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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 II - They

Slowly the drones of Cube #347 woke to darkness, confusion. The huge electrical surge caused by the Federation trap had knocked most major systems off-line. Even those systems not short circuited, burnt out, or simply fried lacked power: the crystalline hearts of the cube's primary and auxiliary cores had destabilized, and the matrices would require time to rebuild. Most frightening of all, from the perspective of a Borg drone, was the near lack of communication.

The fluidity which was the hallmark of the Borg Collective could be broken into three fundamental levels. The first, the most basic awareness of others, came when initially injected nanoprobes constructed an organic neural transceiver, connecting a new drone with others in the immediate surroundings. The organic transceiver had a range of a few kilometers. The second level of the Collective was attained with hardware-based transceivers, installed deep into the brain and powered with a biometric source. Effective range was approximately 34 light hours and served to connect sub-collectives within solar systems, be it a single cube or the tens of billions of a major industrial center. While the vinculum had other important tasks, it was also the foundation of the third level of the Collective, collecting local sub-collective transceiver signals and providing the external power boost to connect drones over thousands of light years into a workable whole.

The vinculum remained functional, able to continue its role as passive coordinator of the sub-collective even if it could not link with the Greater Consciousness due to the masking material coating the hull. Extreme redundancy, including a very compact emergency power source, did have advantages because spare parts for a vinculum were hard to manufacture and very difficult to obtain outside of a Borg shipyard. Removal of the fractal reflective substance on the hull would rectify the problem, as soon as more immediate concerns were attended. Lack of data due to computer damage, however, was swiftly to become a major headache.

Cube #347, like all Borg vessels, retained much information pertaining to operation, assignment, and pre-built solutions to a wide range of problems within its dataspace. Sheer amount of knowledge approached the combined resources of Federation/Klingon/Romulan empires, yet was only a meager fraction of overall Collective knowings. Requests to Collective archives for additional data were routine, pathways handled as automatically as looking up a book in the library and not requiring the dangerous, possibly corruptive influence of imperfect assimilation which worried the Greater Consciousness.

Despite the reams of data stored within Cube #347, only minute fractions could be held

consciously at any one time within a state called "working memory." Working memory was as much information as could be uploaded to the organic brains - heavily modified with internal storage devices and crystalline data nodes - of the crew. Data always available might be navigational charts, transwarp core maintenance, and thirty-six ways to remove a mustard stain. On the other hand, detailed knowledge of a species, including resistance indexes and weapon adaptation profiles, had to be dredged up from local archives. At this point in time, Cube #347 knew much about the Alpha Quadrant, and Starfleet in particular, but if asked how to adapt to the phased shield photon torpedoes of species #8832, would not be able to answer.

Surprisingly, the electrocution had resulted in light injuries and no terminations - much of the trap's fury had expended itself on superstructure and systems, remainder shunted by personal exoplating. Organic bodies were not harmed...much. Some instances of nasty burns and spasming assemblies/prosthetics trickled into the drone maintenance dossier, but overall the hierarchies of Cube #347 reformed quickly upon waking, limping into the inevitable argument upon what course of action to take and what to repair first.

{Weapons!} roared Weapons, his priorities firm. {Weapons! Tractor beams! Shields!}

Delta, head of the engineering hierarchy, snarled in return, {Ridiculous! We can't even see what we would be aiming at! Besides, there is barely enough power available to maintain what is left of our internal communication and regeneration systems, much less take an offensive posture. We must complete emergency construction of a power source, salvage the primary core, work on key environmental conditions, and /then/ repair lower priority systems. It is only logical.} In fact, one hundred eighteen drones plus both of her bodies were currently in Bulk Cargo Hold #8 erecting fusion planets to supplement battery storage and the paltry trickle of energy flowing from the cores.

{Lower priority systems? Weapons are not lower priority!}

{I find the lack of gravity annoying,} commented Second. Ability to see in the infrared part of the spectrum was not useful if the things one was walking into were the same temperature as surrounding air. He had been forced to switch to a relative of echolocation after a pelting storm by loose bolts. A glance at the tiers beyond Captain's nodal intersection showed many flashlights in use by those drones without such hardware installed. Someone was making bunny shadows on a wall. {Delta is quite logical.}

{See?} said Delta.

{See?} mimicked Weapons. His "voice" was the same, but he had purposely added a secondary harmonic to the overtone in imitation of Delta's double signature.

{Shut up, Weapons.}

{Shut up, Weapons.}

{Quiet!}

{Quiet!}

{If you don't stop, I'll make it /very/ unpleasant for you.}

{If you don't stop, I'll make it /very/ unpleasant for you.}

{Delta, Weapons, both of you cease your bickering,} cut Captain into the childish display.

Weapons rarely got along with any of the engineering heads, but he and Delta were an extreme example of animosity. There were instances when the sub-collective had become paralyzed with indecision because of the two. Now was not a good time to repeat such a deadlock. An order echoed through the cramped dataspace: {Consensus.}

Drones all over the cube came to a standstill, turning inward to lend their weight to the building decision matrix. Such an action normally did not occur, the halting of units on the

move, but crippled resources were to blame.

Announced Captain, {The order of repair is as follows: immediate power needs, basic environmental systems, primary power core and sensors concurrently, propulsion, shields, and weapons. The link between the Greater Consciousness and local computer systems will be restored as time permits; for the former it will be necessary to wash down the hull and remove the scattering layer, which cannot occur until we find a secure place for ourselves where we are not Starfleet targets.}

Despite a few grumbles from Weapons, the sub-collective swung into coordinated action.

The establishment of fusion plants, camouflaged by devices which hid coherent energy readings as random output, was the first good news Captain received since the Starfleet trap. The second came from Sensors in the form of a perceptible, if fuzzy, image of space beyond the hull.

{Sensors has [shoed] a passive sensor grid,} the insectoid declared, {to avoid [fireworks] signs of our functionality. The [suck] on our available power resources is negligible. However, due to limitations imposed by the situation, Sensors will be unable to substantially increase [eyeglasses] beyond what Sensors can see now.} Members of the hierarchy had been forced to perform manual rewiring themselves, engineering busy with more important tasks. Scavenging the necessary tools, transporters and replicators unavailable and hierarchy members largely without appropriate specializations, had been the hard part. Sensors carefully lay her spanner on the ground before settling herself in her form-fitting alcove. {Observe.}

Captain could not use his viewscreen - not only was there not enough spare power, but it required extensive repair. Instead he turned inward, carefully allowing himself to accept the input. The grid had been configured to allow photons impacting sparsely protected sensor patches over an entire cube face to be extrapolated into a single image. Neutrinos striking buried, unaffected hull clusters designed to "see" them lent a static to the overall scene, a sense reinforced by Sensors' perception of the particles tasting like a carbonated orange drink. Manual realignment not up to the standards of the currently overworked engineering drones also added a touch of inconsistency to the final product.

Three stocky vessels with oversized nacelles led the small convoy through warp. They were obviously tugs; and even if tractor beams could be neither seen nor sensed, the technology was clearly in use. Estimates of red-shifting put velocity at warp three, the top speed possible by the trio of ships when towing the bulky mass represented by Cube #347. While a full sensor suite was presently unavailable to the sub-collective, focus upon neutrinos and other particles emitted by the tugboat drives produced an energy signature fingerprint. From that point it was a short step to cross-index the profiles with a copy of the most recent Federation ship list loaded into working memory to find identification strings. The vessels in question were Tugboat Johnny, Tugboat Willy, and Tugboat Sammy.

The tugs were not the only ships in view; two larger spacecraft matched pace. The first was identified as USS Explorer, an easy task as it trailed behind the cube by a good distance, saucer section with registration available for examination. The second vessel held position off face #2, only its profile visible. Sovereign-class was the first analysis; enhancement of the saucer section gave half a registration: "NCC-9" and "USS BAN". While the ship itself was labeled "destroyed" in the cube's Federation database, the sub-collective knew better.

NCC-9561-C, USS Banshee. Captain - Jad Vorezze, Betazoid. The ship may not be personally known, but its captain most certainly was.

Suddenly many possibilities, many doors, opened for the sub-collective of Cube #347. In

the dark of his nodal intersection, Captain's face stretched into a half smile.

Some time ago Cube #347 had inadvertently been sent to the dawn of the Borg Collective, thanks to members of the Banshee crew who had managed to transport themselves to the cube and set events in motion through sheer ignorance. In a complicated series of incidents which had the sub-collective bending over backwards to /not/ upset the timeline, thus wiping out the Collective before it was begun, those same Banshee personnel had been outfitted with exterior neural transceivers to provide secure communication (among other things) with the directing cube while chasing after a band of rogue drones. Eventually, after history turned out as was fated with initiation of the Greater Consciousness, the whole gaggle of imperfectly assimilated and nonassimilated returned to their native time. Neural transceivers were excised from all crew prior to their restoration to the Alpha Quadrant...all but for one - Captain Jad Vorezze. The final rush to rejoin Banshee was hurried at the last second due to an abrupt change in circumstances, thereby prohibiting the final physical removal.

The assumption by Captain, the sub-collective, was that Vorezze had demanded Starfleet medical practitioners to extract the transceiver at first possible chance. True removal was easier said than done.

The initial connection of the implant had been directed by a single-use variety of 5' nanites. 5' nanoprobos served as Borg repairmen and mechanics for both organic and inorganic components. On their own, they were unable to assimilate an orange, much less a sentient being, a different suite of nanites required for that function. However, unless a specific command was given for the implant to detach or the doctor had infinite patience to remove all hardware tendrils millimeter by millimeter (causing excruciating discomfort due to direct stimulus of brain pain centers), bits and pieces of the transceiver, and associated nanites, would remain.

Under normal circumstances this issue would not be a problem. The specialized nanites, which could only build one implant type, were dormant; the body of the transceiver was itself long removed, probably to a Federation science lab. Jad would live out his normal life, eventually dying due to natural causes. Well, as natural as could be expected when Section 31 didn't really like you, and kept you alive only because you captained a really nice ship.

However, a certain command, sent upon a certain fractal subspace frequency, could reactivate the nanoprobos. The submicroscopic machines would begin to rebuild the neural transceiver, following their encoded blueprint. While the vinculum required 87.8% of the offending subspace reflecting layer on the hull to be removed before a link with the Collective could be re-established, the single unaffected face was more than sufficient for a connection to be forged with one Jad Vorezze. The Banshee captain was required to remain within one hundred light years of the cube for the transceiver link to work, but that detail would not be a problem.

Everything rested on the assumption the transceiver had been incorrectly removed, either the doctor not maintaining sufficient patience to properly complete the job or Jad unable to withstand several hours of unbelievable, unblockable pain, or both. If the nanites could not be activated, so be it, and other avenues of action would be considered. If they could...

If they could, Vorezze was about to experience one Hell of a surprise.

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Jad Vorezze nervously sat in his captain's chair. He occasionally fidgeted, trying to find a more comfortable position, but was not successful. He just did not trust the smoothly running

operation; and from the heightened emotional tension rolling from the rest of the crew, neither did they. A message, laced with word codes based on archaic Terran idioms and recorded under the watchful eye of Vulcan "experience officer" Captain Velorn, had been dispatched to superiors back on Waystation upon capture of the Borg vessel.

Admiral Newman was not on Banshee, nor within range of any probable s**t and fan combination. The high ranking types didn't stick their butts on the line when lower peons would adequately serve. Jad knew this, as did everyone in Starfleet: the enlisted crewman and ensign population had to be controlled, after all. Still, observing the action from a cloaked overwatch position had not been fun.

Borg cubes were damn big; and records indicated this one was a rather small vessel for its type. Jad vaguely wondered how large the one to which he had been transported was, Cube #347 or some such boring Borg designation. It had seemed enormous from the inside, the little he had seen.

All of Banshee's sensors were trained on the cube, actively scanning every centimeter of its surface for deviations in energy emissions, watching for signs of activity. To remain within the warp shell produced by the three tugs without destabilizing the field meant the side of the cube loomed close, less than one hundred meters separating hulls. Explorer was to the rear of the convoy, taking advantage of its position to lag as much as possible.

"Any change?" asked Jad. He consciously suppressed any vocal waver which might indicate he was less than calm. He was not successful.

Doctor Liz Lang, chief science officer, looked up with annoyance from her station. Ever present Zeke the hamster gnashed his teeth together before leaving a small deposit on the chair he was loafing on. Liz utilized a miniature pooper scooper with plastic baggy before glancing at the appropriate readouts. "Nothing. Odd fluctuations here and there, but nothing that can't be explained as internal damage by the electrocution."

Jad lapsed into silence to reconsider worst case scenarios. He absently rubbing the back of his neck where the transceiver had been located before Brian Issac, Banshee's medical doctor, had yanked it out. The scratching was a bad habit he has picked up over the last several months, a nagging virtual itch when stress reached new levels of discomfort. This morning, while squinting in the bathroom mirror, he had caught the telltale signs of a developing rash. Perhaps a visit to Brian should be scheduled.

Stream of consciousness thoughts rambled on, tangential from rashes to Ensign Tihara's notorious athlete's foot to what to replicate for dinner. Everyone knew their jobs - what good was a captain in times like these? Sure, the power trip was a good feeling, he would admit, but the pause between moments of action could be both nerve wracking and tedious. Jad reached a hand to scratch the back of his neck. Maybe he should end the yellow alert condition, or at least have someone dismantle the bothersome blinking yellow lights. Scratch. Unlike some people - glance to Burns - who can nap anywhere, Jad was unable to fall asleep on the bridge. Scratch, scratch, scratch.

Scratch?

"Oh, f..." squeaked Vorezze, the expletive cut off as pain suddenly split his head. It was the worse migraine he had ever experienced, including that time at eleven years he had tried to peek into the mind of his older cousin during her illicit liaison with the jewelry store clerk. He stood from his chair, tottered for a few agonizing seconds, then dropped to his knees. Charlotte snorted awake as the rest of the bridge crew stared.

"Are you okay, sir?" asked the commander. "Should I call the doctor, or simply hit Ford

over the head?"

"It isn't me!" protested Ford at helm. "I'm not thinking of anything which should do that!"

Charlotte looked around, "Well, it is /someone/." She paused. "Computer, locate Ensign Holth and Lieutenant Japloh."

"Ensign Holth is in main engineering. Lieutenant Japloh is her quarters," stated the mildly feminine tones of the Banshee computer.

"Well, our two Klingon lovers aren't going at it, then. I've been told the deck practically shakes." Everyone was quiet. Charlotte turned red. "That's what I've been told, honest! I have /not/ been spying on them. If you want that type of sick mind, look to Ford, not me!"

Meanwhile, Jad continued to writhe on the floor in front of his chair, hands clasped to the sides of his head. Suddenly he stopped. His breath came as ragged gasps.

"My brain feels like someone reached in with a hot poker and stirred," moaned Jad, eyes closed. "Someone help me up."

Charlotte assisted Vorezze to his feet. He wobbled back and forth, steadying himself with the command chair. "Are you okay, sir?"

"Do I look like I'm okay? Do I?"

"Frankly, no. You should go to sick bay. I can take care of things here. No need to bother the Vulcan with his meditations, or sleep, or whatever he does on his off hours."

Jad grumbled, "There isn't much happening, and I don't even think you could screw up being in charge. I will go to sick bay. Ford, don't let her tell you to steer us into the cube. DiSanto," Vince DiSanto peered from his station at tactical, "don't let her play with weapons." A hand was lifted to rub the back of the neck where it was suddenly very, very sore. Huh?

Jad's fingers played over the flattened, slick surface at the juncture of head and spinal cord, just under the fringes of his regulation cropped hair. It was skin temperature. A small trickle of wetness leaked down his back. It felt...it felt...

"Commander!" loudly demanded Jad. "Look at my neck...what do you see? Hurry!"

Ford snickered loudly.

Sensing herself to the butt of a possible prank, Charlotte carefully craned her head to glance towards her superior officer's gesturing hand. She gasped. "It looks like one of those neural trans..." If Charlotte had anything more to say, it was drowned out in static.

{Testing, testing. Testing one, two, three. Testing. Can you hear me, Captain Jad Vorezze of the Federation starship Banshee? Aural is the second link established and we need you to respond. Pain center is the first. You know what will occur if you ignore us. Testing.}

Suddenly Jad knew exactly what cube the tugs were towing, and it was anything but dead. Worst case scenarios were suddenly looking downright cheery when faced with this unlikely possibility.

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The probe had the intelligence quotient of a dog. It could come; it could go; it could stay. The commands it responded to were basic, simple. Unlike a dog, however, its allegiance was absolute. They made it; They controlled it; They were Master; They were God.

It was linked with They through telepathic imprint: whatever it saw or experienced, They saw and experienced. The probe's brain, buried at the center of its squid-like body, was conditioned to seek out certain patterns of stimuli, such as warp contrails and sentient-derived radio transmissions. When it found such nuggets it happily reported back to They. The reward

with a burst of endorphins and pleasure. Misidentification brought failure, shame, and pain.

The probe liked to keep They happy.

Many such as the probe plied this region of interstellar space, tracking and watching the civilizations in what the denizens called Alpha Quadrant. They had come from far away, sailing the uncharted gravitonic currents and supraspace seas between galaxies. Tens of thousands of years in thought (supplemented by the ever more tenuous link to Home before the telepathic link to Chaos was finally lost) brought refinements to organic technology, to such a point the only manufactured, grafted part of the probe was its engine core. Eventually, someday, even that last appendage of Order would be replaced.

A sleek form was that of the probe, its twelve meter self unique from every other probe even as it shared the same general body plan. No obvious eyes or other organs marred the thick, chameleon skin. Rather, the entire epidermal surface was sensitive to the electromagnetic spectrum and particle clades rivaling anything merely silicon, ceramic, and metal. The ten trailing tentacles could delicately dissect a communication satellite for close study, or render a comet nucleus down to consumable chunks.

The expedition force of They was ready to move into this part of the galaxy, had found it suitable to establish a beachhead for the main force still in transit a thousand years out. The probe knew, in a fuzzy way, that a new Home was to be made, a new Chaos brought forth from order, the strongest of resistance absorbed into Chaos while the rest were exterminated as unsuitable. It was the way to Perfection.

Before They could begin their mysterious programs, of which the probe could not begin to understand with its limited mental potential, the quadrant required certification it was clean of a particular taint, of the spoor of Order, of the presence of Borg. Borg were strong, the expedition had learned thus many millennia ago, the epitome of electronic and physical technologies upon which they relied - Order personified. Eventually, however, they would be brought into Chaos, else driven to extinction. They needed to get their foot in the door; the eons since initial retreat had been required to regroup, rebuild, move to a new vantage, and wait for the main force to catch up.

The probe simply scanned, searching for Borg. Singleton tracks and trails were closely monitored by more intelligent brethren. It saw nothing in its assigned sector and thusly reported each time it was directly ordered by They.

They were happy. The probe was happy.

* * * * *

"Sir," called the ensign who was monitoring communications this shift. Normally the position involved a complex weaving of frequencies, from ordering impatient captains regarding docking priorities to angry words directed at joyriders exceeding the station's well posted speed limit. The last week had been boring after Explorer and Banshee left, destination on a need-to-know basis which did not include station personnel.

"Yes?" asked Lisa. "What is it?" She glanced back at the two Section 31 observers lounging at the science consoles. They were talking quietly to each other. Although the black-op group's pervasiveness included the bridge, they had tactfully kept their presence at a minimum. The screaming fit Lisa had thrown in Admiral Newman's face had probably helped as well.

The primary viewscreen altered to show a volume inclusive to ten light years in all directions from the station. A yellow dot blinked insistently at the edge of the displayed space.

"We are picking up a distress call, at least that is what I think it is."

"Think it is? Can't you tell?"

"Sorry, sir, but it is garbled beyond belief. Usually people don't drive their ships off the main lanes to sit and scream about their troubles, though."

"True, although I've been tempted at times, especially recently."

Silence on the bridge. The observers seemed greatly interested. Lisa came to an abrupt decision, one which would surely irk Those-In-Charge.

"Ensign Larson, go find Russel and tell him the situation. I want him to round up a rescue team, take the Wayward, and check it out. If anyone," directed over the shoulder at the alert duo, "gives you or him trouble, tell them Ih'mud and Baughb are my good friends and will be severely displeased if I can't follow Starfleet ethics and help someone in distress, bogus quarantine or no bogus quarantine. Oh yes, also tell the lieutenant it may be a first contact situation."

"Yes, sir!" The ensign leapt from her station, delighted to have something to do. Tonight there were sure to be juicy rumors concerning the inevitable squabble between captain and admiral.

"Say again? You are breaking up," said Lisa to the viewscreen. The visual from Wayward was clear enough, but the audio was terrible. Sean appeared to snap something to someone off-screen. Quickly the problem cleared.

"Sorry. Seems to be local interference, a pin-point anomaly by the computer's estimation. Harmless except to communications." Sean's head was larger than life, as befitted the cramped quarters of the scout's command area. "Anyway, we found what was yelping for help. Automated probe, we think. The distress call ended shortly before we arrived. By the condition of the probe, it has probably died."

"Died. That is not a word one usually assigns to a probe. What race?"

Sean looked sheepish. "Um, not really sure. Nothing Starfleet has records on, that is for sure, although we are just moving into the Beta Quadrant. Our scans indicate the probe is nearly all organic, except for what appears to be a miniature warp core and power unit. Died may very well be the relevant word, as it was probably quite alive up until a few hours ago. Difficult to tell since our scanners are calibrated to peer into the innards of ships, not what appears to be a large squid. Would you like a visual of the object?"

Lisa was intrigued. One could hardly perform first contact with a probe, be it dead or broken, but one might be able to prepare a bit better for the owners with technology examples in hand. "Yes, I do."

The screen split, upper pane displaying a squashed view of the security chief's head, lower the space-going organism. The hull (skin?) was dull black with tan mottling. As Sean indicated, it bore a definite resemblance to a Terran squid, down to the tentacles held stiffly behind the main body - rigor mortis? A superimposed ruler measured the probe at roughly fifteen meters long. Big squid.

"Sean, is there anyone non-Federation in the area?"

Sean's elongated face replied, "The Multiks definitely know, considering how loud the probe was broadcasting, but unless they have a patrol on top of us, they will require several days to get here. As far as cloaked ships such as Klingon or Romulan, who knows? They are probably spying on us because of all the activity at our 'quarantined' station. The Klingons are allies, but they wouldn't be above quietly taking this thing; and the Romulans you can make your own judgment about. I'm sure there are several other governments, including our own, with illicit

cloaking devices around as well."

"You are sometimes incredibly paranoid, Russel."

Sean shrugged. "It's my job. What do you want done with it?"

Lisa hummed in thought. "Tractor and haul it back to the station. We'll deal with it here. I'll relay the matter through official channels to make it more difficult for Section 31 to claim the probe for themselves."

The Wayward and her tractored oddity were still half a day from Waystation when the recorded message hit Waystation's communication arrays. It was a burst transmission, flung equally to all parts of the galaxy to foil tracing back to its origin. As it was a simple matter to pick the message up, it had been encrypted based on a huge prime number, of which Section 31 held the only key.

After skipping over Admiral Newman's head considering the incoming probe, and enduring the tongue-lashing about quarantine procedures given by a Rear Admiral at Earth who appeared to believe Waystation's isolation was a real thing, Lisa felt lucky to be included in the party viewing the unscrambled message. Unfortunately, no one bothered to enlighten her as to what the code phrases meant, although those in the room seemed pleased.

Vorezze's bespeckled face appeared on screen. It became evident as the camera pulled back that he was sitting in his command chair on Banshee's bridge. He held up a PADD, glanced down at it, frowned, and began to read from its display: "Banshee reporting. Our fish has been caught. While not a whopper, it is definitely a keeper. Electroshocking has been successful. The package will arrive at dock in three shakes of a lamb's tail..."

Vorezze trailed off, looking at someone off-screen and to the left. "This is ridiculous. What does 'three shakes of a lamb's tail' mean, anyway? The universal translator can't be right, not with the image I'm getting."

"Just read it, Vorezze. It is an old Terran saying." The new voice had a certain dry and measured cadence to it which screamed Vulcan.

"Why Terran? Why not Klingon sayings, or Betazoid? Why /always/ Terran?"

"Read it."

Vorezze scowled, clearly unhappy. He glanced once up to the camera pickup, then back to his PADD. "Where was I? Oh yes, that three shakes of a lamb's tail bit. Okay." He cleared his throat. "The steamboat trio have notified us we cannot move faster than three shakes due to the size of our catch. All hands are well and nary a scratch was taken." The recording continued from there, occasionally leaping off on a wild tangent as the Banshee's captain complained of the increasingly archaic /Terran/ phrases, many of which had been out of date for five centuries.

"What the hell does 'boss, da plane, da plane' supposed to be? It sounds like pure nonsense! Were the writers of this poor excuse for a code bored out of their skulls?" pretty much summed everything up.

An hour later Lisa held a clandestine meeting in her quarters. While she couldn't be absolutely sure her suite wasn't bugged - Section 31 personnel showed a disturbing lack of morals - it was less likely than other places on the station. In attendance were Morales, Porter, and the doctors Amedon Nelson and Janice Browning. The first was an integral part of station crew and had not been evacuated; the latter was on leave from the Explorer to compete head-to-antennae with Ic'hassssst V'kelsnet in the literally cutthroat restaurant business. Lisa had found Browning hiding under her desk when Section 31 had descended, claiming that to abandon the station while Ih'mud and Baughb remained would be bad for her restaurateur image.

Lisa vaguely wondered how many other irregulars remained aboard. Better to not inquire too intently, but Admiral Newman would probably be very surprised.

"Okay," said Lisa after she rehashed the transmission she had watched, "it is obvious the mission was successful and a Borg cube is on its way here. Most of the bulls**t was for the sake of bulls**t, I think, but that 'three shakes' business is what has me interested."

They all mulled over the words. Answered Browning, "Might it mean they are three days out? By the way, remind me when this is all over to add gyros to my menu. I have this great cucumber sauce which would be perfect with lamb."

"It is as good a guess as any," supplied Morales, ignoring the doctor's comments about food.

Nelson shrugged. "Don't look at me! I'm not exactly a Terran scholar, and neither is Midon."

"Then we will call it three days." Lisa turned the conversation to a new direction. "Craig, have you seen the scaffolding yet? Are they doing anything to it?"

Craig Porter, as engineering chief of Waystation, had not been happy when two-thirds of his staff was shipped out. Section 31 subsequently went through all the station's systems, rewiring entire areas and installing new equipment. When all was done, and the black uniformed technicians vanished with their toys, it would take weeks to undo the damage and make sure everything was returned to standard specs. He knew, after inspecting the outer skin with a remote probe, at least some of the so-called sensor gear was actually weapons of a type he had never seen of before in his life. "Last I saw, the corners were 1.3 kilometers distant from each other and robots were beginning to spin cables between them."

The scaffolding was worrisome, for it implied Section 31 might be present for longer than a couple of weeks. Shortly after arrival of the first black ships, construction robots had begun to build eight large frames. A bit of puzzling, but a few well-placed questions (and bribes in the form of real alcohol or vouchers to Dillon's Supply Depot) to various people brought forth the revelation the scaffolding would fit at the corners of any cube caught, providing a snug cradle for dissecting equipment to dock. The final phase of linking the formerly separate pieces hinted at the size of the cube to come.

"Damn," spoke Lisa as she mentally envisioned the final product hanging less than five kilometers from her station, "that thing is going to be larger than Waystation."

It was a sobering thought to the fivesome. And this was a "keeper," not a "whopper."

Inserted Morales, "Perhaps we should look into tethering our probe out there as well. Get it close to that special scanning equipment." He paused. "It will also put all our troubles in one place."

* * * * *

The bulk of Explorer's command staff sat in The Twilight Zone, nursing drinks of assorted sorts. Missing was Conway, who was pulling bridge duty, and Larkin, who was off doing whatever it was she did when she wasn't at Ops. The pair of tables the group was seated at seemed small, especially as Browning's replacement doctor, the Flarn Benzra, hulked over the group; and Charlie's exuberant tail wagging under Counselor Kelly Peterman's chair did not help either.

"This sucks!" exclaimed J'hana for the umpteenth time. "Big target like that sitting defenseless, and we can't even shoot at it! I'm sure there's at least one or two Borg wandering

around clueless on that thing, begging for someone to put them out of their misery." Mirk, the bartender for The Twilight Zone, had begun carefully watering J'hana's drinks several glasses back.

Baxter looked into his drink, something called a Shirley Temple. "We follow orders, J'hana. Besides, if anything was alive over there I'm sure they would have repaired their ship enough by now to swat us back to the Delta Quadrant. I just want to get our 'fish' delivered so we can go back to our normal duties."

The Flarn lifted her drink, an evil green concoction resembling melted lime popsicles and called a Typhoon. Benzra wasn't sure why she liked it, except it bore a distinct resemblance to sour apple Jolly Rangers. That particular hard candy was the sole redeeming quality for humans, in her estimation. "Borg are a menace to the universe. I agree with J'hana: we should destroy the cube."

Various murmurs of assent echoed from various chairs. Mirk magically appeared with a fresh round, sweeping away the empties before vanishing again.

"I don't know," began Peterman, "maybe it is just that we don't really understand the Borg. Maybe if we tried to talk..."

Ford loudly interjected, "I bet you wouldn't say that if you'd ever been assimilated."

"Or had your homeworld decimated by them," slurred a knowing Benzra with a wide sweep of an arm. Mirk apparently wasn't watering her drinks, and whatever he used as an alcohol for the Flarn was beginning to affect her nervous system.

Baxter sighed, sipping at his pink drink. "Well, we'll be at Waystation shortly. Banshee hasn't radioed us with the end of the universe, so everything must be going according to plan."

"Then we'll go on to greater glories than looking at the butt end of a cube," darkly grumbled J'hana.

* * * * *

"Are you absolutely sure everything is okay?" asked the Banshee's rather short chief medical officer. The view of the man was odd, washed-out, and the vocalization lacked a certain richness. Visual jiggled slightly, glance darting down the hallway to a door only ten meters distant.

{Say: "I'm perfectly functional. I continue to hypothesize some equipment was not rendered inoperational due to the electrical discharge, which was the most likely causation for implant rupture. It will keep until we arrive at Waystation. The station has a greater selection of medical equipment to assist in its removal." You know the appropriate words.}

A throat was cleared. "You worry too much, Brian. I'm fine. Something didn't get fried on the cube, and this happened. When we dock at Waystation in a couple hours you can play with their selection of devices to remove it. I'll keep. Just make sure any other crew on the ship who have had the misfortune of meeting the Borg don't similarly break out in unwanted implants."

If the doctor noticed the emphasis placed on the final two words, he did not show it. He simply nodded. "Liz has said she'd like to make you suff...er...said she'd like to help as well. You'll make a right good demonstration subject for several papers if we all play our cards right."

{Go to your regeneration chambers.}

"Joy. Well, I need to catch a quick nap before Waystation and the rigors of Admiral Newman and Section 31. Now is as good a time as any."

"See you later, then."

"Yah, later." Brian's back was watched to retreat down the hallway towards the turbolift.

{Go to your regeneration chambers now, or else.}

The point of view rapidly scurried towards the target door. It whooshed open.

{Enter and lock it. You are not available for the next several hours.}

"Computer, lock my door. If anyone calls for me, I'm not available unless it is a red alert."

The computer chirped in feminine tones, "Door is secured. Voice messaging system is activated."

Once again the visual altered as the owner of the eyes sat in a soft chair, changing the perspective of the room to a lower vantage point. Faintly red darkness descended as lids closed, turning black a moment later with a "Computer, dim lights. More. More. Stop." A groan. What began next, to an exterior and uninformed watcher, would appear to be a one-sided conversation. Brian would have taken one look and ran off for a straightjacket and several burly men in white.

"Okay, I'm here. What do you want of me now?"

{Careful. I can hear those "you bastard" undertones perfectly clear. My genealogical lineage is irrelevant. We need more data on Section 31, especially the weapons we may encounter when we arrive at our destination. You will return to the bookmarked file you began before your duty shift. Allow the documents to scroll at high speed. We will sort out the relevant information.}

"And if I don't, Captain Ahab?" No move was made to leave the chair. "I do need to sleep occasionally."

{You will feel pain. Your neural pathways are not sufficiently advanced to block the impulses. After all, those nerve clusters were among the first the implant reached towards when it regrew, assuming nanotendrils were properly removed from that cranial area in the first place.}

"So I have a primitive brain."

{Yes, Vorezze, you do. You even find it difficult to think your thoughts to me as opposed to your verbalizations. Unfortunately, it is the only brain we have to work with; and those nanites, as you well know, are not capable of assimilation, else this task would be much easier. We require communication beyond our hull and you provide it.}

"Great." A resigned sigh. "Computer, raise the light level. More. Stop." The body, point of view as from looking out of Captain Jad Vorezze's eyes, levered itself to a standing position. Ultimate destination was a desk covered with multitudes of PADDs.

Captain budded off a partition to capture and process the shortly incoming data, filing and sorting of a mundane type. The awareness of Vorezze was tucked to a small corner of his mind as other, more immediate, concerns demanded his attention. Banshee's captain only required direct coddling and not-so-subtle reminders of who was actually in charge when thoughts of rebellion began to swirl; otherwise he was quite tractable. Imagine, simple threat of pain goading compliance!

{Delta, report,} ordered Captain.

Replied Delta, accompanied by a secondary datastream of relevant schematics, {We are at a theoretical 85% functionality. However, several systems are unable to be tested due to internal power fluctuations which would render our attempt to play dead moot. We will be at 93% by the time this convoy reaches Waystation.}

{And that final 7% is?}

{Atmospheric life support, lighting, temperature control, gravity in a few places, standard

subspace radio. On the latter, we can receive, but not broadcast.}

{Not important, then.}

{No.}

Captain spent a few minutes examining the latest engineering updates, sparing a second here or there to figuratively glance at Vorezze. He had replicated himself a cup of stimulant-enhanced liquid and was now busily reordering PADDs on his desk. A remote caressing of the Betazoid's pain centers ended procrastination as the correct PADD was suddenly unmisplaced.

{What is this?} asked Captain, interrupting Delta as she had her heads deep within auxiliary power cores at opposite sides of the cube.

{What is what? Tuning harmonics is a delicate process even when we aren't supposed to be nonfunctional.} Delta was a tad annoyed.

The appropriate sub-sub-sub-bullet was highlighted, an important kernel of data buried deeply in such a way as to try to avoid detection. It was as if the compiler of this section was purposefully trying to hide bad news on the theory the reader would grow bored reading tedious repeats of wire resistance checks and skip ahead.

{The statement about our fractal subspace communication readiness. The notation indicates that even if the crud on our hull is removed, we will be unable to contact the Collective because of faults within several thousand kilometers of wiring. Wiring which will have to be replaced by hand. What happened to our surge protectors!?!}

Both of Delta's bodies extracted themselves from their respective cores, slack-jawed. She had grown bored reading tedious repeats of wire resistance checks and skipped ahead. Engineering calculations were flashing through her hierarchy. {We can still use the fractal bands, but our greatest range will be one hundred twenty-six light years, assuming all the jamming material is washed off.}

Captain groaned as he requested navigational data on Borg vessel locations. The information was several cycles outdated, but it was unlikely major changes had occurred between then and now. The closest cube was one of several Exploratory-class scouts lurking on the Federation's opposite Alpha Quadrant border and well over one hundred twenty-six light years away.

Delta had delved into the update to determine the drone responsible for hiding the bad news. 296 of 310 was swiftly located, quiescent in his regeneration phase, mind stilled.

{Wake up, you bloody idiot!} echoed in the intranet. Delta was on a rampage to combat criminal inefficiency.

Captain monitored the arousal of several hundred additional drones from regeneration, their task to begin the massive rewiring campaign. Knowing Delta, 296 of 310's negligence would be rewarded with a particularly nasty job.

Otherwise, all was going according to plan. Only 3.2 additional hours of playing possum left.

* * * * *

Modifications were complete to allow drone-to-drone-to-cube communications despite the disrupter material coating all but one face of the ship. The several cycles in warp transit - so slow the tugs traveled! - allowed unobtrusive drilling to the hull surface and careful remote placement of new antennas and sensor clusters. True, the Collective would remain unreachable until the offending substance was dissolved with corrosive acids and rewiring was complete, but

local interchanges on Borg channels to half a light year was now possible. Vorezze was not informed of a possible escape route involving the simple action of leaving the vicinity.

All plans to gain a Borg toehold on this side of the Federation, or lacking that, escape, were abandoned as warp terminated. Passive visual scans examined the area, noting the large scaffold towards which the tugs were vectoring. A small object not of Federation manufacture, a fact obvious even with poor sensor acuity, caught the sensor hierarchy's attention. Curious, the hierarchy first pinpointed the location of potentially hazardous Starfleet ships before zooming in on the unknown thing, quickly identifying the configuration. An ancient root command, part of the prime Borg software code interlaced in the artificial instincts all drones were programmed with, leapt into sudden awareness:

<<Primal root command 004: They to be destroyed at all costs; presence of They to be recorded and reported. Secondary primal root command 004: if evidence of They intrusion into any volume with current Borg presence is ascertained, They will be eradicated at all costs by any means.>>

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

Acting as One, ignoring the potential consequences, Cube #347 fully powered up, channeling all available energy to weapons, to shields, to propulsion. The three tugs suddenly found themselves flung around and dragged backwards as the unaffected face was spun towards the target to present the clearest possible picture, supposedly dead vessel lunging forward at high impulse. Shields snapped up, neither slicing the tugs in half nor severing tractor beams only because of the ships' close proximity to the hull.

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

{Kill it! Kill it! Kill it!} chanted Weapons within the dataspace as he brought phasers, cutting beams, torpedoes of various flavors, and rail guns to bear. The quiescent probe exploded like a watermelon dropped from a great height; any piece larger than a fist was targeted for vaporization. Coincidentally, the scaffolding corner the organic ship had been docked at disintegrated, cables snapping with dangerous intent towards their opposite anchor.

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

The decision tree was already producing fruit, although many were branches closed due to inability to contact the Collective and others required more resources than that immediately available. Captain slowed the cube to a halt, directing Second to restrain Weapons and his hierarchy from further rampage. The tractors of the still stunned tugs were broken and the ships tossed away with a pressor beam. Delta diverted additional power from non-essential systems to shields.

The few Starfleet ships in evidence would quickly become tired of lobbing ineffectual munitions against an unresponsive cube.

* * * * *

The command deck of Waystation was busy, and sitting in the middle of the chaotic weave, happy as a fat spider, was Captain Lisa Beck. Gods, how she /loved/ her rank at times like these: it was /so/ much harder to leave her out of the loop by setting need-to-know on a Captain basis. If Admiral Newman tried that stunt, using his own rank as the qualifier, his little conspiracy circle would consist of one. Period.

Lisa was present when Banshee's hail came through. Explorer had called earlier, reporting several instances of crewmen requiring sedation and restraint when they began

screaming about the "voices." Prior Borg contact did that to you. Sporadic reports of a similar nature continued to filter in from the marine contingents, although no one on Waystation's truncated staff had had the misfortune of meeting the Hive face-to-drone. Well, there was Ensign Jackal, but Dr. Nelson had yet to determine if it was a true reaction to the cube, or one of his infrequent attacks of multiple personality disorder.

"Put him on hold," snapped Lisa to the lieutenant manning communications. "Morales," this to her second-in-command, "has the cube done anything in the last couple minutes?"

The named looked up from his console. Several Section 31 uniforms scurried around the command area: Admiral Newman was on his way up. "No. That first damn weapon, cataclysm torpedo I've finally been told, did some surface damage, but that was all. Tri-cobalt devices are absolutely useless. Other than that, it has sat there passively, soaking up whatever the few ships out there throw at it, occasionally returning fire with disrupter or cutting beam. The attacks seem half-hearted, assuming Borg have hearts."

"Sir, Captain Vorezze is demanding to talk to us. He has hailed the Explorer, and they are waiting on the line as well," chirped the lieutenant. Of course, the lieutenant always chirped, universal translator not quite masking a native language which sounded like love-sick crickets on LSD.

"On screen."

The main viewscreen, formerly showing stationary cube and remains of scaffolding, split into two sections. On the right was a bespeckled Betazoid in black - Captain Vorezze; opposite was a very frazzled Captain Baxter. The former appeared to be in his ready room and the latter on his ship's bridge.

"Captain and Captain," nodded Lisa to the two.

"Captain and Captain," echoed Baxter. Several faces usually on the bridge were very obviously absent.

Vorezze opened his mouth to say something, then abruptly snapped it shut.

Admiral Newman swept grandly onto the command deck, turbolift doors opening to disgorge the man. His gaze locked upon Jad. "Vorezze," he roared, "what is the meaning of this? This communication is not through proper channels! Who knows what black operations may slip from your lips, not that you know many of them, but it is the principle of the matter!"

The Betazoid opened his mouth again, closed it, winced, then began a conversation with himself. "I will not say that! Why? Because it sounds idiotic, like I was a drone or something. Well, I'm not!" Pause. "And I won't say that neither." Longer pause. "No, not that. That royally hurts. And don't you dare do that either, 'cause I'll get nauseous and puke all over the display. You wouldn't want that, would you?" Short pause. "It is not irrelevant, you Borg SOB. My 'weak body' will be incapacitated, and who will talk for you then, hmmm?" Very long pause. "Fine, I'll say that, word for word."

Vorezze shook his head back and forth, as if he were a dog shaking off water. "Sorry, Admiral, I had to do this. If I didn't, the consequences would be painful for me. Very painful. First a bit of background for Captains Beck and Baxter.

"Sometime back myself and one hundred seventy-four crewmembers from Banshee were involved in a little spatial rip accident originating in the Delta Quadrant. The specifics are unimportant, but we were all transported to a Borg cube. Through another set of coincidences, the cube and everyone on board was conveyed to the past.

"I won't relate the whole story, but in order to avoid assimilation, those that hadn't already been taken, had to be fitted with devices called external neural transceivers. The things

act like internal comm badges with a few extra bells and whistles, like tendrils curled around your pain center for Pavlov dog conditioning. When all was said and done, most of the crew managed to be returned to Banshee, minus their transceivers. All except for me. Mine was removed, improperly I've now been informed, by people on my own ship.

"The Borg vessel we managed to catch is known as Cube #347; and it is the exact same one I had the misfortune to live on for several months. Yes, so you say it wasn't exactly a picnic for you either. I'm getting to the point, just give me a moment." That last bit was obviously directed at someone who wasn't present, who wasn't in Vorezze's empty ready room. He cleared his voice and continued.

"All you need to know is that the cube suffers from a problem called 'assimilation imperfection.' Don't let your guard down, though - OUCH! That was uncalled for! Sorry. Anyway, the drones aboard this ship are less connected with each other and the Collective than your normal group, and can function perfectly fine without constant input from the Hive. However, they are very much Borg, and all that the label implies.

"The one in charge would like to introduce himself. He is called 'Captain' or his designation '4 of 8.' Don't call him Captain Borg. He is very adamant about this point. He requests a face-to-face conference with those 'who speak for all', which is his term for myself, Admiral Newman, Captains Beck and Baxter, and whomever else would be appropriate. Okay, okay, I'll repeat what you have to say word for word."

Vorezze closed his eyes, rubbed fingers against temple, and began again. "'Federation, our subspace radio systems have been compromised, thanks to your trap. Melted is a better term. Cycles of repair will be required to allow ship-to-ship hailing. However, we are functional in all other ways, as demonstrated by our continued existence despite your actions. Your attacks are futile, and you do not have support vessels within range of sufficient quantity or firepower to destroy us. We wish you did.

"The /thing/ we destroyed was a They probe. All They incursions must be eradicated. By any means. They are extremely dangerous. I, 4 of 8, require a meeting with those who will speak for all. At 2100 by your time, this drone will be beamed to the airlock of the docking station nearest our position. Terminating this body is not an option, as 'Captain' is a term of convenience and another drone will assume my duties within seconds. I speak for all on Cube #347.

"You will comply."

The Banshee's captain broke into a fit of coughing, quickly suppressed. The words which came next were delivered in a subdued manner, expression drained and tired. "Sorry, but I have a massive headache now. He's pulled back and expects you to be ready for his arrival. You three can discuss what course you are going to take, but for myself...I am going to find an analgesic, take a nap, and be at that location at 2100." The connection was ended.

Baxter, Newman, and Beck quietly regarded each other, eyes locked in speechless communication. Lesser ranked crewmen stood silently, pondering their dim future; and how much it might cost to buy one of Dillon's three "Colonial Scouts" (Slogan: "Find your next homeworld with ease!") parked in the station hanger he rented.

* * * * *

It was 2100 hours, and the corridor outside the airlock was full.

"Transporter detected at docking station beta," calmly informed the computer. In response, thirty phaser rifles powered up, thirty muzzles aimed at the airlock door, thirty pairs of

eyes (and two pair of antennae) under comm helmets waited in anticipated mayhem. The three ten-squads of soldiers were all that could fit in the hallway without getting in each other's way. More marines waited down the corridor.

"How many lifeforms and what species?" asked Lisa. It /was/ her station, after all, no matter how outnumbered she was by black uniforms.

Responded the computer, "One lifeform, species unknown. Presence of cybernetic implants suggests a Borg drone."

"This is it," said Russel. After towing back the space squid, he had returned to his security duties overseeing the few people whom remained in his command. Baxter - not present due to difficulties on his ship involving the subduing of a Flarn medical-exchange officer who disagreed with the handling of the cube - had offered his own crew. One look at a glowering Andorian named J'hana had persuaded Sean to politely decline. He idly wondered if J'hana and Jaroch from Secondprize had ever met.

Lisa nodded. "It is. Computer, open the lock to docking station beta."

The large doors hissed as back-up hydraulics disengaged, allowing magnetic fasteners to detach. They were greeted with the back of a Borg. Its arms were crossed and it was tapping its right foot with an intensity approaching impatience. The head was panning slowly back and forth, obviously scanning something invisible to the mere humanoids awaiting outside.

"What took you so long?" it asked, not bothering to turn and meet ranks of phaser rifles. "I have analyzed a system of stress fractures ringing the outer door of this airlock. The next occurrence of a hard docking has a 72.4% chance of explosive decompression. With each subsequent docking, the chance of damage will rise another 7.8% until failure is inevitable. Very sloppy. Very inefficient."

Thirty index fingers caressed thirty "vaporize" buttons.

The drone swiveled on its heel to face the threat. If it (he?) was worried about addressing so much firepower, he did not show it, simply registering and dismissing the threat with nary a glance. Surprisingly, the eye opposite ocular implant which fell upon Beck and Russel, the only two authority figures in evidence, was a piercing blue.

"We will not talk to you in this unsuitable environment." An arm minus obvious prosthetics was waved vaguely at a group of marines. Sarcasm? "You will escort me to those who will speak for all. Now."

Captain looked in turn to each of the important beings in the predominantly human gathering. The soldier contingent did not count. He continued to be personally mystified why the Federation, a supposed benevolent hegemony containing several ancient races, was human-centric, especially as that race was relatively new to warp technologies. Borg archives held spotty records indicating a predecessor to the Federation, but it had abruptly disappeared. Perhaps if the conundrum was solved it might give a clue as to why the physically and mentally deficit human species had an anomalously high resistance quotient. The specimens present certainly did not solve that puzzle.

{Don't you dare get yourself terminated. I do not desire to be Captain.}

{You don't want to be Second, either,}

{True, but I'd rather be Second than Captain,} spoke Second to Captain. The communication link was solid, if a bit distant, the normal closeness of four thousand others held at arm's length. Delta preferred to begin washing the hull down with acidic substances, but the risk of losing a substantial number of her hierarchy was too great. Intense concentration

continued to be focused on the wiring.

Captain spoke to the silently glowering faces. No introductions had been offered beyond the most basic upon his arrival and subsequent escort to this conference room. Introductions were irrelevant. "We can do this the easy way, or the hard way. You decide. We prefer the easy way, but we can adapt to the difficult track, should you decide to resist. This sub-collective must succeed, by any means."

"What the hell are you talking about?" demanded Beck, the most out-spoken of the group. Newman was close in seconding what was less question and more order for information. Captain could relate to that attitude. The thoughts in Vorezze's mind, those which weren't the incoherent babblings and nothings of a small being, centered around wishing the Waystation's commander would shut up before all were assimilated. Baxter was simply trying not to be noticed.

"They," flatly stated Captain. The graphic collective memories of They, stored within the permanent files of all sub-collectives, all drones, burned in his mind. They were terrible. "They. Tens of thousands of languages are known to the Borg, yet the self-designation of They remains an enigma. Most species designations translate to 'People', 'Us', or 'The People of' some planet. The best extrapolated approximation of their own name for themselves is 'They.' They are horrible. They are chaos. They are enemies of the Collective."

"Well, I'm liking them more and more," responded Beck, eyes flashing defiance. Maybe not all the specimens in the conference room were totally inept.

"You, Captain Lisa Beck, do not understand. Borg are order, the Federation is order, anything which uses non-organic technology is order. They despise order. They believe intelligently directed genetic evolution will lead to perfection and material technology detracts from perfection. The strongest species will win, bringing lesser intelligences into itself and eradicating sentient leftovers such that 'cleaned planets' may evolve a new species to claw its way to the stars and meet They in combat. They bring chaos to order. They are anti-Borg."

Baxter muttered under his breath, "If Borg and anti-Borg are brought together, will there be a large explosion?" All eyes, including the passive marines, riveted on Baxter. "What did I say? What?" he protested. He quieted with an eye-rolling "Geesh. I should have sent Conway to this thing. He's the one who loves conspiracies."

Captain continued where he left off, "They originate from a satellite galaxy Federation charts designate as M31. Several millennia ago, a force of They attempted to strike into territory held by the Collective. They failed. We discovered we could not assimilate They peons, and They found out They could not absorb drones into Chaos. They inflicted substantial losses in Our fleet before They retreated, which necessitated several centuries of absorbing species into perfection at an accelerated rate to offset the toll. They have obviously not given up their designs to bring this galaxy to chaos, simply moving to a different quadrant to prepare their assault. This cube /must/ stop them."

"Is this where the easy way and hard way comes in?" asked Newman. He looked vaguely thoughtful. Captain supposed he was plotting in a small way to try to turn this problem to his advantage, or more specifically, Section 31's advantage. Neither Borg nor They technology could be allowed to fall into Federation hands. The consequence of raising the resistance quotient higher would put Cube #347 on duties fit for automated probes.

"We must convince They scouts Borg have a presence in this area large enough to defeat any probing attack. The easy way involves covert operations, carefully supervised modifications to all ships in the area to produce signatures as if they had been assimilated, as well as a limited

drone presence on vessels as well to efficiently coordinate activities. This plan includes Waystation. We would lure scouts or battlers to traps and terminate them."

Beck frowned, "I don't like that plan."

Quiet Vorezze raised his voice, breaking his silence, "Fishing, Admiral...he wants to go fishing with us as bait. That sound familiar? And if the 'hard way' is as unsavory as the alternate option myself and my crew had in the Delta Quadrant, I'm sure you'll like it even less. Don't be fooled: he is a Borg."

Captain suppressed the ironic smile which threatened to cross his face. Anything other than deadpan was not good for the PR department. "The hard way involves Cube #347 assimilating every being in the immediate neighborhood. Initial losses from the sub-collective are estimated at five hundred eighteen drones, after which enough bodies will be processed to offset damage and continue to the inevitable end. The final result will be the same, namely convince They of Borg presence. In this case, however, it will not be trickery, but reality." Captain left out the bit where he would be forced to coordinate the whole, attempting to partition as many drones as possible from the corrupting influence of assimilation imperfection such that the fruit of the mass assimilation would be salvageable. Cube #347 was normally not allowed to process so many drones, but....

By any means.

Phaser rifles lifted at the threat, squad nervously pointing the weapons at Captain. He would undoubtedly terminate if they fired, frequency modulations likely all different and unadaptable until several drones sacrificed themselves to gain necessary weapon data. Captains, except for Vorezze, and admiral sat open mouthed at the threat. Banshee's commander simply murmured, "I told you so," and lapsed back into resigned silence. One last touch, rather frivolous and theatrical, was demanded. Captain yielded to the impulse, trying not to outwardly react to the howls of mental laughter at the faces of the Starfleeters.

The final uttered words were absolute, menacing: "You will comply."

Here ends "A Fish Story" Part Two: "They". Part Three will continue in "Tally-Ho!"