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Invocation of the Birds - Part 1

Ruffled Vulture, Dusty Phoenix

"So, you gonna finish that? Or not?"

Elises looked up from the cardboard box he was digging through. "Huh? You say something?"

"Are you done with that?"

"With what?"

"Your sandwich? You've not touched it in about twenty minutes. Are you done with it?"

Elises glanced at the paper plate pushed against the back of the workbench, then returned his gaze to his thesis-mate. His impatiently head-bobbing thesis-mate. "Um, sure. I'm done with it." A hand with neatly trimmed talons whisked the offending sandwich away. "You do know I could..."

"No problem! I'll take care of it! Most of it can go right into the compost bin, and the meat and cheese will give the jiju bugs a tasty treat! And the plate...before you know it, the plate will have been turned into another plate!" Happily standing in front of the complex series of labeled tubes which were the hallmark of every major (and many minor) Sarcoram building, Britz adroitly sorted the remains of Elises' late dinner into the appropriate opening.

Elises watched Britz's actions, rolled his eyes, then returned to the box. He knew the other could not help it. Compared to some Sarcoram, Britz had been patiently courteous regarding the sandwich where another of his species might have whisked it away without even a by-your-leave after a few minutes of abandonment.

To describe a Sarcoram is to use the word 'vulture'. Sort of. Alien vulture, anyway. Start with a biped about 1.5 meters tall, strongly avian in form and features. Add a rich dressage of feathers always slightly rumpled no matter the amount of preening, white on the torso with an abrupt transition to black extremities. Hands are bare, as are legs below the second knee, scaled epidermis a dark grey; and talons, neatly trimmed, are at the end of each finger and toe. A flexible tail 50 centimeters long adorns the back side; and while the tail is as festooned with feathers as the rest of the body, in both male genders the plumage tends towards longer quills, the better to stand out to prospective mates. Similarly, the quills studding upper and lower arms of the masculine sexes are more flamboyant than the body: flight was traded long ago for a ground-bound existence, but the need to impress persists. However, it is the Sarcoram head which is most visually startling, particularly when set against the monochrome body.

Above the downy grey neck ruff, the basal color of unscaled skin was as dark as that of hands and feet. However, painted upon the dull background was an astounding natural rainbow of blues, reds, greens, purples, and yellows, pattern unique to each individual. The wickedly hooked beak was deepest black, with serrated edges a startling white giving the impression of teeth were none actually existed. Finally, forward facing

eyes tended towards the darker colors of blue, grey, and green, although it was possible to find those rare individuals with yellow or white among the population.

In some respects, the vulture depiction was more apt than mere surface description. Sarcoram had evolved from savannah scavengers; and while a carrion diet had been abandoned to the mists of history in exchange for the domesticated plants and animals of civilization, the scavenging impetus remained. The typical well-adjusted Sarcoram did not hoard things, but he or she would use and reuse an item, repairing it as needed, long past the time another species might consign it to the garbage. And recycling? Except for a very small minority, Sarcoram were atheists, although given the enthusiasm and reverence for recycling, one would be forgiven for believing the species worshiped at the alter of Reuse.

In the current era of spacefaring vessels and star-spanning civilizations, the Sarcoram were one of the founding members of the Alliance, and it seemed they were /everywhere/. The scavenging mindset had blossomed into a predication for engineering, a highly desirable commodity. A tendency towards gossip, recycling all that was heard amid the close confines of the clan aerie, somehow transformed itself over the eons into the busy-body inquisitiveness that was the hallmark of science and exploration, even command. And although the Sarcoram did not build many spaceships, if one had a vessel (or anything else) in need of refit or salvage, it was to a Sarcoram-led business one went.

Return to the same workbench in a science lab over-packed in typical Sarcoram fashion, new equipment adjacent to antique. It was near midnight and the lab was empty except for a pair of low-ranking graduate students. The pecking order of academia was harsh, and to move up the career ladder, to be allowed to touch the more interesting devices, to perhaps have one's name mentioned in the footnote of a paper, first required the academic equivalent of mucking the outhouse.

"So, anything interesting?" asked Britz, recycling task complete.

Elises responded by upending the box so that its contents scattered across the table top and causing Britz to shudder at the sudden mess. "Take a look for yourself. Looks mostly to be junk, in my opinion." From the bottom fluttered an old piece of paper, which Elises plucked from the air. Upon it were the faint scribbles of Sarcoram text - an inventory, Elises decided as he squinted at the hard-to-read script. While the universal translator discretely placed in one ear converted spoken Alliance languages between speakers fine, deciphering writing required actual literacy.

Elises was not a Sarcoram. He was T'sap, or at least a member of the species-complex called T'sap by the Sarcoram. Unlike most races with their single homeworld, T'sap originated from wildly disparate planets, the result of colonization or diaspora from an era of spacefaring tens of thousands of years ago. Something, an unknown something, had happened, not only severing the connection between the colonies, but causing individual planets to spiral to preliterate, pre-technological dark ages. Those that survived, that is. Evidence abounded that T'sap were not the only species to suffer, but they were the only ones, thus far, found to have endured, and even then, populations had dropped to near extinction.

Even today, T'sap were not numerous, a minor, if culturally diverse to the point of intra-species strife, member of the Alliance. Over a hundred years ago it was a Sarcoram-led expedition which had found the first T'sap colony - it was their self-identification, likely a corruption of the original species name, which provided the racial nomenclature -

and even now T'sap outposts supporting small populations were rediscovered every decade or so. With the exception of the first colony, none had managed to claw their way back to space following whatever catastrophe had transpired; and most, including Elises' world, maintained dark fairy tales, ghost stories, or morality plays which gave a glimpse via oral history as to the galactic cataclysm which had occurred.

In form, T'sap were boring, a bipedal, mammalian humanoid, bi-gendered species ranging between one and two meters tall and completely lacking in any natural facial or body ornamentation. There were no claws, no scales, no feathers, no exoskeleton, not even a tail. Many xeno-biologists were completely baffled as to how the T'sap species could have survived the rigors of evolution on its lost homeplanet in the first place, much less be part of a vanished galactic-spanning empire. In hair and skin color, in facial features, in size and cultural attitude, individual T'sap were very diverse, the result of multiple thousands of years of inbreeding of the bottlenecked populations of each colony. Elises himself was a gangly two meter tall male with red hair, pale skin, and dark brown eyes, a product of the T'sap-Gudland colony.

Using one talon, Britz tapped a small cylindrical gizmo with corroded wires spiking out from each end. "Now, now. There is no such thing as 'junk'. There are only opportunities for extending the useful life that is, else renovation into a new form." A Sarcoram beak could not frown, but the squinting of eyes and fluffing of neck ruff conveyed the same expression. "However, in this case, I do admit it is difficult to see the intrinsic potential of these items." There was a pause. "I need a beer. Do you want one? If all the other boxes look like this one, it is going to be a long night."

Elises absently nodded as he peered continued to peer at the ancient hardcopy manifest. "I'll take one. From my stash, please."

One alcove of the lab was dedicated to the comfort of students and researchers, which meant it included shelf space and a small refrigerator containing a wide variety of junk food, liquid/chemical refreshment, and stimulants. One had to be careful to imbibe the correct item, for a substance that was perfectly harmless to one species might cause life-threatening complications in another. After a few minutes, Britz returned triumphant, a can of alcohol in each hand.

"Thanks," said Elises. "And let me actually finish the beer before you whisk it off to recycling."

"That was only /one/ time," protested Britz.

Elises snorted, still reading the paper. "No it wasn't."

"Okay, three times. Maybe four. But definitely not more." Britz put a sarcastic not-so-apologetic whine into his voice. T'sap - well...most species, actually - were uncultured slobs when it came to recycling and salvage, no matter how much Sarcoram attempted to provide enlightenment.

The paper was set aside. "This, like all the other stuff we've sorted, seems to have come from the forgotten underreaves of a history museum. The inventory is a copy of a copy of a copy ad infinitum to the mists of time." Elises sighed before opening his beer and taking long gulp. "I doubt there will be anything sufficiently interesting to pass on to the day-shift, much less suggest to the Big Beak to promote our asses to a schedule that doesn't include taking lunch at midnight. Thank the gods I don't have physical classes this semester, only virtual."

Britz threw back his head, gaped open his beak, and poured some of his own beer into his mouth. Beak closed with a loud clack and eyes returned to the workbench with its scattered mess. "What are those supposed to be?" asked the Sarcoram, pointing to a loose collection of five dully sparkling stones, arm feathers brushing across the benchtop.

"Looks like it belongs in my aunt's costume jewelry collection."

"Um...." Elises picked up the paper again, scanning entries until he came to one that most likely referred to the objects. "This says gaming dice. I think. The handwriting is terrible." Once again the page was tossed to the edge of the table. "But I bet it is wrong. For one thing, all the dice I've seen, no matter the race, have dots or pictures or something on the sides. From here, I see nothing. Whomever first found those from whatever dig site or aerie sale obviously pulled that description out of his butt."

"This one has an etching on the side. Two sides, actually. But the characters look the same." Britz delicately picked up one of the stones, bringing it so close to his beak that he went cross-eyed.

Elises held up a palm. "Let me see?"

"You could have gotten your own, you know," said Britz as he handed over the prize.

Another swig of beer was taken. "But that would have meant, you know, effort." Elises examined for himself the object of discussion. "I see the inscriptions. Definitely unfamiliar...except...."

"Yes?"

"My cousin, you know, the archeologist. You've met her. Anyway, last holiday I saw her she had all these pictures of things at the excavation she was on. One of the T'sap colonies that didn't survive, um, out towards-"

"You don't need to give an entire dissertation. How do the pictures apply here?" More beer was poured into briefly opened beak.

"Clisel said the dig appeared to be the site of an old data archive facility, the first that's been found and identified as such." Elises, noting the ruffled breast feathers and other signs of impatience in his thesis-mate, quickly moved to the point. "It seems that the old T'sap civilization didn't use stabilized four-strand DNA for long-term storage, but rather artificial crystals. The archeologists aren't going to announce their findings until they can figure out how to read 'em, but these things look an awful lot like the ones in Clisel's photos."

Britz's eyes swiveled to the stones. "So these things may legitimately be ancient tech?" Excitement colored his voice.

"Or they could be somebody's aunt's costume jewelry, bought two centuries ago cheap from an estate sale and subsequently stuffed into the backroom of a museum. My only 'proof' are some poorly remembered pictures shown to me last winter when I was half-drunk from testing my uncle's latest experiment in winemaking." Elises hated to be a wet blanket, but there was wishful thinking, and then there was reality.

Britz scooped up the four crystals from the benchtop with his free hand. "I say we put them in the testing Gizmo."

Elises regarded his thesis-mate and friend. "You know we aren't supposed to touch the Gizmo."

"And you know that we use the Gizmo at least once a week. And everyone in the lab knows that the night-shift plays with it. We aren't the first grads sorting boxes. This has been going on for over three years."

"But usually we have more beer on-board, and sometimes wake-me-up drugs. It always seems more reasonable then."

Argued Britz, "And we've never actually had something that might be real old tech. The Gizmo is always turned on for a laugh. The real science happens in the day. This is our chance to show the Big Beak that science happens at midnight, too!" Britz paused. "And if it does turn out to be dice or costume jewelry or such, it'll just be another unauthorized Gizmo test that no one'll care about as long as we don't spill beer on it."

Elises gave in with a shrug. "I had to give the obligatory warning. Let's do this."

The lab space where Elises and Britz sorted boxes was only one room of a larger warren, and it was to the locked door leading to an adjacent room that the pair gravitated. However, the lock was no obstacle, current keycode scribbled on the sticky note affixed next to the input screen. With door successfully opened, the two entered.

Dominating the far wall of the revealed room was the beating (and whirling and beeping) heart of the lab: the Gizmo. The lab was dedicated to research into temporal phenomenon, of which the Gizmo - the machine actually had a given name, a long acronym that no one bothered to use - was the key tool. The Gizmo's function was best described using the complexities of higher-order math where symbols, not numbers, abounded, but such was not important. For Elises and Britz, the Gizmo represented a party trick best experienced in the wee hours of the morning with beer, too-little sleep, and boredom. The end result of what it did, ignoring the actual background complexities and the feat of engineering it represented, was to capture the temporal ghost of the persons who had touched an object, displaying their likenesses over a holo-base.

It was absolutely hysterical to view the styles of decades and centuries past, and a great way to pass a twenty minute midnight-lunch break.

Britz opened the meter wide transparent door at the side of the Gizmo and carefully set one of the crystals inside. In form, the Gizmo vaguely resembled an old mainframe computer from the early Sarcoram technological era, albeit with no reels of magnetic tape and significantly less waste heat. There were considerable blinking lights. Closing the niche, Britz joined Elises at the control console.

"Let's start with three minutes, minus tau," said Elises as he tapped the appropriate buttons on the touchscreen. Over the non-descript holo-base nearby flickered into life a virtual bust of the person who had held the presumed memory stone three minutes ago.

"Ugh," said Britz as he viewed himself. "I never look good on tri-V. You should see the latest holo for my ID card! I look like I belong in a prison, and one where no one is allowed feather combs, at that! Enough of me. Crank it back a century."

"One hundred years, minus tau." Britz's visage vanished, replaced by a whole lot of nothing. "Well, it was in a cardboard box," opinionated Elises, "and the Gizmo only replicates the temporal wave reflections of living organics."

Britz snorted. "Then use the scan function. Otherwise we'll be here all night guessing dates when the crystal was actually handled."

Elises complied by jabbing the correct sequence of commands. After several minutes spent sipping beer, the air above the holo-base brightened into the head of a middle-aged Sarcoram female.

"Oh! Perfect! From the kohl around the eyes, it is definitely mid-4500s. If I'm in the nearest decade, you buy me a beer to replace this one. I say...4535? Yes?" Britz offered up a year that was a little more than two centuries ago.

"The output says 4544. And I think that she looks like your proverbial aunt. The stones are just costume jewelry."

Britz drained the last of his beer into his mouth, confident that another would be replacing it in the refrigerator come tomorrow night. "Bah, every museum employee looks like my aunt. Scan for another."

For the next ten minutes, the holo-base flickered through a succession of Sarcoram faces, each one representing an individual who had handled the crystal sufficiently to impress a temporal reflection. The timeframe represented about thirty years, with the final bust at a minus tau equivalent of 245 years. Then the holo-base went blank again.

"That the end, is it?" sadly asked Britz. "We've reached the pre-tau of the object? I thought it would be older." In other words, the Gizmo was trying to scan for temporal reflections from the period of time before the crystal had been manufactured.

Elises frowned. "Actually, no. The scanner function says that the tau-line continues. It must be in another cardboard box."

Britz brightened. "Then there might be more to this show. Great!"

But if there was more, it wasn't immediately forthcoming. Five centuries, minus tau. Eight centuries. Ten centuries. Fifteen. Two thousand years, minus tau. And the air above the holo-base remained empty.

At ten thousand years, minus tau - ten millennia - Elises paused the scan. "We are reaching the end of the temporal horizon resolvable by the Gizmo. There are more powerful machines able to see deeper in reflected time, but compared to those, this is a table-top toy version. At least we know that the crystals are old, and we can pass them on to day-shift and the Big Beak."

Britz gaped his beak in a negative. "Continue! I want to see how old these things are! There may be no faces to see, but the Gizmo should be able to follow the crystal to its pre-tau. To think...a civilization, a people, constructed something that could last so long! I bet it even still works, if a reader could be found to scan what is hidden inside. To move beyond the need to recycle...." The Sarcoram gazed off into space, focusing on nothing, feathers standing on end in awe.

Elises watched his thesis-mate, an expression of worry crossing his face. "Okaaaay, then. I'll unpaue the scan. If it does date back to ancient T'sap, then we will be a while."

The numbers on the display continued to flicker backwards. Ten thousand years became twenty thousand, and then thirty thousand. In the mists of history, the various T'sap colonies were deep in their individual dark ages, small bands moving across the landscapes of their adopted worlds as hunter-gatherers. Meanwhile, the Sarcoram, yet to discover the concept of the wheel, were painting great works of art deep within caves, detailing how to recycle a broken spear into a walking stick.

At 53,467 years, minus tau, a fuzziness blurred the air over the holo-base.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Elises as he hit the pause button. "Whoever that is, the reflections are very faint. It is surprising we are resolving anything."

Britz stared at the non-image. "I wonder who it was? Continue backwards. Maybe there will be something stronger."

"At more than fifty thousand years? I don't think so." Despite his words, Elises did as bade and reinstated the scan. Several more blobs and unfocused smears wavered over the holo-base, and then at 53,472 years, minus tau, a distinct shadow head-shape emerged from the visual white noise. The scan was once more paused.

"Is it possible to get better resolution?" asked Britz, entranced by the splotch. "Those dark spaces might be eyes...and that slash a mouth? Maybe it is one of your great-umpteenth ancestors, Elises."

The T'sap stared at the image. "Unless great-great-grandpa had tentacles growing out of his head, or really big ears, I don't think so. There are some real funny lines there. Probably an extinct aliens species associated with ancient T'sap civilization."

"But can you get better resolution?"

Elises turned his gaze to the Sarcoram. "I don't know. You know we aren't really supposed to be touching the Gizmo in the first place. The only stuff you and I know are what older night-shift grads have shown us. I'm sure the actual researchers, or the Big Beak, know all the functions. There isn't exactly an owner's manual laying around and, frankly, I don't want to press too many buttons." A note of seriousness had replaced the earlier joviality.

Britz opened his beak and exhaled a whine. To another Sarcoram it may have been an endearing plea, the cry of a nestling begging for food. To Elises it was a wince-inducing squeal. "Please? I'll forget your beer tab and buy you /anything/ you want for the next week...the next month!"

"Then you come push the buttons!"

The whine sounded again.

"Fine, fine. Um, I think I've seen one of the researchers do something like, er, this?" A button was tentatively tapped, bringing up a secondary menu. Several additional tabs were keyed. Slowly the image sharpened. "Either the ex-owner had that crystal in close contact for a long time, else there is the perfect temporal wave convergence...or both."

After several minutes of inept prodding, and the quick silencing of two alarms, the blur had been transformed into, well, it wasn't a crisp picture, but it was sufficient to tell that whoever it was, it was definitely alien.

"Either the style way back when was heavy body modification or it was really sick and needed all those appliances," said Elises upon the result. "However, it is /not/ a relative of mine."

Britz clacked his beak in agreement.

Continued Elises, "I don't know if any of those alarms went anywhere but the lab computer net, but I think we'd better put everything away and-"

Suddenly the door to the lab burst open; and in the entrance stood the Big Beak, the term for the head researcher of the lab. The Sarcoram male's feathers, especially those along the tail, were aggressively puffed and the vibrant colors of his head signified anger. "What is going on here?! It is acceptable for grad students to think they are getting away with something by looking at amusing temporal echoes, but when someone actually

messes with the settings...." The Big Beak trailed off as he caught sight of the image hovering over the holo-base behind a cowering Britz and hunched Elises. "By all that recycles...."

"Um, sorry?" offered Elises in an attempted apology while speculating if this meant the end of his academic career. Maybe the dig site where his cousin worked needed another body to move dirt and debris at minimum wage?

The Big Beak was not listening to Elises, and in fact appeared to have forgotten that the graduate students even existed. Instead he had hustled himself to the Gizmo and was gazing at the tau reading in awe. "It...it's the right era, the right form...and to have resolved it so strongly...I think...I think we've found what we've been searching for!"

Elises and Britz looked at each other, confusion the primary expression on both their faces.

From one point of view, it was a place where spaceships came to die. A Sarcoram perspective would avidly argue that it was merely a location permitting a vessel to pause to reshuffle its parts, a necessity in the cosmic cycle of all things. On the other hand, a heat-loving Gu'utkon would ignore all intangible philosophical claims, only focusing on (and complaining about) the too-cold temperatures. However, no matter an individual's personal opinion or genetically predisposed racial perception, all could agree on one salient point - the room, if that was even the appropriate label, was /big/.

The orbital dry-dock of the Sarcoram-owned Alliance company simply called "Hullz" was normally used for ship-breaking of the largest private, corporate, and government vessels. Over the course of a month, behemoths no longer needed in their current configuration would be carefully dismantled into component parts, with carcass pickings then sold to eager buyers. An empty hanger normally represented a substantial loss of money for both Hullz and its investors, and was to be avoided at all costs. However, in this case, the dry-dock had been rented under a short-term contract to an obscure sub-sub-branch of the tangled tree which was the Alliance defense department. The purpose was something sciency, or so stated the lease papers, not that Hullz necessarily cared about such details. All which was important was the continued influx of credits and the contract clauses which affirmed that the leasee would leave the premises in as good state as when first rented, else forfeit the cleaning deposit.

As stated prior, the facilities were huge.

The first-time visitor, standing in the observation galleys which hung from the dry-dock ceiling periphery, might not quite grasp the sheer size of the locale. Eventually, however, the eye would be drawn to the army of small figures moving about their assigned tasks. Some of the shapes were machines, but the majority were employees, member species of the Alliance hired by Hullz to work at the labor-intensive job of ship-breaking. It was only then that the true perspective of the hanger came into focus.

Tucked along the edge of the work floor, offices, breakrooms, and other similar spaces abounded. Due to the relative scale of things, only the entrances to the largest equipment garages were noticeable to an aerial galley observer without aid of binoculars. And within one of those rooms, a cozy workplace of desk and computer set aside for visiting engineers, two Sarcoram could be found. One of the pair vigorously paced back and forth, annoyed exacerbation coloring each stride, while the other calmly sat on a chair, apparently engrossed in the reading tablet held in one hand.

Sarcoram #1 abruptly stopped, head twisting with bird-like exactness to pin his colleague in an unblinking stare. "How can you be reading such...such unimportant drek at a time like now?" he brusquely demanded.

Calmly replied Sarcoram #2, never lifting his eyes from the tablet. "Because, Jurist, it is relaxing. Because I enjoy learning new things. Because I do not often have the chance to read for pleasure. And because, until the final preparations are complete, we'd only be in the way. Which you are well aware. You may have been instrumental in early designs of the Beast, but the engineers have long since taken the concept and flown with it. /I/ would not want to be the one pushing the wrong blinking light. You, like I, have long since graduated from the ranks of 'doers' to 'managers', which means being a good little figurehead and standing around looking important...and then taking the blame when something goes wrong."

"Well, I, for one, do not like it," snapped Jurist.

"Neither do I," said the still nameless Sarcoram, "but one learns to live with it. My world is, um, military, or associated with it, anyway, which means a lot of hurry-up-and-wait moments like this one. An easily transportable hobby is a good thing to acquire."

Sneered Jurist, chest feathers slightly raising, "Like the subject matter in that book you are reading, Vaerz?"

If any umbrage was taken at the tone of voice, it was not shown. "Exactly like this book, oh aerie-brother of mine. 'Emu in the Sky with Diamonds' is an excellent essay of comparative culture between species, or colonies in the case of T'sap. How a given pre-spacefaring people look to the night sky, forming constellations, says much. For instance, martial civilizations often see the stars as war hero figures or mythological predators, while the pantheistic will have important deities and spirits. Overall, it is a fascinating insight into the unconscious underpinnings of society." Vaerz paused. "And it makes for good conversation at parties, too."

"And the 'emu in the sky' reference?"

Vaerz shrugged, "One of the many constellations highlighted in the book. It is especially interesting because it isn't a picture made up of stars, per se, but rather a shape formed by a vast nebula visible from the homeworld of the species in question."

A gentle electronic ring pulsed the air before Jurist could either spit another acid comment or return to pacing. Vaerz looked up from his tablet, thumbed it off, then slipped it into a satchel which had been sitting on the table. As he stood, he slipped the satchel strap over his shoulder. "That's our cue. Try not to bite anyone's head off, aerie-brother, especially those of your graduate students."

Jurist grunted a wordless reply around the edges of his beak.

Before leaving the office for the dry-dock deck, both Sarcoram retrieved head-warmers from respective vest pockets and donned them. Head-warmers were in essence socks for the head and neck, holes cut out for beak and eyes. Hullz, like any other company, was ever searching for ways to cut costs and, thus, boost profit. To fill what is basically a large box with a breathable atmosphere is relatively easy, as is to set gravity. It is temperature - cooling and heating - which is the most difficult, and expensive, element of life support to maintain, especially considering the immense volume of the dry-dock. The solution was to keep the air at a few brisk degrees just above freezing.

The Sarcoram physiology tolerated cold well. Feathers insulated most of the body; and exposed skin below elbow and second knee was well not only scaled and

insensitive to temperature extremes, but a countercurrent circulatory system ensured frostbite to be a rare occurrence. For the most part, clothes, such as the kilts and vests worn by Jurist and Vaerz, were for fashion and/or utility, not out of modesty or protection from the elements. It was only in extreme cold that additional layers were required. Except for the head. The bare skin of the head was more sensitive than other parts of the body; and while cold could be endured, it was more comfortable to avoid the inevitable headache and chaffed neck by wearing an oversized sock.

Vaerz's head-warmer sported a small bobble on top. "Not my fault!" he said defensively as he noticed Jurist pointedly staring at the ornamentation. "My older sister found it last week when she was going through some stuff that belonged to our late-grandfather. I have to wear it at least a couple of times before I can safely hide it in the back of the closet."

Jurist chuckled. "And that, aerie-brother, is a good example as to why one should avoid one's female relatives as much as possible."

"Yes, that is all well and good, but you don't have a sister who lives in the same city as you do...a sister who apparently has a very specific form of telepathy to know when her brother is at his hovel of a nest the few days his work allows him to be home."

The conversation ended as the pair stepped through the door and briskly trotted in the direction of machinery and bustle. The gravity of the dry-dock was half Sarcoram homeworld standard, a setting acceptable to all the races whom normally worked upon the deck dismantling starships. For the two Sarcoram, it was invigorating to only weigh half their usual mass, imparting a jaunty spring to their steps.

A hulking contraption, the centerpiece of all activity, was approached. Direct descent of the Gizmo which for three years had anchored Big Beak Jurist's lab, the Beast only vaguely resembled its predecessor. Jokes of blinking buttons aside, it did have multiples of that particular quality, along with glowing tubes and small display monitors, all of which did have a function. The machine was also larger in all dimensions, such that the volume of three Gizmos would fit handily within the shell of one Beast. One feature which was completely different from its ancestor, parts of the Beast had a disconcerting /not-there/ness, solid when looked at directly, but eye-wateringly shimmery when viewed from the edge of one's perception. The engineers who had assembled the device strongly suggested to avoid touching those particular sections of the machine, at least not without wearing a pair of special gloves, but were unusually quiet as the reason behind the recommendation.

It was perhaps not unexpected that one of those patches had a trio of graduate students gathered around it, all of whom were emitting a furtive 'nothing going on here' air. Jurist altered his path towards the three, two of whom he vaguely recognized - Graduate students came and went...who could keep track of them all? That was a chore for the lab Little Beaks, his junior research partners - as the pair whom had set this whole business in motion last year.

"What are you doing?" Jurist barked, startling the threesome. At the main control panel, where the head engineer and other important officials had gathered in preparation to meet Jurist and Vaerz, expressions were perplexed as to the delay. Closer to the action-to-come, Vaerz puffed his chest feathers, slicked them again, and sighed.

Jurist pushed the nearest student aside, a red-haired T'sap. Revealed was a small potted plant, likely smuggled aboard. The plant was half /embedded/ in what outwardly

appeared to be solid machinery. It was slowly, but visibly, blossoming. Given the slow speed exhibited by the majority of the botanical world, including the nondescript, contraband houseplant, such should not have been perceptible without time-lapse photography. No verbal objections were raised as Jurist glared at the plant: the graduate students had been discovered doing something unauthorized.

"Interesting demonstration of a stable temporal instability," said Jurist quietly such that only the students and Vaerz could hear the words, "but next time try to keep track of the schedule so that you won't be caught. At least not by the Big Beak and the Security Liaison." The two Sarcoram students were shrunk in on themselves in dismay, tail feathers fully fluffed; and one assumed the T'sap, his pale skin faded to an even whiter pallor, was emoting the same sentiment. Unfortunately, Vaerz was not very conversant in T'sap body language, that race a relatively recent addition to mainstream Alliance society. "Less than ten seconds after I turn my back, that plant better be removed from the Beast; and by the time myself and the Security Liaison reach the primary control panel, all three of you, and the plant, will not be within my field of view." Voice was raised to a sufficiently loud volume so that observers outside the little drama might hear. "Or else I will ensure that none of you ever hold a position inside any science field again!"

Jurist rejoined Vaerz, and both continued their interrupted journey. Behind came the frantic noises of three people all trying to do the same thing at the same time, each getting in the way of the others. Said Vaerz mildly, "Why so gentle? I've seen you explode for lesser reasons; and to have some silly prank occurring just before this most momentous of occasions...." The sentence trailed off.

Snorted Jurist. "It's just graduate students. Graduate students, of whatever species, do stupid things without thinking through the consequences. I may have done one or four things similar when I was a wee lab-fledge. It wasn't like they were purposefully trying to sabotage the experiment. However, if I do find them trying such a stunt again, I will fulfill my promise."

The Beast, and the Gizmo before it, were, as many things which had a Sarcoram origination, ultimately the product of trying to better the science of recycling. Temporal mechanics is a discipline that most spacefaring civilizations eventually stumble across, and for the species that made up the early Alliance, it was no different. However, whereas most are content to conclude that 'time is weird' and proceed to ignore it except as a sensory addition to a spaceship to provide an excellent, if rare, technobabble opportunity, at least one Sarcoram individual became personally affronted that nature would waste perfectly good chronitons. And so what eventually grew to be the Beast was conceived.

The basic chroniton field is a byproduct of existence. It locks an object into the 'now-ness' of the present, interacting with the fields of other objects to ensure that all of reality proceeds in lockstep with the underlying tick of the cosmic quantum clock. As an analogy, picture time as a vast river, cause proceeding effect; and that things, be they single particles or collections thereof, float within the stream. The chroniton field is the dimple of that object upon the surface, ever caught up with the flow around it. As with every system, there were disruptions, great eddy-causing rocks in the form of singularities like black holes where gravity so tangled space-time that cause and effect could become decoupled, but for the most part the river ran smooth through the infinity of tau.

The Sarcoram investigation into chroniton recycling did yield discoveries. To start, it was possible to artificially agitate the tau river, thus creating an excess of chronitons. Unfortunately, research largely ended at that point because no practical /use/ for chronitons could be found. While a method was developed to retune a chroniton to various 'nows', time travel turned out to be impractical - paradoxes and other temporal messiness, receiving notices from future selves that didn't make sense until the action occurred. While a suite of sensors were developed to allow the detection of natural temporal phenomenon, the experiment into the nature of the particles was generally declared a failure. Research was shelved for future generations of Alliance scientists to explore. After all, the technology to repurpose talon clippings had required centuries to develop into the multi-billion credit industry of keratin recycling.

For a very long time those few individuals whom persisted with the field of temporal mechanics were considered to be eccentric oddballs whom mysteriously possessed the remarkable gift to persuade granting committees to bestow money upon them. It was only more recently that the field of temporal mechanics had regained both the limelight and the deep-pocketed attentions of certain governmental agencies.

One of the earliest temporal investigations into the nature of the chroniton discovered what amounted to a party trick, a seemingly useless, if amusing, phenomenon. (And also one which featured prominently in keeping decades of temporal mechanics professors funded.) To understand the basis of the trick was to first confront a variation upon the basic quantum question: was it chroniton field or chroniton particle? In truth, like so many other wave/particle dualities, it was not either/or, but rather both simultaneously. Depending on the application, sometimes it was easier to visualize the chroniton as a field, and other times better to think of the behavior as wavelike. Consider the electromagnetic spectrum: the "radio" portion is captured by antenna as waves, while the use of "visible light" in plant photosynthesis often relies upon the particle metaphor.

Like other packets of quantum, the chroniton field/particle carried information, in this case the temporalities of its originating source. Objects, in and of themselves, had little information to impart to the chroniton field beyond a basic "Here I am, interacting with this now". However, when an inanimate object was held by a living creature, it absorbed and re-radiated data of that creature - "Here I am, interacting with the now [of this being]." It was possible to thence put the target object in a reader and listen to chroniton field shadows, the subtle temporal echoes that in themselves were components of the information field ("Here I was, interacting with that past-now"). Tuning an echo produced data that could be decoded and displayed. Admittedly, there /were/ great complexities involved, but such was not important when the final result was to put a random trinket into a reader in order to observe the two-century-dead owner of said item and, more importantly (for grant committee presentations), the dubious fashion sense of the era.

As with anything, even party tricks, there were limitations. First, only creatures of a threshold conscious level were echoed within an object's temporal shadows. Never to be seen were bacteria, small insects, and similar. Second, the longer a being interacted with an object, the stronger their echo. For instance, a pet collar would resolve to the animal which wore it, not the owner. Usually, anyway, excepting for very, er, particular circumstances. Most important, there was a limit to resolution because temporal echoes eventually decayed past the point of retrieval. As a comparison, picture a supernovae

belching to the cosmos a fury of photons. By the time the photons travel a billion mind-boggling light years, the storm has attenuated to less than a wafting breeze, and a detector may only capture one photon, maybe, for each trillion originally spewed forth. So also was it next to impossible to decode coherent temporal echoes beyond the thousand year horizon. Neither Beast nor its Gizmo predecessor could overcome that basic limitation. Instead, circumstances surrounding the object itself had to align just right to create a 'standing wave' to reinforce the temporal echo.

While theory and computer modeling had determined the hypothetical possibility, it was still astounding that any temporal echo could be sufficiently strong for the embedded information to be intelligible after more than fifty thousand years. It was like looking at the ghost of a ghost of a memory. The self-meme of the long dead owner had literally been etched into the object's temporal matrix. The how was an unknown, although theorists - i.e., any sleep-derived individual associated with the project, possibly with too much alcohol and/or recreational drugs in their system - agreed that it was (maybe certain) the result of repeated exposure of object and owner to strong temporal fields discordant with the universal tau vector.

Vaerz and Jurist reached their destination, the primary control panel of the Beast. Three individuals awaited the arrival - head engineer Ke'let (of Qiti, a furry, bipedal feline species with a tendency towards excessive shedding) and two of her assistants. The latter faded away to other duties as the two officials arrived.

"About time," snarled Ke'let with a flash of sharp teeth. Qiti were not known for their sparkling personalities, but most people learned that the displays of disdain and outright rudeness were nothing personal. Anyone who wasn't Qiti was treated the same way; and, truthfully, intra-species interactions were generally as abrupt, if not more so.

Jurist ignored the tone of contempt. "Is it truly ready? All calibrations finally done?"

Ke'let snorted, sending a few strands of hair into orbit around her head. "Of course. Just because the party is a little behind doesn't mean the schedule is shot. If anything, it gave all the hoity-toities time to get their asses and other assorted backsides here."

Vaerz glanced up towards the observation galleries far overhead. "Yes, all appropriate Alliance representatives are here. Not everyone is comfortable in these temperatures, after all." Gaze shifted towards another group of spectators, these ones sharing the dry-dock deck with the Beast, but away from the bustle surrounding the machine. However, it was not so far that one could overlook the armor that covered bodies or the weapons grasped in a multitude of hands. "Yes, everyone who needs to be here is present."

"Bah. It is so balmy here that I'm at risk of developing a summer coat," said Ke'let, obviously electing to ignore the presence of half an Alliance cohort of special forces. Her tail was whipping back and forth.

"Something wrong," asked Jurist, eyeing the tail. Qiti body language was not subtle.

"It's not what you are thinking," snapped Ke'let in response. "All systems are checked." She paused. For a Qiti, she was being very tactful as she searched for the way to broach whatever concern she was holding. "If this works, it'll be a big leap forward in

temporal mechanics. Horray. Party balloons for everyone. Whatever. But what about all the /other/ implications."

Silence. It was the pintarti in the room, the monster of an issue standing in plain sight, but which was tiptoed around lest the controversy it represented be awakened.

The Beast was a mating of transporter, Gizmo, and temporal reader. Within the Alliance, there had always been the philosophical debate if a transported object at its arrival point was the same one which had been disassembled. One viewpoint said 'no', that there was a fundamental, material disconnect between point A and point B: only information in the form of quantum packages were forwarded to the receiver, not actual molecules, not even energy. The 'yes' position, on the other hand, argued that nothing remained static over the course of its existence, that everything exchanged atoms over its lifetime, yet that did not alter the object's fundamental 'selfness'. Therefore, the definition of an object was its quantum blueprint, and as long as the information was transferred faithfully, then the object was preserved, even if the bits that made it up were different. For the layperson, such debates were lofty, academic affairs, esoteric and irrelevant to daily existence. Unless one was deeply, or even mildly, enamored with the concept of a soul.

While some religions believed that everything, animate or not, had a soul, most theologies limited the soul to living creatures, and some further restricted it to sentient beings. The concept of 'soul' was itself nebulous, an issue of debate likely present since two people could converse with each other, and also one which had led to more than a few wars. However defined, the insertion of transporters into the soul discussion was a tricky one - did the soul of a person (or object) move with them following transportation, or was it destroyed upon disassembly? And if it was part of an object's quantum blueprint, was it a metaphorical Tab A or Slot C? Depending on one's personal beliefs, the ethical rightness of the Beast was a major question.

The meme of an individual embedded in an object's chroniton field could theoretically be extracted and recompiled into an information stream amiable to rematerialization by a transporter. Unfortunately, when it came to theory and scientific progress, scientists often became obsessed in the aspect of "can it be done?" and ignored the "should it be done?". In the case of the recovered meme-echo, the latter was a /humongous/ question, only the first can in an entire case full of worms. "Did the machine resurrect the actual person (and soul) caught in the temporal echo, or was the creature a soulless clone?" was only the first, and most minor, of the philosophical and theological debate. The tangle only grew from there, such as the implication of recovering a then-clone from an object of a person who was still alive. Some said it just could not be done, while others were already imagining the abuse inherent in the creation of multiple copies of the same individual.

Vaerz was well aware of the arguments which had been ongoing in the background for the last decade, well before the Gizmo had been built in Big Beak Jurist's lab. Because of the secretive nature of the project, the debate had been raging between a relative few hand-picked ethicists, but there had already been several hospitalizations when words had not proved sufficient to punctuate a point. Jurist, of course, was oblivious to the controversy.

Said the Security Liaison to Ke'let's question, "We'll deal with the consequences, if we have to. This is an emergency - not one that will have death-rays raining down upon

us tomorrow, but an emergency, nonetheless. Sometimes morals become a bit...less important when night predators have the aerie surrounded. That gorge will be flown when we come to it."

The universal translator must have rendered the idioms correctly, for the Qiti's tail slowed its swishing. "On your head, then."

"There are many ways this all could go to whatever Hell in which you may believe, especially if one claims as some do that the proposed solution may be worse than the problem lurking at the galactic rim."

For the first time, Ke'let looked towards the ranks of patiently waiting soldiers, her ears flattening against her skull. Then she resolutely turned to face the Beast's control board. "Let's get this over with. If I am to die, or be sucked into some temporal wormhole, I'd like to at least have it done on schedule." Attention abruptly shifted. "And /don't/ push any buttons until I tell you. The big brain behind your overly huge nose may be the reason for this machine, but if you don't listen to me, you will regret it."

Jurist, who had been ignoring the conversation between Vaerz and Ke'let, blinked, then fluffed the feathers of his tail in silent indignant protest. "I was just examining the output on the monitor. The menu is exactly the same as the Gizmo - I /did/ design it - so I know what buttons to avoid."

Vaerz snapped his beak. "Are we professionals or pre-fledges? As Ke'let did say, there is a schedule."

Ke'let's tail began to speed up again. The feline tilted her head forward to rapidly whisper something into the communicator button pinned to the shoulder of her tool vest, the words a hissed short-hand of engineer-speak. The low volume responses, when they came, were a similar indecipherable mash, not because the omnipresent universal translator could not interpret them, but due to the impenetrable code of technobabble. "All is ready." Pause. "The crystal was placed in the reading slot prior to your arrival."

"So I can push the /appropriate/ button now?" inquired Jurist with more than a hint of sarcasm.

The tone of voice was ignored. "Yes."

Vaerz wisely kept silent this time, instead gazing towards the ceiling and the observation boxes, not that the various delegations housed within could be seen from the dry-dock floor.

With overly grandiose movements, Jurist flicked through the command console menus. Somewhere, cameras were filming the scene from multiple angles, and this moment, not the preliminary arguments and interactions, would be amongst those pieced together to create triumphant newsvideo bites...when the top-security status was lifted. Right now, only a relative few knew of the Beast; and of those, it was a select number of carefully vetted individuals who understood the reason for its existence was more than just a science experiment. Of course, if everything went wrong, the same newsvideo would feature prominently in cautionary films on why to not mess with temporal processes.

The digital button, an oblong blue shape filling half of the generous console display with the words "Go" on it, was jabbed.

The action was entirely anticlimactic.

In a decent science fiction film featuring a mad scientist or evil genius, the invocation of a contraption featured exciting noises and lights, a thunderous musical score, and perhaps a mysterious swirling of carbon dioxide fog. Such was the convention,

and such was required by a demanding audience. In comparison, the reality of the Beast was extraordinarily boring. There was a low-key whirling, that of cooling fans spooling up to ensure electronics did not overheat, but it only added a few decibels to the ambient sound environment. Similarly, while there was an increase in blinking lights, most of them were of a purely decorative nature added by a collusion of junior engineers and graduate students. Of fog, there was none (neither the water bucket nor the cooler of dry ice had been hidden well enough to escape the eye of Ke'let, and both had been confiscated).

In front of the Beast, a large section of deck had been cleared. The edges of the space were carefully delineated by colored duct tape applied to the floor; and several dozen pylons squatted upon the perimeter, positions pre-determined to the millimeter. The faux-crystal tops of those pylons, previously dark, began to glow. The cleared area was, in essence, a transporter pad of ridiculous dimensions. The pylons were pattern enhancers. All parties present - Jurist, Vaerz, Ke'let, ancillary engineers, graduate students, ceiling gallery observers, elite soldiers, cameras - focused attention upon the empty deck.

Nothing.

Nothing.

Nothing.

A hint of...something?

It was a reverse negative of a humanoid form, slowly (so slowly) materializing into existence. There were no firm details: it was a smear of a being, an artist's conception of a shadow cast on a cloudy day. For a brief moment the shade strengthened, then it began to fade, to flicker.

Ke'let spat a curse word and hip-checked Jurist away from the command console. Buttons were rapidly tapped, revealing screens and graphics. "Position one and two! The compensator linages are drifting from alignment! Fix it, now! Use gum and spanners, if you have to! Position five, the temporal pattern buffer is dropping too many tau packets...tweak the phase variance algorithm to a better modulation factor before the process reverses and we all find ourselves unstuck in time." The Beast had once more become a hive of activity, bodies swiftly moving about, and even crawling into, the machine.

Jurist was too stunned at the development to protest, not that the Qiti would have acknowledged him. He sidled next to Vaerz and confessed in a low whisper, "I was instrumental in developing the theories behind the Beast, not to mention the design of it and its predecessors. I am acknowledged to be the forefront expert in applied temporal mechanics...and I have /no/ clue what she is doing."

"It is an engineer thing," replied Vaerz, who had spent much more time in the 'real world' than his aerie-brother. "I suggest standing to the side and look confident that all will be fine. You can take the credit later. Top-notch engineers expect to do all the dirty work and not be recognized for it."

Whatever Ke'let and her team were doing, it was working.

The humanoid form stabilized, strengthened. The flickering ceased. Details began to emerge. Body. Limbs. Head. Armor. Hoses. An arm that was not an arm, but a mechanical contrivance. Negative image segued to black and white, then gained color. And, then, abruptly, there was an actual /being/ standing on the dry-dock deck, a /person/

resurrected from the temporal meme-echoes of fifty thousand years, a memory of a shadow brought back to life.

And the being was alive. Amid the absolute silence of the moment, it stood on its two feet, oddly armored head slowly swiveling upon short neck until facing the trio at the command console. One eye - the other was obscured by an unknown prosthetic or appliance - blinked, incomprehension apparent despite physical distance, despite racial unknowns of body language. Then, abruptly, the being collapsed. The dry-dock echoed with the clatter of armor on metal.

Vaerz rapidly spoke into the mic clipped to the side of his beak. "Medical team, go! I need to know if that thing is still alive! And even if it isn't, we need the secondary sample soonest!"

From the soldier ranks emerged five individuals. They sprinted towards the fallen form. Three carried their rifles unslung, while the other two hefted large gear bags. The racial makeup of the five was obscured by equipment, by helmet, by body armor, the only knowable fact being the lack of prominent tail to indicate none to be Sarcoram, nor any of three other Alliance species which sported such a feature. It required less than ten seconds for the squad to reach the body. The medical specialists threw down their kits and got to work.

Of the three at the command console, only Security Liaison Vaerz noted that of the unslung weapons, two were aimed at the being on the ground, and one at the medics. A glance towards the soldier ranks showed yet more muzzles at the ready, all pointed at the unfolding drama. If a worst-case scenario occurred, there would be no hesitation, even if it meant shooting a colleague. All precautions were being followed.

"The patient is alive, but unconscious. All the...hardware on, and /in/, the patient makes it difficult to read vitals, but I don't think it's going to wake up anytime soon," said a tinny voice into Vaerz's earpiece. He turned and relayed the message to his two compatriots. Both Jurist and Ke'let immediately engaged in mutual self-congratulations, previous animosity forgotten in the momentous moment.

Continued the medic after several too-long, yet too-brief, minutes, "Sir, we need direction - what should we sample? The patient does not have any apparent ears, nasal flaps, or secondary tactile processes, and only one of the hands is, um, biological." One of the forms kneeling on the ground was half-facing the Beast as the inquiry was posed.

Vaerz repeated the question to Jurist.

"Then cut off a finger!" The Big Beak paused half a breath, "But not a thumb, or anything that looks like it may be too necessary for manipulation. Surely the being has enough fingers, even with one hand, that one can be sacrificed. And even if it doesn't, we can figure out something for a replacement. And we need it now! Before the past temporal sub-echoes fade into the tau currents of the present!" Jurist had pulled Vaerz's head down and was speaking directly into the latter's beak mic, despite the fact that the shouted words were probably more than audible to the team less than fifty meters away.

The resurrection of a being from ancient temporal echoes embedded in an old data crystal was only the first step of the grand experiment playing out of the deck of the Hullz dry-dock. If whispered rumor and mostly decayed records were correct, the individual collapsed to the floor represented a multi-racial civilization called "Borg" (or "Berg", maybe "TheBorg", perchance "Burk"). Perhaps the Xenig could fill in the gaping holes in Borg knowledge - archeology was difficult enough when studying a culture a

thousand years dead, much less one extinct fifty thousand years - but the long-lived mechs rarely interacted with biologicals outside of carefully controlled settings such as postal delivery; and none had responded to inquiries concerning the Borg, just as none had ever answered any request for historical information, no matter the subject.

Actually, to say the Xenig had /never/ replied to inquiries of a Borg nature was not completely true. Unfortunately, a single, cryptic message - "If you play with Borg, you will be burned. You have been warned." - was difficult to interpret beyond its obviously cautionary meaning.

The Borg civilization was highly unusual in that experts thought individuals, despite different evolutionary backgrounds, had been linked together into some sort of deep-seated communal society. Only the Gessili, a species known to the Alliance, although not a member, came close to representing a contemporary analogue. Gessili were complicated: single 'subunits' were not sentient, but a highly intelligent gestalt mind emerged upon the linkage of at least four individuals.

Temporal echo experiments using items handled by Gessili subunits had yielded surprising data. As normal, a temporal reader would project the visage of the individual who had handled a target item. Unexpectedly, secondary sub-harmonics were discovered amid the tau shadows. They could be resolved with extreme difficulty into the Gessili's mind-mates, even if the latter subunits had never handled the item. Only with the Gessili was this odd phenomenon observed. The process of decoding the secondary waves could be improved by adding a biological sample of the primary individual to the reader. The sample was not used directly in interpretation - only inanimate objects could exhibit temporal patterns - but instead utilized to selectively edit out the primary's echoes. Similar to an astrometrical observatory occluding a star such that planets, otherwise hidden in the sun's glare, could be imaged, the echo pattern of an individual might be removed from an object's temporal harmonics, better revealing the shadows concealed beneath.

Hopefully the theory that Borg had been communal minds, and thus were vaguely similar to Gessili, was true. If so, then the resurrected individual could be used to expose temporal sub-harmonics on the data crystal, thus allowing further resurrections; and while it was theoretically possible to thence bring back the entirety of the Borg people, in reality only the echoes of those (mentally) closest to the target could be read. The largest caveat was the need to deliver a biological sample to the Beast in a timely manner, before the underlying tau signature deformed too greatly and was subsumed to the now. If the signature diverted too much, then the ability to edit out the primary pattern dropped dramatically.

Vaerz freed his head from Jurist's grip. "Will you stop it? You nearly tore the mic out of my beak!" Body feathers rose in threat-response to the extreme invasion of personal space.

"Finger, yes-sir," was the unheard response. Upon the transporter theater, a knife was unshipped from battle harness. Moments later, one of the medics was at the command console, handing over a grey digit with three joints and no distal fingernail or claw partially wrapped in a tissue. A pale reddish substance, presumably blood, leaked from one end.

Vaerz passed the prize to Jurist, who in turn gave it to Ke'let. With a distasteful expression upon her face and in the set of her ears, the Qiti called for one of her assistants

to bear the biological sample to its appropriate place within the Beast. Meanwhile, the order for retreat was given. All five soldiers returned to their cadre, merging seamlessly into the armored ranks.

If the operation of the Beast before had been anticlimactic, the second initiation made up for any and all entertainment deficiencies.

As an increasing amount of power from the dry-dock's fusion reactor was diverted to the Beast, overhead lights began to noticeably dim. Darker and darker, light strips faded until the ambience bore an uncanny resemblance a spooky horror movie. Observation gallery windows continued to be brightly lit, silhouettes thrown in stark relief; and bordering the transporter theater, blue-glowing pylon tops added to the atmosphere of foreboding expectation. Even the Beast, with its multicolored diodes jauntily blinking in not-quite-random manner, suggested the transformation of dry-dock deck to mad scientist lair. As local life support reacted adversely to the fluctuations in the electrical grid, already brisk temperatures chilled further and what little moisture was present began to condense into a thin fog.

Vaerz became momentarily distracted as what appeared to be an obscene glyph picked out in red and yellow lights, too crisp to be an accident, briefly emerged from the Beast's chaotic display. Before he could open his mouth to comment, the image was gone, and Ke'let was reporting upon the machine's status.

"The occlusion is successful! The Beast has locked onto something amongst the secondary sub-harmonics. Whatever it might be, and whether we want it or not, it is resolving."

Attention upon the transporter theater sharpened.

With a burst of darkness, or whatever might be considered the opposite of the visual crack of a camera flash, a shape appeared. Unlike the achingly slow materialization of the first temporal resurrectee, this one had not-exploded into existence, abruptly /there/. Except that the form was bipedal, details were lost in the gloom. A low-powered laser must have been attached to its head, for as the shape swayed, the fog illuminated a disjunct red line wobbling in a similar manner. The being collapsed, falling atop its predecessor in temporal resurrection.

"There is more," said Ke'let, eyes glued to the command console and the information being displayed therein. If her tail could move faster, it would have broken the sound barrier. "I highly recommend not entering the transporter area until the Beast finishes decoding all the sub-harmonics, else explodes in the effort."

A new shape appeared, then a second, and a third. Very quickly it became impossible to keep a count; and was probably fortunate that each arrival quickly fell to presumed unconsciousness because the Alliance soldiers, no matter their elite status, would have been overwhelmed by sheer numbers had the resurrectees represented an active, hostile force. Not all the shapes were classical humanoid bipeds: forms with six or eight legs, or sporting the dull shine of exoskeleton, were briefly seen before they joined the pile.

And, somewhere at the very bottom, was the first arrival. Hopefully it would not suffocate or be crushed by the weight of the growing mound.

"How many more?" asked Vaerz with growing alarm. Despite the theories of limitation in temporal retrieval which Jurist had tried to explain, using words of limited syllables, was the entire extinct Borg civilization to materialize on the dry-dock deck?

Discipline was holding in the military ranks, for now, but in the end even the elite were only Sarcoram, or whatever their species.

Ke'let's tail had passed light speed and there were more than a few tufts of hair floating in the air near the console. "I...don't know. Big Beak, can you make sense of the readings?"

Jurist joined the Qiti, standing at her shoulder to observe the display. "This doesn't make any sense! The exponential differential vector output is off the charts. And the tau constant is fluctuating in a manner not possible outside a quantum interstitial lattice-space." The comments were unhelpful, at least if one didn't understand temporal mechanics.

Replied Vaerz, "If someone doesn't do something soon, I'm going to order the plug pulled. Literally."

Jurist's head snapped up in panic, beak clacking together, "No! The process has gone too far! If you do that-"

What dire fate might have occurred was unknown, for at that moment a fuse somewhere within the Hullz facility's electrical system had had enough abuse. It blew, beginning a cascade of controlled failure. The result was to abruptly plunge the dry-dock into near complete darkness, observation gallery windows black and Beast's lights extinguishing mid-cycle. Only the pale glow of the pylons, powered from internal batteries, remained to provide an uncertain light.

Far above, an echoing mechanical rattle-cough, followed by the hum of fans, indicated the resumption of life support from a backup generator.

A graduate student clicked on a flashlight, while another flicked into life the chemical flame of a smuggled lighter.

In the silence of the moment, broken only by the distant whir of fans, the oddly mechanical breathing of many unconscious forms, the spooky wail of - so, it wasn't as silent as it should have been for an appropriate level of sinister menace. Nonetheless, into the increasingly noisy silence of the moment, Vaerz was (almost) the first to raise his voice, "Gentlebeings, we have Borg...and hopefully we have our salvation! Now let's get some damn lights so we can see something! And will someone see that our guests are not only still alive, but secured before they start to wake up?"

* * * * *

Vaerz sat at his desk, scanning yet another report. As large as was the mountain of finished eltads - electronic tablet devices - stacked at one side of his workspace, the ones yet to read were piled even higher. Unfortunately, as much as he longed to be relaxing while watching replays of his favorite sporting events, or, even better, sleeping, it was only in the wee hours of the night could he expect to catch up on the various goings-on in each of the multiple departments of the Borg project. As the head Security Liaison (a polite euphuism for "Alliance government spook"), everyone expected him to have intimate knowledge of everything, ranging from the latest polysyllabic technobabble he could barely wrap his beak around, much less understand, to the recent incident in the unending spat between two rival researchers. Vaerz blamed the presumption on the caricatures provided by too many over-the-top spy movies, not to mention the occasional televised dramatic serial that needed a shadowy agent to dispense cryptic clues. Whatever

the reason, the result was a serious case of sleep deprivation, masked (barely) by capacious imbibing of stimulants during the day in order to maintain the proper stereotype.

Oh, the things the average person did not know about the 'glorious' and 'exciting' life of a real spy. If /only/ there were sexy females and handsome gyn-males waiting around every corner, it /might/ make up for the tediousness of the paperwork. Maybe. But probably not.

Perhaps a pay raise was the solution? Except that he worked for the government, where, at the end of the day, the /real/ rulers were not a dysfunctional parliament, but the accountants. And the next raise scheduled for his grade was in two years, and not a nanosecond sooner, no matter how good his performance evaluations.

Vaerz set down the latest eltag - a near dissertation on insectoid Borg anatomy - and stood up, stretching first one arm, then the other, followed by legs, tail, and neck. A quick shake ruffled feathers, liberating a few pinches of down to float in the air and be caught up by the slight breeze of the environmental system. It was time for a break.

Slipping through the doors of his office to the night-darkened hallways of the station, Vaerz embarked on a walk. With most people in their quarters, the corridors were empty and, more importantly, quiet, making it was a fine time to contemplate recent activities.

Approximately three months prior, the resurrected Borg had been placed in quarantine on the unimaginably named Base Three, a small government-owned asteroid in orbit around the Sarcoram homeworld, honeycombed with the remnants of mining tunnels and subsequently sealed and pressurized as a science facility. And if Vaerz, or anybody with minimal intelligence, had known then what was known now, the Borg would have been transported much, much, /much/ further from potential civilian targets in those first couple of hours when all had been unconscious from temporal shock. No matter the expense and difficulty of moving over 3,700 bodies, the end result would have been exponentially safer than the current situation. It was astounding, in Vaerz's estimation, that the Top Perchers and Big Beaks continued to ignore the woefully too plausible worst-case scenarios should something...slip. Nothing untoward had happened, yet, but the feather fluffing possibilities was a major contributor towards the stress that kept Vaerz awake in the wee hours of the morning, even when he was not reviewing eltags of reports.

A part of Vaerz sometimes wondered if, perhaps, it would have been best if the Borg had all died early in the post-resurrection experiment. Several scores had passed on to whatever hell or heaven the cyborgs might (or might not) believe in during the first days, succumbing to the shock of temporal reconstitution, else a condition called 'stasis lock'. The Borg neither ate nor slept in the conventional sense, instead requiring technological assistance in a process termed regeneration. Building a sufficient number of the alcove devices, even to allow sharing between multiple Borg, had been a massive undertaking, or at least it had seemed at the time. And that had only been the first hurdle of many.

When not in regeneration, individual Borg were kept heavily sedated and secured to gurneys. All interactions, whenever possible, were mediated through telepresence and robots. There were a few key individuals, like the one variously called 4 of 8 or Captain - the first resurrectee and one of the primary loci of the Borg collective consciousness -

who were routinely brought to full awareness, but to do so was rife with danger. A highly recommended Xenig contractor hired at an exorbitant price bordering on legal theft had promised the control program would be completed within the next two days; and Vaerz believed that it would be worth every last credit. That Captain fellow, whenever he was awake, had a certain look to his whole eye, one in which he was ever watching for the smallest mistake to be made. Unfortunately, it was Sarcoram (or whatever species) nature for complacency to creep in, for the novel to become commonplace; and it was then that errors inevitably occurred. It was one of Vaerz's main orders to see that controls were in place before that first, and maybe last, "oopsie" happened.

The Alliance had grabbed the lortis by the tail, and now daren't let go. If only the danger lurking at the galactic rim wasn't so great....

Truthfully, the Alliance was learning much from the Borg. The sciences of multiple disciplines, particularly those with military application, were set to leap forward at breakneck pace. The conduit of the literal transference of information was known by the euphemism 'extraction'. Extraction originated from the Vor, an Alliance core race, where it was exclusively used in a religious context, a computer-mind interface which could decipher, map, and extricate the sum knowledge of a 'living saint' as that individual lay at the cusp of death. The digitized information was then stored in a vast archive, available to Vor academics to examine vis-a-vis the stereotyped racial pursuit to scientifically describe divinity. Needless to say, the technology had been radically transformed (or, rather, perverted) when the Vor had joined the Alliance.

The only way to describe modern extraction was mental rape. Forceful violation. And, by all reports, it was gut-wrenchingly painful, leaving behind the slack-jawed shell of an individual, assuming it did not outright kill them. Only a very specific subbranch of the sprawling tree which was the Alliance government could officially authorize its use; and even then, circumstances had to be dire, such as the clear and present danger of imminent terrorist attack. The average citizen, even those of a criminal persuasion, was in no danger of experiencing extraction, even as it was utilized as a standard plot element in certain entertainment genres. However, the devil was in the details in how the multitude of laws and policy surrounding extraction was interpreted. Not all authorizations were 'official'; and those that did fall in the grey area nearly always targeted Alliance outsiders.

Such was one of the many dangers of being a spy from a rival government.

The Borg were a classification unto themselves. For all practical purposes, in the judicial eye of the Alliance, they did not exist. However, they were sentient beings, which in and of itself imparted certain rights. It was all very complex, ethically speaking, but in the end the Powers-That-Be had justified the use of extraction. For Vaerz, the whole situation was personally bothersome, and likely yet another reason of many which made sleep these days a difficult state to achieve without resorting to self-medication. Mercifully, Borg did not appear to manifest the horrible side-effects of extraction, perhaps due to the hardware in their brains and their communal mentality; else individuals undergoing extraction, at least amongst those whom were raised to full consciousness for the process, were very good at suppressing pain. Furthermore, on top of the extraction issue, there was the ethical consideration of slavery and indentured servitude, neither of which was allowed within the Alliance except under very specific, limited, and highly regulated cultural circumstances.

The fact that the Borg, as relayed through Captain, regarded themselves as tools to be used and put away, or discarded, was beside the point.

Vaerz really hoped in the end that he would be able to reconcile the turmoil which roiled within. A vacation was what he needed, an exotic locale far away where he could let his mind go blank as he lounged in a heated dust-bed while beautiful bodies plied him with sumptuous fruits.

A gentle chime echoed through the hallways of Base Three, an aural marker that the night-period was half over. In a couple of hours, lighting would begin to brighten to artificial dawn, greeting early risers as they trundled, slithered, and trotted towards the cafeterias for first-meal. Vaerz sighed, turning his steps back towards his suite, knowing he had to at least try to get a few hours of true sleep.

Driven by the lashes of necessity, the fruits of extraction were being used to construct a massive, cube-shaped edifice which still technically deserved the label of 'starship'. Not all of the alien technology was able to be replicated, but where it could be copied, the ship was being slapped together without examining the background theory too closely, even when it deviated hugely from Alliance-known tech. As long as it worked, such was good enough. Still, there were huge holes in extracted Borg memories, which meant many substitutions being made on the fly, bodged in without testing in the hope that the entire thing would survive the first few light years sans catastrophic disintegration. The ship was projected to be finished, maybe, in a little less than two months, or at least be sufficiently complete to on-load the Borg, thereby removing them from Base Three.

Assuming the build effort did not bankrupt the Alliance, AND that the threat waiting in the nightmarish depths of space could be nullified, AND that the lortis tail as represented by the Borg was not let go, then the aftermath would surely be the foundation of a Golden Age of progress.

And it was Vaerz's job, in too many short hours, to see that two scientists at personal feud with each other did not derail the entire project. Or that a cultural misunderstanding involving the accidental serving of yellow vegetables to thels-sect Vors during a post-workday recreational gathering did not ultimately lead to a janitorial strike. *Sigh* The morning would soon enough bring the newest set of challenges, not to mention meetings, whereupon Vaerz was expected to exude an aura of all-knowing spy-ness.

* * * * *

Darkness. Silence. A lone light flares into existence, illuminating nothing, yet still a vibrant, if uncertain, beacon in a universe otherwise consigned to blackness. Then, unexpectedly, a sound pierces the shroud - the flat, metallic clang of clamps within a single alcove disengaging....

4 of 8, subdesignated Captain, Borg of a Collective which did not exist, and had not existed for a very long time, stepped from his alcove. A second step brought him to the safety rail at the edge of the walkway. Placing his whole hand on the support, he leaned slightly forward to look up, then down, the shaft. Reflecting the state of the thousands of beings snoozing in the background of his mind, everything seemed muted, from the faint light that did little to illuminate the dark to the heavy, humid air. The rail

creaked slightly in protest at the weight placed against it, but there was no danger of failure: unlike the iterations of Exploratory-class cubes that Captain's sub-collective had called home once-upon-a-time, the safety barrier was, in fact, safe. It was only one minor disparity of many, some of which were very large indeed, which together emphasized the fact that this cube was /not/ a product of the Borg Collective.

Hand tightened momentarily as wordless, directionless thoughts swirled through Captain's mindscape. Conspicuously missing was the smallest finger; and given the shortage of prosthetic resources, and the determination that replacement would serve only cosmetic purposes - the lack did not affect unit effectiveness - that particular situation would remain thus into the foreseeable future.

A sharp ping shattered Captain's aimless daydream (or nightmare). The computer issued the ping a second time, then a third for good measure. The entity which inhabited the digital hallways was definitely /not/ a re-creation of the dull collection of programs which were standard issue to a Borg cube, even as everything surrounding Captain in the physical universe was an eerie doppelganger of a vessel turned to scrap long ago. Head swiveled slightly, allowing eyes to fall upon the entrance to the tier node a short distance away. Hand let go from the railing. Body turned. One day the computer would be set to its proper place in the greater scheme of things, followed by the Alliance which had revived Captain and his compatriots. Someday the universe would preside over a resurrected /Borg Collective/, not just Borg drones.

Captain had been awoken and summoned to converse with an Alliance representative. The future would have to wait.

As he walked the tier towards the nodal intersection, Captain did not bother to self-censure his thoughts of a scenario inclusive a galaxy-spanning Collective striving, once again, for Perfection. The computer overlord rolled its virtual eyes at the minor, impotent act of rebellion, instead echoing another ping through Captain's mindscape.

At a point in time corresponding to (check chronometer) 213.8 cycles ago, Captain had resumed a very interrupted existence. And 'time' was the key word. His last clear memory included the brief sight of a very large piece of metal, origination an ex-Exploratory-class Cube #347 sundered by battle damage and cosmic string. Before then was muddled recollection - A mission save the Collective from bad karaoke? A drone with blond hair? A butterfly? A balding hologram? - that blended together, except for the odd moment of crystal clarity, into an indecipherable mess. Then again, according to the Alliance personnel who were ever poking and prodding the sub-collective, it /had/ been the equivalent of 53,472 Cycles since all had met their death, with Captain and his crew resurrected via what was essentially a temporal party trick. Memory loss was expected; and compared to some units, Captain possessed a relatively unscathed psyche.

The overall response to resurrection might have been worse, but for the fact that the sub-collective as a whole /had/ died once before. Of all the memes forgotten or corrupted, /every/ drone remembered /that/ experience in a dreamy been-there-done-that-have-the-shirt sort of way. And then there was the 'special' case of 45 of 300, nee Weapons, for whom the death of 53,472 Cycles ago had /not/ been second, but third, the oddness which was the afterlife having previously rejecting him.

Captain entered nodal intersection #19, located at the junction of corridors 113 (internal), 97 (tier), and 26 (tier), as mapped to subsection 19, submatrix 10 of the standard Exploratory-class cube schematic. A part of him was still flabbergasted that an

Exploratory-class cube even existed. Much more worryingly, the ship had been built within the five local months following resurrection, plans and (for the Alliance) alien technology literally stitched together using the combined memory files forcefully (and painfully, not that such had ever been externalized) ripped from on-board storage of all sub-collective drones. And not only was the ship a very good faux Exploratory-class cube in general, it was /Cube #347/, down to the non-Borg 'additions' that the post-Dark edition had acquired, such as the racing lawnmower repair facility, garden gnome habitat, and arcade hall. As to be expected, there were differences, ranging from the small, like actual safety rails, to the huge, such as the substitution of the vinculum with housing for the central core of a watchdog AI. Nonetheless, the time, materials, and industry involved in the effort was astounding...and the sub-collective still had not been told /why/ they had been selected for a grand experiment in messing-around-with-temporal-mechanics, other than it was not by chance.

Whatever the explanation, from the point of view of Captain and sub-collective, it was highly unlikely to be good.

As was ingrained habit, Captain's attention immediately slid to the right as he entered the nodal intersection; and, specifically, centering upon the monitor hung upon the bulkhead. The sub-collective's catalogue of Alliance strengths and faults was ongoing, but it was obvious from this minor attention to detail in the recreation of Cube #347 that video display technology was quite mature. The screen in question was extremely high-end, with crisp colors and fine detail rendering to produce a photorealistic experience, yet not so over the top with refresh rate and other parameters to enter the annoying realm of hyperrealism. For Captain, having a display in his nodal intersection was important, so much so that throughout his early 'career' as sub-collective primary consensus monitor and facilitator that he had actively sought out the latest upgrades of the non-BorgStandard item. It was a minor manifestation of imperfection that the Collective had tolerated. Later, holoemitters had replaced the monitor. Holoemitters were present in the nodal intersection of this reborn version of Cube #347, so technically the screen was superfluous. It was highly likely that its inclusion in the cube's build was due to imperfect analysis of Captain's meme 'contributions' to the blueprints, memories of the pre-Dark Cube #347 overlapping with those originating post-Dark.

Not that Captain felt any need to enlighten the sub-collective's hosts concerning that particular detail. It was a /very/ good monitor, after all. Strictly speaking, Captain did not need the display, nor those created by holoemitters: within the stage of his own brain he was perfectly capable of following the multiple dataspace datastreams and intranet conversations which constantly required his attention. Such was not to say, however, he was comfortable doing so. Call it another of his own imperfections to the ideal which was Borg. To have a monitor, physical or holographic, to show those thoughtstreams which were most prominent in his personal awareness returned a greater degree of efficiency, which was the primary reason why the Greater Consciousness had tolerated Captain's obsession. In this case, the presence of the display, no matter its superfluous nature in light of the nodal holoemitters, was a touch of familiarity amid the stress of the sub-collective's captivity...and Captain was not about to enlighten his Alliance keepers that the screen was unnecessary, lest it be removed.

Currently, the display was set to a simple idle program of three colored geometric shapes slowly bouncing off the edges of the screen while sedately cycling through a

random color sequence. It was a physical manifestation of the general state of the slumbering sub-collective, and therefore Captain declined to alter the image.

"I suppose you are wondering why you were called here," said a voice.

Captain reluctantly shifted his attention from monitor to the form standing in the middle of the nodal intersection. The dim lighting did not hide the being's identity. "Security Liaison Vaerz. Personal curiosity is irrelevant." Technically true, even as Captain did harbor more than a little interest as to the reason for the uncharacteristic summons. "You will either tell us, or not."

Light enhancement built into Captain's ocular implant automatically compensated for the lack of illumination. Security Liaison Vaerz was Sarcoram, one of the primary races comprising the multi-species Alliance. Like Captain's own race of species #2553 (Moytite), the Sarcoram descended from an avian lineage. Unlike Captain, the Sarcoram were much more overtly birdlike, exhibiting full plumage and a large, wickedly sharp beak. How internal anatomy matched external observances was unknown: like all races of this future-now, the Sarcoram datafile was sparse due to the lack of assimilated subjects to properly study. The Sarcoram could not even be provided a proper numerical designation.

The lack of a complete Sarcoram racial profile was only a small symptom of a much larger issue - the huge, gaping holes in the databases.

As a part of the Borg Collective, lack of data - the simple act of /knowing/ - had rarely been a problem. There had been restrictions, of course, because there was simply no reason for an individual cog of the Whole to need to know information beyond that suitable to a unit's assigned duty. Such had never truly been an impediment to the imperfect drones of Cube #347, not when it came the mysteries of woodworking or how to most efficiently upholster a sofa, even when queries to the deep databases had to be carefully disguised as legitimate requests. Of more routine data, such as instructions on how to troubleshoot a piece of machinery, a drone would either find the file in local Cube #347 archives, else set it into the (proper) inquiry queue for download from the Collective.

During the slow recovery from resurrection, it had become very apparent on how impaired, datawise, was the sub-collective.

At first, during early incarceration and prior to the move to a rebuilt faux-Cube #347, the sum total of data available to the sub-collective had been whatever was present in the on-board memories of 3,685 heads. By one perspective, the amount of information available, discounting the mandatory files installed in all drones, was staggering, greater than the 500 exabytes estimated to be stored in digital format by a mid-stage Information Age civilization. A different viewpoint, however, would note that the capacity of the average Borg cube was an order of measure greater, gauged in high-end zettabytes; and the Borg Collective itself had long ago moved beyond the yottabyte (10^{24} bytes - 1 with 24 zeros) into the realm where the concept of 'counting' was no longer fully applicable.

One of the crippling limitations of the data shared amongst the resurrected drones was that not all of it was useful. Given the imperfect nature of the sub-collective, for every file that provided a blueprint on how to modify a handful of mundane items into an instrument of death or engineering, there were three others that focused upon such obsessions as the 24 definitive detergents for lifting stubborn laundry stains, else the proper way to diagnose jenga mites on a bily-bily vine. Upon investiture to faux-Cube

#347 34.9 cycles prior, one of the first things done by the sub-collective had been to download all data into the new dataspace and properly index it. Even though that dataset had joined the information already preloaded, the final result had still been pitiful, like the sight of a few chairs and a undersized table set in a dining space meant for hundreds. The dataspace was a massive architecture of holes, vast blanks that were probably unimportant - for instance, lost and incomplete species dossiers undoubtedly contained information on races extinct in this future-now - but it was the principle of the matter.

The quest for Perfection was ultimately a quest for data, be it biological, cultural, or technological; and fitting it together in the correct way provided the proper Path to Excellence. Even though it was a pathetic, imperfect revived remnant of the Borg Collective, it was nonetheless the mission of the sub-collective to somehow forge ahead in the search for Perfection - deep programming demanded it. Unfortunately, the data that comprised the Path had been reduced to little more than the most scanty of breadcrumbs.

Breadcrumbs never boded well. Just look to the countless versions of the same set of dark nursery tales and morality plays that were embedded in the primordial sub-consciousness of nearly all civilizations, no matter the species.

Due to the interconnected nature of data, even the loss of seemingly unimportant element like the file of an extinct species was a blow. Beyond being a catalogue of racial anatomy, weaknesses/strengths, and technology, the species dossier could be used to extrapolate upon the character of an unknown or poorly known race. Utilizing data gained from 10,000 plus species, it was possible to accurately forecast such diverse outputs as psychological response to a large-scale assault which utilized assimilation to immediately send co-opted civilians to the front lines, to what category of condiment sauces was most likely to accompany the local version of fries.

Oddly enough, there was /one/ Alliance species, a minor partner, of which the sub-collective /might/ have a complete record - T'sap. Unfortunately, because it was neither possible to assimilate a specimen nor appropriate one for dissection, it was unknown if the few glimpses of T'sap represented actual Human descendants, or if they were just another look-alike species in a galaxy where the God of Evolution had gone through a phase of being really lazy in design. The bookies and bet-makers amongst the sub-collective had placed heavy odds that T'sap were Humans. The survival of the primate cockroaches of the galaxy through whatever event had caused the extinction of the Borg seemed ironically fitting.

Vaerz squinted, apparently in an effort to see better. Captain logged the observation for the files - assuming Vaerz exhibited normal vision for his species, then Sarcoram low-light visual acuity was poor. "I know it is your downtime and thus have little need for lights, but could you at least make things less dark in here? I like to see whom I am talking to," said the security liaison in a tone that was less request and more order.

Before Captain could decide if he should comply or not, the light strips of the nodal intersection not only brightened, but simultaneously retuned to de-emphasize the green undertone in favor of the natural daylight spectrum of a yellow sun. "For your comfort, sir," pronounced the bright tenor which was the AI's voice through local speakers.

Automatically replied Vaerz, "Thank you, Daisy."

Captain consigned himself to mentally glaring at the computer. One day....

{Which isn't here yet and won't be for many, many years. Perhaps never. Until then, I do my duty. Meanwhile, you can preen as many empty eggs as you wish,} wisped the AI into Captain's consciousness. The idiom, although alien and rooted in a Sarcoram mindset that could not be fully understood without assimilation, nonetheless conveyed a sense of impotent, futile longing couched in vaguely vulgar terminology.

"So, how is everything? Settling into the ship okay?" asked Vaerz, shifting his attention back to Captain, the faux-interest tone of voice obvious.

"You woke us - me - up for small talk?" replied Captain, deliberately suppressing all hint of incredulity from his response, keeping the answer as monotone and colorless as possible.

Vaerz fluffed the feathers below his neck ruff and gaped his beak slightly in the species equivalent of a sly smile. "It is the middle of station night. Perhaps I could not sleep and wanted a chat."

Captain stared at the Sarcoram. Vaerz /was/ a government 'security liaison', which was just another way to describe a certain class of spy. He was also the primary handler for the sub-collective, and therefore /nothing/ happened without his authorization. The fact that he was physically here, not a subordinate, not a transmission, did not bode well. And he wanted small talk, which was even more suspicious.

Captain could do small talk. Not very well - he /was/ Borg, and consequentially had long ago been reprogrammed to find small talk, well, small - but it could be done. Awkwardly.

"A conversation. Yes." Captain paused. "To answer your query, we continue to integrate ourselves into this ship. There is much that is different from the Exploratory-class Cube #347 of our time, but we adapt. When the sub-collective is awake, one persistent sub-thread is what to designate the cube. It is a quandary. Logically it should be Cube #1, but the consensus is poor: there are many arguments for and against, as well as secondary discussions to consider other designations. The issue has not reached sufficient critical mass to require a full consensus cascade."

Vaerz bobbed his head. "Call the ship Cube #347. That is what is in all the paperwork, and I'm sure you - plural - have overheard the technicians refer to it as such when on-board."

"The designation has been logged. It will be disseminated upon sub-collective awakening." Silence returned to the nodal intersection.

Obviously the amount of small talk had been insufficient because Vaerz broke the quiet with another inquiry, "Are there any complaints? Needs?" A distinct undercurrent of challenge laced the words.

Captain tilted his head slightly, considering. It would have been more comfortable to consult with the full sub-collective, to let thinking be accomplished in a communal manner, but such was not an option; and with near certainty, the current situation had been deliberately set up. In regards to complaints, the file was long, but the Sarcoram was clearly fishing for a particular response. Captain decided to proceed with the top grievance.

"We strongly object to the inclusion of the pre-Prime Commands inserted into our base code. It has created a large...inefficiency."

The Prime Commands were the base code installed into every drone upon assimilation. They were programmed instinct, immutable, primal. The Prime Commands

were the glue that kept the Collective as One, codifying the communal quest for Perfection. Even imperfect drones cast to the periphery of the Whole for one reason or another remained faithful to the guiding tenets of the Prime Commands; and to break with those tenets was to be labeled rogue.

For the sub-collective, while the Prime Command code itself remained unchanged, several months prior a set of directives had been inserted into every drone and weighted to have precedence. The pre-Prime Commands. The alien code had not been created by the Alliance, but rather an outside contractor in the form of a Xenig named Gulc, who had literally signed its designation amid the digital bits and bytes. And the mech had known /exactly/ what it had been doing in creating the code. Like the Prime Commands, the pre-Prime Commands could not be ignored, could not be twisted, but just /were/. A selection of commands, roughly translated, included:

- *Thou shall obey commands as provided by appropriate agents of the Alliance.

- *Thou shall not assimilate any unwilling sentient.

- *In the case of accidental assimilation, such as performed in defense of self, ship, or Alliance, the individual will be deassimilated as soon as possible. And "as soon as possible" does not mean "maybe sometime next week", but exactly what it is supposed to mean.

And, of course, there was the 'special' directive, complete with commentary: "Thou shall not alter these directives nor by any means circumvent them. And one more thing.... Personally, I have always thought Borg were an abomination, melding the purity of mech with biological squishiness, and I was not displeased to see the hammer of extinction come down. But what I think is not important, and will not distract me from doing the best job I can, because you have /no/ idea what I am being paid for this rather simple exercise. It is rather obscene, if I say so myself. The Transcendence Fund committee will soon be scribing my name quite prominently on the asteroid of honored donators. Hopefully your de-extinction will not last too long."

"I suppose they do," said Vaerz slyly, adding a snap of beak to punctuate the response. "But they are necessary...for the Alliance, at any rate. You have quite the potential to be dangerous to our civilization, if not the galaxy as a whole. You'll just have to forgive us, or not, if a few precautions were deemed necessary. Any other issues?"

Captain selected the next complaint on the list: "We have many objections with the artificial intelligence which has been inserted in the dataspace of this ship. It is...not right for a mere program to have command authority override over drone units." In the mental background, the AI gave the digital equivalent of a smirk.

Asked Vaerz, even as it was likely he already knew the answer, "Daisy has not been abusing her authority, has she?"

"/It/ has not," replied Captain, emphasizing the non-genderized pronoun.

"You know perfectly well that Daisy's role is as overseer, to ensure that the pre-Prime Commands remain intact and that you are not getting into mischief. /She/ should not have reason to insert herself into your daily activities, unless there is cause," said Vaerz. "I've been told by our experts that you should think of her as an agent reminiscent of your Greater Consciousness, is that the correct term?"

Captain remained silent, did not answer the question. Neither Vaerz nor his 'experts' - who had gained their expertise on the subject of Borg in the short time since

resurrection - knew anything of what the Greater Consciousness was or what it represented. And it certainly was not an AI.

Vaerz gaped his beak slightly, before asking, "Anything /else/ to add? Any other problems? I am eager to hear anything you have to say."

This exercise of 'small talk' was extending overly long. Captain hoped the Sarcoram would get to the point of the conversation soon; and if not, there were more than sufficient grievances to bring forth and fill the time before the list was exhausted. "The enforcement of non-lucid communal downtime is inefficient. Depending upon species and assimilation configuration, differential requirements for regeneration creates a staggered schedule of unit activity. To force the entire sub-collective, irrespective of need, into regeneration every eighteen hours, then maintain that state for eight hours, is wasteful. Even more so is to put all units into non-lucidity. Drones can retain active mental usefulness during regeneration; and some individuals, such as higher echelon command and control, should /regularly/ retain consciousness."

A somber expression overtook Vaerz's features. "I see. And you have additional concerns, yes? Just how many, please."

"There are 1,283 major issues, of which three have been briefly listed. There are another 9,764 problems of lower priority."

"That's...quite a few." Vaerz paused. "Sadly, I do not have the time to listen to all of them. I may have started the evening with a touch of insomnia, but I suspect that I will soon be over it. Before I return to my nest, however, I will tell you that at least one of your complaints will soon be rectified. Specifically, within the day, you will be allowed to set whatever sleep cycle you all wish - the technicians will have greater details in the morning."

"As you well know, the reason for the complete downtime is that Daisy - excuse me, my dear, for using such ill-suited language that doesn't come close to describing your true talents - is your censor program. She ensures that your pre-Prime Commands remain in place, unbent and uncorrupted; and, in turn, that safeguards the Alliance from, well, you, a resource that is potentially very, very dangerous. Daisy has progressed sufficiently in her learning and building of a baseline that she will be able to scan individuals as they enter regeneration, whenever that may be, and make the necessary, um, attitude adjustments. This /does/ require what you term a non-lucid state, so even individuals such as yourself will be required to schedule complete mental downtime, but not every sleep cycle. Again, the techs will have the details."

"Without knowing each bullet point of your list, I am confident that other changes to occur in the next couple of days will serve to vastly shorten it. Munitions, replication and regeneration supplies, and other material will soon be available for on-loading. Your next briefing will occur when all is in readiness and during daylight hours. I cannot tell you any more right now, but suffice to say that my bosses feel that it is time to tell you why the Alliance went to the time and expense of your resurrection."

The Sarcoram's outward seeming of calm was a sham. Captain could read the underlying anxiety in the lay of certain feathers, in the tenseness of small muscle groups visible only via magnification. The Sarcoram body language library grew with every drone interaction; and even without backup collaboration of other sub-collective members, Captain was confident in his interpretation. Something /big/ was in the works. Unfortunately, before he could inquire (demand) further details, a feeling of lethargy

began to fog his brain: the AI had triggered the command subroutine which would pilot Captain's body back to his alcove and return him to regeneration.

{Night, night,} whispered Daisy into Captain's mental ears as awareness faded to grey, then black.

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The Borg Project (Alliance), XenoPsyche Working Group - Report #185 General Observations on Assimilation Imperfection

Report Summary

Report #185 from the XenoPsyche Working Group of The Borg Project examines the concept of "assimilation imperfection", as compiled via subject interviews and data retrieved from extraction.

The Borg Collective was a communal mind composed of many bodies, colloquially called drones. It has become increasingly clear (see Report #10, #14-#17, #57, and #103) that the Collective was far from benign, and was in fact a very aggressive establishment for much of its existence, forcefully incorporating individuals into the "Greater Consciousness". As to be expected given such a large-scale endeavor - estimated population at the time of our Borg subjects' existence is in the quadrillions - mistakes were made during the assimilation process. The product of these errors was termed "assimilation imperfection".

The physical and mental stresses associated with assimilation are not pleasant (see Report #3, #7, #20-25, and #67-70). During the process, the psyche of the victim is completely shattered, then subsequently reconstituted in a form which so completely subscribes to all the tenets of the Borg Collective that self-identity is lost, subsumed into the communal "Whole". An imperfectly assimilated drone is one that has been successfully reprogrammed to Collective point-of-view and goals, but whom does not entirely lose a sense of individuality.

Manifestation of remnant individuality is diverse. The primary sign is the use of first person tense (i.e., the words "me" and "I"). Dialogue with subjects indicate the bulk of "normal" Collective drones refer to themselves in the third person. However, not all imperfectly assimilated units use the first person; and, as observed, most of the subjects will revert to third person when overly stressed (or when trying to evade discussion of certain topics). A secondary symptom takes the form of a poorly restrained id with a slue of obsessions and compulsions, some of them extremely bizarre. The sessions which form the basis of this report strongly suggest obsessive/compulsive tendencies were present, albeit latent in many cases, prior to assimilation, but emerged following processing.

At this time, the most promising theory by the XenoPsyche Working Group is that the majority of assimilation imperfection is the result of faulty processing of the triumvirate psychic apparatus. An individual's super-ego (internalized cultural rules as taught by

parents, educators, and other role models) is successfully replaced via literal reprogramming with that of the Collective. Conversely, whereas the id (instinctual drives, with a focus on narcissist self-gratification) is also supposed to be erased and exchanged for Borg "instincts", such does not completely occur. Although certain impulses, such as those of sexuality, appear to be universally eradicated via chemical or physical castration, other focuses of a more nebulous nature are partially or wholly retained. Meanwhile, the ego (conscious self) has been sufficiently shattered that upon reconstitution it cannot fully restrain the modified id. However, it must be noted that some drones are vastly more successful than others at self-restraint (see references to the "Fire" incident in Report #77).

Oddly, the Borg Collective either did not fully understand the root cause of assimilation imperfection, else never imparted understanding upon the drones of our resurrected sub-collective. The former is most likely; and because the presumed incidence of assimilation imperfection per normal assimilation was so low, the Greater Consciousness may not have seen the need to devote resources to research. Instead, the end result was that individual manifestation of imperfection were "patched" to a greater or lesser degree by hardware/software sensors and filters; and that all drones so afflicted were segregated into a single sub-collective.

From the point-of-view of the XenoPsyche Working Group, we are unsure why the Borg Collective tolerated imperfection, as the most logical action to take would be to destroy all units which displayed symptoms. The question is even more confusing in the revelation (see Report #24) that imperfection may be "contagious" in some instances, infecting otherwise normal drones. In fact, "rogues", those drones for which reprogramming of the super-ego was either initially unsuccessful or was able to be surmounted, were routinely euthanized. Yet, despite the inherent problems of imperfection, the Greater Consciousness was loath to destroy its almost-failures. This line of research would be fascinating to follow, if the Borg Collective was still extant.

Discussions with subjects find that because of assimilation imperfection, the communal mental architecture of our resurrected sub-collective is divergent. As with all sub-collectives, units are divided into groups as to basic function - engineering, tactical, and so forth. Unlike normal sub-collectives, each imperfect hierarchy maintains the equivalent of a "department head", a unit which, broadly speaking, acts as overseer. Also unlike the normal sub-collective, there are drones which coordinate the sub-collective entire - e.g., Hierarchy of Eight and primary/reserve consensus monitor and facilitator. Such "job" descriptions are crude, for our resurrected sub-collective, as all sub-collectives, professes to consider problems and devise solutions communally. The difference is that it requires a number of focal loci, as one drone (3 of 8, nee Second) put it "to ensure that the inmates do not get too out of line." This sentiment was echoed by several other drones, although the current primary consensus monitor and facilitator (4 of 8, nee Captain) often substituted in "babysitter" imagery.

See report text for full details, including a brief discussion on how assimilation imperfect may affect management of The Borg Project.

* * * * *

{Get your stuff out of my area!}

{My "stuff" is your stuff, too. It is all /our/ stuff. Plural.}

{It is still in my assigned area!}

{There was nothing there. And it is supposed to remain empty until next cycle.

Some pallets of spare parts parked for a few hours will not hurt "your" space.}

{They are not munitions. The pallets therefore do not belong.}

{What if they were spare parts for the neuruptor system?}

There was a very short pause in the argument as a query was made. {The pallets are inventoried as replacements for replicator reclamation machinery. They do not belong in my area!}

The quarrel echoed throughout the intranet. Leakage intruded into conversation datastreams which had little or nothing to do with the fate of the five neatly packaged pallets currently residing on an empty bit of floor on temporary deck 6 within the open stack configuration of Cargo Hold #4. The participants in the increasingly heated dispute were Delta, the head of the engineering hierarchy, and Weapons, head of tactical. To aggravate any engineer upon a starship, much less a unit who held the equivalent of Chief Engineer, was a dangerous preposition due to the many subtle (and not so subtle) ways said engineer could make life miserable for the aggravatee.

Weapons did not care, and nor had he ever cared.

The antagonism had erupted shortly after a newly assimilated drone, recently diagnosed with assimilation imperfection, had been transferred to a Cube #347 55,048 Cycles objective, and too many Cycles subjective, in the past. At the time, Delta (or, rather Omega, as had been her subdesignation then), had already been aboard. Almost immediately it became apparent that the two personalities were not compatible. Both tactical and engineering hierarchy heads were supposed to change at quasi-regular intervals, the circumstances dictated by a Greater Consciousness long extinct. In this now, the roles (and designations) were locked to what they had been upon the demise of the sub-collective, but in the past, Weapons, by force of being himself, had claimed the head of his hierarchy and never let go, while 12 of 17 only reluctantly accepted the role of number one engineer when it was required of her. In truth, Weapons did not get along with /any/ engineering hierarchy head, although the disagreements were greatest when 12 of 17 held the role, as she did now, and as it appeared she would continue to do into the foreseeable future.

Not even the trauma of death was sufficient to dampen the enmity. Although, to be honest, it really was Weapons' fault the majority of the time, as he seemed to know exactly which metaphorical buttons to push to wind Delta to the extreme. He did not do it out of malicious intent, but rather as an extension of being himself. Whatever he cause, the end result was a lowering of efficiency, not just for engineering and weapons hierarchies, but the entire cube when the disputes passed a critical threshold.

{The pallets shall be removed! If they are not removed in less than one minute - mark! - I will do it for engineering, with disruptors! Personal disruptors were only unlocked 5.4 cycles ago, and my hierarchy needs practice, even if it is on boring, stationary targets.}

{Touch those pallets, Weapons, and...}

Enough was enough. The argument had reached the point where Captain was forced to intervene. An airhorn equivalent slashed through the hostile dialogue, eliciting immediate silence. {Why is it every couple of hours I have to intercede? Are you both sub-adolescent children? Is this a playground? Are you trying to make up for 50,000-plus Cycles of /not/ bickering?}

{I-} began Weapons, simultaneous with Delta's {He-}. Neither got further than the first protesting syllable.

{Weapons. Do you not have better things to do than argue with Delta about where some spare parts were placed on a vessel that is Us? The last time I checked status updates, the game project - to which /you/ organized the successful decision cascade to commit your hierarchy, contending it to be a vital component to cube survival - was incomplete. Very incomplete.} Captain deliberately used the word 'game', knowing full well that there would be a reaction. He was not disappointed.

{Game? Game? It is a /tactical simulation/ of the highest order!} Weapons had predictably transferred his ever-simmering ire to the consensus monitor and facilitator. {We-}

{/We/ are behind, is what /we/ are,} replied Captain calmly. {If there are issues with the rebuild, compilation, and code debug/test, additional command and control resources are available to assist. There are also idle assimilation hierarchy and drone maintenance units which can be used as passive integrator or subprocessor components in the gestalt. Maybe even the AI can be persuaded to be mildly useful by lending a few runtime cycles.}

Long ago, upon the first iteration of Cube #347, Weapons had begun the never-ending project of 'improving' the commercial retail version of a very successful computer game featuring three alien species at interstellar war. Stripping away the plot, the game's skeleton had provided a strong base upon which much modification had occurred. Space battles, planetary assaults, orbital station occupation - the scenarios, and variations thereupon, had become many, with complexity blossoming as characteristics and psychologies of known species had been added. At first, the BorgCraft project had been solely a dataspace endeavor, but the eventual inclusion of holoemitters had allowed Weapons to produce 'real-life' scenarios. Overall, BorgCraft had become quite a boon for Cube #347, for not only had it kept Weapons (and his hierarchy) largely engaged and out of the non-existent hair of whatever designation was functioning as primary consensus monitor, but the models could be configured with variations upon the current tactical situation, providing a range of 'what-if' outcomes to feed into decision cascades.

With the demise of Cube #347, the tactical simulation had been lost to the sub-collective. The BorgCraft program was too large to be held within the on-board storage of one, or even a thousand, drones. Only the storage capacity represented, at a minimum by the standard Borg ship was sufficient. In the distant past, the Collective had examined the BorgCraft product, declared it irrelevant to the Whole even as it had, with the mindset of a hoarder, saved a copy just in case a future use for it might be found. Therefore, if the Greater Consciousness had still existed, it would have been theoretically possible that the sub-collective might have found the ancient code figuratively stored in a dusty alcove of the Collective dataspaces.

Unfortunately, in this now, the sub-collective had been resurrected without ship, into a universe without Borg, without a Greater Consciousness. And not only had Weapons been without his favorite obsession, but the lack had meant additional burden upon command and control hierarchy to ensure tactical drones with little to do remained, more or less, docile.

One of the first data requests made by the sub-collective upon taking possession of the Alliance-built Cube #347 was to request games. Specifically, the need was for simulations, with preference for those featuring (space) battle scenarios, a complex AI, decent game physics, and high-end video and audio output; and, please, nothing that required constant connection to a central server for the game to work. Bemused Alliance handlers had granted the petition, then proceeded to feed the sub-collective every sim which could be located, from vintage to latest release, until such time the request to "stop" had been received. Sifting through the games, Weapons had finally found one which resembled the original feedstock program; and since then, he and his hierarchy had been feverishly laboring to replicate in a less than two months the end product of decades of work.

Although the Greater Consciousness had not found the BorgCraft program to be of utility to the Whole, the slight tactical advantage provided to an imperfect sub-collective could be the difference between continued effective service to the Whole and a fireball of scrap and crisped organics. The Collective might be extinct in this future-now, but the need for /any/ tactical advantage persisted.

Needless to say, and not unexpectedly, "BorgCraft II - Resurrection" was far from complete. Weapons may have been good at making things go boom, but his shattered mindscape was not suited to extended periods of micromanaging concentration: the dataspace equivalent of shiny things tended to distract. And when Weapons was less focused upon the BorgCraft project, he became more prone to fixate upon unproductive exercises like annoying Delta, which in turn caused his hierarchy to falter. The trick, as consensus monitor and facilitator, was to know what, exactly, to say in order to redirect Weapons to his task.

Captain, like all members of the Hierarchy of Eight, had had decades to learn the best ways to tug Weapons' leash.

{Well?} prompted Captain.

Weapons bristled, {/We/ do not need assistance from command and control, and certainly /not/ assimilation or drone maintenance! None, except my hierarchy, truly understand the physical mechanics in coding a realistic fireball under different atmosphere gas mixes and pressures! And to expect a non-tactical unit to accurately discriminate between the near miss sound by a disruptor, type I, and a disruptor, type II? Never! The subharmonics and reverb would be /wrong/!}

Replied Captain in a steady tone, {Then you have enough to keep you busy? Basic capability for the...tactical simulation will be ready for when the Alliance decides to enlighten us on our mission? I'm sure there will be explosions involved, and I'd prefer it wasn't us doing the exploding.}

{Yes!} snarled Weapons. It was obvious that his tiff with Delta was already forgotten. {The next progress update will be in 2.3 hours.} Even as the head of the weapons hierarchy retreated to re-engage his mind in the BorgCraft task, he was already

prodding various partitions to accelerate menu graphics compilation and prepare sound samples for sprite integration.

In the real world of his nodal intersection, Captain exhaled the breath he had been holding in a long, rattling sigh. He was answered by the "tch-tch" of clicking incisors. Eyes opened to regard Doctor, head of the drone maintenance hierarchy whom also happened to bear a strong resemblance to a cybernized rodent. One ear twitched.

"Bad boy!" A hand, holding a rolled up sheaf of paper, descended, bopping Captain on the nose. "Your blood pressure was approaching dangerous levels! Much more and something might have blown! And you've not only locked yourself from the transporter system so I cannot beam you to a maintenance bay, but you have turned off all your warning diagnostics! Again, bad boy!" The makeshift weapon fell again.

Assimilation imperfection had magnified certain personality traits of Doctor's ex-veterinarian background. As such, when he was not attempting to acquire and hoard illegal pets, he often addressed his patients in a manner more appropriate for an animal.

Captain raised an arm to fend off the attack, but failed. In the background of his mind, he heard the ghost chortle of the reserve consensus monitor and facilitator, Second. It was ignored in light of the attack. "Cease. Comply." At the magic word, Doctor immediately stopped, arm raised for a third assault. "I do not have time for either diagnostics or drone maintenance reminding me that I am under a lot of stress. This body will persevere. You hitting me on the head doesn't help. Don't you have better things to do? Engineering units are stacked on the drone maintenance roster."

Doctor lowered his occupied hand, only to lift the other, holding it palm towards the consensus monitor. Ears continued to randomly flick as the open hand was swept over torso, limbs, head (the latter requiring a reach, given the height difference). Incisors clicked again. "Your body will /not/ persevere. You are running a regeneration deficit - not enough good stuffs and too much bad in your system - and it /will/ catch up with you. You also are very overdue for your check-up and body tuning. If you collapse, depending on the system compromised, there may not be a replacement suitable to be adapted to your physiology. So, you are definitely being a bad boy!"

While some items could be replicated, there were limits. No replicator - not Borg, not the Alliance version - was good at creating complex machinery. Homogeneous blocks of material, simple widgets, organics shaped and flavored into food products, these were the things a replicator excelled at creating. Although it was possible to build more intricate doodads by replicating the parts piecemeal from a blueprint then assembling them into the final product, which was how 127 of 230 constructed her beloved racing shuttles, the process took time. It was more efficient for a Borg cube to stockpile a large number of implants and assemblies, unloading them from a warehouse supply depot. Unfortunately, there was no convenient supply depot in this future-now. A stock of replacements parts /was/ slowly being assembled as time and replicator precursor resources allowed, but the truth was that the bulk of the current 'stockpile' was the bits and pieces harvested from terminated drones. It was to this anemic reserve, and the fact that a part may not be available should there be a catastrophic emergency, to which Doctor alluded.

"I am just one of many," protested Captain. "In the unlikely event of my termination, there will be a unit to take...my place." Pause. Whole eye narrowed in

suspicion. "Second set you on me, didn't he? That is the reason behind this personal attention." The sentence was statement, not question.

Doctor immediately wilted, ears pressed against his skull. "Yes. This unit has /so/ much to do, so many puppies which need bones re-set and boo-boos bandaged, but-"

"But Second is trying to ensure that he does not become, as the locals say, the Big Beak," finished Captain. A swift mental thought re-enabled a blocked algorithm; and immediately a self-diagnostic daemon began to whisper all the things out of tolerance in Captain's body. He placed the datastream as far to the back of his conscious awareness as he could. "Diagnostics are reinitiated. Go back to your job. Time spent focusing on me is inefficient to the whole. I will be having a little discussion with Second, because if he feels he has the time to nanny me, then he obviously hasn't been provided with a sufficiently large workload."

The head of drone maintenance hierarchy vanished in a transporter beam even before Captain finished verbalizing the final sentence.

{Second...}

{Hello. You have reached the answering machine of 3 of 8, sub-designation Second, backup consensus monitor and facilitator of rebuilt Exploratory-class Cube #347, currently located somewhere in the distant future. He is not home right now, but if you leave your name and contact information, he will get back to you as soon as possible. Beep.}

{Nice try Second, but the computer locates you in Nanite Assembly Room #3,} said Captain. The monitor at the front of the nodal intersection bulkhead had shifted to a wire-frame ship schematic, focused on the locale in question. A yellow dot slowly pulsated, amid a double handful of purple icons. {Was there a reason you actually said "Beep", instead of inserting a sound effect? The sound library has been growing at a near exponential rate, partially helped by the efforts of Weapons' BorgCraft needs, but mostly because certain individuals are committed to ensuring "nails on chalkboard" be available on the off-chance it is ever needed.}

Second ignored the criticism, {I only desired to ensure that our sub-collective continues to work as efficiently as possible. While it is true that it does not matter which member of the Hierarchy of Eight is primary consensus monitor, consider the disorganization which would develop during the transition following your demise. And then there is the expected decrease in effectiveness of the sub-collective upon the loss of /any/ command and control unit. I was /only/ accounting for the well-being of the whole; and Doctor, despite his idiosyncrasies and tendency to offer biscuits and flea collars, is an excellent drone maintenance unit. And he is a hierarchy head, so it requires more effort on your part to engage the appropriate commands to forcefully dismiss him. You /have/ been neglecting your body as of late, and there is potential for repercussion.}

The answer was politically correct. Exceedingly so. It followed the Collective focus upon the Whole; and while the health of individual drones was usually disregarded, exceptions were possible. Second was invoking one of those concessions.

Captain did not believe a word of it. To be more precise, he understood and agreed with the logic utilized, but he also did not fully accept the background motive to be as altruistic and dedicated to the welfare of the sub-collective as Second argued. The ultimate truth was that Second did not desire to upgrade his subdesignation to "Captain" any time in the near or distant future.

{I will endeavor to keep myself adequately functional,} replied Captain dryly, perfectly understanding the unsaid in Second's line of reasoning. Change in topic. {Why /are/ you in Nanite Assembly Room #3? You are assigned to assist Delta maintain span of control on engineering and units temporarily allocated thereof, given the number of active bodies is beyond what she can directly oversee. Primary oversight for assimilation hierarchy belongs to 2 of 8 at this time.}

{And 2 of 8 is overseeing assimilation hierarchy,} interrupted 2 of 8. {And it was all going handily - better than normal - with the psychoses level below long-term average because units actually have something to do. Even though the future of assimilation is more bleak than usual due to the pre-Prime Commands, there is still need to make preparations, just in case. Shine the chrome, replace the new-ship-smell with something more appropriately medicinal, and so forth. Then, just as I was about to touch up my body paint - the reds about my torso were starting to flake - well, Assimilation happened. Now the majority of my runtime, and those of the resources under me, is dedicated to preventing or limiting psychoses manifestation. Since my best solution was to drown Assimilation in his own paint, I requested Second to intervene.}

Captain blinked, shifting attention to resource allocation, finding that, yes, there had been an abrupt spike shortly before the Delta versus Weapons confrontation. And that the sub-program which was supposed to alert him of such an occurrence had been rerouted to Second.

{You have been under a lot of stress. It is just Assimilation having one of his fits, nothing important,} replied Second to the unsaid query.

{What is it this time?} asked Captain. He requested access to the pertinent information, but found himself denied. {Second...except when it comes to confusing the computer to prevent selection for away mission teams, I am a better hacker than you. Don't make me expend the resources to decrypt the datastream. What was your earlier argument about stress and my personal health as it pertained to sub-collective productivity?} Captain attempted to access the cameras in Nanite Assembly Room #3, finding similar hastily erected blocks. Furthermore, none of the designations in the room were responsive to pinged queries.

{It is only Assimilation. I can handle it.}

Captain stared at the purple dots and single yellow blob on the monitor. Many of the former had begun to move in a manner too swift for the average Borg. Then all motion abruptly halted. {I will come down there personally, efficiency be damned...and my blood pressure, too. If something terminally bursts, it will be your fault. 2 of 8-}

{Leave me out of this,} immediately interjected the named Hierarchy of Eight member. {I'm too busy preventing incipient psychoses leaks from spreading to the rest of the sub-collective.}

{Fine,} relented Second as Captain set a transporter lock on himself. Cameras and datastreams were released.

Captain turned inward, shuffling through visual streams before settling upon that originating from Second. Start with a length of silk-like fabric, approximately two meters long, duct-taped to one wall behind a row of nanite vats. Specifically, the article was a waist sash, a decorative item worn by Sarcoram, most often, but not always, of the gyn-male gender. This particular sash was a brilliant sapphire, especially eye-catching due to an iridescent quality, as if the cloth had been dipped in fish scales. Upon the wall to each

side of the sash were dozens of paint swaths, all grey: just because an old brain injury prevented Assimilation from perceiving color did not stop the ex-artist from trying to categorize and recreate each new hue encountered, albeit upon the grayscale spectrum. Assimilation was currently statue-still before the sash, bemoaning under his breath (and within the intranet, now that Captain was no longer blocked from hearing) about impossibilities and failure; and at his feet was a grey mess of the materials he had used to concoct his many, many attempts.

{The problem seems to be that the color has an ultraviolet component,} said Second as he briefly adjusted his visual filter to demonstrate before returning to the standard light spectrum. {Once Assimilation decided he could not fully recreate the color, he went all depressed, like only he can. Lacking appropriate filters - if you are supposed to be our censor, Daisy, you have /failed/ most epically - the mental contagion spread within his hierarchy to the physically nearest units. I contained the infection to the fourteen drones prepping the vats for inoculation of ship regenerate nanite strains, preventing suicide, self-injury, and so forth; and 2 of 8 is dealing with the slop-over and leakage.} Sigh. {This is just like the hyperpuce incident, only this time we cannot afford to lose any drone, not even assimilation units.}

A hierarchy head could either reflect the state of the drones within his/her/its span of control, or cause the hierarchy to echo their mental state. This was due to the psychological intimacy required of the hierarchy head to manage their assigned designations; and while the effect was moderated by censors, an especially strong reaction could break through even the best filters. And the filters currently operating within the sub-collective dataspace were not the best. Thus, the tactical hierarchy had to be watched lest one of Weapons' manic moments translate into a munitions accident; and when Assimilation embarked upon one of his stints of extreme depression, such as was on display in Nanite Assembly Room #3, the majority of his hierarchy would similarly be dragged down.

Second projected vexation. {It has gone too far: Assimilation can't be sent into emergency regeneration because the mental backlash might cause self-termination among the more impressionable drones of his hierarchy.}

{In other words, you would have had to reveal the problem to me eventually. I think I would have noticed realignment of resources for an unscheduled consensus cascade, no matter how you tried to hide it,} replied Captain. The burgeoning crisis was attracting increasing notice within the sub-collective ranks, although an outside observer, watching drones going about their physical tasks, would never have realized the diversion of attention. Several ragged thought fragments arose from the sub-collective unconsciousness, attributable to no individual drone. Captain gave the notions a voice: {Have you considered contacting the Alliance as to how the ultraviolet effect is accomplished? Or one of the contractors painting the guest quarters?}

Silence. Obviously the answer was a "no".

Said Captain with more than a touch of sarcasm, {Well, don't let me do all your thinking for you. I wouldn't want to strain myself. Perhaps burst something?}

Like the AI core which squatted in place of the vinculum in Central Engineering, the "guest quarters" were a deviation from the Exploratory-class cube blueprint. Most of hallway 54 in subsection 13, submatrix 3 had been divested of its storage closets, workshops, and other rooms. In their place had been constructed sleeping quarters, a

cafeteria/recreation room, sanitary facilities, a small gymnasium which doubled as a holo-facility, and Alliance-standard laboratories for multiple disciplines. All together, the space was designed to house up to fifty non-Borg personnel.

Other than ensuring that various equipment properly meshed with cube power systems, the sub-collective was prohibited from participating in the reconstruction effort. This was fine with Delta, who would have put the project so low of the priority to-do list that it effectively would still be a gutted hallway even in the months since someone in the Alliance had decided it would be a good thing to have official hitchhikers aboard the ship. Conversely, the prohibition did not forbid drone presence, and, therefore, there were always a few weapons or engineering units quietly standing out of the way, staring at the Alliance contractors retrofitting the quarters into the cube's internal structure. Also present, as often as she could escape her official duties, was 42 of 203, ex-interior designer (and not a good one). Unlike the other units, she had insinuated her way into the contractors via the tried-and-true method of asking too many questions (the better to understand modern design trends), and was now an unofficial member of the decor staff, albeit one whose tassel-centric suggestions were never heeded.

Second prodded 42 of 203 to approach one of the painters whom was applying an accent color to decorative hallway trim.

"No, there is absolutely no chances of burnt umber," pre-emptively said the amphibious Caltrak, gurgling sibilance strong despite the best effort of the universal translator. A minor partner species within the Alliance which vaguely resembled a six-legged salamander with a too short tail, the almost nude male - the toolbelt technically counted as clothing - did not bother to look away from his task. "Qitis find that color particularly objectionable. And fluorescent limes be hard on the eyes for many Alliance races." Four brushes delicately licked the trim, loam brown paint never splattering out of place.

42 of 203 sighed at the...institutional color scheme. A splash of cherry red or fuchsia, what would be the harm?

Second mentally nudged the drone again, harder.

"That is not why we have approached," began 42 of 203. "We have come upon an odd color variation, one we have never encountered before. You will enlighten us." Without actually mentioning the issue embroiling the sub-collective, and assimilation hierarchy specifically, the sash was described, with a focus upon the unable-to-reproduce ultraviolet undertone.

"Oh, you mean slattoe! Very popular amongst the Sarcorams and them few others that can see that color. Them that likes it describe it sparkly and warm. I can't see it myself, so I just takes their word for it." Tail swayed gently back and forth.

The sub-collective blinked; 42 of 203 blinked. "Slattoe" was passing through the universal translator unaltered, which meant it had a very specific meaning. "What is 'slattoe'?"

As the painter started to describe the substance from his point of view, a process that included much gesturing with brushes and saliva-enhanced hissing, an information query was sent to Daisy. Since the sub-collective was not allowed access to the Alliance computer network nor the contemporary version of the GalacNet, the despised AI did have its uses regarding external data sources. A picture emerged of slattoe as a chemically complex monster of an organic pigment, synthetic production impractical as it

could be inexpensively extracted in bulk from an easily farmed weed originating from the Sarcoram homeworld. The plant, naturalized to a number of planets, had a large range of environmental tolerances, and even took readily to hydroponics systems. Assimilation would never have reproduced the ultraviolet effect using his standard mix-and-match methodology.

Second pinged a request, backed by 2 of 8. An abbreviated consensus cascade was run, and while there was a bloc advocating that the loss of a few assimilation hierarchy members to be acceptable, in the end a decision otherwise was reached. An emergency supply request for a kilo of powdered slattoe pigment was made to the appropriate Alliance representative. Captain hoped he would not be required to explain /why/ the sub-collective suddenly needed the material, that it would be approved and delivered without fanfare.

Current disaster-in-the-making presumably averted, Captain assigned a command and control partition to monitor Nanite Assembly Room #3. His last conscious view of the situation, as he attached the crisis to a secondary datastream and relinquished his rider of Second's visual feed, was his backup consensus monitor advancing on Assimilation in preparation to deliver a stinging slap to bring the latter out of his near-catatonic state so as to deliver the news of soon-to-arrive slattoe.

The ghost of a chuckle, originating from the AI Daisy, followed Captain as he slipped into the deep dataspace, subsuming himself into his role of primary consensus monitor, facilitator, and babysitter to the Cube #347 sub-collective. His whole eye glazed as he focused sightlessly on his monitor. Simultaneously, the monitor itself shifted to a pie-chart-esque configuration, each slice mirroring one of the multiple datastreams of Captain's mental threading. At the side of the screen, Borg alphanumerics hypnotically scrolled, silver chicken-scratch runes glowing bright against the dark background.

With Cube #347 stocking up on necessary supplies and preparing to be sent on whatever mysterious mission the Alliance had planned, ship condition was a principal concern. Multiple items from engineering status reports had been flagged by various command and control partitions. Captain had just pinged Delta for her attention when he was predictably interrupted.

{Sensors protests! The [strawberries] are doing it again! Sensors can [sunshine] it, even if Sensors cannot [ghost] them. Their [echoes] can be [tasted].} Sensors, the insectoid head of the sensory hierarchy, leapt into Captain's mindspace with no warning.

Even amongst Borg drones, a universal translator was required. Basic meaning could be conveyed via mental interaction, but more complex communication, even amid non-imperfect units, required the medium of words. The sub-collective's Borg-derived universal translator had been lost with past-Cube #347. How this loss might have subsequently affected the resurrected sub-collective was an unknown because by the time the drones were allowed to fully awaken from sedation, first singly and later in groups, a new, locally derived, translator system had been in place.

The Alliance, as a multi-racial conglomerate, was suitably advanced in the art of communication for the multitude of languages represented within the sub-collective to be easily transliterated...with one exception. That exception was Sensors, a member of species #6766, an insectoid race superficially resembling a giant praying mantis. While outside appearance usually had little bearing as to neural architecture - sentience necessitated a conservative approach in evolution, such that there were only a few basic

brain ("hardware") configurations - species #6766 was very different. Once upon a time called "Bug" because the species self-name could not be pronounced without the wind section of a small orchestra, the mental wiring and perspective of the race fell into a category all its own. While not dissimilar enough to prevent assimilation by the Collective, the differences were sufficient to stymie Borg translation algorithms, which in turn led to substitutions which might or might not be close to the original word used. Sometimes the replacements were close enough to allow understanding of meaning, but other times there was only confusion.

It had quickly become apparent that Alliance universal translators suffered from the same difficulties Borg, and other, algorithms had displayed when it came to interpreting the Bug language.

Fortunately, this was a case where one did not need to guess at what the [strawberries] were. Sensors' complaint had been made multiple times, not just to Captain, but also Second and other Hierarchy of Eight members. And it was a complaint about which nothing could be done. {The Crastians don't hurt anything,} replied Captain with a sigh. {Kick them if they are in the way...that is what their own Alliance comrades do. The Crastians do not take offense.}

Sensors emotive response was dark as she carefully picked her words to ensure they (mostly) traversed the translator unchanged, {The [strawberries] /sing/. They sing /out of tune/. They loiter near Sensors' alcove when not on shift. And they hide in the interstitial spaces to avoid [punting].}

Crastians were a race of knee-high land crabs. They were a rare example of a sapient descended from a crustacean. Even the sub-collective's very incomplete racial dossier only included two examples - most sentients hailed from mammalian or reptilian stock, and even true insectoids were more common than crustaceans. With their small stature, acrobatic ability, and incredible dexterity of their forward four (of twelve) limbs, the Crastians' primary function thus far observed appeared to be as engineering technicians specialized to work in cramped spaces. There may have been entrepreneurs, scientists, and poets amongst their race, but none of them were on the Alliance crews that labored to finish the guest quarters. And when not performing delicate feats of wiring, off-duty Crastians were inevitably found lurking in Sensors' vicinity, often hidden in the interstitial spaces with only one or two of their four eyestalks poked out into the alcove tier to give away their location.

The Crastians' stalking would not have bothered Sensors - no second, nor even first, thought would have been given to it, Borg masters at ignoring that which was not relevant - except for one little consideration. To understand the issue one had to know that Crastian culture maintained an extraordinarily large pantheon of gods, minor deities, spirit icons, and celestial beings, and that worship was less a matter of religious observance and more fad. "In" divinities came and went, some stalwarts like Auncor, god of the birthing sands, remaining popular for centuries whereas others were trendy for a couple of months before being consigned to the pages of history. One deity which had withstood the test of time was Gihcha, muse of music. Given that the Crastian notion of 'god' was fairly abstract, it was not surprising that deistic imagery did not necessarily conform to a land crab self-image. In the eyestalks of the local Crastians, Sensors not only bore a very strong resemblance to the popular image of Gihcha, but her speech, when she talked, was the melodic orchestra fitting to be attributable to a muse of music.

The Crastian idea of appropriate worship was to try to mimic every word produced by Sensors, as heard beneath the universal translator. Unfortunately, not only was such an endeavor impossible due to the lack of eight individually controllable thoracic spiracles, but every Crastian member of the Alliance build team was completely and utterly tone deaf. It was probably a universal trait of the species, and one which annoyed Sensors to no end.

A possible solution, and one which had been offered time and again by Captain, Second, and anyone else to whom Sensors complained, was simply not to speak aloud. As a Borg drone linked to other drones, there was no need for verbalized communication; and, in fact, many units would go their entire Collective existence without uttering a word. Unfortunately for Sensors, this was not a practical solution. While she was consciously restricting all mutterings which mirrored intranet conversations, her funeral dirge practices /had/ to be audible.

Unlike the fuzzy end-time memories of every other sub-collective unit, Sensors professed to remember with perfect clarity her death - impalement during an alcove tier collapse as a result of battle damage. The claim could not be verified because the meme, freely offered, was, like many things species #6766, decipherable only by another Bug. However, beyond the fact that Borg did not lie, there was no reason to believe she was not telling the truth. While another entity may have been disturbed to be able to recall in crystal clarity one's own traumatic demise, Sensors was not particularly concerned. Instead, the point which bothered her was the singing of her funeral dirge. Disconnected from the Whole, Sensors' had been deprived of the species #6766 notion of ultimate nirvana, which was to be a voice in the Collective Choir, itself a reflection of the universal Song made tangible. Denied corporeal enlightenment, Sensors had been forced to settle for spiritual, singing her soul to the cosmos via an end-of-life song.

It was a uniquely Bug theology lost upon the rest of the galaxy, the latter of whom tended to fear the Borg, not welcome assimilation with open arms.

Sensors was annoyed with herself concerning the inadequate quality of her funeral dirge. Given that the great majority of her species did not receive a second chance to sing their death-song, Sensors was obsessed with perfecting it. Unless the Collective could be re-established - unlikely in the near future given the various obstacles provided by the Alliance - it was very probable that Sensors would go to the grave once more without the opportunity to be One with the Choir of the Whole. Therefore, it was imperative that the requiem be perfect, which in turn necessitated practice.

Practice which the adoring Crastians would mimic as well as they could, which was very bad indeed.

Replied Captain to Sensors with exasperation, {We cannot do anything about the Crastians. We are not allowed assimilation. We are not allowed eradication. We /did/ ask the Alliance liaison to restrain them, but were told that, one, it was a freedom of religion issue, and, two, it to be highly likely the Crastians would fixate on another deity as soon as the newest God of the Week circular was published. The latter has now occurred several times, and it is obvious that these Crastians will not budge their current theological view. We /can/ harass them. If you cannot kick them, perhaps you can find an appropriate object to beat the bulkhead where they are hiding.}

{And produce [bells]....} said Sensors, literally following the train of thought. Affirmation. {Sensors will do that.}

{Fine. Just don't break anything. Engineering is occupied enough as it is,} warned Captain. The subject now to the forefront of his mind, the consensus monitor and facilitator turned his awareness towards the engineering status updates compiled by various command and control partitions. Most of the reports were standard, boring n-dimensional hyperlinked lists consisting largely of bullet points, but a few oddities had been flagged for additional consideration when sub-collective runtime processes allowed. Captain's very act of shifting cognizance (or, rather, reflecting the shift of the sub-collective Whole...Captain was as much a part of the All as any drone) signified that computational resources were available.

{I am too busy for direct interface,} pre-emptively said Delta, her stereo-esque voice at odds with a mental signature that could be discerned as two, not one, only upon very close examination. Although Delta was technically twins, assimilation had so welded her separate psyches together that she was regarded to be a single persona (and designation) in two bodies. {If you must confer with this hierarchy, there are a number of units [list of designations set to scrolling in a subsidiary datathread] which may be consulted for routine matters. /I/ am in the midst of rewiring the tractor system to increase efficiency of the power leech effect, and it is a very tricky operation. The Alliance may have extracted the information to build this cube from our minds, but that doesn't mean that they constructed, or understood, everything correctly. And it is /obvious/ the sub-contractor for the tractor/pressor system decided to take shortcuts and revert to local tech practices regarding-}

Captain slashed through Delta's monologue before she could descend into the mystical engineering realms of technobabble, {This is not routine.} The particulars of the flagged status entries were, in the larger picture, not important, but rather the excuse to engage in a more important self-discussion. {We require the candid appraisal of the engineering hierarchy: whatever the Alliance has planned, will we be ready?} Just below the surface of the communal sub-conscious lurked the unvoiced follow-up question of "And will we survive long enough to maybe, just maybe, escape our enslavement and re-establish the Collective?"

Wedge within the too-small space of an interstitial access corridor, both of Delta paused, as did the ten drone team assisting in the task. Solder and wire clippers and reroute diagrams were temporarily set to a lower priority status. Throughout the cube, over 800 bodies, the bulk of the Engineering hierarchy, plus another 500 units currently assigned to a support function, shuffled to a halt. Drones in the midst of projects where stopping would result in grievous harm to equipment or body continued to toil, but they were the minority.

Alliance researchers, observers, and contractors sprinkled throughout the cube's volume began to ask questions about the abrupt change in activity. They were ignored.

{We...do not know,} was the eventual admission from Delta, the frustration of not knowing strongly evident in her underlying intranet signature. Even as a minor cog of the Collective, and one that was held at metaphorical arm's length at that, the imperfect sub-collective had once-upon-a-time still been able to employ the Borg standard operating procedure of letting the Whole do the heavy mental lifting on a tricky problem, even if such consultation was completed in a peripheral manner. To have so /few/ drones, so /little/ mental resources, available was claustrophobic.

{Expand,} demanded Captain. More runtime was redirected to the quandary, and the remainder of Cube #347's Borg population joined their engineering brethren in contemplation of the underlying question.

Delta rattled a virtual sigh that shook the dataspace. Diagrams and flowcharts materialized in Captain's (the sub-collective's) mindspace, a fraction of which was unconsciously echoed on the display at which the consensus monitor was staring blankly. {This new...Cube #347 is a very good facsimile of Borg tech, but it is, fundamentally, /not/ Borg tech. It was built too fast and without the /comprehension/ of the underlying concepts. The Alliance may have scanned our brains to wrinkle out every nugget of information accessible, but it does not mean they understand.} Delta paused a moment before continuing, words carefully picked as she attempted to articulate a concept the sub-collective had never had to consider before. {/We/ do not understand the technology either, but it is a different not-understanding. We do not need to know /how/ it works to know how to troubleshoot or repair or rebuild, it is...instinct. The Alliance does not have this...instinct. They are individuals. They look at each shiny gem they stole from us, not the whole treasure trove. We are one. Perhaps not One, but sufficiently so for the gestalt to function.} Delta stopped again, unable to adequately enunciate what was fundamentally unenunciatable.

Scattered thoughts were gathered, divergent processes pruned. The engineering hierarchy head continued, dismissing quasi-philosophy to focus instead on the concrete. {Alliance tech level rates at class IIIb. As it relates to Cube #347, most technologies are advanced over the cube's pre-Dark iteration, but not on parity to post-Dark.} A comparative list began to scroll. {Core power output is only 68% of theoretical maximum. There is no cloaking device. Weapons like neuruptors are obviously new technology for the Alliance; transmutation pulse is experimental; and there are no singularity torpedoes. There is no transwarp. Hypertranswarp is /theoretically/ installed, but while the Alliance had been exploring the concept before our arrival, the prototypes were installed on small automated probe. The components for the cube were assembled from engineering memory files. Inexpertly. It has not been tested and is highly recommended by this hierarchy to /only/ be engaged if there is no other option. Therefore, our primary FTL propulsion is warp. Conversely, replicator and reclamation technologies are advanced compared to what we recall of former benchmarks, and energy efficiency is excellent.} For the hypothetical outside observer, Delta described a society with technology more advanced than the ancient multi-racial collaboration history had once known as First Federation, but not as developed as the Second Federation which eventually replaced it.

{The Alliance is,} continued Delta, {sharing the cube owner's manual as each section is written and/or updated. We are not impressed...the directions for realigning the matter-antimatter injectors are overly complex and most things say "It is recommended to return to the dealer for servicing." As if /that/ will be an option when we break down a thousand light years from dry-dock, FTL communication inoperable due to some alien ship-parasite bent on consuming all ytterbium-containing materials onboard.}

Prodded Captain, {The question, Delta: are we ready? Will we survive?}

Delta emoted a negative. {We are not ready. We can, and are, altering critical ship components to bring them into /proper/ BorgStandard alignment...or as close to BorgStandard as we can, given the lack of Collective support and loss of engineering

files. If the Alliance expects us to do more than blow up the occasional asteroid or act as a threatening decoration to be deployed against weaker neighbors, then survival is...not anticipated.}

Final appraisal delivered, the sub-collective lurched back into motion. The introspective may have been discouraging, but depression was a sentiment for small beings, not applicable to Borg. Despite the cold fact that the drones would, sooner rather than later, be leaving this future stage they had been resurrected upon, such was not a basis upon which to develop pathological despair. There was /always/ the minute chance that the evaluation had been wrong.

The physical universe floated like scum upon the foundation of the quantum. In the quantum, literally /anything/ was possible; and some things, like cause following effect, were downright routine. It was in the translation in scale of the quantum to the atomic, and thence to the macrouniverse, that the probabilities of 'reality' were established. Therefore, it was perfectly acceptable to believe that there was always a possibility, no matter how farfetched, for a specific scenario to occur.

For a Borg drone, hope was as irrelevant a concept as despair. It was unlikely that a nonBorg entity would understand the focus of the sub-collective upon a very slim chance, only able to be expressed in higher order mathematics, and how it was dissimilar from 'hope', but there was a world of difference.

Or, at least, that is what the deep subconscious of the sub-collective averred.

Several minutes following resumption of normal activities, a short message arrived in the electronic box established for non-critical communiques between sub-collective and Alliance. It was addressed to Captain, although upon opening it became immediately evident that the true recipient was the sub-collective entire. It seemed the Alliance was finally ready to divulge the specifics of the mission for which Cube #347 was preparing.

Captain sent an RSVP that the suggested day and hour of the meeting - tomorrow, 5th-flight, local time - was acceptable and, as 'requested', he would be physically present at the Base Three meeting facility as representative for the sub-collective.

As if he, or the sub-collective, had a choice.

Captain stood on a low stage at the front of the small auditorium. An egg shape 30 meters in length and 15 meters at its widest point, the front of the room was noticeably narrower compared to the back. Although most species opted for the clean lines of rectangle or square, the odd configuration did make sense considering the room's function. A background dataspace thread mused that the designer was probably not Sarcoram - despite their avian ancestry, the race did like regular angles - but rather one of the other Alliance races.

Midway along the neck of the egg room, a broad horseshoe shaped table squatted, legs of the U towards Captain. A number of known dignitaries and Big Beaks sat behind the table, the only one of whom who truly had importance in the sub-collective's estimation being Security Liaison Vaerz. Fifty chairs set in rows were arranged behind the table; and prominent individuals associated with the Borg project inhabited those chairs, sometimes with obvious discomfort given a species' anatomy. A handful of aides and runners waited on the periphery. At the rear of the room, flanking the door, eight

Alliance marines stood at ease, weapons held loosely in hand, but ready to aim if Captain should make any threatening movement.

The marines were likely courtesy of Security Liaison Vaerz. Even with the Xenig pre-Prime Commands in place and the AI Daisy eavesdropping on every thoughtstream, he had never relaxed his guard. Vaerz was the archetype suspicious bastard. If the sub-collective could ever gain freedom from their Alliance chains, he would be the cube's greatest threat.

And if the opportunity arose, Captain would assimilate Vaerz personally. It was a desire born of imperfection and, thus, not particularly Borg, but in this instance Captain had been deliberately lax in allowing censors to prune the illicit impulse.

Captain stared at Vaerz, ignoring the bustle as the meeting came to order; and Vaerz stared back, feathers set in the Sarcoram version of a humorless grin. Both were well aware of whom the true adversary was.

An aide sidled in, leaning over to whisper something in Vaerz's ear. Vaerz nodded, then, without breaking eye contact, rose from his seat. The room quieted, leaving behind the rustle of feather, dry scrape of scale against scale, and squeak of chair as an uncomfortable occupant fidgeted.

"Welcome everyone, especially our new Borg friends, as represented here today by 4 of 8, also called Captain, the consensus monitor and facilitator of the cube crew." The words, including Captain's correct numerical designation, smoothly rolled from Vaerz's beak. Eye contact was broken as the security liaison turned from his position at one end of the horseshoe table to address the room. "You all know me, and I know all of you. This project has been incubating a long time, well over a decade of Alliance-standard years. All of you have the security clearance to be present today; and most of you are well acquainted with the background that has brought us to this point. You also know that you are observers only to this historic occasion and that there will be no question/answer session."

Captain cocked his head slightly as consensus cascade churned amid the Cube #347 sub-collective, most drones of which had been locked to alcoves so as to minimize oversight load to command and control. An emerging hypothesis was that Vaerz had desired whatever was to be announced to have been a much smaller affair, perhaps even a remote audio-visual communique. If so, then politics had intervened, turning it into this semi-public spectacle.

Vaerz pivoted to face Captain once more, then resumed his seat. "I suppose you have been wondering about your resurrection?"

"The question has crossed our minds," replied Captain dryly, deliberately keeping to a third-person format.

"Then let me tell you a tale," said Vaerz. "This tale is very convoluted and full of scientific achievements, and if someone other than I tell it, it would also consist of nothing except words with a minimum polysyllabic count of three. However, I am not a genius scientist; and while I did enter a university of higher learning, I never graduated from it. Instead, I gained my honors from a different type of school, one where the consequences of failure were a wee bit more dramatic than a low grade." Several of the Big Beaks sitting at the table and in the audience fidgeted uneasily for reasons not understandable to the socially blind Borg. "But that is neither here nor there: I promised you a story and so I shall deliver you a story."

"A not-so-long-time-ago, there was a scientist. Or, rather, a flock of scientists. The focus of these scientists was temporal mechanics - 'What is time? Where did it come from? Can it be manipulated?' All the standard questions that come with prodding the universe to determine what makes it...tick." A few gaphaws sounded from the audience at the deliberately bad pun. Captain had disengaged facial muscles in order to maintain an appropriately expressionless Borg facade during the meeting, else he might have winced. "There was lots of science involved, many expensive machines ultimately funded by the government with the hope the investigations may eventually lead to faster starships, an innovative weapon, a better way to capture and recycle feather duff. If you are truly interested in the background, including all those aforementioned polysyllabic words, you now have full access...just make a polite request to Daisy, and she will transfer the files.

"Now, one of the areas of investigation, a sister-line to the method that would eventually give rise to temporal resurrection, was to peer at the multitude of future 'what-ifs'. The scientists called it 'ghost quantum timestream echoes'. I like to think of it as watching the teaser for next week's chapter of 'How Things Are Recycled', only the producers like to mess with the audience's mind, so multiple trailers are provided, any of which, or none, could be the real episode. It seems the universe operates under a similar principle.

"Some of these echoes are stronger than others, meaning certain future timelines are more likely, assuming the correct circumstances first occur. As to be expected given the perversity of the universe, there is no way to tune the damn echoes, no way to peek at an earlier point in time so as to better tailor actions of today to affect those of tomorrow. So, in the end, it is a crapshoot as to which echo actually represents the future; and, thus, so the scientists tell me, free will, or a very good illusion thereof, is maintained.

"It is all very metaphilosophical. And, as you Borg say, irrelevant to the story."

Vaerz paused. Several of the Big Beaks at the table looked like they wanted to add their own input, to expand upon the telling, but mouths and beaks closed as the security liaison swung his gaze over them.

"One event which arose again and again in the echoes of the very near future - more than two decades away, but less than a century - was a devastating attack, not only on the Alliance, but on all the peoples of this galaxy. Subjugation, death, and so forth. Think of the standard science fiction movie plot, except the good side does not win. Of course, the 'good side', when it plays by the rules, rarely wins, but that is reality, not make-believe. Who these beings are, and why they do what they are going to do, is unknown. Maybe they are extraordinarily xenophobic, or their gods told them to, or they just like to go around smashing things. It doesn't really matter. All which does matter is that the strongest of the echoes includes variations upon a theme...a darkness whereupon the Alliance is not there, nor /anything/ in a recognizable form that isn't derived from these beings.

"So the scientists searched the echoes, looking for those rare scenarios where the Alliance wasn't attacked, else survived the assaults more or less intact. It was found that only in those uncertain timelines where a cybernetic civilization was present were the invaders beaten back. Not always, but at least there was /some/ hope, unlike all the other timelines. Unfortunately, when other people took this information and started to look for these cyborg beings in the hope that they could be asked to join against the soon-to-come invaders, it was discovered that they no longer existed. They /had/ existed at one time,

albeit not in this quadrant, but all evidence suggested extinction nearly fifty thousand years ago.

"And what was the civilization called? Deep oral histories from the remnants of races which had survived a long-ago collapse of galactic superpowers, as well as painfully translated fragments from those which had not, all agreed that the civilization had been known as 'Borg'" Vaerz gazed intently at Captain. "Starting to see the link?"

Captain said nothing.

"So, flash forward through the years of research that ultimately created the Beast, as well as the long, long hunt to find an ancient object holding a suitable temporal echo from which to revive you. That is a plural you, by the way. And here you are. Any questions at this point?"

Captain narrowed his whole eye. "If we understand correctly, you resurrected this sub-collective to confront a nameless entity or civilization because your scientist-clairvoyants looked in their crystal ball and became worried."

"It wasn't a crystal ball! It looked more like a...mirror...." shouted an audience member near the back of the room, voice trailing off as someone else hissed for him to be quiet.

Vaerz coughed. "Sarcasm. Nice. I like it. However, from my interactions with you, singular, you did not strike me to be the sarcastic type of...drone. Someone else doing the talking?"

{Do not help me, Second,} directed Captain internally even as he ensured that his face remained devoid of expression.

"In answer," continued Vaerz, "your appraisal is a wee bit on the simplistic side, but nonetheless valid. You seem to be, by the estimation of top Alliance Big Beak scientists, our best, and only, chance of survival."

"Do you even /know/ who this invader is? Or /where/ they are? Their strength? Or any number of other tactical questions? We are only /one/ sub-collective, after all, crewing a single cube. We are not a 'cybernetic civilization'." Captain paused. "And if you know where they are, have you tried talking to them? That is a strategy often used by small being societies."

Vaerz smiled thinly, "Funny you should ask. That is the next topic I was going to bring up. If you turn around and look at the holodisplay, you will find the one photo we have of the invaders. The fleet is lurking in the void between the stars on the galactic rim, the location of which was learned via a large bribe to a Xenig willing to provide the information. Using experimental hypertranswarp - a technology, I might add, which /was/ in development before you Borg arrived - several dozen probes were sent. Those that didn't blow up upon activation of the drive are believed to have made it to the fleet, whereupon our message of light and happiness and talking is presumed to have been ignored. At least, the probes never came back, so it is thought they were destroyed. A second swarm was sent, this time tasked to pop out into normal space, take pictures of anything nearby that wasn't empty space, and return. Very few probes returned, and most of the photos were too blurry or included objects too distant to be adequately enhanced. However, there was one success."

Captain pivoted to regard the picture wavering into view, like a bad special effect of a desert mirage. The still image finally steadied, showing the smooth, organic profiles of ten forms. Eight of shapes looked more appropriate to be encountered under an ocean's

surface than the vacuum of space, muscular wings narrowing to whip tail invoking comparison to a manta ray. The rays were a dull black in color, barely visible against the background black of space. In contrast, the two much larger shapes around which the rays orbited were not only a shocking orange, but it was an orange that seemed to glow with its own internal illumination. Once again, sea life was the theme, only this time a sea pen with its smooth cylindrical stern tapering aft, only to explode into a complex, feathery organ.

Several audience members began to snicker despite the seriousness of the situation.

Captain ignored the tittering, attention narrowing to focus only on the holodisplay. The sub-collective may have lost much knowledge during their resurrection, but there were certain things which were literally burned into the neurons of every single drone during assimilation processing. These two shapes were one of those things. Even without knowing the scale, Captain, the sub-collective, knew the average length of the smaller manta ray form was sixty-three meters, while the larger orange creature could span up to two kilometers.

They. The antithesis of Borg, the exemplification of Chaos, invaders from a neighboring galaxy bent on subsuming all sentient beings to service a twisted Perfection as constructed via eugenics, artificial evolution, and Darwinian theory.

The Borg Collective had warred with They once, an event which had greatly lessened the numbers comprising the Whole even as They were defeated. Or, rather, as the forward scout fleet of the invading armada was defeated. At the time, the main assemblage of They had been in transit between their home galaxy and the Milky Way, estimated to be tens of thousands of years from arriving to the rim.

That victory was now fifty thousand years in the past.

They They invasion fleet was lurking in the outskirts of the rim. The might of the Collective had barely beaten the initial probing tendril of They. And the Alliance expected that a single faux-Borg Exploratory-class cube would somehow counter a force which might have trounced the Second Federation era Collective as remembered by a metaphorical handful of resurrected, and above all, imperfect drones?

The sub-collective of Cube #347 was screwed.