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The rest of the small print is still the same. Therefore if you haven't read Part I, go back and do so.

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## **A FISH STORY**

### **Part IV - The One That Got Away**

{I want off this rock!} wailed 119 of 230. {I want off this rock! I want off this rock!}  
{So do we,} interjected five drones in the same predicament, but on a different asteroid.  
{Second, take care of them,} snapped Captain to the drone so named. After the They medium attack units had been harpooned and the power plants activated, only four-fifths of the engineering detachments were able to be retrieved. The remaining one hundred and four drones were left to cling to their posts as the mediums convulsed.

Sensors added her contribution to the on-going internal chaos of normal operations. {Sensors sees shields have [eroded] on all eight units. The [bolo] has disrupted defensive [carbon].} She had been waiting for a particular cue which would allow the cube to order itself and its two vessel "armada" into action. Whereas Cube #347 might eventually batter its way through the shields of a single swarm member, the Federation ships were doomed to failure if extreme measures were not taken, hence the trap.

{This is not fun!} yelped 216 of 230, a drone whom the process of assimilation had not dampened a rather twisted sense of humor. He blanketed sub-collective visual input with a first-person view of an orange wall looming close, a tooth-shattering quake, followed by a retreat of the They unit's hide. While someone with a functioning stomach would consider the sight nauseating, or others exhilarating if the sensation were captured in an amusement park ride, in-your-face reality was much less delightful.

Second cut the visual. {Stop that. We are working on the problem.}

{We are ready,} stated Captain. The knowledge was internal, immediate, innate. Captain articulated orders as consensus was formed in the deeper sub-collective subconscious, a nebulous area part instinct and part the combined will of four thousand drones. At the edge of all actions lurked Primal Root Command 004 and its demand to eradicate They by any means. {Auxiliaries #1 and #2,} sent Captain to the drones (chosen by the Borg version of short straws) on Banshee and Explorer, {order Starfleet to attack. If they falter, or are overly inefficient, we will take command of the ships.} The demand was acknowledged.

Cube #347 completed reactivation of its major systems, rising from the sensor shadow of the asteroid it had been hiding behind. Eight large orange targets - none of which would die easily, shields or no shields - writhed under the unabated assault of electricity. As the lead They assault unit was targeted, the cube rotated until a corner was leading. A brutally direct method of killing large They had been developed by the Collective a millennium prior. Like a giant spearhead, Cube #347 charged forward at the stationary unit, quarter impulse.

Assault units ready, spoke Jackie Chan. The unusual self-designation had come about when, several centuries earlier, the unit had tapped into overflow from a probe sampling Terran television broadcasts two hundred light years from the Federation capital world. Although she did not understand the actions of the biped - contemplation of racial history and its meaning in the greater scheme of Chaos was left to cerebrates and those units bred to such work - in the broadcast, its fighting skills had been engaging. It was an honor to the long dead warrior that its name had been appropriated by a newly decanted They medium attack unit.

Jackie Chan had thrown off two of the six harpoons embedded in her epidermal structure. While the remaining four continued to pump electricity into her body, causing subdermal muscles to spasm, her mind was the only one of the swarm clear enough to allow transportation of assault units.

Target two shows fluctuating shields, noted Jackie Chan, therefore I am transporting.

Tactical units such as mediums and heavies were large enough to support parasitic biostasis chambers grafted to their internal body cavities. Assault units hibernated until needed, drawing upon nutrients supplied by the metahost. Once awakened and prepared for battle, the humanoid units were beamed to targets via the Order mechanism of a transporter. Genetic-specialist cerebrates continued to mull over a method to breed or gene-splice true teleportation, but at this point only certain neural masses specifically bred to the task could perform such tasks. Unfortunately, said neural masses also required many resources to maintain, could move only one object at a time over relatively short distances, and were otherwise less-endowed than a probe or symbiont in the intellect department. Therefore, the Order evil of transporters, along with that of the warp drive, had to be tolerated.

Ko was one of fifty assault units transported to target two before the latter hardened its defensive shield. Ko was proud of his one syllable name, for it demonstrated his mental potential was enough to support abstract thought. While the name was the limit of his abstract capability, it was more than a probe or a symbiont; thinking was better left to They bred to the task. His metahost had directed him to destroy the Borg units, and that was what he would do.

"Ko," rasped Ko, asserting his individuality among the eleven additional units transported to these coordinates within target two. His unit subtype retained the ability for limited vocalization; he could not, and had no desire, to say anything more complicated. The pleasure associated with his name was enough.

A medium sung its death, followed quickly by a second, their bodies wracked with pain from the trap. The units had failed in their duties, and They declined the pleasure reward, allowing the mediums to drift to the afterlife and final chaos of Entropy unfulfilled. Ko would do better.

Chaos units come, informed Ty from his point position of the assault group. Approximately twenty drones were advancing along the corridor. Yes, Ko thought, I will do better.

"We've lost control of the transporters," said Larkin as she absently punched a few buttons at Ops. She didn't really need the console, but since human(oid)s ran the ship, she had to at least maintain appearances. She tried to circumvent the attack, but was unsuccessful. "There has been an influx of one hundred and four Borg. They are scattered all over our lower decks."

"As if I don't have enough trouble already," muttered Baxter. Explorer shook as an arc-disrupter glanced off the shields. Stars in the forward-looking viewscreen spun as Ford curved

the ship back towards the action. J'hana whooped as a volley of torpedoes impacted against organic hull, spurting large globules of a red substance - blood? - to vacuum. The mid-body of the same creature suddenly exploded as the Borg cube tunneled directly through layers of living flesh. Baxter swore he could hear the wet noise of tearing muscles. Amazingly, the medium unit continued to live.

Conway flinched as a large hunk of gore smooshed against the camera, leaving a long streak of dark red across the field of view, "Oh, gross! Ford, don't steer us through the crud. Do you know how long it is going to take to wash this ship? Try to go around the chunks." He made veering motions with his hand, ignoring the fact a starship did not support speedster agility.

Tilleran braced herself at her station, then spoke as the ride momentarily smoothed, "Lords below demanding your attention, sir."

"J'hana, try aiming at the...feathery end. Audio only on the Borg."

The Collective Voice boomed on the bridge: "Explorer, our cube was unable to retrieve drones from the ambush points. They will remain on your vessel until after the battle. You will comply." The speakers hissed off before Baxter could form a reply.

"Hitchhikers!" spat J'hana. She coordinated another round of torpedoes, adding phaser shots as Explorer swooped close. "Shall I evict them?"

"No!" shouted Baxter. If she left her station.... And she was entirely too eager as well. "I mean no. I need you at tactical doing tactical things. Um...Conway...go round up a security team and see if you can herd the Borg somewhere. And try not to get assimilated. They may be trying to take advantage of the situation."

"But, sir..." began Conway.

"No buts. We have one hundred plus wandering around doing who knows what." The ship rocked again, this time as an organic torpedo sneaking up behind Explorer was dispatched by phaser fire from Banshee. "Go!"

"Yes, sir," sulked Baxter's second-in-command as he levered himself up from his comfy chair. He wondered what the ancient writer Tom Clancy would have made of all the intrigue and paranoia flying around. The answer was clear - write a three thousand page discourse as to why Soviet-era Russians were ultimately responsible.

Conway's face met the hallway wall at a high rate of speed as Explorer viciously shook. A series of thumps informed him his fifteen body security detachment had undergone similar fates. The inertial dampers were enduring extreme hardware abuse either from Ford's maneuvers or enemy munitions...or both. If Richards was on board instead of at Q'onos, he would be certainly giving birth to the mother of all cows in his haste to keep Explorer in one piece. The last Conway had heard, Hartley was performing credibly in the bovine department.

"Computer, damage report," barked Conway as he regained his balance. One of the phaser-wielding crewmen had neglected to set his weapon's safety. A large black scar slashed across the ceiling.

The smooth tones of the computer responded, "Minor damage to inertial dampers." Pause. "Five cases of Romulan Ale spilt in storage area two." Pause. "Damage to plasma conduit 47a." Pause. "Shields are collapsing." Pause. "Shields at zero percent."

'Damn,' thought Conway, 'I knew I should have insisted Mirk not use that utility closet as an extra place to store liquor, no matter if it was a perfect place to chill beverages.' Aloud: "Conway to all security details. Continue to advance on your Borg group, but be ready for anything."

"J'hana to Conway," called the Andorian, "are you listening?"

"Yes. We are nearing the Borg now. They are only a couple of corners away."

"For your information, we have shields back, but during the few seconds they were down we registered fifty signatures beamed aboard. They originated from one of our orange enemies. Internal sensors show a dozen unknowns between you and your Borg targets...and the Borg are moving at a high rate of speed towards the unknowns. Since /I/ am not allowed to leave the bridge, my honor and that of my hive falls upon you. If you screw up, it will be my sacred duty to kill you; and if you are already dead, I will desecrate your remains and make sure your soul goes to Hell. Andorian Hell."

Conway sighed, "Understood, /Lieutenant/ J'hana. You don't have to be so dramatic."

"Who is being dramatic? Bridge out."

The fifteen security crew edged away from Conway, as if they were afraid association with him might lead to J'hana's displeasure transferring itself to them. Conway frowned, gripping his phaser rifle tighter. "Well, come on then. Let's go see what's happening."

Conway led the detachment down the corridor and around two corners. The second turning revealed an odd battle, one raged in near silence but for occasional scrape of metal or thump of body. The lone exception was a sporadic "Ko" which rose from the middle of the struggling knot. The twenty Borg and twelve "unknowns" had been found.

The opponents to the drones - They assault units, Conway remembered from a quick multimedia briefing he had received prior to the trapping mission - were of multiple forms, the only commonality a bipedal stance. The impression of spikes and claws was strong, along with an odor of cooked flesh. Conway watched as two drones hung on one assault unit, literally beating its head to pulp. The not-so-victim responded by flailing one limb, finally making contact with an assailant. With a sizzle, one drone backed off, pale skin of exposed arm crisped black.

One crewman raised his rifle, obviously of the opinion "shoot to kill first, ask questions later" was a sound policy. He fired. The setting might as well as been a tickle, for all the attention it gained. The beam shimmered off one drone's personal shielding, eliciting a very dirty look and an upraised middle finger. Then, suddenly, it was over.

Twelve assault units, and pieces of assault units, lay all over the deck. The splattered outline of a body decorated one bulkhead. The Borg had not emerged unscathed: four bodies joined the units on the deck in termination. Those drones still upright sported an uncomfortable number of rips, tears, gouges, acid and electrical burns, and maimings; one individual held a severed prosthetic with its still functional arm. Despite the prominent death of the They units, drones stamped the remaining bits into bloody footprints.

An ensign turned and was noisily sick; several others appeared to be in a similar state of queasiness. Conway's stomach began to rumble in warning. Dignity and officership aside, he joined other vomiting crewmen in adding to the future duty of Explorer's custodian.

Fragments of muscle, epidermal tissue, and internal organs draped Cube #347's exterior surface; several long bone structures lay wedged among damaged sensor clusters, with one silvered ivory spear impaled at an angle to a depth of twenty meters. Vacuum-dried gore and dehydrated fluids streaked gunmetal gray sides in gruesome parody of racing stripes.

A single They medium tactical unit endured. Although its comrades floated as bits and pieces, it fought on, weakly discharging arc-disrupters at its tormentors, unleashing quarter-sized torpedo units as quickly as they could be force grown, which was not very fast. Four of the

original six harpoons had been shaken, to no avail: defiance is difficult when one has a large hole punched through one's side, especially when it exposes one's power core. Cube #347 held position, ravaging the insides with raking cutting beams and the occasional torpedo. Finally a quantum struck something vital. The unit died as its core imploded, shredding all remaining functional systems.

By any means...by any means...by any means....

A command was sent to forty-eight transceivers located in forty-eight rock-encased independent fusion plants. Forty-eight brilliant displays of pyrotechnic fury momentarily brightened the asteroid field, reducing Borg technology to molten slag. No inadvertent opportunities could be given to the Federation to examine Borg handiwork. The chunks of They units not cremated by the explosions were subjected to controlled phaser blasts until all was dispersing vapor and sterile ash.

The sub-collective of Cube #347 paused to examine itself, to listen to damage reports submitted both by computer and engineering hierarchy. A large tear rent through face #5, exposing Bulk Cargo Hold #8 and several surrounding submatrices to vacuum. Numerous acid and arc-disrupter scars crisscrossed hull plates; relatively minor cosmetic damage except where newly installed sensor clusters and antennae were destroyed, lowering the cube's already crippled sensor ability. Deeper, Auxiliary Cores #4 and #5 were nonfunctional, and warp nacelle tri-segments under three edges had shut-down. Miscellaneous power outages, blown conduits, and fluid/gas leaks completed the self-analysis. Numerous designations were entered on the drone maintenance roster.

The status of Banshee and Explorer was unknown, although superficial scans of both ships showed extensive damage. Drones whom Second contrived to send to the latter had found themselves in pitched battle with They assault units. It was surprising the ill-equipped engineering drones had not sustained greater losses; the Starfleet security details proved themselves to be less than useless. Currently, Explorer limped on its own propulsion, but Banshee hung motionless except for the occasional violet cone of a firing thruster.

It was time to clean up. Cube #347 pivoted, lancing out tractor beams to capture first Banshee, then Explorer. The former had to be browbeat to lower shields for a good lock, bridge crew appearing stunned. The sub-collective, damn surprised all three vessels had survived a swarm of medium tactical units, turned thoughts towards calculating the probability of They's retracting of resources. They /had/ to believe the ruse of firm Collective control by now. The chance of surviving a second swarm, a swarm /expecting/ a trap, was negligible.

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Our swarm is shattered, stated They with disbelief.

The universal truth of Chaos decrees anything is possible. We have underestimated Order, responded They.

There is no excuse. Ancient adages are impertinent, silly! Borg have advanced technologically, raged They, and one of those technologies is of They! Personal shielding of drones encountered was originally They!

As predicted by Captain, a part of They was having a royal cow. More importantly, They were divided upon what action to take.

Order obviously has a firm foothold in this sector of the quadrant, moaned They. We must either retreat and wait for the main colonization force, or concentrate our scouts in

preparation to strike elsewhere.

A third option of media deception remains, reminded They.

Hopeless! wailed They. That particular voice abruptly died as its nutrient flow ceased, as symbionts were ordered to tear the living mass of jellied brain apart. Now was neither the time for active dissent nor for cerebrates bred to espouse caution. Rationalization of conscious, moral or otherwise, was easy when disapproving individuals could be removed at will from Chaos. They called it an advanced form of (un)natural selection.

Atom and Nova flew through the radiation hell which was suprawarp, listening to They cerebrates as They argued among Theyself. The Order defenders are heavily damaged, indicated Atom as he replayed pertinent memory engrams captured from the medium swarm, and we will not fall to a similar trap. If we allow the Borg units time to repair, then decoy them away from the station with probes or light tactical units, we could strike...

And destroy Order's heart, finished They's thought. A station is a vulnerable thing. Our dispatched heavy tactical units will destroy the assimilated Waystation, if necessary, but preference is to leave it intact for PR purposes.

They was forming a grand plan.

Nova concurred: Atom and I hold enough assault units to overwhelm drones on the station. We will also attempt to capture Borg to determine the method of their personal shielding. It may be possible to readapt it to our assault units, minus the intrusive bit of Order, of course.

Of course, agreed They. The irony is fitting. Make it so.

Yes, replied Atom and Nova together. They would drop to normal space within the same sensor-disrupting system the medium swarm had died. Stealth was a sword which cut two ways. Probes would act as visual relays, watching for the three vessel fleet to disperse; and then, waiting over, They would attack.

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Sensors was bored. The majority of the engineering hierarchy was either in regeneration, undergoing repairs, or putting the cube back together to reach the state it had been at before the battle with They. Since the Starfleeters could not identify outwardly similar Borg apart, much less distinguish the subtle line which delineated hierarchies on Cube #347, randomly chosen drones had been assigned to inspect damage to Explorer and Banshee. Thereby, Sensors found herself among the group beamed to Explorer.

Inspecting Borg components installed on Explorer for functionality had been a minor adventure, one which involved maps and schematics in a type of scavenger hunt. The Starfleeters which escorted her assigned subunit, as well as those encountered within corridors, seemed taken aback by her form. The holy Borg were an equal opportunity Collective; the quest towards perfection and Oneness in the sacred Choir was blind to shape.

Hours later, Sensors found herself on the bridge, along with two drones from command and control. 18 of 31 was describing the condition of Borg hardware (decent) in conjunction with surrounding Federation components (shoddy, inefficient, and nearing failure). Explorer's engineering chief, Lieutenant Hartley, was becoming increasingly red in the face as 18 of 31 detailed his report.

"Plasma conduit 18c exhibits an unacceptable number of stress fractures and must be replaced. Our shield node at juncture 18c-3 is unable to draw full power and is consequentially operating at less than full efficiency."

"Do it yourself, you slave-driving automaton, if you want 'full efficiency.' A conduit with stress fractures is quite low on my priority list when I'm having plenty of trouble just getting propulsion back on-line. As is, my engineering teams are working double shifts, which gives my people just enough time off to grab a bite to eat and a quick nap."

18 of 31 blinked. "Irrelevant. The humanoids aboard this vessel have the physical ability to work more than a Federation standard day of twenty-four Terran hours without sleep. Additionally, the proper chemical stimulants can boost most sophonts on Explorer without adverse hallucinogenic effects or loss of coordination." 18 of 31 paused as he accepted a series of numbers from the dataspace. "Probability calculation complete. If plasma conduit 18c is not replaced in five hours, likelihood of irreversible core breach explosion rises to 85.1%." Another pause. "All drones will be evacuated before that time. We will not lose units due to inefficient Starfleet technicians."

Hartley flushed a flaming red with anger. All three drones present watched somewhat curiously as bets raged in the intranet background over the odds she would burst a capillary in her brain; heart attack and seizure were additional favorites. Finally the engineering chief turned away to reorder the list of maintenance priorities, placing plasma conduit 18c at the top.

Captain Baxter began to speak, "Hartley, they are only trying to help, I think. There is an agenda somewhere, but leave it for now. And you three," Baxter shifted his focus, "if you and your circus are done crawling over my ship, I want..."

The doors to the turbolift split apart, revealing a woman dressed in black with blue turtleneck. Slightly behind her was a human male in a soft velvet blue jumpsuit. A happy smile was plastered on his face as his eyes roamed around the bridge.

"Come along, Dean, come on out," coaxed the woman. She gently took one of the man's hands and tugged him into the open. Baxter sputtered to a halt as he saw the pair.

"Nurse Holly! I told you not to bring Wilcox up here! The man is a walking corpse, for Pete's sake!"

Holly snorted defensively, "The latest medical journals say 'total sensory immersion' is the best way to rehabilitate extreme cases such as Dean. I expect someday he'll just wake up, as if from a bad dream."

"He's legally /brain-dead/! I signed the papers myself."

"Not brain-dead - cerebrally challenged. Seeing these Borg will be a good thing. He can have the chance to face his nightmares."

As Baxter continued to rail away at the blithely smiling nurse, amused spectators watching, Wilcox pointed at an unoccupied chair. "Dog," he solemnly stated. "Yellow dog." Finger stabbed in the air towards Conway. "Targ." Pause. "Jello targ. Jello jello jello."

Holly smiled. "Very good," she cooed. "Very good." She nodded at the staring Baxter. "See? He's been consistent at stringing together two, or even more, words as of late. I'm sure he'll be speaking in complete sentences in a few more weeks. Half a year at the outside."

"He just called my first officer a jello targ. And that chair a yellow dog. I know two-year olds who can do better."

Sensors, who had been standing patiently contemplating the paradox of photonic waves and packets (actually, she was musing why other beings thought the duality a paradox), regarded the human male as he spoke. With growing excitement she listened as Commander Conway was named a targ. No one was watching her at the moment, not physically nor in the dataspace, so she sidled closer to Wilcox.

"[Grape plaster moose]?" she whistled, indicating a console. Wilcox looked startled.

He answered: "Orange. Banana and orange and apple." Five words, two repeated, seemed to take a lot of effort.

"Sensors think you raise very interesting philosophical issues."

"Catnip spider?"

"Sensors [nods] completely."

Wilcox seemed put off at being spoken to as if he were an intelligent being. He rallied. "Borgie buggy! Paperclip! Dog! Jello jello jello!"

Sensor's forward walking legs momentarily pranced as she waggled her antennae. "Yes, right now! Sensors rarely has a decent [radio] now a'days. Why don't we [jump] elsewhere?"

"Borgie buggy."

The turbolift doors whooshed open, then closed again. No one seemed to notice the departure of the pair until Baxter looked around in puzzlement. "Where'd Wilcox go? And wasn't there a giant Borgified insect here a minute ago as well?"

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Repair of damage taken in the battle with the swarm of medium tactical units was proceeding satisfactorily. Overall injury was relatively light considering the odds of survival, even with trap deployment, had been very low, approaching the single digits for many scenarios. From the exterior, Cube #347 looked like Hell warmed over, but inside all was functioning. Level of efficiency, ignoring the breach of Bulk Cargo Hold #8, prior to the fight would be achieved in a few hours.

Captain observed through the eyes of both Deltas as a task group worked on removing the bone spur impaling face #5. The portion sticking out from the hull had already been cut away. Notches were being carved in the remaining stump in preparation to attach block and tackle. Delta A leaned on Delta B to remove a vacuum-dried gob of tissue which had adhered to her foot.

{Could you not have driven us a bit more carefully?}

{You know as well as I do that punching holes through the medium tactical units is the only proven way for an Exploratory-class cube to kill them. This vessel does not, despite Weapons' belief, have the power to go one-on-one with a medium, shields or no shields on our opponent. Biological systems on They units can be as decentralized as Borg,} rejoined Captain.

Delta tossed the glob on a trajectory which would eventually impact against one of Waystation's exterior view ports. {We know that,} she chided. {The mess is just so, unsanitary, inefficient. I request the cube is taken through the exterior edge of a star's corona to burn off the junk. Those teams who continue to wash down the faces to free us of the jamming material are complaining about the extra work.}

{Noted,} said Captain as he posted the petition to the general dataspace as a low priority matter requiring consensus. Notches complete, heavy cable was threaded through several pulleys. In his alcove Captain shifted body position slightly, then focused his attention to the heart of Cube #347's collective consciousness. A very important decision had to be made.

{GWF! Galactic Wrestling Federation! I say we watch that program next!} spouted 37 of 79.

{GWF,} mused Captain. {'GWF'...wait a minute.... No, the status of subspace entertainment is irrelevant. We have more vital deliberations demanding consensus.}

{But...} began 37 of 79. He was cut off.



{No buts.} Captain performed the intranet equivalent of clearing his throat, then gathered four thousand threads of wandering awareness in preparation to weave them into an acceptable whole. {They have certainly retreated by now, at least for several Cycles, on the belief the Collective unequivocally controls this area. We will continue to monitor They signs for confirmation. The question thusly poised is: shall we begin assimilation of this Federation outpost now, or wait until contact with the Collective and allow the Greater Consciousness to decide for us?}

The Starfleet present, if they could eavesdrop into flow of mind and rapid numerical calculations which were the heart of a working sub-collective, would call the question treachery, a stab in the back by an assumed ally. No remorse, nor other such irrelevant emotion, was attached to what was a fundamental Borg fact of life: assimilation of technological and physiological distinctiveness into the Whole. For the drone seemingly absorbed by a poker game or another busy demonstrating exotic flambe techniques, no outward clue was given of impending doom. All participated in the cascade, knowing an affirmation of the primary decision fork would turn comrade into foe. It was the Borg way.

{Matrix complete. As a sub-collective, we do not have enough analytical power to foresee all possible complications. We will allow the Greater Consciousness to make the final decision.}

Starfleet, from plotting Section 31 admiral to drunken soldiers to Explorer's aged janitor taking a break from scrubbing the deck while wondering where an odd echoing song was originating, never realized how close they had come to meeting the true Collective. A marine frowned, certain the drone he was playing against was bluffing. Or cheating.

{Assimilation,} ordered Captain, {continue to worm us into all their systems. Acquire as much information as possible.}

{Is that all?} asked Assimilation. {And here I thought events might become slightly exciting. My hierarchy just seems to be along for the ride. A shake here, a rattle there.} Captain ignored Assimilation.

{We may have a slight problem,} said Delta.

{With the bone?} queried Captain. He stepped from his alcove and moved at a sedate pace down the walkway to his nodal intersection.

{No. Inventory shows we are short of wiring. Most of our stocks were employed to produce superconducting cables for the trap. The wiring can be replicated, but it would be easier to salvage what we can from the ambush site.}

The time required to present pros and cons and come to a decision was brief. {Fine,} replied Captain, {but I require you to reorganize the details first. In addition to continuing promised alterations to the smaller Federation vessels, we must install additional hardware on Waystation to ensure the eventual undertaking of station seizure and assimilation will be easier. I will inform Waystation of our departure to...} random generation of plausible lies, {...scan the ambush system for signs of They origination. Spoor might indicate direction and heading of They main fleet.}

{Compliance,} acknowledged Delta as she brought up the engineering drone manifest.

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The cube returns to this system: have the Borg seen us? asked Atom. Prickles of tension fluidly erupted on his hull as iridescent orange waves. Gene-ancestors, long absorbed into Chaos,

had spoken to each other with sound and bioluminescent color under the ice-encased surface of their oceanic homeworld. The tattered remnants of a once complex and poetically rich visual language was now emotion driven. Atom was given no response. Shall we attack now?

Calm, soothed Nova, be calm. They have not seen us, but surely come for another reason. Review your memories. Do you remember Order ever successfully adapting sensors to find passive units among the background clutter of rock and ice?

No.

Then calm.

Yes, calm yourself, Atom, whispered They. The plan as formulated will succeed.

Both Nova and Atom had been decanted in the long dark between galaxies, heavy tactical units born in anticipation of strife. Not knowing what to expect when the target was reached, Atom and two now-deceased siblings had been modified as zygotes to exhibit an excess of specific neurological chemicals and appropriate receptors. The end product was an attempt to install the ability of heavies to "think like the enemy" and extrapolate their next action. Unfortunately, the experiment, while successful under battle conditions, led to an overactive imagination - paranoia - by the heavies during times of inaction. Atom's siblings, Ion and Null, had succumbed to mistakes made while raving of impossible scenarios. They had to keep a tight rein on Atom to prevent his premature attack.

But what if Order has developed cloaked probes that can rip the thoughts right out of my mind? questioned Atom. One could look like anything...an asteroid, a comet nucleus, or be completely invisible.

Nova's tone was sharp. Atom! How many times my I, as your gene-mate, remind you such objects are not possible! Moons shooting death rays are plausible; a device reading your mind is not. Be still. Calm down. Why don't we play a game.

Atom subsided, color of epidermis stabilizing to a mottled tan. A game? I choose?

You choose.

I spy.

Okay. Nova sighed relief. Destroying the cube would be easy, as would taking control of Waystation and decimating every Borg drone in the area. However, They plan had to be followed. Nova began: I spy with my dermal eye something that begins with 'zoot'.

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"Is it alive, does it writhe..." sang a voice in a precise melody, eight tones blending smoothly together.

"Can it survive under the sun?" croaked a second throat, obviously not adept in the art of song. By paradox, this rendition was closer to the original than its musically perfect opposite.

Together: "I can't put my finger on it."

"Is it green, is it red..." trilled Voice One

"Is it alive or is it dead," Voice Two rasped.

"I can't put my finger on it," rang the chorus once more. The corridor added a nice reverberation to the whole twisted piece.

A woman scurried out of a turbolift halfway down the hallway, head moving rapidly back and forth as she searched for her quarry. "Dean? Where are you, boy? Here, Dean! Time to take your medicine. Are you on this deck? You shouldn't take off your com badge, except when we play hide-and-seek, because it makes it very hard for me to find you."

"Scathe with a lathe..."

"All the days in the path..."

"I can't put my finger on it."

The owner of the choir quieted, half shrouded multifaceted eyes sparkling under artificial light as torso slightly pivoted. Mandibles smacked together as one metallic leg clicked against the deck. "Your keeper comes. Sensors say we move to another level." The melodic chords which formed the words - /without/ benefit of the universal translator - originated from four pairs of spiracles along the insectoid's upper body. Occasionally the translator did kick in when native language was substituted for concepts not possible to understand unless one was also a large black bug in the general shape of a praying mantis. The badly extrapolated phrases did not seem to bother the human half of the duet.

"I see Holly. We not sing?" Entire understandable sentences; Holly would have been proud.

Front walking legs clicked in agitation. Abdomen was pressed against the human's waist, subtly pushing him out of the nurse's line of sight. She had not seen the pair yet. "Sensors say we sing. These 'Ween' songs from late 20th century Terra are [zinc velvet], are begging to be released to the cosmos. They speak of universal [lime jello] truths."

Wilcox's face frowned. "We sing, yes, Borgie Buggy? Jello jello, lime jello."

"Yes." Pause. "We will take Jefferies tube 5A to junction 62F. Three internal conduits meet at that point to form an open area. Once there we will finish 'I Can't Put My Finger On It.' Do you still retain the sacred song list?"

Wilcox happily waved a PADD. "We sing!"

"We sing!" echoed Sensors. She eyed the nurse, who was proceeding in the wrong direction. "Open that hatch and enter it. Sensors will be directly behind."

The human tucked the PADD away, opening the directed Jefferies tube entrance to easily slide inside. With agility one would not suspect from a species sporting a stiff exoskeleton, Sensors folded herself up and backed in, pulling the panel closed.

"Is it brown, is it white..."

"Is it really outta sight..."

"I can't put my finger on it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cube #347 returned to Waystation following an uneventful task. Retrieved fragments had been split among three Bulk Cargo Holds, and drones from all hierarchies worked at unweaving superconducting cabling to its constituent wires. As Waystation came within transporter range, drones were swapped on and off the vessel, some to regeneration, others to be reassigned to new duties.

Captain materialized within one of Waystation's storage/shuttle bays, crates stacked high against the walls and on racks. Five barrels sat in the middle of an open area where the absent runabout would have normally been parked. Unknown was if the ship was not present due to the barrels, or the barrels had been left out because the ship was not there. Captain checked drone locations.

{Transfer complete,} said Captain. He eyed the rows of marines. {And our escorts await.} Drones began to move off to their tasks, accompanied by squads dressed in black or tan.

Sensory hierarchy supplied a navigational grid chart to command and control, several

sectors highlighted. Odd They signatures had been spotted in the indicated areas. {The cube will head to those coordinates and begin patrol. Second, you have propulsion control and immediate moderation duties. Delta, concentrate on completing our repairs such that we may contact the Collective as soon as possible to request directives and report upon They.}

{They signs appear to be retreating,} inserted Sensors helpfully. Captain ran through the location manifest again, noting the insectoid was not on Cube #347.

{Sensors, return to the cube. You are required to be in close proximity to grid input.}

A drawn out silence. {Sensors complies. [Jello] Voodoo Lady.}

Captain mentally shook his head, ignoring the cryptic comment. He felt as Second linked command of cube propulsion to his signature, complaining the whole time he was Second, not Captain. Captain listened as he verified everyone was where they should be. He paused, digging into a suspicious secondary thoughtstream Second was maintaining. {Yeoman Tina Jones? Why is that human on the cube?}

{Because.}

{Why? Answer.}

{We are...linked. She gave me a tour of Waystation, therefore I must perform a reciprocal action. She will not detract from my efficiency and I already have a place to put her.}

Captain dug deeper into Second's thoughts. {You are planning to install her in my nodal intersection,} accused Captain. {You know the rules, no pets except for the rock variety! If Doctor cannot keep pets, neither can you.}

Second replied indignantly, {Tina is not a pet. Technically her designation is 26 of 152. She is Borg, albeit not at the moment.}

{She is species #5618, human.}

{She is Borg with a Borg designation. Her base species is human.}

{You are twisting my words, Second,} warned Captain.

{I am not that crazy pet-loving Doctor. Therefore, Tina is not a pet. She is Borg,} said Second with conviction.

The discussion was going nowhere, and the matter was not important enough to force compliance. Damn assimilation imperfection. Captain acquiesced, {This argument has required fully five seconds of time; the marines are becoming antsy. You may have Yeoman Jones on board, but if I find a single crumb of nutritional supplement or fleck of garbage when I return, she /will/ become 26 of 152. Permanently.}

{Acknowledged. Preparations for departure will be completed in ten minutes.}

Two days later, Banshee and Explorer left Waystation, heading for Borg designated sectors to patrol for They presence. Both ships were fully functional once more, necessary repairs expedited by drones able to toil in vacuum without a spacesuit. Various dings and dents remained, but Captain declared the cosmetic damage irrelevant.

Cube #347 itself was out of Waystation's sensor range, chasing phantom signatures of a hypothetical retreating They force. One profile matched a They mothership, a vessel type never captured by Borg and rarely seen directly. A deep scan, even a fleeting one made while running from hostile defenders, would be a coup to present to the Greater Consciousness when contact was reestablished. On the communication front, only one face remained to be washed and half of the wiring was complete.

Three hundred fifteen drones, most from engineering with a scattering of command and control and assimilation, remained within Waystation's sphere. Progress to convert tugs and

runabouts into small vehicles to fight an increasingly distanced They presence had been mostly abandoned, energy concentrated on adding bits and pieces of hardware to Waystation itself to facilitate its eventual incorporation into the Collective. Neither Waystation personnel nor Section 31 appeared to realize installation of the additional nodes was unnecessary. Suspicious were tempered by the fact tampering with the hardware led to painful shocks and burns. The computer was completely compromised; hidden code which stripped Starfleeters of all access, from internal sensors to the ability to order a sonic shower, was being laid.

All was smoothly proceeding according to plan. Too smoothly. Somewhere a figurative thermonuclear device was waiting to explode, if only it could be found. Yet, the only snag thus far encountered had been a request from Explorer's captain to delay deployment in order to search for a missing crewman by the name of Wilcox. After a quick examination of the sub-collective for new mentalities attempting to link with the only local Borg presence (none were "heard"), the request was denied. Wilcox was listed in Explorer's medical database as being brain-dead: he was not a suitable candidate for assimilation (accidental or otherwise). The location of a misplaced walking not-quite corpse was irrelevant

Still, the disappearance was disturbing.

\* \* \* \* \*

They often employed guile and subterfuge to gain Their ends, methodology contrary of the forthright Borg approach. Chaos versus Order. However, heavy tactical units are anything but subtle, and the subspace ripples of Atom and Nova nearing Waystation could be likened to a cruise ship bearing down on a dinghy dock at full throttle.

We near the station. Order has seen us, remarked Nova. The update was not necessary as They knew all of Theyselves from symbiont to cerebrated, but They did not protest; one of Nova's quirks of individuality included running narratives.

Atom was silent, his earlier paranoid restlessness replaced with growing hunger for battle. He focused on the target, examining it with his own senses as well as those of available probes.

Assault units ready. Dischargers powering. Torpedo compliment full with additional embryos in developmental stasis. Webbing spun. Metabolism levels optimum, prattled Nova, deep mental "voice" repeating the entire pre-battle checklist.

Atom scoffed, We are still half a Home rev from the target. You told me to calm, and now I tell you to relax. One of our unit type could burn out the Order cancer. Two of us is overkill, especially as the primary battleships and cube will not be able to return before we have completed our task.

Nova said, Right. He paused. Current organic matter storage is...

\* \* \* \* \*

"Sir?" called Ensign Taylor. The older woman was at one of the science stations, performing an extra-long-range sensor sweep for the absent Astrometrics department. Astrometrics was attempting to map minutely every spatial imperfection for twenty light years surrounding Waystation, and refused to have their project halted due to forced deportation. Ensign Taylor had been bribed to continue basic protocols, the price of which she refused to divulge.

"What?" asked Lisa as she looked up from the novel she had been reading on her PADD. Much more interesting than the latest security update of drunken brawls at Dillon's open-air bar. It seemed the Borg who was mixing drinks served as a bouncer as well: marines occasionally bounced off the far wall of the Mall and into Dr. Nelson's sickbay.

"I have something big, /very/ big, heading our direction. If I didn't know better, I'd say a pair of small asteroids had managed to outfit themselves with warp drives. The bow wave signatures I'm picking up are massive!"

"Put it on screen." Lisa stood from her chair and set down the PADD. Ensign Taylor punched a pair of buttons to transfer visual data to the command deck's main screen.

A green dot representing Waystation sat in the middle of the two-dimensional display, concentric circles two light years apart radiating outward like contour lines. Yellow dots were local star systems; a pair of light blue specks symbolized Explorer and Banshee with Cube #347 nowhere to be seen. At the very edge of the picture, out of range for normal long-range sensor sweeps, a pair of red question marks made a bee-line for the station.

Lisa's brows crunched together in puzzlement. "What does the computer identify it as?"

Ensign Taylor consulted her readout. "It's wavering between spatial anomaly and 'supersized Bird of Prey'. Hey," she protested as Lisa glanced at her, "I'm just reading what it says. I didn't write the program, someone in Astrometrics did."

"Well," began Lisa, "as I really don't think it is a 'supersized Bird of Prey', it must be a spatial anomaly. Not even the Borg build things that big, and I'm sure the vibe here would be quite a bit different if those were approaching Borg cubes." She hummed. "Speaking of Borg, maybe I'll pass the readings on to our resident drones and see what they make of it." Ensign Taylor nodded in rhetorical agreement.

"Computer, location of the Borg known as Captain," ordered Lisa.

"Captain is located in Dillon's Pioneer Depot."

"Beck to..." Lisa paused as she always did: Captain was a rank or position, not a name, "...Captain. Respond."

The drone's tenor voice sounded on a speaker, "What? I'm busy."

Lisa grumbled, "You and your crew have been mooching off my station long enough and I want some repayment. Astrometric sensors have picked up what our computer is identifying as a 'spatial anomaly' sporting an unusual warp drive, only it is too big to match anything in our database. Maybe the Borg with their vast collection of files might have an answer."

"We only retain a small percentage of the information we would have available if we were able to link with the Collective. We are accessing the sensor data now..." Captain's voice trailed off.

"Sir," yelped Ensign Taylor, "this console has gone loopy! Someone is running a series of scans through it, and it isn't me. The output is all numbers scrolling by so fast I can't make heads or tails of it." On the viewscreen, millisecond flashes of visual data appeared at strobe-light pace.

At Ops, Lieutenant K'toh, quarter Klingon and all attitude, swore fluently in a variety of languages. "Captain. The Borg have penetrated our computer systems deeply."

"Oh great, just what I need," muttered Lisa. Louder: "Beck to Captain, I did not give you free reign to muck around in our computer." The distinctive whine of a transporter announced a visitor. Lisa turned in time to see Captain materialize on her command deck. "And that is an illicit use of station transporters! How many times must I tell you Borg to use the turbolifts?" she scolded.

"Inefficient use of available resources," complained Captain quietly.

"And what's that you are holding?"

"Data crystal for 'Saga Six of Jumba the Wise Lizard: Jumba Meets Elvis, the Terror Demon.' Very difficult to find in the Delta Quadrant." The tone was...sulky. Captain palmed the crystal, hiding it somewhere on his person.

"Talk about inefficient use resources. You did /pay/ Dillon, didn't you?"

"Money is irrelevant."

Lisa sighed, "That's what I thought. He'll be after me for recompensation. Anyway, about our spatial anomaly? And I have several additional questions concerning intrusions into the computer."

Captain stared at Lisa, blue eye unblinking. "It is simple. The signatures belong to two They heavy tactical units. Even if Cube #347, Explorer, and Banshee could return before They arrived, the outcome would be the same. We are dead."

"Dead?" Lisa noticed the drone had switched from the singular to the plural.

"We will be terminated. If you are lucky, you will also join us in death. If you are unlucky, you will be absorbed into They. We, Borg, on the station can prevent this occurrence, but small beings such as yourself tend to object to assimilation..."

"Damn right we do," interjected Lisa.

"...therefore, you will die or become They. Cube #347 is returning. We have told Explorer and Banshee to do so as well. We will fail. We prepare for final oblivion." Captain paused. "Because of Starfleet, we cannot even link with the Collective and download our essence into the One." A regretful sigh. "I'd better start reading my novel, then. They will be here in fourteen hours."

Captain began to turn away. Lisa barked, "Wait just a minute, Captain Borg." Predictably, Captain's head whipped around to voice a protest; as Vorezze had confided to her, the drone appeared to absolutely despise 'Captain Borg.' "Where is all your 'Resistance is futile' jargon? There must be options beyond death, assimilation, or They, and I want a meeting to determine them."

"So, mighty scion of the Collective, what are we to do now?" asked Beck.

Captain frowned. He was becoming weary of this conference room and the need to discuss face-to-face events and tactics. The soldiers lining the walls and presence of phaser rifles did not help. "We have already told you the outcome: we will be terminated. We do not have the firepower nor the bodies to withstand assault by one heavy tactical unit, much less two. The Collective believed all heavies had been eradicated; it is unknown if these vessels are veterans of the war, or newly grown units."

"Would it matter?" asked Baxter from the split viewscreen. Both Explorer and Banshee captains were present via Borg carrier wave.

"No."

Silence. Delta was attempting to squeeze every ounce of speed out of Cube #347's drive, but there was an upper limit to transwarp conduit velocity. The wild goose chase the sub-collective had embarked upon had drawn the cube far from the station, not that an Exploratory-class had much of a chance. Simulations currently underway by weapons hierarchy were all returning negative endings, even under the most favorable beginning scenario.

Vorezze idly scratched one ear. Since the assimilation hierarchy had solidified its data link to Waystation and begun to riffle on-site files at will, Captain had not paid much attention to the Betazoid. As a tool he was of very little use at the moment. "What about a Trojan Horse? The

concept has worked against you Borg often enough."

"Trojan Horse?" Captain accessed the linguistic dictionary. "You refer to incidents of sneaking crews aboard Borg cubes. We have adapted to that Federation attack."

"But would it work against They?" Vorezze squinted at the motionless, vacantly staring drone. "Are you even listening to me?"

Weapons had shifted the focus of his simulation runs, now funneling in known data of They responses. Captain linked command and control and idling drone maintenance mental resources to weapon hierarchy. Massive parallel processing of several simultaneous runs brought forth possible answers within thirty minutes. The process would have been much easier for a normal sub-collective: the argument about the validity of including the chance of spontaneous formation of a spatial anomaly composed of cheese had been highly irrelevant.

Captain returned self-awareness to his body. No one was paying attention to him. The viewscreen showed two empty command chairs, behind which moved various bridge crew performing routine tasks. Marines lounged against the wall, rifles slung, conversing quietly about sexual encounters, alcohol, sexual encounters, target practice, sexual encounters, and bar brawls. Admiral Neumann, captain Beck, and lieutenant commander Morales sat in chairs and read PADDs. The last had his feet propped up on the table near a mug of gently steaming liquid.

"An 82.9% chance exists a Trojan Horse will work. We require a Section 31 construction runabout, a tri-cobalt device, and seven containers of oil, quarter liter size. We have already begun construction of an apparatus to mask life signs, but proper modifications to the aforementioned vessel will require twenty minutes."

"Oil?" asked Morales as he set down his PADD, regaining an upright posture.

"Oil is a generic term, denoting a flammable lubricant, often made from botanical products. We prefer something with the consistency of light syrup, but anything which spreads well will do."

"Oil?" repeated Morales. Captain ignored him.

Beck was quick with inevitable questions, "How many in this excursion?"

"Eight. Seven of engineering hierarchy, and one from command and control to serve as immediate consensus monitor." Random generation of designations returned seven "volunteers" from those drones aboard Waystation, who responded with various degrees of enthusiasm. A similar lottery for the eighth member returned...4 of 8, himself. "Drones are now chosen; I am among those included."

"No!" roared Neumann as he rose from his chair. "I will not have you traipsing around the quadrant in one of /my/ runabouts, not without someone to keep an eye on you. A dozen marines will accompany you." He crossed his arms in defiance.

Retorted Captain, "Unacceptable. Their presence will detract from our efficiency."

Beck stood up. "As much as I dislike the admiral, I must agree. Twelve marines. However, to keep watch on them, I propose sending, um, Morales and Russel." The named present stared at his commanding officer.

"Uh, sir?" began Morales.

Captain's words drowned the lieutenant commander's protest, "Unacceptable."

"No marines, no runabout. I will self-destruct or destroy everything warp capable near Waystation if I have to," countered Neumann. He gave a small grin of triumph.

Captain internally fumed as consensus was reached. "We accept."

The trip to meet the heavy tactical units stretched until Captain and the seven engineering



drones were in agreement that an unknown temporal anomaly was dilating time. Calypso, even after quick modifications to enhance transporters, remained a Federation construction runabout. Although the habitation area was expanded to transport work crews between base and site at shift change, twenty-two beings, eight of whom did not sit, crowded the small space.

Captain had explained several times, each repetition utilizing increasingly terse sentence structure, the task. They were to match speed with the heavy tactical units and draw in close, acting as if the vessel was a remote scout. They, especially the capital units, tended to ignore obviously harmless probes. Once a target had been chosen, six engineering and Captain (AND marines AND Morales AND Russel) would beam on board with the tri-cobalt device. Power cores were buried too deeply for direct transport, so a trek of indeterminate length would be required. One drone, 127 of 230, would remain on Calypso to control the runabout and its transporters.

127 of 230 currently piloted the vessel through the expedient manner of direct computer link to the ship systems. She also maintained a connection to the sensors, passing information to the distant sensor hierarchy on Cube #347 for analysis. The sub-collective had already determined the target unit, choosing the bulk which exhibited only one primary core signature to its compatriot's multiple weaker signatures. A former race shuttle driver, 127 of 230 expertly slipped Calypso into the combined warp bubble of the heavies. Neither unit reacted.

"We are here," announced Captain.

Twenty-one humanoid shapes solidified to a dim and humid environment dominated by shades of red and pink. The still air held a distinct animal smell, offset by a slight metallic tang reminiscent of blood. The Federation part of the contingent glanced uneasily at each other. An unnatural silence loomed ominous to those used to background whirrs and clatters present on even the most well maintained ship or station. Approximately a minute later, a large oblong object materialized nearby.

Morales watched as two drones, one at each end, picked up the tri-cobalt device as if it was nothing more than a heavy crate packed with books. He did not know which was more unsettling: the alien ambiance, the overt demonstration of strength by the Borg, or the fact no obvious communication had passed between the drones as to who was to carry the torpedo. The lieutenant commander decided to focus on his surroundings.

One of the marines prodded at the wall with the muzzle of his rifle. It came back coated in mucus. "Gross! Who did the decorating?"

Two unburdened Borg set off down the corridor, leading the way. They paused after a few steps when it became apparent the marines were lollygagging. Captain replied, "Move. We must get the weapon to the core before this unit realizes we are inside it. If it floods the area with fluids or removes oxygen from the corridor, you will not survive. Similar consequences await if it dispatches assault units to attack us."

The marine poked the wall again. "It's like snot! I wonder why it looks like that. The minds that built this ship must have been really odd."

"For the last time," began Captain, irritation in his tone obvious to Morales, "this unit was grown. It is alive. There is no biological equivalent on your species' body as to this structure, but you might understand we are like bacteria oozing down a capillary. The host body has a myriad of defenses it can and will use to eradicate us."

"Alive?"

"Yes."

The man gulped, imagining a tiny invader jabbing holes through his own blood vessels. It was not a pleasant thought, the picture of a small being taking a stroll through his large intestines.

The order of march was quickly determined. Two drones led the way, followed by half of the marines. Next came Captain, another Borg, and the torpedo with its porters. Morales and Russel crowded together in a knot, followed by the final drone. The rest of the soldiers brought up the rear of the pack.

Through living corridors the small army slunk. Occasional openings split away, winding towards unknown destinations, all lit with the same sourceless bioluminescent light. Once movement was seen in the far distance, but the leading Borg paid it no attention. The party paused in front of an aperture notably larger than any passed thus far.

"We must pass through this chamber. The engine core is just beyond," said Captain. Unassimilated nodded, gripping their weapons tighter.

Russel stopped; Morales bumped into him. A traffic jam ensued. "My God," whispered the security officer, "I didn't know anything could be so big."

83 of 230, the final Borg in the train, swiveled his head, targeting laser catching Russel square in the forehead. "Impressive for organic technology. However, the Borg routinely build larger. Keep moving."

Flesh arched up into darkness and spread out to encompass a huge volume. As with the rest of the living dreadnought, the air was still and warm. Unlike the corridors, audible sound - throbbing, hissing, thumping - hovered in the background, filling the space with a muted roar. Honeycomb structures rose from the floor, dividing the chamber into a series of corridors. Within each backlit cell, a humanoid form could be faintly discerned beneath an otherwise opaque film.

The Borg shuffled to a stop. Their eyes peered sightlessly to the near distance, taking in sights unseen by mere Federation peons. The marines muttered uneasily, looking to Morales or Russel for leadership. Hands tightened on rifle stocks. One cursed as the /thing/ in a nearby cell fluidly moved.

"F\*\*\*!" exclaimed private Walter as he aimed at the creature.

"NO!" barked Captain, moving with speed Morales did not believe possible for a drone. Pincher of prosthetic limb clamped onto rifle barrel, crunching it into uselessness. The moment of communal reflection was broken. "Do that, human, and we will all be terminated." Voice turned harder, directed no longer at the Federation personnel, "And we have consensus, agreement. The device must be placed near the core, not here."

"What is here?" asked Morales.

A look of clear distaste passed over the normally impassive Borg facade. "Biostasis cells for assault units. Here lies your doom, human, should we not succeed. They cannot assimilate Borg into Chaos; you would not be so lucky."

The biostasis chamber was passed, each step torture for Captain. Blocs from the sub-collective clamored for the tri-cobalt device to be set, for They assault units to be destroyed; root commands screamed along Captain's synapses to do likewise. Enough control remained in the form of sane voices and catalogued weaknesses of heavy tactical units to forge ahead despite mounting collective will. Detonation of the weapon anywhere but the central core would only cause localized, nonfatal harm. The assault unit cells would be destroyed, but it was likely the creature had several additional chambers also stocked floor to ceiling with They.

{Radiation levels are rising. The core is directly ahead,} reported 8 of 240. She broadcast the readings. {The system is very dirty; the Starfleeters will require decontamination.}

Captain bade the two at point to proceed. Aloud: "Increase in radiation. Depending on species, nonBorg will absorb a lethal dose within three to seven hours."

The Waystation officer in charge of the Federation element opened his eyes wide. "Radiation?" Morales squeaked. "Nothing was said about me spending my last few hours puking while watching my hair fall out."

"Yah," chimed Russel, "it's not like you have to worry. You don't eat and you're already bald."

"The radiation is a minor annoyance to Borg. Our systems are already compensating. Success will see us beamed away with sufficient time to decontaminate you, or consumed in the resultant explosion. Either way, radiation from the core will not be your death."

"Oh, joy," muttered an eavesdropping marine.

8 of 240 stepped through an opening at the end of the short corridor. {We are here,} she said, gaze turning upward in concert with 23 of 240 to provide the sub-collective a view of the engine core. Captain urged the Starfleeters to continue.

The chamber was a compact dome overarching an efficiently manufactured power core. It sat on a fleshy pedestal, tendons reaching from wall to innervate and steady the two meter high structure. Nerve clusters infiltrated the form, and huge elastic conduits of an organic nature swept away to merge with the floor. The engines themselves were long nacelles located as segments hundreds of meters below the epidermal surface near shield matrix bone spurs, but the energy to move the massive unit came from this relatively small machine. They were many distasteful things, but They were also masters of blending inorganic with living tissue until it was nearly impossible to discern built from organic.

Creatures, some as small as a hand, but none more than knee high, scurried around the room intent on unknown duties. Shapes ranged from miniature bipeds to something that looked like a millipede with three pairs of feathered wings. Blind eyes focused solely on the task at hand, which often included long moments of motionlessness followed by energetic bursts of speed. They ignored the intrusion, devolved brains incapable of registering novel situations for which They were not specifically programmed.

The engineering hierarchy took over, carefully setting the tri-cobalt device near the core. The symbionts detoured around (or over in a few cases) the new obstacle, as focused as a well-integrated Borg drone - outside stimuli were not relevant, were not a part of the immediately perceived universe. 101 of 310 swiftly removed the casing covering the guts of the torpedo using a tool on his artificial limb.

"We are arming the device. Once ready, we will have eight minutes to reach an area transparent to transporter lock," remarked Captain. He eyed a marine with upraised foot. "Do not step on the symbionts."

Several minutes passed with the six engineering drones clustered around the tri-cobalt device. In the process the sub-collective not only recorded additional information about the new family of Federation weapons, but began to improve upon the concept by mentally inserting several gizmos assimilated from three other martial species. Morales, Russel, and the marines nervously swept eyes from corridor opening to drones to symbionts. Captain observed reactions as the occasional symbiont ran over toes in its haste to go from point A to point B. Finally 23 of 240 reported completion of the task with timer set.

"We are ready to leave," Captain stated as he shifted a leg to move. Additional

commentary died in his throat as foot came down to a wet pop. A puddle of red oozed from beneath his sole, soaking into the resilient floor. The previously hyperactive symbionts stood or sat immobile, eyes and other senses peering at the intruders. As one, throats lifted in an undulating cry, those without voice mimicking the positions of others able to vocalize alarm. "Oops."

{Oops?} came the distant mental voice of Second. {That is all you can say for yourself?}  
Returned Captain, {Shut up.}

Marines began to fire randomly at the wailing creatures. The result was not unlike an amusement shooting gallery. Symbionts either messily exploded or vaporized, depending on phaser rifle setting. The six engineering hierarchy drones had already left the scene at the best speed a heavily cybernized being could attain. "If you value your small existence, I suggest you run. They will focus on us and not the torpedo." Captain knew his personal life was not important within the greater Collective, but little would be gained by dying now that the weapon was set.

Morales quickly caught up with Captain as the biostasis chamber was entered. Russel and the marines lagged behind, taking potshots at anything which moved. Unfortunately, many of the cells showed writhing figures in the final stages of waking. Covers punctured by phaser fire drained a viscous yellow liquid. Morales puffed. "I didn't realize Borg could actually move faster than a walk."

"My years in the Collective has added considerable mass to my frame in the form of implants and prosthesis; I currently weigh twice as much as you. You try to move such bulk quickly. Second, situations rarely necessitate haste because another drone is usually in a position to intercept wayward beings. Lastly, at the moment I am well motivated." He had consciously stopped breathing other than to answer Morales' ill-timed question - why did humans ask such irrelevancies during moments of stress? Oxygen to muscles was directly supplied via the same mechanism which allowed a drone to function in a vacuum. In front, 15 of 42 passed into the main artery and caught sight of shapes massing down the hallway. {Oil!} Captain barked.

In the corridor, the six drones deftly removed the small canisters of flammable liquid they had secreted on their person. Captain joined the line, removing his own container from the thigh storage area of his right leg. As one, three vessels went arcing towards the dimly seen assault units and the other four into the biostasis chamber. The containers shattered, allowing liquid to spray all over the place.

Captain pointed at a pair of loitering marines, "You and you. Phasers on low and fire at the oil." Lances of light streaked out; milliseconds later flames plumed. A keening shriek split the air. "We have three minutes until the tri-cobalt device detonates. Two minutes are required to reach a beam out location."

The party trundled off at best speed.

Morales shouted over the never-ending screech, hands held close to ears, "What did you do?"

"Heartburn, emphasis on burn. It is too moist in here for anything to actually scorch, but this unit appears to be very unhappy about the incident of fire inside it."

"I would be too! And what is this about three minutes? We should have another five!"

"We lied. The timer was set for six minutes. Adequate time to escape, had this drone not stepped on the symbiont by accident."

Morales frowned, then returned to the task of jogging. Beam out to Calypso occurred with thirty seconds to spare.

The closest Terran analogue of a They heavy tactical unit was a wrinkled sea cucumber. The target unit now resembled a latex glove inflated to the bursting point, fingers pointing in every direction from taunt palm. Its coloration was a very pale yellow verging on clear which abruptly became ash gray as body deflated like a pricked balloon. The ailing unit made an uncontrolled deceleration from warp, emerging to the Einstein universe as galactic baco-bits. The question of termination was academic.

Calypso threw her engines into overdrive, escaping the immediate vicinity of the unreactive surviving unit. A showdown at Waystation would occur soon enough.

\* \* \* \* \*

Atom is dead, cried Nova, and I will avenge him. Locking onto offending vessel...

Interrupted They, No. We will proceed to our objective. The shuttle must return to the station.

Anger drained from Nova as They activated proper biochemical pathways. They did not often alter the emotions of individual units - one's feelings were one's own - but sensibility towards the task had to be maintained. Heated rage for loss of a gene-mate of ten millennium was replaced with icy calm. Nova mulled the situation as he was drawn deeper into They and the seductive whispers of Chaos.

The loss is a minor one, acknowledged Nova. Atom will be remembered for his accomplishments, but his death will also provide advancements for Chaos. All future heavy tactical units will be of the type with multiple small cores throughout the body. I am preparing myself against future invasion by reprogramming symbionts to react to nonThey presence, sealing my cores, and secreting transporter scattering mucus around vital areas. Metabolic efficiency decrease is 0.24%.

The station will be easily overwhelmed, said They.

Yes, replied Nova. Order will become Chaos; the universal law of Entropy demands it.

\* \* \* \* \*

The They heavy tactical unit exited warp smoothly, its bulk piloted with a precision only a mind intimately meshed with body could manage. Over six times the length of Waystation's longest axis, it literally cast a shadow over the Federation structure. The scaffolding originally meant for Cube #347 shattered on the unit's epidermis as it heedlessly plowed closer, metal spars tumbling like a game of zero-gee pick-up sticks. It slowed to a halt less than two kilometers from the station proper, a living wall ominously looming.

Speakers throughout Waystation came to life as a communique was intercepted. Squealing moans ratcheted up and down the auditory spectrum - an intergalactic cetacean. A sexy soprano, courtesy of Borg translation algorithms, overlaid background groaning. The words of the inappropriate voice did not match with disgorged harsh words.

"Order," cooed the unit, "I am Nova. You will submit to They, be one with Chaos, join with Entropy, or I will destroy these drones. You will also surrender unassimilated sentients unto myself." The background liturgy suddenly changed from single whale to chattering pod on caffeine and LSD; a new voice, electronic wails emanating from a deranged choir, replaced Miss Sex Kitten. "They demand it! You will submit to They and contribute to our individuality!"

The answer boomed out in Borg multivoice stereo: "We are Borg. We will not comply. /You/ will lower shields and prepare to be boarded and stripped of biological technologies. Resistance is futile."

On Waystation's command deck, Morales listened to the exchange with head cocked at an angle. "Well, as far as mottoes and ultimatums go, the Borg are ahead in the style category. I give them a ten and They three. However, we are still going to get our butts kicked."

Lisa glanced over at Captain, who was staring sightlessly at a point several centimeters in front of his nose. An utterance came from him, issued with mechanical precision sans the drone's usual conversational demeanor, "Initialize the security system before the unit begins a deep scan. And before it starts to transport assault units to the station. Our words will not stall They much longer."

Lisa nodded at Porter, who was manning the engineering station. He punched a series of buttons and said, "If we blow a fuse...." The rest of the sentence was left unfinished.

Lights immediately dimmed, as if someone had plugged in a very large hairdryer or Browning had turned on her pizza oven. Environmental support - hundreds of years removed from archaic fan ventilation - whined alarmingly before compensating. At every doorway, every juncture, every Jefferies tube access point, internal security fields leapt into life. Invisible walls of pain sprouted every ten meters in corridors, and numerous barriers bisected Starfleet Square Mall. Hundreds of newly replicated emitters created force fields where none had been designed.

Powering the jury-rigged system was not only Waystation's own core, but the cores of three tugs buried as deeply as possible within the two saucer sections. They had been stripped from the vessels against Starfleet engineers' better judgment and connected to the local grid. Everyone had been employed in the desperate bid for survival: if one could hold a spanner, solder a wire, or wave a tricorder while spouting technobabble, one was drafted.

The end result was the densest collection of security fields ever attempted by Federation hardware. Not only was the heavy tactical unit forced to beam an assault force into the exterior docking rings (all left open to vacuum), but modulation tweaking by Borg produced barriers opaque to scanning. The primary flaw with the gesture was an unknown concerning They's intent. Assuming units attempted to take Waystation, They would be forced to disassemble shield emitters every few meters. However, if They planned on simple destruction, the heavy tactical unit would roll over Waystation with no more notice than a driver would take of a bug impacting the windshield.

On the down side, from the nonassimilated point of view, only Borg could pass through the myriad of security fields with ease. All personnel were concentrated in the bowels of the saucer sections, with a double handful on the command deck ready to evacuate at a moment's notice. Unescorted drones had the run of the station, much to the annoyance of Admiral Neumann, Lieutenant Russel, and anyone else remotely security conscious.

"Everything appears to be stable," noted Russel. "Now what?"

Eyes turned toward Captain. The drone responded, "We wait; and we attempt come to a consensus on a plan which doesn't include termination."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kee, Ra, Tu, Yo, and Xi fell to the deckplates, bodies twitching under the onslaught of electrical current. Od, Wy, and Klo wailed with telepathic pain from terminal cranial disrupter burns; Nova euthanized the trio, allowing them to join hundreds of other assault units already

one with Entropy.

Order was defying They, was not behaving as expected. Of course, during the years of war with the Borg, They had primarily fought naval battles, assaults occurring with purpose of killing, not securing property. Still, They had not fully calculated the potential for Borg to adapt to and use guerrilla tactics.

Every meter gained towards the objective of the station's central engineering and computer cores was a meter brimming with danger. Booby traps both high-tech and simple, ambush points, and physical barriers took their toll on assault units; and that short list did not include the damn (Nova rarely swore) force fields. Force field after force field after force field required dismantlement. No easy way into the station existed as even "Jefferies tubes" were lined with pitfalls meant to kill units.

Nova's target was the engineering area. From the most basic scans available to the unit - everything deeper than three levels was a blur - it could be seen that the security fields were a huge drain on the power cores energizing it. The destruction of one core should disrupt the entire system; three stripped vessels floating nearby attested to potential instability of the overall grid via adaptation of parts not designed for the purpose employed.

Qua, Lek, and Pleep stumbled around a corner and into a dozen waiting drones. The resulting carnage ended as Lek's telepathic thread of consciousness was extinguished following a vicious blow to the head. Nova grumbled as he completed preparation of another hundred assault units, transporting them to secured portions of Waystation. Frustration!

I will kill every drone personally, swore Nova. I retain sufficient assault units to perform my mission.

As long as the station remains intact, reminded They. Our latest plan requires us to become "friends" with the Federation, and this purpose would be best served with a gift.

Groused Nova, I understand as I assisted in forming the plan. However, all drones here will be destroyed. Order killed Atom. It is my privilege.

They does not disagree, responded They.

Nova noticed as the small Borg cube arrived in the system, dropping from a transwarp conduit. While the drones on board had stalled long enough to allow reinforcements to arrive, the action would be futile. Nova was slowly gaining ground to the objective through sheer force of overwhelming numbers.

\* \* \* \* \*

{Cappy! Cappy Borgie! Lime jello jello jello! Cappy Borgieeeee!}

{Quiet, Dean. Desist! This sub-collective has important actions to contemplate.}

{Cappeeeeeeeeeeeee! Borgieeeeeeeee! Carve out a pumpkin and rely on your destiny!}

Captain suppressed the urge to scream. As was, he had been forced to leave the Waystation command deck and seek a semi-quiet corner of Main Engineering near the core. Sensors had pulled a real boner; unlike another cube long destroyed, the sub-collective of Cube #347 was not connected to the Collective and had been able to adapt to Dean's...mental state.

{Cappy Cappy Cappy Cappy! I love Cappy Borgie! Throw that pumpkin at the tree. Watermelon jello targs!}

Some impulse had passed through Sensors' brain, one which prompted her to first smuggle Wilcox to the cube before it left Waystation, then to assimilate the certifiably brain-dead crewman. He had undergone the procedure once before, to the detriment of the sub-

collective involved. Dean (Captain refused to authorize a designation to be attached to his signature) not only displayed erratic impulses and mental ambiguities solely understood by Sensors, he was utterly uncontrollable. Captain could not turn the human off!

{I love Cappy!} sang Dean. {I love Cappy! Cappy loves me! We are a happy family!}

{I do not...WE do not. Love is irrelevant. And don't call me Cappy!} Captain shoved Dean to the back of his awareness so that he could continue his conversation with Second. {So, your pet human wishes to return to Waystation?}

Second sent assent; unlike Captain, Dean had not latched onto him. {She says she has had an interesting time, but she'd like to go back to the station.} Second replayed the long discussion which had occurred between himself and Tina. Parts of it had been obviously removed, much to Captain's curiosity.

{What about those blank periods?}

Second cagily replied, {Nothing relevant.}

{Fine,} said Captain, {we will allow her to return. Dean! Stop that! No...no, no, no, no! Do not play with the warp engines! Warp while in a conduit is a Bad Thing. You will go Boom, along with most of the sub-collective.}

{Cappy go Boom?}

{No, but Dean will go Boom. So will Sensors.}

{Dean don't want Borgie Buggy to go Boom.}

Sensors interjected, {Sensors doesn't want Sensors to go [Boom], neither.}

{Sensors, this is your fault. Return to your duties,} ordered Captain. Sensors complied, acutely aware of her disgraced status. Captain kept finding himself resorting to baby-talk while speaking with Wilcox. He opened half an eye as a shape paused in front of him, then closed it again in dismissal as it proved to be a marine.

{We arrive in fifteen minutes,} called Weapons, {and my hierarchy is prepared.}

Weapons had been keeping an eye on the internal chronometer with uncharacteristic persistence, reporting status of readiness to Blow Things Up. Captain knew Weapons didn't care if the target was assault units, the heavy tactical unit, or Federation: something was to be vaporized (in T-minus fifteen minutes).

{I know, Weapons,} answered Captain.

{Engineering hierarchy is performing everything wrong. If weapons hierarchy was on Waystation, They would be destroyed by now.}

{Says you,} argued 81 of 240 from Waystation. She had acquired acid damage to her leg during They's last push. {These boogers keep coming, no matter how many are terminated. One could stuff an entire Cargo-class cube in that heavy tactical unit with room to spare; and Cargo-classes can be outfitted to transport half a million drones in stasis! It is unknown how many more assault units the They vessel can support.}

{Irrelevant,} snorted Weapons.

81 of 240 retorted, {You are delusional! I, for one, cannot wait until the cube is within transporter range. I wish to leave Waystation and return to tasks for which I have been specifically modified, such as scanning stress fractures along the sub-hull nacelles or assisting with calibration of the static warp shell to maintain high propulsion efficiency.}

Weapons sneered, {Engineering wuss. Seven minutes to Waystation.}

{Call my hierarchy a wuss again, Weapons, and you will regret it,} interrupted Delta. {I concur with the consensus to remove engineering drones from battle and replacing them with more appropriate units...such as yourself, maybe?}



Captain surfed the wave of internal dissent, smoothing things as warranted while trying to avoid the mental babbling of "Cappy." While Second retained propulsion systems, other duties befitting the consensus monitor and facilitator had been returned. In spades. A mental dip into the processes originating from those drones aboard Banshee and Explorer...

\*\*\*

"Come out of there Borg, I want to talk to you," yelled J'hana with bat'leth partially hidden behind her back. "I won't hurt you...the captain just wants to know what is going on at Waystation." She was standing at the parameter of the force field separating the Explorer drone contingent from the rest of the ship. Several security officers stood nonchalantly at a greater distance, phaser rifles openly displayed.

"We don't believe that assessment. We will stay here where our chance of dismemberment is low," responded 206 of 300, the perception of whom Captain was currently tapping. Visual slipped sideways to receive signals of agreement from the others on the battle bridge; nonverbal assent accompanied species specific gestures.

"I told you to come out!" screamed J'hana. "Out! I. Will. Not. Hurt. You! My schnarzing wimp of a captain forbids it."

"No."

Meanwhile on Banshee, a similar display was playing out, minus screaming Andorian. One might think the lack of a blood-thirsty being would be a good thing, but if anything, it was worse. Banshee had...Counselor Emily Stokes, their secret weapon.

"Hell! Hell and damnation I tell you! The Book of the Lord - updated and unabridged version year 2465 - speaketh of the sins of dependence upon machinery, upon technologies! One must be able to do without, be like our ancestors, should we be forced to live like savages and have to microwave our dinners or type on a computer. Repent, repent and come to the Lord, who will let you go with only the slightest of smiting. The all-powerful Lord is all-forgiving." The counselor was practically foaming at the mouth. As she paused, a nearby ensign whispered something to her. She straightened up. "Oh yes, the Lord may dismiss with the boils and pestilence if you tell us how the battle goes at Waystation. Very, very forgiving, is God."

All of the drones on Banshee were cowering next to the shield generator, praying as much as it was relevant for a Borg to pray, that it would not fail. 101 of 230 (whom Captain was "riding") watched as 42 of 42 whispered in defiance, "Religion is irrelevant." The human's hearing was obviously much better than the racial norm.

"Irrelevant? Irrelevant?! For that, Borg, I damn thee to the deepest circle of HELL!"

\*\*\*

{Cappy Borgie! Cappy Borgie! Guess what?}

Captain was bounced out of the datastreams by Dean. {What?} he asked warily while investigating the location and tasks of Doctor and Assimilation aboard Cube #347.

{Dean jello jello jello.}

{I...do not understand. I do not want to understand.} Doctor and Assimilation were found, neither engaged with an assignment of vital importance. Captain pinged for their attention.

{I didn't do anything. You can't blame Dean on me,} hurriedly replied Doctor, always quick to redirect the blame associated with accidentally assimilated pets.

{No. Both of you, listen up. Restrain Dean. I don't care who does what in what order, but I do not want to hear 'Cappy Borgie' anymore! Deassimilate him, terminate him, I have no preference.}

{Cappy Borgieeeee!} happily echoed Wilcox, oblivious to his possible doom.

{Cube #347 arrives,} uttered Weapons, {and my hierarchy will destroy They!}

Captain watched with a doubled internal vision, one from the perspective of Waystation's grid and the other riding the coattails of the sensor hierarchy processing cube sensor input. Either way, the cavalry was not very impressive.

Browning was tired of sitting in the little anteroom off engineering, forced to remain passive under glares from Ih'mad and Baughb, whom had also been stuck in the storage closet with her. She knew the Andorians were plotting against her business enterprise as per the calculating looks she was receiving. The Borg which occasionally clanked by outside gave her the creeps. Even Dillon was elsewhere, lending his help in some matter while the restaurateurs were deemed useless baggage. Worst of all, the replicators were only producing roasted turkey and Swiss on rye or lukewarm tomato soup. However, there were ways to work around /that/ particular problem.

"Well," Browning announced to no one in particular, "I'm feeling a mite peckish. How about some pizza?" She plugged in the machine she had insisted accompany her into engineering exile on pain of temper tantrum.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nova was preparing one thousand hibernation cells to wake their assault unit occupants when he noticed the brownout. While most of the Borg-assimilated station's system of security fields remained steady, flickers in the overall grid due to an unknown energy drain had leeched power from one section. Nova hurriedly performed a superficial scan, noting the presence of life signs gathered in an open volume, presumably a storage area. Risking a gamble, Nova snatched fifty half-awake assault units from their cells and transported them to Waystation's depths.

Although Order was rapid to diagnose the problem and mend it, reinitializing the transporter and scan block surrounding the internal cargo hold, twenty-two units successfully arrived.

\* \* \* \* \*

Captain's eye flew open as the lights flickered; engineering drones not engaged fighting. They units yelped of power drains and began internal traces to determine what was causing the problem. The leak was tracked to the central engineering area of Waystation's top saucer, specifically Storage Closet 16B. An enraged bellow floated out to Captain's position as a drone physically sighted the device causing the brownout and pulled its plug. Browning was not a happy woman as she pounded on 8 of 240's armored back while wailing of tomato soup.

"We have an incident in one of the cargo holds, sir," called a voice from the other side of Main Engineering. Waystation's command staff had evidently evacuated into the depths of their station.

"Have some marines started a fight over their confinement?" asked Beck's tired voice. Captain moved himself closer to the speakers, eavesdropping even as he completed coordinating the massive job of reciprocal transportation which was about to begin.

"No sir. Twenty-two...things...have beamed aboard and the marines are shooting at them."

"Sh\*\*," swore Captain aloud as he personally scrambled along Waystation's compromised computer system, examining output from internal sensors in the indicated hold area. They assault units. {Transporting commencing /now/,} sent Captain into the intranets, ignoring protests of individual drones who were not prepared. "We do not apologize about events which are about to transpire. The fiction must be maintained," said Captain to the clueless faces peering at him.

A complex series of commands flooded Cube #347's dataspace, triggering mass transporter beamings. Most of the engineering hierarchy aboard Waystation was to leave and be replaced milliseconds later by weapons drones; emergency action diverted fifty bodies to the compromised bay along with an equal number of assimilation hierarchy. Concurrently, Tina was to be sent to a secured section of the upper saucer of Waystation. Or, at least, that was the plan. Unfortunately, Dean took that particular moment to think happy thoughts.

The reciprocal transportation occurred smoothly, drones materializing in the appropriate places. Dean's reflection upon orange dogs redirected Tina's signature to the They occupied hold, now a no-man's land of drones, assault units, and phaser fire. Dean, on the other hand, accidentally initiated a lock upon himself. He disappeared from the restraints Doctor had looped around ankles, waist, and wrist in preparation for deassimilation.

{Cappy!} called Dean. {Cappy Borgie!} Pause. {Oh, yuckies. Slimy yucks. Jello jello jello.} Wilcox's mental signature now originated from inside the They heavy tactical unit.

"Beck to anyone: what is going on in that bay?" Screams, human screams, sounded over the intercom. Captain Beck focused on Captain, "What did you mean by 'The fiction must be maintained'?"

Captain locked Waystation's transporters on himself; in the distance, he could hear Porter chewing out Browning about her pizza oven. "Sorry, we are experiencing minor technical difficulties. This drone is required elsewhere." He sent himself to the comparatively lesser danger represented by the clash between They units and the Weapons-led detachment of tactical drones.

Captain materialized at the edge of the ruckus. Half of the They assault units were terminated, overwhelmed by numerical superiority. The other half were in a fighting retreat towards an exit, one unit already at the door attempting to remove the forcefield. A query as to the location of Tina was rewarded with a visual from a drone in the front line: an unconscious human female slung over the shoulder of a (literally) faceless unit.

The human(oid) screams Beck had heard over the intercom in Main Engineering had been the cries of astonished rage as fifty drones from the assimilation hierarchy had attacked marines. Of the eighty-five soldiers bivouacked in the cargo bay, all now instinctively reached for a Collective which was not present. If the Starfleet command officers thought hijacking a pair of ships was bad, they were going to go through the hull over the impromptu assimilations. Unfortunately, it had been necessary to maintain the fiction for They that the Borg were in firm control.

Captain heaved a long sigh as he watched the new drones in their post-assimilation fugue state stare sightlessly at each other, the floor, the wall. Three They assault units, with Tina, had successfully escaped, leaving him with this mess. The last thing the sub-collective needed, or wanted, was eighty-five bodies to process, to attempt to keep separate from the corrupting influence of assimilation imperfection. A consensus cascade was run. Outcome? Deassimilation.

{Doctor, Assimilation, assign a duty roster and beam over nanoprobe denaturing agent. Weapons, continue to stall the assault force as long as possible. Delta, We demand a link with

the Collective, and We demand it now.} Yes, this was indeed a mess.

{Cappy! Cappy Borgie! Yucky place.}

Captain concentrated, delicately lifting a visual from Dean's damaged brain. Sensors added her confirmation. The heavy tactical unit seemed not to have noticed the intrusion.

{Dean...just don't think about anything. We will terminate you when we get the chance - the universe will be a more efficient place without your presence. Remember, don't think. Comply.}

{Jello jello jello jello jello!}

\* \* \* \* \*

Nee was proud. She had absorbed the human into They. It (Nee was fuzzy on the concept of gender, she being "she" a matter of genetic convenience as her assault type was easiest to propagate as female) had materialized in the middle of the battle, prompting They to change tactics as a new opportunity had been seen. Nee had sunk her nails, organic hypodermic needles, into the target's soft flesh and triggered release of They virus from special glands in her fingers. The human had subsequently drifted into post-absorption stupor, requiring Nee to carry it on her shoulder, which had severely hampered her ability to fight.

They virus was similar in many respects and function to Borg nanoprobes, much to the chagrin of each. In part because of the semblance, neither could assimilate/absorb the other's drones/units, leading to skirmishes where the objective was to kill the other. On unabsorbed targets, the pervasive virus swiftly rode the bloodstream to the brain, where it stimulated an often rudimentary or atrophied telepathic center to reach for the nearest They unit. At the same time, insertion of genetic code - the assault virii carried a diversity - into cells produced secretion of a hypnotic calming agent which not only sapped a potentially struggling being of the will to resist, but opened the target's mind to the budding link with They.

Newly absorbed species were rarely good candidates for immediate submersion into the Chaos of They. Often several generations of selected breeding and genetic manipulation was required before a species could be fully integrated into They as a true individual. Initial linkages were very tenuous connections consisting of hypnotic secretions and telepathy tuned to They frequencies. Eons of experience had perfected They's pacification of a sentient through biofeedback methods which relied on the target to trick him/her/itself into believing it had no recourse but to submit. However, unless individuals were suitably modified through species-specific retrovirus engineering, there was danger a strong-willed mind could shake off They's influence. Those few races without any telepathic sense were designated as biologically inferior and promptly exterminated such that a successor could evolve in its place.

Nova directed Nee, Hru, and Tum along a secured passage, using additional units to block the drones that were attempting to follow. Order retreated as it realized its foray was futile. Bloody stalemate re-established, They began to delicately probe into the captive human's mind.

Who are you? What are your duties? interrogated They.

The dreamy, nearly incoherent answer came from a mind unaware of its new link to They and Chaos. Yeoman Tina Jones, Starfleet liaison to incoming ships at Waystation.

Why were you transported with Order drones? You are not an assimilated unit.

Tina's mind was dazedly wandering. It did not reply immediately, instead posing a query of its own. Who are you?

They. You are now of They. Why were you transported with Order drones?

Order?

Borg. Why were you transported with Order drones?

I asked to return, but I wasn't supposed to go there, responded Tina. A barrage of impressions, mental babbling, welled up from visual, memory, and cognitive centers. They seized upon the information, swiftly deciphering it.

Order had tricked us! raged They. Tina shrunk back from the exclamation; still slung over Nee's shoulder, she whimpered despite her unconscious state. Somewhere, a dozen sensitive symbionts were struck dead with hemorrhages by a strategy-bred cerebrate's emotive outpouring. Order has bluffed us! Lured us!

Tina quailed, But...but all those soldiers! I know some of them! Second didn't say anything about assimilation. What about Captain Beck? My friends?

Order is as order does, reminded They to the increasingly panicked human. Order assimilates, that is its nature. They spread the final oblivion of Entropy through introduction of Chaos, that is They nature.

No...no...it can't be...

They left Tina to her commiseration, unable to do much other than offer comfort. Although she was low in the hierarchy of Starfleet and could provide little tactical knowledge, she would make excellent genetic rootstock to begin domestication of humans. The easiest course of action would be to recast them as a symbiont, although potential existed (maybe) as a new cerebrate type; their species physiology, without extensive manipulation, was not suited for the rigors of assault or vacuum work. Part of They was already studying the problem. Whatever the outcome, the final path would eventually allow humans to experience true individuality as a part of They.

They noted, These Borg are not even linked with Order.

Affirmative, said They, the Borg are alone.

The Collective does not know of our presence, insinuated They.

They mused, The display of assimilation by these Borg means the sub-collective realizes their bluff has been called. It is unlikely unassimilated sentients now exist on the station, nor on the two Starfleet vessels, assuming a drone presence there. The Borg are contained.

Continued They, following They's train of thought, We can proceed at a slow pace. No reinforcements will arrive and we can "rescue" this station from Order. Psyche profiles of the Federation indicates our actions will be regarded as heroic. Our toehold in the quadrant is assured.

We agree, declared They.

But I may still exterminate these Borg drone by drone? queried Nova, worry peaking as his revenge appeared to be taken away.

You may, affirmed They.

Nova breathed a mental sigh of relief, purples of stress spiraling over his exterior epidermis calming to a neutral tan. As he began to finalize preparations for the next wave of assault units, he noticed a physiological anomaly at nerve cluster alpha-three. The twinge of pain, mere annoyance, was repeated.

Heavy tactical units were blind to their insides: symbionts and other free-roving units served as mobile eyes and ears. Cameras were the providence of Order. Unfortunately, internal units were both more and less flexible than mechanical sensors, and the current situation showed the limitation as something had to be directed to the area of pain.

A symbiont pattered down a corridor once part of a respiratory system long altered to serve other purposes. Nova nudged the unit's simple mind, allowing it to move at its own pace.

He saw, smelled, heard, felt what the unit sensed as he voyaged within his own body. Whereas the symbiont lived in the now, belief of individuality restricted to ME, Nova was cataloguing himself, trying to ascertain the cause of the minor damage.

The symbiont halted, focusing on a being not-They. It sucked in breath to call an alarm as programmed, but Nova stopped the impulse, urging the unit to advance for a closer look. The intruder was obviously Borg, unprocessed beyond recent nanoprobe injection and likely an ex-Waystation crewman. The garments it wore were unlike those of Tina, but military dress was proven to follow many codes, especially when civilians were integrated into the overall hierarchy. As to its current actions, it was systematically severing the pained nerve cluster fiber by fiber.

Nova was uncertain. How did this Borg arrive? What was its purpose? Was its presence and behavior an indication of cognitive breakdown on the part of the controlling sub-collective due to severance of link with the Collective? Nova sent the symbiont closer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dean was happy. This strange place was odd and gooey, but he had found something fun to do. The white fibers sounded like guitar strings when he plucked them and broke with a satisfying "twang" noise. A small voice at the far reaches of his damaged brain - Wilcox before a fifteen meter header - was aghast at this second assimilation, but it was easily ignored by all the bright and fluffy things of the world.

"Jello," mumbled Dean as another string split. "Does it glow, will it shine, will it leave a trail of slime?"

Movement out of the corner of his eye caught Dean's attention. He turned his head towards it, seeing a small person with oversized head, floppy elephant ears, and huge eyes. If Wilcox had possessed the appropriate IQ, the term "bipedal Chihuahua" might have crossed his mind. Unfortunately, Dean was not that smart. The symbiont looked like...

"Puppy!"

Explorer had a complete compliment of pets. They all tended to run and hide if Nurse Holly brought her husband around during his daily walk.

Nanoprobes are versatile quasi-machines. The multiple varieties are capable of many things if programmed correctly, able to adapt and function in a wide range of environments. Unknown to any of Cube #347, the nanites had met their match in Wilcox as they tried to alter very damaged mental pathways to fit a standard Borg profile. In response, the nanoprobes which circulated in Dean's blood had changed themselves, and now were highly divergent compared to the normal nanoprobe.

"Puppy puppy jello puppy!" coaxed Dean at the top of his voice.

The symbiont crept closer, huge eyes riveted on Dean. It entered grabbing distance.

"Gotcha Puppy!" crowed Dean. He concentrated, feeling for that weird place in his mind where Cappy Borgie lived. {Cappy Borgie! Puppy! I love Puppy!}

The response was curt. {We are busy. Do not think. Thinking is bad.}

Dean peered down at the struggling, squeaking symbiont. Dean thought happy thoughts. Assimilation tubules emerged from the back of his hand and sunk into the captive's side.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nova's link with the symbiont was lost. He assumed it was dead. The final visual from the unit had been the sight of hands reaching down and the sensation of being lifted off the ground. No matter. It had been advanced in age and would have been euthanized soon so as to save it a painful decline into senility. Five assault units were on the way and they would deal with the loose Borg.

Nova's primary consciousness rode that of the assault units jogging down the corridor towards nerve cluster alpha-three. Ji, whom possessed the best auditory reception of the five, heard the noise first. A final bend brought a disturbing sight into view.

"Twang! Jello Borg jello? Twang!" The Borg broke a nerve fiber with each "Twang!", watching the white thread curl back on itself. Perched on its shoulder was the symbiont, throat working as it tried to mimic the drone's verbalizations. Large ears twitched; head turned. The assault units recoiled as They made out the mottled gray blotches which were slowly materializing on the small biped's skin.

"Jewo-wo-wo," squealed the /assimilated/ symbiont. The Borg's head swiveled to see what had captured the small unit's attention.

Attack! roared Nova. Destroy the monstrosity!

\* \* \* \* \*

Dean smiled - more people had come to be friends! He had tried to tell Cappy Borgie and Borgie Buggy about his new puppy, but neither would listen. They told him they were busy fighting something called They. Dean thought "They" a very silly name.

{Friends for Puppy? Friends for Dean?} Dean asked Puppy. Puppy had been thrilled to be given a name. It seemed Puppy had never had a name before, although it had always wanted one. Intellect-wise, the symbiont had less IQ than Wilcox, which wasn't saying much considering the latter was officially brain-dead.

Puppy's answer came as pictures rather than actual words, true cognitive ability bred from his symbiont genetic line twenty thousand years ago. The impression was one of "more friends!" And lime jello.

The pair thought happy thoughts. The assault units never had a chance to escape...Deanification.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Return! Return and be terminated!" bellowed Weapons towards the retreating backs of the most recent They assault. {They will not comply,} pouted the head of the weapons hierarchy. His violent tendencies and desire to follow They were reined in by the narrowest of command and control margins.

{You are acting very unBorg,} sternly said Captain. {You will cease the irrelevant threats. Even if it is They.} Weapons fumed, but began to reorder and redeploy his hierarchy onboard Waystation in light of the latest advance. He desired to attack the heavy tactical unit head-on, but was in the minority.

{Sensors sees more transporter signs originating from the They unit,} reported Sensors. Second, still on Cube #347, intercepted the incoming information. {To or from Waystation?}  
{From.}

{They are planning something. Partition #3, calculate probability of regrouping in preparation of overwhelming attack versus They are giving up the assault ahead of a campaign to destroy all structures in the vicinity.} Second was not looking on the bright side of death.

{Partition #1, report on progress towards modifying nanoprobes to affect They units.}

{Zilch,} chorused the drones currently comprising partition #1. {We need input from the Greater Consciousness.}

{Dandy,} growled Second, {we, a bunch of imperfectly assimilated freaks, are supposed to unravel a problem which the /Collective/ has not been able to solve, and apply it before we are terminated or reduced to a level of extreme inefficiency. Captain, these tasks are useless.}

Captain was having troubles of his own.

{Cappy! Cappy Borgie! I got a jello puppy! Pumpkin! Ween!}

{That's nice. Remember what I told you about thinking?}

{Don't?}

{Very good. Don't think. This includes talking to me. We are very busy right now.}

{Puppy?}

{Not now. Do. Not. Think.}

Dean was very good at not thinking. Captain swore he could hear the brain damaged drone "click" off. Back to more relevant things, like the situation threatening to explode in Main Engineering.

All drones forced to work near Main Engineering had put one, if not more, force fields between themselves and the pissed off demon-woman who was Captain Lisa Beck. Captain periodically eavesdropped on the comm line from Engineering; the human had yet to stop swearing, but at least objects were no longer flying through the air. He would not have believed an unaugmented human female could shot-put a pizza oven, if he had not witnessed the action via Waystation's internal sensors.

Anticipating a momentary break in the battle with They, Captain gingerly prodded the computer to open an intercom channel to Main Engineering. "We have things to discuss," he began.

"You bet your sweet metallic a\*\* we do!" shouted Beck. "You went and assimilated Federation personnel on MY watch. I may not /like/ the marines, I may not /like/ Section 31, but I /like/ having them turned into drones even less." A masculine mumble. "Admiral, begging your pardon, I really don't care what you think. You are going to be leaving the station eventually, while I have to stay here and pick up the pieces."

Captain ignored the secondary comments. "They have been deassimilated and returned to Waystation. We cannot deal with the distraction of new drones while in battle with They. This sub-collective does have its limits."

"Well, Mister Captain Borg, I want your butt back here in Main Engineering, or at the very least turn off these damn force fields."

"We may be imperfectly assimilated, but we are not stupid. And neither is this drone." The conversation, such as it was, fell apart after that point. Captain turned the intercom system off.

{Second, report,} ordered Captain.

{You know the answer.}

Captain sighed, {I do.}

Sensors flooded Captain's perceptions with grid data, both Waystation and Cube #347. {Explorer arrives. And Sensors has seen another series of transportations to the heavy tactical



unit.} Captain shunted the information aside. As much as he hated to admit it, resistance was becoming quite futile.

Dean's circle of friends was growing. In fact, he was now wandering the pinkish hallways of this yucky place looking for more friends, Puppy sitting on his shoulder. Some of his new friends were smarter than him, and most were more spiky. These people had all manner of odd appendages, often of the sharp variety. Nurse Holly didn't like him to play with sharp objects, but it was probably okay in this case since he wasn't the one actually possessing them.

Not all of Dean's new friends could speak aloud, but those who could were now singing "Spinal Meningitis Got Me Down." Borgie Buggy would be proud. Jup asked why they didn't ask Nova to be a friend.

{No-va?} asked Dean. {Purple chairs. I love Cappy Borgie.}

Jup was hard to understand at times. The difficulty may have had more to do with Dean's ambiguous thought processes than that of the more coherent unit. {Nova. Individual all around. We are in Nova.}

Dean halted in the middle of the verse he was leading. His friends also stopped. {Nova?} questioned Dean, finger pointing at a slimy wall.

Jup clapped his claws in assent. {Yes, Nova! Shall we let Nova be a friend?}

Dean cracked a wide grin as he scratched Puppy's bald head. {All friends! Nova friend!} Wilcox and over a thousand Deanified units thought many happy thoughts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nova was panicking as he felt parts of himself become unresponsive. The sensation the heavy tactical unit was experiencing was akin to watching a degenerative disease wither a previously healthy body. No matter how many assault units he transported back to himself or brought out of hibernation, all failed, all fell to leprous Order; and now the Borg were attacking him.

Giant heart pumps and perfectly controlled rings of muscle restricted fluid flow to the afflicted areas. Nanoprobes traveled swiftest in the bloodstream as they searched for higher order nerve centers. Unfortunately, Nova was losing the internal battle with himself. Five kilometers is a large bulk to assimilate, but continuous input from over a thousand jello-chanting nanite factories is difficult to resist.

They were in a state of alarm, as it appeared the Borg had successfully broken the microscopic stalemate which prevented assimilation of units and absorption of drones. Cerebrates spun tales of paranoia, of fantasy, individuals shouting to be heard over the milling mental crowd.

The drone was bait, a trap, declared They, to lure us. We swallowed it whole, and now we are doomed!

They wailed, The Tina was wrong, was fed false information! The sub-collective was a part of Order the entire time, waiting for the correct conditions to present before striking.

It must go beyond that, knowingly said They. The Federation was a part of the larger trap. They "brought" the cube to this quadrant, after all, and sacrificed their own citizens to assimilation.

This galaxy is out to get us, whispered They fearfully, nonexistent facial tic working overtime.

Symbionts scrambled over their cerebrate charges, massaging ganglions and spitting out the They version of a chill pill. The titanic motherships themselves, placid creatures of low intellect of a size to dwarf heavy tactical units, broadcast empathic distress. Hormonal depressants slowly brought They back from the black pit of hysteria.

We must pull our expedition force back, decided They with a semblance of calm. The Borg may know of our location and attempt to strike now that they know their nanoprobes work.

They concurred, And we must devise a new virus, one which will not only protect units from assimilation, but bring Order into Chaos. Entropy will prevail!

Entropy will prevail! The colonization fleet will meet with the expedition in less than a millennium; and what is another ten centuries after a hundred thousand Home years of Chaos? They posed the rhetorical question to Theyself upon a note of drug-induced triumph.

Nova raised a mental appendage and plaintively asked, But what about /me/? These conclusions are all well and good, but I am losing myself to Order. I can /feel/ my individuality falling from the safety of Chaos.

They boomed, You know what to do. Individuality is about sacrifice.

Nova did know what to do, had known what the answer would be despite a wisp of self-delusional hope. His purpose as a heavy tactical unit was fulfilled, and he had failed most spectacularly. Limitless Entropy was not his soul's destination, but rebirth into the confining shell of a heavy tactical unit. Splotches of dark blue streamed across an increasingly gray epidermis as Nova wept.

Suicide was easy to implement. Release of nerve paralyzing toxins into the bloodstream required mere milliseconds. The action was followed by relaxation of offensive acid glands, allowing the powerful liquids to eat into the body proper. Nova disengaged his pain centers as the first waves of agony swept along his five kilometer frame. The assault units, torpedoes, symbionts, and other support They under the heavy's direct supervision were not neglected, for they too would be denied to Order.

Nova let his mind wander as the battle between death and lime jello pumpkins began to overtake his higher cognitive pathways. I am coming gene-mate Atom, he called.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I have something on my boards," shouted Porter to Beck. He glanced across Engineering to the spacious closet in which Browning was now locked, minus pizza oven. "Sensors. Banshee has arrived in system." He paused, "And we have an incoming communication as well."

Beck levered herself up from under a console, multitool in hand. She had finally given up her tirade and was helping others in Main Engineering to reroute the severely Borg-compromised systems back to Starfleet control. She had not realized how extensively the self-proclaimed imperfect sub-collective had wormed into Waystation's computers. "Is it for us from the Banshee?"

Porter shrugged, "I don't think so. It is from the heavy and is being broadcast to anyone with a receiver. Right now we appear to have control of the com system. Shall I put it on speakers?"

"Yes," said Beck.

The moaning tones of singing whales thundered through Main Engineering. It quieted to a background roar as translation algorithms deciphered the otherworldly speech. Miss Sex Muffin of the Month was back. "Jello jello jello. Jello jello jello. I can't put my finger on it," she

cooed seductively.

"What the hell?" asked Beck to an equally puzzled crew.

"Jello jello jello. Jello jello jello. I can't put my finger on it," babbled a voice from many a male's favorite dream. "We love Cappy Borgie. Aren't you surprised when I touch the dwarf inside?"

Baxter was on the bridge, sitting in his chair. He peered at Larkin at Ops, then commented to no one in particular, "You know, except for the woman's voice, that sounds an awful lot like Wilcox."

\* \* \* \* \*

The epidermis of the heavy tactical unit had lost its chameleonlike luster and was now a necrotic gray. Large sections of skin bubbled in slow motion as digestive acids strong enough to dissolve the strongest starship metals ate through defenseless flesh. A fissure five hundred meters long ripped through exterior armor, exposing innards to the destructive desiccation of vacuum. Vital liquids entered a freeze-evaporation cycle as they leaked into the uncompromising medium of space. The unit was dying.

A shudder ran the five kilometer length of the enormous space-faring creature, muscles contracting in a final death spasm. Mind ravished courtesy of Dean, body quickly followed. Neural poisons floated in non-circulating blood, their work complete. Acids ate deeper and deeper into the giant corpse, finally entering into power cores. The universe never paused in its on-going subatomic dance as Nova lit Waystation's vicinity with the brilliance of his namesake.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Cappy Borgie! Puppy! Look Dean's Puppy!" spouted an unfortunately familiar voice behind Captain following the sound of a transporter materialization. He carefully turned his body and winced as his fears were realized. Wilcox stood holding a They symbiont up for Captain's inspection. The devolved biped blinked solemnly as it fluttered its unsupported legs.

Captain locked a transporter beam onto Dean and his "Puppy," sending both to Maintenance Bay #2. {Priority level compulsion, target drone maintenance and assimilation hierarchies: deassimilate Dean, NOW! Comply.} Startled acknowledgments trickled in from both hierarchies. Captain did not notice the assimilated state of the symbiont; Deanified units had never linked to Borg fractal subspace frequencies.

The few assault units left on Waystation were dropping dead, much to Weapons' vocal frustration. Captain was reigning the weapons hierarchy, not allowing them to charge forward into a possible trap, when background datastream from the sensor grid overwhelmed his senses. As with every other drone, he flinched as a fireball lit up in his mind, heavy tactical unit vaporizing with atomic fury. Automatic programs initiated to filter the glare to more tolerable levels. Cessation of light and a scan by Cube #347 sensors revealed charred hunks of flesh. The They threat was unexplainably...gone.

With a "pop" and a mass of static, the white noise produced by billions of conversations occurring at the speed of electronic thought filled an uncomfortable void in Captain's mind. He stood motionless, mind blank, a blissful smile stretching little used facial muscles, and basked in the security of the Greater Consciousness. The simple pulsating, rushing river of the Collective

informed him Cube #347's severance had not been afforded much importance in the greater scheme of things. {Our link is re-established,} needlessly informed Delta.

{All drones return to the cube,} ordered Captain.

Starfleet personnel emerged hesitantly from Waystation's nooks and crannies. Security fields disappeared as Porter ordered the extraneous (and dangerous) cores powered down and physically detached from the grid. Repairs were underway on the station and aboard Starfleet vessels to eradicate Borg presence from computer systems.

The Borg. The human mind is extremely flexible in accepting what hours earlier might have been adamantly denied; other Alpha Quadrant species appear to have similar mentalities. All drones, alive and dead, seemed to have returned to their cube, intent unknown. Hours of waiting passed, during which the most basic of primal urges demanded fulfillment - clean up. If the Borg were to attack the utterly defenseless Federation outpost, at least they would find toilet seats freshly sanitized for their protection and decks recently mopped.

Less than half an hour after the mass exodus of drones, Dean Wilcox of the Explorer was found wandering Starfleet Square Mall clutching what appeared to be a personified Chihuahua. No one was quite sure how he had (1) managed to travel from Explorer to Waystation, and (2) emerged from the Borg versus They battles with not a scratch on him. Wilcox was in no mental condition to relate his adventure. Reunited with wifely caretaker Holly on Explorer, he had simply said "I love jello Cappy Borgie" as if the nonsense phrase explained all. Holly had been ecstatic over the complete sentence, pronouncing his experience a good one.

One of the messy consequences of the Borg/They skirmishes was a preponderance of dead assault units. For the first time Starfleet people were able to take a close look at the less mutilated forms. Spikes and spines, talons and claws, venom sacs and quills, skin impermeable to phaser fire...the list of attributes continued until even the most skeptical marine was convinced of They's mincemeat-making ability. Eventually a dazed Yeoman Tina Jones was found under the bodies of outwardly unmarked units. She was rushed to Sick Bay; and unlike Dean, she was perfectly able to relate her encounter in minute detail.

"Are you feeling better, Tina?" asked Doctor Nelson.

Tina rubbed her temples as she sat on the side of the biobed. She kept her eyes closed. "It depends on what you mean by better. I'm alive, I think."

Beck broke in, "This is all heartwarming, and such, but I want to know: what was it like?"

Tina squinted at the captain of Waystation. The lights in the sick bay were too bright. She remembered everything. "Well, you know, courtesy of Lieutenant Russel, I spent several days on and off in a Borg's body. While in 3 of 8's mind, I knew without a doubt that the Collective views drones as tools, nothing more, nothing less. Very honest way of thinking, I guess." Tina drew in a deep breath and continued. "They...They...They promote individualism where none really exists. Think back to high school and all the cliques. Each one claims to be unique with each person different, but if you look at it, all whom are part of the group look and think alike. And if you are on the outside.... Anyway, They civilization is based on a self-delusional lie. A very big and very dangerous lie. We'd do better with the Borg."

The Greater Consciousness expressed surprise (and disappointment) over Cube #347's survival. It had not shed any tears after the sub-collective had been drawn into the ring, instead

ratcheting up the speed of the science platform to its maximum with a desire to arrive at the target star while interesting things were still occurring. All the cube's experiences, from initial trap to They assault upon Waystation, was downloaded from the sub-collective's memories.

The Collective processed data, leaving Cube #347 on the Borg version of "hold". Neo-classical muzak echoed through still corridors and over alcove tiers. Hours passed as the Borg mind exhaustively calculated odds, ran simulations, and pondered upon They's next moves. A decision concerning They was reached, in conjunction with new data from automated probes high above the galactic plane: They were in full retreat. The Federation, on the other hand...

The order, the compulsion, from the Greater Conscious was clear, unambiguous. And expected.

<<The chance of assimilation imperfection infection is outweighed by possible gain. Assimilate them all.>>

\* \* \* \* \*

Meanwhile, in a galaxy far distant from the Milky Way -

"Minor planetoid in the corner pocket" called Q as he carefully aimed. The asteroid swung around a gas giant at high speed, missing the pinpoint black hole by mere kilometers. The billiards game was not going well.

Q snorted. "Lousy shot. Let me show you how a pro does it. Terrestrial, side pocket." The earth-sized planet, red with shifting iron-oxide sands interlaced with occasional glimmer of dying lakes, spun on its axis, careening at a rapid pace towards another of the system's six black holes. The cloud-capped globe - lifeless but for a few self-replicating molecules any proper paleoxenobiologist would deem belonging to the realm of exotic chemistry - disappeared.

"You're cheating," groused Q. He didn't want to admit he was lousy at solar billiards. A board game like 'Paradoxes and Time Lines' was much more enjoyable.

Q ignored Q. "And for my next trick, bolonite asteroid off that comet, around the sun, and into the far corner pocket. Nothing but net. Any bets I can't pull it off?"

"I'll place the evolution of the Hydrins on it; you can fiddle with their destiny /if/ the rock goes in. If you make it, then I'll /know/ you've been cheating," claimed Q.

Q mildly replied, "Hydrins? The hairy ostriches with two heads? You obviously have no faith in my talent. I'm already making big plans for them as we speak."

The named asteroid began its odyssey across the Q-doomed system. It had absolutely no bearing on the outcome of events a billion light years away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Traveling great distances, eeling between the threads of space-time, leaves no wayfarer unscathed. The ancient builders of the lambda transportation system, the same ring Cube #347 had passed through, were many things. They were kind to animals, very intelligent, had an exquisite recipe for fresh salsa, and firmly believed in the adage "There is no such thing as a free lunch." Therefore, all ships (and material within) that used the ring system without first paying a toll were branded on the sub-atomic level with a resonate gate "bar code." Once out the other side, a preset grace period was allowed for the vessel to pay the toll. Money removed the brand. If no payment was forthcoming after a set time, the gate latched onto the delinquent resonant pattern and pulled all things - ship, people, possible illegal goods - back to the point of departure.

Regardless of era, species, or moderating effects of civilization, all custom agents are similar in one respect - absolutely no sense of humor.

Cube #347 was tardy on paying its toll to a race long scattered to dust among universe's cosmic winds. Tens of thousands of light years distant, the final functional lambda gate of a transportation system once linking galaxies counted down to zero. The simple computer tagged the cube for non-payment, sent a request to a nonexistent office for absentee custom officials, and began preparations to retrieve the offenders. There was no such thing as a free lunch.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We are the Borg. Prepare to be assimilated. Your technological and biological distinctiveness will be adapted to service us. Resistance is...." The Collective Voice booming over every Waystation speaker and echoing through the hallways of all local Federation ships abruptly cut. Almost immediately, damage reports began to roll in.

On Banshee -

Vorezze rolled around on the floor as his brain was subjected to a horrible sensation of microphone feedback. The screaming went on and on and on and on....

He awoke to the white ceiling of the sickbay, Benzra's armored back looming nearby. A shift of head showed many biobeds occupied, crewmen sporting a wide range of injuries and levels of consciousness. Lolling his head the other direction brought into view a surgical tray with medical instruments surrounding a fat metallic oval reminiscent of a bloated tick. The object, complete with tattered umbilicus, reminded Jad of something.

"Crud," whispered Vorezze, hand struggling up to feel behind his neck. The neural transceiver was gone, replaced by a slight divot. His frantic patting and increasingly vulgar curses attracted Benzra's attention.

The Flarn peered at Vorezze, "I ssssssee you are awake. I removed the thing which wasssssss caussssing your problemsssss. It wasssssss easssssy to yank out." Benzra motioned to a nurse to tranquilize a thrashing patient.

"No, you don't understand," moaned Vorezze, "you have to remove every last microfiber with the main body, otherwise the bits and pieces may grow back."

Benzra stared. "Oh well. Your problem, not mine. I have a sssssick bay full of people. Your doctor asskssed if I could assstss for several hoursss on thissss ship. I agreed. Why doessssss your sssssspeciesss' promote such weaknessssssssss? It would be eassssier to terminate the lot and breed a sturdier sssssstock. At the very leasssst, you would have a lot of meat in the freezer."

Jad blanched. "That is disgusting." Benzra shrugged - cultural differences - and turned to leave. "Wait! Can I go? How is the ship doing?"

Benzra paused. "The ship ssssurvivesssss. A lot of the Borg sssstuff disssappeared with the cube. Engineering issss in a sssssstate of chaosssss. Many injuriessss from ssssystem malfunctionssss. You are sssstill here, ergo, the ship is sssstill here." The Flarn stared at Vorezze, daring him to dispute such an obvious truth. "If you can move, you should leave. I have tonssss of people to fix. I do not need a voice whining that I didn't do my job right. I think Commander Charlotte will be mildly disssappointed you did not die, or at leasssst were not sssseriously maimed to the point of irreparable brain damage. That issssss my impressssion of the situation."

On Explorer -

Baxter peered behind the open ceiling, water streaming off his face and soaking his

uniform, puddling on the seat of his captain's chair, the arms of which upon he balanced. He studied the pipes for a few seconds, then ordered, "Wrench." The tool was handed to him. His socks were wicking up the minor waterfall, threatening to flood his already squishy shoes.

Bang, bang, bang! Bang, bang, bang! The business end of the wrench was applied to a certain sprinkler head. Gush eventually became mere torrent, and finally dripping trickle. Baxter would complain to Hartley for engineering to do something, but before the internal communication system shorted out, she had been cursing in languages he could have sworn were unpronounceable by the human throat. The gist was she was so swamped (pun unintended) by /other/, more /vital/ concerns, a ship-wide failure of the back-up fire suppressant system was a very minor incident.

The bridge crew was isolated from the rest of the ship - turbolifts dead, local computer systems shorted out or nonfunctional. The sprinkler deluge was not possible to escape because the doors to the various bridge anterooms were locked closed. Of all the times for the emergency "what if we have a decompression" system to work....

A primal scream of rage arose from the direction of the munchie replicator. Conway began to pound on the inoffensive machine. "Coffee! Coffee! Give me my coffee!"

Baxter nodded, flipping wet hair out of eyes. Things seemed to be puttering along normally. "Everyone okay? Other than the commander, that is."

Wet yesses were returned from everyone. J'hana seemed to have taken out her anger on her assigned pipe, which was now leaking the entire contents of the fire suppressant system all over the science consoles. Someone had pried up a deckplate to allow the water to drain. Hopefully it wouldn't short out a vital system, like life support or the Bolian lavatory.

Baxter sat heavily in his chair. Splash. Wet underwear was highly uncomfortable, but he didn't want the others see him trying to fix a developing wedgie. He sighed, "I guess we wait, then. Hopefully someone will remember to rescue us before the deck floods. Oh, and remind me later to have a talk with Starfleet Command about the concept and necessity of sprinklers on a starship."

On Waystation -

"Repeat again," ordered Beck, speaking into a Fun Time Walkie-Talkie with Real Short-wave Capability and Nifty Color Scheme commandeered from Dillon's Supply Depot, "the last part was fuzzy."

Porter's tinny voice emerged from the hand-held device; all internal (and external) communications were shot. "I'm down <buzz> sewage reclamation. There was a node <buzz> computer junction here. <buzz> out life support for the lower saucer. We'll have it fixed before <buzz>. The only major problem I foresee is the station smelling like <buzz> and old socks for the next several days. The air sterilizers are <buzz> as well."

"As much as I'd not mind losing the marines and Section 31 bastards stuck below, it probably wouldn't look too good in my report. Fix it."

"<buzz>. Over and out." The connection clicked dead.

Beck examined her walkie-talkie. "Ensign," she called to a passing woman with PADD in hand and budding insanity to her eyes, "go find Dillon. Tell him if he can't find something other than Perky Purple and Yummy Yellow, I'll ask Russel to take a closer look at his stock. That store's security system is anything but standard, and I know," Beck paused significantly, "there are other quasi-illegal items in his inventory. Or there will be if I don't receive a decently colored walkie-talkie." The ensign nodded and left.

The day, all one hour of it thus far, was not proceeding well. First she had been woken to

red alert klaxons and the information the Borg were finally acting like Borg. A quick change of clothing and an emergency transport to the command deck was rewarded with the cube disappeared, along with every single bit of Borg hardware installed on the station. Unfortunately, the very busy drones had rerouted many systems through the vanished nodes. It was amazing Waystation had not subsequently disintegrated or exploded. Beck wondered how Explorer, Banshee, and the various tugs and minor ships orbiting the station fared.

"Help! Help!" screamed Porter's voice from the discarded walkie-talkie. Beck grabbed it, pressing down the transmit button with her thumb.

"I'm here. What's happening?"

"There's been a major backwash of raw replicator sludge. I don't think I can hold her together much <buzz>!"

"Hold what together?" Beck could feel a vague rumbling shaking her bones. Oh-oh. Waystation was theoretically too big and stable to vibrate, hence the "station" part of the name.

"I have to vent it all!" Pause. "Ah, s<buzz>!"

Waystation's inertial dampers and associated gyros, one of the few uncompromised systems, whined in complaint as hundreds of thousands of gallons of replicator sludge, the basic matter replicators drew upon to make a variety of objects, was flushed. The high speed ejecta impacted a Section 31 tug which had otherwise avoided major Borg-related damage, consolidating around the poor vessel and freezing. Crippled station sensors recorded the action, relaying it to a single functional viewscreen at Ops.

Beck groaned and covered her face with one hand. The day had just begun.

Several hours later, the worst of the problems controlled, captains Beck and Baxter met with Section 31 admiral Neumann. While Vorezze was also present, back of neck heavily bandaged, he remained silent, distant. Two aides hovered nearby; the marines whom had been ever-present over the last three weeks were conspicuously absent.

Admiral Neumann leaned on the conference table, hands flat against the surface. "I have asked you here to tell you of events as they are going to happen over the next several days. Beck, you can protest all you like, but you really should be flattered I'm informing you and Baxter at all."

Lisa's eyes narrowed. "I think I liked the Borg better," she said. "At least you knew what to expect from them. Section 31 seems to be a bunch of silver-tongued changelings in Federation clothing claiming the ends justify the means."

Neumann harrumphed. "The ends do justify the means. You just can't see the bigger picture from your vantage point, while Section 31 can. We plan for the long term. Anyway, we have begun packing and will leave within the week, as soon as everything has been put back together the way it was when we arrived. Before we leave, all Waystation computers and logs remotely associated with this mission will be wiped and data reentered to reflect the reality-to-be: an infection by spaceborne siliconian parasites. Explorer will receive a similar treatment, except a month worth of meaningless tasks will be substituted, all occurring several sectors away."

"Gad, not that BS again. I didn't believe the story when I first heard it. Why will I, or anyone else here for that matter, believe it after you've altered a few computer files?"

Baxter glanced at Beck, then at Neumann. He carefully held his face expressionless, willing himself to become invisible.

"Why? Because Section 31's parting gift will be deployment of the Mass Telepathic



Coercion Broadcasting System, or MTCMS."

Baxter interrupted, "Is it anything like the Emergency Broadcasting System? You know, the periodic tests subspace stations run in the event of a planetary natural disaster? I really hate that drawn out tone."

"Captain Baxter," said Neumann crossly, "special care will be taken in your adjustment. No one must ever guess the true reason behind the EBS."

Meanwhile, Beck leaned towards Vorezze, catching the latter's attention. "Does Section 31 really have such a device? It sounds highly illegal."

Vorezze nodded slowly. "Unfortunately, yes. Cardassians were developing it, until all the blueprints were lost in a fire and the primary researcher 'disappeared'. Section 31 doesn't use it often. The side-effects in some individuals can be difficult to explain without suggesting hallucinatory drugs."

"Enough," barked Neumann, "as I was saying, the MTCMS will be deployed, providing everyone with suitable memories complimentary with the altered files. As far as Waystation personnel who remained on board are concerned, the period of decontamination was extremely boring. Explorer will be towed out and dumped at a suitable location and undergo similar conditioning. Any questions?"

Beck asked, "Yah, one actually...what about Section 31? The paper trail of what happened here will remain in your department, open to scrutiny. Eventually this whole misadventure, from Borg to They, will come to light, with damning evidence pointing at your department's jealousy of Inventory's access to Borg technology."

Vorezze answered before the increasingly red Neumann could explode. "I've been told /all/ those involved here will undergo the MTCMS processing, including the admiral. Everything remotely related to this project will be burned or scrambled. The original 'Project Fish On' file will be labeled as unfeasible and hidden at the bottom of a pile of administrative papers so big it is on the verge of becoming its own black hole. The potential embarrassment factor for Section 31 is just too high, even if the Admiral Neumann won't admit it."

Beck smiled, baring her teeth at the admiral in a wicked grin. "Good. I hope he experiences the side-effects you mentioned."

"You just don't know when to quit, Captain Beck," Neumann snarled. "This briefing is at an end. I hope we never have to cross paths again." The admiral sharply waved at his aides to follow him. Jad shrugged, following his superior out of the room. Baxter looked at Beck curiously.

"Why do you agonize him?"

Beck levered herself out of the chair she had been sitting in. "Well, if I'm not to remember any of this, I might as well get as much satisfaction as possible. Come on," Lisa headed for the door leading to the command deck proper, "I have to see how the crew is doing chipping that tug out of the frozen sh\*\*, and then I have a few ideas I'll need your help on to make the admiral's stay here even more miserable. And afterwards, I hope you are up to a little writing, because I plan to make hardcopies of everything that transpired here and hide them. I will not give in to Section 31 so easily."

Baxter pursed his lips and reminded himself for the umpteenth time to not put himself on Lisa's bad side: the Borg were preferable. He did not envy Admiral Neumann, nor Section 31, the grudge they had fostered.

\* \* \* \* \*

## EPILOGUE

"We are the Borg. Prepare to be assimilated. Your technological and biological distinctiveness will be adapted to service us. Resistance is..."

The universe blinked. Gone was Waystation, gone were its irrelevant defenders, gone was all traces of Federation. In its place was a dim white dwarf and a very large ring of dull metal surrounding a small sea of liquid silver. A cloud of debris surrounded the cube. By slow increments, the dwarf was steadily brightening towards its original luminosity.

"...futile."

{What the hell?} asked Second. {What happened?}

A crowd of similar sentiments was raised. Over the chaotic, directionless hubbub, Sensors bemoaned, {Sensors has lost her exterior antennae clusters again. The [pickled herring of love] is fuzzy!}

It quickly became very clear with the ample evidence around that the ring had brought Cube #347 back to the start of its odyssey. The debris cloud around the cube consisted of the various components which had been installed on Waystation and in the Starfleet ships. Whoever the ancient builders of the ring were, they were very efficient: all technologies, down to the smallest screw, were accounted for. Compromised Federation systems tens of thousands of light years distant probably resembled hardware Swiss cheese.

On the plus side, the link with the Collective was strong and as immediate as it could ever be between the Whole and one wayward imperfect sub-collective. The response to Cube #347's abrupt return to the Delta quadrant and failure to perform as ordered was a billion-mind sigh. Inefficient, imperfect. <<Return to previous task.>> Cube #347 would go back to stalking species #8511 while sub-collectives specialized for research studied the ring and how best to adapt its representative technologies to the Borg.

As Captain split his attention between directing the cube out of the system, plotting a course to intersect the last known spoor trace of species #8511, coordinated repair priorities, and the multitudes of additional tasks he had to oversee, a hail was received.

"We apologize for the delay, but multiple translation algorithms had to be devised to allow for mutual understanding. The scans we employed only examined language database; no other computer systems were probed. Please remain in this system. Custom agents of Transgalactic Shipping Unlimited will be arriving shortly. This message will automatically repeat."

Captain stepped on the gas, ignoring Delta's protests and warnings indicating extreme stress upon engine cores.

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Here concludes "A Fish Story." Cube #347 is back in the Delta Quadrant, the Alpha Quadrant regulars are returned to their postings, and life in the Star Traks universe continues its winding, drunken weave.