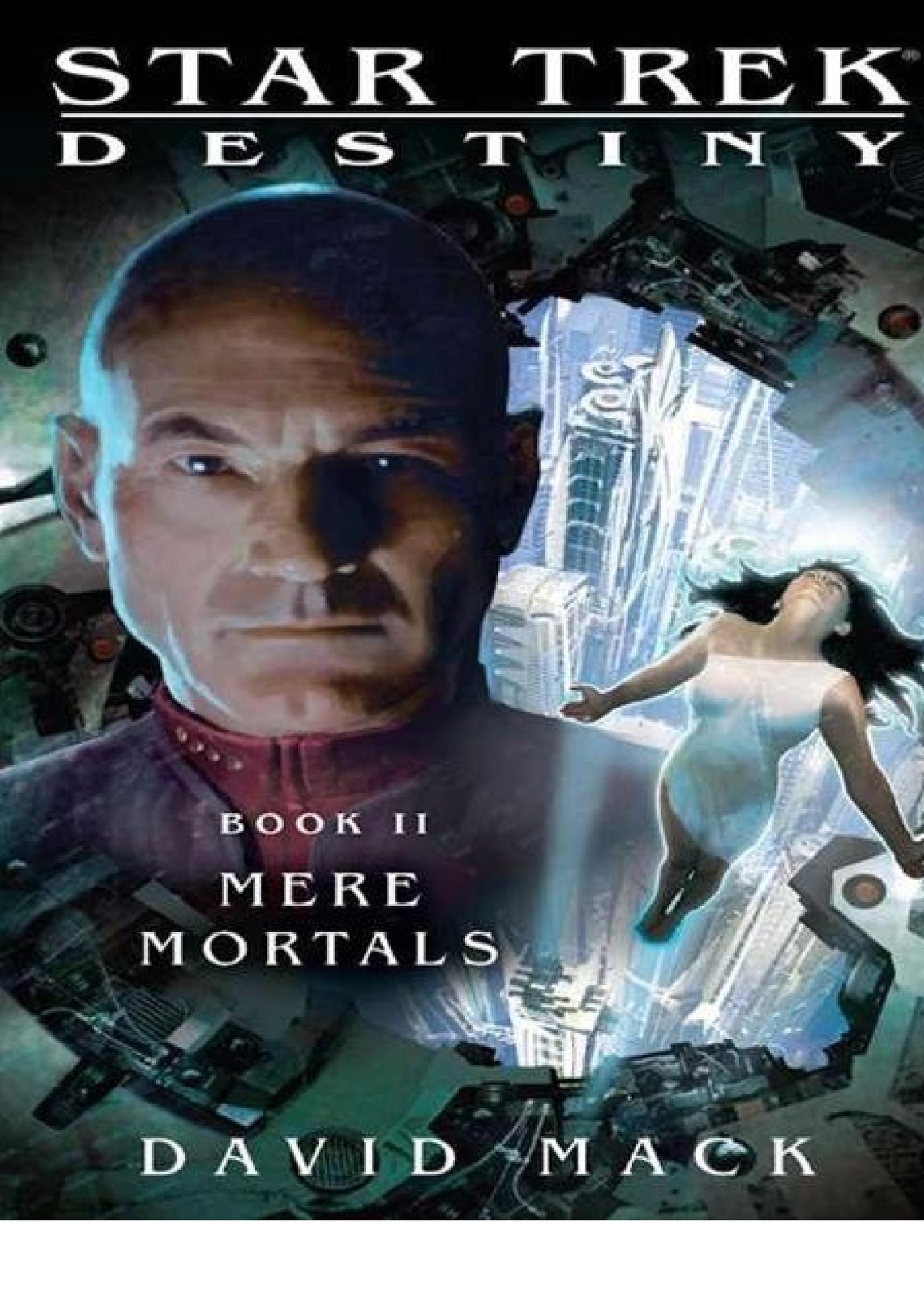


STAR TREK[™]

DESTINY



BOOK II
MERE
MORTALS

DAVID MACK

In a snap of action, Seven locked her right arm around Admiral Jellico's throat.

She pulled him backward, off balance. Borg assimilation tubules extended from the steely implants still grafted to her left hand as she pressed her fingertips against his jugular. The tubules hovered above his skin but did not penetrate it—yet.

Around her and the admiral, the combat operations center became deathly quiet.

“If you do not escape beyond the Borg's reach, you will never be safe,” she said, all but hissing the words into the trembling man's ear. “They know where you are, and they are now committed to your annihilation. Even if you collapse the subspace tunnels, they can still reach you by normal warp travel. It may take them decades. Perhaps even a century. But they *will* come. And when they do, your civilization will be eradicated. All that you have built, all that you have labored to preserve, will be erased from history. You cannot stop them, ever. As long as they exist, you will never be free.”

She retracted her assimilation tubules and removed her arm from Jellico's throat. “I trust I made my point clearly, Admiral?”

“Get out of here before I have you shot,” Jellico said, massaging his bruised windpipe.

She met Jellico's furious stare. “You are only postponing the inevitable,” she said. “When the Borg have the Federation by the throat, they will not release it—they will destroy it.”

Jellico scowled. “Over our dead bodies.”

“Precisely,” Seven said.

STAR TREK®
D E S T I N Y

BOOK II
MERE
MORTALS

DAVID MACK

Based upon

STAR TREK and

STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION®
created by Gene Roddenberry

STAR TREK: DEEP SPACE NINE®
created by Rick Berman & Michael Piller

STAR TREK: VOYAGER®
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POCKET BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney New Ergol

Pocket Books

A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

1230 Avenue of the Americas

New York, NY 10020

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ISBN-13: 978-1-4391-1792-7

ISBN-10: 1-4391-1792-6

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For friends now gone but never forgotten

HISTORIAN'S NOTE

The main narrative of *Mere Mortals* takes place in February of 2381 (Old Calendar), approximately sixteen months after the events of the movie *Star Trek Nemesis*. The flashback portions begin in 15 and continue through 2381.

Our torments also may in length of time Become our elements, these piercing fires /
soft as now severe, our temper changed Into their temper.

—John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, book 2

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2381

Blue fire preceded a crimson flash, as one of the Borg cubes on the main viewer erupted into a cloud of blazing wreckage. The two that had followed it from the indigo fog of the Azure Nebula barreled through its spreading debris, accelerated, and opened fire on their lone adversary.

Pitched alarms of struggle surrounded Captain Jean-Luc Picard, who sat in the bridge command chair, stone-faced and silent, watching and hearing the battle unfold around him.

Over the thunder of energy blasts hammering the shields of the *Enterprise*, Commander Worf bellowed, “Helm! Attack pattern Echo-One! Tactical, target the closer cube and fire at will!”

Picard tried to focus on the voices of his crew—Worf barking orders, second officer Miranda T'Pol relaying damage reports, security chief Jasminder Choudhury confirming her targets, and the low buzz of several junior officers manning backup stations and sensor consoles everywhere he looked—but they all were drowned out by the one voice that was many: the dehumanized roar of the Borg Collective.

Resistance is futile. You will be exterminated.

It had been more than fourteen years since the Borg’s voice had first invaded the sanctum of his mind, when the Collective assimilated him. Transformed into Locutus of Borg, Picard had watched through a dark haze, a spectator to his own life, as the Borg used his knowledge and experience against the Starfleet and against Earth. Even after he had been physically liberated from the Collective, he remained yoked to its voice, attuned to its soulless group mind.

His bond to the Collective had faded with the passage of years. He had expected to welcome its permanent absence from his thoughts, but then the Borg returned with an unprecedented ferocity marked by aggressive tactics and a disturbing new motivation. It had been several months since, in a desperate bid to understand the true nature of the new threat posed by the Borg, he had attempted to infiltrate the Collective by posing as Locutus. He’d thought he could outwit them, that experience and innovation would protect him as he dared to plumb their secrets. *What a fool I was*, he castigated himself.

A powerful concussion threw the bridge crew to starboard and strobed the lights. A port-side console exploded into smithereens. Glowing-hot bits of smoking debris landed in Picard’s lap, and the momentary jolts of hot pain on his legs broke the spell that the Collective had held over his thoughts.

He swatted the blackened embers off his thighs as he stood and moved to stand beside Worf. The Klingon executive officer remained focused on directing the battle. “Helm,” Worf shouted at Lieutenant Joanna Faur scrambled back into her chair, “hard to port!” To Choudhury he added, “Ready aft torpedoes!” As Worf turned forward again, Kadohata switched the main screen to display the

ship's retreating aft view. A Borg cube loomed dramatically into sight, dominating the screen. "Fire!"

~~Four radiant blue bolts flew from the *Enterprise's* aft torpedo launcher and separated as they~~ followed weaving, spiraling paths to the Borg ship. At the final moment they shot toward different faces of the cube. Two penetrated the Borg's shields and ripped through its hull. Within seconds cerulean flames consumed the Borg vessel from within and broke it apart. A blinding flash reduced the wreckage to fading supercharged particles.

Two down, one to go, Picard mused as the main viewer image reverted to its normal, forward-facing perspective.

"Attack pattern Bravo-Eight," Worf ordered, and the bridge crew translated his words into action with speed and skill.

Picard heard the intentions of the Collective and saw the trap that Worf had just stumbled into. He snapped, "Belay that! Evasive maneuvers, starb—" The bone-jarring thunderclap of an explosion cut him off, and the deck felt as if it had dropped out from under him. He fell forward and landed on his forearms. A bank of large companels along the aft bulkhead blew apart and showered the bridge with a flurry of sparks and shrapnel.

Gray, acrid smoke lingered above the shaken bridge crew. "Continue evasive maneuvers," Worf said to Faur. He plucked a jagged bit of smoking debris from the rings of his metallic Klingon baldric as he stepped behind Kadhata, who was struggling to halt the erratic malfunctions that flickered across the ops console. "Damage report," Worf said.

"Hull breaches, Decks Twenty-two and Twenty-three," replied the lithe human woman of mixed Asian and European ancestry. Her Port Shangri-La accent was just similar enough to a Londoner's inflections that Picard had to remind himself again that she wasn't from Earth. "Direct hit on our targeting sensors," she continued. Then she swiveled her chair to face Worf and added with alarm. "Sir, we can't lock weapons."

Another shot from the Borg cube rocked the *Enterprise*. "Break off, Number One," Picard said.

"Full evasive," Worf said, "maximum warp. Engage!"

As Worf stepped quickly from station to station, gathering status reports, Picard moved forward and stood beside Kadhata's console. In a confidential tone, he said, "Casualty report."

Reciprocating his quiet discretion, she replied, "Four dead in engineering, several dozen wounded. Still waiting on official numbers from sickbay, sir."

"Understood," he said.

Worf finished his circuit of the bridge and returned to Picard's side. "Captain, the transphasic shields are starting to overload. Lieutenant Choudhury estimates—" Cacophonous booms resonated through the bulkheads. When the echoes had faded, Worf continued, "She estimates shield failure in nine minutes."

"Commander," Picard said to Kadhata, "we need those targeting sensors. Devote all remaining resources to their repair. Mister Worf, help Lieutenant Choudhury find a way to target our torpedoes manually."

The XO nodded and said, "Aye, sir."

As Worf walked back to the tactical console, Kadhata confided to Picard, "Sir? The damage to the targeting system was major. I doubt it can be repaired in the next nine minutes. And manual targeting transphasic torpedoes is almost impossible. Without the targeting computer, we'll never adjust the phase harmonics quickly enough."

"What do you suggest, Commander?"

"With all respect, sir...a distress signal."

Picard frowned. "To whom? Our nearest allies are several hours away, at best."

~~Kadohata mustered a bittersweet grin and shrugged. "You have your desperate measures, I have mine."~~

He had to admire her ability to smile in the face of danger. "Make it so," he said. Then, dropping his voice again, he added with grim resignation, "And prepare the log buoy."

Captain Ezri Dax was seated and steady, with her hands relaxed on the ends of her command chair armrests, but in her mind she was pacing like a caged beast, feverishly circling her anxiety.

"Time to intercept?" she asked.

Lieutenant Tharp answered over his shoulder, "Two minutes, Captain." The Bolian conn officer returned to his controls and faced the main viewer, whose image was dominated by the retreating mass of the Borg cube that was pursuing the *Enterprise*.

Her first officer, Commander Sam Bowers, returned from his hushed conference with Lieutenant Lonnoc Kedair, the Takaran chief of security for the *Aventine*, and stood beside Dax. "I feel like a dog chasing a shuttle," he said, watching the Borg ship. "Even if we catch it, what do we do then?"

"Sink our teeth in, Sam," Dax said. "As deep as we can."

Kedair looked up from the tactical console. "We've just been scanned by a Borg sensor beam," she said, her deep-green face darkened half a shade by concern.

"So much for a surprise attack," Bowers said.

"Lieutenant Mirren," Dax said to her senior operations officer, "signal *Enterprise*. We need to coordinate our attack."

Mirren nodded. "Aye, sir. Hailing them now."

"Sixty seconds to firing range," Tharp said from the conn.

The cube was large enough now on the main viewer that Dax could discern the layers of snaking machinery and the haphazard network of grids, plates, and crudely grafted pieces of alien machinery that this ship must have assimilated in its past. She couldn't tell by looking how long ago each component had been acquired, or even guess at how new or old the cube might be. Every Borg cube, from the raw to the battle-scarred, had the same weathered, dull look, the same drab utilitarian aesthetic.

"Incoming signal from the *Enterprise*," Mirren said.

"On-screen," Dax replied. A blizzard of visual noise and twisted images danced on the main viewer while banshee wails and the crackle-scratch of static muffled the words of Captain Picard, which Dax could recognize even through the storm of interference. "Mirren," she said, "can we clean them up?"

Mirren jabbed at her console and grimaced in frustration. "Trying, Captain. The Borg are jamming us."

Lieutenant Commander Gruhn Helkara, the ship's second officer and the head of its science division, called to Dax from one of the aft bridge stations. "Captain, I might have a way to bypass the jamming!" The wiry Zakdorn moved toward one of the starboard auxiliary consoles. "The Klingons use a super-low-frequency subspace channel to stay in contact with cloaked ships." He keyed commands into the auxiliary panel at furious speed. "I'll interlace an SLF signal on a subharmonic frequency."

"Less talk, Gruhn," Dax said. "Just make it work."

“Aye, sir,” he said, and then he tapped in a few final details. “Channel ready. Try it now.”

~~Dax waited while Mirren reestablished contact with the *Enterprise*. After several more seconds of garbled images and sounds, the visage of Captain Picard snapped into shaky but mostly clear focus. “Captain Dax?”~~

“At your service,” Dax said.

“I thought your ship was in the Gamma Quadrant.”

She was about to explain, then shook off the impulse. “Long story. We’re coming up fast on the Borg. How can we help?”

“We need you to be our eyes,” Picard said. He nodded to someone off-screen, then continued. “We’re sending you a set of targeting protocols. After we fire the transphasic torpedoes, you’ll have to arm them and guide them to the target.”

“Data received,” Mirren said. “Decrypting now.”

At the auxiliary console, Helkara studied the incoming data, frowned, and then looked up at Dax. “I’ll have to recalibrate the sensors.”

“How long?” asked Dax.

“Four minutes,” Kedair said.

Dax expected bad news as she looked back at Picard, and he didn’t disappoint her. “Our shields will fail in three.”

“Gruhn,” Dax said to her second officer.

“I know, three minutes,” Helkara said without looking up.

“Hang on, Captain,” Dax said. “We’re on our way. *Aventine* out.” Walking back to her command chair, Dax said to Bowers, “Sam, let’s give the Borg something new to think about for the next three minutes.”

“Aye, sir,” Bowers said. “Tactical, arm phaser cannons one and two, stand ready on quantum torpedoes. Helm, set attack pattern Alpha-Tango...and engage.”

Dax settled into her chair and stared at the ominous mass of black metal that filled the bridge’s main viewscreen like a spreading cancer. She wondered how close the Borg would let the *Aventine* come before the cube opened fire.

Then a searing flash of green light shot from the cube to the *Aventine*, and the *Vesta-class* explorer lurched forward like a ship at sea running momentarily aground over a sandbar. When the percussive din of impact finished resonating through the hull, Dax pushed herself fully back into her chair and said to her XO, “I think they’re in range now, Sam.”

“We’ll only get one shot, Captain,” Bowers replied. “I plan on making it count.” He nodded to Kedair. “Fire at will.”

Deep droning hums swelled rapidly in pitch and volume and ended in rushing thunderclaps as the *Aventine*’s experimental Mark XII phaser cannons fired their peculiar mix of supercharged high-energy particles at the Borg cube. The enemy vessel’s shield bubble flared violet for a half second before it buckled. A series of blasts punched through the cube’s hull and left fire and molten metal in their wake.

A volley of quantum torpedoes arced in alongside the phaser blasts, punching more holes in the Borg ship’s dark exterior. Then the last two torpedoes impacted harmlessly against the Borg’s resurgent defensive energy screen. Two more bursts from the phaser cannon were absorbed by the protective field.

“Hard to port,” Bowers ordered, “full evasive!” The whine of the impulse engines grew louder as the *Aventine* veered away from the Borg ship. Bowers wore the slack expression of a man who knew

all too well what would happen next. "Here's where the real fun begins," he said.

Then the Borg started shooting back.

Commander Geordi La Forge dodged through flames and smoke in the main engineering compartment of the *Enterprise*, trusting the enhanced-spectrum view provided by his cybernetic eyes to keep him step ahead of the next catastrophe.

He grabbed the sleeve of a passing engineer and spun the dark-haired human woman back to face him. "Granados," he said, "shut down the starboard EPS tap, it's overheating!"

"The gauges read normal," the ensign protested.

"Maureen, they're wrong," La Forge shouted. He let go of her arm and pointed at the auxiliary control panel a few sections away, down the corridor. "Shut it down, now!"

She nodded. "Aye, sir." As she sprinted toward the control panel, La Forge continued on his original path and weaved around a running damage-control team in pressure suits.

The din of system-failure alarms, panicked voices, cries of pain and fear, and running footsteps all were drowned out by the overpowering percussive rumble of an energy strike against the ship's hull. A hurricane-force gust hurled La Forge several meters through the air for a few seconds, then he fell away and dropped him to the deck as emergency force fields and bulkheads engaged to isolate the breached compartment a few sections away.

A flash accompanied another ear-rending blast, this time from the already overtaxed electroplasma system energy tap, which routed power from the main reactor to the ship's internal power grid. Its magnetically sealed protective housing cracked and blew apart. The superheated plasma inside it jetted like lava from a volcano, engulfing a team of engineers who had been trying to prevent exactly that disaster. Even from a distance, the heat overpowered La Forge.

The lucky ones nearest the rupture were vaporized instantly, transformed into gases and trace atoms. The handful of technicians and mechanics who had been behind them were fighting to pull their maimed, burned bodies away from the fiery mess. Most of them had lost their legs in the first half-second of the explosion, as the falling tide of plasma cut their feet out from under them. One of them, a Benzite, had lost an arm.

Another hazard-suited damage-control team sprinted in from an adjacent compartment. La Forge pointed to the rupture. "Seal that breach, and raise the force fields!" His skin tingled with pain. *Great* he brooded. *Now we'll all need anti-radiation shots.*

When he turned around, he saw a lot of young enlisted engineers and fresh-faced junior officers staring at the wounded and the dead, and only a few of his more experienced people minding their posts. He stepped between the young gawkers and the horrifying spectacle and started snapping orders.

"Gallivan, rebalance the power load on the starboard PTC. L'Sen, make sure the SIF is compensating for the hull breach. Newaur, stop chewing your claws and start patching that hole in our shields. The rest of you, back to your stations!"

The engineers had just resumed work when another hit by the Borg roared and echoed inside the *Enterprise*. La Forge moved at a quick step down the line of consoles, glancing past his people at their work and assembling the glimpses of data into a mental picture of the ship's condition.

As he neared the impulse system's power relays, he was intercepted by his assistant chief engineer, Lieutenant Taurik. The Vulcan's uniform was torn and smudged, and his face was obscured by dark gray carbon dust. "Commander," he said, "the targeting sensors have been almost completely

destroyed. Rebuilding them will take up to a day.”

La Forge cringed as a resounding boom shook the ship. He heard the crack of exploding consoles behind him a moment before he felt a blast of heat and the sting of shrapnel on his back. The impact knocked him facedown at Taurik’s feet.

Within seconds, Taurik was lifting La Forge back to his feet. “Are you all right, sir?”

“No,” La Forge said, gritting his teeth against the burning pain shooting through shallow wounds on either side of his spine. He turned and looked back at the damage. A quick scan in several different wavelengths revealed no other imminent overloads, but the body-heat readings of several downed engineers were alarmingly unstable. Pain and anger overpowered his sense of decorum. “Where are the medics, goddammit?”

“Sir,” Taurik said, trying to lead La Forge away from the scene, “you need to get to sickbay.”

La Forge threw off Taurik’s helping hand. “What I need, Taurik, is two more minutes of shield power. Focus on that.”

The Vulcan betrayed no hint of umbrage at La Forge’s sharpness of tone. “Aye, sir,” he replied, and he walked quickly toward the engineering control center for tactical systems.

La Forge limped in the other direction, one painful step at a time, back through the haze of toxic smoke and bitter dust, toward his fallen engineers. At long last, he saw a team of medics rounding the corner from the far corridor.

Another pounding blow resounded through the hull.

“Just keep it going a little longer, people,” he said, his mood grim and his voice strained by his fresh injuries. “One way or another, this’ll be over in the next two minutes.”

Helkara spun away from his console to report, “Sensors ready!”

“Signal *Enterprise*,” Bowers said to Mirren.

The slender, blond ops officer tapped a ready key on her console. It flashed red twice before turning green. Mirren replied, “*Enterprise* confirms. Torpedoes away in ten.”

“Helm, all ahead,” Dax ordered. “We need to get in close and arm the warheads before the Borg realize what we’re doing.”

Bowers threw a look at the captain that she recognized as one of apprehension. Putting the ship into easy firing range of the Borg was something her XO had wanted to avoid, but in this case she couldn’t be helped. To his credit, she thought, he kept his objections to himself and resumed directing the attack as if nothing was amiss. “Tharp, show the Borg our port side. Kedair, reinforce the port shields for the flyby.” He looked to the relief tactical officer, a Deltan woman named Talia Kandel. “Lieutenant, arm the *Enterprise*’s torpedoes as soon as they’re away, and lock them onto the Borg cube as fast as you can.”

“Incoming!” called Kedair. Then an erratic series of hard impacts scrambled monitors and control panels around the bridge, which dipped deeper into shadow after each blow. The high-pitched whine of the engines began to fall. “Shields buckling,” the security chief said.

“Six torpedoes away!” Mirren shouted over the clamor.

“Acquiring control,” Kandel said as she worked.

On the main viewer, Dax saw energy pulses from the Borg cube slice past the *Aventine* in the seemingly empty space. She was about to be grateful for the missed shot when she saw the flare of a distant detonation.

“We just lost two torpedoes,” Mirren said. “The Borg are locking on again—”

Kandel cut in, “Torpedoes armed!” Her fingertips danced lightly across her controls as she added, “Target acquired!”

“Resume evasive maneuvers,” Bowers ordered.

The remaining four missiles became incandescent, shining bright and blue against the blackness of space. They traced corkscrew paths through the Borg’s defensive fusillade of energy blasts. A blinding pulse of light washed out the image on the main viewscreen, and a gut-wrenching sensation of collision lifted the bridge officers several centimeters into the air. Then the artificial gravity kicked back in and dropped everyone roughly on the deck.

“Stations,” Dax said, the edge in her voice cutting through the daze and shock of the direct hit. “Mirren, get the viewer back on. Tharp, new evasive pattern. Kandel, report!”

It took a few seconds for the Deltan woman to coax her console back to full operation. “The Borg neutralized three of the torpedoes while we were down. Adjusting the last torpedo to compensate.” The main viewer flickered back to life as she added, “It’s through their shields—direct hit!”

Sapphire flames blazed from an erupting rent in the cube’s patchwork hull, and fissures traveled with surprising speed and ferocity across all its surfaces as it began to tumble through space like a can of sardines. Explosions peppered its surface, ejecting chunks of its exterior in its wake.

Bowers turned and favored Kedair with a satisfied grin. “Feel free to have a little target practice, Lieutenant.”

“With pleasure, sir.” Seconds later Kedair opened fire with the *Aventine*’s phaser cannons and quantum torpedoes. Piece by piece, she vaporized the debris of the disintegrating Borg vessel, which now looked like a hollow shell; it had been all but consumed from within by the transphasic warhead’s electric-blue fires. Staring at the gutted hexahedron, Kedair said, “Permission to finish the job, Captain?”

“Permission granted,” Dax said, noting a subtle grin of agreement from Bowers. They both watched as a volley of ten quantum torpedoes plunged into the smoldering wreckage of the Borg ship and obliterated it. Watching the fire cloud disperse into the unforgiving vacuum of space, Dax noted the heavy odor of scorched metal and burnt optronics that permeated her bridge.

Mirren silenced a beeping alert on her console. “*Enterprise* is hailing us, Captain.”

“On-screen,” Dax said.

Captain Picard’s visage filled the screen. “*Captain Dax*,” he said. “*My thanks and compliments for a fine rescue.*”

“The pleasure was all ours, Captain,” Dax said. “We’re still licking our wounds over here, but we have medics and damage-control teams standing by if you need them.”

Picard sighed softly and nodded once. “*We’re not too proud to say we’re in need of assistance. Any help you can offer will be gratefully accepted.*”

“Understood,” Dax said. “Send us a list of any parts or equipment you might need. I’ll have my chief engineer take care of the details.”

Nodding, Picard replied, “*Very good. My second officer, Commander Kadohata, will apprise you of our needs. In the meantime, Captain, I’d like to invite you and your first officer to meet with me privately aboard the Enterprise. We came to the Azure Nebula on an urgent mission, and now that you’re here, we need to ask for your help in completing it.*”

“Of course, Captain,” Dax said. “Commander Bowers and I will beam over as soon as you’re ready to receive us.”

“At 0230, then,” Picard said. “*Enterprise out.*”

The main viewer blinked back to the serene vista of deep space. Dax turned to Bowers. ~~“Enterprise took some heavy damage in that fight, Sam. Make sure Mikaela knows to make the repairs a priority.”~~

“Will do,” Bowers said. Quietly, he added, “I guess it would be awkward to ask if they could loan us a few of those transphasic torpedoes, wouldn’t it?”

“Not as awkward as it’ll be for me seeing Worf again,” Dax replied. “With all that’s been going on for the last five weeks, I haven’t had a chance to talk to him since my promotion. Last time I saw him, I was congratulating him for accepting the XO billet on the *Enterprise*. That was before he transferred here, when I was still a lieutenant commander. Now I outrank him.”

Bowers shrugged. “Don’t worry about it, Captain. Maybe he’ll just be happy for you, as a friend.”

“Maybe,” Dax said. “But you know what they say: Rank is like sex—it changes everything.”

Dr. Beverly Crusher moved quickly from one biobed to the next, supervising her staff of surgeons, nurses, and medical technicians as they tended to the scores of grievously wounded personnel being portered into sickbay by security officers, paramedics, and damage-control officers.

At one bed, Dr. Tropp, her Denobulan assistant chief medical officer, was already deep into a surgical procedure, trying to stabilize the vital functions of a Bajoran woman whose legs were gone, sheared away halfway between the waist and the knees, cauterized black and smooth by some hellish trauma.

Walking down the row of biobeds, Crusher saw only more of the same: the burnt and the broken, the amputated and the paralyzed. Her normally antiseptic-smelling sickbay was rich with the charnel perfume of scorched flesh and spilled blood. Pitiful moaning, wails of agony, the hoarse exhortations of the suffering and the dying dispelled the quiet ambience she had always taken for granted.

A woman’s voice called out, “Doctor Crusher!” She turned and saw Dr. Rymond, a chestnut-haired female surgical intern, beckoning her into the triage center adjacent to sickbay. Crusher dodged past a pair of medical technicians carrying a wounded officer on a stretcher to the O.R., brushed a few sweat-soaked strands of her red hair from her face, and joined Rymond.

The patient, a youthful-looking man, lay on his side, facing away from Crusher. A jagged length of what looked like a fragment of a metal support beam skewered his torso. “Fill me in,” Crusher said.

“Fell onto a broken railing segment,” Rymond said. “The DC team cut him free and left us a few centimeters to grab on to, but it’s stuck tight. He’s in shock and fading fast. Pulse is one-forty and thready, BP fifty over thirty.”

Crusher grabbed one end of the man’s stretcher and nodded to Rymond to take the other. “Okay, front of the line, let’s go.” They carried him into sickbay, toward a biobed that had just been vacated. “Does our lucky friend have a name?”

“Lieutenant Konya,” Rymond said as they set him down.

Hearing his name enabled Crusher to see past the blood and grime on the wounded man’s face and recognize him. He was the ship’s deputy chief of security. “Get a breathing mask on him. Try and bring up his pulse ox while we get a clearer picture of the damage. And watch his EEG, he’s a Betazoid.” She called over her shoulder, “We need a surgical arch over here!”

She lifted her medical tricorder, which she kept holstered on her belt during crises like these, and began an exploratory imaging sequence of Konya’s torso. “Damn,” she muttered. “It’s straight through the inferior vena cava.” To the unconscious Betazoid she added, “You had to make it difficult.”

didn't you?"

~~A pair of technicians, one an Andorian *thaan* and the other a female Saurian, hurried over with surgical arch for the biobed. They slipped past Rymond and Crusher, fitted the arch into place, the~~ rushed away as Dr. Tropp called from across sickbay for a new pack of hyposprays.

Crusher powered up the arch, calibrated its settings for Betazoid male physiology, and downloaded Konya's medical history from the ship's computer, to serve as baseline data. "Activate the delta-wave generator and monitor his vitals for me," Crusher said. "I'm about to open the pericardium and put a circular constrictor field around the auricle of his right atrium."

Her touches on the arch's interface pad were delicate and precise. Its noninvasive surgical protocols were state-of-the-art medicine, but only if one knew how to use them. This seemed to Crusher like a good opportunity to pass on some of that skill to her fresh-faced intern. "Watch closely," she said to the younger woman. "We're going to constrict the auricle and create a virtual venous-return catheter from there to the IVC."

The procedure went exactly as Crusher hoped, with the surgical arch manipulating force fields and tissue regenerators in an intricately programmed sequence. "As soon as I detect resistance from the fragment, I want you to use the controls on your side to dematerialize it." She watched Rymond initialize the interface on the other side of the arch. "Ready?"

Rymond nodded and kept her eyes on her controls.

"Okay," Crusher said, watching the resistance gauges creep upward for the constrictor field "now."

Rymond tapped in the micro-transporter sequence and removed all traces of the intruding metallic fragment.

As soon as the transporter sequence ended, Crusher finished closing the constrictor field. "All right," she said. "The auricle's sealed, the catheter's functional, and we can start doing some repair work." She looked over at Rymond. "Feel up to finishing this one on your own?"

"Yes, Doctor." The young surgeon glanced at the display screens on the arch. "I'll need to transfuse him first." She turned her head and caught the eye of Nurse Mimouni, who was passing by. "Nurse, prep eight units of J-neg and two units of Betazoid plasma, stat." Mimouni nodded her acknowledgment without breaking stride.

"Let me know if you need a hand," Crusher said. Rymond nodded and continued repairing Konya's wounds as Crusher moved on, back through the chaotic hustle of bodies and equipment.

She paused in the open doorway to the triage center, which was packed almost to capacity. Patients lay on beds arranged in long parallel rows. Most of them were unconscious; a few stared blankly at the overhead. Multiple copies of the ship's female-personality EMH—Emergency Medical Hologram—moved from bed to bed, assessing the criticality of new patients as they arrived.

Closer to Crusher, the ship's senior counselor, a Bajoran man named Dr. Hegol Den, knelt beside a wounded young medic and conversed in soothing whispers with the shaken Trill woman. Crusher admired Hegol's gentle bedside manner; for a moment she lamented that he lacked the surgical training to do more for the wounded, but then she noted the generally subdued mood in the triage facility, and she realized that much of it was likely the product of Hegol's calm attention.

From the main sickbay compartment, she heard Dr. Tropp's voice get louder and pitch upward with frustration. She turned back and watched a moment she had witnessed far too many times before a surgeon fighting a losing battle against injuries so severe that nothing short of a miracle could fix them.

"Push one-twenty-five triox," Tropp snapped at his trio of assistants. "Cortical stims to two

eighty-five! Dammit, th'Shelas, that artery's bleeding again!"

"V-fib," said medical technician Zseizaz, through a vocoder that rendered the buzzes and clicks of his insectile Kaferian language into recognizable phonetics.

"Charge to three hundred," Tropp said.

"Belay that," Crusher cut in. "Your patient has total organ failure, and her EEG flatlined four minutes ago." She hated to pull rank, but Tropp could be obsessive in times like this, and she couldn't afford to let him fixate on one lost cause when there were a dozen other lives in need of his help.

Tropp stared back at her, wild-eyed, and his nurse, his technician, and his intern all watched him. Then his shoulders slumped and his head followed. When he lifted his head again, Crusher saw in his eyes that he knew what he had to do.

He shut off the surgical arch. "Time of death, 0227." Zseizaz and th'Shelas removed the surgical arch, and Tropp waved over a pair of medical assistants to remove the body. Then he nodded to Nurse Amavia and said, "Let's go see who's next."

Crusher watched the assistants transfer the body of the dead Bajoran engineer to an antigravity gurney. With decorum and gentility they stretched a clean blue sheet over the body from head to toe and guided it away from the living patients, into the recesses of sickbay, to the morgue, where it would be placed in stasis pending its final journey home to its next of kin.

Over in the triage center, Tropp and Amavia zeroed in on a patient and directed Zseizaz and th'Shelas to move the wounded Tellarite officer to a biobed in sickbay.

The fight goes on, Crusher told herself. Then she impelled herself into motion, and summoned medical technician Ellwood Neil to join her as she crossed the compartment to find a case of her own. "Look for criticals," she said to the sharp-eyed young man. "I'm in the mood to work miracles tonight."

"A subspace tunnel to the Gamma Quadrant," said Captain Picard, sounding intrigued by Captain Dax's account of how the *Aventine* had found itself in a position to charge to the *Enterprise's* rescue. He reclined his chair from his ready room desk and continued, "That's a remarkable discovery, Captain."

Dax grinned. "I'll tell my science officer you said so."

Commander Bowers, who had accompanied Dax on this visit to the *Enterprise*, added, "It was Mister Helkara's suggestion to look for the subspace tunnel in the first place."

Picard nodded at Bowers and replied, "It sounds like you're blessed with an excellent crew."

"The best in the fleet," Bowers boasted. Worf, who was standing on Picard's right behind the desk, shot a fierce, challenging stare at Bowers, who quickly and nervously added, "Present company excluded, of course."

Worf signaled his acceptance of Bowers's capitulation with a muted growl from the back of his throat.

Captain Picard turned his chair away from Worf, stood, and walked around his desk to face Captain Dax. "I cannot dismiss as coincidence your discovery of a subspace tunnel and the recent entry of Borg ships into Federation space, both within the Azure Nebula," he said. "My instincts—not to mention common sense—tell me that these events are related."

"We're in complete agreement, Captain," Dax said, speaking with authority and serenity. Listening to her, Worf thought for a moment that he could hear and see echoes of Jadzia Dax in Ezri-

the same confident timbre in her voice, the same poise and grace. Then the shadow of his slain wife faded and he was left with only the present.

“It’s important we act quickly,” Picard said. “Starfleet’s defenses are faltering, and I can sense that the Borg are on the move. Another assault is imminent, unless we prevent it.”

Bowers said, “We can have the *Aventine* ready for action by 0630.” He cast a questioning look at Worf.

“Most of our systems will be functional by 0630,” Worf said. “But Commander La Forge reports that repairs to the targeting sensors will take roughly twenty hours.”

Picard nodded. “I see. Until we finish repairs, then, the *Aventine* will have to lead the investigation.”

“Our pleasure, Captain,” Dax said. “If I might make a suggestion...?” Picard nodded for her to continue. “I think we should start our search at the coordinates where my ship emerged from the subspace tunnel. If there is another passage with a terminus inside the nebula, I think the best place to look for it is in proximity to one we already know about.”

“Agreed,” Picard said. “But before we begin the search, I want to reiterate our objective. If there is another subspace tunnel being used by the Borg, our mission is first to obstruct and then to destroy that phenomenon. It’s imperative we deny the Borg access to Federation space, at all costs. Is that clear?”

“Absolutely, Captain,” said Dax.

A look of resolution passed over Picard’s face. “Very well. Let’s get to work. We’ll return to the nebula together at 0630.”

Bowers and Dax nodded their assent and got up from their chairs. As the two visitors walked toward the door, Picard shook Dax’s hand and then Bowers’s. The portal sighed open ahead of them, briefly admitting the gentle humming and chirps of work being performed at numerous duty stations on the bridge. Then the door closed after the departed officers, leaving Worf and Picard alone in the captain’s ready room.

Captain Picard walked to the replicator nook behind his desk and said to the computer, “Tea, Earl Grey, hot.” His drink took shape inside a tiny, short-lived blizzard of atoms. He picked up the cup and saucer and eased himself into his chair.

Worf watched the captain take a sip and wince slightly at the sting of it on his lips. He wondered for a moment whether Picard was aware that he hadn’t dismissed Worf. Then he wondered if his commanding officer was even cognizant of the fact that he was still there at all. Finally, Picard looked at Worf and said with a droll half smirk, “I understand your pride in the *Enterprise*’s crew, Number One, but do you think it was polite to intimidate Commander Bowers in front of his captain?”

Worf scowled. “He should choose his words with more care.”

“Perhaps,” Picard said. “Though I have to wonder...was your display really about what he said? Or did it have something to do with seeing your former colleague precede you as a captain?”

Worf looked away from the captain. “I do not resent Captain Dax’s promotion,” he said, and it was mostly true. However, he had to admit there was a certain dark irony to the situation.

During the Dominion War, Worf had decided, during a vital military operation, to save the life of his wife, Jadzia Dax, rather than complete his assignment. The ensuing fallout of that botched mission had resulted in a black mark on his service record, one which Captain Sisko had believed would prevent Worf from ever receiving his own command.

Years of distinguished service in Starfleet and the Federation Diplomatic Corps had mostly overcome the stigma of that old reprimand, but there were times when Worf still felt pangs of guilt for

all the other lives that had been lost in the war because of his selfish choice. Despite all he had achieved since then, Worf still harbored serious doubts that Starfleet would ever place him in command of a ship of the line.

And now Ezri Dax—for whose previous host Worf had committed his professional *Hegh'bat*—was in command of a starship. He didn't begrudge Ezri her success, but he had to wonder how long the universe intended to mock him for his actions on Soukara.

“Do you wish me to apologize to Commander Bowers, sir?”

Picard's expression brightened. “Definitely not. Everyone knows the *Enterprise* has the best crew in Starfleet.” He sipped his tea and smirked. “Dismissed, Mister Worf.”

1519

The future was the past, and the past was the present.

On Earth, Cortes was leading a Spanish expedition in Mexico and triggering the New World's first pandemic by introducing it to the influenza virus; Babur was conquering northern India, as a prelude to establishing the Mughal Empire; Magellan had begun his circumnavigation of the globe, and in Europe, Martin Luther was challenging the infallibility of papal decrees.

Adrift in the cold light and deep silence of interstellar space, however, time began to feel like an abstraction to Captain Erika Hernandez. During the months that she and her landing party from the *Columbia NX-02* had spent on the planet Erigol as “compulsory guests” of the reclusive aliens known as the Caeliar, she had accustomed herself to the rhythm of natural days and nights. As much as she had shared her crew’s desire to escape the aliens’ custody and return home to Earth, she had on some level enjoyed being back in a natural environment.

Now that lush world was gone, annihilated by a supernova along with much of the Caeliar civilization—and, as far as Hernandez knew, the *Columbia* itself.

Without the rising and setting of the sun, Hernandez had no sense of the passage of days or weeks or months. She slept when she was tired, ate when she was hungry, and filled the indeterminate span of her waking hours with nostalgic remembrances of a life left behind. Her only indicator of time passing was the length of her hair, which had barely reached her shoulder when she’d first come to Erigol; it now fell in dark, thick tangles a few inches below her shoulder blades.

Three other survivors from the *Columbia* had escaped the cataclysm of Erigol with her, along with other passengers inside the fleeing capital city of Axion: Commander Veronica Fletcher, the first officer; Dr. Johanna Metzger, the ship’s chief medical officer; and Ensign Sidra Valerian, the communications officer. None of them had adapted to the formless, unstructured existence of the Caeliar with any more ease than she had.

Hernandez stood alone in the middle of an empty, granite-tiled plaza, surrounded by the majestic towers and spires of the Caeliar metropolis. Its delicate metal-and-crystal architecture captured the feeble illumination of starlight, which cast the city in stygian shadows, dull swaths of titanium white, and endless shades of gray.

The silence of the city pressed against her soul. It was so absolute, so unnatural. Despite the presence of millions of Caeliar denizens, the megalopolis appeared deserted. Its concert shells were empty; shattered sculptures lay abandoned in the plazas and streets. Even the air was deathly still.

Footsteps, faint and distant, behind her. Drawing near by slow degrees. She felt no need to turn and look; she already knew that it was one of her officers. Only they ever walked in Axion. The

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