

Here is the disclaimer! We are monitoring you, and if you do not read it, we will erase everything from your computer...or, worse, sic eighteen different direct mail companies on you. Paramount owns Star Trek, as well as a vast collection of eternal souls. Alan Decker is purveyor of Star Traks and Waystation. Anthony Butler lords over The Vexed Generation spin-off. Brad Dusen pilots Banshee. I live in BorgSpace.

All Star Traks stories are important, but in this case, several are more important than others. This book draws heavily upon background presented in #BorgSpace: "Cube #347's Excellent Adventure" Parts I-III and "In Space No One Can Hear You Scream"; #The Vexed Generation: "You Will Be Inventoried"; #Banshee: "Collective".

Timewise, this story takes place several months after the events in "You Will Be Inventoried". Banshee is in the midst of secret Section 31 stuff; and Waystation is still brand-spankin' newly renovated. Out in the Delta Quadrant, Cube #347 is tasked with tracking down a new species for assimilation. However, this book introduces no conflicts with any series. Not at all. Nope. You'll find out why at the end of Part IV; or, if you desire, you can always assign inconsistencies to future time-traveling teenagers messing with the past timeline.

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A FISH STORY

Part 1 - Circle of Friends

At a distance of half a kilometer, the Federation starship Banshee, under special detachment to the clandestine department known as Section 31, orbited a large asteroid research station by the undignified name of Rouge.

Rouge, as in the cosmetic. The choice had been purposeful and not an accidental letter transliteration of "Rogue".

Rouge had formerly been an AVON facility built to manufacture a line of blush; many high-powered defenses had been installed in the asteroid's crust to dissuade competitors in the cutthroat cosmetics business from undertaking "hostile takeovers." When it became clear the Sultry Klingon Warrior line of products was the newest of AVON's stars, a decision was made to construct a larger complex in the system. Starfleet was offered Rouge at a steep discount. Cash-strapped, Starfleet eagerly accepted.

"Sir," said Lieutenant Commander Vince DiSanto as he squinted at the latest tactical read-out from a skirmish occurring half-way across the star system, "looks like AVON facility Blush has beaten off the Mary-Kay aggressors."

Commander Charlotte Burns, absently toying with her nose ring as she watched the unexciting view of ultra-ultraviolet top secret Rouge on the main viewscreen grumbled wordlessly. "They going to make a swing by us as they leave the system?"

"Nope. After all, we don't carry a secret recipe to top-selling lipstick on board. Why would they bother?"

Charlotte replied darkly, "One of the most closely guarded Federation research stations in the galaxy..." The rest was unintelligible. Actually, the entire bridge crew had thoughts running in a direction counter to corporate squabbles four AU distant: what was happening in the ready room?

Several days prior, Banshee had received instructions to abort her mission of playing hide-and-seek behind the neutral zone and hightail it to these coordinates. The odd station, constructed intelligently and cheaply inside an asteroid instead of sitting in the open as millions of metric tons of easily targeted metal, had at first elicited much talk among the crew...until it was learned no one would beam down. Instead, a terse message from Admiral Jared Newman, head of Section 31, ordered Banshee's Betazoid Captain Jad Vorezze and Vulcan "experience" officer Captain Velorn to meet with him at 0900 in the starship's ready room. At the appropriate time, a security detachment had met the admiral and three aides in the transporter room, then escorted them to the bridge. The sixsome had been in the room for over an hour now.

"No! No! No! No! I'm not going to put myself, and this crew, through that hell again! Not even close! Not for the Federation, not for anybody!" The door to the ready room suddenly opened on Jad's shout, equal parts dismay and forced bravado. With eyes riveted on the viewscreen, the bridge crew attempted to listen without giving the impression of eavesdropping. The doors slid shut, cutting Admiral Newman's quiet response immediately following the first syllables.

Quiet reigned for several minutes during which not a breath was audibly drawn. The doors began to slide open and close, whooshing first one direction, then the other, as Jad was seen to pace within his own office. Open, close. Open, close. Open, close. A disjointed one-sided conversation heavy with overtones of pleading emerged.

Jad abruptly came to an unintentional stop in front of the doors, causing them to hold in the open position. With back to the bridge, he proceeded to reply to an unheard question from someone within the room.

"Why am I trying to refuse assignment? Why? You have the nerve to ask me that question? Well, let me tell you, in short sentences even an admiral can understand." Breath was held by the bridge crew; Charlotte not-so-secretly hoped Jad would be busted in rank for his uncharacteristically impertinent attitude to a superior officer. "Every time Starfleet has tested that insane BIC protocol - Borg Internment and Containment my a** - something has gone horribly wrong. It does not work...it does everything /but/ work. It attracts cubes. It sends Starfleet personnel over into Borg clutches for a round of free assimilations. Who knows what will happen next?

"And I had the hickey from Hell when the Banshee's doctor removed that damn Borg neural transceiver from my neck.

"Therefore, I adamantly will /NOT/ allow myself or this crew participate in the insane plan Section 31 has cooked up. Absolutely not!!"

The door silently shut on the final word, exclamation points audible. Suddenly Charlotte didn't want control of Banshee. In fact, she, along with many others who had participated in an unanticipated trip to the Delta Quadrant last year, felt extremely nervous. Perhaps a suicide run on Blush or defection to Mary-Kay would be preferable.

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Many hundreds of light years from Rouge, Waystation, the colonization and exploration gateway to the newly opened Beta Quadrant, was under attack. The forces, however, were not foreign, not alien, not "hostile" in the traditional sense. However, Captain Lisa Beck was openly pissed, likening the descent of the black painted Federation ships and the stupid orders from on-high as an assault nonetheless. Why couldn't Starfleet at least have waited for the new-station

smell to dissipate before turning her private world upside-down?

"Quarantine my a**," muttered Lisa to her second-in-command Lieutenant Commander Walter Morales as she stood near the center of the Starfleet Square Mall, next to a convenient column. "Have you ever heard such bulls**t in your life? 'Silicon-based space parasites have been detected in your area and all non-essential personnel must be evacuated; and no ships are allowed within twenty lights of the station.' What a freighter-load of targ crap."

Walter did not respond, not when Lisa was in this mood. Both silently watched as black clothed soldiers, supposedly not marines although they had the same bulldog look, attempted to herd a pair of Andorians out of their restaurant. By the noise coming from the area, they were not encountering success. Dillion had barricaded himself in his store behind an impressive array of high-level forcefields backed by a metal barrier constructed of material usually reserved for the plating of warship hulls. The not-quite-marines were similarly daunted there, weapons which would grant access normally mounted as primary offense on starships: hand-helds just didn't pack the oomph.

"I mean," continued Beck as yet another soldier was bodily thrown out of Ic'hassssst V'kelsnet, liberally covered in a tangy red sauce, "I have never heard of 'Section 31'. Rumors, yes, about some covert-ops group, but I didn't truly believe it. And why would such an organization be performing prosaic duties such as evacuation, anyway? There are so many holes in the story I could drive a Galaxy-class ship through it. 'Special coating on the evacuation and inspection ships'? Sure, whatever. And why, if there is a danger of hull breach, don't they remove the command crew as well?"

Walter cleared his throat, "Sean just told me a short time ago our marine detachment aren't being evacuated with the rest. The commander of our new friends down there has also asked about billet space for his overeager team of thugs." Walter referred to Lieutenant Sean Russell, Waystation's chief of security.

One of Lisa's eyebrows rose, "Really? That's interesting. I hadn't heard that one, or else those-that-be haven't seen fit to inform me about the request yet. I've already seen space has been assigned to the multitudes of 'inspectors' we are about to be deluged with, as soon as unnecessaries are removed."

"Have you any idea on the time frame?"

An extremely loud noise from the direction of Dillon's Supply Depot interrupted the conversation. Three soldiers lay on the ground stunned, piece of mining equipment in the center of the trio a smoking ruin. It seemed Dillion had managed to smuggle a few illegal offensive weapons into the station to protect his stock. Lisa just shook her dark-haired head, expression turning black as she contemplated Walter's relevant question.

"No direct answer yet, although I will wring it out of the bastards eventually. Section 31, those people that I've talked to, keep reassuring me this supposed inspection and decontamination will only require a couple of weeks. However, one or two have hinted the actual time may be on the order of months."

Walter gave a low whistle. "That is a long time."

Lisa nodded. "And to top it off, when the so-called inspectors come, they will bring a load of classified equipment we on the station are not allowed to see. My understanding is that a significant portion of it will be installed onto the station."

A wince from Walter. "Craig is going to have kittens."

"Yup." Like any chief engineer, Lieutenant Craig Porter liked to know exactly what was being attached to his systems and how it would affect important things, like life support and

replicators.

Another pair of bodies hurled out of Ic'hasssssst V'kelsnet, followed by a hailstorm of unidentified vegetables and one or two pieces of uncooked meat. Several soldiers loitered outside the eatery in a compact knot, obviously waiting for a superior officer to tell them how to proceed. A similar group was consolidating near Dillon's, carefully outside the range of the store's weaponry.

Lisa sighed, turning away from the scene. "At least the show is going to get on the road soon. After the station is evacuated and the 'quarantine' firmly set into place, after the decom/inspection teams and their classified equipment get here, several additional vessels will arrive. We get briefed then."

"Do you think they are going to tell us what it really happening?"

A snort. "No."

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"Are the sprinklers fixed yet?" asked Captain Andrew Baxter from his command chair in the center of the bridge. He was quite damp, although no longer dripping; a towel hung around his neck to prevent additional water from soaking his already drenched uniform. Aboard the Federation starship Explorer very few dry places remained since the back-up fire suppressant system went haywire, and the bridge was one of them. Unfortunately, Baxter's office wasn't, which is where he had been when the indoor shower had begun.

"No, sir," replied Lieutenant Megan Hartley. She was in charge of engineering while the chief, Lieutenant Commander Chris Richards, was away on the Klingon homeworld pursuing his dream of writing a network television series. Her enlarged head was on the main viewscreen, water streaming down her face. The background of main engineering sported many people frantically rushing from semi-dry spot to semi-dry spot, attempting to bring the problem under control. One nameless crewman, dressed in bright yellow rain gear with a festive miniature umbrella attached to his head, was busily hammering at a pipe exposed in the bulkhead.

Baxter frowned, "Well, hurry up, then. Do you know how bad wet animals smell?" He motioned for the screen to blank and be replaced with a view of stationary stars. Someone snickered behind Baxter's back. "Whoever that was, do that again and I'll put you on pet drying detail."

Momentary quiet reigned, broken seconds later as Lieutenant Commander Kristen Larkin, android, fielded an incoming transmission. "Starfleet is calling, sir. Priority transmission. Do you want to take it here or in your office."

"Is it still raining in there?"

Larkin quickly linked to the computer and ran an internal environmental sweep of the ship. The process took milliseconds, and only that long because the height of water in the computer core was approaching two meters. She should probably report the latter to engineering before the Explorer short-circuited herself with the digital version of a lobotomy. "Yes, sir."

"Then put it on screen here."

A bored human dispatcher with ensign pips appeared on the viewscreen. He squinted at a display of words running below his end of the transmission, giving the impression of reading to someone located on the deckplates of the Explorer bridge. Regulation cut hair of bright purple - the cheap dye variety that cannot be washed out no matter what the manufacturer claims - enlivened the scene; his eyebrows were a more prosaic dark brown. "Explorer. Priority. You are

hereby ordered to break off your current assignment and travel to Waystation at top warp." The voice was the dull monotone of someone wishing they were elsewhere.

Baxter blinked. "Why?" It wasn't that the astrometric survey to chart dark matter was thrilling, but Starfleet was usually a bit more forthcoming when an assignment was interrupted.

The ensign shrugged, meeting the eyes of Explorer's captain for the first time. "I don't know. Wait, there's a bit more." He proceeded to read additional text. "'You will be briefed of your new assignment upon arrival. Inform engineering and security crew of prototype weaponry to be installed.'" Pause, eyes returning to the level. "That's all, sir."

Lieutenant J'hana, chief tactical officer, quietly began a small Andorian jig at the good news. Baxter sighed. "Fine, whatever. We'll get there as soon as we can. We've a tiny bit of maintenance to take care of first before we can get going."

"Yes, sir. I'll note that in my shift log, sir," said the ensign before he signed off.

Message received, Baxter returned his full attention to the very important task of air drying while waiting for the malfunctioning sprinklers to be fixed.

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Three heads of their personal domains - Waystation, Explorer, Banshee - sat in a conference room on Waystation. Baxter and Beck knew each other and had already exchanged greetings. Conversely, Vorezze remained silent, shaking his head at any friendly overture: he seemed to know what was about to occur, and his worried face was not reassuring. No aides nor security were present, only the three captains.

Jad occasionally rubbed the back of his neck. A nervous habit?

The door slid open, admitting an admiral and four "aides," the latter of which whom sported more than a passing resemblance to mastiffs. All carried miscellaneous PADDs and bits of paper; and all wore the black uniform Lisa and Baxter had learned to associate with the mysterious Section 31. Jad stood up.

"Admiral Newman, I'd like to get the full story in the open now. They," the Betazoid nodded his head at the only Starfleet in the room with normal uniforms, "have a right to know what is going on."

The admiral harrumphed, then brusquely told the aides to distribute PADDs. He himself instructed the computer to begin the visual presentation after inserting a data crystal into a port.

"Vorezze, you've already heard some of this, so sit down and shut up." Jad sat down.

"You two, listen up. By now I'm sure you've figured out the quarantine is bogus." Lisa snorted.

"The reasons are very good. Starfleet, specifically Section 31, is about to embark on a top-secret experiment to test new technology, and hopefully acquire even more advanced technologies in the process. The survival of the Federation is at stake. As you well know, the Dominion War drained our resources. While other powers in the Alpha Quadrant suffered similarly, spies have relayed information hinting ship depletion may not necessarily be what it seems. These are perilous times, when the fate of empires totter..." Admiral Newman began to ramble, invoking numerous cliches. One of the aides quietly fell asleep on his feet in the corner.

Baxter raised his hand. "Sir? What exactly is going on?"

Newman reawoke to the present. "Ahem. Computer, lambda one." On the screen, a crude ring appeared, nothing more than rocky pearls strung on wire. It seemed small, until one understood the specks flicking around the periphery were actually construction robots. Superimposed scale indicated the radius of the ring to be two kilometers. "Federation scientists

have recently discovered a possible use for the lambda particles producing by bolonite ore: transporting objects over vast distances nearly instantaneously. While this would seem to be a godsend, a way around warp, it isn't. Not only does one need to make a terminus where you want to go, the process of linking two ends to make a tunnel able to transport something larger than a probe has been calculated to require the energy output of at least one yellow dwarf star. That is technology beyond our grasp, or that of anyone else we know about. Warp is still better. Besides, it took a lot of work to construct this one ring out of bolonite asteroids. Instead, we are going to use it to go fishing." Newman paused.

Lisa and Baxter looked at each other. The briefing thus far did not sound good. Usually when the Federation went fishing they caught something that was very difficult to throw back. Vorezze just stared straight ahead at a point one meter in front of his nose, face expressionless.

"Computer, BIC one." Scenes of starships shooting at unseen objects with modified deflector beams filled the screen. It appeared to be stock footage from classic adventure films like "Captain Marshall and his Rogue Fleet." Lisa frowned...she could have sworn one of the multitudes of ships which had flashed by was the Secondprize. The admiral continued.

"The BIC protocol has been in production for many years, refinement from theory to weapon a lengthy process. BIC stands for Borg Internment and Containment." Another shared glance between Baxter and Lisa: Borg was not a good thing. Fishing and Borg, two seemingly unrelated topics, was even worse. Starfleet was about to get their butts kicked, again, and they would be at the epicenter. "Experimentation indicates activation of bolonite ore by a low power burst from the BIC protocol may attract Borg cubes as a side-effect to the desired result of jamming their communication system. Our engineers conjecture it may be due to an inadvertent incorporation of a lambda particle attracting substance in their hulls. The actual reason is unknown, however, as we do not have a whole cube to study. Therefore, we are going to get one. Computer, Newman one."

Computer rendered diagrams and ships flashed upon the screen. There were at least five Federation ships involved, including three tugs and one vessel which looked disturbingly like the Explorer. The larger Banshee hung off to one side in a relatively safe position of observation. A ring, the blind lambda terminus, sat off-center; a broken arrow arced away towards a Borg cube. A large Borg cube. A large Borg cube with many weapons and methods to destroy small Federation starships.

"The plan is simple. One ship, the Explorer, will be outfitted with the modified BIC weaponry. The ring is being positioned as we speak. The Explorer will use the lambda activation protocol upon the ore and wait for a cube to appear. Once it arrives, the cube will then be targeted with BIC - which /does/ work now - to sever its link with the Collective. Explorer will then retreat to a trap set up in these asteroids over here. The trap is a series of spun buckywire webs which will be electrified by special power plants both stationary and on the tugs once the cube is entangled. Enough current will be unleashed to fry the cube, killing the drones and any internal security systems, yet allowing plenty of intact technology to study. The cube will then be brought back to Waystation for initial dissection."

Baxter's jaw had dropped open at the description, eyes locked on the viewscreen with a hypothetical perfect netting of a Borg cube. So many things could go wrong...so many things! And all of them ended with the bait destroyed, else part of the Borg Collective. Lisa was in a similar state of shock after hearing how a supposedly dead cube would be parked outside /her/ station for the Directors knew how long. What would guarantee it was truly expired? The admiral would surely evacuate himself at the first hint of trouble, leaving the mess behind for her

to deal with.

Vorezze broke the stunned silence, turning sullen eyes to admiral Newman. "Tell them the rest."

"There's more?" Lisa regained voice first, incredulous surprise coloring her words. Baxter was still coming to grips that he and his crew were to be dangled like minnows on a hook in pike infested waters.

The admiral cleared his voice. "Computer, off." The screen went dark. "Although it is not widely known, Starfleet already employs a limited amount of Borg technology. However, as Section 31 is not an official part of the chain of command, and nor can it be for the good of the Federation, we cannot request samples for our engineers to study. And it isn't very good Borg tech, anyway." The last statement was waved off with a gesture of dismissal.

Baxter tore himself away from the vanished presentation. His face scrunched up in thought. "Borg technology...Borg technology. I've heard rumors through old contacts in Inventory that they got their hands on something. Only applicable to inventory, though. Can't use it in weapons, propulsion, or anything else." A horrible dawning crossed Andy's face. "You're jealous, aren't you?"

The admiral harrumphed, snapping back, "Don't be ridiculous, captain. Squabbling among Starfleet departments like children on the playground? That isn't dignified. No, we need samples of advanced technology, something with applications beyond tagging pieces of crap for the bean-counters."

Baxter winced. They were jealous. He carefully set his face into a neutral expression.

Lisa had a more important question. "Excuse me for speaking frankly, sir, but this plan is idiotic, even for Starfleet. We are all going to die or be assimilated. Is there any way to refuse assignment?"

Jad answered before the admiral could, stare riveted on Newman, acid dripping heavily from the monosyllable word which spoke volumes. "No."

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Tens of thousands of light years distant from Starfleet plotting, Borg Exploratory-class Cube #347, ship of the imperfectly assimilated, found itself in orbit around a white dwarf. Borg-claimed territory held tens of millions of similar boring stars, outnumbered only by their red dwarf cousins. Little attention was attached to these slowly guttering stellar cores beyond logging them in navigational charts: life more complex the single-cell stage rarely occurred, much less assimilable civilizations, and material resources were generally greater elsewhere.

White dwarf catalogue number 8901763at.67j had been noted several thousand years prior (by an imperfectly assimilated sub-collective...fancy that) to be a the remnant of a low mass yellow dwarf, dead before its time despite the fact it appeared to have formed out of the same nebulous nursery as other stars in the vicinity. Within a span of one million years, give or take an eon in a time period representing a blink on the cosmic scale, eighteen stars ignited their solar furnaces, chasing off the gaseous remains of their birth. For some reason, 8901763at.67j had subsequently matured faster than its similar-mass siblings, evolving into the present-day stellar core at odds to its mates three billion-something youth. The Borg had subsequently dispatched probes to observe 8901763at.67j, replacing the simple robots every few centuries. The phenomenon was not studied out of curiosity, but instead based on a low probability chance the premature aging was not natural and might lead to military applications. For 2,386 Cycles

8901763at.67j remained quiescent.

Three cycles prior, 8901763at.67j had abruptly flared, momentarily peaking in luminosity and energy output alike a novae despite the lack of a companion star to trigger the outburst. The occurrence could not be examined in detail by the probes, themselves little more than a few sensors and a subspace transceiver bolted to a propulsion system. The primary fact gleaned out of the input of limited information was its unnatural origin, unexpected novae hinting at technology manipulating the stellar core. As a minor subset of ten thousand cerebrally-minded drones contemplated the steps necessary to strip a star of its atmosphere to expose the core, the Whole reached the conclusion that additional data was required for model construction. Unfortunately, Cube #347, forty light years away tracking the fading trail of an enigmatic ship from species #8511, was the sole vessel in the area. It was diverted, requiring one cycle to arrive in the system.

A flurry of initial scanning reported an anomaly, not from the star, but instead originating above 8901763at.67j's north pole amongst a cluster of precariously orbiting debris. The signature was of lambda-producing /refined/ bolonite ore. Cube #347 had recently been on the nasty end of several incidents involving the odd material and was reluctant to closely examine the artifact. A mere sub-collective, however, is no match when it comes to the Will of the Greater Consciousness. Cube #347 cautiously approached to investigate.

{What is it?} asked Captain, primary consensus monitor and facilitator of Cube #347. He preferred 4 of 8, as that simple designation meant he was /not/ the baby-sitter for an assignment, but as he was the current consensus node for the sub-collective, "Captain" it was. An obviously sentient-made object floated on the illicit nonBorgStandard viewscreen which hung on one bulkhead of the nodal intersection he frequented when not in his alcove.

Sensors, an insectoid with a radically different view of the universe which she often forced upon the rest of the sub-collective via custom sensor grid configurations, replied, {Sensors has no clue.} She also referred to herself in the third person, not unusual among a forcefully amalgamated civilization which spoke in a "This drone is..." manner, but disquieting when taken in context of drones who routinely used the pronoun "I".

{Well, make conjectures, then,} exasperatedly said Captain. Sensors' mental signature retreated to her own hierarchy for an in-depth examination of archival sensor and engineering profiles to determine possible technological matches or, more likely, near misses.

"It is an odd thing, isn't it?" Second, Captain's back-up, was in the same nodal intersection as Captain. He had been "convincing" the weapon hierarchy, mostly the hierarchy head Weapons, not to destroy the artifact. That particular matter was now contained. Captain sent a ping of assent, the Borg equivalent of a nod, towards Second in response to the verbal question.

The object was a giant ring of an unknown metal alloy, its primary constituent refined from the bolonite-bearing asteroids also found in the white dwarf's system. The radius stretched a massive five kilometers and was able to pass two Cargo-class cubes, the largest ship type in the Borg fleet, abreast with room to spare. Filling the interior, an odd sheet of liquid metal smoothly rippled to unseen disturbances. The material absorbed all scans directed at it, leaving its composition an unknown. Sensors was having fits on that respect as even her configurations, many of which did provide detailed data in most circumstances at the expense of hallucinations or headaches for the rest of her hierarchy, were useless.

Whatever it was, it had not been noted by automatic probes in over two thousand Cycles of observation. Initial hypothesis suggested the artifact had been dormant, camouflaged amid the

junk which shared its tight polar orbit. The method of power, both initial start-up and continued operation, was a second mystery, no less important than identification of the object. A superficial scan of the stellar core indicated a second manufactured something embedded within in the top layers of degenerate matter of 8901763at.67j. Unfortunately, from the Collective's point of view, Cube #347 was not capable of descending for a closer look; the sub-collective of Cube #347, on the other hand, was quite relieved. The unknown ring was excitement enough.

Sensors interrupted Captain from his focused attention to the engineering hierarchy and routine reports therein about the minor stresses associated with close proximity to a white dwarf. {Analysis?} queried Captain.

{Insufficient information. Sensors needs more [lollipops] to provide a [dancing] archival search.}

Captain blinked. {You can't find close references to a large ring of bolonite alloy with an interior of scanner absorbing liquid metal, possibly powered by leeching energy from a stellar corpse?}

{Sensors just wants more [lollipops] for thorough research. This hierarchy needs to launch probes at the ring.}

Probes. Oh. Captain shifted his immediate focus to Weapons, who was becoming anxious at the slow pace of operations, and more specifically at the realization there was nothing to blow up. {Weapons, do as Sensors requires. All payloads will be sensory: NO explosive charges of any type unless specified.}

Weapons whined, {Not even a small one? Ten isotons? Five?}

{No. You can have target practice later when we leave. Destroy a few rocks in the main belt of this system.}

{But rocks don't shoot back, at least not usually,} darkly grumbled the head of the tactical hierarchy. Compared to the range of test of wills went normally occurred between Weapons and whomever was currently in charge, this one was won easily.

{Let the sensor hierarchy feed false grid data reporting the asteroids as ships, then.}

{Not the same.}

{Too bad. You will comply.} The final three words could have been posed as a question, an asking for confirmation. Many civilizations believed in polite orders to provide the illusion of choice, even when none existed. The Borg did not practice the irrelevancies of smaller beings. What was, was; and arguing was not acceptable, tendency towards dissension (usually) deprogrammed upon assimilation.

{We will comply.}

Tossing probes at the ring proved to be an exercise in futility. Pick a side, any side, and shoot a probe towards it. Wait. Wait. Watch/feel/listen as the device abruptly vanished, swallowed by the liquid metal. Careful measurements indicated the metallic sheet was a mere ten centimeters thick, but nothing visibly went in one side and out the other. Energy weapons produced a similar lack of response; and the one attempt to detonate a quantum torpedo just above the surface made nary a ripple, explosion absorbed as absolutely as a probe.

Captain drew the line at actually sending the entire cube through. For once the Collective agreed: the task of tracking species #8511 to its origin took precedence. A research platform with an escort of three Battle-class cubes plus an additional pair of Cargo-classes holding pre-fabricated construction material and an extra fifty thousand drone work force was being made ready for the trek to 8901763at.67j. Specialized drones and equipment would take over, cerebral

power of two hundred assimilated Vulcans dedicated to compiling data gleaned from the effort. A few more probes and Cube #347 would return to its original assignment.

Just as the final series of probes were being programmed for their task, the white dwarf abruptly dimmed, luminosity cut to a third of its previous output, except at the poles. In these locations, magnetic field strength was building, had already passed beyond the upper limit of detection, as if in preparation for a massive solar event. At the same time, the liquid within the ring disappeared, replaced with...nothingness. It was an absence of everything and everytime, a peek into the unknown ether present before the Big Bang; peering into the ring was to gaze into infinity.

Cube #347 did not have time for more than the most cursory consideration of the unfolding situation. Part of, for lack of a better term, the cube's autonomic system always watched for danger, for cues which might lead to the immediate destruction of ship and sub-collective. The computer did not truly have a voice, was simply a collection of trinary quantum pulses, but if it was given tongue, the monotone pronouncement which flashed through the intranets would have translated thus: {WARNING! WARNING! CRITICAL STELLAR EVENT SENSED! SURVIVAL CUES TRIGGERED!}

Reflex in response to pain is an instinct inherent to all living creatures. For those with a complex nervous system, stimuli rarely make the long trip to the brain to be consciously processed. Receptors instead directly connect to motor nerves at the spinal column analogue to produce rapid removal of, say, one's hand from a hot stove. A Borg cube, immense and complex as it is, can be viewed as an organism; and preprogrammed "reflexes" in response to abruptly dangerous conditions often saved an otherwise doomed sub-collective. Sometimes the necessary millisecond to appraise a situation and decide how to act is not available. Therefore, as the star dimmed and polar magnetic field exponentially increased, thrusters along face #4 lit with violet-blue fury. As conditions did not allow a stable warp shell, impulse engines revved up.

All was in vain.

A collective blink. The cube was not moving. By all rights it should be accelerating rapidly, moving to a point either beyond danger, or where transwarp could be utilized. A deluge of data flooded the sensor hierarchy: the condition of the ring artifact, continuing changes in the dwarf, the slight hull distortion which signaled a tractor beam. Stop. Examine the final datum closely. Quickly reconfigure part of the grid even as engines unsuccessfully strained against an unknown pull.

Six tractor beams, emanating from the ring, firmly gripped Cube #347. No apertures, no lenses, no grooves marked beam origin; the six lances of focused gravitonic energy simply issued from the dull metallic surface. They were working in concert to align the cube with the middle of the ring, much like docking tractors precisely positioned Borg ships prior to berthing in dry-dock cradles. The view down the black throat was unsettling: according to the grid, nothing, no matter, no energy, no time!, existed in the area previously capped by liquid metal.

Cube #347 had once been transported to the Alpha Quadrant via a method known as "lambda tunneling." The tunneling had occurred quickly, unexpectedly; the ride back had been a product of uncontrolled guesswork to reopen the same rip, recently closed, in the space-time fabric. No time had been afforded to examine the phenomenon, although the sight now looming increasingly close as tractors pulled the cube towards seeming oblivion would have matched sensor profiles. None the Borg had encountered knew of controlled lambda tunneling, the method requiring at least two termini to be built and linked via the production of lambda particles derived from bolonite. Consequently, both places had to be visited /before/ lambda

tunneling could proceed. The ability for lambda particles to be employed thus was hinted several times in the research of five assimilated races, but warp variant transportation was more convenient and, most importantly, cost much less in terms of material and energy.

The species which had built this particular ring was long extinct and unknown even to the eldest of the current crop of sentients. Other similar artifacts existed, but all except for this one either orbited the drained husks of their stellar core power source or drifted in the gulf between stars. No mate remained functional which could act as a termini for the lambda gate and by all rights the vast ring should have never activated in the first place, and certainly never found a link.

By all rights...

However, the universe occasionally throws spit drenched curve balls with a bit of English spin. The ring had survived, had activated, had linked. The question now, as Cube #347 cut power to its overloaded engines and was drawn into the void, was where was the tunnel to end? And would the light be a welcoming lantern...or an oncoming train?

The passage through the tunnel was quick, but not smooth. All exposed sensor and communication clusters extruding more than two meters beyond the hull surface were sheared, rendering them inoperable. The sensor grid was not adversely affected, most input originated from arrays set flush to or just within the hull proper. Conventional subspace communication, on the other hand, was degraded to a fraction of its normal functionality.

Cube #347 exited the lambda tunnel in a very confused state. As it reached to re-establish a link with the Collective, it simultaneously began searching for navigational pulsars and activating weapons. Before any of the above could be accomplished, the cube was enveloped with a wave of vaguely familiar energy. The overwhelming brightness at frequencies well beyond the visible forced "blinking" of the grid, a momentary shut-down, to prevent overload. The weapon energy profile was swiftly matched to that logged during an Alpha Quadrant skirmish with a Federation ship known as Secondprize.

As with the earlier brush with the BIC protocol, linkage with the Greater Consciousness became academic, majority of exposed cube surfaces rendered opaque to the fractal frequencies employed to keep the Collective as One. Unfortunately, upgrades had been made to the weapon, and the effect was no longer confined to the top molecular layer of the hull. Exterior hatches were welded shut, preventing deployment of new subspace communication arrays; the sensor hierarchy squinted at the universe through smoky glasses. The fractal subspace reflection layer was a mere fraction of a millimeter thick, but it essentially made Cube #347 mute, hard of hearing, and partially blind.

The fearsome Borg weapons of the cube, however, worked perfectly, as did propulsion and shields; and enough of the grid remained functional to spot a Federation ship only ten kilometers distant. The sub-collective of Cube #347 was One in consensus, One in action, One in anger: terminate that f***ing Federation ship, ask questions later.

* * * * *

The crew of the Explorer waited nervously. They had received an edited version of events-to-come during a mass briefing several days earlier while equipment was installed on the ship. The only crew member who was looking forward to the venture was J'hana, who had left the meeting at a run to sharpen all her edged weaponry and top off the power in her phaser rifles.

The system, or "fishing hole" as the Section 31 admiral insisted on calling it, was located five light years from Waystation. Orbiting around a cooling red dwarf was a myriad of asteroids and other cosmic debris. The system was unimportant with the exception of some rocks containing an unusually high percentage of bolonite ore. Much earlier, robotic drones, little more than thrusters attached to a simple computer following orders from a mother tug via subspace radio, had gathered eighteen easily accessible asteroids. They had been strung together with high tensile carbon monofilament into a vast ring, the same structure pictured in the initial briefing.

Baxter quietly watched the viewscreen, attempting to quell his nerves. The Borg were not something to blithely play with; and neither were new technologies. Starfleet, predictably, was attempting both at the same time. The eighteen rocks held formation in a rough circle two kilometers in diameter, connected by the unseen cables. Occasional bursts of light from drones embedded in each rock lit space as they made minute orbital adjustments. The contrivance had been ready when Explorer entered the system, confirming Section 31 plans had been percolating for quite some time.

In the dim light of the star, a metallic shimmer glinted within the ring structure. Sensors claimed nothing was there; Section 31 claimed nothing could be there. Baxter wasn't quite sure, but was not going to argue: the resources gathered by Section 31 hinted at Very Powerful People who would not be adverse to eliminating a captain...a crew...a ship. Baxter idly wondered how many "all hands lost due to unknown spatial anomaly" was a reality, then quickly quelled that line of thought.

"Status," ordered Baxter.

Larkin replied, not bothering to glance down at the console that, in truth, was useless to her, "All ready, sir."

Baxter nodded. "Bridge to Hartley and Tilleran. Everything okay down in engineering?"

"Not quite sure what these buttons are supposed to do, but they are all green," said Hartley's voice over internal communications. It was not a report to inspire confidence.

Tilleran's voice added, "Get away from that juncture, crewman! You saw what happened when Ensign K'lula tried to see what they soldered in there. Oh, are we ready? Am I on-line to Baxter? Guess I am. Yes, all read-outs give the go ahead." A pause. "Could someone give me that manual? I need to reread page seventy-four about..." The signal cut off.

Baxter sighed. Confidence. He glanced sideways at his second-in-command, David Conway. The commander was deep into his third cup of coffee this shift. Baxter wondered how the man ever held all that liquid in his bladder.

"J'hana, aim the deflector and be ready with all weapons, not that they will do much good if Section 31's house of cards falls apart. Ford," Lieutenant Zach Ford at helm glanced over his shoulder, "ready us for a very quick get away towards the trap."

"Let's go. Activate BIC protocol one."

Explorer lined herself up, deflector dish emitting an incandescent stream of energy. Under normal circumstances, the output would have seriously drained ship energy reserves, but a special generator had been installed solely to provide the necessary power. Ten kilometers away, the expanding cone of the beam bathed the asteroids. Baxter squinted as eighteen bursts of light shone so brightly automatic filters cut in.

Explorer waited. And waited. And waited. And waited. Larkin played 132 simultaneous games of solitaire while contemplating odd sensor data from the bolonite ring. Conway downed a forth cup of coffee. Ford stared at a bulkhead. Other minor crewmen on the bridge pretended to work at their stations even as they surfed the Quadrant Wide Web and participated in text-only

chat rooms. A grinding sound echoed on the silent bridge as J'hana sharpened her already perfectly edged bat'lath.

Baxter sighed. "Well, we tried. Larkin, send a message in the supposed direction of Banshee and tell them the Borg are a no-show. They can power up and uncloak safely. Ford, plot us a direct path back to Waystation. J'hana..."

"Sir," said Larkin, "something has just appeared near the asteroids. It is in the shape of a large cube."

"Crud."

J'hana laughed with glee, eyes gleaming, antennae erect. "For the Hive Mother!" she shouted as her fingers played across her station, sending a second BIC burst towards the cube.

The Borg vessel was squarely caught in the center of the beam's focus. Adverse effects were not noticeable. In fact, it was already rotating to target the much smaller Explorer in whatever sights it employed, engines and weapons gathering power.

"J'hana, make sure they follow us. Ford, don't run us into any rocks."

"Like getting them to follow us is going to be hard," muttered Conway. He cradled what was possibly his last cup of coffee.

Explorer pivoted, a quantum torpedo launched aft to slam into cube shields. That was not good. Borg usually required several volleys to adapt; to already be adapted meant the drones on board recognized Starfleet was responsible for their kidnapping and had already taken defensive precautions.

Ford programmed several evasive maneuvers, jiggling the Explorer sharply starboard, then back port. A fist came down in trademarked method, as taught to all helmsmen in the Academy. A couple of sparks flew, but nothing serious. In response, the ship sped up. The cube was close behind.

"Well," said Baxter under his breath, "let's just hope this works. Otherwise, escaping the Borg in the Delta quadrant is going to have been all for nothing."

* * * * *

The sub-collective of Cube #347 was Pissed Off. Emotions are known to the Borg, feelings such as frustration and satisfaction felt in a communal manner. While "love" and "hate" are irrelevant, "desire" for perfection drives many an assimilation. The imperfectly assimilated of Cube #347 experienced the same collectively allowed emotions on the individual scale, unlike the rest of their civilization, but a strongly emoted feeling in one (or more) drones easily influenced all.

Deaf and partially blind, very few actions were available on for a decision tree cascade. The consensus was never formed in the first place, alternate avenues not examined, as the weapon hierarchy, led by Weapons, seized upon the overwhelming desire to punish those who had caused this predicament. The Federation was obviously responsible; and with that welcoming raspberry of a torpedo, the starship in view was going to die.

Captain was pulled along in the rip-tide of support for Weapons' actions, unable to capture control of propulsion back to himself, much less override weapon command codes. Too many of his hierarchy sided with the volatile head of the now controlling hierarchy. Cube #347 was reacting to the situation, not trying to determine the cause behind it.

Suddenly Captain did not care, the mental discipline necessary to those of the cube-controlling Hierarchy of Eight swept away by the vast majority. Phasers, cutting beams,

disrupters, torpedoes, tractor beams all locked onto the Starfleet ship. The only important object within the universe of the united Cube #347 sub-collective was a blurry Federation vessel speeding away at high impulse.

* * * * *

"Do you see the webbing? Do you?"

Ford looked over his shoulder at the captain. "Sir, please do /not/ be a back-seat driver right now! This is hard enough as it is!"

A rattle of small boulders glanced off the shields, followed by a more concrete ringing as a torpedo exploded in a deliberate near-miss. Sparks cascaded from stations which had squeaked past quality control due to a hung-over inspector. A small fire began in one corner, quickly extinguished by a concurrently burst sprinkler pipe.

"Eyes on the road! Eyes on the road!" yelled Conway. He had spilled his coffee with the last shaking of the ship, very hot liquid missing his crotch by mere centimeters.

"I have the trap sighted, sir," calmly spoke Larkin. The forward view of the split main screen altered slightly, overlay of glowing red strands crisscrossing between several otherwise innocuous asteroids. The back view continued to show the rapidly gaining cube.

"Running is the coward's way out. We should stand and fight." J'hana had been chafing ever since Baxter had ordered her to not return the cube's fire.

"I've already explained to you, J'hana: we need the cube intact, and /us/ intact as well. We are to lead it to a trap." Baxter did not bother to look at his glaring tactical officer.

"Coward."

"You better believe it. I have a longer life expectancy that way. Bridge to engineering, how are things holding up down there?"

Hartley's voice: "I'd rather be transporting things around. Nice and boring. That second power plant has royally fried many of the deflector circuits; and the abuse the shields are taking isn't much help either. I quote the famous words, 'We can't take much more of this'."

"See! I told you we must stand and fight! Let our glorious deaths blaze a trail to the afterlife and let our exploits be sung of for generations!"

"J'hana!" cried Baxter with exasperation, adding, perhaps unwisely considering the state the Andorian was in, "Shut up!"

A crew member leapt forward to restrain J'hana as she drew her bat'lath, earning himself a fist to the face and bloody unconsciousness. J'hana slightly calmed, imagining the human's visage to be Borg...or the captain. She sheathed the deadly Klingon weapon.

"Here we go!" shouted Ford. He aligned the ship to pass between gaps in the strands anchored between massive rocks. The cube, even if it saw the trap, would have no way to follow the smaller Explorer's maneuvers, may not even have the time to stop. The conductive cables led back to three tugs shielded from sensors by the bulk of asteroid. Once the cube was entangled, they would direct the might of their large power core into the trap, frying whatever was caught. Not even a Borg ship was hardened against the massive electrical discharge posed to catch it unawares. However, if the Explorer through sheer bad luck or faulty driving managed to become trapped as well, they too would be shocked. Messily. Painfully. Terminally.

"First gap cleared," stated Larkin as the sensor-highlighted wire vanished from the viewscreen. "Second gap rapidly approaching. Three quantum torpedoes on an intercept vector. The Borg cube will be within effective energy weapon range in fifty seconds."

* * * * *

{Phaser range!} gleefully announced Weapons over the intranet as he targeted the fleeing ship. The sensor grid had become increasingly degraded as the vessel had dodged between a mess of asteroids, each a third the mass of the cube itself. Propulsion was registering lessened performance, a dilemma quickly rectified by bringing an auxiliary core on-line to supplement power output from the primary core.

An exterior view of the charging Exploratory-class cube would reveal kilometers of superconducting carbon alloy cable wrapped securely around the cube, anchoring rocks swinging along behind for the ride. Once the strands had reached the same velocity as the cube, they had "melted" through the shields and contacted hull. Shields were designed to ward against high kinetic projectiles, protect from dust damage, and reflect (or absorb) energy naturally ambient and malevolently focused; low kinetic solid objects tended to be ignored. Three tugs frantically boosted away from former hiding places, unreeling lengths of the same material. The sub-collective, intent on its task, grid providing the sensor equivalent of non-prescription sunglasses on a near-sighted person during a cloudy dusk, did not notice. Did not care.

The dodging Starfleet ship would soon be carved into very small pieces.

A question suddenly broke the mood, one posed by Captain himself as he ripped himself from the mob, pulling a chunk of the command and control hierarchy with him: {Why does this vessel attempt to escape on impulse when warp would better serve?}

Why indeed?

The Federation ship dodged through another alley of asteroids, angling down the straight-away even as escape paths which would not easily allow pursuit by the cube presented themselves. A churning itch of paranoia surfaced, fed as the sensor hierarchy belatedly recognized the smack of cable across hull as not natural. A filtering overlay on the primary extended visual view brought a complex web wire into awareness. The target, putting on a burst of speed to edge just out of phaser range, cleared a final mass of webbing which would have done a spider proud.

<<TRAP!!>> exclaimed the sub-collective to itself. Captain abruptly seized full control of propulsion, frantically reversing impulse to bring the cube to a halt. However, even the smallest Borg vessels sport tens of thousands of metric tons if weighed in a one gravity environment, all of which adds to extreme amounts of mass at the mercy of the ultimate universal constant of inertia. Cube #347 could hardly stop on a dime.

Closer came the final web. Closer. Closer. The cube slowed. Closer. Closer. Laser range finders twinkled off black cables, kilometers diminishing. Closer. Closer. Almost stopped. Closer. Not good enough. At a speed of mere meters per second, one full face of Cube #347 hit the complexly crisscrossed superconducting wires.

Elsewhere, three tugs and ten portable power plants bolted to anchor rocks fed immense amounts of energy into connecting cables. All Hell broke loose within the trussed Borg cube.

Shielding, propulsion, weaponry, transporter, sensor systems overloaded, conduits exploding in all subsections. Ambient lights vanished, replaced by showers of sparks as power nodes shattered. The dataspaces and intranet convulsed as computer relays fried, even those hardwired into the bulkheads themselves. Within the cores, power matrix crystals from which the energy was drawn to run both warp and transwarp spontaneously degraded. Drones went off-line.

The electrocution ceased. Starfleet sensors warily strained towards the now drifting Borg cube. Several cautious probes were sent, all of which settled on the exterior hull without hostile challenge. Federation personnel breathed a sigh of relief, followed by whoops of joy. Success!

Here ends "A Fish Story" Part One: "Circle of Friends". Part Two will continue in "They."