She and her family could simply demand to be beamed back down to the surface and there's nothing I could do to stop them. They aren't Starfleet personnel after all." Beth reminded him and he smiled.

"That's the good thing about engineering. We have fewer ethical issues than doctors." he said, "Now let's take a look at this energy signature."

"Here it is." Beth commented, gesturing towards her screen.

Hutchins then leant in closer to examine the data on Beth's screen. Then he looked at her again.

"And you say this came from inside a woman beamed up from the surface?" he said and Beth nodded.

"Yes, Elisa Goodwin." she answered, "Her home was about to be overrun by Borg drones."

"How close did these drones get to her?" Hutchins asked.

"I don't know, why? Is this energy signature related to Borg technology?" Beth responded.

"Yes it is. I've seen dozens of reports about it, this signature is the Borg Collective itself. Missus Goodwin has Borg nanoprobes inside her." Hutchins said and Beth's eyes widened.

"Borg nanoprobes?" she repeated and Hutchins nodded.

"I suggest that we do something about them before they spread to the ship." he said.

With communication with the outside world largely cut off the inhabitants of the settlement were largely clustered in small groups in shelters that meant once they were located they were easy to overwhelm. Even without knowing exactly what was happening though some of the inhabitants were beginning to emerge from their hiding places and when they discovered the Borg among them they did their best to flee by the quickest means necessary.

One family rushed to their private vehicle as soon as they heard the warning screams of their neighbours as drones broke into their home. The couple and their three children left their other belongings behind as they got into their vehicle and the father started the engine, reversed into the street and then drove away.

"Which way are you going?" his wife asked from beside him.

"East, it's the quickest way out of town. There's nothing out in the country for the Borg to be interested in." he answered before one of his children pointed to the road ahead as several Borg drones appeared, some of them not yet fully assimilated and still wearing clothing common in the Federation.

"Dad, lookout!" the child snapped but rather than try to avoid the drones the father increased the power of the vehicle's engine and drove right through them, prompting screams from his children. The vehicle smashed through the drones effortlessly, some being thrown sideways while two were pulled beneath it and the vehicle shook as the antigravity field that supported it was disrupted.

"Dad that was Mister Hooper." one of his children said from the back seat, staring at one of the Borg drones that the father had just run into.

"I know." the father replied as he sped onwards, "Just hold on, we'll be out of here soon."

The father continued to drive towards the eastern side of the settlement and the family saw signs of others also trying to escape. At one stage there was a distant flash of a phaser as someone tried unsuccessfully to fight off the Borg before the phaser fire stopped and there was a scream. Just as the family approached the edge of town though another vehicle appeared ahead of them in the road. Although this had the vague shape of one of the sheriff's patrol vehicles it was now heavily modified with Borg technology and it had positioned itself in the path of the family.

"Go around it!" the mother exclaimed, knowing that unlike the drones previously encountered the vehicle ahead of them was resilient enough that the family's own transport could not simply smash through it.

"I am." the father responded as he steered around the assimilated police vehicle but in response it emitted a brief pulse of green energy that struck the family vehicle and in an instant all power was lost. The vehicle ploughed into the ground as the antigravity field failed and then flipped over and began to roll until it smashed into the side of a house. Although the emergency inertial dampeners failed due to the lack of power the safety belts worn by the family protected them from serious injury as the vehicle rolled, leaving

them dazed and confused but without serious injury. The vehicle came to a halt upside down and the family hung from their seats, too startled to act. Then they became aware of footsteps as people approached the vehicle. The mother was about to call out to these bystanders for help when she remembered their situation and she saw the cybernetically enhanced feet of Borg drones closing in all around the wrecked vehicle.

"Captain there's something strange going on not far from Commander Armstrong's position." Ashton announced and Castle looked towards him.

"Can you expand on that lieutenant?" he asked.

"Actually I ought to say that what isn't happening is unusual captain." Ashton replied.

"You still aren't making yourself clear lieutenant." Castle told him.

"I'm still monitoring for signs of Borg activity captain and although I haven't picked up any explicit mentions of it in the planetary network the activity close to the commander's position doesn't match the profile for other places." Ashton said.

"So what are you seeing?" Castle said.

"I'm reading energy sources that indicate things are running down there but so far the settlement just a few kilometres away from where the commander beamed down to is no closer to re-establishing communication links with the outside world than it was two hours ago. If they were having difficulty then I'd have expected them to have sent word using a portable transmitter but there's nothing on any of our sensors." Ashton said and Castle reached for the communication system

"*Spectre* to Lieutenant Commander Armstrong." he said.

"Armstrong here captain." the *Spectre's* first officer responded.

"Commander how are things looking down there?" Castle asked.

"No signs of any further Borg here so far captain." Armstrong answered, "All the Borg we encountered are definitely dead and we've not seen any evidence of more drones. We've almost finished our sweep of the grounds and we haven't seen anything or detected anything on my tricorder out of the ordinary. Of course we haven't checked inside the residence or outlying buildings, they are private property after all."

"Of course commander. What about beyond the property? Is there anything to indicate that there could be a further Borg presence there?" Castle said.

"No captain, we haven't seen anything, why?" Armstrong replied.

"There's a settlement not far from your location that Lieutenant Ashton says isn't acting as it ought to be. It's still cut off from the planetary networks." Castle told her.

"How far away is it?" Armstrong said and Castle looked towards Ashton.

"About eight kilometres captain." the operations officer said.

"Too far to walk in a reasonable time commander." Castle told Armstrong, "You'll have to beam back up to the *Spectre* and-" he continued before the door to a turbolift slid open and Beth and Hutchins rushed out.

"Captain we may have a problem, a big problem." Hutchins said.

"Hold on Armstrong, I'll get back to you soon." Castle said before he closed the communication channel and turned to face the newly arrived officers, "What's wrong?" he asked.

"The Goodwins may have had a closer encounter with the Borg than they admitted to." Beth answered, "Particularly Elisa."

"She has Borg nanoprobes inside her. The doctor's brief scan picked up the communication between them." Hutchins added.

"Where are they now?" Castle asked as he got to his feet.

"Still on deck thirteen in the quarters assigned to them." Beth answered.

"Lieutenant Ashton have a full security team meet us on deck thirteen. Lieutenant Commander Baker, run scans of deck thirteen and watch for any signs of system disruption there that could indicate an attempt to assimilate the ship. Lieutenant N'Riss, you have the conn until Commander Armstrong returns." Castle ordered as he strode towards the turbolift.

There were already four security guards waiting outside the turbolift when it stopped on deck thirteen and Castle stepped out followed by Beth and Hutchins. One of the four carried a phaser rifle while the others just had hand phasers holstered on their hips.

"Any sign of activity?" Castle asked the security team and the man with the rifle shook his head.

"No captain. We just got here ourselves but it looks like everyone's in their quarters." he replied.

"Which one is Elisa in?" Castle said, looking at Beth and she pointed to the closest of the cabins across the corridor from the turbolift.

"That one." she told him and he nodded before walking towards the door and pressing the intercom panel beside it.

"Yes, who is it?" Ted' voice responded after a moment's pause.

"Captain Castle, the *Spectre's* commanding officer. Can you open the door please?" Castle said as the security team moved in around him.

"One moment." Ted said and there was another short delay before the door slid open to reveal him standing directly inside. His eyes then widened as he saw the heavily armed security team as well as Beth and Hutchins standing behind Castle, "What is this?" he said.

"Mister Goodwin a situation has been brought to my attention and we need to conduct some medical scans of your family." Castle said, peering past Ted to where Elisa was lying on the bed with Vost close by. Castle noticed that Vost had a bag close by but that the Romulan was doing his best to keep it out of sight.

"Doctor Vost is taking care of my wife's treatment captain. We have no need for any other-" Ted began.

"Mister Goodwin your presence aboard this ship has become a security issue. You and your family as well as Doctor Vost can either submit to a scan or I can have you restrained while it is carried out." Castle interrupted.

"Captain this is outrageous!" Vost snapped as he leapt to his feet, "You have no right to-"

"I have every right doctor." Castle said sternly, "File a complaint with Starfleet Command if you want but I assure you that it won't get you very far."

"I-" Vost began.

"Vost never mind." Elisa said from her bed and both her Husband and Vost looked at her, "Let them run their scans." she added.

"That sounds like agreement to me." Castle said and he looked at Beth, "Begin your scan." he told her and both she and Hutchins entered the room.

"If you could stand back please." Beth told Vost as she approached the bed with Hutchins right behind her and the Romulan picked up his bag as he retreated from it. Beth then took out her medical tricorder and opened it before she held it out towards Elisa and began to scan her, "There it is again, the energy signature." she said and Hutchins nodded.

"Borg." he said.

"What about the others?" Castle said.

"There are no nanoprobes in anyone else captain." Vost said and Castle looked at him.

"How can you be certain?" he asked.

"Because I injected Elisa with the nanoprobes currently inside her." he said.

"You did what?" Beth exclaimed, "You injected her with Borg nanoprobes?"

"Only after modifying them to prevent replication and change their functionality." Vost responded.

"You're using them as a medical treatment?" Hutchins said and Vost nodded.

"Yes, it's the only way to cure Elisa." he said.

"What's wrong with her anyway?" Castle asked and Vost looked at Elisa who nodded at him.

"Tell him." she said.

"Elisa is infected with a parasitic organism." Vost said.

"She contracted it on a holiday to Harra Four about two years ago." Ted added.

"The parasite is attracted to the victim's nervous system where it feeds off the chemicals used in it. The spine is obviously a primary target for the parasite and if left untreated the damage caused by the parasite will cause paralysis before eventually the parasites become so numerous that they are forced to migrate to the brain and their victim dies." Vost continued.

"Unfortunately I am allergic to the medications normally used to control the parasites so Doctor Vost proposed an alternative treatment." Elisa added.

"Destroying them with Borg nanoprobes." Beth said.

"Yes. Numerous studies have shown nanoprobes to be effective in combating a wide variety of medical conditions without most of the side effects of some stronger medications." Vost said.

"Why not just use regular medical nanites. The sort that aren't used to turn people into monsters?" Hutchins said.

"The parasites shelter within the victim's own cells, hollowing them out and using them as a nest as well as concealing them from the body's immune system. Conventional nanites are unable to identify them reliably enough. On the other hand the superior capabilities of Borg nanoprobes allows them to adapt to this, identifying the parasite infected cells and destroying them." Vost said.

"Is this right?" Castle asked, looking at Beth.

"I don't know, I'm not familiar with the parasite itself but these readings do indicate damage to the nervous system." she answered.

"Captain there is no danger to your ship." Vost said and Castle glared at him.

"So it's just a coincidence that this planet came under Borg attack at the same time as you were using Borg nanoprobes to conduct your little science project am I? I might also point out that the possession of Borg nanoprobes is illegal in the Federation. Regardless of whether you are a Federation or Romulan citizen." Castle said.

Vost drew in his breath.

“Captain I admit that some of the nanoprobes did escape containment but I assure you that the danger is limited. There are only a few hundred and they are incapable of replication. No-one else came into contact with them.” Vost said.

“They sent the signal that drew the Borg here.” Castle said.

“That may be so captain but we saw the news broadcasts, you destroyed the Borg vessel and only a handful survived to attack the Goodwin’s estate.” Vost said.

“A handful approached the estate, yes, but there’s an entire settlement nearby that could be in their hands right now.” Castle said, “Doctor Vost you may consider yourself under arrest. You will be confined to our brig until you can be handed over to civilian law enforcement to be dealt with. The Goodwins will all be checked to make sure that there have been no other lapses in containment that you aren’t telling us about.”

When the away team returned to the *Spectre* both Armstrong and K'Ran made their way to the bridge. "Ah commander, welcome back. The conn is yours." N'Riss said as they stepped from the turbolift. "Thank you lieutenant. Where's the captain?" Armstrong responded. "Captain Castle is dealing with a security issue on deck thirteen relating to the people we beamed aboard from the surface commander." N'Riss told her. "A security issue?" K'Ran commented. "They may have been infected with Borg nanoprobes." Ashton said. "There are no signs yet that the ship is at risk of being assimilated though." Baker added, "All of our systems are still secure." Armstrong then tapped her combadge. "Armstrong to Captain Castle." she said. "Castle here commander." Castle's voice responded. "Captain I've returned to the ship and I'm on the bridge. I understand that there is a security issue. Do you need Lieutenant K'Ran?" Armstrong said. "No, everything's sorted now and I'm on my way back to the bridge myself. I'll explain everything when I get there." Castle replied. "Very well captain. Armstrong out." Armstrong said before she shut off her combadge. Just then there was a chiming sound from Ashton's console and he looked down at it. "Err, commander I think we have an issue on the surface." he said. "What is it lieutenant?" Armstrong asked. "Sensors just picked up a deflector shield activating on the surface. It's centred on the settlement close to where you engaged the Borg." Ashton told her. "You mean the settlement that's still isolated from the outside world?" Armstrong said and Ashton nodded. "The very same commander." he said. "Oh this can't be good." Armstrong commented just as the turbolift door slid open and Castle exited onto the bridge, "Ah captain, just in time. It appears that something is happening on the surface." Armstrong said to him. "There's always something happening somewhere commander. Can you be more specific?" Castle replied. "The settlement you wanted to investigate further has just activated a deflector shield." Armstrong said. "Tell me about it." Castle said. "It's not a type used by the Federation captain. I doubt it's part of a civil defence system." Ashton said. "If it was then they would have activated it earlier when the Borg ship arrived." K'Ran pointed out. "Captain the harmonics of the shield match those of Borg electromagnetic shielding." Baker added, "Assuming the maps on file are up to date then the shield is centred on the settlement's administration building." "Captain, Commander Trent is calling." Ashton announced. "On screen." Castle said and Trent's image appeared on the main viewscreen at the front of the bridge, "Commander." he said. "Captain our satellites just picked up a Borg deflector shield on the surface. Did part of the ship surface to make a landing?" Trent said. "No commander, there's nothing left of the ship. What we're seeing is more likely to be the result of Borg drones assimilating a settlement. My crew have already engaged a small party of Borg on the surface but it looks like there could have been more of them that survived the destruction of their vessel." Castle said. "So what can we do about it captain?" Trent asked. "The planetary authorities will need to be alerted. We're going to study the deflector screen and the area beneath it to try and figure out exactly what we're dealing with here but in the meantime we'll need an exclusion zone to keep people away from the area as well as make sure that the Borg can't spread without being detected. They may try to access the planetary transporter system so I recommend that that is shut down until further notice." Castle said. "That's going to limit the local forces to using hoppers to deploy. It could take a while." Trent pointed out. "Then they'd better get a move on because I doubt that the Borg are going to stop at just one settlement when there's an entire planet to be assimilated." Castle said. "As you wish captain. I'll contact the local government and liaise with them immediately. Tollas Station out." Trent said before closing the channel and Castle looked around. "Okay everyone we have a lot to do. If the Borg have established a foothold on the surface then we need to root them out before they can summon more ships from the delta Quadrant. Our own reinforcements are still

at least a day away and we can't hold off a cube for that long. Let's start with an analysis of that deflector shield, I want to know what it's going to take to disable it. Then I want to know what the Borg are doing underneath it." he ordered.

Beneath the deflector shield the Borg worked to expand their numbers as well as strengthen their position. Establishing the shield itself to protect them from long range or orbital bombardment had been a primary concern but the need to establish a functional collective had also been vital. This called for both drones and infrastructure and at the same time as the Borg had been assimilating the population of the settlement they had also gathered materials in the form of the electronic devices that most modern homes and offices contained. These were moved back to the administration building that had become the location of the hive so that they could be turned into more useful devices. Without the requirement for space that most organic beings had when it came to living or working the Borg were able to fit the entire population into this single building, with each room being adapted to house a dozen or more alcoves for drones. The Collective did not intend to remain limited to assimilating just a single settlement though and work commenced on preparations to spread around the planet as well as establishing contact with the rest of the Collective within the Delta Quadrant. The latter required a powerful transmitter that the Borg began to construct as part of the structure of their new hive while in order to spread efficiently several vehicles taken from the settlement were assimilated, converted to carry drones over long distances rather than being broken down for their components as others had been. Once these were completed the Borg would be able to travel rapidly to other settlements even without the use of transporters and their control over the planet could spread.

Elisa lay on a biobed as Beth examined her. The more detailed scan she was able to carry out using the biobed indicated the damage that had been done to her nervous system, especially in her spine and also showed the presence of the Borg nanoprobes.

"I've been getting better. The nanoprobes are working." Elisa said.

"It looks like the nanoprobes have partially replaced the nerves in your spinal chord." Beth replied, "Your own cells have been destroyed by the parasite.

Elisa nodded.

"Yes, I know. Doctor Vost has already explained that to me." she said, "He is confident that once the parasites are fully cleared from my body the cellular damage can be repaired using more conventional medical techniques."

"You won't stop the treatment will you doctor?" Ted asked from across sickbay where he, Jessica and Alex were being guarded by a pair of the *Spectre's* security staff.

"That's not up to me but I expect that when my report is submitted then yes, the treatment will be stopped." Beth replied.

"But why? It's working." Ted protested.

"Because it is illegal and unethical." Beth said sternly.

"Unethical to let me walk and save my life?" Elisa asked.

"Unethical to recklessly make use of Borg nanoprobes and in doing so lure the Borg themselves to a planet full of innocent people." Beth replied, "Right now there's an entire town full of people who could be in danger."

"You can't blame us for that." Elisa said defensively and Beth stared at her.

"Missus Goodwin you went out of your way to set up this little unauthorised science experiment with little regard for the danger it posed to others. Now people may be dying because of it and yes, I do blame you for that. Just because you are desperate for a cure for your condition doesn't give you the right to risk the lives of others." She said sternly before she looked at the security guards across the room, "Okay I'm done here. Return them to their quarters until further orders." she ordered.

"Captain I think we may have a problem with this shield." Ashton said.

"What sort of problem lieutenant?" Castle asked.

"It's the strength of it captain. Its power has increased by almost thirty percent since it was first activated and I doubt that our phasers will be able to penetrate it." Ashton said.

"I agree captain." K'Ran added from the tactical console, "The shield is too strong for our phasers."

"What about photon torpedoes?" Armstrong said.

"They will probably penetrate though it will take several hits to weaken it enough commander." K'Ran responded.

"And in the process inflict massive collateral damage to the environment." Castle pointed out. Then he turned to the science station, "Lieutenant Commander Baker can you find me a way through that shield?" he asked but she shook her head.

"Negative captain. Though I can't say what equipment the shield was created from I can tell you that it now

appears the same as the electromagnetic fields surrounding Borg vessels. Not as strong perhaps, but the pattern is the same." she replied.

"Can you tell what's happening in the town underneath it?" Armstrong said.

"Readings are inconclusive." Baker told her, "The power output of the settlement is significantly higher than normal for one of this size, even taking into account the fact that it is now running a deflector shield. I suspect this is due to the assimilation process."

"Has everyone down there been assimilated?" N'Riss asked, glancing at Baker.

"Again it's hard to say but I suspect so." Baker answered.

"Wouldn't anyone down there have tried to escape?" Ashton suggested.

"I'd expect so and if they didn't make it away then they'd have been turned into Borg." Castle said.

"So we aren't trying to rescue any survivors captain?" Armstrong said.

"Give me evidence that there are survivors and I'll consider it," Castle replied, "but I'd still rather avoid just laying waste to several hundred square kilometres if I can help it. That's why we need a way through this shield."

Most of the vehicles assimilated by the Borg had been stripped away to leave a simple anti-gravity platform onto which a new vehicle had been built. This provided places similar to Borg alcoves for carrying a dozen drones and with interfaces that would allow them to control the vehicle in the same way that a Borg ship was controlled. The entire vehicle was then protected by a shield similar to the ones fitted to the drones themselves and able to adapt itself to different types of attack. Data assimilated by the Borg had given them the locations of other settlements and as soon as the vehicle was ready it was despatched towards it, speeding across the open country on its anti-gravity field.

What the Borg were not aware of was the deployment of the planetary defence forces, establishing a perimeter around the settlement several kilometres beyond the extent of the shield. Small units of soldiers had been deployed to watch the routes into and out of the settlement for any signs of activity, whether from the Borg or anyone who had been able to escape them and one of these witnessed the Borg vehicle as it moved across country, heading towards their position.

"Contact." one of the soldiers said when he was the first to see the vehicle and the squad raised their phaser rifles towards it while their leader used a set of binoculars to study it more closely, seeing the Borg drones standing exposed along either side of it.

"They're Borg. In some kind of vehicle. Stand by with phasers." the squad leader ordered as the soldiers took aim and then they waited for the vehicle to get closer to improve their chances of hitting it, "Fire!" the squad leader snapped when he judged the vehicle to be well within range and several beams of energy shot towards the vehicle.

There was an initial small explosion as the first beam struck the vehicle and inflicted some minor damage but then its shield adapted to the energy and blocked the remaining beams while the vehicle itself continued towards the soldiers, their position now revealed.

"They're still coming." one of the soldiers said.

"Bring up the isomagnetic disintegrator." the sergeant ordered and one of his men darted forwards with a bulky tube-shaped weapon carried over his shoulder, "Set to maximum and fire for effect." the sergeant added.

The soldier dropped into a kneeling stance and aimed his weapon towards the Borg vehicle that continued to move towards the soldiers' position in a straight line. It took just a few seconds for the soldier to target the vehicle and fire a single powerful energy bolt at it. This struck the vehicle head on and punched through the deflector shield before impacting on the front plating of the vehicle. With no armour to protect it, the entire front half of the vehicle was then consumed in a massive explosion that sent the rest of the vehicle tumbling end over end and bouncing across the ground until it finally came to a halt and burst into flames. The drones carried by the vehicle were all thrown from it as it tumbled and hit the ground with enough force to smash open their armoured bodies, destroying implants and bones in the process. Not all of the drones were killed outright though and the soldiers broke from cover, rushing towards the already injured Borg drones and firing their phasers at them to finish them off. Then once the last of the drones had been despatched the sergeant tapped his combadge.

"This is Sergeant Levant to command, reporting engagement with Borg vehicle. Target destroyed. All surviving drones eliminated." he said into it.

Castle and Armstrong both stood behind Baker at the science station as the science officer studied the sensor readings of the shield protecting the Borg controlled settlement.

"I haven't been able to identify a frequency modulation that would allow our phasers to penetrate the shield captain but it does look as if it is identical to the electromagnetic fields surrounding Borg vessels. The energy pattern will cause torpedoes to detonate short of their target but an inert projectile would penetrate it." Baker said.

"This ship isn't equipped with projectile weaponry." Armstrong pointed out.

"And I doubt that just throwing something out of an air lock from space would be accurate enough." Castle added.

"Perhaps Commander Hutchins' department could rig something captain. Say a modified probe that could be guided towards the settlement but lacking a warhead." Armstrong suggested and Castle smiled.

"That does sound like a good idea. With no warhead and relying purely on the force of impact to inflict damage the environmental damage would be minimal. Zero radioactivity from antimatter annihilation." he said before Ashton spoke up.

"Captain I've got Commander Trent for you." he said.

"On screen." Castle responded and he turned towards the front of the bridge where Trent's face appeared on the main viewscreen, "Commander, how may I help you?" Castle asked.

"Captain we've just received word from the planetary government that a unit of militia has engaged the Borg." Trent told him.

"Where?" Castle asked.

"The perimeter around the settlement. Apparently a group of Borg attempted to break out in some kind of surface vehicle. Fortunately the militia were equipped with anti-armour weaponry and they brought it down but the local government is worried that this could be the start of a push by the Borg to break out and if they adapt as quickly as their reputation suggests they will then—"

"Then the militia won't be able to hold them." Castle interrupted.

"Exactly. Do you have a way to deal with the Borg yet?" Trent responded and Castle looked at Armstrong.

"My first officer has come up with a possible solution but it's likely to take time to put into action. I need to consult with my chief engineer." he said.

"Well the planetary government is going crazy right now, they might not want to wait a few hours." Trent said and Castle sighed.

"I'll see what I can do. *Spectre* out." he said before the channel was closed. Then he turned to Baker again, "You say that the shield is identical to the electromagnetic field that surrounds Borg vessels?" he asked and Baker nodded her head.

"Yes captain." she answered, "It will block directed energy attacks, disrupt torpedo strikes and block transporters."

"But a shuttle could fly through it." Castle said.

"Yes captain." Baker replied.

"You can't be serious." Armstrong said, guessing what Castle was about to suggest.

"That we fly a shuttle through the field and use its phasers to destroy the generator itself?" Castle said with a smile before he turned towards the helm station, "Lieutenant N'Riss I believe that you spent much of your career before coming here as a shuttle pilot in the Cait system." he said and the Caitian smiled back at him.

"Yes captain, that is correct." she replied.

"And Lieutenant Ashton you have had significant tactical experience?" Castle added.

"Yes captain, this is my first posting aboard a vessel assigned to exploration." Ashton said.

"Excellent. In that case I want N'Riss and Ashton to take an armed shuttle and fly through the shield. They are then to locate the shield generator and use the shuttle's phasers to destroy it. That will leave the way clear for us to destroy the settlement using a phaser strike from orbit." Castle said.

"A low altitude run in a shuttle?" Armstrong said.

"Yes and we need to carry it out quickly. Lieutenant Commander Baker has your analysis indicated the presence of any weapon emplacements on the surface?" Castle said.

"Not yet captain. Although Borg systems are notoriously difficult to scan, there could be a weapon emitter down there that is simply powered down." Baker explained.

"Lieutenant N'Riss, Lieutenant Ashton, this is a volunteer only assignment. If you'd rather not go then I'll fly the shuttle myself and find someone else to act as co-pilot." Castle said.

"Captain a low altitude strike is going to need an expert pilot and I'm the best aboard." N'Riss responded.

"And I'm best qualified to co-pilot the shuttle. I can take sensor readings to identify the target and aim the phasers." Ashton added and Castle smiled.

"Thank you. Report to the shuttle bay immediately and take a type nine shuttle. Locate and destroy the Borg shield generator." he told them.

"Yes captain." N'Riss replied as she and Ashton both got out of their seats.

Type nine shuttles were compact and streamlined, perfectly suited to operations within a planet's atmosphere. Although warp capable the shuttle that N'Riss and Ashton took did not have its warp drive fuelled with antimatter, this being a precaution just in case of a containment failure in the atmosphere that would result in the uncontrolled mixing of matter and antimatter. Instead the shuttle would use its impulse drive and thrusters only for propulsion.

"I was just getting used to piloting something larger." N'Riss commented as she completed her preflight checks.

"I know how you feel, I finally get assigned to an exploration ship and I'm right back in a tactical situation." Ashton added.

"Hopefully this won't take long and then we can both get back to our preferred roles." N'Riss said and Ashton reached for the communication system.

"Shuttle *Spirit* to bridge, we are ready to depart." he said into it.

"Confirmed *Spirit*, you are clear to launch. Good hunting." Armstrong's voice responded and N'Riss activated the shuttle's thrusters to fly the craft from the *Spectre*'s launch bay into space.

N'Riss then steered the shuttle down into the atmosphere of Tollas Prime and continued its descent at a steep angle.

"How low are you going?" Ashton asked.

"Right to the deck. Twenty metres ought to be suitable." N'Riss answered.

"Twenty metres?" Ashton exclaimed, "Never mind being shot down at that altitude one mistake and we'll plough right into the ground at a thousand kilometres per hour."

"Trust me, I know what I'm doing and if the Borg have set up any anti-air defences then I'd rather avoid detection for as long as possible." N'Riss said, "Now raise our shields and power up the phasers, getting this right on the first run will make things far easier."

"Okay I'll trust you. Transferring power to weapons and shields." Ashton said before N'Riss levelled out at a low altitude and the shuttle flew not far above the treetops towards the Borg controlled settlement.

It did not take long to reach the settlement and N'Riss decelerated to give Ashton a reasonable amount of time to locate the shield generator that was their target.

"Coming up on the shield now. Here's where we find out if we really can pass through." N'Riss said.

"Okay I've got the generator. Looks like it's near the centre of town. Steer five degrees to port." Ashton responded.

"Turning now." N'Riss said and the shuttlecraft shuddered slightly as it passed through the Borg electromagnetic field without resistance.

"Target now dead ahead. Range three thousand metres," Ashton said. Then he frowned and added, "and I'm picking up what look like several vehicles on the surface."

All of a sudden there was a beam of energy from the ground ahead that struck the shuttle's forward deflector shield and N'Riss banked hard to get out of the beam's path as an alarm sounded.

"N'Riss to *Spectre*, we're coming under fire from the surface." N'Riss said, signalling to the waiting *Spectre*.

"What's your status? Can you continue your run?" Castle's voice responded.

"Shields holding. Get us back on target." Ashton said.

"Can you do this quickly?" N'Riss asked.

"Assuming you can point us in the right direction, yes." Ashton replied and N'Riss turned the shuttle back towards the administration building that had become the centre of the Borg hive.

By this time the building had taken on the external appearance of a Borg structure entirely, with no trace of the original architecture remaining. Instead every windowless surface had a dull metallic appearance with exposed ducts and pipes. In addition to this the roof had numerous antenna arrays on it, most of them just two or three metres across while another larger array was obviously still under construction. Rising up above all of these though was a large energy projecting dish that had a pale beam of light rising up from it.

"There's our shield generator. Locking on." Ashton said as he aimed the shuttle's phasers.

Scattered around the building were several vehicles that had also taken on the appearance of Borg technology. They were being prepared for the Borg's next attempt to break out of the perimeter that had been established but as the shuttle flew towards the building these began to move to protect it and there was another beam of light from a roof mounted emitter on one of them.

"Hurry up." N'Riss said.

"I've got a lock, firing phasers." Ashton responded and he fired the shuttle's phasers towards the building.

The twin red beams of the shuttle's phasers struck the shield projector mounted on the roof of the Borg modified building and it exploded in a ball of flame as the vast amount of energy being channelled through it was released in an uncontrolled fashion.

"*Spirit* to *Spectre*, target destroyed." Ashton signalled, grinning as the shuttle flew over the burning shield generator.

"Fancy some more target practice?" N'Riss asked, glancing at Ashton and he smiled back at her.

"I think we've time for one quick pass." he replied and N'Riss turned the shuttle sharply so that it was pointing back towards the Borg ground vehicles and as she flew over them Ashton fired the phasers again, destroying two in rapid succession.

"Captain the Borg shield is collapsing." Baker announced as the *Spectre*'s sensors detected the sudden drop in power.

"The *Spirit* is still over the settlement captain." Armstrong added, seeing on her console that the shuttle had turned back for a second attack run.

"Then tell them to get out of there." Castle ordered, "Lieutenant K'Ran lock phasers onto the location of the shield generator and fire. I don't want the Borg regenerating it. Then conduct a full bombardment of the area previously covered by the shield. Don't let anything escape."

"Yes captain. Firing phasers." K'Ran responded and he fired one of the *Spectre*'s forward phaser banks towards the surface, striking the former administration building at the heart of the settlement. The powerful energy blast ripped through every room and level of the building, turning the air to fire before the structure collapsed from the damage while the shuttle flew away from it as fast as it could. K'Ran did not stop there though instead he continued to fire at the ruins of the building, boring into the ground with the phasers to make sure that nothing was sheltered beneath. Then he began to spread his firing pattern out, striking at a wider area as he first obliterated everything around the burning ruins such as the remaining ground vehicles and then moved on to the wider settlement.

The other buildings in the settlement had not been assimilated by the Borg but since they offered potential hiding places for drones they had to be destroyed along with their contents. Fortunately because all the Borg had done was to remove anything that was of use to them the settlement's structures were unable to resist the orbital phaser bombardment and entire blocks of residences and places of business were demolished with each blast until all that remained of the entire settlement was burning, lifeless ruins.

"Target area destroyed captain." K'Ran reported when the firing was complete.

"Shuttle *Spirit* now entering hangar." Armstrong added.

"Analysis of bombardment effects?" Castle asked, turning towards Baker.

"Lieutenant K'Ran is correct captain, total destruction of the target area has been achieved. Zero life readings and zero activity." Baker responded as she studied the sensor readings.

"What about the surrounding area?" Castle added.

"Lifeform readings and motion all appear consistent with local fauna captain. The closest signs of intelligent life are from the militia units deployed further out." Baker told him and he nodded.

"Excellent. Continue to scan the area for life and movement just in case anything down there is just playing dead. Once the fires are out the militia will have to conduct a physical check. I know it's obvious but recommend to them that they conduct an aerial search first and then send in ground units." Castle said.

"I'll tell them immediately." Armstrong replied, reaching for the communication system.

"In the meantime well done everyone. I think that we've demonstrated that resistance is not so futile after all." Castle said, leaning back in his chair and smiling.

Despite the destruction of the Borg probe vessel and the drones who had made it to the surface a force of Starfleet vessels still gathered at Tollas Prime, led by Admiral Tyler aboard the *Academy*. Eager to get a full report the admiral contacted Castle as soon as his ship entered orbit. Castle was in his quarters at the time and the signal was relayed to him there.

"Dress uniform Jack?" the admiral said to Castle when he saw the uniform that Castle was wearing instead of his regular duty uniform.

"I have an important meeting coming up." Castle responded.

"More important than an admiral?" Tyler asked.

"Much more, far more depends on it going well sir." Castle answered.

"In that case I'll try to be brief. I've read your report on the engagement with the Borg and everything seems in order. The local government aren't very happy about the loss of an entire town full of people but that can't be laid at our door." Tyler said.

"No sir, they were all assimilated by the Borg. Fortunately their defences weren't tight enough to prevent a shuttle from taking out their shield, otherwise we'd have had no choice but to use a large scale torpedo bombardment despite the collateral damage that that would have caused." Castle said.

"Yes, it was some quick thinking to use a shuttle. I suspect that Starfleet intelligence is going to be interested in any information on those ground vehicles that your people and the militia encountered. To the best of my knowledge nothing like them has been encountered in the hands of the Borg before. They tend to be prepared to just walk everywhere." Tyler said.

"Yes admiral. Unfortunately the vehicle that was engaged by the militia is the only one that left any significant debris. All of the rest were completely destroyed by our orbital strike." Castle said.

"That can't be helped. Better not to risk more lives trying to recover a few pieces of scrap. Is there anything else you've got to add?" Tyler said.

"No admiral, everything about my actions is in the report, including my recommendation that the Goodwins should face charges for their actions. They may have been desperate but they were reckless in their pursuit of a treatment for Elisa and put thousands of lives at risk." Castle said.

"I agree, though I suspect that a court might have a degree of sympathy for Elisa herself. That Romulan on the other hand, well I don't think that a court will look favourably on him. Even if it does he'll likely be in a lot of trouble when he goes back to the Romulan Free State." Tyler said.

"Yes, from what I understand he came to the Federation because he was prevented from carrying out his research at home. Of course it was illegal here too but he didn't seem as frightened of our law enforcement agencies as he is of Romulan ones." Castle said.

"I can't say I blame him. Returning to the matter at hand though I'm going to keep the task force in the system for a few days longer yet, I want to be certain that more Borg ships aren't on their way before leaving the planet almost defenceless again." Tyler told him, "That means your departure will be delayed for a while."

"I understand admiral, though I know my crew are eager to begin exploring." Castle said.

"I'm sure they are and I won't keep you longer than necessary but for now it's the best option. Good luck in the future Jack." Tyler said.

"Thank you admiral." Castle said before Tyler closed the channel and at almost the same time the intercom at the door to his quarters sounded.

"Jack, it's me." Beth's voice said and Jack smiled.

"Come in." he said and the door slid open to let Beth enter, also wearing her white dress tunic rather than her regular duty uniform.

"How long do we have?" she asked.

"Not long probably. I'm just glad that the admiral didn't keep me talking all night." Castle said and then the intercom activated.

"Captain I have that connection to Earth for you." Ashton said.

"Excellent. Put it through to me here." Castle said as he and Beth both sat down on a couch facing the computer terminal as the communication signal was fed to it. The two siblings then smiled together and spoke in unison as a familiar face appeared on the screen.

"Hi mom." they both said.

"Come on we're finished, let's get out of here. I don't care what's being said about this deck being fine, it still gives me the creeps." an engineer said to Lieutenant Ferro as they sealed an access panel on deck thirteen. "You're just being jumpy. Commander Hutchins explained the issue." Ferro replied as she picked up her tools.

"Yeah, right. Did he explain where the missing crews went while he was at it?" the other engineer said.

"No but-" Ferro began.

"But nothing. I'd rather not be on this deck a moment longer than necessary." the other engineer interrupted.

"Well we're done and I've got everything so we can go." Ferro told him.

"Good." he replied and the two engineers made their way to the turbolift.

The turbolift doors closed behind them, leaving the deck empty and for just a moment a display screen set into the wall flickered and there was a burst of Borg symbols before it returned to normal.