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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 III - Tally-Ho!

They were not pleased. Their plan was disintegrating. All had started well: presence of Order, presence of Borg, was determined to be negligible; major civilizations in the area were distrustful, one openly hostile to the aggressive colonization advancements of the other. Various alliances within the major power - Federation - were shaky, with the dominant species known as humans denying economic and materialistic set-backs caused by a recently concluded war. Theoretically, covert introduction of Chaos should have been easy, initiation of massive warfare to winnow the strongest from the pack inevitable.

The promise of new technologies in the form of a probe had been offered, placement of the tool careful and exact. The seeds of envy and mistrust already lay in fertile soil, and it was a prudent gardener who could coax the brightest, most deadly blossoms from a field of worthless weeds. The Federation had predictably responded, quickly acquiring the probe even as their competitors mobilized their military forces or prepared semi-polite requests to examine the booty.

They had not euthanized the probe, instead activating neural pathways to send it into catatonia. Such a state was usually reserved for major operations (chemical anesthesia a primitive and discarded tool) or to store units in minimum maintenance hibernation. At the center of space-adapted body a sleepy mind remained observant, passively passing information to They.

The They cerebrate masses pulsed, vast amounts of neural matter demanding additional sugars and carbohydrates from symbiont units to fuel massive parallel processing. Telepathic communication was maintained between all parts of They, They aboard the many motherships of the scouting expedition in perfect harmony with They still a thousand years distant in the main colonization/pacification convoy. The link with the scout had been terminated in a most disturbing manner - Borg disrupters.

The Borg should not be here! said They.

But Order is here, responded They.

What actions shall we take? questioned They.

Psychoactive substances bathed cerebrates, forcing new heights of cognition through multiple layered simulations examining every possible facet of the problem. Additional symbionts burrowed among neural strands, occasionally interjecting random pulses of painful electricity to generate novel thought patterns. When one cerebrate convulsed in the equivalent of an epileptic seizure, all shared in the sudden burst of chaotic images.

It is only one Borg vessel, small, informed They. An odd anomaly is associated with its appearance, signature of Order backtracked to a neighboring star system.

Agreed. It poses no threat. Although active, the small compliment of drones on the ship will be unable to assimilate and mount suitable resistance to the introduction of Chaos, noted They.

We will eradicate the threat and simply act in a more direct fashion, murmured They. A minimum of 2.1 Home years is estimated for Order to mount an effective offense. By then we will have our prey within our grasp. Proper propaganda, if necessary, will manipulate the prey to fight for us. We can gauge the strength of Federation, of Klingon, of Dominion, of Romulan, of Moltke, of many civilizations through this manner. Megapolitics in this galaxy are no different from the Home galaxy in its wild, preChaos state.

What shall we do about this ship, then? prudently questioned They.

Destruction. Eight medium tactical units plus assault compliment will be sufficient. The swarm will remain active to repulse additional cubes as they arrive. While the swarm is awakened, processed, and dispatched, we will engage with light tactical units already in area, ordered They.

Yes, that course of action will be most suitable, confirmed They.

And if it doesn't work? And if Order successfully gains a foothold here to resist? quivered They.

The Federation will resist Borg advances. If anything, their fear of a proven hostile known will assist us. Our plan will prevail! trumpeted They.

Elsewhere, eight medium tactical units slowly regained awareness.

* * * * *

"This is a light tactical unit."

Click.

"This is another light tactical unit."

Click.

"These are eight light tactical units acting in unison. The formation is called a 'swarm'."

Click.

A slide show was in progress, darkened conference room warm with equipment and multiple bodies. Still shots on the viewscreen showed a succession of black, vaguely winged objects looking somewhat like eyeless manta rays; a double row of clawed tentacles rested flush in grooves along the underside.

Click.

"Here are three swarms attacking a cube." Captain narrowed his eye, scanning into the dark. Most of those present, including soldiers, were either blatantly asleep or nodding. As he watched, one marine's head sunk forward, only to jerk upright seconds later. Captain frowned.

"This is a picture of Captain Jad Vorezze, shortly after he 'lost' his towel. Note Betazoid characteristics normally hidden by clothing." Attention was suddenly riveted on the screen and the most current slide. Vorezze protested weakly, trailing off as coarse laughter filled the air.

"Pay attention, small beings. We can see when you are entering organic regeneration mode."

The next picture which filled the viewscreen was different from earlier slides, this one computer-enhanced footage of a dissection in progress. "While we were unable to assimilate

They units, many were captured and subjected to examination," began Captain. "This is a typical light tactical unit, the average specimen of which is sixty-three meters long. However, size may range from forty to eighty meters. Light tactical units are the type most likely to be encountered and, thus, it is this type against which vessels will be modified.

"Note the overall shape. Muscular wings serve as airfoils for atmospheric work, be it that of a terrestrial planet, a gas giant, or stellar corona. Epidermis is both sensing surface and armor, a biological equivalent to technological systems." The skin of the specimen (still alive, but Captain was loath to volunteer such information) was peeled back to reveal shine of muscle underneath.

"A biometric energy source consisting of twitch muscles and organic capacitors fuels arc-discharge lasers. This medium distance weapon produces very powerful pulsed energy emissions, output of which is equivalent to Federation disrupter devices. Assuming high-yield torpedo units do not shred the integrity of your lightly armored vessels, shields should be adequate to deflect and dissipate this attack.

"Shield emitter modifications, among other necessary alterations, will provide a secondary electrostatic grid two centimeters from the hull. All space-faring tactical unit types can disgorge a very corrosive acid, produced by these glands." Captain indicated the appropriate organs on the They unit. Several members of the audience appeared very pale and distressed. "Without an electrostatic grid in place, a single light tactical unit is capable of physically ripping an opponent to debris if it can penetrate traditional shields. Acid will be repelled by the grid and rotating frequencies will dissuade, but not prevent, the unit from using clawed grapples. Be warned, if a They unit makes contact with an object, it can funnel high amounts of electricity into the target's superstructure." On the screen, the light tactical unit had been rolled over to display several pairs of clawed limbs tucked against the torso. Talons were tipped in metallic resin secreted by special glands; these powerful contact weapons could even rip through the duralloy metals Borg employed in their outer hulls.

"Many They tactical units display a modified telekinesis ability akin to a tractor beam in function. While not a primary weapon due to its weakness in comparison to the technological counterpart, it may be used in desperate situations." The dissection uncovered the brain mass at the center of the upside-down They unit, levering up a metal-encrusted bone shield. While this particular unit had terminated at this point, many others continued to function until rendering for trace elements and recoverable biomass.

"Neural structure of all fifty-two catalogued unit types display traces of sentient ancestry. However, many of these organisms currently have the mental capability equivalent to a Terran dog, if that. Collective hypothesis postulates all They units are enslaved species, genetically altered and selectively bred for tens of thousands of years until a desired functional form and intellect level is achieved." Looks of disgust filled the room. Captain pounced on the PR opportunity. "Whereas Borg assimilations fit each race or individual carefully into the Whole where it will best serve, They literally butcher Their victims through eugenics to be less than what was evolved to be. Additionally, They units are engineered to suicide shortly after severance from Chaos."

Click. A still shot of a single light tactical unit filled the screen, replacing the dissection scene. It was stupidly advancing on a trio of cubes. "As with all unit types, this vessel is dangerous in swarms. However, units often display rash actions, as well as (click) moments of irrational viciousness." A video of a destroyed cube filled the screen, terminated drones floating within the debris. Several manta shapes swam among sundered metal, hunting for opportunities

to slash at the dead bodies.

"So now we know how these things can kill us. What type of defenses do the, um, ships have?" The voice originated from Vorezze.

"Defense is epidermis and conventional shielding. The former has elements which equate it strengthwise with Federation battleship plating. The latter - at the time of They invasion into Borg-controlled space - is powered by a warp core, one of the few manufactured features of a They unit. The shield matrix itself is constructed along a metal-alloy laminated bone lattice. It is adaptable to phaser frequencies." Captain would not reveal dissections of They units had led to the adaptation and incorporation of personal shielding into drones. While They had not been and could not be assimilated, They were still a part of the Borg through their distinctiveness. They would throw a fit when They found out.

A hand rose. Captain ignored it, busy expounding tactics likely to be used by half-swarms of light tactical units. The hand began to wave frantically, beckoning for attention. Captain continued to not acknowledge the distraction. Finally Beck said, "Baxter obviously has something he wants to ask. Aren't you going to see what he wants?"

Captain queried the human database, discovering a raised hand was a common method by which the species indicated a question. "Captain Andrew Baxter, state your inquiry."

"Can I go to the bathroom?"

"Yes."

Baxter levered himself out of his chair, as if to leave the conference room.

"You will not leave this space until we are finished."

"But...but you said I could go to the bathroom! And I really need to visit the head."

"Head? Where does a head fit into your actions? Assuming you are a biologically healthy specimen of your species, it is physiologically possible for you to eject waste."

Baxter grumbled, still standing, "Look, I had too much grapefruit juice with my cereal this morning and now I have to take a whiz. A pee. A potty break."

Captain digested the information, his hierarchy arriving at a decision. "The human male bladder is capable of retaining a large amount of liquid. You will hold it until we are done. Sit down."

Baxter returned to his seat. He squirmed. Half a minute later, hand rose to the air again.

"No, Captain Andrew Baxter, you may not use the bathroom."

"That isn't what I was going to ask. I have another question," said Explorer's captain.

"You have alluded to other They ships besides light tactical units. Are there any? Will we encounter them?"

Captain mentally substituted his next two pictures with alternate still photos drawn from storage. He displayed the first on the screen. It looked like a large black water wiener with spikes studding its side.

"This is a heavy tactical unit. This specimen was approximately five kilometers in length. It is unknown if They retain or have produced additional units of this type since their retreat from BorgSpace. Our mission is to convince They there is a substantial Borg presence in this area, one which is too large to be dealt with by this unit. If we see a heavy, all of us here will shortly be terminated." Captain's conviction was absolute.

The second slide flashed onto the screen. These vessels were an unusual orange, smooth cylindrical stern tapering aft, only to explode into a complex, feathery organ. One school of thought might say it resembled a giant goose feather, another a Terran organism called a sea pen. Captain was about to name this unit when several marine voices interrupted.

"It's a flying Willie!"

"A big Johnson! A very big Johnson!"

"Sausages in space!"

"I wonder if Ferengi are that color down below?"

"Desist!" roared Captain. "State the meaning of this outburst! These are medium tactical units. Units average two kilometers in length."

A low whistle was followed by the murmur, "A /very/ big Johnson indeed." Silence. Baxter squirmed in his seat, legs crossing and uncrossing.

"Andrew Baxter. Explain."

Baxter looked uncomfortable. "Um...the unit...it looks like a penis. An orange penis."

Captain considered the comments. Primitive innuendoes. "Irrelevant. Calculations indicate a 34.1% probability we will encounter at least one of this unit type. Mediums are most hazardous in swarms, where they display a pack mentality. However, singletons can be equally dangerous. Likelihood of a swarm is 1.9%. We will adapt our tactics appropriately if we find a medium attack unit. Probability of survival depends on many factors and cannot be computed unless one is located."

The rising mumble of reproductive organ related comments bade Captain to click past the slide, coming to the end of his show. He stood before the bright light, half-blinded and shadow looming behind. Self-modification of optic implant with a filter removed the annoyance from relevancy.

"Both medium and heavy tactical units carry subsets of themselves, individual creatures which serve as assault units in hand-to-hand conflict. They can, and will, assimilate you into They via tailored viruses; or terminate you in the process.

"We will again remind you that there is a hard way and an easy way in this endeavor. Depending on one's point of view, the easy way has been chosen. You will comply with our orders, else a different easy way will be initiated. This is not a threat. The Collective will assimilate your culture sooner or later. You decide the timetable.

"Drones will arrive on Waystation at 0700 hours local time to begin modification of station systems. Additional units will board Explorer and Banshee at 0800 hours. Smaller vehicles will be similarly altered once the primary vessels are complete.

"We are done with this briefing."

Baxter leapt from his chair, pushing heavily armed marines twice as large as he out of the way in his haste to exit the conference room.

* * * * *

It was 0700 hours and Tina was nervous: she had never been told to perform such a greeting before. When the bulk of the station staff was evacuated, somehow herself, obviously non-vital, had been overlooked. Scuttlebutt among the ranks as other crewmen and ensigns were packed away was that Starfleet had sprung for an all expense vacation to the resort of his or her choice. All except for Tina...and the custodial staff.

Crewman Hal "The Sweeper" Barley looked as if he would rather be dusting or mopping somewhere, or perhaps using a vacuum squeegee on the exterior windows. Tina, absolutely refusing to be the only official greeter to the initial Borg delegation, especially if they began to assimilate everyone, had pulled her mediocre rank (she was two weeks Hal's senior). Therefore, both herself and Barley were dressed in their cleanest service uniforms. Tina held her PADD

close to her chest. No protocols covered this unprecedented-to-be occurrence.

Arrayed behind Tina and Hal in a rough arc was the command staff and two ten-squads of marines, one group in black and the other in dark khaki. Phaser rifles were trained on the cargo airlock to which the first ten Borg would beam.

"Transporter signature detected in cargo airlock delta. Ten lifeforms, all Borg," informed the computer. Tina wished she could sport such a calm voice.

"Computer, open the doors," brusquely ordered Captain Beck. Or Captain Beck's attitude, thought Tina, I could use that. Anything but boring, expendable Tina in her boring, expendable job.

The large cargo doors slowly slid back to reveal ten pale-faced Borg. To the front of the evenly spaced group was one specimen, pair of optical implants of differing sorts obscuring half of four eyes. It took one step forward (phaser rifles quivered) and began to speak, "This drone is...." It spluttered to a halt, gaze riveted on Tina. With a start, Tina realized she /knew/ the drone.

"Second!"

"26 of 152!"

The exclamations were spoken at the same time.

"3 of 8!"

"Crewman Tina Jones!"

Silence within the corridor. No one moved. Time stretched. Several drones surreptitiously shuffled their feet. A marine scratched his nose.

"This is ridiculous!" rang from the ranks of Borg behind the lead drone. The words originated from two different throats. The outspoken duo pushed their way to the forefront, where it became obvious they were perfectly alike, down to the various nicks and imperfections of exoplasting. "Move out of the way, Second, /some/ of us have work to do."

Second continued to regard Tina as Tina stared at Second. Without taking her eyes off of the Borg, she called to her commanding officers, "Excuse me, Captain Beck, but Hal will have to take over my duties for awhile. I have some...things...I need to take care of." She absently held out her PADD for Crewman Barley to claim. Within Borg communication pathways, a similar exchange, ending with {...so don't bother me for a bit, Captain, Delta, everyone,} took place.

Tina and Second moved off down the corridor, through the wall of soldiers as if they were not present. The two were silent as eyes reflecting dozens of emotions watched them. Borg and human, victims of pizza-technology gone horribly wrong and consequently inhabitants of the other's body, had much to talk about.

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They light tactical units were more intelligent than probes, had the distinction of self-proclaimed names. Names denoted individuality; and individuality, up to a point, was encouraged within Chaos. The intellect potential of Talon and Flare fell somewhere in the nebulous range between dog and dolphin: smart enough to improvise on the situation-as-was, yet requiring higher order units to plan for the dimly perceived concept of "future." In many ways, the mind-set of light tactical units could be described as vicious in the manner of falcon or eagles.

Flare was elder of the duo, seventy-six meter length crisscrossed by scars attesting to his battle prowess and survival. Talon, at forty-five meters, was only recently decanted from the

creche chambers, his birth a short century in the past as the expedition began boosting unit numbers for an initial strike into this region of the target galaxy. Both units, grown in a form resembling the extinct Terran animal once known as a manta ray, had been lounging on a comet nucleus, feeding, when the directive from They had come.

We go! We go! chorused Talon and Flare together, reveling as endorphins were released into their systems. They were bred for battle, eager despite knowing it was a useless cause without readily available medium or heavy reserves. The pair, even cunning Flare, would die as they fulfilled their command; they would end their life in pleasure, rending Order, accepting their chemically-induced reward. Flare especially looked forward to the fight, ancient memories bright with youthful battlelust, focusing on the origin of his scars from Borg ships.

Talons and tail gouged comet nucleus as last bites were snatched, epidermal senses triangulating relative position in the quadrant. Additional contact with They brought forth detailed star charts, multiple courses to the target marked as well as current position of other units. The light tactical units were expected to determine the best method of approach, They, as always, in the background subtly pulling strings. Talon and Flare screamed telepathically to each other, hearing answering cries of encouragement from too-distant units. The battle against Order was once again joined!

* * * * *

Ford stood at the juncture of two corridors, watching the Borg down the hallway. He was before an open access panel, all four arms (two artificial) within the workspace. Occasionally another drone would appear from around the corner carrying a piece of equipment or specialized tool. The two never talked to each other, neither a greeting nor an annoyed grunt, the former simply holding out a limb to receive what the latter had brought. Ford counted the arms again, noting, as he had multiple times, a characteristic mismatching section of armor over left shoulders. This drone /had/ to be the one he had overheard Ensign Lowrey and Crewman Vinth talking about, in conjunction with their renewed love life, in the Twilight Zone. Nerving himself, Ford sucked in a deep breath and nonchalantly strolled forward.

"Um, hello? Have you a minute?"

"What do you want, human?" asked the drone in a monotone. "We are busy right now. Your presence lowers my efficiency."

Ford was silent for a moment. The Borg did not seem to have slowed his indefinable task. "I hear you can provide," lick of lips, "sex on the beach. The best."

Work within the bulkhead halted, head turning exorcist style to regard Ford. Slowly a close-mouthed smile crossed pale face. The expression was more parody than actual smile as unused facial muscles were exercised. Ford gulped.

Borg should not be allowed to smile, thought Ford to himself.

"Yes, I can provide excellent sex on the beach. Would you like it now? I can spare a few minutes."

By the Directors, panicked Ford, I didn't mean that! If this turns kinky, I am outta here! What have I gotten myself into? Images galloped through Ford's mind, none good. However, no protestations passed his frozen throat. The Borg took the silence as assent.

"Don't worry, we won't be disturbed. This task will not lower my efficiency, much. I actually enjoy requests like this. My designation is 2 of 240."

No, no, no, no, no, no, no!! Ford poised himself to sprint away and deny all accusations.

2 of 240 turned back to the workspace. His body blocked all view of proceedings, but the distinctive sound of a transporter sounded several times. "You don't know how /long/ it has been since I have had an appreciative species. I am Borg, you know, and would not give it up. If it wasn't against orders, I'd happily add you into our perfection." He paused his unknown task to twist his head and look Ford up and down. Full attention was returned to the bulkhead. "Well, maybe not you in particular. Nonetheless, your species will know Oneness one day. Until then, I will spread what little perfection my imperfect self can." The gurgle of liquids was superseded by click of glass on glass, followed with distinctive ring of metal on glass. The Borg turned, presenting a tall tumbler of some concoction. "Here you go, your drink."

Ford tentatively took the glass. The liquid within was translucent pink with a squirt of white drifting down the volume's center. A pineapple wedge and machismo cherry under a parasol toothpick garnished the edge. "What is it?" asked Ford, eyes wide.

2 of 240 blinked. "Sex on the beach, as requested. My species profile clearly indicates not only proficiency at chemical engineering, but an excellence in the related bartending arts. I was a superb cruise ship bartender before my assimilation."

"Oh."

* * * * *

"I wonder what they are talking about," murmured Lisa absently. "They" in question were Yeoman Jones and the Borg called Second. The pair had been nigh near inseparable since their initial scene at the airlock, trundling around the station together. No one was quite sure what was going on as they shut up when someone came within earshot, but from the distance it was obvious animated discussion was occurring. Currently it seemed Tina was giving the drone a thorough tour of the station.

Lisa's shadow halted, muscle-assisting biomotors in legs whining slightly. Ten additional shadows at a greater distance stopped as well, ever-present phaser rifles lifting. "The human designated Tina Jones is attempting to explain the concept of 'soup on a stick' to Second. Second is trying to understand, but our truncated archives do not contain mention of this substance."

The drone commander - Lisa was not sure if that description was completely apt - had taken to following her around. He claimed his efficiency (at what, no one was quite sure) was greater when he was not on his cube; and he was unwelcome on both Explorer and Banshee for a myriad of reasons. That left Waystation as destination of choice. "How do you know that?" asked Lisa as she turned to stare.

"The same manner I know Doctor has broken into your station files to check the manifest for nonsentients, Delta A has accidentally wedged her leg in a hole, and 231 of 310 is peeping into Waystation's exterior windows. I know all that is going on; that is who I am."

"Who are you?"

"I am Captain. We are the sub-collective of Exploratory-class Cube #347."

Lisa sighed, turning on heel to continue her walk along the market level. Vorezze had warned her about those plurality changes. Just when you thought you had him figured, the "we"s came out. Lisa tried to ignore the noisy footfalls of the marine contingent.

"I'm just amazed there have not been any major confrontations as of yet." Captain remained silent. "There haven't been incidents, have there?"

"Nothing, as you say, major. All mishaps have been taken care of quietly," responded the drone. A glance backwards was rewarded with a face more blank than usual. Lisa frowned. Now

what the hell was /that/ comment supposed to mean?

She was about to pursue that troubling line of questioning when Captain's head snapped towards the direction of his cube, somewhere unseen beyond the station's hull. The three drones which had been in line-of-sight, each with suitable escort, had also halted. Lisa's comm badge chirped.

"What is it?" she asked after slapping the communicator.

"Don't bother," answered Captain before response was provided from the command deck. The various drones had returned to their tasks. "They have noticed us: two light tactical units have entered our sensor envelope. Second has returned to the cube while I coordinate us from here." He paused. "Explorer and Banshee are not quite ready, but we will take them out to meet with They. You are not equipped to observe the forthcoming battle. We should adjoin to your bridge or another suitable location."

Lisa nodded, leading the way towards the nearest turbolift.

{How many now?} sent Captain towards Doctor. His body was walking behind Beck, observing foibles of Federation behavior to add to Collective databases, while the majority of his mind was several kilometers distant. Neither soldiers nor station commander appeared to notice they were not the focus of his attention.

{Eighteen, not including bad-girl Lieutenant J'hana. Bad-girl has visited the vet office three times now.} Doctor was in the midst of deassimilating yet another Starfleeter, the victim of Borg reflexes when on the receiving end of an assault. Upper echelon officers had yet to hear about the incidents, fortunately; and those lower in the command ladder were keeping rumors (truth) from spreading. J'hana was another case all together as she continually tried to test her Andorian fighting skills against drones busy making modifications to the Explorer. She was worse than a Klingon!

{Well, clean up the human, wipe relevant memories, and send him back to his unit.}

{Okie-dokie.}

Beck was commenting on Yeoman Jones' fascination with Second, and visa versa. Captain tore his awareness away from a swearing Delta, one berating a work group for not using the proper thickness of metal in repairing a catwalk: one leg had gone through the floor, trapping body A. Concerning Second, Captain himself continued to be mystified as to why his backup consensus monitor spent so much time with the human, but as long as he maintained his efficiency, the reason was unimportant.

The irrelevant conversation turned towards the status of Borg-Starfleet relations, of which Captain did not want to respond. The art of deflecting questions from a topic was not his strong suit, however, and it quickly became apparent Beck was suspicious. The intrusion from Sensors in the form of /four/ grid points-of-view (Cube #347, Waystation, and the two primary Starfleet battleships Explorer and Banshee) was welcome.

{Captain, Sensors [spouts] two light tactical They incoming at high [zoom].} The visual abruptly altered as Sensors altered the station datafeed. Captain would bet the Starfleeters were unaware exactly how compromised their systems were. The Federation computers resembled Swiss cheese as they leaked information out the holes. {Sensors likes all this grid area!}

By any means....by any means.... The root command began to echo once more.

{Stick to relevance, Sensors. Delta, report on modifications to station and local ships.}

Delta was still trying to extract body A from the hole. {Explorer and Banshee, as the most powerful Federation ships on site, are the closest to completion. However, several vital

systems have yet to be installed. If we need to use them at this time, we will have to take direct control. As far as Cube #347, one face is now clean, but rewiring has slowed as other tasks take precedence.}

Very few options remained open. Captain initiated a decision cascade. The entire process, from sensing to final consensus, including all conversations and viewing of data, required mere seconds. A proper sub-collection would have ran the matrices in a third the time, which only highlighted Cube #347's imperfections. Sub-collective inefficiencies aside, They had to be eliminated.

{Second, take the cube. All engineering hierarchy will continue with their assigned tasks. The following from assimilation [designation list] will beam to Explorer and Banshee and assume computer control. An escort from weapon hierarchy [designation list] will also transport to protect assimilation members from overt hostilities.../do not/ assimilate the crews, nor terminate/injure them if possible. Understand Weapons?} Captain did not wait for acknowledgment. {I will coordinate all from Waystation, as well as serve as liaison between us and the inevitable verbal explosions. Comply.}

{Compliance,} returned from all quarters.

Waystation personnel finally registered They on their grid, contacting Beck.

"Don't bother," said Captain. "They have noticed us: two light tactical units have entered our sensor envelope. Second has returned to the cube while I coordinate us from here." He paused. "Explorer and Banshee are not quite ready, but we will take them out to meet with They. You are not equipped to observe the forthcoming battle. We should adjoin to your bridge or another suitable location."

Beck led the way towards the nearest turbolift. Captain followed, soldiers nervously dogging his heels.

"Multiple Borg transporter signatures," reported J'hana. Baxter swiveled in his chair to look at the Andorian. People had lately reported her stalking Explorer's corridors with bat'lath in hand. That action in itself was not unusual, except J'hana did not normally dress up in full ceremonial attire fit for an Andorian hive function, which often included much hacking with sharp objects and capacious amounts of blood. Her occasional disappearances, no more than an hour, also vibrated the worry chords of Baxter's highly trained captain senses.

"They better not be messing with the replicator again," snarled Conway. Minor modifications by Borg to Explorer's computer code, completed under Larkin's watchful android sight, had accidentally corrupted coffee patterns. Baxter winced as he thought back on those very long thirty minutes; four security personnel had been required to restrain the irate commander from literally tearing apart the responsible parties.

Baxter shook his head at Conway's comment. "Where did this group go? And how many? Hartley is convinced there isn't a square millimeter these Borg haven't scanned or altered, all to the detriment of Explorer. Janice told me our former transporter chief is really picking up the engineering mindset, and all the paranoias that go with it." He paused. "Don't tell Hartley I said that. In fact, forget I said anything at all not related to our newest visitors." Several bridge crew discretely tucked away the information for future blackmail, except Larkin, who dutifully wiped all memory of the incident.

J'hana frowned as she poked a button. "Ten Borg, all on our secondary bridge. Sir, there is no reason for them to go there."

"Incoming transmission from the cube," called Larkin.

Baxter's attention shifted from his security officer to ops. "On screen."

Catwalks filled the screen, devoid of life except for a hint of movement in the distance. Baxter wondered how they managed to pull off that "infinity" effect, and how long it had taken to design. The Borg definitely had ominous style, even if they lacked a winning personality.

"Explorer here," said Baxter. He wanted to add something else, but the surreal picture froze all thoughts of flippancy.

Spoke the multivoice: "Hang on...it's going to be a bumpy ride." The connection terminated.

"What the h-" began Conway. He was interrupted by J'hana's shout.

"By the Hive! A tractor beam has just locked onto us! And, most importantly, my weapon controls are gone!"

Ford, quiet unto this point, started to hit his console with a closed fist. "Sir, I've just lost helm." A couple of sparks flew in response to banging on the shoddily made station.

Larkin cleared her throat. "What?" asked Baxter. "Something's going on, and if you have anything to add to our crisis, just say it!"

"Captain, all computer functions have been rerouted to our secondary bridge and a Borg style forcefield erected around the area."

"We've been hijacked?"

"Affirmative, sir. I still retain sensors at my station and it appears Banshee has suffered a similar fate. We are leaving the station at high speed," Larkin said with typical android demeanor.

J'hana quivered in excitement before charging off the bridge for the turbolift, bat'lath already unsheathed.

{That must have hurt,} commented 118 of 300 as he watched the insane Andorian bounce off the forcefield yet again. The security parameter had been erected from a portable unit with its own power source; while not perfect, neither crews of Banshee nor Explorer could easily disable barrier from the outside. Upon discovery of this fact, J'hana had taken to bodily rushing the field, only to slump to the deck semi-conscious after each charge. Metal of the brandished bat'lath magnified the shock.

62 of 203, hand firmly placed on a console while assimilation tubules provided the sub-collective's link with the ship's computer, did not bother to turn to observe the sight. He was viewing the action through visual input from the alert tactical detachment. {Here comes the Flarn. It seems pissed.}

{She wassss not added to the Collective at the time of her planetary asssssault,} hissed 202 of 203 without audible vocalization. 202 of 203 was in fact of the Flarn species himself, the most recent addition to Cube #347's imperfectly assimilated sub-collective. He had been dispatched as one of the assimilation hierarchy trio tasked to control Explorer. {If she had, she wouldn't be in ssssssuch a mental sssssstate.} 202 of 203 towered over the other drones, his silhouette extremely obvious.

The Flarn, Doctor Benzra by the Explorer manifests, paled as much as her species could as she caught sight of 202 of 203's bulk. Physician duties forgotten, she dropped her hypospray, ignoring the slowly recovering J'hana. She charged the forcefield. The barrier shimmered as the large body impacted, but easily held.

{That must have hurt,} remarked 118 of 300 once again.

{Hang on...it's going to be a bumpy ride,} echoed in Vorezze's skull as Captain's single voice spoke in sync with the multivoice on the screen.

"I don't like the sound of that," said Charlotte.

Lieutenant Commander Ben Rachow at helm leered, "It seems like it would be just your thing."

"You are dead, helm-boy!" shouted Charlotte.

The ebb and flow of the datastreams was engrossing. Sensors coordinated three incoming sensor feeds, her hierarchy seamlessly manipulating them into a single unit. As she did not have fine control over the Federation ship systems, lacking were obvious distortions and hallucinations. Sensors expressed dissatisfaction over the perceived inefficiency, but no one else was complaining. The pair of light tactical units were pinpointed. Captain sent commands for transwarp engines to disengage.

{Weapons, you have provisional control, but don't abuse it. Act responsibly to terminate the They units. We coordinate Banshee and Explorer to follow your lead,} said Captain. Several working partitions of command and control assumed full mastery of Banshee and Explorer's systems, subsuming themselves to Weapons' guidance. The action resulted in a concurrent relaxation of dominance over general drone behavior. Captain internally winced as the number of inappropriate impulses battering sub-collective inhibition filters increased.

Wheedled Weapons, {We cannot blow up even one Starfleet vessel? Maybe moderate damage with light casualties?}

{Not a scratch on the paint, not an intentional bruise. Destroy They. That is the action which must be performed.}

Sensation of heaving sigh as various weapons were untargeted from unsuspecting Federation. {A few broken bones? At least the Flarn and the J'hana.} Several mentalities, those currently tasked to Explorer, weighted Weapons' proposition.

{Tempting, but no. You will comply.}

"My God, they look so alive! I've never seen anything move like that! Borg, Captain...are you listening?"

Captain heard the words, oddly removed even though they originated from a being physically much closer than the ten light year distant cube. He did not have time for such distractions! A battle was about to commence, one where wisdom of the Greater Consciousness would have no input, and he was required to coordinate three ships and four thousand drones diagnosed as psychotic by Borg standards. The continuing efforts by crews of the hijacked vessel pair to regain computer control did not help the situation.

"We are here, but we are busy," mouthed Captain in a low monotone. They units had spotted their adversaries and begun to shift into an offensive posture. While torpedo range remained five minutes away, a complex series of maneuvers was required to demonstrate to They that all members of the small fleet were firmly under Collective control. {Second, initiate pattern alpha; partitions one through four, swing Banshee and Explorer out wide.}

Admiral Newmann pounded a fist on the console Captain was using as an interface to Waystation's computers and exterior senses. Discretely placed communication nodes kept him firmly linked with Cube #347 as well as the several dozen drones aboard the station. "I demand to know what is going on!"

Captain refused to move his hand, despite the fact the human's extremity had missed his own limb by mere centimeters. Primitive dominance displays of the unassimilated could be very

trying. He suppressed the urge to slam the man against a bulkhead, recognizing the violent impulse as not his own. {Keep your hierarchy focused on the task, Weapons.} Captain directed the assimilation hierarchy to modify their computer control slightly.

"We will allow subspace access between those on the station and the Federation ships. However, the signal must be masked as a Borg tertiary carrier feed. Our control will be degraded 0.015% by this action, although the probability They will recognize the deception is calculated to be close to nil. Modifications are complete. We are rerouting the datastreams." Translation: one drone elsewhere on the station had to directly interface itself into station communication to serve as conduit for the humanoids to blithely blather at each other.

The admiral rubbed his hands together. "Finally. You, ensign at ops, open a channel to Banshee. I want to talk to someone, not just look at an exterior view."

The ensign flicked her eyes towards Beck. The station commander had yet to explode, which was a good thing; else stress was building to a critical point, which was /very/ bad. "Do it," motioned Beck with a wave of her hand. "Let me remind you, Admiral, that you don't officially exist. And since you are not officially real, I would appreciate it if you would not go around ordering crew which are under my /official/ authority."

"You are all to receive mindwipes when this is done, so I'll ignore that remark."

"Do so at your peril. The two Andorians your troops could not deport are very close acquaintances."

"Sirs, Captain Vorezze is answering," interrupted the ensign into the budding argument.

"On screen," ordered the two at the same time, glares of mutual open hostility exchanged.

"Vorezze," bellowed Newmann, "report! What in the seven hells is going on there? All we get are pretty pictures from Mister Untalkative here."

Captain withdrew a slice of his awareness back to his body, enough to look up from the uninteresting console. He was positioned at the back of the command deck and was momentarily not the center of attention. Seeing an excellent opportunity, he allowed a rather nasty smile to cross his face, directed at Vorezze. It was quickly erased. Taunting the Starfleet captain was fun...irrelevant, but enjoyable.

"You!" screamed Vorezze, ignoring Newmann. "You Borg SOB! We have no ship control and our communications have been blacked out since that cube of yours latched onto us with a tractor beam! What is the point of dragging us into this fight if you didn't need our crews anyway?"

{You are a redundant system,} calmly replied Captain, facial muscles now locked in a deadpan expression.

"Redundant? That's all we are?"

Demanded Newmann, "Who are you talking to?"

{Defensive and offensive modifications were incomplete at the time of They intrusion. We must act as One to keep your vessels in one piece, and our actions are the most efficient manner at this time. Your ship would not be a match alone against the They light tactical units. Cube #347 could dispatch the units one at a time, but together our overt theatrics will be more convincing.}

"That isn't a straight answer," sulked Vorezze as he relaxed slightly.

{It will make more sense if you survive the battle.}

"Survive? I may die in an engagement of three on two with one of those three being a Borg cube?"

"Who are you talking to?!"

Captain chose to speak aloud. "Human, Vorezze is conversing with me. I have just informed him of a 19.9% chance the Banshee may be destroyed in the upcoming dogfight. There is an additional 5% probability our control will slip and we may accidentally destroy one or both of the Starfleet ships."

"Damn," whistled Beck.

"However, we can only do our inefficient best. Twenty They torpedoes targeting Cube #347. We are now within torpedo range. Firing."

Vorezze's face went white as his tactical officer, DiSanto, informed him of Banshee deploying one of its cataclysm torpedoes without apparent authorization. The battle was begun.

Torpedoes, and their close cousin missiles, are a simple idea. The concept is to use an engine to send explosive payloads towards the enemy with the intent to damage, decimate, and/or destroy. The guidance system may be as simple as a metal detector which locks on the first thing it senses, be it friend or foe, to complex intellects that can not only track prey to a combustive finale, but hold up its side of a conversation on sub-nuclear dynamics at the same time. The latter is typically much more expensive than the former, thus rarely comprises the bulk of a ship's munitions locker.

Warfare in space has added a few extra frills the basic torpedo paradigm. Hulls highly resistant to radiation and concussive damage require payloads with a greater oomph; and electronic warfare devices constantly modify the torpedo's electromagnetic field to remove potentially damaging dust particles from the line of travel, as well as provide ability for warhead to burrow through protective shields of the target. Still, some things never change, and guidance system options are one of them.

They had their own version of the torpedo. Many organic processes substituted for metal and ceramic, but the end result was the same: a very fast body packing a large boom. Unlike mechanized civilizations, They torpedo units /all/ had brains; and brains, even the simple kind represented by a torpedo, are more intelligent than any but the most expensive manufactured device. As a bonus, torpedo units were extremely cheap to grow.

Talon and Flare appraised the situation with their one-track minds, targeting the Borg cube with ten torpedoes apiece. To Flare's experienced senses, the smaller ships were acting in concert with the larger; and Talon felt the quaver of ephemeral subspace harmonics which represented the ebb and flow of Order communications. The conclusion was obvious: They had miscalculated - They could admit their mistakes, and learn from them - in Order's ability to assimilate more unto itself.

If Flare had eyes, they would have narrowed in thoughtful mental pause as he contemplated his forthcoming death. A minimum of two swarms of light attack units was required to rend the small Exploratory-class successfully; and with three vessels, two of unknown capability modified to Borg specifications, he and Talon were outmatched. No matter.

On the other side, the Borg sub-collective directed Banshee to fire a cataclysm torpedo set on area effect. Explorer was brought forward both to act as a target for any They torpedo units which were not destroyed and to function as an extension of the cube's still truncated sensor grid. Cube #347 began to rotate, sending out its own flock of torpedoes.

The battle was over before it had truly began, before medium range weapons such as phasers or disrupters could be deployed. Talon and Flare had barely begun powering twitch muscle capacitors in anticipation of unleashing their arc-dischargers when the cataclysm torpedo exploded. Both units had followed on the heels of their torpedo units, confident they would

provide a living chaff to initial defenses. The tactic had been used by Flare several times, although he had always been part of a much larger swarming. The subspace shockwave from the cataclysm torpedo vaporized organic screen and buckled their own shields.

The torpedoes from Cube #347 bore in, locked on the temporarily dazed pair of light tactical units. Payload was small, only fifty isotons apiece. Talon and Flare disappeared in an orgy of explosions, leaving no trace of their existence behind.

{By any means...by any means...by any means...} echoed in the dataspace of Exploratory-class Cube #347, through Vorezze's stunned brain as his crew watched the flurry of overkill on viewscreens, and over Captain's lips along with a wave of sub-collective satisfaction.

* * * * *

Talon and Flare joyously met their demise, dying in a sea of pleasure as They released all endorphin blocks. They pulled back, focusing on aural/visual/electrical/magnetic and other senses without name, only knowing, through the skins of area probes. The loss of the light tactical units was not onerous and they had been released easily.

Unlike Order, which had a tendency to hold onto drones to the point of absurdity, not wanting to relinquish any piece of its machinery, the Chaos of true perfection was much more forgiving. A unit was bred to its position in the Whole, decanted into individuality and a desire to fulfill its genetic programming. A unit was not truly happy unless it was performing its duties, even if said duty included death as its ultimate destiny; and They endeavored to keep all of Theyself happy.

The passing of Talon and Flare was not without merit, for information had been gained. Somehow, somehow, the Borg Exploratory-class ship had managed to assimilate the Federation outpost, thus raising the stakes. The odds describing that particular outcome were very long, but it had been done. No matter: the swarm of mediums, even now in transit towards the cube target, would suffice.

And if it doesn't? asked They.

It will work, soothed They.

We must not underestimate Order, for that is how we lost our initial toehold in this galaxy, reminded They.

Cerebrate masses separated by a thousand years and countless parsecs, yet as close as snail and shell due to telepathic contact, mulled over options. A symbiont belched a sugar-stimulant cocktail from genetically altered saliva glands. The organs bestowed the once benevolent dictator race the appearance of a goitered chipmunk with cheek pouches full of seeds; outlandishly long fingers and toes massaged gigantic neurons as a reward of pleasure caused its frog-like mouth to curl upwards in a smile of mindless delight. They were pleased with its actions.

We will wake two heavies, decided They.

The forward expedition part of Theyself only has two heavies, reminded They. Many were lost to Order and we had not planned to need such power for pacification on this side of the target galaxy.

Two heavies will guarantee destruction of this pocket of Order. We must cleanse the wound, or watch it fester, declared They. Three new heavy zygotes will be initiated, purpose to deal with future Borg incursions.

We agree, said They.

* * * * *

Captain blinked to local awareness with a phaser rifle mere centimeters from his breast plate. Another hand canon targeted his skull. A third weapon, for some reason, was aimed at groin level. A mental check revealed all drones on Waystation similarly occupied. The lone exception was ex-chef 17 of 19, who had found refuge in Ic'hassssst V'kelsnet with the Andorian owners whom he had struck up an earlier conversation concerning exotic recipes.

"What is the reason behind our apparent restraint?" asked Captain. Battle over, Cube #347 had abandoned Banshee and Explorer to their slower warp drive. Starfleeters could try to slaughter all the Borg on Waystation, but they would fail; the consequence would be total assimilation of all sophonts. The sub-collective would continue under Second's guidance, should he, 4 of 8, be terminated.

{Don't you dare form those thoughts. I am not going to be left with that mess,} berated Second.

"Go ahead drone, make my day," muttered the groin-directed phaser wielder. His eyes shone with dutiful homicidal fervor, or an illegal stimulant or two. "One move, and I bake the family jewels. Remove those assimilation thingies from the computer."

Captain regarded the marine, computing probable intellect to be just above a paramecium. "Human. One, your directives are contradictory: if I move, you shoot this body; and if I don't move, you shoot this body. Two, my species is humanoid, but obviously not human. How do you know where my gonads are located? Three, drones do not engage in procreation, therefore, why would any drone /care/ if you damage that part of its body above others? Four, if you shoot this drone or any of us aboard, you will shortly thereafter be uttering the phrase 'We will comply'.

"Do We make ourselves clear?"

The marine swallowed heavily, raising the focus of his phaser to mid-torso. A glance was thrown to anyone of greater rank to 'please tell me what to do, now.' Captain panned across the command deck, locating the commanding officers.

"Captain Beck and Admiral Newmann. You will order our release and allow us to continue at our tasks. More They will be coming."

Beck glared. All action in the area had come to a halt. Quiet reigned. "Borg captain, I dislike the marines stationed here, but they are Starfleet. And while I know nothing about Section 31 and trust them about as far as I could throw a galaxy-class starship on a high gee world, they are also Starfleet. The truth is, Captain, I have far more faith in them telling the truth, eventually, to me than I have confidence in your plans. We only know one side of this They story, after all."

Captain glowered. "If you knew what the Borg knew...but for that, you would have to be assimilated and linked to the Collective." He looked at the black suited, slightly smiling Admiral Newmann. Time to shatter his obvious ambition for Borg technologies. "Admiral Newmann, inclusive among those Federation assimilated through the years by the Collective are several deep cover Section 31 operatives. We long knew of your department before Banshee crew inadvertently transported themselves to Cube #347. And while you have the stereotypical black attire mastered, your standard operating procedures are petty and your view of how to mold the Federation's future tasteless, even by our standards. And we have the experience of over ten thousand species. We also have detailed knowledge of some of Section 31's

more...interesting...schemes. Irrelevant information is occasionally beneficial. Shall I illuminate Captain Beck and all within earshot?"

Admiral Newmann grew increasingly pale as Captain spoke, until Captain himself had more color in his cheeks than the admiral. Newmann whispered under his breath, "By the Directors, they'll have my job - my pips! - for this if word gets out." He ahemed and spoke in a loud theatrical tone, "You, um, bluff, drone."

"Let us go. We are committed to this path and must prepare for They. By any means. Our probability for success hovers around zero if we must take the time at this point to assimilate this station."

Beck looked thoughtful. "Marines, let the Borg go."

"But, sir!" protested groin-boy. "You earlier told Colonel Lazlo..."

"I change my mind. And I think the admiral has changed his, too."

"Capt..."

"Admiral, you have changed your mind, haven't you? Or should I ask this drone to continue his interesting tale?"

Eyes flicked back and forth between the two titans. Who would give? What manner of rumors could be fed to drunk mates tonight at the bar Dillon had opportunistically opened?

Newmann heaved a racking sigh. "Yes, Captain Beck, I have also changed my mind." His fixed stare never wavered from the other's face.

"Good. Marines, let Captain go, and tell the colonel and his Section 31 opposite to allow all drones free movement again. Borg, I suggest you leave the command deck for now. Marines, please escort Captain elsewhere. Anywhere but my sight."

A string of "yes, sirs" followed. Captain was relieved. A subpartition of command and control had devised one whopper of an emergency lie, but it had not been necessary. While proper Borg were programmed to tell the truth, those imperfectly assimilated could bend their compulsions a bit. Either way, tact was not a Borg imperative. He mentally reached out to push the cube into "bat-out-of-hell" transwarp.

{Second, when the cube gets here, you can take my place on the station. I need a few hours to regenerate.}

"Do you trust 'em?" asked Lisa's second-in-command of her. The two were strolling down the mall area. Both Ic'hassssst V'kelsnet and Dillon's make-shift open-air bar, Warp Nine, were doing well. Personnel from the ranks of Section 31, marine contingents, and skeleton station crew mingled at eatery and bar. Given the choice between replicators and rations, a third option, real food, won out every time; and rumor was circulating Dillon sold /real/ alcohol, not synthahol. Surprisingly, only a few brawls had occurred thus far.

"Trust whom? The Borg, or Admiral Newmann and his Section 31 bastards?" Lisa stopped. She could have sworn there was a drone mixing drinks behind the bar, and she was certain another had just ducked into Ic'hassssst V'kelsnet. One Borg with its mandated escort of three marines came into view from a blind corner, the latter laughing with abandon as if at an off-color joke.

Walter shrugged, "The Borg, of course. I heard about the little scene on the command deck two days ago, but the admiral /is/ Starfleet, not a pack of organic automatons with a twisted desire for perfection. I wonder how the Collective reconciled what I have always thought to be a hypocritical belief that stuffing distinctiveness into one, boring culture could be perfection."

Lisa squinted. Yes, that /was/ a Borg shaking a tumbler at Warp Nine. Someone shouted

for another 'sex on the beach.' "I'm sure there is a logical reason for the Collective's push for assimilation, but they are more a natural disaster that we will have to deal with when it comes. Admiral Newmann is human; and humanity scares the hell out of me sometimes. What if Q, in that whole Picard episode a while back, judged us wrong? What if the universe would be better off without us?"

Walter was silent.

The crowd at Warp Nine cheered as a round was bought by the house.

{Delta, engineering update,} ordered Captain. His body had remained absent from Waystation for several time periods, although his awareness via the perceptions of other drones remained close. For some reason, the various commanding officers considered /him/ to be the entity responsible. Captain didn't really understand why they singled him out for a grudge that in reality should be divided among four thousand.

Delta hummed in stereo, {And what other kind of report would my hierarchy provide? Weapon readiness and supply?}

{Don't you dare! Weaponry belongs to me!} came the predictable reply. Delta's passing satisfaction showed she had been angling to needle 45 of 300 and was pleased with her success. Weapons, meanwhile, turned inward with paranoia, initiating an inventory of his own. At least that effort would keep him and his hierarchy busy for a while.

{Why do you continue to provoke him?} No answer. {It detracts from the high efficiency you wish to maintain.} Silence. {No matter. Update.}

To command and control flowed the most recent compilation of engineering activities, both within and beyond the confines of the hull. It was swiftly sorted, ordered, copied in triplicate, resorted, reordered, and finally filed into the cube's bulging maintenance datastacks. The assimilation of species #5999, a race dedicated to the twin deities Bureaucracy and Red Tape, a thousand years prior had been a mistake; the gain of new methods for miniaturized high-density data storage was not worth the resulting bureaucratic irrelevancies which had yet to be completely purged.

The appended summary, which Captain dragged from the general mess, noted final modifications were complete on Banshee and Explorer. Six drones, two each from the hierarchies of engineering, weapons, and assimilation, remained behind to make sure Federation crews didn't become too feisty poking at contraptions they did not understand. The primary work crews had shifted to modifying smaller, less powerful vessels such as tugs, scouts, and runabouts. While the lesser ships were not as capable as their larger cousins, if They attacked the station all resources would be needed.

As far as Cube #347, communication repairs continued at a very slow pace. Three faces were now clear of the jamming material, leaving two more to wash down. Internal rewiring crawled, ever more faults discovered as testing equipment was set to wire. A link to the Collective would not be possible for another week, assuming the current rate of work remained constant.

{Delta, transmit the first part of the update to Waystation and all relevant recipients. Remove our status: the Starfleeters do not need to know our crippled state. The knowledge might make them bold and we do not need such complications at this time.}

{I comply,} returned Delta.

Captain turned to other duties, watching with a sliver of his awareness that the assigned task was performed correctly. No drone altered the final package as the message was relayed to

the station. Idle musings originating elsewhere in command and control, the Borg equivalent of random thought, noted Explorer and Banshee were not in use. Inaction of serviceable tools was not Borg. Captain opened a communications link with Banshee and Explorer bridges, setting the Collective Voice option; he also awoke Vorezze. An announcement was to be made.

"Starfleet crews. A list of sectors has been downloaded to your computers. You will proceed to the designated coordinates and scan for They. They will be destroyed. If you do not leave Waystation docking arms in ten minutes, we will take your ships out for you.

"You will comply."

"We are Borg. Your biological and technological perverseness will be terminated. Lower your shields and prepare to be destroyed. Resistance is futile," boomed over Banshee's bridge loudspeakers. A visual feed directed towards the They probe upheld the fiction of an assimilated Federation starship, complete with menacing drones moving about on Banshee's bridge. Three excited crewmen had won a lottery to be made up (by Dr. Issac and the ship's chief cosmetic consultant - why can't Starfleet bureaucracy just call him a barber?) to look like half-processed victims. Vorezze had subsequently been locked out of his own bridge for five hours while a drone sporting camcorder, backwards baseball cap, and the words "Executive Director" stenciled on his back, proceeded to film thirty minutes of perfection.

Beyond the modified Collective pronouncement of doom, Banshee was not allowed to contact any They units with subspace radio, that being an unBorglike action. At the start of the patrol the chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander David Riley, had attempted to circumspect the blockage, to no avail. He and his engineering crew's actions had garnered a stern warning from one of the drones still on board that further tampering would result in punishment. At the same time, Vorezze had received a nasty shock from the neural transceiver for not keeping closer tabs on his people.

On screen, the They probe was arcing away, fleeing the only prudent option open to it. It was the third probe thus far encountered by Banshee. "Damn it," swore Charlotte. "I wish we could know Their side of the story. The Borg aren't notoriously truthful, especially when they have something to gain."

"Shush," countered Vorezze, "or you'll get me in trouble."

Charlotte shot the captain a look which plainly said, 'Good. If you die and I can manage to get Velorn confined to quarters, /I'll/ be in charge. Which is how things should be, anyway.'

"Shall I get it?" asked DiSanto at tactical.

Vorezze nodded. "Yes. The Borg captain is becoming antsy over the fact we didn't instantly destroy it the second it was sensed. 'Inefficient, small beings,' are his exact words." Several crew nodded: the phrase was a familiar one from their time aboard Cube #347. "If we're not careful, they might hijack us again."

DiSanto tapped a few buttons as Rachow ordered the helm to pursue. A special mine exploded off the port, one which scrambled the underprotected circuits of the probe's engine core and denied it a chance to escape into warp. It was quickly overtaken. A torpedo placed in the middle of the space squid converted it to galactic sushi.

"Slow to impulse. You all know the drill," said Jad.

The drill was simple. Banshee (and Explorer, which was currently located in another sector) sat for ten minutes in one spot, carefully scanning for traces of They. What these traces were was unknown, information from the sensor grid funneled through the Borg onboard back to their sub-collective for processing. If no spoor was detected, the ship traveled in a random vector

for one light year, then scanned again. When a unit - all probes thus far - was discovered, the sub-collective pinpointed it through Banshee's scanners, then expected the crew to kill it.

Two long boring hours passed with nothing more exciting than a swarm of extrasolar comet nuclei. Vorezze began to nod off in his chair, aware that the action wasn't necessarily safe due to the predilection of his crew to play practical jokes on him, but unable to keep his eyes open despite the danger. Vivid daydreams washed over his mind: a certain ensign new to Banshee, curves in all the right places, asking him to help her on the holodeck. She wanted to try out a new mud-wrestling program.

Sarah was explaining how her colony traditionally mud-wrestled in the nude when discordant feedback shattered the scene. {Now is not the time to regenerate, Betazoid. We detected eight signatures on the last sweep, but resolution was not high enough to determine their status. Move three light years to the following coordinates and provide us with additional data.}

"No, no, no," moaned Vorezze. "It isn't fair!" No answer was forthcoming. He sighed and directed Ben to move Banshee to the demanded coordinates.

Banshee dropped out of warp in yet another empty area of space. Less than five minutes into the scan, a {Crap} resounded in Vorezze's skull. It was not Captain's voice, but the Borg multivoice. "Crap," echoed Jad, feeling the blood drain from his face. All eyes focused upon their suddenly alert captain and his sickly expression.

At ops, Commander Tagel Axik said, "We've mandates from the lords below. They are directing something into our communication feed." The term 'lords below' referred to the half dozen Borg who kept to themselves in a well-shielded secondary bridge. The viewscreen flickered, view of distant stars disappearing. In its place popped up a fuzzy image of cylindrical orange things, sea pen quality apparent to those versed in aquatic biology. "They Medium Tactical Units - Eight (swarm)" blinked in green at the bottom of the picture.

"My god!" spoke Rachow, jaw dropping - he was no ocean biologist. "Those are the biggest penises I have ever seen!"

"Cloak!" screamed Vorezze. "Cloak! Cloak us!""

Several They torpedoes impacted on an asteroid, one of millions in the system. The tumbling rock shattered into hundreds of pieces. By coincidence (or a twisted communal mind congratulating itself on a sick joke only it could understand), the system happened to be the same one the Borg cube had been originally hijacked to.

"We must remind you that maneuver will not work," stated 81 of 203 with outward calm. Internally, he was nervous to be alone on the Banshee's bridge, surrounded by unassimilated lifeforms. His compatriots in the dataspace remained close, but he had become unhealthily attached to this body. It was time to schedule a mental purge to erase the most recent clutter of unBorg attitudes. On the down side and the reason for his hesitancy, many of the barriers he had erected to shield himself from Assimilation's terminal depression would disappear, thus subjecting him to near full force personality memes originating from his hierarchy head.

"I don't care! Those last torpedoes were not potshots! Someone, cloak us, already!"

{You are panicking, Vorezze. They units have displayed an unusual affinity for all cloaking devices known to the Borg, including types native to this Quadrant. If anything, you are making yourself a better target.}

"Shut up, shut up, shut up! Get out of my mind! And get that drone off my bridge while you are at it!"

{Calm, Vorezze.}

"Shut up!!"

Captain distanced himself from the distasteful display of Vorezze's frustration and fear. The view from 81 of 203, whom he bade remain, showed any iota of respect the Banshee's captain may have gained since previous disgrace was fading fast. Still, the rigors of Starfleet academy had drilled into them ship operations. The inadequate attempt at coordination made Cube #347 look like an epitome of Borg efficiency.

The sub-collective worried They might notice the lack of perfection, rendering all plans of subterfuge obsolete. Perhaps the total assimilation option should have been followed, despite lack of resources and minimum projected loss of one eighth of sub-collective drones.

Banshee's role in the most current move against They's advancing chessboard army was to serve as bait. The idea bore an ironic similarity to Cube #347's original entrapment, only this snare was much larger. One medium tactical unit was a near match for a single Battle-class cube with full munitions and linked Collective tactical resources. Eight medium tactical units would chew through a less-than-perfect Exploratory-class vessel severed from the Greater Consciousness and two Federation battleships like wet tissue paper. Although subtlety was required, it would be implemented on a scale befitting Borg.

The asteroids required They units to dodge, to veer around what Banshee could go through. Heavy concentrations of radioactive ores in this portion of the belt confused torpedo unit senses. Given time, Banshee would be hunted down and destroyed, as would Explorer or Cube #347 if they dared to expose themselves by powering up. Currently the pair hid in the sensor grid shadow cast an exceedingly large nickel-iron rock.

{First target entering the trap,} sent Captain to the five drones waiting on asteroid beta-three.

{Acknowledged.}

In all, over five hundred of the engineering hierarchy was scattered on temporarily designated rocks roughly lining a tunnel Banshee would lead the swarm through. Small power plants of efficient Borg design had been constructed on the asteroids; hundreds of kilometers of wire originally meant to repair the cube's communication systems had been sacrificed to weave long metallic ropes of a highly superconductive nature. This trap was not designed to net fish, but harpoon whales.

Captain examined his now-working viewscreen. It displayed forty-eight green specks representing forty-eight modified asteroids, each with a small compliment of drones. Weapons was having a fit his hierarchy was not to be performing the actual harpooning, but consensus had overruled him: transportations beyond initial beamings of work groups might be noticed. To an uninformed observer able to hear subsequent directives from Captain, it would appear he was making all tactical decisions related to the closing snare. Actuality was quite different as Captain merely served as a switch board operator directing outcomes of deeper sub-collective consensus to its appropriate destination.

{Subunit #21, target #8 passing your position now.}

{Acknowledged.}

All members of the They swarm, the least of which was two kilometers of orange fierceness able to kick Cube #347's collective butt, entered the tunnel. Their silent focus remained on Banshee, wolves coursing for the kill. Vorezze adamantly refused to uncloak his ship.

{Lance them,} commanded Captain. Forty-eight chemically powered spears rose from forty-eight asteroids, each unraveling a cable behind it. At six per medium tactical unit, forty-

eight harpoons bit into thick epidermal hide. {Energize plants.} Forty-eight fusion plants originally of species #45 flared into incandescent life. Five hundred Borg signatures reported success, then demanded to be beamed away from their posts as eight giant organic bodies began to thrash.

Captain's next words, set to suitable multivoice, boomed over Explorer, Banshee, and Waystation intercoms: "Fish on."

* * * * *

Brawn and brains are two traits humans rarely associate together. When effort is spent developing one quality, the other often suffers. Not true of the juggernaut pair boosting away from pulsating mothership complexes.

Heavy tactical units were very large creatures; a typical specimen measured five kilometers in length with a girth of two kilometers. The biological form heavies were based upon had no counterpart in Terran seas, although knowledgeable aquatic scientists might claim the giant mass to resemble a sea cucumber. Any similarity was purely cosmetic.

The relative rarity of heavies in the active navies of They was not a product of the relatively easy process of growing the massive bodies to term, nor outfitting them with the necessary evils of Order, but with the mentality which was an integral part of any individual. The brain that developed in a heavy tactical unit was one step below a primary cerebrate mass; and the proper nurturing of such an immense intellectual potential required centuries of education and conditioning. Whereas probes and even light tactical units required only a few short months to go from cell to decanted adult, a properly produced heavy represented exponentially more in time and expedition resources.

The cost was worth the expense. Skirmishes with Order had proven the capability of a single They heavy to outfight anything less than twenty Battle-class cubes, and higher odds produced atrocious casualties for the Borg at the very least. In the end, the expedition had run out of heavies and become seriously depleted in mediums, necessitating the retreat. The primary colonization force, when it arrived a thousand Home years hence, would contribute ten times more heavies and twenty times the mediums as the forward expedition had lost to Order.

Our target is the Order-ridden station, informed Atom, one of the heavies, to They. My companion and I will eradicate the rot at its core before it can spread.

We are now engaging the Borg cube and its assimilated fleet, purred They, acting as a relay for Themselves as the medium swarm.

Excellent, intoned They. The roving strike force will be terminated. Prepare the assault force: we must gain drone specimens to determine the level of technological advance Order has gained since we last battled with them.

Atom and Nova formed their agreement, very much a part of decision making in the overall scheme of They. It would be very simple to destroy everything related to the Borg-assimilated Waystation, but a delicate touch was required to retrieve and process biological samples. The multitudes of assault unit types held in biostasis and directed by the heavies would assist in that endeavor. If They were very lucky, unaltered native humanoid specimens may be secured; unfortunately, the Borg tended to be efficient at converting their victims to Order. At the very least, the Federation would be thankful to They for ending an immediate Borg threat, which was a situation that could be built upon.

As the heavy tactical units faded into suprawarp, as genetic manipulators finished

modifying the next generation of heavies and delivered the three engineered ovum to incubator units, They performed the unusual and allowed the expedition cerebrates access to endorphins. A little celebration was in store.

Here ends "A Fish Story" Part Three: "Tally-Ho!" Part Four will conclude in "The One That Got Away"