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Invocation of the Birds - Part 2 **As the Crow Flies**

<<Initiate classic baritone narrator voice-over>>

In a galaxy where the only constants are asserted to be death and taxes, one Borg sub-collective has found that particular idiom to be false. Resurrected from oblivion by a multi-racial Alliance more than 50,000 years after the extinction of the Borg Greater Consciousness, the sub-collective of Cube #347 has been wondering the "why" behind its predicament. And then...all was revealed.... They!

<<End voice-over>>

The temporally resurrected sub-collective of an Alliance-built Cube #347 was screwed.

On the screen were images of They, a patrol consisting of eight light and two medium tactical units. To successfully eradicate such a small group without receiving extensive damage would require a four-ship mixed force of Battle-class cubes and Assault-class spheres. To field one untested faux Exploratory-class cube was...not recommended. And even should the patrol be eliminated, Security Liaison Vaerz had implied, if not directly stated, that there was an entire armada of They somewhere on the galactic rim.

Deep within Captain, within the sub-collective, a war was taking place. On one side were the Prime Commands, the instincts programmed into each Borg upon assimilation; and among the most powerful was the /demand/ to destroy all They by any means necessary....

[...any means necessary...]

[...any means necessary...]

And on the other side were the Xenig constructed pre-Prime Commands, the Alliance's shackles upon the sub-collective, expertly grafted into drone psyches and kept intact by the artificial intelligence called Daisy. The image and threat of They activated a very specific Prime Command, the efficient following of which would require a response which was in direct conflict to the pre-Prime Commands.

In the end, the pre-Prime Commands won. For now. A less efficient, and less effective, if at all, path would now have to be attempted to satisfy the Prime Command.

"It is They," said Captain quietly. Behind, he heard the sounds of beings leaning forward and adjusting position to hear. "They are...terrible. They are not Borg, and Borg are not They. They cannot be assimilated, and We would not want to assimilate them. Small beings think They are biological versions of Borg due to superficial similarities

such as assimilation and a central Consciousness. But those small beings would be wrong. They are...Chaos."

Captain abruptly pivoted to face the audience. Eye swept over the crowd, noting expressions of confusion. "The Collective did war with They, and They lost." Confusion melted to relief. "But it was a costly victory, the entirety of the Whole against a mere forward scouting mission of They. The main fleet had been far from the galaxy. No more. And you expect /one/ Exploratory-class cube to fight your battle? We will lose...even the Collective we remember might lose.

A step forward was taken. Whole hand was lifted and curled into a fist. "The /only/ way to beat They is through mass assimilation. Every adult and child, every sentient species, every being in the Alliance must come together as a new Collective. Worlds must be stripped for their resources, fleets must be built, technologies recovered. And the Whole must expand and expand again to absorb neighboring civilizations, adding to the All. Only then /might/ They be eradicated. Even now it may be too late, but if the quest for Perfection is to be maintained at all, it /must/ be done. Therefore, you /will/ remove the restrictions placed upon us by-

"Daisy! Quiet him!" shouted Vaerz. Although the AI did not maintain a presence aboard the station where the meeting was occurring, nonetheless it was in attendance, listening via Captain's own senses.

Captain's jaw locked shut as the AI which squatted in the heart of Cube #347, in the place of a vinculum had the ship been of proper Borg manufacture, triggered compliance pathways.

At the back of the room, the eight marines had leveled their rifles. The audience began to fill the sudden quiet with shouted questions, frightened moans, and other hubbub.

"Everyone," said Vaerz as he stood, "please settle down. I think our Borg friend is exaggerating the danger. One has to admit, he does have cause." Pause. "Daisy, let Captain respond, although you may completely shut him down if he starts another tirade."

Captain felt his jaw unlock. He wiggled it slightly: so tightly had it been clinched that diagnostics were reporting a cracked molar. After a moment, a reply was provided, each word bitten into a near bark: "Borg. Do not. Exaggerate."

Vaerz blinked. Feathers briefly flattened in shocked understanding and realization that, perhaps, Captain's aborted speech had not been hyperbole. However, the outward manifestation of that moment was fleeting. "Maybe, maybe not. But the option you suggest is not acceptable." Expression hardened. An executive decision had been made. Vaerz turned to address the audience. "Ladies, gentlemen, hermaphros, neuters, I am sorry, but as my prerogative as Security Liaison, I must cancel this gathering. Government secrets, need to know, and all those spy cliches. You may register your complaints in the normal matter. I may, or may not, consider them."

The meeting was adjourned.

Even after so many months, the trauma of death and resurrection was distressing. For some drones more than others, the need to cope, so as to minimize impact to sub-collective efficiency, had led to some...interesting solutions.

"My designation is 122 of 510, and it has been 258.7 cycles since my temporal echo was ripped from the orderly tau flow and reconstituted as this drone."

Murmurs of ritual welcome were given.

"Since our last meeting, I have experienced six flashbacks, although only one of included a giant pair of lips acting as narrator, picture-in-picture style. And just three had butterflies of which I noticed. As usual, coherency was not strong. All episodes were logged and are at the usual datafile address for viewing."

Silence reigned as the memes were reviewed.

"Progress is being made," said Captain. He, like all of the Hierarchy of Eight, had been tasked to lead temporal reorientation sessions. Under normal circumstances, however 'normal' might be defined, the meetings would have been a job for the assimilation hierarchy, but the slatloe incident was still reverberating, making Assimilation and, thus, his hierarchy-mates, next to useless. Much internal intra-hierarchy self-therapy was happening, leaving reorientation to other drones. "It is suggested you attempt to control the episode next time it occurs. 188 of 240 with 1 of 8's group managed to launder some of the floating cloaks that were bothering her, and has been without flashbacks for six cycles now."

"We will do that," answered 122 of 510, reverting to the third person.

Captain looked around the circle of ten drones gathered in Supply Closet #24. All returned his appraisal. "And, with that, we are done. Keep your flashback journals. We are scheduled to meet at the same time in seven cycles. Return to your duties." A flurry of transporter beams took each unit away, leaving behind Captain and one other, non-Borg, observer.

"Interesting," commented Vaerz from the corner, next to several brooms which had yet to be unwrapped from their packaging. "Many years ago, when I was first briefed on the emergent crisis lurking on the galactic rim and the potential solution offered by the acquisition of Borg, group therapy sessions were far from my imagination. Of course, what little which was known about Borg amounted to ghost stories and pieces of decayed tech. Still, I envisaged something a bit more...darkly grandiose if not downright evil, given my natural bastardly and overly realistic outlook on life."

Controlling his annoyance, Captain confirmed his facial muscles to be locked into generic non-expression before turning to face the Security Liaison. In the dimness of the supply closet, the white feathers of Vaerz's plumage stood in stark contrast to the black. Standard Sarcoram casual wear of kilt and open-fronted vest were colored a muted pattern of grey and dark green, under which the latter was the dark shine of a leather weapons harness. Even with the leash afforded by the pre-Prime Commands, Vaerz kept at least two handguns - projectile-type, perfectly suitable to disable Borg - and several knives about his person at all times.

Yes, a definite bastard with a very realistic outlook on life, and particularly one's place in it should one's personal universe go all pear-shaped.

"You are aware that the drones of this sub-collective are imperfectly assimilated." The sentence was statement of fact, not question. "We function, but are far from the Borg ideal."

Vaerz ground the edges of his beak together while briefly flaring his neck ruff in a Sarcoram version of polite acquiesce. "So I've been told many times." The dryly ironic tone was sufficiently heavy that even a Borg drone could catch it. "I first had an inkling that all was not quite as I envisioned fairly early in the process when I was reviewing the extraction team summaries of what was being found in your brains. Yes, there were the

bits and pieces of what would eventually be built as this ship-" hands waved in gesture to the surroundings "-but there was also little things like the pickle recipes. Eight hundred seventy-three to be precise. Who needs that many pickle recipes?"

{I now have 904 pickle recipes,} reported 467 of 510 smugly in the background of Captain's mind. {The Sarcoram aren't much for briny preservatives...probably something to do with their carrion-eater background. Their not-so-distant ancestors ate days-old dead critters, even as more recent evolutionary pressure has expanded the menu to include fruits, vegetables, and grains. I strongly suspect a highly defined sense of taste regarding 'past-date' foods is lacking in the modern Sarcoram. The Caltrak, on the other hand...pickle paradise! Who'd have thought amphibians would have such a rich preservative cuisine?}

As the Security Liaison was a singular being, and thus did not have to deal with commentary with a potentially interruptive factor, he remained blissfully unaware of the pickle-related dialogue which was building in the background of Captain's mental processes and threatening to intrude. "Of course, there are many of my colleagues whom continue to believe that the example set by your sub-collective is a true view of what the Borg Empire looked like. There are entire /dissertations/ on the matter, some of which pass the thousand page mark."

Captain laboriously extracted himself from the pickle thread. He found himself staring at Vaerz, an awkward silence hanging in expectation of a response which had not occurred. The last twenty seconds of the conversation were replayed. "Not Borg empire. An empire is a small being concept. The Greater Consciousness is not a governmental entity. It is a Collective of which All belong equally." Pause. "Some less equally than others, in the case of the imperfectly assimilated. However, we are quite willing to provide you, or any of your colleagues, with an accurate understanding of what the Greater Consciousness was, and will be again, at any time."

Vaerz barked a sharp peal of laughter. "As in right now? I think I'll pass, once again; and I'll pass for all my colleagues, even those who might be more than willing to accept your offer."

An automated timer chimed in Captain's mindspace, elevating a background process to forward consciousness. The information carried by the thread was rapidly absorbed. "We are six hours from our destination coordinates." The change in topic was jarringly abrupt, but Vaerz's token reaction was to blink. "Sensors are still not observing anything other than the normal variation in energy flux, molecular density, and dust particle counts expected for interstellar space. We have been traveling for 34.2 cycles, averaging warp 7.7, to the middle of nowhere. Why? You have tasked us with the impossible mission to rid the galaxy of a They invasion, but unless the Enemy has acquired the perfect cloak and decided to sit at those particular coordinates, we are only slightly closer to death than we were when we started."

A cloaked They fleet was only one of the many tactical scenarios weapons hierarchy was modeling, when the reconstructed BorgCraft platform wasn't crashing due to bugs or as the result of the latest hastily constructed add-on. As with every other scenario, Cube #347 did not survive, although there was the 4.6% chance of the ship slamming into the flank of an invisible opponent, causing cartoonishly humorous consequences.

Replied Vaerz, "You are not dead yet, and neither am I. And I expect to remain not-dead into the far future, when my too-tough corpse will be served at my funeral to unappreciative extended family and friends. In six hours, the shake-down cruise phase will be an official success, provided you continue to keep yourselves, and me, amid the living."

There had been a time or three when that particular outcome had been in doubt, as Captain was sure Vaerz was well aware, via Daisy's reports. Overall, however, the security liaison was probably correct to assume the cube would continue to fail to explode catastrophically in the next six hours. "You fail to answer the central question - in six hours, what next?"

"Daisy tells me not a day goes by whereby your engineering hierarchy is not prodding a certain piece of Xenig tech, a bauble which cost the Alliance minerals rights to a very rich system."

An abrupt change in topic by Captain, or any Borg, was the result of a lack of interest in, or awareness of, the finer points of small-being conversational flow. For Vaerz to make a similar jump in subject matter was a calculated move. Captain did not allow the apparent non-sequitur to outwardly affect his demeanor. Instead, he automatically called forth the correct file structure as he answered, "The Xenig folded-space drive with accompanying zero-point energy array system."

Vaerz fluffed his feathers in an affirmative. "That's the egg." Pause. "And it is a trainer model, don't forget to add that small detail."

It was a vast understatement by the security liaison concerning the implied level of interest by Delta and her hierarchy in the Xenig drive. It had been mounted literally a day before the cube had departed on its trek to nowhere. The entire contraption, drive and power source, was a compact grey box measuring less than a meter per side, without seams and near featureless except for a small slot. With barely a five minute warning, a Xenig had appeared off the hull, beamed the module and several spider-bot remotes to Central Engineering, wired it in place, installed a software interface to the dataspace, provided a five centimeter thick hardcopy owners manual written in an indecipherable script, and left. The whole process had taken less than an hour.

The theoretical basis of the folded-space drive - theoretical because the Xenig, their Progenitors, and the few other advanced species who possessed the technology were not divulging any secrets - was rooted in knowing the 'energetic address' of a specific point in space-time. The first step demanded a point to be exactly described not only in regards to its X, Y, and Z relative to the rest of the universe, but also its position on the tau vector, condition of the underlying quantum foam, and other increasingly esoteric components. Next, a warp bubble-like shell was initiated around a vessel and the point's descriptors 'input' into the volume of space temporarily isolated from the rest of the universe. When the bubble was collapsed, the ship would /be/ at the input address (or the universe would have adjusted itself to consolidate around the ship, depending on the particular theory to which one ascribed).

The object installed upon Cube #347 was the input device, as well as the energy source required to power it. Because the ship was capable of standard warp, only minor modifications were required to form the bubble into which a point could be inscribed. The disconnect came in that the standard sensor grid, even one spindled and mutilated by Sensors, whom literally saw the universe differently from every other species on the cube

and, probably, in the Alliance, could not resolve the variables necessary to construct a valid energetic address.

As it happened, a 'young' Xenig, joined with its first space-capable chassis, also lacked the ability to appropriately perceive and compile all the variables necessary to direct a folded-space drive. Even with the sensors grafted to its body, decades of learning were required before a mech's neural network was sufficiently trained so that space-time addressing became routinely instinctive, as easy and unconscious a notion as a biological entity walking, slithering, or otherwise ambulating across a room. Until that skill was perfected, the Xenig had to utilize a 'trainer', a folded-space drive which accepted pre-set address sequences.

"We do not forget," replied Captain. "What does the Xenig drive have to do with our destination?"

Vaerz idly drew one of his knives, tested the blade's sharpness by trimming an already neatly pared thumb talon, then sheathed it again. Like all the Security Liaison's actions, it was undoubtedly performed with a deliberate purpose, one lost upon a Borg drone willing to patiently wait (on the outward aspect, anyway) for the conversation to continue. Finally Vaerz answered, "At the coordinates awaits a robotic courier. It is both very small and powered down, so it is understandable why sensors have missed it. The payload is a library of a dozen space-time addresses for the trainer drive. Included should be at least one backwater star system with sufficient resources in the form of asteroids and comets - no habitable planets - for you to indefinitely resupply this ship with replicator feedstock basics without returning to Alliance systems. Some other locations of potential interest. And several insertion points near the primary They, er, encampment, for lack of a better tactical description."

A deep growl, felt with the body and not heard with the ears, rumbled the supply closet, accompanied by the merest hint of tremor. The incident was transitory, quickly fading to the normal background hum of cube operations.

"By the poxy egg of the ancestors, what the f**k was that?" exclaimed Vaerz with uncharacteristic surprise, those feathers unconfined by clothing puffing outward as his head jerked up to stare at the ceiling. "Are we under attack?"

Captain carefully kept all hint of a smirk, or any similar expression, from his face. The reply was otherwise swift, delivered before AI Daisy could provide an explanation either via closet speaker or Vaerz's personal implant. "There is no emergency. Engineering has simply initiated several upgrades to the propulsion system. Alas, the clutch engagement was a bit rough. The hierarchy has noted the issue and is working to correct it." Pause. "And, coincidentally, our velocity has increased and we will be arriving at the courier to take possession of the files in 3.9 hours."

Certain amid the sub-collective began to vocally express their displeasure that the schedule for certain death by They had been advanced by several hours. The 'death' part was not of concern, but rather that there were now two hours less to formulate a (workable) plan to break the pre-Prime Commands or otherwise devise how to convince the Alliance to allow mass assimilation, thereby reconstituting the Collective. However, the eagerness of engineering hierarchy to have a new toy, especially one of Xenig manufacture, had tipped the balance of consensus.

"I see," said Vaerz, feathers flattening to their usual configuration. "In that case, I need to return to the Alliance quarters. There are some preparations I, and a few others, are required to finish before we arrive."

Ignoring the small being need for polite farewells, Captain locked a transporter beam to himself and abruptly relocated back to the nodal intersection nearest his alcove. He had his own duties to perform and he would concentrate on them better if he wasn't forced to devote run-time awareness to interactions with nonBorg entities.

The sub-collective of Cube #347 managed to stave off the inevitable for nearly a week. After recovering the data crystals, each one of which held one energetic address, from the courier, the folded-space drive underwent testing. Annoyingly, every time the drive was activated to an address, it required inserting the specific crystal into the mechanism's external slot. Inefficient...not to mention time consuming and potentially dangerous because the drive hesitated more often than not in spitting out the currently engaged crystal; and a new address could not be input until the old one was cleared.

Except those labeled to be near the They beachhead, all of the pre-set addresses were visited. Only a few locations could be matched against Alliance starcharts - Borg navigational files had been one of the many casualties of resurrection - but all seemed to be within the home galaxy. As promised, there was a system suitable from which to acquire raw supplies. There were also several jumps to the middle of apparent nowhere in interstellar space, as well as a neutron star, a triplet of red dwarfs, and a blue-white giant a million Cycles from supernovae and surrounded by a dense ring of asteroids rich in bolonite ore. (The lattermost crystal was inscribed with a glyph for 'Extreme Hazard': a large number of memory memes etched within the collective drone consciousness included bolonite-related misadventures.) Three stops put the cube within a few cycles of moderate warp travel of an Alliance ship repair facility or military outpost. The final two addresses led to once inhabited systems, their respective owners long vanished or otherwise removed from the cosmic stage: a yellow dwarf aged before its time, orbited by planets abused and stripped of their resources; a second yellow dwarf, the scene of an ancient battle, two rocky planets and several moons shattered.

And, finally, no more excuses could be made. It was time to confront the They fleet. It was time for the resurrected remnants of the Borg Collective to rejoin the Greater Consciousness in extinction.

Unlike other forms of faster-than-light transportation, the process of folding space skimmed on the special effects. There were no streaking stars, no colored vortexes, not even 'whooshing' noises. To engage the folded-space drive was to blink out of the ken of the universe, spend about five minutes in a dull region of nothingness, then return to reality at the desired location. Perhaps the transition was different for a Xenig with its extended senses, but to a mere biological, even ones augmented by technology, the trip was rather boring.

Alliance-built Cube #347 emerged at the jump node labeled to be the furthest from the They fleet. With shields up, the ship immediately initiated a defensive spin. Assuming the drive's crystal ejection mechanism did not jam, calculations advised a 95.4% probability of survival long enough to gain an initial scan of the enemy forces prior to retreat to a safe address. It was only later in the campaign, when the cube began to actively engage elements of the They fleet, would destruction become inevitable.

The scene was not as expected....

Except for minor inclusions which could not be replicated via genetic engineering, They were entirely biological entities. Therefore, when the torpedo hit the target, it did not so much cause an explosion as a splatter. A very large splatter. One corner of the ship intercepted the gore, adding to the layers already present.

Well beyond the hand-wash, it would be necessary for Cube #347 to (carefully) bask in the sterilizing heat of a star's corona to be truly cleansed.

{Will you cease with the potshots?} demanded Captain to Weapons. {You are wasting munitions.}

Added Delta in the background, {And you are making a mess of the hull.}

{Which degrades [cheesy] sensor quality,} appended Sensors.

{It twitched,} replied Weapons before either assimilation or drone maintenance could insert commentary. He attached evidence in the form of the light tactical unit under discussion, the tip of one of its manta-ray wings curling slightly. Ignored was the fact that the same unit sported multiple ragged holes punched with surgical precision through hide and flesh, not only completely destroying the brain, but also all primary nerve ganglions. Any perceived movement was the ghost of reflex, the unthinking reaction of muscles to the electromagnetic caress of ship shield and propulsion. The creature was dead. Very dead.

All They of the invasion fleet which Cube #347 had examined in the last seven cycles were dead. Every single one had a terminal case of neural evisceration. Disconcertingly, a few had also been literally torn to shreds, little remaining except flesh and organs flayed from the skeletal support structure. What had once been a galactic beachhead had been transformed into a slaughterhouse, an abattoir, a killing field.

The sub-collective did not know to feel relieved that the They threat had been neutralized, or concerned regarding the current location of whatever entity (or entities) had so casually (and brutally) performed the massacre. If the executioner was still nearby, it might decide to add Cube #347 to the They graveyard.

Even more disturbing was that the unknown attacker might not even be aware of what it had done. Omniscient beings - Q a prime example - did not always understand the concept of 'mortality'; and some considered sentient life to be the equivalent of slightly evolved pond scum and therefore of no particular significance. The sub-collective retained memories of interacting with a number of omniscient beings, the outcome of which had rarely been positive.

Captain concurred with Weapons on the technicality of the latter's defense, {Yes, it twitched. Barely. However, even worst-case tactical algorithms indicated it to not be a threat. If you do not cease, you will make me make Second lock your hierarchy out of your weapons.}

{Hey! I've already enough things delegated to me,} protested Second.

Weapons replied to the primary consensus monitor with what might be termed 'smugness', if Borg were allowed that emotion, {Weapons systems cannot be locked out at this time because this is a fluidly evolving tactical situation which requires full support from my hierarchy. A lockout will require several seconds to undo should one, or all, of the corpses prove to be They feigning death to encourage us to let down our guard.}

In his nodal intersection, Captain audibly ground his teeth. Weapons was correct; and until the threat level decreased, base level programming would not allow potentially critical systems such as weaponry to be disengaged. {Nonetheless, the fact remains that you are wasting munitions that cannot be easily replaced. There are /no/ stockpile facilities nearby.} Weapons' argument was turned back upon him. {And if some They are faking it? Where will we be if we do not have sufficient torpedoes for long distance engagement options?}

Silence. {That is a valid point.} A decision cascade within the tactical ranks was concluded. {All engagements thus far are at close quarters. Therefore, we will only use neuraptors and other energy-based weaponry. Torpedoes will be reserved for They proved to be faking death.} A short pause. {And for those which are zombies returned from the dead.}

It was not exactly the response Captain (and command and control) desired, but it was the best possible outcome considering the circumstances. What a minute...zombies? A quick glance at recent activity amongst the tactical hierarchy confirmed that a bloc of fifty-two drones had been obsessively watching and rewatching undead horror movies, origination the extensive entertainment package uploaded to the cube for the amusement of the Alliance personnel whom accompanied the mission. And thinking of Alliance personnel, Captain turned his attention to the small subwindow of the nodal intersection monitor linked to the 'guest quarters'. In response, the window expanded until it took primary position in the center of the monitor, mirroring the refocusing of Captain's awareness.

The guest quarters - or Alliance outpost, or whatever label was appropriate - installed in subsection 13, submatrix 3, hallway 54 were fully occupied with official trespassers. Most of the fifty billets were filled by Vaerz and his security detachment, but there was also a contingent of engineers and technicians to observe details associated with the cube's shakedown cruise. Rounding out the group of unwelcome intruders were several graduate students with a research scientist overseer, presumably ritual offerings to the Deity of the Unforeseen because of all the Alliance citizens present, they were the most obviously expendable.

As any seasoned adventurer knows, one does not have to win the race to escape the horror chasing behind, but merely needs to run faster than at least one of one's companions. Given the propensity of scientific types to turn and study a phenomenon when the proper response was to retreat as quickly as possible, the inclusion of a few sacrifices was wise.

Captain spent a few minutes shuffling through the views of the guest quarters, noting the activities of all the inhabitants. Following the initial revelation of the mass They murder, nearly all of the detachment had been riveted to the status update screen located in the cafeteria/recreation room. However, fully biological entities can only watch exterior cameras of cadavers and scrolling statistics for so long without boredom setting in, so most of the Alliances had eventually drifted away, returning to their normal routines. Currently it was the middle of the local night with few persons awake. One obsessive student was in the rec room scribbling on an eltab - electronic tablet - apparently putting to words everything witnessed on the monitor. The effort might have been more impressive if Captain did not know, via the insertion of a remote spyware program, that the student was in the midst of a long, rambling epic whereupon himself

and the characters of several fictional entertainment series were being forced to interact in the same universe.

Perspective was shifted to the room which served as both office and personal quarters for Vaerz.

"You have been observing," stated Captain. It was not a question.

Sitting at his desk while perusing one eltab from a stack of the devices, Vaerz startled, chair crashing to the ground as the Sarcoram jumped to his feet. Hands automatically raised into a stance of self-defense, talons at the ready. Feathers flared, particularly those of the neck ruff and tail. Vaerz bobbled his head and blinked several times as he reoriented upon the situation; and in the dataspace background, Captain noted that Daisy's link with the security liaison had gained extra activity. Presumably the AI was informing Vaerz whom had intruded, for the avian's eyes flicked towards the desk monitor (and Captain's patiently waiting image) even as his body relaxed.

"Don't you Borg believe in knocking? Privacy, or at least the illusion thereof?" complained Vaerz as he righted his chair and resettled into it. An annoyed glare colored his expression.

Answered Captain, "Irrelevant concepts."

"And that's the answer I expected. What can I do for you this fine-" Vaerz's eyes flicked towards the corner of the screen where a time display was set to Alliance standard "-near midnight hour?"

"You have been observing. Have you made your decision? We continue to scan the target, but expect to send away teams within the hour, exact timing dependent on final compilation of data." Five hundred meters off face #5, neuroptors raked at the hide of light tactical unit. It was followed by a complaint that the resulting carnage was not as effective as a torpedo. "As well as the extent of other distractions."

Vaerz grunted. "Show me."

Captain modified the input to Vaerz's screen, selecting an enhanced exterior view while shrinking his own image to a corner picture-in-picture position. The cube traversed a dense field of corpses, but there was no convenient star to light the slaughterhouse stage; and, therefore, the sensor hierarchy took the initiative to digitally highlight the target.

The heavy tactical unit target.

The biological origination of the heavy tactical unit was an unknown. All They species, from near mindless torpedo to the stable of tactical units to cerebrate, came from sentient ancestry. The genetic modification of form over the course of tens of generations to achieve the desired end result could be extensive. However, some changes were just too great to undertake, even for They eugenics wizardry. Thus, it could probably be said that either an ocean planet or gas giant had birthed the heavy's umpteenth-great grandparents.

A sea cucumber. A partly inflated balloon with spikes. A wrinkled melon erupting conical tumors. The image had no counterpart upon the worlds of the Alliance, and nor could the sub-collective's drones provide a succinct description. Epidermis which had once been an inky, oily black was largely faded to a dull ash grey, except for a few patches which chaotically, and queasily, shifted through the color spectrum in the manner of an organic aurora borealis. There was no scale from the visual from which to provide a perception for size...until AI Daisy inserted one at the edge of the monitor for Vaerz's

benefit. At seven kilometers in length and nearly three in girth, the heavy tactical unit was unusually large, the average for the type a mere five kilometers from stem to stern.

In comparison, the Alliance-built Cube #347 was constructed to BorgStandard dimensions at 1.3 kilometers per size.

Like all They in the killing fields, the heavy tactical unit had been neurally eviscerated, primary brain and secondary/tertiary ganglions vaporized. Unlike its comrades, however, the job appeared to be incomplete. Perhaps the heavy had been 'lucky' or, maybe, the being(s) which had attacked the fleet had become sloppy or distracted. Whatever the reason, this particular They retained about 15% of its brain, as well as a handful of ganglion clusters. Not that such had changed the fate of the heavy. Technically, the unit was not dead. 'Technically' being the key word. Its status might best be likened to an accident victim comatose in a persistent vegetative state, enough brainstem left to direct a few bodily functions, but higher neurological functions lost forever.

Unfortunately, even the living corpse of a They could prove to be dangerous.

The sub-collective required additional information, the remnant Whole needed to know what had occurred to better gauge the threat to self (and any future Greater Consciousness). Was the massacre an isolated occurrence, the result of an entity having a bad eon as it traversed through this region of the universe? Or was it the first sign of a more extensive peril? As this desire to appraise the tactical situation - unlike the propensity of small beings, the sub-collective did not gather data for the sake of gathering data - did not run counter to the Alliance need to learn more about the situation, there had been no order to retreat.

The best method to gain intelligence was to adapt Alliance extraction technology. Unlike its deployment by the Alliance upon chemically restrained Borg drones, the proposed use would ironically be closer to the device's original intent of obtaining knowledge from an individual treading the edge of death. The sub-collective had successfully petitioned for data pertaining to extraction to be added to its files shortly following the transfer of units to a nearly completed Cube #347. The reason? Drone maintenance required the information to better treat patients whom had been overly affected by the extraction process, on top of the residual trauma of temporal resurrection. Therefore, extraction technology was among the resources available to the sub-collection; and if Borg were good at anything, it was adaption (and perversion) of technology to serve the Whole.

The concept and application of extraction as a method to rip memes from the brain of a living (or recently dead) individual was not new; and many civilizations assimilated by the Borg had developed some version of it. However, the Alliance variation, as well as could be determined from the fragments of communal Collective histories retained, was the most efficient. Extraction technology alone would have made the Alliance a high value target for complete assimilation in the estimation of the Greater Consciousness. Without the full knowledge of extraction already at digital hand, the sub-collective would not have had the option of what it was about to attempt: board a near dead They; find, secure, and appraise a neural target for extraction; and abstract the appropriate neural patterns from which to (maybe) learn what had happened to They.

The 'find, secure, and appraise' portion of the plan was the most dangerous. One of the features of a heavy tactical unit was the ability to carry in stasis tens of thousands

of mobile assault units. Assault units, derived from standard humanoid stock, were heavily armed and armored. Utilizing similar tactics as Borg to overwhelm a target without concern of the death toll, the heavy would deploy assault units as shock troops, sending wave after wave to attack. On the up side, assault units were not very smart, there being no need for mental acuity when one's goal in life was to be cannon fodder. Without a heavy or other upper echelon They unit to coordinate strategy, assault units fought as individuals without regard to the actions of their mates.

The They almost-corpse would undoubtedly have able-bodied assault units wandering the ship's passageways, an autonomic auto-immune system reaction primed to attack any not-They perceived. Without coordination from the central mind, units encountered during exploration should be easy to repel for the weapons drones integral to any Borg away team. Thusly protected would be the drone maintenance and assimilation drones required to appraise and prepare a neural node for extraction, as well as the command and control asset needed to maximize local span of control. Acquisition of memes for initial analysis was projected to be accomplished in less than ten hours.

In an apparent bid to be as intrusively annoying as possible, Vaerz had in previous conversations suggested the potential for himself and a handful of Alliance marines to join one of the Borg away teams. There was a definite element of danger in the request. In this particular instance, the pre-Prime Commands had just sufficient ambiguity to create a loophole whereby the sub-collective did not have to guarantee the safety of any self-invited guests, at least not when such would also endanger the life and functionality of a drone. Participation by Vaerz and company was optional...any away team could be followed very effectively via remote feeds.

"There are asteroid communities smaller than that thing," opinion Vaerz soberly. "Obviously you aren't going to wander randomly about. Where are your start points?"

Captain added six yellow highlights to the picture. "These areas appear to have the highest probability for intact neural clusters. If nothing suitable is found, we will switch to secondary targets." A trio of pale orange dots joined the schematic. "Unfortunately, due to passive biological shielding disrupting focused scans, we cannot determine the exact location of the clusters. Walking will be necessary." Pause. "Enough stalling. Have you made your decision?" Captain did not bother to censure the note of exasperation from his voice.

Vaerz clacked his beak together. "Yes. The Alliance will accompany one of the away teams. And that away team will also include you."

Captain blinked at the unexpected demand. The away teams rosters had already been determined. The on-site command and control component for each was a mid-echelon unit. "The presence of this drone is not operationally required," he protested, unconsciously slipping into the third person. "The best use of this drone is-"

"Is on the same away team with me," said Vaerz, overriding Captain's response.

"If you are operating on the small being supposition that my presence will increase security of the mission, and thus lessen the risk for Alliance personnel, you are mistaken. Although we are relatively few, nonetheless this drone is still only one of many. My loss can be compensated."

"That is not my 'small being' reasoning."

"The request is denied. The greatest efficiency is served by this designation remaining at its current location."

Vaerz's voice hardened. "There is no request. This is a command. As long as there is no fatal deficiency in operation of this ship, you must obey. You just said it: you are one of many. If your outright loss can be compensated, then a simple reorganization should be easy."

And, thus, were certain elements of the pre-Prime Commands invoked. Into the virtual foreground swam Daisy, the AI overseeing the alteration of priorities. Chained by the parasitic lines of Xenig-written code, Captain (the sub-collective) could not willingly disobey.

Captain narrowed his eye in a glare as his priorities were rewritten. One of the away team rosters shifted, substituting his designation for the previously appointed 26 of 31.

{He is tricky. I like him,} chortled Second from the safety of his alcove.

"Alliance personnel are assigned to away team #3. There will be a five minute warning prior to beam out." Captain abruptly cut the active video feed to Vaerz's quarters, then turned to other matters. {If I am incapacitated, Second, you inherit primary consensus and monitor.}

{I know that.}

{Chances are, Vaerz would somehow survive whatever killed me. And then /you'd/ be the main liaison with him for the rest of this trip. And probably beyond, given the high likelihood he is to be the sub-collective's Alliance handler for the foreseeable future.}

Second was silent as he digested the implications. {The solution, then, is for you not to die. That way, not only will I remain your backup, but I can keep admiring Vaerz...from afar.}

* * * * *

Apogee was dying, and there was nothing he could do about it. In his distant genetic heritage, he might have gifted the cosmos with his visual death-song, but the ability to consciously control the bioluminance of his hull had long been edited out of his geneline. Instead, all he could offer the universe was meaningless scintillation.

The Foe had been swift. The Foe had been brutal. However, the Foe had not always been thorough or accurate.

The minute hint that the Foe was not omnipotent was a small comfort.

Apogee wished he had joined the bulk of his brethren in oblivion upon the Foe's attack. Even individuals not with the central fleet or its many secondary armadas, scouts and forward task groups moving about the galaxy, had been neutralized. Those few, like himself, which had survived had found themselves paralyzed, shreds of conscious mind inhabiting bodies which no longer functioned. One by one those lights against the black backdrop of interstellar space had been extinguished, until in the end only himself was left.

Apogee, the last of Chaos.

Too much neural matter had been lost. Paralysis was absolute; repair systems terminally disrupted. Apogee turned inward to focus on what remained of himself, to meditate and consider a fate where the Mind was not present to receive his memories, his soul, to be reordered and eventually rebirthed as another heavy attack unit.

Time sense blurred.

The ping, the buzz, the sandpaper scratch of active scanning rasped over non-necrotic epidermis and through those few internal structures which maintained neural linkage to the remnants of Apogee. Reflection disrupted, the heavy squinted into the hazy depths of space, attempting to make sense of the scene. Only passive means of reception remained of the sensor grid.

It could not be!

From the shattered remains of genetically inherited memory were recollections of a time long ago, of Chaos' greatest enemy, of a biomechanical Order. But it could not be! Outside of battle, heavy attack units were very long-lived. Even so, Apogee represented the third generation of his type decanted since the last confirmed sighting of Order, with the fourth generation well grown and fifth nearing the end of the gestation cycle prior to the Foe's arrival. Order was extinct!

Which did nothing to explain the impossible cube-shaped ghost. As it glided ever nearer, Apogee obviously the goal, it threw electromagnetic lances and the occasional torpedo at They corpses. It may have been a small vessel compared to a heavy, a mere smear-to-be if Apogee had encountered it when he had been whole of body, but the implications were huge. The cube was an Exploratory-class, a scout. Even more strongly entwined together than the They superorganism, dreaded Order did not (could not) operate as single units, but were extensions of a central consciousness.

It seemed as if the small voices of the Mind, cerebrates purposefully bred for paranoia and to dwell overlong upon unlikely what-ifs, had been correct. With the evidence even now slowing to a stop and lashing Apogee's body with invasive sensor scans, it was clear that Order /had/ faked its own extinction. With They fatally crippled, Order had finally emerged to investigate.

Apogee's remnant thought processes sharpened. Most mental acuity may have been lost, either outright vaporized or literally cooked by the same attack which had eviscerated primary brains and major ganglions, but enough remained to devise a simple plan.

An attack plan.

Just as Order had feigned its extinction, Apogee would continue to feign his death. Not that the latter would be too hard given the fact that his condition /was/ terminal. Order would not be content to prod his body externally...he would be boarded. And then, when the time was right, he would strike.

Even in death, They would prevail.

* * * * *

Away Team #3 trekked through the hallways of the They heavy attack unit corpse. Although the ship was technically dead, the controlling mind obliterated, the body itself was still dying. With They equivalent of environmental control disrupted, the air was stale with an increasingly oppressive sweet-strong smell of decay. Some walls wept capacious amounts of slime while others were cracked and dry. Embedded phosphorous glow was weak, where it was even present, reducing visibility to a monochromatic scene dense with shadows. The occasional symbiont - genetically degenerate once-upon-a-time-sentients whose primary function was to see to the needs of

the larger host - either sprawled lifelessly, else were twitching mounds oblivious to anything but the progressing death of the heavy.

In a perfect universe, the away teams could have been beamed directly to their respective targets. Unfortunately, the universe was far from perfect, and metallic inclusions throughout a They's flesh were natural transporter inhibitors, a passive defense against boarders. Therefore it had been necessary for all teams start in the outer subdermal ring of corridors, making the trip deep into the moribund body towards the otherwise inaccessible neural clusters.

Leading the progression of Away Team #3 were a dozen weapons drones, cheerfully killing with extreme prejudice anything that remotely looked as if it might be a threat. Most of the 'threats' consisted of symbionts, usually already dead; and even if they had been alive and mobile, individuals so bred lacked defensive or offensive capability, being no more dangerous than the average pet tribble or womble-worm. On the other hand, there /was/ a degree of danger in the form of tactical assault units, singletons and small packs of which were roving the hallways, instinctually striving to protect their host. Without a controlling brain, however, attack by this unit type was uncoordinated and unfocused, able to be easily dispatched by Borg drones unified in mind.

Protected by the wedge of weapons drones, the remainder of Away Team #3 consisted of one command and control, two drone maintenance, and three assimilation units. Although the assimilation drones could technically act as (weaponless) backup to the weapons drones, their primary purpose was to assist drone maintenance in appraising the neural target for meme extraction. The command and control drone functioned as a local coordination node for away team members, as well as ensured those elements which made imperfect drones 'unique' did not disrupt the effort of the whole.

For the most part, Away Team #3 resembled the other five teams who were similarly working their way inward the They corpse.

Except the other away teams did not have Captain, the sub-collective's primary consensus monitor and facilitator, as the command and control component; and nor were a handful of Alliance military operatives trailing behind as observers.

There was a pause as a split in the hallway was reached. Two four-unit squads of weapons drones smoothly broke away from the group to scout the new corridors. The same passive shielding which made transporting into the corpse problematic also skewed sensors just enough to cloud imagery of the deep interior spaces. Sensors called it [fuzzy]; and while computer algorithms tagged the translated word as suspect, it did seem to adequately denote on-the-ground reality.

"Ugh," said Vaerz as he ran a finger against a wall. A long string of mucus stretched as he retracted the digit. Hand was wiped on kilt. Next to him, a Sarcoram marine was nudging a dead symbiont with the muzzle of her energy rifle. "This trek is fascinating, yet highly disturbing, as well as disgusting. How much further, Captain?"

{No,} said Captain as he eyeballed 69 of 212. The latter's nascent impulse to shoot the symbiont 'target' withered and attention returned to watching for real threats. The marine never knew how close he came to being 'accidentally' vaporized, along with the small corpse. Focus shifted to address the security liaison's question, "It is either 305 or 340 meters distant and, we think, two levels dorsal. Sensor hierarchy is working with engineering to embed remote devices in the heavy's epidermis which should increase interior resolution. A...blob, as interpreted by current sensor readings, 35 meters distant is

suspected to be a dorsal-lateral cross-artery, which should bring us to the correct level. Unfortunately, it is unclear which of these two hallways leads to it."

The threads originating from the sensory hierarchy were more jumbled than usual due to Sensors actively manipulating the grid so as to extract every iota of potential data. Even the cleaned output was mildly confusing; and none who wanted to remain sane of brain ventured too close to the raw sensor grid input.

Drone maintenance roster incidence rate of neural trauma complaints amid the sensor hierarchy had become increasingly elevated in the last hour.

Vaerz grunted acknowledgement. Silence reigned. The marines were too professional to fidget, much, although it was obvious they were uncomfortable given both surroundings and their cybernetic comrades. In contrast, the Borg, inclusive Captain, stood statue-still, ready to wait as long as needed. Belying their unperturbed exterior, internally the drones were freely chatting back and forth, conversations ranging from tactical reports from scouts and other away teams to comments upon the artistic merit of 171 of 230's latest wire-and-ball-bearing-with-jello sculpture.

"What /is/ that sound?" complained Vaerz, breaking the silence.

96 of 203, one of the assimilation drones, roused herself to answer. "Captain is busy. This drone temporarily speaks for him. If the question was rhetorical, say 'one'. If you do want the question answered, say 'two' and be prepared to elaborate upon which sound to which you refer. If the question was a small being attempt to elicit pointless conversation, say 'three'. If none of these options are relevant, then refrain from speaking until the consensus monitor is available."

Vaerz clapped his beak together in exasperation. "That sound. The...the new sound that...." He trailed off in the face of 96 of 203's expressionless visage. "By the aeries of the ancestors...two. I select option two."

"Option two engaged. Stand by. Your question has been placed in the queue and will be answered in the order it was received." 96 of 203 started to tunelessly hum. After a few bars, she was joined by the remainder of the assimilation contingent, then one of the drone maintenance units. Vaerz vaguely recognized the ghost of a Sarcoram classical piece, incredibly distorted and given an inappropriate one-two back-beat.

One of the Alliance marines, a species with pronounced ears, made an urgent gesture with her rifle.

Suddenly, and with a wet ripping sound, a section of wall tore. As a clear fluid began to spurt from damaged flesh, six assault units pushed their way free, displaying a much greater degree of coordination than their conspecifics encountered thus far. Despite the relative differences in size, the unit at the front of the pack immediately leapt at Captain, the drone nearest the rip, wrapping its left arm around his neck. Momentum and inertia on its side, the small assault unit overbalanced the consensus monitor and facilitator, sending the latter to the ground into a spectacular face-plant.

Needless to say, Captain's attention was abruptly diverted back to the here-and-now, shattering the multiple throughstreams he was embedded within, as well as the progress of several consensus cascades.

{Get it off of me!} demanded Captain as he felt the arm tighten around his neck. Short spikes lining the forearm began to bite into the scant protection afforded by bodysuit. Captain flailed an elbow backwards, making firm contact, but the only response was a quiet grunt.

Borg have armor and armaments spliced post-assimilation, in extreme cases adding half again or more to total body mass. In consequence, few drones are especially nimble - there were individual and species exceptions - although given the typical Collective response to throw drones at a problem until it was solved meant that particular trait was rarely valued. Conversely, Their use of eugenics to genetically (re)build soldiers in a martial image meant armor and weaponry was literally a natural extension of the body, already present upon decanting from the vat-womb. In other words, where Borg were awkward, Their assault units were agile.

Captain's request for assistance when unheeded as the remaining five assault units charged into the hallway.

An assimilation drone was the next target, attacker similar in stature to the one attached Captain's neck launching itself. The outcome, however, was vastly different. The small assailant successfully reached around 96 of 203's neck, but failed to take into account the fact that the Borg drone was much, much larger, built along the lines of a professional jhad-ball player even before assimilation had added yet more bulk. Instead of tumbling forwards, 96 of 203 maintained balance before purposefully falling backwards, pinning attacker between her mass and the floor. With a sickening crunch, armored shoulders and back impacted the assault unit's skull, crushing it amid a spray of gore and brain.

Alliance marines opened fire as one of the assault units turned in their direction. High velocity projectiles slammed into the creature, shattering bone and organs, and yet it continued to advance. A punishing hail of bullets eventually forced it to the floor. The marines, joined by Vaerz with a pistol, persisted in shooting the thing long past the point of its death.

Two other assault units tried to turn in the direction of the weapons drones. The less said of the overkill, the better.

The final They unit paused amid the chaos of the skirmish. An expression, perhaps one of confusion, twisted its face. Not fully paying attention to the surroundings was dangerous, and it slammed backwards into a wall as 4 of 203 lowered his shoulder and charged. Thusly pinned, the assault unit attempted to use its talons to scabble at its opponent. 4 of 203 stoically endured the punishment as the two drone maintenance units stepped forward, each seeming to magically materialize a laser scalpel from their person. Catching one of the flailing limbs, the tools were plunged deep into exoskeletal joints; and, one segment at a time, the threat was expertly and swiftly dealt with via amputation.

On the ground, Captain attempted another elbow. Arm spines jabbed deeper into neck, eliciting warnings from body diagnostics. Thus far, damage was minor, easily repaired by nanites. However, if the spikes punctured an artery, sawed through a tendon or nerve, or otherwise seriously compromised body integrity beyond the ken of nanite doctoring, the results would be grave, if not terminal, given beam out to surgery was impossible. {A little help here before I am decapitated!}

The weight on Captain's back lessened. Sorting through visual feeds, the consensus monitor was rewarded by the view of 17 of 24, the only drone not directly engaged in battle, attempting to bodily lift the assault unit from its perch.

With the opening of a new opportunity, the They unit's free arm snaked around, driving a handful of claws into Captain's face. Cheek and forehead was compromised; and Captain's whole eye barely escaped intact. A new system diagnostic, previously

silent, added to the clamor already present in Captain's head, highlighting the introduction of unrecognized biological agents into the circulatory system. At least that particular warning could be dismissed: They infectious agents, an analogue to Borg nanites, could not infect Borg drones (and visa-versa).

One of the weapons drones stepped into the fray. Arm-mounted disruptor was set against They skull. It was followed by a quiet popping sound, the result a wet explosion of blood, gore, and brain matter. A final convulsion, the assault unit on Captain's back went limp.

{Easy-peasy,} commented 225 of 300. {Now if we could only have a /real/ challenge. This is boring.}

Captain dismissed all visual points-of-view except his own as he was helped back to his feet. The They threat was terminated. One of the drone maintenance drones - 135 of 152 - liberally splattered in a greenish hued blood, was immediately present, hand with embedded diagnostic equipment waving over neck and face.

"What the /f**k/ was that?" demanded Vaerz from the direction of the Alliance marine contingent.

Ignoring the admonishment to hold still, Captain pivoted his head towards the Sarcoram. It looked as if Vaerz, and several of the marines, had been directly in line with the spray from the They's skull. What only could be described as 'organic bits' clung to clothing, feathers (or hair), and skin. Captain's species' sense of smell was poor, but even he was aware that the assault units' various violent deaths had aggressively added to the underlying stench of rot which permeated the ship corridors.

"That was They," croaked Captain. "That was They, not as uncoordinated as They should have been." The fact that the assault units had (sort of) acted together, had burst from a planned ambush, implied the heavy was, perhaps, not as brain dead as had been assumed. The sentience of assault units, whatever the intelligence of founding genetic stock, was greatly devolved, and the They type did not have enough presence of mind to act on its own outside of a few instinctual actions. In other words, a controlling mind had to direct them. It was still true that the ship was dying and that most of its neural matter was absent or inoperative, but evidence as provided by the attack suggested (with 76.4% probability) that neural capacity of the heavy was less degraded than believed.

The weapons hierarchy cheerfully upgraded the potential threat to all away teams, as well as the cube itself.

{Stop vocalizing,} admonished 135 of 152. {You are disrupting the scan.} A short pause. {All injuries are minor and most are cosmetic. Nanites will take care of it. A non-lucid regeneration session upon return to Cube #347 is recommended. Repair of body suit can be scheduled at your convenience.}

{Now can I talk? Our Alliance comrades are starting to fidget.}

{Yes, yes,} replied 135 of 152 as she turned away to assist her counterpart in appraising 4 of 203.

Captain resisted the urge to swipe his whole hand over his face to remove the gore which was beginning to dry. Appearances, and comfort, were unimportant. Once back to the cube, and /before/ he returned to his alcove for regeneration, he would steam clean the gunk from his body. Until then, he would tolerate the irritation of flaking brain.

The Borg component of Away Team #3 was already rearranging itself to the previous status quo. The They were dead and no serious injuries had been acquired, so

the task of locating the neural target once again had primacy. One of the forward scout squads had located the cross-artery; and once the other sub-team returned to the group, all would proceed forward on the trek.

Not unexpectedly, the small being propensity to demand explanations was in full force in the guise of Vaerz, his impatiently lashing tail, and a spooked marine contingent. It was the lattermost which was of greatest concern to Captain. The marines' guns projectile loads were purposeful given a Borg drone's inbuilt defensive shielding against most energy-based weapons - a suspicious-bastard-Vaerz 'just in case'. Therefore, to minimize the potential to procure an accidental bullet to the back, Captain had to offer some reasonable account to decrease the anxiety level.

Which, given the conversational skills of the typical Borg, Captain included, was a more difficult task than resisting a They intent on flaying one's face from one's skull.

As Captain began to speak, a fuzzy grayness and buzzing overwhelmed senses. He stopped, attempted to vocalize, then halted a second time. A previously dismissed diagnostic surged forward in Captain's awareness, screaming a wordless warning of invaders, of an unknown virus/mechanism/bacteria systematically invading various organs, as well as crossing protective membranes into the brain. The nanite-based immune system could not withstand the assault.

Vision abruptly went dark.

Captain distantly felt the impact of ground as his body brutally shook in the grasp of a vicious seizure.

* * * * *

Borg could not assimilate They; and They could not corrupt Borg. The synthetic and/or augmented immune systems of each collective defended against the infectious agents of the other. Such was accepted belief...by the Greater Consciousness, anyway.

Except, it wasn't quite true.

Nearly a fifth of a galactic revolution ago - a long time, even by They standards - the forward elements of the They invasion fleet first met, then began to skirmish with, Order. With the bulk of the fleet still in transit between the Milky Way and the galactic crucible of They, it was the mission of the scout group to identify and appraise both opportunity and hazard. The Borg Collective fell in the second category. It was hate at first sight, both Minds recognizing that there was no place in the cosmos (or, at least, the Milky Way galaxy) for two collective entities competing for the same prey base - small-being sophonts.

They's first sortie into Borg territory - a brazen affair - had resulted in defeat. The Borg had been hurt, precipitating a massive surge in assimilation of entire planetary populations and civilizations to counter drone and resource loss. However, They had been injured to an even greater extent and forced to withdraw to the galactic rim.

Reinforcements were not expected for at least a millennia. But They were patient - They /had/ absorbed Their entire home galaxy, a process requiring hundreds of thousands of Home years - and could afford to literally regrow, and expand, their forward fleet. They were also adaptable: resources were dispatched to spy upon the non-Borg peoples of the target galaxy, to determine where chaos might best be strewn in anticipation of reaping future rewards.

It was during one of those missions when disaster had struck.

They had identified a quadrant of space containing several major civilizations. From the viewpoint of the uneducated observer or clueless civilian, there was peace. In reality, tension was high as governments carefully vied with each other, ever looking for advantage over the other. They baited Their trap, offering up mysterious new technology in the form of a (not-quite-dead) light attack unit to a border outpost while ensuring that the find was observed by all potential opposition. Surely /someone/ would attempt /something/ that would result in a diplomatic incident. Further plans were laid by They to ensure the incident would be elevated to confrontation, which in turn could be promoted to war. It was in that chaos that They could take advantage, allowing the forward fleet to gain a firm beachhead. Such tactics had been successful in the home galaxy and there was no reason why such would not work in the Milky Way.

The locale was far from Borg territory. No elements of Order were supposed to be present. Except one was - an Exploratory-class cube. And in the events that followed, somehow multiple They units, including a heavy attack unit, were assimilated.

The heavy suicided, of course, taking with it all infected sub-components, before it could be absorbed into the Borg Collective. Yet, the implications were dire.

Too bad They did not know that the assimilation had been a fluke, one which had never been recognized, much less reported, to the Greater Consciousness. And even if it had, it was highly doubtful the circumstances could have been replicated. If They /had/ realized the assimilation to be a freak accident, They might have saved Themselves thousands upon thousands of years of paranoia.

They started simply. Borg were stolen. Even sedated, many drones ceased to live upon forced severance from their Collective; and those that did continue to function showed distinct signs of insanity when allowed mental awareness of their situation. No matter. The neurological health of Borg drones was not the issue under study, but rather the assimilation process. Nanites were scrutinized - cultured, broken down, reassembled, poked, prodded, sequenced. Non-They sophont test subjects were acquired to examine the progress of assimilation from initial nanite application to drone ready to link with an overMind.

What was /not/ successful were the tests which included nanite injection into They units. None, not even the most devolved symbiont or torpedo, could be successfully assimilated without major (and usually lethal) suppression of the underlying They immune system. That fact alone should have suggested the accidental nature of the original assimilation incident.

Sometime during the study, Borg went extinct. Most likely. Maybe. At first the Color variants became harder and harder to find; and, eventually, even the few remaining colonies of original Collective Borg winked out. The reason was unknown, perhaps related to the massive war which had swept the galaxy. It wasn't that They particularly cared that Order was seemingly perished, except in such that acquisition of new test subjects became impossible. The only Borg left were assimilation test lines kept under deep sedation.

Extinction of Order /should/ have signified the end of research and resumption of the timeline for They to absorb into Theyself the peoples of the Milky Way. 'Should' was the operative word. The assimilation event so long ago which had triggered They's paranoia had become embedded into They's psyche, creating permanent scars. The main

body of the formidable They invasion fleet had joined the forward scouting elements, but caution remained, keeping All to the outskirts of the galactic rim. Perhaps the Borg had faked their own extinction? That degree of paranoia had not been assisted in that experimental cerebrate lines bred to explore the odd realm of quantum perceptions captured, maybe on the order of once every other Home century, the ghostly hint (maybe) of a Borg broadcast wafting on the quantum seas. Therefore, just in case, They continued research, carefully husbanding their increasingly domesticated Borg resources, assimilating new stock as the need arose.

Assimilation, Borg nanites, and the impact thereof upon a sentient quantified to the nth degree, it was time for the next step.

Domesticated drones were injected with the They viral agent used to pacify non-They individuals. Unlike Borg, the They virus did not mentally and physically prepare an individual for immediate integration. Instead, absorption enhanced latent telepathic abilities while creating a persistent sense of euphoria and I-couldn't-give-a-sh**-ness. Absorbed sophonts were destined to be used as broodstock, their genetics dissected to discover the best traits for their descendants to further the interests of They. How Order expected to mash together disparate individuals, cultures, and technologies to achieve its perverted vision of Perfection was not understood - did that Mind truly believe that adding one more random organism to the hodgepodge would one day magically transform it into something grander than the sum of its parts? Perfection was something that required work! The parts had to be scrutinized and only the Darwinian fittest allowed to continue existence! They was ever inspecting itSelf, excising those bits that did not suffice while breeding its many unit lines in the eternal quest for superior traits.

Those initial tests with They viral agents, as expected, failed. The Borg conferred nanite immune system rejected the invasion. And so began the directed evolution of a virii subset, ever searching for those characteristics which allowed the agent to last longer in the Borg body, to evade nanites, to attack. After many, many iterations and many, many thousands of years, a positive result was achieved; and, thus, the They 'phage' was created.

By technical definition, a phage is a virus that attacks bacteria. The analogy of modified They virii confronting Borg nanites wasn't quite the same, but it was close enough for purposes of visualization. The phage destroyed nanites, interrupted the nanite production process, and attempted to disrupt the Borg neural transceiver. These actions theoretically provided an opening for normal unmodified virii agents to infect the target in the usual manner, either partially or completely weaving a psi-receptor in the place of the transceiver.

After millennia of experimentation, the project was complete. The problem? Although it worked well on lab subjects, there were no 'wild' Borg left against which to deploy the weapon. It was strongly suspected that after thousands of years of unnatural selection, the domesticated drones bore little resemblance to the original strain. After all, dogs were a subspecies of wolf, but the former was much preferable to the latter to loaf around the house or go for walks on a leash. Relatively few alterations in the genome could create extensive changes, as They, masters of the genetic arts, well knew. And without wild stock, the true efficacy of the phage was unknown.

Still, if the cerebrates whom whispered the paranoia of a faux-extinct Borg re-emerging upon the galactic scene were correct, then one of three scenarios were deemed most likely:

1. Nothing. If domesticated drones were too unlike the wild type, or Borg nanites and body systems were sufficiently altered from that for which the phage was developed, then the phage would fail.
2. Drone might die. A strong phage attack would simulate an abrupt de-assimilation, terminally disrupting biological systems. Borg drones could be de-assimilated, but the feat required hours (newly assimilated units) to weeks (long-assimilated units) under controlled conditions. The phage was definitely not a 'controlled condition'.
3. Drone alive, but disconnected from the Collective. The preferable alternative, the phage-infected Borg drone would be subjected to waking catatonia, similar to that experienced by non-They sentients injected by the standard pacification virus. Thus controlled, a large number of doors were theoretically opened, ranging from permanent neutralization to turning the drone on its own kind.

Nonetheless, the reality of the situation was that there was no Borg Collective against which to test this weapon long in development. Perhaps Order truly was gone and the invasion fleet waited needlessly, shunning opportunity after opportunity to begin absorption of the Milky Way into the Body of Self.

In truth, although They would never admit it, They were fearful. In the long history of They, there had /never/ been an incident which threatened Their autonomy. They had suffered defeat and lost battles, but not ever had the ultimate, inevitable outcome been in question. Until the Borg assimilation event. Suddenly, They were not the top predator, but potential prey...to be forced to be subject to Order. It was a scar to the psyche.

And, so, They waited amid the sparse stars of the galactic rim.

* * * * *

His thoughts were diffuse and scattered, like nervous birds circling the evening roost. An eternity passed before coherency began to emerge, flock members one by one finding a suitable perch. Even before external senses reinitiated, several shocks shook the core of his being.

First, and most important, his link to the sub-collective was reduced. Vastly reduced. It still existed, but in form it was little more than a carrier wave, a faint footpath where a superhighway used to be.

The birds exploded back to the air. Nothingness returned.

The condition did not last, could not last. Even normal Borg drones were able to survive full severance from the Whole; and not only did a small trickle of data remain, he was imperfect. The situation had happened before, and it would likely happen again. The whirlwind of birds once more began to alight.

He now knew who he was. He was 4 of 8, he was.... He was.... Something was missing, and thence came the second shock, albeit not the magnitude of the first. An

emptiness existed in his definition of self. Where that emptiness had formerly been filled by "primary consensus monitor and facilitator - subdesignation Captain", it was now vacant. He was only 4 of 8, a command and control unit for the sub-collective of Cube #347, a member of the Group of Eight, but still only 4 of 8, only one drone of many.

More nontime passed in the timeless place; more birds roosted, fluffing their feathers in a manner which suggested that they were planning to stay; more mental processes reinitiated. 4 of 8's internal chronometer came on-line. It had been 10 minutes and 47 seconds since the seizure had disrupted systems.

4 of 8 opened his whole eye and blinked; diagnostic for optical implant reported positive functionality. He could see. The view was blurry and the colors not quite right, but compensation was on-going. His first conscious view was that of a drone staring sightlessly down at him, hand held steady at the edge of peripheral vision as it presumably scanned something. Him. It was a drone maintenance unit. From its location it must have been kneeling above his head, an awkward position for most drones given the underlying lack of flexibility of the basic Borg. Although he recognized face and implant configuration, 4 of 8 did not know the drone's designation: all units continually transmitted the equivalent of a "Hello, My Name Is -" notification, but without a wider data pipe to the sub-collective, 4 of 8 could not resolve it.

Figures elsewhere in the field of vision captured 4 of 8's attention. Two more units - one each drone maintenance and assimilation - stood overhead. They stared intently at each other, heads slightly cocked, presumably in deep (and silent) conversation with each other. Or, alternatively, they were an outward representation of intense discussion between their respective hierarchies. Even in his fuzzy-minded state - a few thought-birds refused to perch - it did not take a genius for 4 of 8 to deduce that the subject of any exchange was very likely to be himself.

A flicker of movement. With a supreme effort, 4 of 8 turned his head a fraction, just enough to resolve four figures. Four weapons drones. Four weapons drones, all with disruptors aimed at their target. Him. And, now that he was focused upon it, 4 of 8 could hear the high-pitched sound of weapons primed to fire.

"Neural patterns indicate a return to active consciousness," announced a voice, breaking the silence. The drone maintenance unit hovering overhead withdrew hand and stood up.

"By the eternal egg, /now/ will someone tell me what the f**k is going on?" The demand lacked BorgStandard reverberation, indicating it originated from a non-assimilated being. 4 of 8 identified the voice as belonging to Vaerz, Alliance master spy. Recent memories were rapidly consolidating as the last scattered thought processes found their niche, ending with the exploration of a They heavy attack unit...and an ambush.

The assimilation drone within the field of view looked down at 4 of 8. It - she? - had clearly been designated as the speaker for the group. "Do you harbor any urges to attack us?"

Confused at the question, 4 of 8 answered, "No." Pause. "But this unit does have a headache and would like to know why it has been excluded from the sub-collective. Is it correct to assume a re-integration request will be denied?"

"Why the f**k is Captain talking in third person?"

"The drone is 4 of 8. The 'Captain' subdesignation has been revoked." Attention remained steady on 4 of 8 even as a response was given. "Re-integration is denied. Current sub-collective deliberation is on-going as to your future: termination is likely."

4 of 8 blinked. "Elaborate." The demand was short, succinct. So many Cycles as primary consensus monitor had left their mark, even if he was lacking that particular job description at the moment.

"What?!" exclaimed Vaerz, followed by a lower volume, "I give up. Daisy, I should have come to you first. I humbly apologize. Now give me a summary about what the rotten-yolked egg is happening."

Eyes - the assimilation drone retained two outwardly whole ones - flicked towards the wall of weapons drones, then back down to 4 of 8. "There is disagreement, but we accept the potential hazard. As you profess no desire to attack, you will be allowed to regain your feet. The new position will allow greater efficiency in conversation. The tactical advantage is less, but we retain more than sufficient resources to dispatch you if you should advance in an aggressive manner."

"This unit agrees." 4 of 8 narrowed his eye, then asked the question which had been most bothering him. "What is your designation?"

The assimilation drone blinked, then smacked himself on the forehead. "Doh! Your link is near severed. I am 17 of 24. Other re-introductions will be offered, when and if they are required."

"Acceptable." Two weapons drones brusquely stepped forward, lifted 4 of 8 from the floor, then returned to their previous position when he demonstrated his admittedly wobbly balance was sufficient to remain standing. 4 of 8 panned the hallway, noting an uncharacteristically agitated Vaerz amid his Alliance marines, as well as marking each of the Borg drones. Of the latter, eight, not four, weapons unit were present - one of the scout squads had returned while 4 of 8 had been incapacitated; and all were aiming weapons at him. An inquiry was warranted: "Situation?"

Said 17 of 24, "You have been infected by They virii. As best as can be ascertained given our limited resources, the contagion is in stalemate against your nanites. Some systems, including neural, have been compromised. Degree is uncertain. It is hypothesized that regular, intensive infusion of fresh nanites could destroy the infection, a procedure best accomplished upon the cube. However, you /are/ a carrier of They contagion, and we /cannot/ risk the potential for additional contamination."

4 of 8 understood the implication of the emphasis. Among the strongest compulsions of the Prime Commands was the eradication of They. However it had come to be - sometime in the last 50,000 plus Cycles, They appeared to have at least partially overcome the historical nanite versus virus deadlock - he was now a threat. In the immutable perception of the sub-collective, he was as good as They. "Then only one conclusion is logical: this drone must be terminated. Now."