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Invocation of the Birds - Prologue

In front of the workbench, transporter special-effects shimmered the air with distortions and more than a hint of green. Into the space materialized 25 of 32, caught mid-stretch rolling her head back and forth in an effort to pop the vertebrae of her neck. Once again, as she had for the last three regeneration cycles, she registered the need for engineering hierarchy to adjust the cervical clamps of her alcove; and, once again, the request was assigned a very low urgency rating due to higher priority tasks already filling the engineering to-do roster. 25 of 32 heaved a small sigh of disappointment, but had expected the response. After a heartbeat or two, the transporter system activated again, this time depositing a moderate-sized cardboard box on the bench before the drone.

The workday was begun.

The Borg drone 25 of 32 belonged to the assimilation hierarchy of Lugger-class Cube #238, which until very recently was one of two ships of the Collective where imperfectly assimilated units were warehoused. To be imperfectly assimilated was to be successfully processed into the Whole, yet still retain a kernel of individuality, or at least poor impulse control. Drones so afflicted, like 25 of 32, wholeheartedly believed in the quest for Perfection. Unfortunately, while a unit's basic 'Borgness' was never in doubt, at least not sufficiently to trigger euthanasia and recycling of the drone, the abnormal thought patterns of the imperfectly assimilated decreased the efficiency of those sub-collectives into which it was embedded, sometimes to the point of catastrophe. The solution of the Greater Consciousness was to gather all its square pegs into one basket, give said basket useful, if relatively tedious or of low importance, tasks to accomplish, and hope the problem would take care of itself, or at least not blow itself up in an inopportune manner. The mere concept of imperfect assimilation was embarrassing, not that the Whole would admit to harboring such a small-being emotion, and it was preferred to keep the whole issue low profile, both in regards to Self and the galaxy gossip-zines.

In the more than eight thousand year history of the Borg Collective, the imperfectly crewed Exploratory-class ship designated Cube #347 had evoked the most heartburn to the Whole. It had been present at the birth of the Greater Consciousness (via inadvertent time travel); it had endured war; it had even (somehow) cheated death; and until a month ago, it was this vessel which shared the galactic stage with Cube #238. Maybe it was the particular combination of drones which comprised the sub-collective, or perhaps it was mere coincidence in the cosmic rolls of the dice...whatever the reason, Cube #347 had gotten in to (and successfully endured) an astounding number and manner of difficulties. Unfortunately, neither sub-collective nor cube had survived its final adventure, leaving Lugger-class #238 assigned to literally pick up the wildly sundered pieces.

The fact that Exploratory-class Cube #347, in its sacrifice, had saved the Borg Collective, and maybe the entire universe, from a quantum parasite was conveniently ignored. Karaoke, an obsession with used warp nacelles, and all the other signs of a

period whereupon the Greater Consciousness had been less-than-sane were already being erased from communal memory. If it could not be recalled, then it had never happened. One minor, yet telling, datum, easily overlooked, was the current status of the deceased sub-collective, which had been "rogue" at the time of the it-didn't-really-happen Incident. The label had...vanished, as if it had never been; and since the Collective did not make mistakes, the truth must be that the sub-collective had never been rogue, that it had always been acting under orders from the Whole.

Just as history is written by the winner, so can lies, especially those told to oneself, mutate into truth. Refocus upon Lugger-class Cube #238....

In Bulk Cargo Hold #8 - gravity was present, with the ambient environment otherwise alike that outside the hull - mounds of wreckage were strewn about the vast floor. Even after weeks of salvage, each sweep through the debris zone brought with it more dross to be tagged and transported to the piles. An Exploratory-class cube may be the smallest of the Borg fleet, but it is still an immense structure; and like a watch taken apart and scattered across a tabletop, the amount of material comprising a deconstructed cube appears to be more than the same cube in functional condition. It will be many weeks more before all the remains are found and recovered.

Once secured, engineering drones began initial sorting of the debris. Large pieces, such as superstructure spars and warp nacelles, had their own piles, dangerously teetering things built from less-than-expert use of cargo tractor beams, over a hundred meters high and always on the edge of transforming into an avalanche. Chunks originating from Cube #347's exterior hull received special inspection; and those pieces crusted with phasic armor - a paint-on coating with immediate defensive application, the production of which had somehow been assimilated by the lost sub-collective - were sent to special storage in another cargo bay. The remainder of the material was subsequently restacked into smaller mounds, ready for further processing.

The next step in processing the remains of Cube #347 occurred in adjacent Inner Cargo Hold #8. Restructured especially for the task, the lowermost floor of the salvage tiers was thirty meters high, with six stories stacked atop, each with a ten meter ceiling. To the bottom floor were transported the small piles prepared in Bulk Cargo Hold #8, new mounds brought in as older ones were dismantled. Ceramics, different metals, plastics, wires, every type of object had a fate awaiting it. Some material was sent immediately to storage, but most required further action to be taken. For instance, a sundered data pillar or alcove had many constituent parts to be extracted. It was upon the upper salvage tiers that ranks of drones, primarily engineering, but also other units with appropriate qualification, performed the strip-downs. Eventually, all material was stockpiled; and when the salvage task was determined complete, the Lugger-class cube would transit in-system towards planet #1 to off-load its cargo at an appropriate recycling facility.

The occasionally encountered 'organic component' required a specialized salvage process, of which one entire tier was dedicated. To be an 'organic component' was to be the freeze/vacuum-dried corpse of one of Cube #347's former crew...or, more often than not, pieces thereof.

Processing organics was a multi-stage affair. First, a corpse was dumped into a small vat of deconstructor nanites, the microscopic machines programmed to scour muscle, organ, and other soft flesh from the body. The long-chain carbons, proteins,

amino acids, essential minerals, and other compounds were collected for inclusion in Cube #238's waste reclamation system, to be locally recycled into replicator precursor and regeneration system components. Left behind by first-stage processing were implants and assemblies, as well as bone, exoskeleton, scales, and other mineralized body parts. Bones and analogous internal scaffolding were sifted out and sent to a second digester: the shielding laminate built by nanites during early assimilation represented valuable exotic metalorganic alloys. Meanwhile, the hardware for each ex-crewmember was sorted, boxed up, and sent to individuals, primarily conscripts from assimilation or drone maintenance, for examination to determine functional status and/or salvageability of every disarticulated component.

The drone remains of Exploratory-class Cube #347 were odd, their hardware a jumble of modern and antiques centuries out of date. The sub-collective had a strange history, to say the least, appearing in the Borg homesystem about four years previous, after being lost, and declared dead, in the Dark War five centuries prior. Upon interrogation, a tale had been spun about death and resurrection, an after-life waiting room, and a giant eyeball; and, in response, the Greater Consciousness had written "communal hallucination due to the effects of temporal displacement" to the sub-collective's master file.

All old hardware was automatically consigned to discard pile, to be recycled for raw components. It wasn't that the implants and assemblies did not work - in many cases, functionality was fine, the unit in question just never upgrading to modern equipment because it would have been more trouble than worth when considering the potential gain over the aged models. However, there was the appropriate image to maintain, and the Greater Consciousness could not afford the chance, no matter how slight, of a drone being spotted with an out-of-date limb or eyepiece. Also tagged for final salvage were one-offs, no matter the age, items which were not just species-specific, but built or modified to fit a single individual and unlikely to suit another unit.

Sorted from the dross, modern equipment underwent further scrutiny, each piece tested to determine if it was functional. Items found to be broken were assessed concerning feasibility to repair, or if it was more efficient to scrap. Still working implants and assemblies were tagged for further reconditioning, their fate one of eventual unity with a new owner. After all, why build a new component for a drone when a gently-used one was sufficient?

It was probably only coincidence that Lugger-class Cube #238 would find many of the rebuilt parts to be off-loaded in the near future subsequently re-loaded for use by the very sub-collective which had initially sorted them. Maybe.

25 of 32 peered into the box, the faintest of frowns crossing her face. Each box was only /supposed/ to have the parts for one drone in it, but sometimes the units tasked to fish the bits from the scouring vats were less than attendant in their duty. /Especially/ when /certain/ designations began comparing the newest etchings engraved onto body armor, it being nearly impossible to apply a tattoo to a nanite-altered epidermis. Why, last shift, 25 of 32 had received one box with the fragments of /three/ arms, and obviously /not/ belonging to the same individual. However, after several swift minutes of digging through the box and performing a hasty parts categorization, she concluded that it was only a single drone, albeit a heavily cybernized one.

Processing for each ex-drone averaged approximately five hours, but it was obvious that this individual ("Box #1097", as written with a black marker on the thick cardboard) would need substantially more time. Usually it was the weapons drones whom were the most heavily cybernized, required armor and weapons replacing up to a third of the original body even before parts were shot or burned off in the course of deployment. However, implant and assembly configuration suggested a command and control function, units of which usually spent the majority of their existence in alcoves and away from overtly dangerous situations. There were exceptions, of course, and any drone which had been amid the Collective ranks for a long time tended to become more cybernized as organic parts simply wore out and had to be replaced by machine. Unfortunately, a quick scan indicated at least one important implant missing from the box, the one which included the unit's full identification, designation, job assignment, final minutes of memory, and other miscellaneous information. The dataspace notes associated with the box number were equally unhelpful, simply mentioning that the unit therein had been recovered from a mangled shuttle outside the main debris cloud.

25 of 32 registered yet another complaint (adding to a long list of previous criticisms) concerning negligence on the part of the vat crew. Unless a truly unique death had somehow destroyed a normally near indestructible black-box implant, there was a box of parts waiting to be processed which had two such devices in it.

And some drones continued to wonder why the sub-collective of Lugger-class Cube #238 was always at the bottom of the Collective-wide efficiency percentiles?

Heaving the exaggerated sigh of the long-suffering, and making sure the angst was appropriately echoed by her intranet signature, 25 of 32 proceeded to begin work with sorting, categorization, and initial component repairs. Hours passed.

25 of 32 picked up a thigh assembly, automatically providing it with its new official moniker as part #1097-32.sub-1a. As she turned it over in her hands so as to build a visual condition scan to attach to the part's dossier, she noticed a closed compartment. Body compartments were useful things, the Borg equivalent of pockets and something no unit should be without. Even normal drones utilized them, storing small items of prosaic use. For example, an engineering unit might keep a specialized wrench, one for which it was more trouble than worth to add to a limb assembly. 25 of 32 idly shook the thigh, listening. If Cube #347 had been any but an imperfect sub-collective, then there would be no question that any items within the limb would be boring in nature. However, Cube #347 /had/ been imperfect; and if the individual units were anything like those aboard Cube #238, there was the strong possibility of finding something /very/ interesting.

A soft rattle, as of small stones knocking against each other, was 25 of 32's reward.

Part #1097-32.sub-1a was set on the workbench. At the edge of the table was a small power source, suitable to plug into the numerous devices required during the drone salvage process. 25 of 32 attached two leads to the power source, then carefully brushed the free ends against a pair of contacts adjacent the thigh compartment. Success! Motors energized, the compartment doors sprung open; and from within tumbled a bunch of crystals. Meme crystals.

25 of 32 looked to the right, then the left, and upon only seeing the expected bustle of drones assigned to organic salvage, turned her attention inward. Because she did not exhibit any of the more disrupting or dangerous neuroses, only the standard censure

filters rode her psyche. No units or spyware specifically watched for aberration, unlike 407 of 550, for example, whom was fixated upon extreme juggling despite the fact he could not, even before assimilation, juggle. Therefore, if 25 of 32 were to consciously consider indulging in her own obsession - which, in her opinion, was a legitimate hobby, and unquestionably harmed no one, even as /certain/ Greater Consciousnesses labeled it 'unBorg' - it was fairly easy to circumvent the lockouts. Unfortunately, there were some designations which did not make the same leap of logic as did 25 of 32.

All key drones liable to notice abnormalities in 25 of 32's thought processes were otherwise engaged, and likely to remain so in the near future. In general, command and control hierarchy was busy with salvage coordination activities or babysitting those designations prone to irregularity. Specifically, Prime, the sub-collective's primary consensus monitor and facilitator, was physically overseeing (and assisting, given her high strength quotient) secondary sorting in Inner Cargo Hold #8. Meanwhile, Reserve, Prime's backup, was stowed in his alcove, coordinating with Weapons, the latter of which had been utilizing resources of the BorgCraft program - an old, yet powerful, tactical simulator that resided amid dusty Collective digital archives, ignored by the Whole even as its imperfect sub-collectives had regularly employed it for over five centuries - to model the final moments of Cube #347, and, more importantly, track where debris might have gone so as to direct the Lugger-class towards the areas of highest salvage potential. The head of the engineering hierarchy, Engineer, was another whom would look poorly upon any action, no matter how innocuous, with the potential to lower salvage efficiency, but he was busy sorting out an issue two tiers above 25 of 32, one involving inappropriate use of an aerosol can and lighter to melt plastic insulation from wire. Finally, the only other designation to have reason to disapprove of a certain budding notion was Assimilation, the head of 25 of 32's own hierarchy, but that notable was currently in regeneration, mental resources harnessed for computational processing.

25 of 32 opened her eyes and returned attention to the meme crystals arrayed on the workbench before her.

Where there were meme crystals, there had to be a reader. In fact, 25 of 32 had already sorted said reader - Part #1097-14.sub-5c - setting it into the discard pile. Formerly integrated into a lower arm assembly, she had detached it from its housing, vaguely wondering at the time why its previous owner had installed it in the first place. Now with the discovery of the meme crystal stash the answer was clear; and the illicit device would serve to enlighten 25 of 32 as to the content of the crystals.

The reader could not be installed upon 25 of 32's chassis, not without raising serious questions. However, by attaching a few leads here and there, it was possible to temporarily jury-rig it to her sensory input. 25 of 32 performed the minor self-modification, then inserted a crystal into the reader.

Bah! The meme crystal was exceedingly uninteresting - a hard-boiled noir detective novel revolving around the adventures of a character called Jumba the Wise Lizard. It had all the markings of a long-running serial, a hypothesis swiftly confirmed as each crystal in turn was inserted into the reader. Even worse, the novel was almost entirely /words/...no animation, no live-action sequences, no narration, only a very few stylized line drawings to accompany the work. Presumably the ex-owner, a drone alike 25 of 32 who could have absorbed the entire crystal in seconds, actually /read/ the things in the archaic word-by-word mode.

The meme crystals were useless, except...

25 of 32 disconnected the reader, then carefully swept the crystals aside. The final destination of the crystals was not to join the reader in the recycling pile, but rather to be hidden in one of 25 of 32's own body compartments. Their discovery was carefully omitted from the catalogue associated with box #1097. It wasn't lying, exactly, but rather not reporting a nonstandard item that the deceased drone obviously should not have had in the first place.

As was common for many drones, assimilation had distorted, or outright erased, many of 25 of 32's personal memories. Skills, training, and similar proficiencies were left intact, such adding to the value of the drone-to-be, but little weight was placed on retaining undamaged connections in those parts of the brain where a personal 'self' was seated. Therefore, while 25 of 32 did not know why the concept of 'flight' and 'flying' was so very important to her, the context blurry at best, the fact remained that it did. Following the leap of unlogic so prevalent amongst the psyches of the imperfect, from 'flight' it was a short step to 'bird'. Unfortunately, the keeping of birds, or any nonsentient, aboard a Borg vessel as a pet was strictly disallowed for a multitude of reasons. So, if 25 of 32 could not possess an aviary, then she could at least acquire, surreptitiously, the /parts/ of a bird; and, specifically, 25 of 32 was fascinated by feathers in all their myriad forms and colors.

As desirable as the notion might be, it was not possible to formulate a successful consensus cascade to direct the sub-collective to embark on a feather collection expedition. 25 of 32 had tried several times, but very few had recognized her belief that the quest for Perfection of the Whole could only be enhanced by assimilating a deeper understanding of feathers. Therefore, the next best venue of feather acquisition was gBay.

A massive auction site spanning the civilizations of the Milky Way galaxy, and possibly beyond, if an item existed, it could probably be purchased on gBay. As long as there were willing buyers, there would be willing sellers, even for the oddest of objects and services. Feathers did not even rate a blip on the gBay scale of the weird. The use of gBay by an imperfectly assimilated Borg drone to add something to his/her/its collection was, of course, forbidden, gBay a concept for small beings. Perfection could only be achieved by all working as One, and for individual parts of the Whole to trade with each other (even with the unassimilated masses whom had yet to be joined to the Collective) defeated the concept of Oneness.

Naturally, there was a small cadre of drones, including 25 of 32, who continually worked to secretly circumvent the various locks and traps preventing individual access to the galactic communication protocols (and gBay).

Given that Lugger-class Cube #238 was in the heart of Borg territory, not to mention busy at an assigned salvage task, to even contemplate sneaking a glance at the gBay feather markets was not only ill-advised, but impossible. Such, however, did not prevent 25 of 32 from hiding the meme crystals, for while she personally did not have need for the Jumba stories, there were surely people on gBay who would pay a pretty credit for them...especially if they were rare, first-edition stories packaged in their original crystals, not copies. In a week, or a month, or a Cycle, the opportunity would arise to log in to gBay. Research would be required to determine an appropriate price to start an auction offering for the crystals, and anything else which might accidentally fall into a body compartment. While the Borg Collective, and 25 of 32, had no use for credits,

those who sold feathers on gBay would demand recompense before sending the feathers to the buyer.

Decision made and action complete, 25 of 32 continued to process box #1097. In total, it required 7.12 hours to finish the task, from initial reception of the box on her workbench to sorting of the final spinal implant. 25 of 32 logged her accomplishment; and all the neat piles of parts vanished in a transporter beam, off to the next stage of organic component salvage. The next box in the queue was requested.

25 of 32 peered into box #1153 to assess her upcoming work load, and immediately registered a complaint. The exoskeleton of the former individual had not been fully dissolved from implants and assemblies. 25 of 32 would be forced to use chisel and laser to remove the mess from each item before she could appraise it. The time spent carving exoskeleton would lead to a decrease in her efficiency rating. Unacceptable!

The complaint was dutifully accepted by one of the several overworked partitions of command and control hierarchy tasked to deliberate grievances. After about a minute, the objection was declared to have insufficient merit to warrant further consideration. Grumbling, 25 of 32 picked up a laser scalpel and fished from the box the first of many implants requiring cleaning.

Birdsong. The trilling and chattering of birds (and bird analogues) was always an antidote to annoyance. And the more time spent griping was more time not doing the assigned task. Therefore, 25 of 32 consciously damped the trickle of irritation over the vat crew, focused on her workbench, selected a track from the "100 Top Tweets" compendium she kept in on-board memory, and turned up the figurative volume. And as laser began to turn exoskeleton into a wafting of foul smelling smoke, 25 of 32 dreamed of the beautiful feathers which would soon be added to her collection.