

Captain's log, stardate 48494.1:

The Sarek is in standard orbit of the third planet in the Beta Nicson system, where an away team is currently surveying the planet's surface...

On the surface of Beta Nicson III, a small group of Starfleet personnel spread out from a central checkpoint being monitored by Lieutenant A-ZuRQuIL of Capella IV. Two science personnel, Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Jo Ann Tredworth of the xenobiology department and Lt Commander T'Ashara of xenobotany walked along together through the underbrush.

"This is quite fascinating," remarked T'Ashara. "The types of plants in this area of forest should not be growing together. Take for example this plant." The Vulcan woman pointed to a stubby plant with short, spiky leaves as she knelt to examine it. "This plant is very similar to a variety of desert dwelling, water storing plants on my home planet of Vulcan. While this one next to it..." She pointed at a large, spindly plant whose short roots were spread across the surface of the ground. "...Is of a variety that takes its moisture directly from the air, which I would expect from an ecosphere like the one we are located in. I have never seen two so vastly different plants share the same climate region like this unless planted together deliberately."

"Tricorders show no life beyond non-sentient animal life and the away team. To my surprise, though, I can empathically read some of the animals," said Lieutenant Tredworth. Almost in response, a small fawn-like animal, grey in color with short stub-like antlers on its head, stepped out from a bush and approached the two officers. Tredworth held out her hand to the animal, a move that started to prompt a protest from her Vulcan companion, mentally calling it to come closer. As the animal took a few hesitant steps forward, T'Ashara scanned it with her tricorder.

"Fascinating," she remarked, studying the tricorder's readings. "Although the creature does not appear much older than an Earth fawn of only a few weeks in age, the tricorder indicates the animal is almost two-hundred standard years old."

"She wants us to feed her," said Tredworth with confusion. "I'm getting mental feelings of affection toward us and the want to be fed." The fawn-like creature took the last slow steps toward Tredworth and started licking the Betazoid's hand as she started petting the animal. Her hand stroked over the animal's strong neck and came to a stop when Tredworth felt something there.

"What is this?" she said as she pushed away the grey fur covering the object. It was a black metallic collar with a clasp on the bottom. T'Ashara approached to study the collar. "She's domesticated. That explains the feelings of affection she's has shown toward us. But how did she get here?"

"Perhaps we should report this to the rest of the away team?" suggested T'Ashara. "They should look for signs of other extra-planetary visitors in the recent past."

The two officers started back toward the checkpoint, the fawn-creature following closely behind like a lost puppy. As they reached a clearing in the woods and started across it, Tredworth started to fall into a pit hidden by what at first appeared to be the undergrowth. She was grabbed by T'Ashara, who pulled the strawberry-blonde Betazoid woman back to a steady footing before extracting her tricorder to scan the immediate vicinity.

"We are standing on the edge of a crater," T'Ashara reported. "It measures... 7 kilometers across by 5.3 kilometers in width. Although it appears to be a clearing in the forest, in actuality the plants and trees have grown to fill in the crater to approximate normal ground level. This crater averages one-eighth of a kilometer deep." She started turning in a circle, scanning the surroundings, her eyebrows lifting in amazement. "There is evidence of disused road systems converging on this crater, long unused and covered by dirt and vegetation, almost as if..." The thought occurred to the two officers simultaneously.

"Trouble," said Tredworth.

"I concur," said T'Ashara as she tapped her combadge. "T'Ashara to *Sarek*. Lock on to my signal. Two to beam up." A moment later, the two Starfleet officers dematerialized in the hum of the transporter. Their new friend, startled by the noise and sudden disappearance of the people she was following, sniffed the air and ran back off onto the woods with fright.

Space, the Final Frontier...

These are the voyages of the starship *Sarek*!

Star Trek: Sarek

"If One of Those Bottles..." by PJK

A grim-faced group was gathered in the *Sarek*'s conference lounge. Captain Kalin Kale, a displeased look on his face, sat at the head of the table. To his left sat Lt Commander Yu-Fen Mickey Cosna, the ship's first officer, with Commander T'Veer, the Vulcan chief engineer on her left. Across from T'Veer sat Tredworth and T'Ashara, with Lieutenant Penji Fil, the ship's chief of security, sitting at the captain's right, while Fil's own assistant, Lieutenant A-ZuRQuIL standing against the wall near the viewer behind Kale.

Conspicuous by his absence was the operations officer, Lieutenant Setton To'Lock Arbelo, who was still on the bridge performing an assignment for the captain.

“If this turns out to be what I’m afraid it is,” said Kale, “then we may be facing the one thing I thought this ship would be safe from in this quadrant of the galaxy.”

“What exactly has the away team found on the planet?” asked T’Veer, but Kale’s reply was cut off by the intercom.

“Arbelo to Captain Kale. Ship’s sensors are reading two hundred fifty seven craters on the planet’s surface matching the description of the one discovered by Lt Commander T’Ashara and Lieutenant Tredworth, all in various stages of being reclaimed by nature. And I have detected magnetic residue readings that match those we have on file. I’m afraid it’s confirmed.”

“Thank you, Monster,” Kale said before closing the intercom and looking at his gathered crew. “That’s it. There’s now no doubt. We may soon be facing the Borg.” Everyone in the room looked at each other, stunned into silence.

“Captain,” said T’Ashara. “The crater we found had to be at least seventy five to one hundred standard years old. That does not necessarily mean the Borg are still around.”

“Yes, but this star system is hundreds of light years from known Borg space. This is a lot further into this quadrant than anyone would have figured they would get. And our preliminary survey of the planet indicates that this planet was once a colony of the Dominion.” The crew started discussing the possibilities of encountering the Dominion – a galactic political entity in control of much of the Gamma Quadrant that the Sarek crew believed lay many light years in the opposite direction – amongst themselves. It had been a long time since the name had been mentioned aboard the starship because the *Sarek*’s course of exploration had purposely kept her out of space known to belong to the Dominion until further research and negotiation could be completed by Starfleet from *Deep Space Nine*.

“Bridge, this is the Captain. Send a subspace communiqué to Starfleet. Inform them of our discovery and add that the *Sarek* is going to investigate just how far the Borg have penetrated into the Gamma Quadrant.”

“Aye, sir,” replied Arbelo.

* * * *

The door chime to Tredworth’s quarters rang and Jo Ann pressed the button near her couch to open the door.

“You called?” asked Val’ri Raiajh as she entered the cabin.

“I hope my projecting to you didn’t disturb anything you were doing,” apologized Tredworth.

“Not at all. I had just sent Charissa to bed for the night when I ‘heard’ you, and I just told Sylvan I had an errand to run. What’s up?”

“You know the Captain pretty well, don’t you?”

“I’ve known him for almost seven years now. Of course, before we found ourselves in the 24th century it was only in passing. Why?”

“I think this searching for the Borg is foolish and dangerous, but I don’t have the sort of... relationship, if you will... to just walk up to him and tell him so.”

“And you were hoping I could do it?”

“Would you?” Tredworth asked. Raiajh thought for a moment.

“On one hand, I do agree with you. Seeking out the Borg IS foolhardy. On the other hand, if the Borg are still in this area of space, wouldn’t it be better if we knew it and were prepared for an encounter instead of our vessel or some other running into them by accident and unprepared?”

“I suppose. But I still have a nagging feeling. This doesn’t feel right and it won’t feel right until we stop looking for the Borg.”

Raiajh helped herself to a raktajino from the cabin’s replicator, offering to order something for Jo Ann, who declined. The Vulcan-Deltan woman then returned to the couch and sat down.

“I know that in some ways I’m not as sensitive a telepath as you, but I don’t feel that,” said Raiajh.

Unexpectedly, the door chime rang again, causing both women to look toward the door.

“Come,” said Tredworth.

The cabin door opened and ship’s counselor Kethry Sutherland, a half-Betazoid woman and friend of Tredworth’s, walked in.

“What is this?” she asked with a grin. “A telepaths convention?”

“Hello, Kethry,” Tredworth said. “Val’ri and I were just discussing our current mission.”

“I know. The way you’re projecting your anxiety, I’m surprised half the ship doesn’t know.”

“When I worry too much, my mental shields slip,” Tredworth admitted.

“Maybe talking would help,” Sutherland suggested. Tredworth explained her feelings and worries to the counselor, who because of her Betazoid heritage and telepathic abilities, Tredworth felt fairly close to. The presence of other telepaths on the ship, something that had not been present during her previous assignment aboard the *Fearless*, comforted the Betazoid science officer.

After Tredworth had finished explaining how she felt, Sutherland said, “You know, it’s part of my job to present these problems to the Captain. I’ll speak to him for you.”

“Thanks, Kethry,” Tredworth said with a sigh.

“No problem.”

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Captain's log, supplemental:

We are four days into our 'Borg Hunt' and the indications are not promising. Out of three life-supporting class-M planets we have surveyed, two had traces of being victim of the Borg, the most recent estimated to be within the past three to five years.

Starfleet is being sent near-constant updates and we have received word from DS9 that the USS Ajax is heading into the Gamma Quadrant to assist us.

Kale, out.

"Captain, this is my shift. You really should get some rest," said second officer T'Veer as she watched Kale pace the bridge. In the four days since the survey began, Kale had been on duty on or near the bridge for seventy hours of them. Dr. Rasa was ready to file the forms relieving Kale of duty to get some rest, but a well timed reminder of the tardiness caused by a certain holosuite program on DS9 delayed the paperwork from being submitted.

"Now entering the Beta Fourd star system," reported the ensign manning the helm.

"Six planets. One of them is class-M. Atmosphere analysis indicates presence of an industrialized society," reported the junior grade lieutenant at ops.

"Standard orbit of the class-M planet," ordered Kale, taking the first officer's seat since delta shift was T'Veer's normal bridge duty shift.

A few moments later, after the starship had assumed orbit, Kale followed the ops officer to the science station at the aft end of the bridge.

"Scanning the planet's surface," the lieutenant reported. "Indications of road systems. Scattered population areas like farms and very small towns. But where the roads seem to indicate there should be large cities, there are nothing but craters in the surface."

"Damn!" grumbled Kale as he turned to face the viewscreen. "This definitely indicates the Borg are penetrating into the Gamma Quadrant and towards the Bajoran Wormhole. If they come across that, Bajor, the Cardassians, the Ferengi, *and* the Federation could be doomed!"

"Captain!" the ops officer exclaimed, turning to look at Kale. "I'm detecting magnetic residue traces indicative of the Borg fingerprint. The readings are strong enough to indicate this planet was attacked within the last 24 to 72 hours."

"**WHAT?**" Kale exclaimed.

"According to these indications, the Borg could still be in the..."

The ops officer was interrupted when Counselor Sutherland, who had been on the bridge observing the captain for 'Ahab Syndrome,' moaned loudly, grabbing the sides of her head in her hands like she was experiencing a sudden migraine headache.

"Are you well?" T'Veer asked the counselor when the effect seemed to subside mildly.

"I... I don't know. I just suddenly experienced what felt like a... a mental assault."

"Val'ri Raiajh to bridge," said a voice over the intercom.

"Bridge. Go ahead, Ms. Raiajh," said T'Veer.

"T'Veer, I've just experienced a mental probe from some sort of powerful alien mind," reported the starship's civilian liaison.

"Counselor Sutherland has just experienced the same thing," T'Veer replied.

"Val'ri," interrupted Kale. "Please come up to my ready room."

"On my way," Raiajh responded before signing off.

"Rasa to bridge."

"What is it, Doctor?" Kale asked before T'Veer could respond to the intercom.

"Captain, I'm on deck fourteen, crew's quarters. Lieutenant Tredworth is in a coma, the result of some sort of mental overload."

"How did you find her, Doctor?"

"The call to sickbay was placed by Lieutenant Harcue. He's still here with me."

"Please send him to my ready room, Doctor. And do what you can for Tredworth."

"Aye, Captain."

* * * *

Kale sat at his desk in the ready room. On the chair before him sat Lieutenant (JG) Larry Harcue, and on the couch across from Kale, Counselor Sutherland and the ship's civilian ombudsman, Val'ri Raiajh.

"Lieutenant, tell me everything that happened," Kale said.

"Jo Ann, ...that is, Lieutenant Tredworth and I were having dinner together in her quarters. We're friends from back in our Academy days. She was telling me about her objections to this search mission."

"Yes, her concerns were brought to my attention," Kale said, glancing at the Counselor.

"Anyway, just as she was taking another bite, she stiffened, screamed, and her hands went up to the side of her head. As her scream faded, she slumped out of the chair. By the time I got over to her, she was unconscious."

"Very similar to what happened to you, Kethry," commented Kale.

"As far as I can tell, everyone aboard the ship who has even the slightest telepathic abilities felt it. My brother was down in engineering when it happened, and he still has a headache," said Sutherland.

Raijrh continued, "Jo Ann had... I mean, has very sensitive abilities, more so than anyone else on board. Whoever or whatever probed us is powerful enough to read even the slightest telepath aboard our ship, from wherever it is they are. I couldn't determine what they wanted with us, other than perhaps to find out who we are."

Kale contemplated silently for a moment before saying, "This had to happen now. Just when we've almost found the Borg, something else has to come along and cause a problem." He looked at the counselor. "Kethry, do you think what happened was as bad as it could be, or do you think it could get worse?"

"I think that was as powerful as it could get. I also believe it won't happen again."

"Why?" Kale asked.

"They, whoever *they* are, now know we're here. They know where, and they know exactly what we're doing."

"Do you think they pose a threat to us?"

"Who knows? They may have been just curious, or they may be looking to find out how well defended we are."

"Like that incident with Commander Cosna last year. Okay. Thank you all. Dismissed."

As the three crew members stood to leave, the red alert klaxon sounded and the intercom came to life.

"Captain to the bridge," said T'Veer's calm voice.

The four crew members walked out of the ready room, Raijrh pausing near the turbolift door to see what all the commotion was about while Sutherland moved to her regular seat and Harcue stepping up to the upper level of the bridge, likewise pausing near the turbolift there, out of the way but where he could see what was happening.

Penji Fil and Mic Cosna soon hurried out of the aft turbolift, each taking their normal posts. Meanwhile, Kale, who stood at the center of the bridge, stared at the screen.

The viewscreen showed the unmistakable square shape of a Borg cube slowly emerging from the shadow of the system's fourth planet.

"We were fortunately behind the third planet when it came out of warp," reported T'Veer as she stepped up to her engineering panel at the aft stations.

"Do you think they know we're here?" Kale asked.

"Unknown. They are approaching at an extremely relaxed pace," said Cosna, consulting the monitor screen next to her chair.

"Ready shield nutation. Prepare to go to warp at my command. When is the *Ajax* due?"

"Not for another four days," the first officer replied.

"Good, then they won't get caught up in this. On my mark...! ...Enga..."

Suddenly the viewscreen blinked to an unfamiliar view. The interior of the Borg ship, its row upon row of drones visible.

"*We are the Borg. Federation starship Sarek, lower your shields and surrender your ship. You will be assimilated,*" the voice of the collective stated.

"Captain," Sutherland said with urgency. "The Borg's voice. I... I heard it in my head."

"What do you mean?" Kale asked.

"They're telepathic, Captain!" Sutherland exclaimed. "This ship-full of Borg are telepathic!"

"Ops, employ shield nutation! Conn, set course for the next nearest star system, maximum warp!"

The *Sarek* spun in orbit, facing out of the solar system. Immediately the great starship's warp engines blazed to life, propelling the ship toward the next star.

"On course toward the Alpha Raegan star system. Maintaining warp 9.95," reported the conn officer once the *Sarek* had attained maximum speed.

"Borg are in pursuit. Speed is warp 9.98," said the young officer at ops.

"T'Veer," said Kale. "Give me everything you can."

After adjusting the power distribution on her board, T'Veer reported, "I can give you warp 9.995 and maybe a slight bit more."

"Conn, adjust speed to compensate," Kale ordered.

"Borg are maintaining warp 9.995," reported ops. "They're holding."

"Kethry, can these Borg read our minds and know what we intend to do?" asked the captain.

"That was their attempt. And because they are so numerous yet linked as a single mind, the attempt was very powerful. That's why all the telepaths on the ship felt it. And why Jo Ann Tredworth is now in a coma."

"Are the Borg gaining?" Kale asked the ops officer.

"No, sir. Still maintaining warp 9.995," said ops.

Kale looked over at the woman still standing near the forward turbolift. "Val'ri, I need your help."

"Whatever I can do, Kalin."

"Can you tell me what the Borg are doing?"

Raijrh closed her eyes and concentrated. Her body started to shake with the effort, but after a few moments her eyes finally popped open again.

"They are trying to determine our course of action by reading our minds. Fortunately, they are unaccustomed to individual thought and they're trying to read the entire crew's thoughts as a collective, which is confusing the hell out of them."

"Good. T'Veer, are you familiar with computer file FMP-002X?"

"Yes," the Vulcan-Terran woman replied.

"Prepare to implement it once we reach the Alpha Raegan system."

"Aye, sir," T'Veer replied.

Kale then turned to Cosna and remarked, "It worked once. Hopefully it will work again." Cosna's confusion showed on her face until she looked up what file FMP-002X was on her screen.

The stars on the viewscreen streaked past, one in particular getting larger as the *Sarek* approached her destination. Then suddenly the view was replaced by the Borg again.

"*Resistance is futile, Federation starship Sarek. Cease fleeing. Lower your shields and surrender your ship. You will be assimilated.*" The screen then changed back to the view behind the *Sarek*, where the huge cube remained behind them.

"FMP - Double Oh - 2X is ready and programmed into the cloaking generator, Captain," reported T'Veer.

"Hold until my mark," Kale ordered.

The ship started to buck as the Borg attempted to lock on to the *Sarek* with a tractor beam. The nutation programmed into the shields threw the tractors off like a bather slipping on soap.

"Ready aft torpedoes," ordered the captain. "They have to expect us to fight."

"Kalin!" said Raijrh with urgency. "The Borg are now attempting to read individual minds, in an attempt to learn what we're going to do."

"Val'ri, can you project the thought that we're going to continue to run, firing weapons at them? Make them think that's the official order?"

"I can try," she replied. A look of deep concentration crossed the Vulcan-Deltan woman's face as she attempted to do what Kale had asked. Then suddenly, she screamed and collapsed to the deck.

"Sickbay, medical emergency on the bridge," said Sutherland into her combadge.

Raijrh, moaning softly, opened her eyes, struggling to sit up.

"The power of all those minds all at once," she croaked. "It was a little overwhelming. But I believe I got the proper message through." As if in confirmation, the Borg cube on the screen started closing the gap between the two ships.

"Penji, fire aft torpedos, full spread," Kale ordered.

The *Sarek's* aft torpedo tube came to life, spitting out six powerful red stars of bottled anti-matter. They streaked across space, the first two striking the blunt edge of the cube before the Borg ship's shields adapted and stopped the final four. The two that did strike the Borg vessel did little more than physical damage to the Borg vessel's exterior. The cube continued in its relentless pursuit as Alpha Raegan now loomed large on the viewscreen.

"T'Veer, engage new shield program. Conn, set course bearing 001 mark 2, full impulse."

"But, Captain!" said the ensign at the conn. "That course will take us into this system's star!"

"Not exactly," Kale replied. "Just the corona."

Kale turned to look at T'Veer again. She nodded and said, "Program is complete. Metaphasic shielding is holding."

"Borg ship is closing," reported ops.

"Entering the corona of Alpha Raegan," reported conn.

The lighting on the bridge became an eerie yellow as the ship, protected by the new metaphasic shielding technology, hid in the star's corona, the area of super-hot gasses surrounding a star.

"Correction," said ops. "Borg ship is slowing to a full stop one-quarter AU away from the star's corona and holding position."

"Damn. If they don't get closer to the surface, we can't start a solar flare with our phaser/tractor beam combination aimed at the Borg. I need ideas." Kale appeared to be thinking for a moment before he activated the intercom on the arm of the command chair. "Senior staff in the observation lounge in three minutes."

Kale turned to Raijrh, who was now sitting in the first officer's seat and being attended to by one of Dr. Rasa's nurses.

"Do you feel well enough to join us?"

"Yes," Raijrh replied.

* * * *

In the briefing lounge a few minutes later, the ship's entire senior staff, including civilian liaison Val'ri Raijrh, sat or stood around the conference table. The yellow glow from Alpha Raegan made A-ZuRQuIL's blonde hair seem almost silver where he stood behind the seat of his superior, Penji Fil. Counselor Kethry Sutherland sat near science officer T'Ashara. Setton To'Lock Arbelo and T'Veer were debating a graphic on one of the screens off to the side with the engineer's assistant, V'Pier 'Greg' N'Vorda. Meanwhile, Mic Cosna sat, as usual, at the captain's left hand side.

"Captain," said T'Veer. "We can't stay here forever. The metaphasic shield, even using power from the warp engines, will collapse in one hour, twenty three minutes, fifteen seconds."

"And besides, the view we have gets annoying after a while," commented Sutherland, glancing out the huge transparent aluminum viewports at the bright yellow glow surrounding the ship.

"Captain Kale, I have some information that may be of help," said Raijrh. All eyes turned to the civilian liaison. "When in mental contact with the Borg aboard that ship, I learned that the crew is the descendants of a race of telepaths that occupied the planet Beta Nicson III when they were assimilated, along with their technology, into the collective about a century ago. Their Borg implants have increased the power of their mental abilities, enabling them to reach out with their mind – note the singular terminology – and find civilizations that have technology and abilities they desire."

"And why do they want US so badly?" Kale asked.

"This ship and its technology are an irresistible target for this particular Borg ship. Remember, they've been all the way on this side of the galaxy for probably the last couple of centuries. They had no contact with Federation technology like other Borg ships in the Collective have had in the last few years. We represent new technology to them."

"Captain," interrupted Arbelo. "That may be our key."

"What do you mean?"

"What was your plan to destroy the Borg ship?" Arbelo asked.

"If we could get them to come within a few hundred kilometers of the star's photosphere, we could use a combination strike of the ship's phasers and tractor beam to cause a solar flare several hundred kilometers long. If aimed precisely, the flare should envelope the Borg ship. At least in theory."

"It should work. I've heard of the *Enterprise* using a similar method a little more than a year and a half ago," said Lt Commander N'Vorda. "Of course, those Borg weren't part of the Collective at the time."

"So what's your plan, Monster?" Kale asked Arbelo.

"If Val'ri could project the thought that we offer far more advanced technology than they previously believed, they'll move closer to the photosphere, compelled to capture our ship."

"Val'ri, can you do it?"

The Deltan-Vulcan hybrid closed her eyes in deep concentration. Sweat started beading on the woman's brow. After a moment, with a sudden release of breath, she opened her eyes.

"I don't think so, Kalin. They seem to have raised some kind of mental shield. I think they realize there are other telepaths among us and don't want us probing them for information like they've done to us."

"Damn! What next?" he asked the assembled group. Before anyone could answer, the red alert klaxon sounded throughout the ship.

"Kale to bridge. What's going on?"

"The Borrrrg ship is firrrring some kind of torrrrpedoes at ourrrr position, Captain," said the purring voice of the Caitain Ensign Pr'n Kes. "Most of the torrrrpedoes arrrrr vaporrrrizing before they get near us, but two have gotten thrrrrrough and struck the surrrrface of the starrrr, causing minorrrr errrrrrruptions."

"Captain," interrupted T'Veer. "If even one torpedo hits us, we will lose our metaphasic shielding and burn up in seconds."

"Mister Kes, have the Borg been holding position or are they following our orbit?" Kale asked.

"They arrrrr orrrrrbiting the starrrr, but opposite ourrrr dirrrrrection. They pass us everrrrry half rrrrotation."

"Perfect!" Kale exclaimed. "Next pass, after they go behind the body of the star, change our orbital direction and speed to match theirs. Keep us out of their sights."

"Aye, sirrrr."

"Captain, we only have one hour left on the shields," warned T'Veer.

"I know, T'Veer, I kn..."

"Sickbay to Captain."

"Kale here," the captain said after tapping his combadge. "Go ahead, Doctor."

"Lieutenant Tredworth has regained consciousness," Dr. Rasa reported.

"Can she come up to the observation lounge?"

"I wouldn't recommend it, Captain."

"Ok, I'm coming down there, Doctor. Kale, out." Kale then looked at the senior staff gathered around him. "Ladies and gentlemen, I want you to find some solution to this dilemma while I'm gone. Mic, T'Veer, Kethry, you're with me."

The four officers departed the lounge, taking the ramp down to deck two and entered a turbolift. Exiting on deck six, they proceeded to sickbay, where Dr. Rasa was tending to a resting Jo Ann Tredworth.

"How do you feel, Lieutenant?" the captain asked.

"I've got a splitting headache," she replied.

Kale looked at the Bajoran doctor.

"Physically she's fine," the doctor said. "But she says the last thing she remembers is the day on Nicson III when she almost fell into the first crater we found."

"Lieutenant, can you think back to your dinner with Lieutenant Larry Harcue? Or the first four days we spent surveying the planets affected by the Borg?"

"No, Captain," the Betazoid woman replied weakly. "I remember surveying Nicson III with Commander T'Ashara. I recall almost falling off the edge of the crater and the realization the Borg must have created it. Everything else since then is a fuzz."

"Can you feel the Borg probing us in any way?" asked Counselor Sutherland.

"No, I... wait. Yes. They're looking for us. They know we are here and they want us. Badly! How can I feel that so powerfully?"

"These Borg are telepathic," Sutherland explained. "They've been trying to read our minds in hopes of knowing what we'll do so they can capture this ship."

"This is worse than the Locutus incident," commented Cosna. "Instead of just knowing what a single starship captain knew, they could conceivably find out the knowledge of the entire crew. AND give that knowledge to the Collective."

"Wait," said Kale. "The Lieutenant just said she could read the Borg. Val'ri said she couldn't."

"Well, Jo Ann is a somewhat stronger telepath in some areas. I think the strongest aboard this ship," said Sutherland.

"Maybe we could use that," Kale said.

"Brrrridge to Captain. The Borg ship has apparrrrntly discoverrrred ourrrr strategy and is once again firrrring at us."

“Has their orbital altitude in relation to the star changed?” asked Kale.

“Verrrry slightly. They arrrrre one hundrrrrred kilometers closerrrr to the starrrr than they werrrrre prrrrreviously. Theirrrr hull is starrrrting to heat up, but the Borrrrrg ship is in no currrrrrent dangerrrr.”

Turning to Tredworth, Kale asked, “Lieutenant, do you feel well enough to try an idea I have?”

“I’ve still got a splitting headache but if it will help us, I’ll try anything,” Tredworth replied.

“Doctor, I need Lieutenant Tredworth on the bridge,” Kale said.

“I don’t recommend she leave sickbay for at least an hour,” said Rasa. “She needs rest.”

“Doctor, in an hour she could be resting as she’s assimilated into the Borg collective, along with the rest of us.”

“It’s still against my better judgment, but if she must...”

“She must. Lieutenant, come with me.”

Rasa quickly injected a hypospray into Tredworth’s neck before the science officer left in an attempt to mitigate her headache. Then, on the way to the bridge, Kale explained to Tredworth the situation they now faced and his idea to resolve it. The turbo lift doors opened onto the bridge, and Kale took his usual place at the center. Tredworth took the seat next to Counselor Sutherland, and Cosna her own usual seat.

“Captain,” said Arbelo, who was sitting at ops. “The senior staff has discussed the problem at length and decided that trying to outrun the Borg is our best course of action.”

“Past experience has shown that outrunning a Borg ship is not a possibility, Lieutenant. Mister Fil, ready the tractor beam and lower phaser array.”

“Aye, sir. Tractor beam ready. Lower phaser array is energizing,” Fil confirmed.

“Incoming! Bearing 102 mark 72!” shouted Arbelo.

“T’Veer?” asked the captain, concern on his face.

“If it hits, we will lose the metaphasic shield. We will burn up almost instantly.”

“Borg ship is attempting to lock on us with a tractor beam through the photosphere,” reported Arbelo.

Immediately, the ship shook violently as the Borg torpedo struck the ship’s shields. For an instant Kale felt as if his skin were being seared by extreme heat. It took him a moment to realize that he and his crew were still alive.

“What’s happened?”

“The Borg have locked onto us with a tractor beam. While, with the help of the star’s gravitation we are holding our position, the tractor beam has formed a shield of sorts that’s protecting us,” said Arbelo.

“T’Veer, can you get our metaphasic shields up again?”

“I will endeavor to do my best,” she replied.

“Mister Fil, stand by on my last orders to you. Keep those systems energized.”

“What would you like me to do?” asked Lieutenant (JG) Tredworth.

“Plant the idea in their mind that they should move closer. That we have advanced technology they crave and must have. Let them feel we have... I don’t know, transwarp conduits to other galaxies. Massively powerful weapons. Anything that would attract their interest and draw them closer.”

“Yes, Captain,” Tredworth replied as she closed her eyes in intense concentration. In her mind she formed the image of the *Sarek*, but bristling with weapons, new propulsion systems, super-shields, anything that she felt would attract the Borg, and projected this image at the adversaries as strongly as she could. Though her head pounded with the effort, she then projected the need for the Borg to come closer. That – if they approached – they would most certainly capture their prey, the *Sarek*. And all this time, with her head feeling like it would explode and each thought a matter of total concentration, she still had to implant the thoughts into the Borg collective as if they themselves were doing the probing. Even the slightest realization by the Borg that they were the object of mental counter-probing would bring about untold consequences.

“Captain,” T’Veer said, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’ve gotten program FMP-002X primed and ready.”

“Mister Fil, would a photon torpedo survive the distance between here and that Borg ship?” asked Kale.

“If we were firing in the other direction, I’d say no. But we’re firing out of the star. I believe we have a good chance of hitting the Borg vessel.”

“Very good. Prepare shields. Mister Fil, lock torpedoes on the tractor beam projector and arm tubes.”

The preparations were interrupted by Tredworth’s weak voice.

“They’re attempting to probe our minds again. Don’t think of what you’re doing!” Then, with a scream, she again collapsed.

“Bridge to sickbay,” shouted Cosna. “Doctor Rasa report to the bridge, medical alert.”

“The mental probe is over,” said Sutherland a moment later, her hands grasping the temples of her head. “That one even gave me a headache.”

“Any change in the Borg ship?”

“Negative,” said Arbelo.

“Mister Fil, fire torpedo. Stand ready with shields. The timing of this is critical.”

“Yes, sir.” A moment later, with a fwoosh, the torpedo launched from its tube on the dorsal of the ship, streaking along a course parallel to the Borg tractor beam, finally striking the emitter on the cube’s surface. The beam quickly vaporized.

“SHIELDS!”

An intense heat filled the bridge. Klaxons and alarms lit on every panel. All over the ship crew members collapsed, dripping in sweat. On the bridge, through ragged gasps of breath and the sounds of the atmosphere filtering system, Kale asked, “Status?” Fil picked himself up off the floor, sweat pouring down his back as he checked his readouts on the tactical console.

“Tractor beam and phaser array fully charged and standing by,” he gasped. “Metaphasic shields in place and holding.”

Kale looked around at his bridge crew. T'Veer stood near the food dispenser, ordering cool water for each of the crew. Cosna lay slumped over on the arm of the captain's chair. Sutherland and Arbelo were slowly recovering, and Ensign Kes, her fur matted down on her body and her tongue panting in steady gasps, attempted to keep her forearms up on the controls of the conn.

"Sir," said Fil as he gazed at his tactical display, his cup of water already long gone. "The Borg vessel is now much closer. They're within range of a mid-sized solar flare!"

"She did it," Kale whispered, referring to Tredworth, before turning to face his engineer. "T'Veer, go to mission ops. Calculate the angle, firing time, and attractive resonance needed for this to work properly." The Vulcan turned from where she was giving water to a fallen ensign from the science division and activated the mission ops panel, entering in the requested parameters.

"Penji, set phaser intensity to seventy five percent, aimed at the coordinates I'm putting on your targeting panel. Set tractor beam to coordinates one-half kilometer solar-south of the phaser target. Fire in precisely 10.235 seconds." It took most of that time for Fil to set his controls as per T'Veer's instructions.

"Borg ship firing torpedoes again," reported Arbelo. "Also attempting to lock on with a different tractor beam emitter."

On the screen, a bright green object approached from the direction of the Borg ship, a second quickly following, but both object's brightness faded as they neared the *Sarek*. Only a couple of hundred meters away from the hull, the Borg torpedoes melted away in the heat of the star.

It was then that the *Sarek* herself came to life, her phaser array on the underside of the engineering hull firing at the surface of the star and starting a boiling eruption on the glowing mass. The attraction by the simultaneous tractor beam broke the gravitational adherence of the surface and a huge plume of stellar material erupted from the star, flashing quickly out into open space.

The last thing, it seemed, that the Borg were expecting was an attack from the star itself. The flare engulfed the Borg cube, its shields glowing bright green against the onslaught before finally collapsing under the strain of the superheated matter. For a brief second, the entire cube glowed a dull, angry red before its engines overloaded, blowing the craft into uncountable pieces of debris that vaporized as the star's gravity pulled them down.

Kale, pleased with his crew's handiwork, fell back into his command seat, a slight smile forming on his lips. His distraction was interrupted by T'Veer's urgent voice.

"Captain," she said from the engineering station. "Metaphasic shields are fluctuating. They will collapse any second now. We are also losing containment on anti-matter bottle number five."

"This is like that old countdown song on Earth," remarked Cosna. "But if one of these bottles fall, we're all dead!"

"Mister Kes, set any course as long as it's away from the star's surface. Engage, warp factor three!"

"Warrrrp engines arrrrre not rrrresponding," informed Kes, her paw-like hands frantically trying to engage the warp drive.

"T'Veer?" asked Kale with concern as he turned to face the Vulcan on the upper level of the bridge.

Her face a mask of concentration, T'Veer was making adjustments on her engineering console.

"I had to redirect warp power to redeploy the metaphasic shields. Stand by." An alert signal sounded on Arbelo's ops board.

"Hull temperature rising," reported the Vulcan-Efrosian-Terran officer. "Currently passing one thousand degrees Celsius and rising."

"Our shields are fluctuating," said Fil. "Shield four on the verge of collapse."

"Power restored to warp drive," informed T'Veer.

"Ensign, ENGAGE!" And with a sudden burst of speed, the *Sarek* soared out of the star's corona, its warp eddy causing another flare to erupt from the previously weakened surface, a final parting wave to the Federation starship.

* * * *

1602 hours that day, Kale stepped out of a turbolift on deck six. He walked down the corridor, careful not to drop the tiny object in his right hand. He walked up to the sickbay door, which parted with a whoosh at his approach.

Walking into the chief medical officer's office, Kale sat down opposite Doctor Rasa, who was finishing a medical report on the computer screen. Pressing the button that entered the report into the records and shut off the screen, the Bajoran man looked across the desk at the captain.

"Is the crisis over or do you need to try and kill Lieutenant Tredworth again?" the doctor said sarcastically.

"How is she?" Kale asked.

"Recovering. She'll probably have a headache for a couple of days and her psilosynine count will remain unusually high for a while. I recommend she avoid any form of empathic or telepathic contact for a time."

"I'm authorizing time off from duty for the next five days," said Kale. "But before I go, is it all right if I talk to her?"

"As long as you do it verbally," Rasa warned. "You know where she is."

Kale walked out of the CMO's office and into sickbay proper. Of the four beds in the ward, only one was occupied, by the injured Betazoid. As Kale stood next to her, Tredworth's eyes fluttered open to look at him.

"Good afternoon, Captain," she said weakly.

"I'm going to let you rest, but first I had to tell you some things," said Kale. "First, thank you very, very much for what you did today. You saved this ship and her crew."

"Just doing what I had to do," Tredworth said modestly.

"Which makes it no less admirable. The second thing I needed to say was congratulations. For service to this ship above and beyond the call of duty, I hereby promote you to the rank of full lieutenant." As he said it he removed the black and gold half-pip from Tredworth's uniform collar, replacing it with a solid gold full-pip. Kale continued.

"I'm very privileged to have an officer like you on my crew." A smile, weak though it was, spread on Tredworth's face.

“Thank you, Captain.”

“Now you get some rest, Lieutenant. That’s an order. You’ve got the next five days off.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Tredworth replied as she closed her eyes again. Within moments, she was softly snoring. Smiling, Kale left sickbay to face the mountain of paperwork that this entire incident had generated.

The End