

ON THE EVE OF BATTLE
BY DAVID DIETZ

PERSONAL LOG, Lieutenant Y'Vrn Martyn: Stardate 43997.6

I don't know if anyone will ever hear these words. But if they do, and I must assume that I am no longer among the living, please get this recording to Federation Ambassador Valeria MacFarlane.

I am alone. Again.

As I glance back out the rear window of this single-occupant escape pod, I can still see the fire of the carnage I have left behind. The Borg ship was... awesome, for lack of a better word. More powerful than we had ever dreamed. And with the captured captain of the starship *Enterprise*, whom we must now call "Locutus," leading them, it seems more and more likely that the Federation is about fall.

Nothing we tried could even put a dent in that damn thing!

The inferno among the stars is getting smaller and smaller, as I move further and further away from it. I don't know how many others made it off in one piece. Perhaps, I was the only one. I've programmed the small, on-board navigational computer to set me down on the first Class-M world it can locate.

Though between you and me, I sincerely doubt that even if this bucket can last the journey to that world that it will set me down on the surface in one piece. So meanwhile, I have to pass the time somehow. Might as

well do it making out my “last will and testament,” as it were.

How, in the name of God, did I ever end up like this? I suppose it all began on that fateful day nearly a year ago....

* * *

I had been aboard the U.S.S. *Cairo* for about two and a half years, ever since I received my lieutenant’s pips. I guess I was expecting to move up the ranks at a steady pace, maybe making Commander by the time I was in my late thirties. After that, who could say?

Oh, there were plenty of purely research vessels in Starfleet, but at twenty-two, serving aboard a ship whose main purpose was mapping out stellar nebulae or cataloguing gaseous planets did not promise the kind of adventure and excitement that someone at that age usually craves. It was certainly not what I desired.

So, thanks to the little bit of pull I *did* have with Starfleet Command, I requested to be posted aboard the *Cairo*. *Now that*, I had thought, *would be an assignment!*

The *Cairo* had spent the last few months in and out of the space between the Cardassian Empire and the Federation. We didn’t have much on the Cardassians at that time, and so it was our job to get as close to the border as we possibly could, without rousing their suspicion of course, and learn as much about them as we were able. Yeah, that was what I was looking for! Something to research that had just a hint of danger to it.

It's amazing how stupid one can be when they're younger.

As I remember it, I was sitting in the research lab one day, going over some recent transmissions we had picked up from along the Cardassian border. Unfortunately, we nearly provoked an entire fleet of Galor-class warships to come across the border and basically blow us out of the stars. If it hadn't been thanks to a brilliant maneuver by our CO, I think we probably would have ended up as kibble for whatever the Cardassian equivalent of a dog was.

However, we hadn't made it out without a few bumps. And so, we were ordered to the nearest star base for some much-needed repairs, and maybe even some shore leave. That would be nice. Unfortunately, the Captain said he wanted the data we had just received analyzed and translated with our speculations as to what the Cardassians were doing *before* we got there, or there wouldn't *be* any shore leave.

"Just get it done," he had said.

And so, there I was staring at the information as it rolled by on the screen atop my desk. I remember my eyes began burning after a while, and having the realization pass over me that I could not remember the last time I'd blinked. So, I closed my eyelids and rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger for about ten seconds, hoping I could coax some moisture to return to them and douse the burning sensation.

I didn't know what it was about my eyes. Mother had always told me that all Yarzonians had light green sclera and emerald irises. She also mentioned that Yarzon was a desert world and that it was possible that because of the harsh, dry conditions of the planet, that Yarzonian eyes did not have as-fully-developed tear ducts as humans had.

Personally, I never bought that. All my years as a researcher had made me realize that nature invariably compensates for shortages in one way or another. In other words, I believed that most Yarzonians actually had *more*-developed tear ducts than humans because of the planet's conditions, and that if my eyes were indeed as dry as I believed them to be, then I should have had a river flowing into them right now.

But I didn't. And seeing as I had never actually met another Yarzonian, I'd never know if my mother's theory, or my own was the correct one.

After I had finished rubbing my eyes, I looked up from my terminal. As I blinked once or twice, trying to bring everything back into focus, I noticed that the room was not as full as it usually was. Oh, there were about three or four other people in the room besides me, but there was usually triple that number here.

Where were they all? I wondered. The Captain did say he wanted this done before we reached the star base. Then the terrifying thought occurred to me: oh God! Maybe we have and my report's the only one NOT on the Captain's desk! In a slight panic, I whipped my head

quickly around the room, searching for a sign that my worst fears had come to pass.

Then, I saw it. The chronometer on the far wall of the research area. I breathed a huge sigh of relief. It read that it was 1800 hours, the time everyone usually went to grab a bite to eat. My heart, which had been beating faster than a mouse running for its life from some ravenous, salivating feline, began to slow down as I retook my seat.

I wasn't really all that hungry at the moment, so I decided to just sit there at my terminal studying the data until I did feel my stomach ache, protesting the fact that it wasn't full. I turned my attention once again to the brightly-lit blue characters which ran endlessly across the terminal's black screen.

That's when I heard the doors to the research area hiss open. The first thought that ran through my mind was that perhaps it was several of the other officers in the department returning early from dinner. No doubt to get a head start on fulfilling the Captain's request. I didn't bother to look up from the terminal.

That was when I felt a finger poking me on the shoulder. I glanced up and saw Ensign Monroe, a rather insecure young man who just transferred aboard, looking down nervously at me. Monroe always looked as if he had just urinated without remembering to unzip his uniform trousers.

However, the look on his face at that particular moment was even more intense than usual. He was cocking his head to his left side as he looked down at me. I began

wondering if he had suddenly developed some kind of nervous twitch or perhaps experiencing a seizure, as the jerky movement of his head became less subtle and much more intense. As if he were non-verbally trying to warn me of something.

I glanced above the top of my terminal, and when I saw them standing in the open doorway, my heart began racing again. I rose to stand at attention as Captain Jellico stepped into the room. Beside him walked a much older, plump, balding man with wispy salt-and-pepper hair, wearing the uniform of a Starfleet Admiral.

Captain Jellico looked back at the Admiral, who for the first time appeared to notice that the few people who were in the room were all standing at attention. “Oh, as you were everyone,” said the Admiral.

The other three or four people in the room took their seats, as did I, but with much less haste. The information on the Cardassians could wait a moment or two. At that moment, I really wanted to see what the Captain and this Admiral were doing here.

I made like I had returned my attention to the screen in front of me, though in fact, my eyes were staring past the top of the terminal towards the two senior officers. At first, they appeared to be doing the standard inspection. Looking around to make sure everyone in the room was busy enough, running their fingers along a tabletop checking for dust that shouldn't've been there.

Finally, after they had circled the room once, the Admiral stopped dead in his tracks, and turned to face the Captain.

“Alright,” the Admiral began pleasantly in a deep, scratchy voice, “which one is he?”

Captain Jellico raised his arm and pointed in my direction. “Over there, sir,” he said.

Could he...? No, he couldn't have meant me. I glanced quickly behind me, and there, at her usual terminal, was Lieutenant Borana. Yes, the dedicated, though somewhat standoffish, Andorian was definitely the one the Admiral had been talking about. She was who they wanted to see! Good for her; maybe she was about to be promoted, or decorated or something.

I returned my attention to the screen once again. This time, with the full intention of doing my job of analyzing the data.

I had been sitting there for no more than a moment, when I heard the sound of someone clearing their throat above me. Somewhat annoyed by the disgusting sound, I glanced up from my terminal.

And nearly had a heart attack.

Captain Jellico and the Admiral were standing right in front of my desk! I don't know how long they had been there, but the Admiral grinned warmly at me while Captain Jellico's stony face had just a touch of annoyance written across it.

“Admiral Hanson, this is Lieutenant Y'Vrn Martyn,” introduced the Captain.

Admiral Hanson extended his hand to me and I quickly rose from my chair and returned the gesture. All the while hoping that neither one of them could sense the confusion and embarrassment I was experiencing at the moment.

“Yes,” said the Admiral as we shook hands, “I’ve heard quite a lot about you, Lieutenant.”

“Lieutenant Martyn has been instrumental in helping us decipher several Cardassian military codes,” said the Captain. “He seems to have quite a flare for it.”

“Does he really?” said Admiral Hanson, sounding very impressed.

I shot a quick glance at my CO.

I had always admired Captain Edward Jellico from the moment I stepped aboard the *Cairo*. He had a keen sense of order and discipline that I have rarely found in other humans. He was a strong, imposing man with a keen sense of right and wrong that few other Starfleet officers could match. He did not easily give his loyalties, but when he did, you had them forever.

Had he not been born on Earth, I would have sworn that he had Yarzonian blood flowing through his veins.

The Captain and I had become as close as two officers could expect to be aboard a starship, but he was still my captain. And I was still just a lieutenant. So, I really didn’t feel quite right telling him that I wanted to be called by my Yarzonian name. Especially not with a fleet admiral standing next to us in the same room!

The Admiral turned away from me and began to walk towards the doors. Captain Jellico began to follow him a second or two later. The doors parted and Admiral Hanson paced sprightly through the threshold and into the outside corridor. As Captain Jellico was about to depart as well, he turned back to face me once again.

“Well, don’t just stand there, Lieutenant,” he said sternly. “Follow us.”

* * *

As I stepped into the at-the-moment-deserted corridor outside the research area, I noticed that Captain Jellico had already caught up with Admiral Hanson, who was walking at a light, but steady pace about twenty feet down. I dashed after them and finally joined them after about five seconds. Admiral Hanson shot a glance behind him at me as I came up behind them. He smiled again.

“Ah, there you are Lieutenant,” said Admiral Hanson.

I chuckled to myself. This Admiral Hanson appeared to me to be the complete antithesis of Captain Jellico. He seemed open, warm, and it appeared that he would always make an effort to become friendly with every officer who served under him. I imagine that if some officers had a poker game going on in their off-duty hours, the Admiral would surely have wanted to join them.

And while I have no doubt that Hanson was an effective commander, (one didn’t become an admiral in Starfleet because of their good looks,) it was a style that, at the time, I wasn’t used to. Captain Jellico had once

commented that to be an effective commander, you had to have some distance between yourself and the lower-ranking officers. Being too friendly with your shipmates could only bring about trouble for the ship, and for the longest time, that was precisely what I believed.

“I was just talking with your Captain about you, Lieutenant,” Admiral Hanson continued. “Your service record aboard this ship has been commendable.”

“Thank you sir,” I said, carefully pacing my steps so that I didn’t accidentally bump into the back of either one of them.

“I understand that it was you who deciphered the transmission detailing the Cardassian attack on Salla 3. We would have lost that colony if it hadn’t been for your brilliant analysis.”

“I really can’t take all the credit sir,” I stammered, feeling my cheeks flush.

“Don’t be modest, Lieutenant,” said Captain Jellico, with a rare smile. “If you hadn’t been able to determine that they were using a trinary code, we would never have been able to figure out the rest.”

“Well,” I said again with slight embarrassment, “I still say it was a team effort.”

“Modest,” commented the Admiral. “And a real team player, too. I like that in an officer. I think you may just be the man we’re looking for.”

“For what, sir?” I wondered.

Admiral Hanson paused a moment before continuing. I’ve noticed that most high-ranking officers

have a tendency to do that whenever they had something to tell you that noone else was meant to hear. I don't remember Admiral Hanson actually looking over his shoulder to make sure that the corridor was indeed clear of other people, but in retrospect, I imagine he might have. I know I would've!

"I imagine you're familiar with the records of the Federation's flag ship?" said Admiral Hanson.

"You mean the *Enterprise*?" I wondered.

Admiral Hanson nodded. "This hasn't been made public knowledge as of yet, but a few months back, the *Enterprise* encountered a life form which may pose a serious threat to the safety of all the Federated worlds."

"More than the Cardassians?" I enquired.

"More than the Cardassians, the Romulans, the Gorn, and the Tholians put together."

That surprised me, I recalled. I'd often wondered if sooner or later, the Federation might encounter an enemy that could prove to be too much to overcome. But I never thought I'd live to see the day that it actually happened. Now, here I was, in a corridor with both my captain and a high-ranking Starfleet admiral who had just told me that it was possible that that day had finally come!

"They're called the Borg," Admiral Hanson went on to say, "and Starfleet is anticipating that they will be in our region of space some time within the next three years."

It was even worse than I'd imagined. This Borg, whoever or whatever they were, must have had the upper

echelons of Starfleet Command quaking in their boots. But still I wondered what all this had to do with me?

The Admiral quickly supplied me with the answer.

“A division is being created within Starfleet Tactical, whose mission will be to study the Borg and see if some kind of defense against them can developed in time. We’re recruiting the best researchers and tactical analysts in Starfleet to operate this division.”

“I take it then,” I boldly ventured, “that I’m on your list?”

“Close to the top of it, actually,” said Captain Jellico with pride.

There’s an old Earth expression which says that happiness is a pat on the back from your boss. At that moment, I began to understand for the first time where that saying might have come from. Captain Jellico rarely, if ever, expressed pride in his officers. Perhaps he was afraid of their egos growing too large and consequently them not being able to complete their duties.

That’s what made this display all the more special to me. At that time, I don’t remember ever being happier in my life than I was at that moment. If I’d been near a mirror, I imagine the width of my smile would have been splitting my face in half.

“Well, what do you say, Lieutenant?” asked Admiral Hanson. “Would you like to be a part of Borg Tactical Analysis?”

With an excited nod of my head, I accepted the offer.

And sealed my fate.

* * *

About a week after Admiral Hanson had suddenly appeared aboard the *Cairo*, I found myself at Deep Space 5, home of the new Borg Tactical Analysis division. DS5 was the largest space station I had ever been aboard at that time, and as I stepped out of the airlock connecting one of the station's docking pylons with my shuttlecraft, I took a moment to marvel at the immense interior of the offloading area.

The *Cairo*'s main shuttle bay had been large, but this place made it seem like the interior of a standard officer's quarters by comparison. I imagine that as several other disembarking officers brushed past me, they must have thought that I was as green an officer as the color of my eyes. After a moment or two more of awestruck admiration, I began moving along with the rest of the crowd, slinging my duffle bag over my shoulder in the process.

The standard, overview presentation of the station and life on it didn't interest me much, but it was required and so, like every other good officer, I silently sat through it. Trying to take in as much of the boring, monotonous lecture as I could without dosing off. Finally, though really no more than an hour later, it was over and we were shown to our quarters. I stopped in mine just quickly enough to throw my duffle bag on the unmade bed, straighten out my overall appearance, and then head down to the area of the station where I would be doing most of my work.

The main doors parted gently open with the usual hydraulic hiss, and I stepped through the threshold and into the room. To my astonishment, there were already several other officers in the room, hard at work. Judging by the different colors of their uniforms, they had been pulled from every conceivable branch of service in Starfleet. Engineers, technicians, medical and command personnel, all working together to solve a common problem.

I admit, I was greatly impressed.

“Can I help you with something, Lieutenant?” a distinctly feminine voice said.

I turned around, and standing before me was a human woman dressed in the red duty uniform of a Starfleet officer. She was a bit shorter than I, and had her long, blonde hair pulled up into a bun atop her head. Her piercing blue eyes were striking enough, but it was the Lieutenant Commander’s rank pips on the collar of her uniform that made me really notice her.

“I’m one of the new officers that’s been assigned,” I said hopefully. “Lieutenant Y’Vrn Martyn, of the *Cairo*.”

For the first time, a smile curled the woman’s lips, growing wider until it eventually revealed her immaculately straight, pearly-white teeth. She extended her hand to me and as I took it in mine, she began to pump it vigorously.

“So you’re the Lieutenant Martyn I’ve heard so much about?” she said excitedly. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you. Lieutenant Commander Elizabeth Shelby, head of Borg Tactical.”

Lieutenant Commander Shelby began to lead me around the room, stopping here and there to point out a piece of equipment or introduce me to one of the other officers working in the room. According to her, Borg Tactical had been up and running for nearly a month, almost as soon as the *Enterprise's* logs concerning their encounter with the Borg had reached Starfleet Command.

They weren't up to full operation yet, but it had been decided that the problem of trying to create a defense against the Borg needed to be solved as quickly as possible. And so, from the moment the first personnel had arrived aboard DS5, they went to work almost immediately, knowing that any one of them could be the one to find the solution.

"Needless to say, our progress has been slow," continued Shelby. "But your arrival here means that we finally have a full complement of people working on the problem. And, who knows, maybe we're just days away from a solution."

"If the Borg are as powerful as everyone seems to believe," I interjected, "then I doubt that the answer is going to come that easily."

"You must be a pessimist, Martyn," said Shelby.

"I'm a realist," I replied.

I hadn't known Shelby for more than a few moments, but I think that it would be safe to say that I felt comfortable around her. Although she was a few years older than me, she still had the youthful exuberance and drive of a first-year cadet. Sometime later, I learned that it

was this passion for her job that had brought her up the ranks so quickly, and eventually led to her being put in charge of Borg Tactical.

I wasn't sure at that time how close we would become. But there was one thing I had been wanting to straighten out for a long time, and somehow, I found in her the courage and determination to do so.

"There's just one thing, Commander," I said in a more pleasant tone of voice. Shelby stopped in her tracks and gave me her full attention.

"If we're going to work together, would it be too much trouble if I asked you to call me by my Yarzonian name?"

Shelby shook her head slightly. "Any particular reason why?"

"Well, it is personal," I said. "But, suffice it to say that I'm trying to get in touch with my heritage, and using my Earth name doesn't help me."

Shelby smiled. "No problem, Lieutenant."

I hoped that my own smile was thanks enough for her gracious understanding. It seemed to be. Shelby then took me over to show me my own personal work station.

* * *

We had been working on the Borg defense plan for about eight months, and every day we seemed to be no further ahead than we were when we started. Oh, we'd had several leads on a possible solution, but each one of them led to one dead end after another.

Everyone was tired and beginning to get frustrated. Off-duty, I would hear people complaining about Lieutenant Commander Shelby being a slave-driver and not caring a tinker's cuss about the ones doing "the real work." In reality, I don't believe anyone even stopped to consider the tremendous pressure that Shelby was under.

I mean, here she was a young Commander, probably in charge of her first major project for Starfleet Command. She had been at work on the problem with the rest of us for eight months, and what did she have to show for it? The same, big zero we all had. She was the one who had to tell it to Admiral Hanson that we were no closer to a solution. She was the one who had the excruciating weight on her shoulder to get it done.

There were times when I would swear she'd come into work in the morning with weary red eyes. Many of the others speculated that she didn't sleep, but stayed up all night looking over the day's work, trying to find the one item the rest of us might have overlooked. I prefer to think that maybe she did do some of that, but that the red, restless eyes were brought about by tears of frustration.

I really felt for Commander Shelby. She'd had a lot put upon her recently, and she was the one who had the most to lose if we failed. She really didn't socialize with anyone because of this. Perhaps she feared that someone in her position of authority couldn't afford to get too close to any of the officers under her.

I remember often seeing her drink alone at the bar on the station's promenade. At those times, part of me

would want to go up to her table and ask to join her. But the other part of me, the one that respected her privacy, decided that, like myself, there were times when she wanted to be alone. In many ways, she reminded me of myself as a young boy back on Earth.

I remember coming in to work one morning and noticing that the attendance that day was considerably lower than it had ever been. I checked the duty roster, and it appeared that half of the other officers were listed as either sick or off on vacation somewhere. I remember hearing one of the ones who were there that day commenting that there was an epidemic of “Shelby-itis” on the station.

They laughed, I didn’t.

I sat down at my terminal and began going over sensor playbacks of the Borg ship’s attack on the *Enterprise*. At this point, I should mention that when I first saw an image of the scaffolded, cuboid Borg ship, I nearly wet myself. This thing made a Galaxy-class starship, the largest and most powerful space vehicle ever devised by Starfleet, look like a tiny, solitary pebble sitting in a vast ocean of sand.

Even at that point, every time I saw even a picture of a Borg ship, I felt a chill race up my spine. If this thing could make a starship as big as the *Enterprise* seem puny and insignificant, imagine what it might do to an entire planet.

I’d been studying the same replay over and over again for the past several hours. I admit, it was beginning

to grow tiresome. I glanced over my right shoulder, and noticed that Commander Shelby was seated at one of the other stations that was usually occupied by one of the “sick” officers. Her chin rested atop her fist, and the look on her face seemed empty and lifeless. Not at all the woman I knew when I first arrived here.

Just for a laugh, and because I couldn’t think of anything else to do, I ran the playback one more time, this time enhancing it with an electro-magnetic scan. The program played back as it had before, and as it ended, something appeared on the screen that had never been there before. I ran the playback again just to double-check that there wasn’t some fault with the equipment.

But, no! It was still there.

I called Commander Shelby over. She rose lifelessly from her desk and dragged her feet across the maroon-carpeted floor for an endless moment, until finally she stood above my desk.

“What is it, Y’Vrn?” she said in a tired drone.

“Take a look at this,” I said. I then set up the computer to run the same playback I had just been watching.

“I’ve been running this same section of the *Enterprise*’s sensor logs. The last time I did, I ran it with a computer-enhanced EM scan, and look... right... here!”

I stopped the playback just as a Borg tractor beam disengaged itself from the *Enterprise*’s hull. Commander Shelby leaned in closer as the screen displayed a faint,

colorful, computer-enhanced echo on the metallic hull of the ship.

“What is it?” said Shelby, her curiosity piqued.

“Near as I can figure, it’s some kind of residual radiation left over after the Borg tractor beam disengaged. It caused no damage to the *Enterprise*’s outer hull, and seems to pose no threat to biological life.”

“You mean it’s like a... radioactive footprint?” ventured Shelby.

“That’s a pretty good analogy, sir.”

Shelby stared at the screen for a long moment, apparently taking in this new information, and perhaps formulating the ramifications of what it meant. I noticed her eyes growing wider with excitement, the fire in them once again sparked by the discovery.

“This could be it, Y’Vrn,” she said excitedly. “The breakthrough we’ve been looking for. If we can determine what kind of radiation is given off by that tractor beam, then maybe we can determine the Borg ship’s power source!”

“And come up with some way to neutralize it,” I postulated.

Shelby nodded ecstatically. For the first time in about a month, I saw the youthful sparkle that had been missing return to her eyes. I smiled contently to myself. Even though she didn’t actually come right out and say it before she dashed back over to her own terminal, seeing the old Shelby that I knew and loved back again was all the thanks I needed.

News of the discovery of the Borg “radiation footprint” swept through DS5 like wildfire. For the first time in nearly a year, the possibility of finding the solution never seemed greater. The “footprint” even turned out to be the cure for the “Shelby-itis” epidemic that had stricken so many of the other officers, as they were now all back at their stations. Working feverishly to find the answer.

Somehow, part of me thought that it also set off a kind of rampant competition among the other officers. Commander Shelby and I had found the first piece in the puzzle, and now the others were fighting harder than ever to find the others. Shelby had commented that the footprint had proved to be just the right kick in the ass needed to get Borg Tactical up and running once again.

Shelby still never thanked me personally, but I got the feeling that that sort of display just wasn't in her personality. In many ways, she reminded me of Captain Jellico, and I often found myself stopping to wonder what would happen if the two of them ever met. Then I found myself wondering what my old skipper and the *Cairo* were up to?

I missed them a lot. But there would be plenty of time to think about them after we had our solution. Unfortunately, that was the day that our time had run out.

As we sat at our terminals, going over the usual data, the main doors hissed open, and in stepped an unexpected visitor. Admiral Hanson swept hurriedly into the room, telling everyone to remain seated when he

noticed them begin to rise to attention. I watched as he dashed over to Commander Shelby at her desk and as the two exchanged words for a moment.

A horrified look slowly came over Commander Shelby's face.

Admiral Hanson and Commander Shelby walked to the center of the room where everyone would have a good view of them. Shelby then called for our attention, saying that Admiral Hanson had some news for us.

It was news we least wanted to hear.

"Two days ago," began Admiral Hanson, "the New Providence colony was attacked without warning. Sensor logs from the colony indicate that the aggressor was a gigantic, cuboid ship that blocked out the sun. The last report stated that the colony had been locked onto by some kind of tractor beam. After that, we have no information."

The grim look across the Admiral's usually pleasant features spoke volumes. He said that there was no way to be certain, but everyone in the room knew it had all the earmarks of a Borg attack.

So, they were here. Two years earlier than Starfleet's initial prediction. And we had only begun to scratch the surface of how to defend ourselves against them. There were no two ways about it; we simply were not ready.

"The *Enterprise* has already begun an investigation at New Providence," the Admiral went on to say. "Commander Shelby and I will be leaving at once to

rendezvous with them, and we will be relaying any new data we can find back to you. That is all.”

With those last few words, Admiral Hanson strode out of the research area.

For a moment or two afterwards, we all sat there in dumbfounded silence. It only seemed like yesterday that we’d discovered the radiation footprint and really begun to make progress towards finding a solution. And now this. A quick glance around the room, and I could feel the sense of defeat literally permeate the air.

Commander Shelby finally broke the silence. “There may still be hope,” she said. “Now that we have an actual Borg attack to study, we could learn the invaluable facts that we need to overcome them.”

“What use is it, Commander?” a voice called out. “Let’s face facts, it’s finished.”

“No, it’s not!” Commander Shelby said sternly. “It’s not over until either the Borg or we come out on top. And I mean for us to be the victors!”

Commander Shelby then brushed back to one of the other officers, a coffee-skinned, Terran female. “Jeffries, I want you to carry on experimenting with the warp funnel. There may be something we can use in that.”

Then, she came back over to me. “Y’Vrn, see what else you can find out about that radiation footprint. There’s still more to that than we realize.”

Finally, she turned to address the group. “Above all, don’t give up hope! I’ll be coordinating my findings with all of you back here. We may still have a chance to

beat them, and if anyone can find the solution... I know all of you can.”

I don’t recall if there were actually tears welling up in her eyes, but I do remember that that was the first time that Lieutenant Commander Shelby had ever expressed any emotion for the rest of us. I can’t speak for the others who were in the room at that moment, but I know it made me feel very good.

Commander Shelby then headed for the main doors. As they parted open to allow her access to the outside corridor, she turned back to face us once again. A smile wormed its way across her face.

“I know you can do it,” she said softly. “You’re the best.”

As the doors closed behind her, I silently wished her well on her mission before returning to my own. I didn’t know it then, but that would be the last time I would ever see her.

* * *

For about a week after Lieutenant Commander Shelby left for the *Enterprise* we continued to work harder than ever to find a solution to the crisis. But in the end, it proved to be a fruitless endeavor.

The Borg had continued on a path of devastation beyond New Providence, and showed no sign of letting up. The *Enterprise* had been sent after the invader in a desperate attempt to hold it at bay. But one ship against the might of that awesome force had about as much chance of

success as an ice cube attempting to maintain its shape on a hot sidewalk on some mid-July afternoon.

Shelby had sent us the reports of the Borg being a collective lifeforce, and of how changing the frequency of both the shields and the phasers disoriented them. There was also some talk of possibly using the *Enterprise*'s main deflector dish as some kind of a weapon.

But then came the most terrifying news of all.

The captain of the *Enterprise* had been taken prisoner and assimilated into the Borg collective intelligence. Now all his years of training and experience in Starfleet were part of their intelligence. Because of this, the plan to use the main deflector dish had failed miserably, and now it seemed that the Borg had a single goal on their agenda.

The taking of the planet Earth!

In a desperate attempt to prevent this, Starfleet had decided to set up a blockade against them at sector Wolf 359. This was where I became involved yet again. Each ship in the blockade needed a Borg expert aboard in order to better advise the ship's captain and crew of how to proceed, as Shelby had done aboard the *Enterprise*.

When I received orders to report to my assigned ship, I had to go see Admiral Hanson.

I rushed into his office and noticed that he was busily packing away some of his personal effects that he would be taking aboard the command ship in the blockade. He asked me to excuse the mess and come in to the room.

“I really don’t have a lot of time,” said Admiral Hanson. “So what’s on your mind, Lieutenant?”

“Sir,” I began somewhat hesitantly. I knew he wasn’t going to like what I wanted to say. “I wish to request a transfer.”

“I beg your pardon?” said the Admiral.

“I can’t serve aboard the *Melbourne*, sir. I’d like to be transferred to one of the other ships in the blockade.”

“I’m sorry Lieutenant Y’Vrn,” said the Admiral, returning once again to his packing. “I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” I said, perhaps a bit more forcefully than I should have. “Sir?” I added.

“Y’Vrn, we have to mobilize this blockade as soon as possible, or else the Borg are going to be breathing down our necks. Now, why do you want to be transferred?”

“I... can’t tell you that, sir. Just suffice it to say that I cannot carry out my orders effectively on the *Melbourne*.”

“Well, then you’re gonna have to learn,” said the Admiral. He then added with a shake of his head, “I’m sorry.”

Exasperated, I turned away from the Admiral a moment. I remember my mind racing, trying to come up with some kind of explanation that would satisfy the Admiral, and yet be vague enough to cover up the truth. It must at this point be said that a frantic mind is not the most reasonable, and mine was no exception.

And I could not come up with a valid story that would fit the bill. Once again, I tried one of the most ancient methods that humans have used to get their way: pleading. Perhaps I thought that if I begged him enough, he would become so annoyed that he'd grant my request just to get me away from him. I'd seen it work before.

"What about the SARATOGA?" I said. "It hasn't left yet. You could put me on there."

"The SARATOGA is Lieutenant Garrovick's assignment," said the Admiral, his annoyance building. For a moment, I thought I had him right where I wanted him. However, he glanced up from his desk to look me dead in the eye.

"Look, Lieutenant. I don't know what your problem is with the *Melbourne*, and at the moment, I really don't care. The *Melbourne* is the last ship that needs a Borg expert, and like it or not, you're it."

I cast my eyes ashamedly to the floor. What the hell was I doing? Admiral Hanson was right. Perhaps I was being a bit childish. After all, the *Melbourne* was really no different from any of the other ships in the fleet. She had a fine crew and a highly-experienced captain. But still, I had my reservations about serving aboard her.

"Now Lieutenant," said the Admiral with some degree of finality in his voice. "Are you going to disobey a direct order?"

I looked up into the Admiral's eyes, hoping that he made note of the stony expression I wore on my face.

“I accept the order, sir,” I said sternly. “But under protest.”

“So noted, Lieutenant.”

And with those final three words, Admiral Hanson returned to his packing. I strode out of his office and headed back for my quarters, to pack for my journey to the *Melbourne*.

* * *

In retrospect, that may not have been the best way to present my case to Admiral Hanson. Perhaps, I should have told him the truth. No, that was a matter of personal choice; and anyway, it really wasn't any of his business. But, it hardly seems to make much difference now, seeing as I'm the only one left.

In any case, that's how it all happened. According to the escape pod's tiny, on-board sensors, I'm approaching that class-M world. Now comes the ultimate test. If this thing doesn't burn up in the planet's atmosphere, or shatter to pieces on impact with the surface, I can assume that I'll be alone. Again.

I really don't mind being alone. After all, I have been for most of my life anyway. It always seems that every time I ever get close to someone or something, I invariably lose them. Perhaps, if I survive the landing, life on this world won't be so bad. There appears to be abundant vegetation and animal life to sustain me for many years to come. No signs of any kind of civilization, but maybe that's for the best.

To hell with Starfleet. Signing up in the first place was the biggest mistake I've ever made. It's brought me to this point. It's built up expectations in me and then not come through on them. It's taken from me everything that I've ever held dear.

Mother: if this recording has, somehow, made it into your hands, I want you to know that... I love you. And I'm sorry for everything that I've ever put you through. I hope that you'll find it in your heart to forgive me.

Please, don't try to find me.