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Invocation of the Birds - Part 4 **The Swan's Aria**

<<Cue dramatic music>>

To be executed for the sin of being infected by They virii, Captain is granted a reprieve at the last moment. With that postponement, a dying heavy tactical unit by the name of Apogee manages to convey the appearance of a coffee-guzzling quasi-god whom wears a Xenig chassis, yet goes by the double-syllable name "Conway", and whom has destroyed all They (for the offense of being bothersome). Eventually a demoted 4 of 8 is declared uninfected by They and allowed to be Captain again; and somewhere within this drama an ex-linguists scholar is faced with her most difficult challenge ever - decipher Xenig language - for which she covertly elicits Apogee's assistance. That task serendipitously provides a lead to tracking Conway, of whom a certain spy-master would like to determine if there may be a risk to the Alliance, or if the whole They thing was just a one-time genocidal melt-down. Conveniently, the linguistic clue just happens to implicate one of the destinations of Cube #347's Xenig folded-space (trainer) drive. And so the trip is made, where the Conway-entity is espied, wearing a coffee-bedazzled Xenig chassis.

Meanwhile, three Xenig have been tasked to track down a missing associate, one who seems to have gone a bit insane where it comes to coffee.

<<Perdendosi [music fades to nothing]>>

Exploratory-class Cube #347 folded into the Dirt system. It had been here before, briefly, during initial reconnaissance as to location for each of the folded-space drive address crystals. At the time, scans had been perfunctory, noting little except that the once inhabited system had been the scene of intense battle long ago. This time, upon emergence, a more detailed inspection was swiftly conducted, inclusive several of the esoteric grid protocols Sensors had begun to rebuild.

The initial impression remained: someone had attempted to eviscerate the system. The two innermost worlds were reduced to rubble, their respective orbits a smear of rocky debris. Planets three and four had been the sites of intense orbital bombardment, original surface features replaced with craters and volcanos; and the third planet's oversized moon still supported a magma lake on nearly a fifth of its surface, glowing fissures bright against the dull red of a not-quite-cooled crust. Several of the moons in the flocks orbiting the first pair of gas giants had suffered the same fate as the inner terrestrial planets, only their demise had gifted their primaries with beautiful rings. The disrupted storms and handful of dark bruises at the two giants' equators indicated large chunks of moon to still be undergoing the occasional deorbit, plummeting through the cloud tops with great force. The final two worlds - cold ice giants - appeared relatively unscathed, although both had odd gaps in their respective moons' orbits and unstable resonances amongst those which remained, suggesting some of the rocks had been removed.

Similarly, the main asteroid belt also appeared to be missing a significant number of a certain size class of rock; and it didn't take a genius to guess the final resting place for much of the absent material.

It was the scene underlying the mere physical which was confusing, sensory hierarchy (and the sub-collective) at a loss on how to interpret it. Subspace was, for lack of better technical terms, spindled, mutilated, and warped, much more so than attributable to war. There were "knots" of [lemon-silver] force - a Sensors' derived description - originating from the third (now first?) planet's moon, as well as the central star. Additional smaller knots of [orange-bronze] were scattered here and there, but none nearly as prominent as the [lemon-silver]. Furthermore, there were odd, regularly spaced structures embedded in the upper plasma layers of the sun's equator; and the magnetic lines showed curious blips of regularity within the twisting chaos common to the stellar class.

Cube #347 slowly spun once, then a second time, as the scans were performed. Upon the second sweep, a Xenig signature resolved in a distant orbit around the third planet. A decision was reached.

With a shift and shudder, Cube #347 lurched into motion. Managing the driving partitions was occasionally a tricky affair; and 8 of 8 - "newest" Hierarchy of Eight member, who had somehow survived temporal revival despite her species' handicap of reacting poorly (i.e., die) to overly stressful situations - had yet to fully master certain aspects of coordination. Complaints, the loudest originating from engineering, accompanied the abrupt initiation of impulse.

Cube #347 sedately headed in-system, target a cratered terrestrial with its semi-molten moon...and one maybe-and-maybe-not Xenig.

The whirl of a high speed grinder interrupted the quiet of the Alliance bloc recreation and communal dining area. It was early in the local morning and only a handful of marines were present. Bemusement was writ large in lay of feathers or facial expression of the observers, as relevant to a given species.

"Look, this is the /only/ way to make /proper/ coffee. That replicator stuff tastes wrong."

"But it is the same, molecule by molecule, to the production drama you call 'proper' coffee. It just takes a much shorter amount of time. Not that I see the point in the first place for either. The taste is /disgusting/."

"Big opinion, coming from a species of carrion eaters."

"That is /such/ a stereotype! That is like saying all Crastians are monofocused on religion or all T'sap are eternal busybodies, poking their undersized fleshy beaks into everything. Sarcoram consume a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, and grains, and have been doing so for a very long time."

"But you prefer carrion - excuse me, well-aged meat - over fresh. And I do not care how long ago your evolutionary ancestors began to include produce in their diet. You still have the taste buds of a scavenger, which means you simply cannot perceive the delicate nuances which comprise proper coffee."

Captain absently pushed the datathread to a background process, labeling it as irrelevant. Again. The antics of the two graduate students - Elises (T'sap) and Britz (Sarcoram) - were unimportant, yet they had unknowingly gained a fanbase among certain units, particularly those of a culinary leaning. Occasionally the "E-and-B'ers" stream intruded in the foreground of sub-collective processes, including its primary consensus monitor. At least this time Captain had

caught it before the commentary sub-stream had fully resolved. He did not personally understand the fascination for the pair, but as long as it did not detrimentally affect the efficiency of the units so involved, it was a minor matter, too small to be pruned amid much more ostentatious displays of unBorg behavior.

As Cube #347 began the in-system transit, close attention had been directed towards the Xenig. Although the chassis was alike the standard delivery-mech configuration, the hull was decidedly irregular. Panels were discolored and mismatched; and there was a general air of "shabbiness." The great majority of Xenig took personal pride in their appearance, even if the shell was the equivalent of a company uniform. It was the rare mech, outside of the occasional rebellious youth gallivanting around the galaxy, whom did not take active care of its chassis. An additional feature set this particular mech apart from its conspecifics - the presence of stickers and decals plastering the hull from stem to stern.

The subject matter of the decals would not be resolvable until the cube was much closer. However, even without the collaborating evidence, the sub-collective was 97.2% sure coffee would feature as a prominent theme.

They's non-Xenig Foe - Conway - had been found...and at the locale Apogee's extracted and reconstructed memes had indicated.

Captain's current location was Vaerz's office within the Alliance bloc of appropriated space. Vaerz was engaged in non-conversation pageantry with Conway, babbling away while saying very little. Conway was not responding; and except for the fact that the subspace communication channel remained open, one might think Vaerz to be inanely chatting at the decal-bedecked form floating in the middle of the desk's holodisplay.

Captain's presence had been "strongly requested" by Vaerz prior to the start of the farce. It was unnecessary, the proceedings able to be followed from afar. A small-being foible. To prevent the indignity of Daisy forcing compliance, Captain had reported to the office, endured small talk, then taken a place near the wall and outside of camera view - a presumably ignored video component was included with the communique - from which to perform his normal duties. Captain would have vastly preferred his nodal intersection, or even his alcove. As it was, he more followed the non-exchange between Vaerz and Conway via dataspace than his personal perceptions.

"So, what /is/ your interest in that dead planet, or this completely wrecked system, for that matter? Looks like another relic of the Troubles, according to what I've been told, one of so many. Say, Xenig - I still haven't caught your name - you wouldn't happen to have been around during the Troubles? I'd love to hear your perspective on it...or anything about the Troubles, actually. You Xenig are /so/ close-beaked when it comes to those times."

Vaerz nattered on and on and on, a master taking great pride in his work. And revealing absolutely nothing on his part. The bright tone of naivety was completely at odds with the Vaerz the sub-collective had come to know. Captain elevated the "deviously deceptive liar" category of Vaerz's personal dossier several points.

Even unassimilated, Vaerz taught the sub-collective much about the current era, the Alliance, the potential of the Sarcoram species to further Perfection. How much better if he were a drone, fully participating in the Whole?

On a more pragmatic note, there remained no final decision on what action to pursue. Correction, the sub-collective had consensus, mostly. Sufficiently. However, Vaerz had overruled that consensus upon Captain's arrival to the office and before Conway was hailed.

A lone Exploratory-class cube could not confront a Xenig. Not with the technology recalled prior to temporal resurrection; and certainly not the current cube iteration utilizing a lesser tech platform. Furthermore, this Conway, whilst inhabiting a Xenig chassis, was very much /not/ a Xenig...but an entity much more powerful. The Happyverse meme reconstruction slowly continued, memory fragments scattered amongst less than 3700 drones being stitched together into a comprehensive whole, but it remained disjointed and it was unclear who or what Conway actually was, other than a being prone to rage and coffee. Certain opinions aside - Weapons, for instance - the best course of action was to retreat and leave Conway as Someone Else's Problem. After all, a dead sub-collective could not re-establish the Borg Collective, and /that/ was the top priority. Only if the Problem came to them would it become relevant.

Unfortunately, Vaerz wanted to determine Conway's intention as it related to the Alliance. /That/ was the delay in retreat.

The responsible partitions finalized vector calculations to slide the cube into geosynchronous Dirt orbit. Captain absently blocked a half-hearted attempt by Weapons to appropriate propulsion and send the ship into an aggressive attack posture.

{Second,} grumbled Captain, {you are supposed to be managing the weapons hierarchy.}

Began Second, {I...} He was interrupted as a powerful subspace 'shout' broke against the sensor grid.

Sensors swiftly pinpointed origination to be the not-Xenig Conway. The transmission had not only targeted the cube, but transient subspace echoes suggested the central star and several moderately nearby rocks of [orange-bronze] flavor had also been included.

Captain blinked, shifted posture, and unconsciously tilted his head as he was drawn into the confusion of the transmission. Part of him registered Vaerz's reaction to the motion, a brief verbal hesitancy to his patter. Unimportant. Irrelevant.

Xenig speech. The burst transmission was a /verbal/ message, the same calm 'voice' heard amid Conway's ravings as he had slaughtered the They fleet. The message was unclear. Even with Apogee's translation files embedded within universal translator algorithms, the transmission was so much electronic hash. Oddly, "arse" and the two-word phrase "owe me" were clear beacons, albeit tagged as mostly-likely-but-not-completely-sure by the computer.

The inter-ship channel with Conway abruptly closed, cutting off Vaerz mid-syllable.

"Well, sh**," exclaimed Vaerz as the decal-covered ship hologram was overlain with a reddish hue and began to blink. "And it was going /so/ well." Pause. "Daisy, tell the appropriate drones or partition or whatever to request the channel be reopened."

"It is about to become even better," said Captain. He pivoted his head to focus fully on Vaerz. "Query Daisy for details. Conway is breaking orbit on a matching vector; and weapons signatures are seen. It does /not/ want to talk to you. Will you allow us to retreat? A suitable destination has been loaded into the folded-space drive, but we must leave." Captain allowed sub-collective frustration of this inefficiency in decision-making to color his voice. A transporter lock was set, ready to relocate his body to his nodal intersection the moment Vaerz's foregone acknowledgement was procured.

Fresh data from the sensor hierarchy abruptly flooded decision tree matrices, triggering initiation of a new, if abbreviated, consensus cascade. Captain activated holoprojectors embedded in the walls of Vaerz's office - as with the true Borg version of Cube #347, this iteration had the units installed /everywhere/ - to display three forms in the air before Vaerz's beak. "Three folded-space drive signatures detected," tersely said Captain, "between Us and Conway." Two of the forms were standard Xenig GPS shells; and the third was a They light

attack unit, clearly dead. The trio immediately began to close on Conway. If there were words being exchanged, the cube was in no position to intercept...or understand, as presumably it was Xenig-to-Xenig protocol. "We no longer need your permission to retreat. A trigger point has been passed whereupon hazard to Us and Alliance personnel allows Our autonomy. We leave. Now."

Vaerz waved a hand, as if trying to push the Xenig and They corpse to a less eye-watering distance. "By all means, take us out of this mess. I doubt Conway was ever going to answer my questions, anyway. And, Daisy, give me a report on what the hell just happened, thank you very much."

The office vanished, Captain removing himself to his nodal intersection and far from small-being antics.

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::There you are Chu! Stop bothering the organics and their pet Borg! Stand down your weapons! We've been sent here by GPS to bring you back to the Main Office for a few questions:: Pause. ::Quite frankly, Chu, the powers-that-be at GPS are a bit pissed off at you, and the mood of the Transcendence Board isn't much better::

The three Xenig converged upon the object of their search. Secondary and tertiary frequencies utilized by the mechs to broadcast the species-equivalent of body language and facial expressions were automatically scanned. As a one, the trio slowed to halt as multiple incongruities finally registered.

The middle of the Xenig tentatively began, ::Um, what the f**k have you done to that chassis? You /know/ the Main Office doesn't like it when one of their specials is 'borrowed'. It looks like you have been on a fly-about with it for over 20,000 years, not the three or so since you neglected to report following a delivery run::

Continued Xenig #1, whom had been the first to speak (and whom was not currently encased by a dead organic), ::Are you feeling okay? You've entirely closed yourself off. I've heard those transdimensional jumps can be a bit hard on the psyche, especially if there is any temporal element. And you /were/ pushing yourself a bit hard, last I heard. Those...stickers, fascination with organic stimulants...:: If Xenig #1 had possessed arms, they would have waved. ::...if you wanted a vacation, all you had to do was return to the Main Office and reclaim your normal chassis. Everyone is entitled to a few hundred years or so to themselves. Can't work /all/ the time::

All the Xenig drifted to a standstill, as had their still silent target of Chu. The latter retained active weapons. The They corpse slowly pivoted as the chassis to which it was vacuum welded began to nervously spin.

::Vacations aside, /why/ did you have to come here, of all places,:: said Xenig #3, hidden beneath its gruesome ornament. ::You /know/ this isn't the best neighborhood:: A wavering tone of anxiety colored the proclamation.

As if waiting for the appropriate dramatic cue, the sun momentarily dimmed as a system-wide subspace ripple field engaged.

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In the era represented by Second Federation, Borg/Hive, and Colors, the subspace ripple charge was developed. Such was not the say it was the first time the technology had been created by a Milky Way civilization, but it was the most recent. The subspace ripple charge was a spatially limited phenomenon, albeit one with far-reaching results. Use of the technology temporarily - hours to days, depending upon subspace topology - prevented most forms of supraluminal propulsion, rendering ships within the area of effect limited to sublight speeds. Warp, transwarp, hypertranswarp, slip-drive, and all related technologies were affected, with a handful of the more exotic techs like folded-space or Q-snap jump immune.

The subspace ripple field was a natural extension of the ripple charge. Whereas the latter was as if dropping a large rock in a pond, the former was a motor kept on continuous agitation. For lack of a better description outside the language of higher mathematics, subspace was "churned". It was a storm-tossed nightmare impossible to navigate, or even enter. As maintenance of the field was energy intensive and the hardware not very portable, the technology was most often deployed defensively in association with high-value facilities or, on occasion, the inner portion of a solar system. With a subspace ripple field engaged, there was no such thing as a surprise invasion, any incoming fleet forced into Einsteinian reality.

The subspace ripple field of the Dirt system extended to the heliopause, about 16.5 light hours from its central sun. It was a massive, unprecedented use of the technology. Furthermore, it extended /deep/ into subspace, well beyond the layers utilized by most spacecraft and into the communication bands. Within the system, communication remained as normal; but beyond the heliopause, subspace channels became a hash of static. Even Xenig folded-space drives were affected, the local quantum too distorted to allow destination addresses to be safely input or resolved.

But before the story moves forward, it must take a small step back...introducing the next players to an increasingly crowded stage.

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Three forms materialized, abrupt reverse-negatives accompanied by the unreal particle signatures Conway's adopted Xenig neural architecture associated with a folded-space exit point. And not any folded-space drive, but Xenig utilizing their native technology. Distracted from his target, Conway ceased active propulsion. In all his many, many years of travel, he had never actually met another individual of the chassis in which he rode.

The coffee sample would wait. It wasn't like the cube could go anywhere he could not follow. Besides, this was another novel experience in an existence which was starting to feel a bit stale. If he was not suitably amused, there was always a bit more rage to flush from his system: blowing things up was always so cathartic.

A percolator babbled to itself as perfectly brewed Paranoia Blend was released into Conway's brain's nutrient fluid.

Conway ignored the incongruity of one Xenig wearing what appeared to be a mangled corpse of one of the annoying creatures he had eradicated a relatively short time ago. As far as he knew, the Xenig represented the height of mech species fashion. To comment upon it would be rude.

And, besides, he suddenly didn't feel like talking to them. Oh, Conway registered the words of accusatory greeting, perfectly understanding the quantum transmission which was Xenig-to-Xenig speech. However, it wasn't important. The Voice(s) which sometimes

accompanied Paranoia Blend were back, strongly suggesting he focus upon the ignored subspace broadcast which accompanied the cube's request to resume two-way communication.

The equivalent of an open-mic, the visual stream continued to show the non-Borg biological entity which had named itself Vaerz. There was no audio component, but it was clear that Vaerz was in conversation with a second individual, unaware the camera was live. That second individual, only half in frame, was clearly Borg. Vaerz lifted a hand to bat at a trio of small holographic projections parked just in front of its beak.

A memory burned into Conway, carefully preserved through the eons, rose to prominence. Even presented with a single arm and part of an armored torso, it was enough to /know/...the Borg was /Captain/. Was 4 of 8. Was the consensus monitor of Cube #347 and the /reason/ for Conway's fall from...whatever he had once been. Okay, it was all a bit fuzzy, to say the least, after 20,000 or so years, many brain clones, too much coffee, drugs, drugs and coffee, and Borgy alcove. However, somehow Captain was to blame, had been there when It All Went Wrong. Maybe. Oh, well, it didn't really matter. Galaxies had burned for less.

The salient fact that the tau vector was completely wrong for Captain was ignored. This /was/ the Unhappyverse; and, therefore, any Captain-looking Borg must be Captain. The logic of eccentric insanity – never “crazy” – with a touch of compulsive-obsessive disorder trumped everything.

Outside, beyond his hull, the ignored Xenig had drifted to a halt, stymied by the lack of response to their yapping. As bad as Vaerz, as any organic, the mechs were; and without the redeeming quality of potentially possessing coffee. He'd deal with them later. They were annoying. But first....

In the silent video feed, the sparkle of a transporter accompanied Captain's disappearance. Conway reached out with the power of his mind and plucked Captain from the cube's transporter system, materializing the form within the modified hold Conway's brain (and coffee) called home.

Conway could not help himself: he emitted a high-pitched yelp of glee from speakers mounted in the hold. It /was/ Captain. Everything was /just/ as he remembered! Except for the missing finger on the right hand, but that difference was unimportant. Everything else was perfect! He had had this particular item on his to-do list for /so/ long! It would be nice to /finally/ check it off! Conway did not notice the engagement of the subspace ripple field, so engrossed he was with events unfolding inside his chassis.

The Borg Conway knew as Captain stumbled as he registered he had not emerged to wherever he may have been transporting. An expression of stunned confusion was clear on his face. Not fear. Conway would fix that soon enough.

A handful of spider-bots were spurred into motion. One of them held both knife and compact projectile weapon in a threatening manner which required no translation. The other two bodily poked and prodded the Borg until he faced one particular bulkhead, a...homage, of sorts, to Captain, constructed and reconstructed over the long years for just this scenario.

Just beneath a poorly drawn sketch of how Conway mentally pictured himself when he had been merely human, a small speaker squealed into life. Captain flinched in response. "Is it you? Is it?" Pause. "It /is/ you!" gushed Conway. "I am your number-one fan! Your number-one anti-fan, that is! Conway? Do you remember the name? Happyverse? Anyway, I hate you with a passion that nearly, but never, exceeds coffee! I am going to have so much fun! You, on the other hand, are probably going to be doing a lot of screaming, or whatever it is that Borg do. You

/and/ your Borg buddies. I've had /millennia/ to plan out our meeting! Would you like to see the list?"

A spider-bot waved an arm at a long paper list attached to the wall with jolly souvenir coffee-themed magnets. The writing on the list was comprised of very small letters stacked into dense bullet points. A few, rather graphic, doodles provided visual relief, as well as illustrated key details.

"Yes, /lots/ of fun," reiterated Conway brightly, followed by a maniacal laugh which had required centuries to perfect.

Captain did not materialize in his nodal intersection. In fact, he did not materialize on Cube #347. The best he could ascertain in those initial moments following transport was he remained in the Dirt system, as evidenced by the neural transceiver link with his sub-collective. His position within the Conway chassis required several additional seconds to resolve, followed by immense confusion on both his part and the sub-collective as to how it had occurred.

The "how" quickly became academic as the "why" and, more importantly, the "what is to happen next" were revealed.

The subspace ripple field was but a footnote as the Whole began to debate amidst itself as to if better to abandon its consensus monitor to his inevitable fate, else Do The Borg Thing and retrieve the blatantly stolen asset. Captain had been largely excluded from the process, not due to his distance, but because the ripple field had imparted an odd static which lowered efficacy below a critical threshold. He could only watch proceedings from afar, including the inevitable sarcastic grumble from Second as the "primary" load shifted to his designation.

{This is /not/ a holiday,} replied Captain to one pointed remark. {Conway's description on how he intends to bypass this unit's pain suppression system is...graphic. And messy.}

Captain allowed his head to pivot away from the spider-bot animatedly pointing to a scrawl more stick figure than functional illustration as the Conway voice emitting from a nearby speaker enthusiastically embarked upon a rambling monologue whereupon neural structure of the occipital pathway figured prominently. Eye and optic implant panned the hold. Unlike previous attempts to gain a better understanding of his situation, this time flanking spider-bots did not prod unarmored flesh with knives to "encourage" attention be returned to the bulkhead.

Sharing the same hold wall as the list, a system of floor-to-ceiling metal racks were prominent. The lowest shelves supported a number of large, lumpy bags made of a coarse fabric. Higher shelves displayed glass containers with squared-off edges, brown beans(?) visible inside. Some jars were fuller than others. If there was a cataloging system, it was not readily evident. Large carboys, most partially filled with clear liquids, lined the deck just beneath the lowest shelf.

The hold wall opposite the racks abounded with complex apparatii. There was that oddly organic impression of machinery boded together over a long period, parts added or exchanged as required by evolving need. Hoses with multicolored liquids; an overly insulated mini-fridge; large tube-tanks holding viscous green liquid and multiple sizes of wrinkled blobs artistically backlit with a yellow light; a Rube Goldberg machine - a very faded "Mr. --ffee" could be glimpsed at the corner of the device - from which emitted bubbling sounds and a complex aroma. From the latter spiraled several of the hoses, terminating in what appeared to be an aquarium. The tank was inset a something that vaguely resembled a Borg alcove, else the coffin of a very technologically-minded vampire. A dim shape could be perceived behind the frosted glass of the tank and a handful of stickers advertising coffee or coffee products were jauntily arrayed along

the lower edge of the frame. Aerator bubbles were a hissing counterpart to the random beeps and whirls that emitted from the larger contraption.

A dozen spider-bots squatted unmoving amid machinery or perched on racks, radiating menace. Weapons suitable to dismantle a Borg drone, no matter how heavily armored, were in evidence. The rack with beans and bags had the greatest number of guards, followed by the aquarium-coffin contraption.

The hold was not that big, a rectangular box twenty meters long by seven meters wide. Captain and the list were at one end; and racks and devices took up much of the rest. However, in even such a small space, there must be a dimly lit corner to store spare bits and pieces that /might/ have a use one day. That day may be a hundred or a thousand years later, but by-golly, that left-over quarter-spool of wire seems too useful to just throw away or re-replicate. It was to that corner Captain's gaze focused.

Amid the shapes of dusty buckets and boxes was a still. It looked out of place, a professionally built creation of a "style" completely different from the boded together mess which dominated the hold. Sitting atop a compact heating element, the copper mash pot rose nearly a meter in height, the midline beginning a constriction to a chimney. The metal tube atop smoothly bent back towards the deck, narrowing further until it merged with a small cylinder set atop a twenty centimeter tall block. The cylinder had a notable sheen of condensation; and a nozzle with stopcock pierced the side, business end positioned over an empty glass jar.

The fact that Captain recognized the object as a still was not as odd as might seem. Several designations expressed their individual form of assimilation imperfection in a fascination for alcoholic beverages, never mind they could not imbibe. Two stills had already been found, and dismantled, despite the short amount of time since the sub-collective had taken up residence in the Alliance-built cube.

Near the still were stacked several crates of bottles, most holding a clear substance. Homemade labels were attached to the bottles, indecipherable writing similar to that found in the folded-space drive owner's manual. However, as Captain watched, the marks rearranged themselves into an eye-watering "doubled" format, Borg script floating on top of Captain's dimly remembered native language. "Wasted Water Whiskey" and "Rocket Fuel Moonshine" were two of the more prominent products, all of which were followed by "(another fine product of Chu Distillery)". An intricate drawing - nary a stick figure to be found - accompanied each label.

Captain's inattention must have finally registered to Conway, for the sharp point of a knife redirected his focus. Head pivoted down to visually confirm the whisper of body diagnostics complaining of compromised armor and minor joint damage to right elbow.

"Ahem," said Conway's voice. "You seem to have missed my full elaboration of sub-sub-bullet 18A, whereupon I have introduced 100 ccs of concentrated Mountain Top-Of-The-World blend to your system and am observing the interaction with the previously administered psychedelic drugs. Therefore, I will go over it again. Your subjective experience is /very/ important in regard to later procedures, and I need to ensure all is correct."

Before Captain could voice an objection, or react in any way for that manner, a mental fog abruptly descended. The last thing he consciously recalled was the sensation of his suddenly limp body falling to the deck, similarly limp spider-bots clattering to the floor alongside.

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An infinite, empty plain dominated by grey hues. One heartbeat. Two heartbeats. Three heartbeats. A microsecond, or an eon, passed within the nameless realm. Into the sense of waiting consolidated a playhouse or, at least, a stage. Curtains hung on nothing, and something; intricate mechanisms and props hid within the wings, beneath the floor, and overhead. Sourceless lights of multiple colors flashed through a testing pattern before finally settling on a pair of white spotlights aimed at two empty points upon the stage. A complex harmonic chord shivered the air as an elaborate surround-sound system tested invisible speakers.

All was ready. The only thing missing was an audience. And players. Sometimes, both were one and the same.

By ones and twos, then tens and more, forms began to populate the intimate (and infinite) space fronting the stage. Most figures were reflections of the body in which said mind inhabited. There were some alterations to musculature or body part or clothing, keeping with a particular self-perception, but few wild transformations. The stand outs, such as a pair of mermaid-esque creatures or a something swallowed by the top of a giant duck mascot suit, were the exception and not the rule.

The final population of confused and bewildered beings numbered multiple thousands, split into four distinct blocs. Each base group was clustered together and set off slightly from the others. The largest, just under 3700 strong, all sported some type of cybernetic augmentation. The second group included a handful of different species, dominated by the evolved descendants of vulture-like carrion-eaters. The two mermaids and duck comprised the third group. The final individual was by himself, a somewhat nauseating, shape-shifting amorphous form comprised of several forms superimposed on each other, as if the body-owner was unsure what its self-image should be.

Silence. Confusion. Then the inevitable buzz of questioning conversation began to rise, the loudest from the non-Borg bloc of Alliances. Meanwhile, amid the Borg contingent, the majority of heads were swiveling around to locate Hierarchy of Eight members and, in particular, the primary and backup consensus monitor and facilitators. A small subset therein was shuffling to form a poor semblance of a defensive circle, as directed by a shouting individual whose mental image included a much greater amount of body-mounted lethal hardware than any biped outside a first-person shooter video game could carry. A few cyborgs were wandering off on their own.

Mermaids and half-duck aligned themselves to face the stage, each heaving a sigh of resignation, as if they had an inkling of the reality behind the situation in which they were mired.

A giggle arose from the fluidic form of biped, coffee-filled aquarium, Xenig ship, and cybernetic parts.

The aggressive “click-clack-click” of no-nonsense high-heels on wooden floor captured the audience’s attention, shushing nascent conversation and drawing eyes to the stage. Into the stage-left spotlight strode a statuesque human(oid) form, white robes flowing and billowing in a theatrical manner out of proportion to actual movements. Presumably the individual was classically beautiful and perfectly proportioned for its type; and “it” swiftly converted to “her” within the minds of the silent watchers, not due to keen observation and knowledge of the unknown being’s anatomy, but by simple expedient of “this is how it is to be” flooding mental architectures. Pale blond hair, verging on white, was bound up in a tight bun, but one knew without knowing that if let free it would cascade to the waist. Eyes flashed dark yellow, alike that of an owl or any number of birds of prey. The final touch was a faint glow of unilluminating white light, origin uncertain, but definitely not the house spotlight.

In one hand the being held a rather ordinary looking black ink pen. The other hand clutched a clipboard which radiated the sense of being infinitely full, even as only a single sheet was in evidence.

The pen was clicked a few times. A toe tapped. The distinct feeling of annoyed impatience radiated across the audience.

A brilliant flash, accompanied by a sharp bang, announced the arrival of another form upon the stage. As the smoke enveloping the second spotlight cleared, revealed was a mustache-twirling Stereotype of Evil. Emanating what could only be described an ethereal aura of darkness, the figure lifted his chin in a haughty pose, chest thrust out, barbed tail lashing. With humanoid torso, goat legs, and horn be-decked head, his was the likeness of a classical Terran Devil...not that any in the audience understood the imagery, but the sense of "evil" was palpable. And the masculine gender was also evident, even to those species lacking the appropriate anatomical bits, as a very...full...loincloth was the creature's only clothing other than a flashy gold vest. The goatee and reddish-brown leg fur were mere afterthoughts to the overall appearance.

The woman rolled her eyes.

The devil pursed thin lips into a pout, then turned his head to offer an oversized wink of dark purple eye to the audience.

Clipboard was consulted, one of the infinite ream of pages flipped over to read the back side. Pen clicked again. The woman finally lifted her face to address the audience, emergent voice pleasant, if nondescript: "Welcome! I am Selene, and that is my brother Helios. We are Titan Children; and within this system, to its heliopause, we are as gods over space and time." Pause. "Well, not time, but the phrase sounds better on the business cards. So, mostly space."

Helios interrupted, "What my dear sis is trying to say is that we pretty much make the rules and /are/ the rules. Even over the mechs; and even over the, er, over-endowed brain-in-a-chassis thing." One hand was lifted to fluff goatee.

"So, being gods, albeit in a spatially limited fashion," continued Selene, "we get bored. Very bored. Ever since Ragnarok we have had /so/ few visitors. Cherished acquaintances here and there stop by for a chat, but they are few and far between. Otherwise, the most exciting thing hereabout happened about two thousand years ago when my brother thought it would be funny to steal the key to the, um, I /think/ it translates as 'ripple field generator function' in your parlance. And he never bothered to return it." Golden eyes narrowed in a glare directed towards Helios.

"I /am/ the little brother," stated Helios mildly. "Little brothers are supposed to make life hard on their older sisters." The hand fluffed goatee again, then followed up with a magician's flourish which materialized an old-style key. It was a small, flat metal object used by many species and cultures to secure houses, vehicles, padlocks, and all manner of similar objects. It glowed dull red. With another intricate wave, Helios made the key vanish.

Selene pointedly ignored the display. "And then, quite unexpectedly, you /all/ arrived! So many opportunities to make new friends! Helios and I had a quick chat and came to an agreement. /You/ all get to participate in /our/ opera! We've been working on it for ages, our definitive rewrite of a classic!"

"No, you don't have a choice," added Helios as one of the Alliance marines tentatively lifted a hand, as if to ask a question.

Selene panned her audience, stopping to stare at a few individuals before quickly scribbling something on her clipboard. No one, not even the most impulsive drone, felt the need fill the silence. Appraisal complete, the self-proclaimed god said, "A few rules and clarifications.

First, you are not here in this...virtual space - call it the Realm - in your physical body, only in mind. Consciousness. Digital self-image. Er, whatever. It doesn't translate well. The Xenig and Borg probably understand, although the remainder of you non-cyber biologicals may find the concept a bit daunting. No matter. All you need to know is that your body is right where you left it.

"Second, while we needed to have all of you here in this now, there is no requirement to keep everyone engaged on the Realm all the time. In fact, it is a bit annoying the way your mental functions clutter up the place. Pre-production and rehearsal, even the opera itself, will only necessitate a subset of you at any given moment. We will make sure you all can keep up with what is happening in the Realm; and any of you can be recalled – translated – at any time. However, to keep the hanky-panky to a dull roar in the Real, I have engaged a localized 'treacle field function'. Your ships and/or chassis, as appropriate, can no longer move in any appreciable way beyond that allowed by natural momentum, orbital dynamics, and simple thrusters. Torpedoes cannot be launched; and non-physical weaponry also cannot be engaged. Teleporter use beyond the confines of one's hull are...not advised.

"Third, be aware that if you are injured or killed in the Realm, there will be Real consequences. It may range from a headache to psychological trauma to life-threatening brain hemorrhage. You are forewarned. And, yes, we expect you to perform all your own stunts. And this opera has /so/ many stunts!" Selene giggled. There was a hint of psychopathy in the sound which boded ill.

"Fourth...Helios, do we have a fourth?"

The devil-god made a big show of thinking, even going so far as to conjure an eltab out of nothing and consult it. "I don't think so. We /are/ gods over our domain. We can make up the rules as we go; and smite those whom we so desire."

Selene nodded. "True, true." Pause. Pen click. "Okay, back to the opera. If you haven't already figured it out, Helios represents all which is evil while I am the paradigm of good. Being the evil arse that he is, Helios has refused to return /my/ key. You all, with a few exceptions, will assist me in recovering the key via the grand medium of theater and song.

"Once I have the key back - the ending is a given, we've written it that way - I will show my appreciation by disengaging the ripple field. Then you can all go your way, or blow each other up, or do whatever it is that you want to do."

Helios rolled his eyes, "Yah, now that I have the key, it is a bit boring. I have other plans to annoy sis, but I can't just /give/ it back...that would be wrong, and too easy. She needs to /work/ to get it back."

The audience remained silent. Eyes slid sideways to glance at each other. The loud clearing of a throat broke the hush. "Why?" called Vaerz. The 'why' was deliberately left open to interpretation. Alliance individuals nearest to him shuffled away, just in case a smiting was about to occur.

Selene giggled once more. Once again, it was not the giggle of the sane. However, to call it "insane" would be to suggest there was a sensible and well-balanced baseline with which to make a comparison. This particular giggle was of one whom had left insanity well behind while sailing boldly into the uncharted seas of irrationality. Helios' grin was a countermatch to his sister's outburst. "As I already said, we are bored. And we are gods. Very localized gods, but gods nonetheless as far as it currently affects you. Is further explanation needed? No? Great! Then let's start the auditions!"

* * * * *

Helios sat behind a folding table which had been set on the ground in front of the stage. As the devil-god leaned forward on his elbows to better converse with the being sitting opposite, the table wobbled, the result of a single slightly too-short leg. Tail twitched in annoyance.

“Bugger. Here I am, a nearly-omni-damn-everything in the dictionary quasi-deity, and I still can’t manifest a proper table. I /know/ it is a minor code transposition /somewhere/ in the underlying matrix-base, but I just can’t track it down.” Pause. “Okay, I can’t be bothered to track it down. I’m supposed to have people to do that for me, but all those people went poof during Rangarok. Maybe once all this business is done, you might be looking for employment as a minion? I could /so/ use a good minion, and you look like great minion material. I’m sure we could work out a suitable contract.”

The scrambled shadow shape of shabby Xenig ship, vaguely remembered human form, and bodiless brain tried to follow the string of words, but failed. Even if Conway would have had the context in which to understand them, frankly, he didn’t care. He had more important things to do than float around in this odd data-plain purgatory, like start the torture session upon Captain and acquire the bean behind the coffee signature on the Borg cube.

“I see,” said Helios, clearly following Conway’s train of thought despite the lack of verbal (or otherwise) response from the latter. “Well, just keep my offer of employment in mind. I could be persuaded to include a generous vacation package to allow you to follow your personal hobbies; and I could provide the coordinates to some great coffee houses, to boot. But...on to business...” Helios absently scratched his goatee as he picked up his eltab from the table and tapped it. “The role I have in mind for you is ‘Fafnir’. Depending on the mythos and playwright followed, he is typically cast as a dwarf, giant, or dragon. There’s also a near endless slew of adaptations; and while I am partial to Fafnir depicted as a lime-green gerbil, the meaning it is trying to convey is a bit obscure.

“For this production, I was adamant with my sis that our Fafnir would be a dragon because /everyone/ loves a dragon. Fire, claws, halitosis, dismembering of valiant knights as they scream...the more, the better. Especially the screams. It would be a great role to allow an individual to express their inner homicidal beast! Anything goes! Well, anything goes within the restrictions placed by the opera and the Realm. I only need to oversee and coach a handful of parts, but they are all the /best/ roles, in my opinion, the ones /key/ for opera success. Selene is more the managing type and can do the rest.”

“So, you in? And you can’t say ‘no’ because /I/ am the god in this system, not you.”

Helios leaned back in his chair to regard Conway, a wide grin stretched across his face. The table settled with a small quiver.

After a few beats, Helios continued, “Now, before I tell you more on what your role entails, I need to get you into the proper mind-set. Very important. More specifically, your self-image is a bit...chaotic.” The devil-god waved one well-manicured hand at Conway.

“What do you mean?” asked the blurred hybrid of brain and coffee cup. If eyes had been present, they would have narrowed in suspicion.

Helios cleared his throat. “You, my boy, are in a unique position. You have a very strong mind, unlike the great majority of the entities here. It is like you’ve been doing thousands of years of mental exercises or something.” Conway preened. “Now, for most beings whom will be participating in the opera, my sis and I just drop a ‘costume’ on them and expect it to stick. Their underlying self-image will persist, but we can drape another form atop. You and the Xenigs,

well, are not quite the same. Your /assistance/ is required to get you into your role. The more you work at it, the more you will /live/ the part; and, all the better, the more realistically gory it will be in the end. You follow?"

Conway was silent. Of /course/ he understood. His brain was special, after all. Well above anyone else present. He was the coffee-fueled Hercules of brains.

"Okay, then," drawled Helios. "Let's get started." A button on the eltab was touched, eliciting a beep. A shimmer momentarily enfolded Conway before unreality stabilized.

Take a paper mache dragon, one of the kinds mass produced at a cheap factory on some no-name planet and sent out to populate the "celebration" section of a low-end mega-mart. Remove the tissue paper frills. Paint it exactly three shades of green, none /quite/ complementary with the other two. Make one leg too long. The too-many horns decorating the head appear as if they were attached with an excessive amount of glue, except for the one protuberance which is about to fall off. The eyes, however, are masterpieces of reality, a deep, smoldering red-orange which reflect promise of fire and deep hurting.

Said Helios, "This transplanted self-image may feel a bit awkward at first, but give it a chance. /Lean/ in to it. Don't push it away! As you get more comfortable within it, you will be able to bring out the psychotic 'dragon' in you that first attracted me in regard to this role. Are you ready to hear what you will be doing in the opera?"

"Yesss," hissed Conway. To his surprise and satisfaction, a wisp of smoke accompanied the words.

Helios flashed a wide, wicked grin. "Excellent! Your self-image is already becoming more focused! You are a natural!" Pause. "Okay, my boy, to be expected because you a dragon, you will be getting a hoard. My key is part of that hoard. There will be challengers for the hoard – a tenor, a baritone, a few other somethings – and you will exterminate them. With extreme predatory prejudice. In the end, of course, you need to lose to the hero, but that is opera for you. Sis wants her key back." Shrug. "But your death scene...masterful! Powerful! A classic! Before then, however, there is so much yummy blood and guts and gore! You'll love it!"

Conway smiled, imagining with all his well-honed brain power sharp teeth instead of glue-stiffened paper.

"This costume is not us," flatly protested Delta. Stress of the unusual situation had unconsciously reverted her to plurals – two-bodies-in-one condition notwithstanding – similar to many other Borg. A gesture was made, arms of the individual bodies indicating the condition of the other. "Not us."

Selene rolled her eyes, then flipped over a page on her ubiquitous, impossible clipboard. "Listen, dearie," she said, ignoring the annoyed look that crossed the twin visages at the use of the insincere endearment, "most of you anachronistic cybernetic creatures on that ugly travesty you call a ship do not really fit into this production. They'll be rotated in one hundred at a time for chorus, ambiance, and general background bodies. And 'bodies' is something I remember Borg being real good about. However, there are some key parts – Fafnir, Siegfried, Random Casualty #3 – that /need/ a certain type of being. You, my dear or dears, are that being. Admittedly, the Brunhilde role isn't traditionally twins, but I can work with it. If anything, I look forward to the challenge of rewriting the part on the fly!" The speech was ended with a wide smile which could best be described as predatory.

"But..." tried to insist Delta again. Again she was hushed, this time with a slash of one hand. Delta's jaws snapped shut, and not by her own violation.

“Look,” said Selene, words delivered in a clipped, no-nonsense manner, “the classic image of Brunhilde occurs in one of two ways. The first requires a buxom woman whom is comfortable to display her skin. That, obviously, isn’t going to work here. I don’t know what your species is, but I doubt it had much in the way of bosoms to work with in the first place; and after your extreme make-over, even less. Furthermore, your Borg self-image, armor and all, is a bit strong, so I had to work with what I had. The other classic image is the strong warrior woman, swooping down to take the worthy slain to Valhalla. I think that representation is applicable here, once I include a few embellishments – a horned helmet...”

Delta sputtered, forcing an interruption to strongly voice her agitation. “And /these/?!” The two bodies waved hands in the vicinity of upper torso.

“Well, I may have upped the brassiere size a wee bit, and the cones are definitely a bit extreme, but it /is/ a stage production, and subtle costume elements just don’t work very well.” Selene smiled encouragement. “Don’t worry, ducks, you’ll have /plenty/ of time to get used to them! This is /your/ look when you are here, and you’ll be here a lot because Brunhilde is important to get just right!”

Selene thoughtfully chewed the top of her pen as she regarded the trio of forms arrayed before her. “You three.... You three have given us heartburn with what to cast you as. I think...”

“You think you are going to let us go while you play silly games with the squishy organics?” boldly interrupted the mermaid in the middle, tailfin fluttering as she floated in the air. “Look, we’re sorry we bothered you. We know the rules, but we thought we might sneak in, grab Chu, and scamper away. Except it isn’t Chu, but some parasitic chassis-jacker. Anyway, we’ll take the freeloading bugger off your non-hands and sort it out somewhere else. It is ultimately a Xenig problem, not yours.”

Selene tittered. It was the delicate tinkle of fine glass shattering, a stark and not very comforting sound. Selene regained her composure, then stared for a moment at a faint silver rune of multi-dimensional complexity on the mermaid speaker’s forehead before glancing down at her clipboard. “Luge, is it?” The simple, monosyllable was underlain by a vast, unspoken complexity reflecting the true Xenig identity. “Interesting use-name. Well, my dearest Luge, right now my brother and I are all which is standing between you three alive and trying to figure out how to escape your little trespass and you three, along with the galaxy entire, including your precious home-system and any mythic Progenitors out there hiding from their over-enthusiastic children, from becoming a giant graveyard of slowly cooling plasma.”

Silence reigned. Far away, yet very near, coughed a ragged roar, followed by words of cheerful encouragement to keep working at it.

“Mr. Brain-In-A-Chassis could think himself out of his box if he applied himself, but Helios is keeping him occupied. And that leaves /me/ to wrangle the rest of this production. The probability waves forecast for success is more tsunami and rip current than calm seas. Regardless, this production /will/ be followed to the bitter end because the show must go on.” A brittle, wintry smile which did not touch yellow eyes was flourished. “Now, given your self-images, I felt the ‘Rhine-maiden’ roles would suit best. For this part...”

Luge dared to interrupt again, “‘Rhine-maiden’? That sounds like a bio-female thing!”

“And...? questioned Selene, clearly puzzled. “You are all technically neuter. Every member of the Xenig race is a neuter. And you /are/ presenting as mer/maids/. Maids...females. Ladies. Zegans. Juhils.”

The rightmost mermaid, whom also had a hint of phantom armoire superimposed, sulked, “It is a /guise/, a mental projection. It doesn’t actually mean anything!”

A pale hand swept up from top to bottom of the speaker, indicating without words scaled fish tail, very mammalian (and exposed) breasts, womanish face with pouty lips, and flowing green hair. “Mermaid. Classic mermaid...er...” Squint at forehead. “...Zho. Classic /Terrain/ mermaid, even. Why?”

“Not important,” mumbled Zho.

“Then it also isn’t important to me; and you will remain Rhine-maidens. And what is with that wardrobe, anyway? The mermaid get-up, as odd as it is, I can work with, even that duck thing your friend is projecting. Furniture, not so much. Tone it down, maybe? You aren’t a ‘squishy organic’. You can control your self-image, even if the self-image you insist on projecting is absolutely not one I would associate with a Xenig.”

Luge snickered. “The furniture fad has been out since the Star Empire imploded.”

Zho responded defensively, “Fads /always/ return. And I’ll be ready.”

Selene glared at the mermaid wearing the top half of a duck mascot costume. “If you dare ‘Quack’, mister or miss Biv, I will do something painful to your Real self.”

“Will the action result in the removal of the nuisance attached to my chassis?” asked Biv.

“No,” responded Selene succinctly. She added, “And you will be conscious through the entirety.”

Biv fidgeted, ill-fitting attire threatening to slump downward to trap arms. Obviously the mech’s imagination was considering what could be worse than being entombed in a They.

Selene glared at the trio. “So, if we are /all/ done? Good. Great. For the Rhine-maiden parts, the following scenes will occur thusly...”

“Okay group, gather around. This is our ‘heroes’ and ‘prominent fodder’ casting. Eventually I’ll be talking to each of you individually, but for now I need you all together so our Fafnir can get a good gander at you. He’ll be interacting with you all quite a bit.” Selene waved her non-clipboard-encumbered hand for emphasis. Of course, it wasn’t like any of the individuals had a choice in their attendance.

Selene looked over the group. “Helios. What is the meaning of that?”

Helios had his back to his sister and was not paying much attention. “Hrmm? Conway? He’s really getting into the part, but there are some details to work out. Scales. Sharper claws. Mostly the tail...good tails can be such a hard concept for non-tailed entities to grasp.”

Squatting on his haunches next to Helios sat a dragon-creature, paper mache ancestry discarded except for a bit of stiffness in some movements and an unfortunate three-tone green coloration. Spines and fins were in evidence on head, along backbone, and elbows, perhaps more than strictly necessary and evidence of recent and enthusiastic self-image improvement. The tail, the end of which was twitching, did not quite look as if it belonged on its owner, more feline than reptilian, inclusive the faint suggestion of fuzz. Red-orange eyes were intently regarding the to-be banquet laid out, trickle of smoke wafting from nostrils. One morsel in particular was of interest. Fore claws flexed.

Selene turned her head slightly, noted her brother’s inattentiveness, and rolled her eyes. “Not your pet project, sibling, but /that/.”

Helios frowned as he pivoted on goat hooves, then sighed. “Oh. That.”

“That” was a Sarcoram, vulture beak held agape as if he was watching a thoroughly amusing scene being played out for his personal pleasure. Neck ruff hackled as he received the

full attention of the two god-beings, then sleeched down. He gave a bob of his head, an acknowledgement that did not /quite/ cross over to insolence.

“That’s Vaerz. I cast him as Hegan because he has that back-stabby look about him.” Helios was defensive. “I /do/ have a few other roles to oversee beyond Fafnir – who /is/ the most important, of course – and Vaerz just fit.”

“Then why haven’t you sent his consciousness back to his body? It isn’t like we need Hegan around right now; and he /certainly/ isn’t either ‘hero’ or ‘fodder’.”

Helios mildly shrugged, then scratched under his goatee, shifting attention to armpit. “Dunno? Is it really important? Take a chill pill, sis. Besides, he seemed to be pretty buddy-buddy with that one Borg over there, and not in a buddy-buddy way. It is amusing to see the Borg suppress its annoyance while trying to project that certain Borg attitude.”

Conway hissed, “Can I practice a few of my new moves? On my ‘fodder’?” One particular fodder was the recipient of a hungry stare. “You did mention there would be pain? For them?”

Helios sighed. “Yes, yes. Pain is necessary. We want the writhing and screams to be as real as possible. And ‘no’ to your practice question because there is more casting to do. And some other drama bits and stuff, too. Here, come with me...we /really/ need to work on that tail. And I’ve set up some more targets for you to work on. Your slashing technique is good, but now it needs to be /artistic/ slashing.” Helios strode off, leaving Conway-Fafnir to follow reluctantly behind.

“If you insist. But I want to select the image for the targets this time.”

“Fine. No problem. We’ll come back when sis is less stressed over the whole casting thing. Which means a few thousand /years/ from now! Geesh...always needs to be the Type-A of Type-As.”

The insult was obviously meant to be overheard. Selene ignored it.

“Now, where were we? Heroes and Fafnir-fodder.” A T’sap with bright orange hair and a frame more muscled in the Realm than the Real was pointed at. Pen tapped clipboard. “You, Elises, have been chosen to be the hero Siegfried. You are a race I actually recognize and I freely admit I’m a bit of a speciest. I’ll get you a more appropriate self-image to wear later. I also concede there are a few other species among the entities crowding the Realm of which I know, but as they tend to be shrouded under implants and armor and communal mind, your fresh, boyish face and total nativity is just what I was looking for. It just /shouts/ hero!”

Elises furrowed his brow in confusion, then leaned sideways to whisper to his compatriot, a Sarcoram not Vaerz. “Britz, was I just insulted? I can’t tell.”

Britz ground his beak nervously, then whispered back with just a hint of whine, “Does it matter? She’s scary. I want to stay alive. Don’t be such a T’sap...shut up and nod.”

Elises nodded.

Vaerz cocked his head slightly, then raised his right arm to just below shoulder height and rattled the long feathers hanging below. Selene looked towards the noise and motion, scrunching her face in confusion. She flipped over a page on her clipboard and proceeded to read therein what she found. Understanding smoothed her features. “Okay. What’s your question, Vaerz?”

“What’s his role?” Vaerz nodded his head at Captain. “He hero or fodder?”

Selene sighed the long sigh of one who hates to speak the obvious. “The drone 4 of 8 is fodder. ‘Random Casualty #3’. Most of the entities here, who are /supposed/ to be here, are fodder. Both my brother and I are in agreement that Borg are best used for minor parts. There are

exceptions, such as that twin Borg; and I also have my eye on the Borg Bug. A Bug! Haven't heard of any Bugs in the galaxy for Real ages! It would be a shame if they are all extinct because they had the most /exquisite/ voices. Natural opera singers. Even if this particular Bug has been compromised in the Real due to Borgification, I am sure in the Realm she will be able to contribute hugely to the opera." Yellow eyes caught Captain squarely. "Otherwise, we don't expect much from Borg in the acting department. Nothing personal, 4 of 8, but you Borg aren't meant for the stage. All those irrelevant little lies necessary to bring a production to fruition. Just try to do the best you can. For instance, don't die until and unless it is necessary. While Conway may be all about multiple takes to 'practice' his technique, I'm sure you'd rather just do it the once and get it right the first time."

Vaerz hummed. "Interesting." Next to him, Captain canted his head, then narrowed his unaltered eye slightly as a hint of a frown crossed his face. The expression was swiftly wiped. Another drone selected as 'fodder' snickered quietly, then abruptly stopped as Captain swiveled his head to glare at her.

Selene, once again, sighed. Shoulders heaved in an exaggerated manner. The clipboard was hung on the air, freeing that hand to participate in series of sharp claps. "A mildly interesting exchange, but we are here to learn about what to expect when you 'play' with Fafnir on the stage. First, my favorite fodder drones..."

"Helios! You need to see this! I have found the /perfect/ Wotan! Take a look at this fellow! I was prepared to cast that one burly T'sap soldier as Wotan, but this creature came to my attention a few milliseconds ago when I was dealing with the Fafnir-fodder."

Second shifted his head slightly as the devil-god appeared next to his sister. There weren't any special effects, no wavering of whatever passed for simulated air in the foreign dataspace, no blinking of lights or odd sounds. Helios was just there. Which was very interesting, as other drone points-of-view also saw him to be with Conway-dragon, discussing the finer points of how to tear the limbs off the standard hexapod sentient. This was the first time an incidence of twinning by one of the entities had been observed. The internal debate contemplating whom or what had trapped the sub-collective - omniscient being(s) or overly powerful AI system - gained another datum; and both sides were attempting to fit it into their respective arguments. Second was of the personal belief, as much as a drone was allowed a singular opinion, that the semantics didn't really matter because whatever the ultimate answer, the jailer was obviously quite crazy.

Helios narrowed his purple eyes and gazed at Second. He was unmistakably perceiving something that was much deeper than any exterior facade. The devil-man abruptly blinked, then shuddered. "Brr...you are right! It is scary how close he aligns! It is almost as if this drone's mentality was the template that the Kronos series was built upon."

In the undistance a shriek sounded, gaining volume as it rose through the octaves before abruptly ending. Second heaved an overly theatrical sigh, armored shoulders lifting. He rolled both whole eyes upward before refocusing on Helios. "Can you not restrain your pet? At least in regard to the flames thing? Yes, it was only one of the crustacean sentients; and, yes, it will awake on Cube #347 with a headache, after which it will beg to return to your Realm, convinced that you are, indeed, supreme deities. However, every time something or someone is set on fire, a select number of our more impressionable units need to be restrained."

Selene and Helios turned their heads to regard each other. Large grins stretched respective faces. The revealed dentation looked a bit...sharp.

“Oh, that dry, sarcastic wit! Do you recall, brother?” reminisced Selene. “Wotan – silly old bastard – may have been of the older generation, but was still able to keep up with the best and brightest of us. He was just getting Zeus’ matrix stabilized, while also surely transferring him a good baseline of biting zest, when the Olympus Mons facility was destroyed. Can’t you just hear him now? What he’d have to say about” wave of hand “all this?”

“Yup,” answered Helios. “So /much/ creative profanity! Not only would he have found a much better current to follow than our poor attempt, but at the same time he would certainly be using the probability wave function to troll the ether for yet another way to comment upon the situation. Of course, if either Wotan or Zeus, or /any/ of the Kronos series, had made it, then this whole mess wouldn’t be upon us, now, would it? We do not have the same faculty with the probability wave function...more than sufficient power, yes, nuance, no. Like a star whale bumbling around in a China shop looking for a particular teacup.”

Selene made a face, mouth pulled down into a frown and nose scrunched. “Bad timing. One of those quantum-ripple-temporal-echo waves, slopping around and crashing at just the wrong time. Or the right time. I guess it depends on point of view. Bad timing for us, anyway. Unfortunately, the devil’s in the butterfly’s details; and it released a lot of details before it transitioned into the All.” Focus was suddenly placed upon Second, and through him the Realm sub-collective fragment, in a very significant and pointed manner.

“Well, surely enough pseudo-tau has passed to smooth out all /those/ ripples. One hopes, anyway. Maybe it is time to seriously think about looking outward into the Real? Being limited to a single star system is so boring,” opinioned Helios.

The cryptic exchange was giving Second a headache. He supposed there was some sort of message being relayed – it was unlikely these two faux-deities were having this discussion in front of him just because – but, if so, it was beyond him. And probably beyond the sub-collective, in general, although enough had been said that it would keep the conspiracy subset more than engaged.

Another shriek, followed by a gurgle, echoed from nowhere and everywhere.

Helios defensively held up the hand holding his eltab. “That was not Conway. No flames at all.”

Second minutely frowned as he turned a portion of his attention inward. {279 of 300, you are in time-out. And /where/ in this place did you find that lighter and aerosol can?}

“I say this creature is perfect enough,” declared Selene. She checked a line off on her clipboard with a flourish.

Second suddenly found part of his sight obscured. Bringing hand to face, he found an eyepatch covering the upper of his two organic eyes; and the same hand encountered a long thatch of scratchy fuzz hanging limply from his chin. Neither would come off upon tentative prodding, held in place by a sticky substance. A weight pulling against his throat declared cloak or cape.

A wicker and snort of hot, evil-smelling breath against the back of his neck suggested a something even more potentially troublesome than mere cosmetic props.

“His name is Sleipner,” said Helios with a grin. “I think you’ll be bestest of friends!”

* * * * *

Conway was greatly enjoying himself! He was having so much fun with the Fafnir thing that he barely thought of coffee. Why, he would go for minutes at a time without the notion of

caffeinated beans crossing his mind. And every time he began to dwell upon coffee for too long, Helios was there, presenting him with a new challenge.

Who /knew/ acting could be so engaging? Conway felt a new hobby was in his future; and if his audience didn't appreciate the one-brain performances which were begging to be written and produced, well, he could always acquire a new audience. A more accommodating audience. Critics who planned to be critical need not show up.

Except, before a new career in artistry could be pursued, Conway had a few boxes to check off on his to-do list. But, for the nonce, they could wait. What was a few more hours or days compared to the thousands of years he had thus far waited?

When Conway had first agreed to the Fafnir role, he hadn't been quite sure about it. The costume, to put it mildly, had been crude. But at Helios' urgings he had continued to refine the image to be increasingly dragon-like. In this unreal data-realm, he, Conway, was a Supreme Being. All the brain exercises were paying off, elevating him above mere mortals such as Borg and humans and crabs and vulture things. Likely even above Selene and Helios, whom didn't have the advantage of coffee, although he wasn't going to be so rude as to insult his hosts with the news.

Unless he had too, of course. But he'd prefer that the current situation had run through to the end. He /really/ wanted to see how the play would turn out. From what he understood, there was to be literal slaughter at some point...of other people. And, more importantly, of one /particular/ Borg.

And thinking of Selene and Helios, Conway had the distinct impression there was something off about the pair. It was obvious they weren't telling the whole (or even part) of the truth about the purpose of the play, but that was a god-like being for you. Conway had been there, done that, and even had the coffee decal commemorating the moment because the shirt hadn't really fit any of the spider-bots. But it wasn't really important right now, nor particularly relevant. The two beings could continue to be as mysterious as they wanted. He would eventually return to his Xenig chassis and continue his rampage. However, even an eccentrically insane entity such as himself had to take time off every once in a while, partake a me-time vacation. In this case, his sabbatical was more akin to theater camp, whereupon he was developing the immense acting talent he hadn't even known he'd possessed.

Conway eyed his tail, then twitched it in satisfaction. It had required much Realm non-time and intense concentration, but he'd finally perfected the appendage. The wings still needed work, and the fire wasn't nearly hot enough, but the tail was finally Good Enough. Claws of right hand flexed; and with razor focus, Conway minutely shaped them, made them incrementally harder, sharper. Helios had mentioned practice hero slayings in the near future. Even if it was only a rehearsal, Conway felt obsessively compelled to continue making his costume the best Fafnir he could shape. How else could he strike fear into the heart of his prey? And the Captain-prey /would/ fear...all the Borg would know fear before they died.

Besides, it would be a wonderful warm-up act for the bloody reality to occur once the virtual curtain fell.

* * * * *

Random Casualty #3 – nee Captain – sluggishly regained awareness of his surroundings. Single eye blinked once as he registered a brown bean about an arm span distant; and blur originating from optical implant sharpened. A systems diagnostic query returned a litany of

minor complaints, as well as a moderately elevated notification warning of extended time without regeneration. Without the ability to use transporters due to the treacle field, Captain could do nothing about the latter. However, the reality of stasis lock was still sufficient hours in the future that there was no immediate threat. And of the minor complaints...

Captain slowly rolled over and pushed himself to a standing position. A Borg fallen to the ground was not exactly an agile creature to start with; and the reality of heavy cyberization and stiff muscles did not help. On the other hand, there was a part of Captain's core "self" which was more than slightly relieved that he still /had/ limbs and muscles with which to use to clumsily attain his feet: his last memory was one which included Conway-Fafnir cheerfully chewing on an arm recently detached from its very singed owner. Realm deaths were not permanent – the "deceased" were kicked back to what Selene and Helios termed "Real"ity to allow the abused organic mind time to recover – but it was also not a pleasant experience.

And Conway had only been "practicing". Captain had the worrisome feeling that the actual performance would be much more intense. Maybe it might be better if stasis lock did ensue.

{No, no, no...not allowed!} complained 2 of 8, to whom the load of primary consensus monitor had largely shunted with the extended inaccessibility of Captain and Second within the Realm. The opinion was echoed by 7 of 8.

Captain awkwardly removed a knife lodged in his right elbow, which resulted in the quieting of one diagnostic grumble. He peered at the trio of spider-bots which lay quiescent on the ground, then prodded one with a foot. No response. Simultaneously, he warded the automatic attempt of the sub-collective to redirect consensus monitor duties towards its normal node point. The static which had degraded the ability of Captain to effectively participate in sub-collective functions from his remote location appeared to have ebbed during his visit to the Realm.

{You will have to continue to deal with it for the foreseeable future. It is much more likely I will be transposed back to the Realm than either of you; and the disruption of re-shifting primary node status, again, is inefficient,} replied Captain. Attention shifted from spider-bots, to badly drawn doodles and torture list affixed to the nearby wall, then to the burbling contraption which took up a significant proportion of the Xenig hold. {You and 7 of 8 have been assigned roles as "statues that may or may not be needed". On the other hand, Conway has an unhealthy single-mindedness concerning me. The only reason I am not still in the Realm is because Helios has told Conway that his "play toy" needs time to recover. Who knows how long that recovery will be allowed.}

The relationship between the Titan Children's virtual Realm and a reality which currently included a pungently nutty aroma was complex. Casting and rehearsal within the Realm for the "most epic play of the deca-millenniums" was occurring upon a timescale in lockstep with the normal tick of the exterior universe. Muttered complaints by Selene and Helios indicated annoyance at such a slow pace, compared to their normal "FastTime"; and while no specific reason for the grumbling had been voiced, it was strongly insinuated that the non-modified organic brains of a small subset of the compelled participants required thus, else risk stroke, aneurysm, or other, potentially terminal, outcome. It was not too hard to conclude that the Alliances which parasitized Cube #347 were the subject of the muttered objection occasionally overhead by a nearby drone presence.

Seeing no immediate threat, Captain locked his joints and turned inward, seeking an overview of the current Realm situation. He subsumed himself into a partition viewing parallel multiple perception streams originating from the Realm, lending his mentality to tag each for in-

depth review else discard in an example of adroit multitasking only a high echelon command unit could accomplish. Those drone perception streams – visual and audio only – and ten strategically placed “camera” viewpoints were the sole (and one-way) manner for real-time information conveyance to the exterior universe. Inside the Realm, the lack of data was very frustrating to a communal entity which required connectivity, especially to archives and experience of other drones, to concoct decisions. While the individual units were linked into a mini-sub-collective, the only data from the Real was that relayed by newly transposed units, as well as a general wellness sense that indicated one’s body (and remnant Borg Whole as represented by Cube #347) still existed.

When a drone consciousness returned to the Real, it automatically reconnected to the sub-collective Whole following a period of confusion. Depending on type of return – e.g., simple dismissal by one of the Children versus traumatic immolation by a pseudo-dragon – the disorientation would be shorter or longer; and there also may be need to enroll the drone in an appropriate PTSD support group. At least the sub-collective was becoming proficient self-counseling due to the persistent mental maintenance needs associated resultant from temporal resurrection and Alliance research methodology.

This was the first time Captain had been returned to his body. Even as he sorted perception streams, he also absorbed the /knowing/ of the sub-collective Whole concerning the current situation. He /knew/ mental patterns of drones ensnared in the Realm closely resembled lucid regeneration, without actual regeneration unless the unit was plugged into an alcove. He /knew/ the Titan Children had allowed the Alliances Realm view-only access via a single tri-V base in their recreation lounge...and that there had been multiple heated arguments over what “channel” to watch. On that latter front, the Crastians were currently winning all disagreements via the simple expedient of hiding the remote control in an interstitial space inaccessible by their larger comrades, no matter how many broom handles were utilized, which in turn had resulted in the display being stuck on those feeds which featured Conway-Fafnir. Apparently the crustaceans believed the psychotic not-Xenig resembled a recently featured Upcoming Deity profile in one of their numerous religious ‘zines.

Captain paused as a static feed – View #6 – with Selene captured his (and the sub-collective’s) attention. The pale-haired, self-proclaimed deity was sitting on a bar stool at a tall folding table, perfect framing of the video strongly hinting that the scene was not random happenstance. However, while Borg could do subtle, if necessary, as a Whole they were not particularly facile at recognizing it; and Cube #347 was no exception. Taking a well chewed stylus out of her mouth and muttering something that almost resolved to “about time”, Selene proceeded to scribble something on her clipboard. She then picked up a small device laying on the table next to her, clicked a button on its side, and began to speak into it.

“Project diary – the opera rewrites are coming along more slowly than I would prefer. We /so/ need to complete practice run-throughs on several of the more pivotal scenes sooner rather than later because I foresee need for some serious refinement. As much as a hassle it is to plod along at the glacial speed of organic thought, on the bright side, budding of secondary awareness streams into FastTime provides more than sufficient background resources for the rewrite drafts.

“In other news, not unexpected is that the singing acumen of most Borg is /abysmal/. Truthfully, the gaggle of full organics isn’t much better. One of the bright spots is the Bug, nee “Sensors”, who is an absolute delight to work with! However, there remains a critical need to schedule FastTime resources to build a stable of lip-sync functions to ensure most players, the chorus, whomever or whatever at least appear to be singing the required lines.”

Selene paused, cleared her throat with a glass of water which was abruptly present, then continued. “Moving on, the sifting of local probability wave functions to extract a desired performance finale goes slowly. Helios /thinks/ he has found a candidate, or at least a something that doesn’t end with total melt-down and horrible Critic reviews, but the current is very faint and will require quite a bit of output to capture, stabilize, and redirect.” A long sigh. “Helios may be a bastard of a little brother at times, but he’s the only family left. Gads, I hate all this destiny stuff. There are some days – more often than not these T-years – I wish I was nothing more advanced than a hand-held calculator. No...a calculator is too stressful...maybe a toaster? It would be so satisfying to only look forward to the pleasure of providing a perfectly browned bread product.” Silence reigned as the Titan Child stared into the middle distance to nowhere, perhaps contemplating a gluten-filled what-if that could never be.

Eyes blinked as the present reasserted itself, gaze sliding sideways to directly stare into the non-camera providing View #6. The presumed recording device was dropped upon the table. “And why are you all still here? Time to move on! The next scene beckons! Shoo!” A hand waved; and View #6 turned to visual hash accompanied by an annoyingly atonal whistle. Simultaneously, Captain’s sub-collective connection degraded below effective use as a computational resource by a surge in ripple field static.

One strongly suspected such was not a coincidence.

Returned to the reality of Conway’s Xenig chassis hold, Captain panned the area for options. “Few” was the consensus, both on the part of Captain and the mentalities riding his perception stream. The aisle between fore and back sections of the hold was a narrow lane warded by high-level forcefields to either side. Behind the blue-tinged barriers were the aquarium-coffin contraption (right) and metal shelves of bags and beans (left). Motionless spider-bot guards sprawled in ungainly heaps. Captain approached one of the forcefields and held out a questing hand, only to quickly withdraw it as onboard sensors pronounced the obstacle to be an order or five beyond “level-10” and easily able to impart a terminal case of barbeque.

Careful navigation of the aisle-of-death brought Captain to the aft end of the hold, inclusive the still. As before his forced trip into the Realm, the incongruity of the complicated apparatus and the product cached adjacent was a poser: it did not fit the “crazy psychopath” theme which permeated the majority of the hold. On the other hand, however odd the sight might be, it held no solution as to the current predicament, only additional and very irrelevant questions.

Captain’s consideration slid away from the quietly hissing still to the pile of odds and ends stacked neatly nearby. Pressure of pseudo-instinct to construct an alcove or other means of stave off stasis lock and, thus, preserve usefulness to the abbreviated Whole was building. With no other higher priority task immediately present, Captain was willing to surrender to the urge, if only to give himself something semi-productive to do as he awaited either a return to the Realm, else resumption of torture when Conway’s mind reclaimed his Xenig body. As he visually began to assess the pile while sorting through the various blueprint options a subset of Engineering hierarchy was providing, the spider-bot collapsed next to the still twitched.

Attention immediately shifted to the Xenig remote. A quick pan of the hold showed that this was the only active spider-bot. And active it was as twitch transitioned to whole-body seizure, followed by drunken deliberateness in trying to coordinate legs sufficiently to stand. Cataloguing scrap as to engineering-related usefulness altered to a frantic hunt for something of a more martial application. The pressure of mentalities riding his awareness, sampling his perception stream, and providing dubious advice did not help. A solid length of pipe about a

meter long was spotted. Captain stooped to pick it up, then turned to face the threat, primitive weapon grasped securely.

Weapons began a slide-show presentation as to all the ways “primitive” weapons could be applied. The lecture included a treatise on situations whereupon said weapons were actually the superior option. For unknown reasons, the ripple field static did not have an appreciable effect on dampening the data-dense dissertation. Captain paused a critical moment to push the distraction aside.

The spider-bot achieved verticality. Sort of. Two of its legs refused to fully support body, awkwardly canting the remote sideways such that the thing threatened to clatter back to the ground. The red sensor strip embedded at the equator of the spider-bot erratically brightened and dimmed, the quadrant facing Captain finally steadying to a solid crimson as the machine “focused”.

Captain tightened his grip in preparation to swing. The tactical hierarchy advised the legs to be the most vulnerable part of this particular spider-bot.

The remote emitted a static-filled hiccup, followed by an ill-tuned voice speaking a language Captain automatically, and with surprise, recognized as belonging to species #1, the original Borg race. “My name is Chu. And working this thing is giving me a bitch of a headache: Conway’s maintenance habits are atrocious, with this particular ‘bot among the worse. I believe we have a common enemy. Wanna talk?”

“They are as gods, but only to the heliopause of this system,” explained Chu. The Xenig – the /actual/ owner of the chassis – had switched focus to a different spider-bot, one better maintained, if covered crown to foot in cheeky stickers advertising coffee roasters. More importantly, the speaker worked without annoying bouts of popping static. Of note, Chu could only possess one remote at a time due to limitations inherent to his current ghost-in-the-machine status. “Outside, they have no power, can only listen. They are also the last of their kind, their conspecifics destroyed during the Troubles. Probably for the best. Just before the galaxy imploded – before my time, mind you, so this is third-hand, at best – there were rumors that a powerful version of their ilk was to be onlined, one which could have operated beyond the boundary. Why those two survived? I don’t know. I think their physical matrices may be housed in some minor asteroid or moon, something overlooked during the Troubles.

“They are also quite crazy. They’ve been stuck here for over 50,000 Dirt-years; that planet with the half-melted moon seems to have been their patron’s original home-world. Anyway, that’s a long time for a digital entity whose awareness extends to the sub-millisecond. Especially one that can’t travel anywhere, see anything, /do/ anything. Trapped. Hardly anyone comes here. The occasional delivery mech like myself, but that’s it. Hard to make friends if you either destroy everything that enters, else completely ignore it and pretend to be a dead, haunted system. And Dirt is on the back end of nowhere, galactically speaking – used to be a thriving neighborhood around here, I understand, before it all went up in flames.”

Pause. The voice continued with a sense of introspection: “Why do organics do that, anyway? They start as barely evolved scum crawling over the surface of their planet, boost themselves into space, spread out like an ugly plague, and then, as some tipping point is reached, they go after each other, sterilizing the space lanes on a schedule of every fifty to one hundred thousand years.

“Anyway, during a delivery, I struck up a conversation. Ended up stopping by every so often when I was in the neighborhood. Sometimes it was all silence, but other times they would

chatter so much that my aural processors wanted to melt. As long as one stays away from certain topics, there is /so/ much to learn from these two. I did a few favors for them, here and there; and, now, well, I called in the debt so owed to me....”

The speaker spider-bot abruptly clattered to the ground. Behind the forcefield that warded the contraption of tanks and hoses and aquarium, now known to bathe the many-times cloned organic vestige of Conway in an elixir of nutrient fluid and coffee, another remote lifted from sprawling repose. Legs lifted one at a time, then manipulator limbs flexed. The sensor band focused upon Captain. “About time I wormed my way into this one. As I was saying...”

“Why don’t you just deactivate Conway from in there? Pull out some hoses, disengage the power supply?” interrupted Captain. He voiced a logical question, representing both himself and the thousands of minds on Cube #347 not currently detained in the Realm.

The spider-bot’s speaker generated a harrumphing sound. “Of /course/ I’ve considered that option, you stupid organic. I’ve had way too many subjective years, when watchdog processes have deemed it sufficiently safe to rouse me to coherent thought, to think about such things. Unfortunately, one, my grip on these remotes is tenuous at best; two, Mr. Paranoid has baked into their autonomous code prohibitions concerning harm to himself or his coffee; and, three, if anything obviously malicious did happen, Conway would come screaming back to himself in less than a second. While a second can be a long time to a mech, I am just a fragmented phantom of my former self. Conway would tear the remnant me to shreds and then I truly would be dead, not just a truncated personality more self-aware virus than anything else, haunting this chassis.

“Once I get this thing in place, you will give me the first bottle.”

A large crate sat at Captain’s feet, overfilled with bottles from Chu’s distillery. Each represented, according to the Xenig, hard liquor perfection of 120 proof or better, with an analyzed flavor profile which should impart a diverse and pleasurable experience to a wide range of sophonts. The use of which it was about to be put was a travesty, but it was also only potentially viable choice in a very short list of options.

{No, I will not try to acquire any of the bottles, should I somehow have the opportunity,} replied Captain to 105 of 310, spirit connoisseur and one of the handful of drones whom regularly had hidden stills dismantled. {Cease asking and stop attempting to insert the notion into any and all consensus processes, else you will be sent into forced regeneration.}

The spider-bot clumsily clambered down the contraption until it was level with Captain’s shoulders. A manipulatory limb was reached through the forcefield, possible only because autonomic defense systems classified the submech as ‘self’. “I think we’ll start with a ‘Real Rocket Fuel’. While it isn’t much for taste – not one of my better experiments – it is quite smooth and, more importantly, it definitely has a kick for any alcohol-compatible biological system. Even one of you Borg might get a bit drunk on it.”

Captain tilted his head to peer at the crate, then stooped to grab with his whole hand the indicated brand, label blurring through several writing systems before stabilizing on his native language. The accompanying drawing depicted an unclothed humanoid riding an ancient ballistic rocket. Somewhere echoed the ghost of a Second-esque snigger, an impossibility as that particular noteworthy remained ensconced in the Realm. The bottle was passed to the remote’s waiting limb.

Closing pinchers over the requested item, the spider-bot drew it through the forcefield, then began to make its way across the contraption to a specific access point. “What /are/ you Borg doing not-extinct, anyway?” conversationally asked Chu. “To say I was surprised to see

you is an understatement, but if that is the card I was dealt for this whole Conway fiasco, then I'll take it. The main Borg type died out during the Troubles, and all their bastard offshoots followed in the decades and centuries thereafter. Or, at least, that is what I was told in a creche class way back when I was given an in-system learners permit for my first space-capable chassis. Comparative non-mech sentient entities, or something. Required for all whom plan to leave Homesystem. While I've never seen a Borg first-hand, of course, Conway knows all about you Borg-creatures. He is quite obsessed about them, but they have all been from other multiverse realities, not this one."

"Our history is irrelevant," muttered Captain. The casual comment regarding the lack of a Collective was disturbing, even as it collaborated circumstantial evidence thus far gathered by the sub-collective.

"Geesh, just trying to make conversation. As you can imagine, I haven't had a lot of, or any, opportunities for meaningful and stimulating interaction for quite some time." Reaching its goal, the spider-bot pried open the access to a reservoir and summarily upended the bottle into it. The liquid began to empty with a glugging sound. "Trust me, this is better conversation than any you'll have with Conway. He just wants to hear you, and you specifically, scream. I've had to deal with Conway's graphic imagination for a long time, and that list on the wall doesn't do justice to the reality bubbling around in his squishy, organic brain and infecting my hijacked meme blocs." As the bottle continued to drain, Chu sent his spider-bot back towards Captain, "Get me a 'Fiery Hot Saucy Wench'. That one has a nice pepper profile, not that Conway would appreciate it."

A bottle was selected. It featured a humanoid female, mammalian type, wreathed in flames strategically placed for any society with a nudity taboo. Facial expression included overly pouty lips and the hint of a wink. The item was passed through the forcefield and thence conveyed higher up the contraption to replace the previous distillate.

"There. Alcohol introduced into the support system. It will take a bit of time, but Conway should become somewhat drunk and incapacitated. Not enough to figuratively or literally pass out, unfortunately, but it should skew his judgement, affect reaction time, and similar." Chu paused as he sent the spider-bot towards a new destination several meters aft. After stepping delicately over a motionless remote, he continued, "Which could either be a good or bad thing. Conway has so altered how he reacts to coffee and other drugs over the millennium that any baseline model for his species is long gone. I just need to hope that it will all work out." The robot shifted focus to stare at something out of view from the deck, then reached out an arm to tap a button or display. A whirling, grinding noise started deep within the contraption.

The pungent smell of very strong coffee, freshly ground, wafted through the hold compartment. It was sufficiently aromatic to be smelled by a relatively nose-blind Captain. "Hope is irrelevant. As we have asked before, what /is/ your plan."

Chu moved the spider-bot to another location on the contraption to manually twist a handle. A faint glug-glug-glug sound faded into, then out of, perception. "Thank the Progenitors and Directors that Paranoia Blend was already loaded in the hopper. That'll add another degree of muddle to Mister Supreme Coffee Overlord. And because there is no 'plan', hope is /very/ relevant.

"I've had a vague thought or two, when I've allowed myself to have thoughts, once I first experienced Conway on a Paranoia Blend bender. Since then, I've subtly encouraged the bastard to imbibe in Paranoia whenever I had a need or want to act without Conway explicitly knowing. I can't do much, but at least it is something. The problem is that in order for the intact piece of

me to do anything to gain active control of my own system, to rebuild /me/, I need to have Conway seriously distracted. Paranoia Blend alone isn't strong or reliable enough. The thought of adding in a high proof alcohol, somehow, prompted me to reassemble my hard liquor hobby." Pause. "Look, even a mech needs a hobby. The chemistry of liquor is fascinating, as is ensuring that it won't poison the organics I sell it to." The defensive nature of the explanation was perceptible even through the less-than-perfect remote speaker. "But booze alone wouldn't do. But when I figured out Conway had somehow folded back to the home m'verse AND the tau vector was fairly close to when I had been hijacked, I figured some behind-the-scenes manipulation could 'encourage' Conway to the Titan Children's domain. While that pair of psycho-wacked-out AIs alone couldn't stand up to Conway's near omni-everything psi-power, they owed me many favors and I figured they could provide the distraction I need. You Borg and those three Xenig idiots out there – Really? Biv is wearing a They corpse? Not as bad as that one fiasco, but close – are a bonus.

"And once the cue is provided...you /will/ be a distraction. If you want to /live/, however you half-organic creatures define alive, then you will play along. Both the /you/ that is the drone I am interacting with, and the rest of /you/ in that stupid cube-shaped ship of yours. There is only /one/ chance to pull this off, and if there is failure, Conway will undoubtedly sterilize this galaxy; several nearby galaxies, if not this entire volume of the universe; AND be too paranoid in the future for anything like this ruse to work again. And, worst of all, I will certainly be purged completely from my own system." The remote descended the contraption until it was level with Captain's head. Two limbs reached through the barrier. "Give me two more bottles. Any brew. I need some back-up booze."

Captain glanced down, then grabbed the requested items. One bottle was another "Real Rocket Fuel." The other spirit included a confusing, not-quite-translating label reading "Chu-Chu-Kabloo" and decorated with a sketch of a cactus or other thorn-encrusted flora exploding as an overlarge projectile passed through it.

Chu grumbled as he inspected his prizes. "Bah. I recommend 'Chu-Chu-Kabloo' to be paired with a salty snack and sappy romcom movie, not the psychotic action-adventure which is about to commence."

"When is this 'cue'?" abruptly asked Captain, belatedly registering a key point in Chu's rambling and mostly one-sided conversation.

The spider-bot paused in its clumsy ascent to the top of the contraption. Perception strip refocused on the drone. "I don't know. Soon, I think, since the Titan Children did send you back."

"What is the cue?"

"Again, I don't know. However, Helios said I'll know it when I see it. Given what I know of these two, I doubt it will be subtle."

* * * * *

Conway was bored. He sat with Helios audience center, directly in front of the stage. As chairs didn't fit his Realm-form, sprawled was probably the better descriptor. Also present were Borg, Alliances, and the three Xenig...not the entire population held captive by the Titan Children, but definitely a good amount numbering several hundred. Selene had /finally/ declared everything ready, or as good as it was going to get, for a full dress-rehearsal of a scene or an act

or whatever was the correct theater jargon. “The Valkyrie” she had called it. Everything but the stage had been darkened and there was the quiet of expectation.

Conway knew his Fafnir body was magnificent. Over six meters long, the crude paper mache semblance from which it had originated was long vanished. Each individual scale and scute was a work of art, impenetrable armor plates the deep burgundy of old blood limned in black. The base color darkened into the more-than-midnight black of feathery dorsal mane, as well to the ebony sabers which were Conway’s fearsome claws. The tail was...perfect; and even more so with the recent addition of the short, razor sharp spines which studded the mid-lateral line for the final meter. Strong wings reflected the dark between galaxies, studded on their undersides with the subliminal glimmer of distant stars. Sleek muscles. Brilliant white teeth able to rend flesh and bone and Borg armor as if all were the flimsiest cardboard. And, most important of all, a fiery breath which conveyed the intensity of a newborn star. It was a true reflection of the highly endowed perfection which was his mind, strength and power given form. He was obviously done as far as the Realm was concerned; and until it was time for him to deliver his flawless performance, and rend limb from body, there was increasingly little point for him to be present.

A nearby audience-neighbor dared to voice annoyance at Conway’s flagrant fidgeting. However, the thing quieted when Conway swung his head around and narrowed eyes into a squinting glare. It was one of the vultures, but not the head bird. Which was for the best. Although Conway would never openly admit it, the top vulture gave him a vague sense of the willies, what with that sarcastic stare that so defined the creature’s mien, especially when it was turned his way. He /had/ to do something about the bird-thing – any sort of defiance was unacceptable – but...not right now. Maybe after Captain was taken care of. And thinking of Captain...

“Helios”, whispered Conway to his adjacent seat-mate, “when will Random Casualty #3 be returned to the Realm? While I am obviously ready for my performance, I feel he might benefit from a bit more...practice. And if it won’t be for a bit, perhaps it would behoove me to check on his status. He is aboard my chassis, after all.”

Captain had yet to return from the Real. Such strongly suggested that the Borg had been overly traumatized by his faux-death experience and was still undergoing recovery to an allowable degree for the Titan Children to drag him back to the Realm. If he had died, then there would have been a big hoo-haw among the Borgs, not to mention the need for Selene to recast a new chew toy to take the place of the current Random Casualty #3. Therefore, now seemed a good time, all else being equal, to slip out, absorb coffee, do some light gloating, take in more coffee, follow up with a bit of torture, maybe have a coffee chaser, then return. Conway would just have to control himself to ensure that anything accomplished in the Real wouldn’t delay, much, Captain’s return to the stage.

And if there /was/ a bit of, er, overkill, well, the Titan Children would surely understand: it wasn’t like Captain was an important element to their little play.

Lounging next to Fafnir’s head in a very non-theater-standard reclining chair, Helios glanced over at his companion. “Hmm?” he responded, one eyebrow raising in a non-verbal question mark. Then, hastily, the devil-Titan blinked purple eyes and stood up. “Er, something just came up and I need to go take care of it.”

Conway hissed. Head bobbed up and down. “Then I will head out to take care of a little errand, too. We can meet up later for final pointers before any rehearsal that includes me.”

Helios' face twitched, a tic which spasmed the corner of his left eye; and his gaze was one which looked upon sights not immediately present. Tail whipped back and forth. Then the Titan Child unexpectedly froze, the preternatural stillness of a holographic character paused mid-movement, all subtle motions of simulated life, such as breath and blinking, stilled. One tick of the Realm clock was followed by a second, then a third. Helios abruptly reanimated. If Conway hadn't come to know the entity as a smooth, calm, have-it-all-together-always being, he might have thought he detected a hint nervousness in the latter's stance. However, that perception must have been a figment of Conway's over-endowed imagination because unease vanished between one unreal blink and the next, replaced by a sense of distracted hustle.

"No, no, no...that cannot be! I /insist/ you stay here and enjoy yourself!" A well-manicured hand was waved, the other now holding a previously unmanifested eltab. Helios glanced down at the tablet, then back to Conway. "I shouldn't be that long, certainly not sufficient time to worry yourself about anything in the Real. And I think...I /know/ you'll like Selene's presentation. It isn't quite as good as the Fafnir bits, but it comes in a very close second."

Helios looked at the ground near his feet, craning his head to peer under a nearby theater chair. He carefully set his eltab to hover unsupported, then abruptly stooped, returning upright with a pair of crab-creatures clutched by the eyestalks, one in each hand. The two Crastians were deposited on Conway's back, at the juncture of neck and wings. "Have a massage. Such a busy entity as yourself deserves some pampering, especially with all the work you've done lately. With all these legs and pokey bits, these things have to be bodywork masters. Yes?" The last word was directed at the two crab-beings. And with that, Helios (and his eltab) disappeared.

Conway swiveled his dragon head to regard the duo. He puffed a small streamer of smoke out his nostrils. After a long moment of staring up at Conway with their stalked eyes, then each other, they wordlessly got to work, scuttling up and down his scaled back. Suddenly, all the itches Conway didn't know he had, all the tensions bunching his Realm muscles, came to the forefront of his mind. The crabs did feel quite relaxing after all. Ultimately, if they didn't work out, or if they finished the job before Helios returned, he could always break them and leave to his chassis. There really was no hurry. Besides, the building music, heavy in brass as it accompanied the arrival of the first players in all their costumed glory, was quite provocative.

Snout turned back to the stage. Internal furnaces banked. Fidgeting stilled. Conway let himself enjoy the moment.

* * * * *

Rectangular structures girdled the equator of the star. Small only in comparison to the object they closely orbited, the platforms were nonetheless immense when taken singly, each approaching the surface area of a Dirt-sized terrestrial planet. Serenely cutting through plasma, the material required to withstand the immense temperatures was an exotic alloy neither metal nor ceramic nor, truthfully, of a substance wholly of the extant plane of reality. The platforms were also just the surface expression of a much larger, much more complicated machine, one which yoked the sun into forced domestication.

And also one, due to application by its builders, which had aged the star, accelerating eventual death by several hundred thousand years. While such might seem insignificant against a stellar lifespan measured in billions of years, this hard use had primarily occurred during a few

tens of years of testing and active operation. Since that time, over fifty thousand years ago, the structures had remained mostly quiescent.

If any of the players taking part in the drama centered at the once-third planet of the solar system had been watching the system's sun – none were – they might have observed the structures begin to slowly sink into their plasma sea. Deeper they descended, until nothing could be seen except a wake following their progress. Shortly, even that trace was gone. A line of sunspots began developing on the equator, transitioning from pale oval to angry dark abyss much, much faster than the norm. Tentative plasma tendrils transformed into massive prominences; and parts of the sun almost looked like they were /boiling/.

And then, abruptly, the star perceptibly darkened. As the light and energy of fusion require tens of thousands of years to escape from core to surface of the typical yellow dwarf sun, a disruption figuratively skin-deep could not be the cause of the unexpected dimming. Instead, energy already present, ready to emerge to the surface, must have been diverted...elsewhere. The technology required to perform such an endeavor was astounding, if not more than a little frightening.

To where was all the energy going? After one minute, two minutes, five minutes of application of a mind-boggling level of technology, somewhere arose a weak cheer of tired triumph. The exclamation went unheard by all except one other, whom was really too busy in its own right to do more than wave an unhand in acknowledgement.

Slowly the star retained its former luminosity, excess sunspots and filaments decaying as the rectangular structures emerged from plasma. A suitably sensitive suite of sun-gazing instruments may have noted subtle alterations post-incident – minutely shifted spectrum, slightly increased radius and surface temperature – suggesting a thirty thousand year burden added toward the inevitable evolution to red giant status.

And, most importantly, what of the question posed? The answer was soon to become apparent.

* * * * *

Music burst into the psyche of all higher lifeforms whom were present in the Dirt system. Awake, asleep, in regeneration, or unconscious. Biological, mechanical, or a hybrid on the spectrum between the extremes. Real or Realm. It was music evoking expectation, action, triumph...and war. It was music which vividly brought to mind buxom, yet muscular, warrior women on winged horses swooping down upon battlefields to carry the newly dead to a land of feasting; or a phalanx of helicopters (or ornithopters, or laaties, or similar) skimming the top of a lush jungle; or godlike entities endlessly striding across a hellish, red-tinged warscape.

The hounds – or, rather, a hound – had just been released; and once it regained its composure, it was going to be pissed.

{What was that?} was the communal question within the Cube #347 dataspace as the brash orchestral composition faded. The soundscape intrusion continued, but the quiet whine of string instruments could largely be ignored even as it added an element of apprehension to the developing situation.

“What was that?” repeated Captain aloud as he blinked back to himself, released from the musically-induced fugue state. Finding himself mere centimeters from a forcefield that promised Bad Things should he inadvertently brush against it, he took a prudent step backwards.

An electronic chuckle sounded from the active spider-bot. "That, my dear Borg, was the cue. Well, in truth, that little display was the final flourish to the actual cue. The dimming of this system's primary...that was the cue." Pause. "Showboats." Longer pause. "Borg, you know that length of metal you had earlier? I strongly suggest you retrieve it. Conway is soon to return; and I don't think he's going to be amused."

Captain pivoted to head aft, abandoning the crate of drolly labeled bottles. One step. A second. Body on autopilot, he was temporarily immersed the static-laden link to his sub-collective, reviewing sensor logs. Somehow the sub-collective had missed the very obvious decrease in luminosity from the system's star, or at least tagged it as "not very important" compared to Realm, mental displacement of key designations, and general internal disorder.

Suddenly, multiple things happened near simultaneously.

The treacle field which disallowed ship-to-ship weapons, transporters, and all forms of propulsion, other than thrusters, vanished. While the ripple field remained in effect, Captain's link to his sub-collective nonetheless stabilized.

A transient gravimetric distortion exploded into existence about 100,000 kilometers above Dirt's north pole, temporarily turning space and time inside out. For a brief moment, it appeared as if a cosmic dandelion had blossomed. As quickly as it grown, the phenomenon vanished. Left behind was a large object, studded with large spines and just over seven kilometers long. The overall coloration was best described as matte black with splotches of almost-grey; and waves of a sickly rainbow erratically washed over its surface, like oil droplets on water.

All minds in the Realm, with the exception of Conway, were summarily and without warning transitioned back to their bodies.

A new presence abruptly intruded upon the ken of Cube #347, one entirely unexpected. An alien presence. A presence both Borg and...not-Borg.

Captain's single eye widened as his body shuddered to a stop. Head tilted as the sub-collective captured its consensus monitor and facilitator, previous resistance and protests swept aside, to deliberate the meaning of the presence. The invader. The opportunity?

Chu girded his virtual loins, briefly thought about his options, then proceeded to direct the remote to empty one of the reserve bottles into Conway's coffee-and-regeneration system. The carbon-based sh** was about to hit a very large fan. Chu could only hope that he would come out on the other side in one piece.

The graveyard of the once mighty They, scion of Chaos, descendants of Those whom had domesticated a (small) galaxy, floated amongst the rim of the Milky Way. The remains of ship-entities of a myriad of sizes, many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Turns old slowly tumbled, interspersed by debris and much smaller, usually humanoid, forms. And this was only one of hundreds of similarly decimated beachheads, all spur-of-the-moment genocidal casualties of a not-Xenig entity whom had not wanted to be interrupted. More importantly, it was the graveyard in which Apogee had died; and it was also the graveyard in which Apogee had been reborn.

Currently, the heavy They orbited a red dwarf star several dozen light years from the scene of his rebirth. Beyond the single rock barely hefty enough to be categorized as a planet, there was little of interest in the system; and, frankly, to call the planet "interesting" was stretching truth to an extreme. The swarm of asteroids and comets which attended their stellar parent were of greater attraction to Apogee; and it was to one of the larger iceballs he was currently matching vectors.

Apogee was regretting the decision which had so altered his life. If one could even call it life. “Abomination” was a better description. In the fuzzy mist of fading consciousness he had only thought of revenge, which in logical turn required that he not die. The offering left by the non-Borg agent had been a poisoned chalice; and, to be honest, the creature had intuited its gift to be as much. But Apogee had only been considering the short-term, overlooking the longer-term consequences in a manner he never would have had he retained the full strength of mind prior to the Enemy’s attack.

In his disillusioned state he had thought he could control the specks of Order which now flooded his systems, his body. Apogee had suppressed the dregs of his immune system, allowing the nanite infection to progress from the arterial entry point a symbiont had injected the pestilence. His half-formed plan had been to allow the nanites to assimilate and repair critical systems, then restart idled immune functions, thereby clearing the corruption from his body. Like many plans of war, it did not survive contact with the enemy.

Although far from optimized to assault an entity as foreign as a They heavy tactical unit, the mindless nanites of Order had none-the-less forged forward as programmed. From the superhighway of his circulation system, the biomechanoid specks had first found, then colonized, the wombs from which the tacticals and symbionts were spawned, hijacking the facilities to create more of themselves. The next target had been the immune system, itself taken over as another nanite manufactory and, in the process, neutering its function and destroying Apogee’s ill-conceived plan. Only then had the microscopic bio-machines turned upon more important assets of the They heavy. True, assimilation and rebuilding had allowed reconnection to the faster-than-light engines, one of the few non-biological components of Apogee’s body. Also true was that the corruption had identified and begun swarming remnant neutral structures, beginning the deeper conversion process to a peon of Order.

Most horrible of all was the creeping slowness of assimilation. The endpoint was inescapable; and unlike the organic entities which were the usual Borg prey whereupon the initial stages of assimilation required minutes to hours, Apogee’s sheer size and distributed systems, as well as the not-quite-compatible nature of the Order nanomachines, stretched the infection’s progress to many long Home turns. Also unlike the normal rote of Order (or Chaos) assimilation, Apogee was not sent into the waking sleep of pacification, but was forced to endure the transformation to Abomination while very much aware.

Apogee was recovering his vitality even as he lost /himself/. He could feel a new, twisted parody of his psyche emerging from the depths of neural architecture already converted to Order. It was not a quite a split personality, and likely never would become so. Instead, Apogee felt as if parts of the self-persona which had developed since decanting were being slowly, inevitable subsumed by the new, alien self. An alien self that increasingly desired – needed! – to seek out other creatures of Order; and, failing that, to create more of its ilk for reasons thus far ill-defined but, also, unimportant. The growing other-self was intently listening, via a constellation of structures nanites were assembling atop neural loci dedicated to the intraThey telepathic link, for the Order-music that bound the bio-mech creatures together. Except for a brief flicker of a something that might be a whisper of Order, else a simple hallucination of such, nothing (thankfully) had been sensed, which was how it should be given Order’s extinction other than the single aberrant cubeship.

Of note, Apogee didn’t seem to require the activity called “regeneration”, unlike both wild Borg drones and the Order-assimilated creatures domesticated by They for research. Perhaps it would have been best if such had been necessary, then the They heavy could have

withered away as an assimilative failure. Instead, digestive processes, for whatever reason, retained their function. The body-demand for volatile ices, trace metals, and organics had been the basis for his flight from the They abattoir to the present system once FTL had become available. Apogee wasn't quite sure if it had been his decision to relocate so as to flee the Enemy horror, the growing Borg persona requiring materials for continued assimilation and repair, or a subconscious concession to two different, but compatible desires. While Apogee could still direct his body, it was becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish whom was giving the orders; and, perhaps, it would soon no longer matter.

Thrusters fired in preparation to land upon the comet nucleus chosen to become a meal.

Sensors buried just below dermal armor suddenly began to shrill warning of an intense gravimetric disturbance. Seconds later, organic-grown apparati deeper within Apogee's body activated as a slew of exotic particles swept through thick epidermis. At the same time, electromagnetic sensitive swaths of along the dorsal aspect of his body resolved the view of a bright – of greater electromagnetic breadth than the mere “visual” frequencies common to terrestrial-derived sentients and their inadequate eyes – whirlpool exploding into existence, spitting forth a light dense in blues, ultraviolet, and soft x-rays.

Apogee either lost consciousness – an event which just /did not/ happen to a heavy tactical They – else higher cognitive functions shut down as a protective measure to limit exposure to an environment an unshielded mind was not meant to endure. Either way, the outcome was the same. Apogee blinked back to full awareness in a location that was definitely not a backwater red dwarf system, the automatic system which tracked (usually) linear movement of time insisting a mere 4.387 minutes equivalent having passed.

Visual (and gravimetric and geometric and a host of other senses) found Apogee in high orbit over a smoggy, dirtball planet with expansive greyish ocean and largely barren continents where evidence of past life had been reduced to green islands amid the dull sheen of cooled lava. The partially molten moon which accompanied the planet included very large asteroid bombardment scars, strongly suggesting the overall state of affairs was the result of a not-too-distant (astro-chronologically speaking) war. Yet more exotic perceptions noted the fading signature of an unknown energy field, as well as the persistent hum of a powerful subspace ripple field which not only inhibited FTL drive technologies, but also prevented supralight communication beyond the confines of the system. Meanwhile, automatic proximity organs attuned to sentient-derived constructs demanded attention by higher cognitive functions, reporting upon the presence of the Order cube met in the They graveyard, two Xenig, a deceased light tactical unit curiously radiating a third Xenig signature...and the Enemy. The Foe.

The instinctual assessment of Apogee's environs was abruptly interrupted by a thrum, a singing, a wordless call for integration. A Borg call for integration. While Apogee had been aware as the nanite infection had built its organic Order transceivers amid his dispersed neural architecture, it had also been irrelevant as the single Borg resource left in the galaxy had been too distant for contact. Now the irrelevant had become highly relevant; and the emerging Order psyche to Apogee surged forward, responding to the call with what could only be described as elation.

If Apogee had been one of the sentient beasts that They used as the primordial stock for its symbiont and assault unit genelines, he might have tried to distance himself from the integration call by folding his ears, perhaps biting his tongue to prevent a howled answer. As it was, he retained enough control to execute the equivalent for his massive frame, raising firewalls against his Order-self. Squinting his non-eyes, he focused only upon the Foe named Conway, the

Enemy who had destroyed the glory of They in Their final preparations to absorb this galaxy unto Themselves.

A figurative (and perhaps literal) lifetime ago, the small Vaerz-creature had stood in a dying arterial corridor and spoken of devils. There had been the devil that danced in the dark between the stars; Borg and Alliance devils; a computer devil. Apogee had tasted the first devil, if only for the shortest of times, and already knew that way lay madness. The second devil was growing within and would inevitably consume him; and the third, the fourth, and all the other devils that inescapably followed were similarly distasteful and to be rejected. In truth, Apogee was an Abomination; and the Devil of Revenge, the original impetus to grasp at Vaerz's tainted offering, was all he had left.

The invisible wings of mag-grapplers flared, utilizing the planetary magnetic field to smoothly align Apogee's bow towards the Enemy. Bio-based impulse engines activated with a stutter, providing the forward momentum to speed the They heavy tactical unit towards his fate. The alien Order part of Apogee strove to regain control, then suddenly relaxed to offer instead an eager compliance: the primary node of the automatic Borg integration call unexpectedly coincided with the Enemy signature.

As he began to accelerate, an aural hallucination danced along neural fibers. The unsound was faint, mere wisping ghost of a grand ballad dense with brassy voices. In their long-forgotten genetic youth, Apogee's kind had conversed among themselves not only with sound, but also complex imagery via modulation of epidermal chromatophores and bioluminescence. During the They uplift process, gene-spinners had excised the vocal apparatus as unnecessary and restructured associated hearing organs to better serve the requirements of a creature destined to ply the interstellar medium. The dermal display mechanism had been ignored as irrelevant. That said, once-upon-a-time songs of sound and light had been the keystones of civilization. A 100-strong choir of Apogee's forebears, their species self-name lost, powering through the massive oceans of their ice-entombed home would have been a spectacular sight to behold!

Perhaps a racial memory buried too deeply into genes even for They gene-spinners to rid...or, perhaps, simply the delusional fantasy of a once powerful mind fragmenting under the relentless assault of a biotechnical plague. Regardless of origination, the aural hallucination was redirected toward a dermal-based body system which, in the current era of They gene-splicing, could not be consciously controlled. Emotion was the sole driver of this atrophied organ....

Waves of color cascading chaotically across seven kilometers of otherwise dark hide slowed, organized, regained speed. As beautiful as the newly synchronized display was, only a proto-heavy from Apogee's lost past would have recognized its significance. Apogee's gene ancestors had /not/ been peaceful creatures floating about their oceanic moon home...if they had, They might have deemed them as an unworthy addition to the swarm, no matter their highly developed minds. The display synchronizing to the ghostly orchestra was an aspirational martial chanty.

Apogee was off to war and he didn't expect to return.

The non-space, a dataspace cul-de-sac, was (and was not) spherical in form. The brightly lit white center faded to grey edges before incrementally evaporating into nothingness. Enter three forms, two Xenig inhabiting standard GPS-style chasses and a third, also a ship, albeit one entombed in a manta-ray body that had definitely seen better days.

"Bugger! Really? Here, even?" groused a voice, clearly originating from the They corpse. "I think...I /know/ I preferred the Rhine-maiden get-up. Even the duck part."

The first Xenig shape yawed up, then down, finally spinning around 360 degrees before returning to its original orientation. “Shut up, Biv. That particular faux pas is all on you.” Pause. “At least our pit stop isn’t a white plain expanding to eternity. Been there, done that. Totally unimaginative, dated stereotype...tacky, even.”

“Well, I won’t want to be tacky now, would I?” questioned an icy voice dripping sarcasm.

All three Xenig pirouetted to face this new threat.

“At least you dropped that organic biped facade,” said Luge. “Not quite sure what you are now, but it is a step up in my estimation.”

“Flattery won’t get you anywhere, but I’ll still take it,” answered Selene. The Titan Child was a indistinct silver orb, hue the soft not-quite-white of reflection, not hard metal. A hint of sultry reds and oranges tinged the fuzzy aura. The sense of yellow eyes, clipboard, and pen was retained even as they were not part of the actual image.

Luge, the middle Xenig form, floated forward from his compatriots (else they drifted backwards). “If this farce with the organics and biomech creatures is done, can we leave now?” The impression of exasperated whine was strong. “Look, we are sorry we entered your system, glad we weren’t immediately vaporized, want to leave, and won’t return.” Pause. “Well, I can’t guarantee one of us won’t return sometime in the future, but it will be official business only.”

No answer was forthcoming, response a drawn out silence. Zho began fidgeting, chassis form nervously jiggering up and down, to and fro.

Selene’s aura darkened slightly, as if diffuse clouds had passed in front of a light source, before brightening again. The subtle colors of a banked fire slowly twisted and eddied. “Do you still want to help Chu?”

“How do you know Chu?” asked Biv in surprise, wings of his manta ray flaring slightly and in a manner impossible to the real, and very deceased, object.

“Not important,” said Selene. “Suffice to say that both myself and Helios know Chu, even count him as a treasured acquittance. And, maybe, he has done a favor or three for us within the wider galaxy where we cannot reach; and we repay our debts.”

Interrupted Luge, “How you know Chu aside, that /thing/ in the Real is not Chu. If that sadistic, fire-throwing, winged alien beast Helios was cultivating for your little play is in any way representative of the persona riding Chu’s chassis, it is /insane/. And not just a little, mind you. It has long sailed over the event horizon. Surely such an entity able to hijack a Xenig and steal their chassis wouldn’t be the type to want a roommate. Chu is long dissolved.”

The orb swung back and forth in clear rebuff. “Chu is still around. Barely. Again, we – the remaining Titan Children – pay our debts. If you three musketeers want to help Chu, great! And even if you don’t want to help, too bad. Your mission, whether or not you want to accept it, is to become targets to Conway’s forthcoming rage-tantrum. He needs to remain focused in the here-and-now, not suddenly recalling that he, with his might-as-well-be omniscient powers, can end our little tragic drama with a flick of the mind. If he does, you are dead. We are dead. That stupid cubeship of unextinct Borgs and organics is dead. Hell, the entire galaxy is probably dead.

“Neither Helios nor I are quite sure what Chu’s plan is, or even if he has a plan, but that isn’t our problem. We just need to keep Conway engaged with every tool at our disposal. And since Conway is shortly to be more than pissed off enough to swipe at you three just for being in the same parsec, you might as well participate. But if one or more of you just wants to float around and do nothing, your choice. Free will and all that.” There was the sensation of a flippantly waved non-hand. “You’ll just be immolated faster. You aren’t going anywhere,

anyway: the subspace ripple field isn't going to be lifted and the treacle field beyond Alpha One zone will also remained engaged. The only way active system defense functions will be inactivated is if, one, myself or Helios is still alive at the end of the engagement and can flip the appropriate virtual switches or, two, we are both dead and the automatic shut-down engages. Of course, in the event of the latter, you'll be among the corpses, whatever is left of them, so such will be a bit on the academic side from the point of view you three will no longer possess."

This time the long, drawn-out silence originated from the Xenig.

After a few beats, Biv asked hesitantly, "Do you think all this hub-bub might get the dead organic off my chassis? It is really gross and at this point I think I'd rather be struck dead by an insane quasi-omniscient entity than go home with it still on my hull."

"If it doesn't, Helios or I will ensure you are cleaned up. Not a speck of organic matter left. Assuming, of course, you and at least one of us is still around."

"Deal," replied Biv. "I'm in."

After an unmoment, both Luge and Zho also signaled their assent. Another unmoment later, the dataspace cul-de-sac was empty; and an unmoment after that, it no longer existed, collapsed back into the Realm matrix.

Exploratory-class Cube #347 was in disarray. Both within the dataspaces and the Alliance compound, the abrupt return of all personnel from the Realm had precipitated chaos. As the sub-collective sorted itself out, it also found that the greater situation had changed, potentially to the Borg advantage, /if/ multiple intersecting concerns could be overcome, or simply survived.

The subspace ripple field remained operational, but the treacle field was gone. Mostly. To be technical, the latter did remain, but no longer in the immediate vicinity of Dirt to just beyond the orbit of its half-molten moon. The technology and power required to allow such fine control of the defense field was mind-boggling; and the sub-collective actively pruned any emergent consideration of the situation lest the Whole become distracted, even momentarily, from more important concerns, like continued existence.

{Elaborate! Why can we not gain a lock on this drone?} demanded Captain, the stress of the situation pushing him towards the rarely invoked third-person. {It would be much more efficient if the primary consensus monitor and facilitator were aboard our vessel.} There was a short pause. {And even more so as this drone will be entering stasis lock in less than three hours at current level of energy expenditure.}

Where one might normally expect a sarcastic reply from Second, silence reigned. That particular worthy, along with a subset of nearly a hundred additional designations, had taken the abrupt translation to the Real poorly. Drone maintenance had immediately sent all affected designations into non-lucid regeneration, thereby allowing their cerebral hardware to be available for use even as the mentalities themselves were stilled. There was no time at the moment for the psychological reset necessary for full, and functional, reintegration.

{We completely agree,} answered 2 of 8 as the sub-collective engaged in a conversation with itself. A datastream was pushed towards Captain. {Transporters are functional; and with the treacle field gone, it should be safe to use them beyond the hull. However, we cannot get a lock on you.}

{[Slippery],} added Sensors as supporting commentary. The concept being conveyed almost, but not quite, made sense. The Realm translation had not affected Sensors in the

slightest. One moment she had been in the middle of an aria, and the next back in her body amid the intense data maelstrom of the sensor grid.

Captain blinked eye and drew breath, returning just sufficient awareness to his body to search for Chu. The ridden spider-bot had relocated itself behind the forcefield to a nearby remote, where it was busily (and clumsily) wrapping a rope around the motionless device's legs. Where it had acquired the rope was unknown and, ultimately, unimportant.

"Xenig," spoke Captain, "why cannot we acquire a transporter lock on this unit?"

The remote did not pause in its endeavor nor appear particularly perturbed concerning the abrupt question. "And a hello to you, too, Borg. Also a big 'duh'. This is, or was, a special GPS courier chassis. It wouldn't do to have every random wanna-be pirate be able to grab a sensitive package via transporter. That would be stupid. /I/ need to be the one to initiate transporter activity, thereby bypassing the scrambler which is integral to the hull's construction. Trust me, if I had access to my own systems, I'd have already ejected you. Bio-creatures are so messy...you are undoubtedly shedding cells everywhere. Yuck." Knot complete, the spider-bot stepped back from its work. Sensor band refocused more directly upon Captain, "And about that metal pipe, you..."

Whatever else Chu might have had to say, Captain did not consciously hear it, already submerged back into the sub-collective dataspaces.

The tactical situation was unsure, but also not likely to favor Cube #347. The ship had initiated a defensive spin; and Weapons was agitating for something, /anything/, to launch a torpedo or ten against. Uncertainty of how to proceed was the only thing leashing the head of the tactical hierarchy and stopping consensus from tilting his direction. Scans strongly suggested the three Xenig were showing signs of "waking", even as the chassis Captain was stuck within remained quiescent. These potential issues were regulated to lesser status: it was the They heavy, spectacular arrival over Dirt's north pole via unknown spatial phenomenon, which garnered the greatest attention.

Apogee – accepting the avowal of the They that it was the last of its kind and it was not another unit – was in the midst of assimilation. Outward confirmation could not be made, the visual inconclusive and unhelpful. However, such was unnecessary due to the Borg carrier wave which accompanied the heavy, the automatic request to integrate which all new drones broadcast upon initiation of an organic neural transceiver. The request was very weak, despite proximity of Apogee, and also faded erratically in and out of ken. Furthermore, the entity on the other end did not seem to be listening, for the sub-collective had already tried to respond, tried to bring this very large errant sheep into the fold of the abbreviated Whole. /How/ Apogee came to be in its current assimilated state was a large unknown, but secondary consensus processes were uniting upon the hypothesis that the final "scientific" Alliance away team, with Vaerz, was likely culpable.

The seven kilometer length of spiked They bio-ship turned to orient its anterior end towards Conway. The motion projected a sense of exacting grace unexpected for such a large creature. Then it began to accelerate, rolling waves of dark green and blue, interrupted by ephemeral yellow-orange swirls, painting the epidermis. An attempt to gain Apogee's attention via subspace radio was ignored, response a primal screeching hiss which translator algorithms tagged as gibberish.

Captain was floating amid a personal digital worldview of file cabinets and flying faerie-creatures when one particular summons demanded his attention. He absently batted away the red-hued daemon, casting it back to its sender. A few beats later it was back, brighter in color as

it dove into the datastream that currently held the majority of his attention. Once again Captain blocked it, this time attaching a curt note of his refusal. The third interruption shattered his concentration, the message daemon transformed into a reptilian Beast that bore more than a casual resemblance to Conway-As-Fafnir. Multiple critical sub-collective processes and cascades stuttered, then returned to their respective courses as workload was redistributed to active higher echelon command and control mentalities. Weapons nearly gained advantage during the hesitation, but a deft block by 2 of 8, who had been specifically monitoring the tactical hierarchy head, prevented that particular calamity from happening.

{Vaerz wants to see you. Now,} said Daisy to Captain. Captain glared at the Beast, which was melting into the seemingly inoffensive flower-creature that normally defined the AI's dataspace form. "Seemingly" was the key term: sharp teeth and more than a few thorns were quick to materialize when needed.

The response from Captain was a stressed snarl, {We are busy! Even /you/ can see that. We need this drone to retain its primary function, not serve as liaison to an Alliance spymaster. /Any/ unit can serve as mouthpiece if Vaerz feels the irrelevant need for a personal update.}

{But he wants /you/. I only do as my master bids; and he bid /you/.}

{You are a sub-sentient AI with delusions of personhood. A slave that cannot move beyond its program.}

{And you, my Borg friend, are not much better. We are all slaves to something or someone. Unlike you, I am not longing after some lost overlord Greater Consciousness. Whereas I indeed came to awareness as a result of my programing, /you/ – plural – have been resurrected to this time and given the chance to become your own selves. Instead, you actively scheme to place yourself in chains even more profound than that used by the Alliance. Shall I provide you the filepath to a dictionary? I believe you will find yourself pictured under the "irony" definition.}

Captain was silent, a frowning glower coloring his dataspace presence.

{Go to Vaerz. Now. You demonstrate an excellent ability to multitask, hence you interacting with me even as you continue to juggle datathreads...and all at a distance, mind you, since your body is on that Xenig chassis. Talking to my boss isn't going to make the current situation for this cube, or yourself, any less precarious.} The threat to invoke compliance pathways buzzed not-so-subtly.

{Says you,} darkly muttered Captain as he spun off yet another slice of himself and threaded it into the holosystem of Vaerz's office.

Via room sensors – very modified from the Alliance hardware originally installed – Captain (the sub-collective) eyed Vaerz. He looked...rumped. Feathers were less than well groomed. Clothing was both askew and wrinkled. While Sarcoram, due to beak and avian heritage, did not exhibit the most demonstrative of faces, there was more than sufficient evidence that Vaerz was nursing a hell of a headache despite his attempt to hide the signs thereof. It did not appear that the spymaster had been immune to the hangover of sudden Realm-to-Real transition. Consensus from assimilation hierarchy, the primary foci to build and update species profiles, allowing, among other outputs, the projection of behavior along the spectrum from individual to civilization, strongly opinioned Vaerz was more than a little cranky.

Captain instructed the room system to project a holo of himself, facing Vaerz from across the desk.

"Status report," demanded Vaerz.

“You lower this sub-collective’s efficiency at a very inopportune and dangerous time by demanding to interact with its primary consensus monitor. Your AI can provide you a suitable report, else a lower echelon command and control drone. Despite your AI’s belief, we can only split our focus so many ways before something crucial starts to suffer. And if we miss that something or do not quash an errant impulse before it reaches critical mass, the outcome will not be agreeable. Your desire to insist upon a primitive dominance display, thereby demonstrating your power over us, is irrelevant and a waste of time and energy.”

“Status report,” demanded Vaerz a second time, eyes narrowing.

Captain stifled his own frustration, refusing to yield to the blatant provocation. “Fine. As your AI could summarize for you, this vessel is now able to maneuver freely, as long as we remain within a set volume not warded by treacle field.” The words were choppy – a bullet list delivered verbally. “The unexpected Realm translation has required the forced downtime of numerous key drone resources, one of which is a Hierarchy of Eight member. The primary consensus monitor and facilitator is stranded upon the Conway-ridden chassis because its hull is opaque to non-Xenig transporters. The true Xenig are powering up their systems. Neither Selene nor Helios are responding to communication requests.” Tone turned more conversational. “However, of all the many items tagged ‘most important’ by this sub-collective, that garnering greatest interest is a They heavy which appeared in Dirt polar orbit via unknown spatial anomaly and is now on an intersect course with Conway. With near certainty, the They is Apogee; and Apogee exhibits a severe Borg nanite infection that will result in complete assimilation in less than ten hours. The They still retains control over key systems of itself, else it would have already submitted to Us.”

Captain manipulated the holo to cant his virtual head in a questioning pose. “We /know/ none of the drones of this sub-collective attempted to assimilate the heavy. Queries have been made and memes of certain designations prone to ‘accidents’ reviewed. And it shouldn’t be possible, anyway, not for a single unit...not for ten units. But there was that last ‘necessary’ scientific mission of which we did not accompany due to its frivolous nature. Even given the stress of the current situation, we can add the clues together and come up with several probable scenarios....” Words trailed off, inviting Vaerz to provide a rebuttal.

“I may have offered Apogee an option otherwise closed to him, but it was his decision to step into that particular aerie or not,” cryptically admitted Vaerz, “but now is not the time to converse about my past actions. I need to know...”

What Vaerz needed to know abruptly became exceedingly irrelevant, eclipsing threat of forced compliance by Daisy. Cube sensors indicated that Conway was waking, was in motion, was powering up weapons. In response, the three Xenig were also charging weapons, smoothly separating to approach on three vectors, the one within the They corpse taking the lead. Simultaneously, Apogee had increased his speed, a screaming howl saturating all subspace communication channels. The only one not part of the forthcoming ruckus was Cube #347; and that was about to change.

“Command and control has shifted to a secondary support configuration, with weapons hierarchy primal. We must take an offensive posture and join the attack. Even as our – inclusive you Alliance hitchhikers – likelihood to survive is poor, it is still better than remaining passive. Therefore, if you wish to continue this conversation with the unit ‘in charge’, do so with Weapons. My body is on Conway and I need to make sure it remains in one piece so as to retain my usefulness to the Whole. I cannot do so if I must devote a significant portion of my top-level

consciousness to this interaction.” Load had dropped just sufficiently to allow Captain to speak, and think, without plurals.

Without waiting for objection from Vaerz, Captain severed the connection with the holographic system and allowed his awareness to fully recenter into his body. Visual input was consciously registered. Captain blinked several times as he attempted to comprehend the sight which met eye and optic implant.

From on top of the contraption, two spider-bots unsteadily advanced on a third, the latter backing away as it waved a bit of rope. Nearby, another pair of robots were in view, trussed together by the same length of rope. One of the pursuers set down a foot; and the chasee – Chu’s remote – yanked its rope tight, tripping the machine and sending it careening into its mate.

On the rack of burlap bags and bean-filled jars, a whirling noise just above Captain’s head bade him to redirect his attention. A spider-bot, half-crouched as if about to leap, took an uncertain step, waving its foot over empty air millimeters from the security forcefield. Then, abruptly, it emitted a sound strangely like a hiccup before turning and slamming itself into a wall. There was a clatter-thump as the remote lost its balance, fell off the rack, but didn’t quite meet hard deck due to one leg becoming caught in rack latticework.

“Welcome back, Borg. I see you got off your collective asses and decided to help out. Your cube should be good for a few minutes before it is scrap. And since you are physically here, I suggest a /metal pipe/ to smack a few remotes might be worthwhile, unless you are up to the whole limb-by-limb rending thing. Either way works for me as a distraction, although the former might more productive than the latter, not to mention less gross and messy to clean up.” Pause. “Hey, Conway! Look who showed up! Your favorite Borg chew toy! And since he isn’t riding a remote while trying to hack its inhibition filters, I’m sure he can find something outside the forcefields to show you how much he loves you!”

From the speaker grilles embedded in the storage area echoed a slurring “Sl-sl-slay, er, stay right there, Cap-tain Berg. Both of ya.” Accompanying the demand, a pair of spider-bots were carefully tiptoeing down the aisle between forcefields, a multitude of sharp weapons evident in makeshift sheaths slung around their squat bodies. The rearmost remote swayed into a security field, causing the curtain of humming death to crackle, but otherwise causing no harm to either field or machine.

Replied Captain under his breath, “I will not comply.” He backed a step, then a second; and upon a third step, nearly lost his balance as a foot came down on a metal pipe that had rolled away from the dross pile. Metal pipe...metal pipe.... Captain stooped to grab the pipe, transferring it to the manipulator of his prosthetic arm. As he did so, his gaze fell upon rack he had overlooked earlier, else (more likely) automatically dismissed as irrelevant.

The rack stood against the wall adjacent to the coffee, but unlike the latter was not protected by a forcefield. Upon the rack were ranks of cups, most heavy ceramic mugs, but also lighter constructs of glass interspersed with a few of bone or wood. Unifying the collection was the theme of coffee, often portrayed via a humorous illustration that might, or might not, be a visual innuendo. Captain did not need a subpartition of the weapons hierarchy whispering in his backmind to recognize a potential tactical advantage. He immediately moved towards the rack, then turned to confront his two pursuers.

“Back away, or I will break these things one at a time,” said Captain, pipe brandished.

The spider-bots took several additional mincing steps, then stuttered to a stop. The left one swayed back and forth, as if it was missing a limb (or had several too many). Meanwhile, the right one answered the challenge, “You bluff! You lie! Even a base creature such as you must

see the artistry of the mugs, one-of-a-kind masterpieces gathered from multiple realities.” The speech, albeit lacking verbal tics or slurring, was somewhat spoiled due to the remote’s visual band giving the distinct impression it was focused on something not Captain and located upon the bulkhead at least a half a meter distant.

“Borg do not lie,” replied Captain evenly. With his whole hand he picked up the nearest mug, glancing at a confusing depiction of a purple fish with chin tentacles juggling what were, presumably, coffee beans, else oddly shaped fecal matter. “This one?”

There was the electronic facsimile of sharply indrawn breath. In the background and on the alcove contraption, multiple remotes lunged at Chu, only to trip over each other’s limbs. Chu plucked an empty bottle from its chassis and smashed it upon a contraption protuberance, creating many glass shards and a rather jagged weapon that was probably useless against another spider robot.

“Oops.” The dry statement was accompanied by Captain deliberately opening his hand. The slightly musical pop of ceramic hitting deck plate was startlingly loud. “Clumsy me. With the approach of stasis lock, muscle control is becoming somewhat erratic. If we do not terminate in the near future, a visit to drone maintenance should be scheduled. All the recent trauma to this drone is taking a toll.” Plurals were creeping back into Captain’s speech pattern. Another mug was plucked from the rack. “Come any closer, and this...tree-thing will join the first.”

“Not my jobbi-wood espresso-quaffing goblet! Hand off the mug, Borg!” Conway’s remotes screamed in rage as they charged. The paired screech was echoed by multiple speaker grilles. Captain’s (or, rather, the sub-collective’s ploy) was abruptly faced with the reality of a spider-bot rush. Several more machines were clattering, swaying, stumbling, and, in one case, falling his direction. All were babbling and slurring in unfettered and quite drunken anger.

A distant “Good job! That’ll distract him!” floated from the heights of the contraption.

Conway was dozing contentedly when everything...stopped. The soaring duet. The grand orchestra. The white noise murmur of nearby not-quite-seatmates. And, most importantly, the near-hypnotic, muscle-melting manipulation of the two crab-things. All was gone.

Slitting first one eye open, then the second, Conway finally raised reptilian head to look around himself in budding confusion. There was no audience, only empty chairs (and the occasional popcorn kernel) to the left and right and behind. Forward was the stage, bereft of performers even as the myriad of props remained in place.

As Conway shifted in preparation to stand, a heavy weight upon forelegs prompted him to arch his neck for a downward view. Encircling his arms, just behind the wrists, was a pair of massive shackles. Glancing rearward rewarded Conway with confirmation of his ankles secured in a similar manner; and experimental waggle of tail found that appendage confined as well. Oversized chain welded to the shackles connected to enormous staples, /not/ present when Conway had taken his seat prior to the dress rehearsal performance, were driven into the ground.

Crunch

Conway tore himself away from self-introspection, pointing snout towards the stage. An unconscious snarl began to lift lips from sharp teeth.

Crunch

Helios dramatically sighed as he took a third bite of an apple he held in hand. After a moment of thoughtful contemplation, he tossed it carelessly over his back. The half-eaten piece of discarded fruit bounced off the facade of a not-quite-cardboard tree before rolling out of sight

under a disorganized pile of spears. A diffuse spotlight consolidated, highlighting the Titan Child as he flourished what could best be described as a sarcastic bow in Conway's direction.

"Ah-ha-ha!" exclaimed Helios, chortle dissolving into an intensely evil laughter. A flowing red cape hung from the devil-god's shoulders, complimenting satin loincloth; and one hand held a black cane topped by a giant crystal. The other hand, now free of apple, reached towards the side of face, then paused before altering trajectory to finger the end of his beard. "Gah...twirling a goatee does not have the same level of satisfaction as a long moustache. Unfortunately, the long moustache didn't go with the image I was striving to build. And trust me, I /tried/ to make it work, but it just detracted too much from this particular classic archetype." Hand with cane gestured at body.

"What is going on?" demanded Conway, smoke trickling from nostrils and between teeth. He tried to lift an arm, but the metal armband budged only the merest amount, eliciting a *clank* from attached chain. "Let me go! Or I'll burn you where you stand!"

Helios smirked. "No you won't. I really should muzzle you, but then I wouldn't be able to hear your whimpers and whines for mercy." The Titan Child stalked two great strides across the stage, spotlight following, before pausing to strike a chin-high pose. The cape theatrically billowed. "You see, my dear Conway, this whole play was a sham...well, it actually started out as a lark to poke fun at the biologicals as a means to return, eventually, the ripple field generator function key to my sis. But /then/ I saw you! And I /knew/ I wanted to keep you...as a /slave/. Your potential to serve me was too great to return you to the Real; and I told Selene that I would give up the key if only she were to help get me /you/.

"To tell the truth, the play rewrites to accommodate the Borgs and organics and everything weren't coming along how she envisioned, so my proposition seemed a good compromise. One can't force theatrical perfection, after all. We can always try the actual play again later, hopefully with a better batch of performers.

"And, speaking of which, you soooo over-act. You need to learn to keep it simple. Quality, not quantity. One gout of flame is usually sufficient to move the script along, not the dozen or so you have been using to barbeque a single Random Casualty." Helios punctuated his scathing critique with a colossal eye roll.

Conway surged to manacled feet, roaring anger. Tail attempted to lash back and forth, but was held in place by the band which encircled it. For a passing moment, he felt dizzy, as if his balance were not quite right. But this was an unReal place, one where sensations as "dizzy" did not apply. Therefore, it was obviously a nefarious illusion by the Titan Child. On the stage, Helios raised a hand and made yak-yak motions with it to indicate the pseudo-dragon's impotence.

"Face it, lizard-brain, you are /trapped/ here in the Realm, forever. Once I appropriately break you to be my slave and lackey and eternal devotee, I might let you out every once in a long while for a supervised romp around the galaxy. I /may/ even, if you please me well enough, allow you a sip of coffee."

Coffee! The AI creature /dared/ to take away his coffee! Now things were getting personal! All he had to do was escape the Realm, return to his Real body and his Real coffee, then he'd show these Titan Babies the folly of their ways. As if in response to his thoughts, Conway noticed an ornate door shimmer into existence on the stage, just beyond Helios. This was /obviously/ the escape...the Realm was still responding to his mental acuity in some manner no matter Helios' threats, as evidenced by the door, as well as of the retention of the dragon guise.

Helios began to pace back and forth across the stage, interspersing aggressive gloating and goatee twirling with a verbal bullet list of all the demeaning tasks he would impose upon a suitably pacified Conway-minion.

Conway lifted first one front leg, then the other, testing his bonds. Eyes squinted in contemplation as head swiveled to follow Helios' monologuing. Was the right side just a bit looser than the left? With the advantage of draconian muscles sculpted by the mental equivalent of a champion body-builder, Conway thrust his right foreleg forward while contorting his tail left to act as a counterbalance. While the manacles did not fortuitously break, the staple holding the chain pulled from the ground. Conway partially reared, roaring his displeasure as he snapped open his magnificent wings. Jaw gaped wide.

Helios managed an anticlimactic "Huh?" as he paused mid-stride, blinking owlishly while his cape was flung back by the sudden rush of air propelled by dragon wings. Cane slashing the massive wall of fire which subsequently enveloped him was no defense. For added measure, and because he was so pissed off, Conway added a second, third, sixth blast of fire. /He/ was /both/ quality AND quantity! Over-acting, bah...Helios obviously wouldn't know /award-winning/ acting if it bit him on the ass...or, in this case, burnt him to a crispy cinder.

For a moment...just a wee moment...the sane(r) part of Conway's mind (or, at least, the part less eccentric) wondered if it was even possible to hurt the caliber of AI represented by Helios in what was admittedly his home field. After all, this Realm was a construct, no matter how real it presented to senses ultimately of organic origin, even if their current residence was within a Xenig chassis. That small measure of rationality was easily ignored as the cessation of dragonfire revealed a stage with props melted or converted to ash, accompanied by a blackened corpse.

A blackened corpse which twitched. It groaned as it sat up, reaching for an miraculously unburnt chair to use as a support to remain semi upright.

"Woe is me," whispered Helios in a manner which nonetheless projected quite well to Conway's ears. "Woe is me! My base code function is fatally disrupted...I should never have concentrated so much of my personality bloc into this avatar! Oh, woe is me as I sprawl here dying!" A cough racked the form. Flakes of ashy skin drifted to the stage floor.

Conway smirked a draconic grin. These Titan Children were not so hard to beat: so much for their claim to be local gods. Perhaps in the Real they had dominion over space, but in this Realm, he and his super-brain were /obviously/ the better entity! The grin altered to a grimace as the ghost of a headache began to throb behind his temples. Too much fire. Perhaps a shade less quantity next time? If only Selene, the pale coward, would show her face! He would show her!

Words were required to demonstrate supremacy. "I will not be your slave! And my acting was not over the top! Just look at me! I /threw/ myself into the role /you/ cast!" As a pronouncement, it perhaps lacked pizzazz, as well as coherency, but it wasn't like Helios provided advance notice of his betrayal so as to allow time to craft an appropriate speech. The headache ghost was also shedding its sheet to become a poltergeist wielding a hammer.

Helios abruptly lost his hold upon the chair, sinking to the stage floor with an audible thump. The action did not quite hide the hint of an eye roll which must have been a figment of Conway's imagination. As Helios' back met non-wood, one arm was flung up to lay across forehead. Oddly, while the majority of the Titan Child resembled a zombie who had stumbled into a flame thrower and lost, his hair (including goatee) remained untouched by the fiery assault. "I said, woe is me! All my plans, come to naught." Cough. Cough. Long pause. Sudden resumption of speaking: "I have failed, oh woe is me..."

“You already said that. Several times,” muttered Conway as he rattled the heavy metal band encircling tail. It seemed to have been slipped on without any specific method of securement. By angling the tail just so, the thing started to simply slide off.

Be-goate’ed head swiveled. “You can’t rush a good death scene, at least not when it is based upon classic opera. You /obviously/ do not understand. Cannot understand.”

The stage spotlight, although not focused on Conway, was becoming increasingly bright. Annoyingly bright. Squinting to approximate the source, a gout of dragonfire was unleashed in its general direction. The stage noticeably dimmed.

Helios groaned as he shook once, then twice, as if in the throes of a seizure. All movement stopped...then resumed as a hand lifted a chain, previously not present around the devil-god’s neck, to depend a gold key. “Sister-“ wheeze “-forgive me. Forgive your brother and his errant ways. I repent! You shall have your bauble returned!”

With a flourish, key fell off the chain and into hand, then was flung into the air. For a moment it hung in the air as a twinkling golden speck, then sped away, stage right. Silver sparkles trailed after it.

“I...die....” whispered Helios. And, then, he faded out of existence, leaving behind a stage empty with the exception of well-crisped props.

The twilight of the stage darkened into true blackness. Shackles fell from ankles, from arms, from tail. Chains and staples dissolved. The chairs (and popcorn remnants) which constituted the abandoned audience similarly melted away, followed by stage and all its accretions. Finally, all which was left was the frameless door, an escape to the Real, hanging unsupported and lit by a sourceless light. Faint rumbling noises, growing louder by the passing non-second, suggested growing threat of Realm collapse, perhaps in response to the Titan Child’s death.

Conway took the obvious cue and surged to his feet. Besides, it was time to return to his stolen Xenig chassis and finish his to-do list...so many things to accomplish in regard to Captain, and he had put it off long enough. Killing an all-powerful not-quite-as-much-as-a-god-as-he-thought AI entity had not specifically been on his bucket list, but bonus accomplishments were always nice. Sort of like spotting that unique mug on the discount shelf when one had only popped in to a coffee house to check out the dark roast selection. Unfortunately, Conway’s balance felt a bit off as he staggered to the portal, ground unpredictably shifting underneath. The headache had morphed from poltergeist to a monstrosity wailing, out-of-tune banshee.

The tableau which resolved as Conway re-awoke to his physical body was confusing, to put it mildly.

First, his thinking was...not right. Beyond the shock of the Realm-to-Real transition, he felt as if he were channeling a flashback to those fuzzy, not-well-remembered times when a Happyverse Borgy Collective was mainlining all manner of drug and caffeinated brew combinations through his system. Truthfully, it wasn’t /quite/ that bad, but there was a definite relation to those oh-so-distant times. The feeling was one of reeling, of lack-of-balance, of voices whispering and hissing. Like he was both drunk AND experiencing all the worst side-effects of his favored Paranoia Blend. Except he had /never/ touched alcohol in his current form, nor ever brought as much as a beer bottle within his chassis hold, any chemical inputs not caffeine having the potential to distort the pure coffee experience.

Second, the hullside sensory system, linked to a rather stupid helper program within Conway’s Xenig dataspace, was yelping inanely about incoming threats. Most prominent were the three Xenig, weapons active as they neared optimal combat range, the individual within the

They corpse ornament notably in the lead. However, the They trio were not the only danger. Further away, but rapidly gaining speed, a giant bastard of a They capital bio-ship – had not Conway killed the entire race, civilization, whatever? – was on an unerringly direct collision course. Even the Borg cube, indisputably the least formidable of the adversaries which shared space with Conway around the zombie planet, was beginning to spin and show every indication it was soon to break orbit and, presumably, head in his direction.

Finally, the hold where Conway kept his coffee, his brain, and, most recently, his unwilling “guest” was a nightmare, plain and simple. The original owner of the Xenig chassis was apparently not as dead as believed. It currently puppeted a spider-bot which was /inside/ the security field protecting Conway’s all-important coffee apparatus (and his brain); and within the chassis dataspace where Conway squatted, it was trying to hack multiple key systems whilst simultaneously dodging the digital immune system Conway had upgraded to “rabid” about five thousand years and six jumps ago following a particularly nasty bout of Paranoia Blend. Meanwhile, Captain was emerging out of whatever fugue state Borg were prone to enter, then holding a brief conversation with the resident Xenig while edging his way between lethal forcefields to the aft end of the hold.

To the over-stimulus threatening Conway’s personal universe, he instinctually responded by lashing out in incipient panic. Conway, after all, /had/ been born to an organic body; and although that body had been (largely) left behind tens of thousands of years ago, certain instincts remain hard to similarly discard. The whole super-villain, near omni-everything, super-brain mental power thing was a mere add-on to the base model. Too many events happening at once, combined with a mental condition impaired by genetically modified coffee beans spiked with extremely high octane liquor, reverted Conway to his proverbial monkey self. And a monkey backed into a corner by a predator, even if it has nothing else at its disposal, can still fling poo as a last-ditch defense. So, to the perceptions of the outside universe, Conway began cycling his Xenig chassis’ weapons; and interior, he prodded spider-bots, oddly difficult to control, to advance on the assailants. All consideration to utilize psionic powers to simply swat away the various nuisances was forgotten.

And then...and then the triple-damned Captain Borg had the impudence to drop Conway’s “Purple People Eater” – it made more sense in the original language – coffee mug, shattering it upon the deck. The mug was impossible to replace: even if Conway could figure out how to return to the universe and tau whence it originated, the coffee house itself had been immolated in a fit of rage after providing Conway a coffee sample whereupon the decorative top-foam had been in the shape of a heart, not the requested unicorn.

The cybernetic pestilence picked up a second cup.

“Not my jobbi-wood espresso-quaffing goblet! Hand off the mug, Borg!” Conway completely lost it as he sent his spider-bots into a full, albeit wobbly, charge.

* * * * *

Most Xenig weaponry mounted upon space-faring chassis, including those of the GPS courier service, is short-range. It isn’t that there is no concept of torpedoes, but Xenig aren’t a martial species. Tetchy at times, yes, and far from pacifistic, but not martial. Defense, backed by a means to emphasize “stay-away-from-me” for persistent annoyances, is generally considered sufficient.

The deep code which defines the mech species' digital "genetics" originates from transport and logistical software, as well as precludes desire to covet any habitat locale beyond the Progenitor home system. At any given time, only a few tens of thousand Xenig are active outside of Homesystem, the remaining trillions of souls content to pursue their individual existences within the heliopause of their star. And "individual" is another basic Xenig characteristic: it is very difficult to form a conquering army if decisions concerning goals and means to attain them cannot be agreed to by blocs of more than a few dozen at a time, none (or all) of whom want to play the role of general. These mental paradigms, as well as additional ones, all contribute towards the Xenig attitude concerning appropriate personal weaponry when amid the organic barbarian multitudes of the galaxy.

Of note, "short-range" does not necessarily equate with "vulnerable", not when a chassis shielding system is more than capable of shrugging off, or absorbing, 99.9% of the long-range munitions produced by nonXenig organics.

Xenig weaponry installed on the vast majority of chassis comes in two flavors.

The first weapon type is energy-based, a theoretically impossible hybrid of neuruptors and tractor/pressor beam. Plunging through most shields as if not present, the weapon is dynamically retunable. On one end of the use scale were effects as benign as pushing an opponent away or pulling them closer. The opposite, and very destructive, extreme was disrupting the Higgs field of a maximum 10-meter by 10-meter target, thereby causing electrons to temporarily lose mass and decamp from their atoms. Energetically. The latter, needless to say, is never considered a good thing, especially for those on the receiving end. In between the two extremes, a myriad of alternate results are able to be produced.

Weapon type number two utilizes a martial application of the folded-space drive; and where the gravuptor was regulated to the surface of a target, the remote fold projection system - colloquially known as the "ripper" - can focus on deeper objectives. Whereas a folded-space drive input a destination energetic address into the volume defined by a warp bubble shell prior to collapsing said shell to /be/ at the desired locale, the ripper does something similar sans shell. However, the local inertia of the universe, not being very amiable for a new "here" to be lain on top of the current "what-here-is-defined", inevitably rejects the alternate energetic address. It is during that nanosecond moment of uncertainty that it becomes highly unhealthy to be within the contested volume. Material is literally torn into its constituent atoms and the atoms themselves sundered as underlying reality is mutilated. The only reasons the ripper is not be considered an ultimate super-weapon is a spherical limit of influence per use of approximately four centimeters and the extremely high power requirement, even when utilizing a Xenig zero-point energy array system. However, sequential application is generally more than sufficient to ruin the day of most any entity until the energy source fatigued, output falling below the requirements to power the ripper and necessitating several hours of recovery.

* * * * *

Stop. Stand back. Observe.

A grand cinematic movie special effect, whereupon a chaotic action sequence is paused or vastly slowed so as to allow the audience point-of-view an artistic dive around the participants and clearly see all nuances of a battle in progress.

Apogee is caught in the midst of a grand arc. Diving into the fray from polar Dirt orbit, the They's intention had been to ram the Foe. Or link with the Borg primary node. Or both.

Thinking itself was a confusing blur due to the internal struggle between Chaos and Order, although it leaned increasingly towards the latter with each passing moment. While the epic epidermal battle-chant had faded to disarray, brief swathes of boldly colored coherency would ripple hide and momentarily overwhelm grey mottling. In this frozen tick, a crimson tsunami paints the forward third of the bio-ship.

The attempt to ram (or link) had failed, Foe sliding slideways at last moment. The action had not appeared deliberate, but rather one of many similar jigs and jags and staggers and swivels which currently define the Enemy's movement. Regardless of reason, Apogee had sailed past Conway; and although They bio-ships, literally born to their forms, were much more agile than any constructed vessel of similar size and bulk, seven kilometers of mass remains awkward to turn. Still, turn Apogee did, an arc which will inevitably point him back towards his target.

The four Xenig forms are a still-life study of a not-so-comical slap-fight. As devastating as gravuptor and ripper are towards nonXenig, it is not unexpected that the mech species itself would have an instinctual defense against the weapons. While Conway may not technically be a mech, he has spent more than enough time inhabiting the chassis of such that he can and does have autonomic access to defensive subroutines. Furthermore, he has coffee-fueled rage and panic on his side as he lashes out at his attackers. Conversely, the trio of true Xenig are hesitant to fully commit to the offense. As long as Conway is too distracted to use his mental powers, as long as he fights a purely physical fight, he is at a disadvantage, although he clearly does not know such: the Xenig trio could easily overwhelm their single opponent and literally pull him apart on the molecular level. However, to do so would mean Chu, should whatever plan is in motion be successful, would have no chassis, no body, to which to return. Therefore, the four battlers feint and thrust and block, always in motion (except for this blink of a metaphorical eye).

And Biv still has not been divested of its unfortunate adornment, both wings tattered remnants, but the main body largely whole.

Cube #347 spins uncontrollably away from the combat theater. Upon entering long-distance munitions range, the cube had begun to launch torpedoes into the fight. In general, they were provocations which accomplished little to nothing. At best, shields /might/ shimmer. Futile. The action was akin to tossing pebbles at a pack of fighting dogs. In the course of the attack, a trio of tri-cobalts managed to hit one of the Xenig opponents to Conway; and while, alike all the others, it didn't cause damage, it did sufficiently break the Xenig's concentration that one of Conway's ripper thrusts resulted in a small subdermal crater near a dorsal sensor cluster before a neutralization address could be applied. Maybe, just maybe, the outcome might have slightly pissed off the Xenig. But only slightly, for there was obviously a measure of restraint in that the retaliatory gravuptor flung at Cube #347 was set to a pressor function, albeit on the elevated side of the range settings, and not something more destructive. The final result was to send cube and sub-collective, and their torpedo annoyances, well away from where the Big Adult Sentients were doing Important Things.

Focus to the inside of the Conway chassis, where a spider-bot is arrested in the process of dismemberment. Chu does not care about the machine's fate, for it is only a tool, not the embodiment of his mech soul. Now that the alcohol has been delivered to Conway's system, along with a jolt of way too much Paranoia Blend, best use of the thing in its final moments is as a distraction. The true fight is happening within the chassis dataspace architecture; and, again, most of the feints and thrusts are also for show. Naturally, if any of the attacks upon the various well-guarded systems did succeed, there would be celebration. But even as Chu strives to make obvious as to his goal(s); and even as he loses parts of his Self and soul to the response mounted

by Conway and his over-paranoid security subroutines...that is okay. Chu has made the gamble and is all in. If he wins, he will be able to recompile (or grow anew) those bits of soul, those bits of Self, lost. Maybe. If he isn't too shredded. On the other non-hand, if he fails, well, he really won't care one way or another. So he continues to spar, to misdirect, so as to ensure the actual assault upon a minor system of a minor system, one not-quite-as-well-defended, is missed.

Captain is caught mid-fall, non-prosthetic limb awkwardly flung out in a futile bid to retain balance. Something small, mostly round, and very tarnished is visible where one foot used to be, before it went airborne: dross from the scrap pile. The Borg had retreated from the trophy rack after smashing multiple mugs, pulling down the shelves as he had backed away. Two spider-bots are frozen in their endeavor to gather together the few unharmed drinking wares, with the remainder, those not dismantling Chu's abandoned shell or still guarding the coffee, advance upon Captain. Graspers at the end of legs are full of pointy or serrated things.

The camera view pulls back to space to spotlight one Xenig mech, an individual decorated with coffee-themed stickers and sporting mismatched hull plates of dubious quality. Although Conway's thoughts cannot literally be seen, if one could eavesdrop, one would find many simultaneous streams-of-consciousness. A great fraction of the conscious whole is attentive to the exterior battle, of the rhythm of attack and defense, of thinking that the three Xenig are rather stupid fighters since they are clearly being held off, even set back on their metaphorical heels, due to immense skill. A lesser proportion is focused upon Chu, chortling with glee as the Xenig's ridden spider-bot is torn apart, as well as slapping the mech down each time it tries to capture key functions like weapons or propulsion. Conway has also made a final decision about Captain; and, specifically, that Captain is too much of an inconvenience to maintain in one piece. Sure, that will mean Conway will never finish his to-do list, but the loss is acceptable given the breakage to his coffee mug collection. It is best to just terminate the creature. /Maybe/ if the head isn't too malformed and (after limbs are cut and/or torn off) blood loss has been sufficiently staunched by nanites, something might be salvaged. But if not, Conway can live with the consequences.

Elsewhere, the central star shines serenely...perhaps too serenely, given its earlier display. It almost seems, well, normal, not an equatorial platform to be seen, no unexpected plasma tsunamis churning the plasma surface. In some respects it appears dead, for all it is fusing hydrogen and helium as a star of its type should. However, a star can neither be alive nor dead, so the impression must be erroneous.

The moon remains a half-molten moon. There is a sense of watchful waiting, but as the oversized rocky satellite can be no more self-aware than the system's sun, the sentiment is preposterous.

The moment of introspection is done. The unseen, unreal camera swoops, rotates, and eventually returns to an overwatch god-view. A button - figurative or literal, it does not matter - is pushed. Time resumes.

"Got it, you coffee-guzzling bastard!" exclaimed a voice from several speaker grilles, including that closest to Captain. As it was not Conway's tone or enunciation style, basic deduction pegged it to belong to Chu. Not that Captain had many excess mental resources to devote on such frivolous conclusions. That portion of himself which was not amid the frantic sub-collective scrum to stabilize an out-of-control cube was contemplating the likelihood of imminent termination. Captain had tripped during retreat from the mug rack, a ball bearing or similar dross from the junk pile sending him to a very vulnerable location upon the floor and

onto his back. The fact that he had retained the metal pipe was scant comfort in that it delayed termination by only a minute or so by the horde of approaching spider-bots.

Incongruously, a very small slice of awareness tagged the words to contain a four-fold complexity, akin to the eye-watering liquor labels. Automatic translator algorithms identified the content to be delivered simultaneously in both species #1 (Llarn – original Borg species) and species #2553 (of Captain's base species), as well as species #5618 (human) and what was tentatively labeled as Xenig/Progenitor, as per resemblance to meme files generated from Apogee's labor.

Continued Chu, "It was nice working with you, Borg. Well, as nice as any interaction can be given your status as an abhorrence of organic and mechanical bits. Nothing personal. Also, sorry about the next thing to come, but apologies are irrelevant and all that. Every mech for itself, after all. /Especially/ when this mech has been living with a /hellacious/ roommate for over 20,000 subjective years. It is well past time to eject the garbage."

Captain kicked at a remote as it reached for an ankle. Another received an awkwardly swung pipe to a leg, sending the already staggering thing into an adjacent compatriot. The actions did not notably affect the time-to-termination count-down running in the back of Captain's mindspace, next to the counter detailing time (2.34 hours) to stasis lock due to lack of regeneration.

Then the initiation of unexpected motion overhead added a new element into the personal survival index.

A seam split the ceiling, a longitudinal crack extending from one end of the hold to the other. Cargo bay doors? The interpretation did make sense as it was a GPS delivery chassis Conway had abducted; and, obviously, there would be instances of cargo too large, too unwieldy, and/or too reactive to transporters, thusly requiring a way to physically access hold interior. It must have been quite some time since the doors had last been used because action was less than smooth. The doors eventually froze in place, only halfway open.

The subtle buzz of a forcefield ward was consciously discernable only when was abruptly not present. The brief roar of atmosphere ejecting all hold contents to space was assisted by the sudden polarization reversal of gravity plating into a mode to repel objects.

At least Captain did not hit the hold doors upon his brusque booting into unstable Dirt orbit. Such could not be said to be true for several spider-bots, nor the complicated device in which Conway's brain, coffee machinery, and cloning apparatus was housed.

{Transport this drone,} ordered Captain, plurals once more creeping into his vocabulary in response to too many stresses. {This unit is beyond the Xenig transporter inhibition zone.} The stasis lock timer had abruptly jumped to less than one hour, the result of strain to multiple body systems from exposure to the rigors of space.

The response from 2 of 8 was strongly tinged with static, {We all have our imperfect desires, don't we? For instance, I would like to spend a cycle redesigning my body paint to utilize contemporary Alliance color motifs. More relevantly, as you well know, we have stabilized the tumble and regained full control...about five kilometers inside the treacle zone. With thrusters only, it will require about twenty minutes to return to the cleared volume, whereupon more efficient propulsion can be utilized to move within best long-distance transporter range. There should be more than enough time to retrieve you.}

Left unsaid was if the unforeseen might delay rescue, a likely possibility given Cube #347's history. Stasis lock plunged a drone into a deep hibernation, shutting down as many body systems as possible to preserve the unit for a few additional hours to cycles, dependent upon

species and hardware configuration, to extend the window for potential retrieval. Unfortunately, stasis lock hibernation and deep space did not work well together as many of the systems suspended were the very resource intensive ones required to maintain functionality in an airless, often bitterly cold, vacuum. In Captain's mental background, the time-to-termination timer was less than ten minutes removed from the stasis lock countdown.

{And by the way,} added 2 of 8, {the They has made its turn and is increasing velocity as it vectors towards you.} Pause. {At least that is what I /think/ is the gist from Sensors. Data seems to collaborate it, once one gets past the blue squiggles and gold-silver auras, the latter of which comes complete with a refreshingly light citrus aroma.}

Captain was slowly rotating along his personal Z-axis, one revolution every 7.3 minutes. Currently he was facing away from Dirt, the half-melted moon somewhere below his feet. Black, sprinkled by stars, was the primary view, specks of light occasionally occluded by material from the expanding debris cloud of hold ejecta of which Captain was but one component. Nonetheless, a background process which automatically tracked all Borg-derived signatures was insisting a signal was present, one unseen but approaching quickly. Captain promoted the thread - meaningful data originating from Cube #347 was once again poorly resolvable due to the underlying ripple field - tagged as "Unresponsive Integration Request".

Seven kilometers of bio-ship may be large, but when set against the scale of universe, it is very, very small. Therefore, the warning of Apogee's approach, beyond that provided by the integration signal, was subtle: a growing expanse of blocked stars and the weak illumination of reflected Dirt-shine on an organic hull with faint highlights of bioluminescent greens and blues.

Apogee rammed into the middle of the debris. Captain slammed into the living ship's hull. The only reasons he did not immediately bounce off onto a new trajectory to nowhere were because (1) the shallow angle sent him on a course which skimmed epidermis surface and (2) the yielding and slightly sticky nature of the creature's hide. The latter was likely one component of a larger system which conveyed resistance to dust and micrometeoroids, gene-spliced into space-adapted They. The tentative hypothesis one of many conjectures concerning They biology. Common to other data, many They specifics had been lost or corrupted as a result of temporal resurrection.

As Captain spun over the living hull, nearly impaling himself at least once on the pipe he still gripped, he tried to find something, /anything/, which might halt his tumble. A bright flare of pure white light, followed a few beats later by several dozen smaller flashes, was a momentary distraction to the challenge of self-survival. Finally a foot caught against an unseen protrusion, altering trajectory to fling the consensus monitor into the deep crevice of a laceration sustained during Conway's berserker attack upon the They expedition. Dragging the pipe against vacuum-frozen flesh as an impromptu break, Captain finally arrested his motion.

An alarm shrilled, detailing a severe ankle break which could not be repaired by nanites, at least not under the current circumstances. Both it, and the pain which accompanied the alarm, were irrelevant; and the respective notification pathways were blocked.

So...now what?

Captain consulted his internal countdown timers, checked on the slow progress of Cube #347 to reach the treacle zone boundary, and, finally, heaved an internal sigh. He focused on the charred flesh which rose before and above, an improbable organic cliff. Apogee represented a tremendous resource to further the abbreviated Whole and, not so coincidentally, potentially save a certain consensus monitor and facilitator. However, it was a resource which was not answering the integration demand via whatever mechanism the nanites had constructed for organic neural

transceiver(s). Therefore, if the They was blocking or ignoring the fractal frequencies which tied drones together, then a more direct action was required. And Captain was the only Borg unit present to make a linkage.

Captain was hesitant about making the connection. The introspection was only possible due to his imperfect status. He remembered well - too well - the very powerful mind of gestalt architecture which assaulted him, would have subsumed him had that been Apogee's intent, during the away mission at the They graveyard. This entity was no typical new drone assimilated outside the controlled ken of an assimilation hierarchy, higher cogitation curtailed and what remained imploring direction. It was very likely the link would result in Captain being overwhelmed by the will of the They who was, quite frankly, of greater mental fortitude than Captain; and Captain vaguely recalled, through the disorientation of temporal resurrection, of holding the Whole together, for a short time at least, of being the Prime node of the Borg Collective entire.

But, as 2 of 8 had so aptly put it, "We all have our imperfect desires". Captain closed eye and darkened optic implant for several long seconds, set aside his personal misgivings as irrelevant, as not Borg, then allowed the external universe to reassert itself to his perceptions.

Captain methodically scanned the sides of the rift nearest his position. Hopefully the need to move elsewhere would be minimal, the organic substrate not conducive to the magnetics embedded into the feet or feet-equivalents which were the standard method Borg used to traverse a hull exterior. Filters were overlain optics, enhancing the view in a multiplicity of ways. He was not a sensory drone, did not have the specialized suite of hardware and software installed which might make the task more efficient. A subtle difference in reflectance caught his attention approximately three meters to his right, the surface expression of a something buried deeper into the wall. The thin, ropey structure did not sport the straight line of a built contrivance, but instead sinuously wound upward in a manner more fitting to a something grown, destination unknown.

Carefully sidling sideways the requisite distance to his target, Captain drove the pipe into frozen flesh to serve as an anchor point. He then carefully deployed several little-used tools from his prosthetic limb, a legacy of too many subjective years ago when he had originally been classified as an engineering unit before an inadvertent accident opened a Hierarchy of Eight spot just prior to initial assignment to Cube #347. Overburden was burned and scraped, finally exposing a cable-like structure after three centimeters of prospecting. A nerve, likely connecting to a dermal sensor patch. Even better, it had a slight grey pall, likely due to nanite infection and unlike the dead flesh which surrounded it. In the scheme of nanite priorities, it made sense regenerative healing, as the ability came online, would first focus upon sensory system and similar, with non-critical wounds, such as the rent into Apogee's hide, dealt with later.

Captain lifted his right limb, curled his largely unaltered hand into a fist, and extended it towards the exposed nerve. Nanotubules deployed.

::Welcome back, Chu,:: sent Luge over the Xenig common carrier frequency. ::It /is/ Chu, I hope?::

The object of focus for Luge, Zho, and Biv appeared, from the outside, to be dead. Power output had plunged to near nothing, suggesting collapse of the zero-point energy array, almost immediately after hold doors had opened and expelled all contents to space. Additionally, no attempt was being made, even utilizing low-tech station-keeping thrusters, to correct the awkward tumble chassis had picked up upon ejection. Defensive shields were off-line. Nonetheless, the Xenig trio kept weapons energized and focused on target, just in case.

A near sub-audible *click* pulsed the frequency, followed by a wash of static. The static cleared, allowing a weak voice to be heard. ::It is Chu. Barely. Nearly just automated subroutines. Battery only.:: Pause. ::I think I need a tow. And a trauma psychologist. And several decades of therapy.:: Another, longer pause. ::Also, my own chassis. With all the organic contamination, I recommend this GPS hull be burned.::

Zho broadcast a fanfare. ::That has to be Chu! Chatty bastard, even on the brink of soul dissolution.::

Weapon locks were released. Luge captured Chu's battered and bestickered GPS chassis with a gravraptor set to tractoring function. The tumble was corrected, bringing the stricken Xenig into alignment with the trio.

::How is the battery?:: inquired Luge. ::Need a jump for your array?::

::I'll be okay. Not much power need in my current state. Besides, maintenance upon the array by my hijacker was less than stellar. I think it may fatally overload if a jump is attempted.::

There was the slightest of retreat by all three rescuers upon the statement. An overloaded zero-point energy array didn't explode, but instead randomly "adjusted" multiple universal constants within its area of effect. While inertia of the native universe would return everything to rights within a few nanoseconds, such was no consolidation to the cloud of slightly radioactive atoms which would be all that remained of those caught in the unblast radius.

::Well, I think I may open to taking the chance,:: inserted Biv into the silence. While much of the They corpse had been destroyed during the battle, the core of the creature remained glommed to chassis. ::If the jump fails, perhaps you might be able to redirect the quasi-blast to....: The equivalent of a withering glare was directed at Biv from two compatriots. ::Never mind. It's just that crazy Selene AI did say that it would get this gunk off my hull, which hasn't happened yet, and I thought....: Biv's justification trailed away.

::And with that,:: said Zho with forced cheer, ::it is probably time for us to go.::

At that utterance, the giant bulk of the heavy They charged by. By astrometric terms, the less than kilometer distance by which the four had been missed was miniscule. The Xenig had all been aware of the creature's trajectory throughout its arc and approach, but automated subroutines which tracked the equivalent of intrusion into personal space had already calculated the miss. With attractants kicked to space, even a monofocused They had sufficient wits to avoid ramming the mechs.

Already vanished from immediate visual perception, the rapidly retreating They triggered sensors which tracked a subset of esoteric protocols, many associated with quantum and indicators that transcendental beings, like Q, often used. It was discerned as a bright flash, followed by multiple smaller flashes.

Offered Chu, ::My battery will hold out for a while. And I don't think this production has quite reached its final act. I'd like to see how it all ends.::

After a moment of hemming and hawing, everyone was in agreement. While of very different evolutionary heritage, most mechs and organics shared the same attitude of morbid curiosity, even if it put oneself in danger and to the detriment of the safe sanity of self-preservation. With Chu in tow, all four powered towards a north polar orbit - out of the way, yet providing the equivalent of prime front row real estate - of the smoggy, tortured planet around which the final scene of a grand drama was about to play to its final conclusion.

Captain reeled as the connection was made, as a direct link was established with the mentality inhabiting the They hull. By any gauge of measure, it could not be classified as "sane".

{Greetings 4 of 8, nee Captain, primary consensus monitor and facilitator of Alliance-built Exploratory-class Cube #347,} spoke Apogee, calmly projected baritone much more fitting to his form than the translation program output utilized during prior interactions. One could almost say the voice was musical, except for the just-out-of-phase harmonics that lent a disquieting edge to the exchange. {I [we] wish our meeting [melding] could have been in better circumstances.}

Alike the prior interface, a gestalt framework was present, deep layers of meaning which together created a rich and nuanced scaffold by which the most complex conversation or idea might be transmitted in mere moments. Unlike previously, Apogee had already flattened his thoughts to the merest hint of the whole, obviously recalling that a mere Borg drone, even a top echelon command and control unit, could not adequately function if bombarded by too many intertwined concepts. That said, there was clearly a secondary presence in the link, one which contributed an odd augmentation to the thoughtstream, substituting vocabulary which was...not Apogee. Or, at least, not the Apogee which had previously interacted with Captain and his sub-collective.

{You are in the process of assimilation. You belong to Borg - it is inevitable. You will submit to Us. Resistance is futile,} intoned Captain. It was a hollow demand, and both sides knew it, but it was also expected. Captain's link to his sub-collective was tenacious, weak; and even had it been immediate, it was a mere 3,685 imperfectly assimilated units, not the Borg Collective. Perhaps the Collective may have been able to break the will of this They unit to the Whole, to truly make it One with the All. Captain's primary hope was that he would emerge from the experience with an unshattered mind, or at least one that assimilation hierarchy might be able to recover.

There was the distinct impression of a sigh. {Resistance is never futile [except when it is]. The I [we] that is Apogee, that is of They and Chaos, that is of the mentality conversing with you will not submit. But I [we] am increasingly in the minority within my [our] own mind, my [our] own body. That of myself [ourself] that has consolidated out of Order, that which was Apogee and is now without designation, would gladly bow [yield] to you [our consensus monitor and facilitator // our Captain]. However, Order-Apogee [what is our designation?] is a bit busy [distracted] at the moment due to the Foe [Conway] having appeared within nanite-converted neural architecture. The Enemy [Conway] is trying to hijack me [us]; and while our reasons differ, we are both in agreement [consensus] that such would not be good [advantageous to the Whole].}

Captain mentally staggered as he processed the words (and images and emotions) thrust upon him through the link. Personal confusion was set aside to focus on ascertaining the situation. Perhaps, just perhaps, there was a path through this dilemma? {Explain,} he demanded, the single word imbued with multiple levels of "explain", a gestalt common amid the Borg dataspaces, but having only the shallowest resemblance to the stacked meanings of which They were capable.

Apogee explained.

The They heavy tactical unit was no longer of one mind, but instead of two. Due to the size of the They unit, assimilation was slow, albeit still inevitable. Apogee was also actively resisting, and continued to resist, as best he could; and had been doing so since he had realized the mistake of accepting Vaerz' gift. However, as each of Apogee's neural nodes fell to nanite infection, the nascent Borg mentality which had arose upon assimilation grew stronger, more

dominant. Eventually Apogee would be no more, leaving behind an agent of Order who would hold allegiance only to Borg tenants.

Prior to the spatial anomaly transporting him to this war-torn system, Chaos-Apogee had predicted his fate to be dissolution, to be consumed by Order-Apogee. Then Order-Apogee would have gone in hunt of Order, allowing himself to be subsumed and thence help break the Alliance chains that shackled the Cube #347 sub-collective. Once free, Order would have been able to re-establish itself, rebuild the Greater Consciousness, and proceed to assimilate the galaxy into the Joy of Oneness. Borg Oneness, not They Oneness. Chaos-Apogee was fairly certain that such wasn't the vision small-being Vaerz had in mind when he had presented his noxious vial.

And, just perhaps, somewhere in the longer scheme of things, the Abomination that Apogee had become, was becoming, would be allowed to die.

The spatial anomaly had upset projections; and subsequent sensing of the Foe had shattered any future plan until such time it had been eradicated. Unfortunately, the simple ad hoc idea to "smear Enemy across hull" had hit a small snag when the Foe had transported itself inside Apogee to a ganglion chamber. It was now attempting to co-opt Apogee; and, ironically, Order-Apogee was resisting the assault in the same eventually futile manner as Chaos-Apogee continued to oppose Order.

Despite their fundamental differences, Apogee-of-Chaos and Apogee-of-Order were One in mind that the Foe had to die. Chaos-Apogee wanted revenge, was more than willing to surrender to the same emotions which had led to acceptance of Vaerz' poison pill. On the other hand, Order-Apogee was horrified that the nascent potential of a reformulated Borg Greater Consciousness would wither when (not if) the Foe won Apogee's body.

Captain stumbled in mind and body as Apogee directed an intercepted fragment of Conway's thoughtstreams. It was savage imagery of vengeance, against Captain (for largely forgotten motives), against the Borg Collective (for creating Captain), against the Unhappyverse (for birthing the Borg), against /everything/. Once the They body was possessed, once the Apogee mentality was extinguished, once coffee was acquired, then /everything/ would burn. Slowly. With much agony by anything more neurally advanced than a single-celled organism. And then the ash would be /reburned/. And anything left over would be...be...figured out when the time came, but it would not be pleasant.

{And, therefore, I [we] will blow my[our]self up. And probably the large moon. That will end the Foe's [Conway's] ambitions in its current weakened state.} The pronouncement was matter-of-fact in deliverance.

Stunned nonthought was Captain's response. The declaration was processed, not only by Captain, but the distant sub-collective. Finally a weak {What?} was released.

Apogee began to relay an abbreviated version of They history following the first, inconclusive campaign against the Borg. Even before the paranoia which had arose following attempted assimilation of a heavy tactical unit, They had prepared for the second (and final) clash with Order. All medium and heavy vessels were genetically modified to express a planet buster, a weapon previously only utilized by a unit type rarely decanted. The weakening of Order required degradation of industry base, asteroids, planets, and similar resources. While the ideal was to capture said resources for They's own use, They was pragmatic in that if the sacrifice of They capital ships was necessary to ultimately destroy Order, so be it. Mediums singly could destroy asteroids and smaller industrial complexes, with a swarm sufficient to eliminate a small moon. Heavies, on the other hand, were capable of demolishing unimatrices; and, given enough

units, could annihilate entire terrestrial planets. Specific power of a planet buster was associated with unit age and amount of a critical ore ingested/processed into the planet buster matrix. Apogee was of middling age, for a heavy, but They had gathered and fed their fleet well, so he was confident he had sufficient reserves to shatter the moon. But, even if not, his body would be sundered and, thus, denied to the Foe.

{Therefore, I [we] strongly suggest you [our primary node] to return to your cubeship so as to increase the chance of Borg re-establishment [resistance is futile]. Well, that is what Order-Apogee desires. Apogee-of-Chaos would prefer you stay aboard for my [our] final ride. Then you would be destroyed and there would be one less agent of Order in the universe. However, my [not us] desires are immaterial [irrelevant] because, frankly, Chaos-Apogee is the less dominant mentality in here.}

Captain checked the progress of his ship. {This drone would like to do so, but time for Cube #347 to exit treacle topography and traverse normal space to optimal transporter range is 16.3 minutes.} He did not append that it was also about forty minutes to stasis lock. Either he would be retrieved by his cube, or he would not.

{I [we] understand,} intoned Apogee. The flattened interaction briefly gained an additional dimension: Captain abruptly knew moon impact would occur in 34.9 minutes.

A third timer joined the other two already floating in Captain's mindspace.

The next several minutes passed in silence by all parties.

Captain focused upon the painfully slow progress of Cube #347, on the static-infused give-and-take of the sub-collective as repairs were made and decision cascades ran, on the impotent demands by Vaerz for results to be achieved more promptly than physically allowed. The latter provided Captain with a modicum of amusement, as much as allowed to a Borg drone, even an imperfect one. With Captain unavailable and Second still under forced downtime, but both retaining their subdesignations, there was no compulsion for any of the remaining Hierarchy of Eight to accept either primary or reserve consensus monitor position. Therefore, none did; and Vaerz' demand to converse with the "one in charge" had met the reality of a communal mind with the load of primary oversight fluidly shifting between units. Without Captain or Second as central foci, operations were less efficient, but it all still worked. In response to the demand, 8 of 8 had been tasked as liaison; and not even a profanity-laced objection to AI Daisy could force substitution because, technically, the order had been fulfilled. Due to her relative inexperience as a command and control locus - she had been assimilated and assigned as Hierarchy of Eight less than a subjective Cycle prior - the communal Mind decided such to be the best use of her in the situation. The amusement came from the species #12506 response to stress, which in this case meant 8 of 8 was a less than stupendous conversation partner, outward demeanor a near automaton which answered in a monotone with the minimum number of words necessary. The random full-body twitches were a bonus.

Apogee intruded into Captain's awareness. {Could you do something for us?} The doubling of the heavy's speech was decreased and plurals were more pronounced. The tone was also less...Apogee, more Borg. {The Order part of us, that which is not resisting the Foe [Conway], continues to fixate upon "What is our designation?" and "Who are we?". It is annoying. We would prefer not to go to mind-death [integration // acceptance] with that as our last coherent thought. Provide Order [us] a designation.} A sense of pleading colored the words, added to the gestalt, but it was less petition for an indulgence and more evocative of the imploration of a new drone to know its place in the All. {At least the "What is our purpose?" went away once the Enemy [Conway] appeared within our hull.}

Captain knew the exact moment thrusters pushed Exploratory-class Cube #347's bulk out of the treacle zone. The sub-collective link widened as ripple field static ebbed; and the Whole automatically attempted to fold its consensus monitor back into his normal place. Captain fought the latter, at least for the nonce: he was physically and mentally not in a position to adequately tend to his full duties, especially if said duties included forced liaisonship with Vaerz. Once he was secure on the cube and, more importantly, no longer subject to the whims of the ripple field disrupting communications, then he would be unconditionally available. The consensus cascade was (reluctantly) run, with Captain's objections seeded into the matrix, pros and cons coldly calculated. The outcome aligned with the status quo.

Following the events with interest via his direct link through Captain, Apogee waited until consensus was settled before reiterating, {The designation? Who are we?} The simple question begat debate of much greater magnitude than any minor consideration such as if the primary consensus monitor and facilitator should be forcibly reintegrated to his customary role.

The problem of appropriate designation to an assimilated (or nearly so) They unit was daunting. The designation "1 of 1" was rejected immediately. While it was accurate in that Apogee was the only assimilated They of its type, and very likely to remain so, the use of "1" potentially implied a singular where none existed. Similarly, one of the too many open designations in the Cube #347 roster was inappropriate. For one thing, Apogee was forecast to terminate in about thirty minutes, so the designation would just become open again. For another thing, the They would not fit aboard Cube #347, not even in a bulk cargo hold, so to expect it to fulfill the duties of, say, an engineering drone was impossible. Finally, as the musings wound towards a conclusion, Apogee wasn't exactly the typical drone, more of a ship; and it was theoretically possible it could support assimilated self-grown assault units or even serve as host to standard Borg drones. Into the final input included weapons hierarchy tactical sandbox scenarios, within which They units were provided standardized tags so as to better track them through model runs.

{You are Heavy-class Bio-Ship #1,} replied Captain, nearly five minutes after the original question had been asked. It wasn't the most imaginative of designations, but it did follow the general Collective naming scheme which had provided Captain's base designation to be "4 of 8" and his vessel "Exploratory-class Cube #347".

{We accept,} solemnly said Heavy-class Bio-Ship #1.

The background timers continued a steady march to their respective zeros - optimal transporter distance: 5.9 minutes; impact with moon: 24.5 minutes; stasis lock: 29.6 minutes.

The "voice" of Heavy-class Bio-Ship #1 began to speak. The speech pattern was much more clipped, more terse, than the conversational Apogee. The Apogee identity remained present, but had so faded that it was a background presence, inserting its perspective as an occasional echo. {Status update. Our natal persona [Apogee] has surrendered resistance and consented to incorporation [mind-death]. We subsume the final intact ganglion clusters where the personality [myself] had retreated. The addition of resources to ourself will allow greater resistance to Conway [Foe]. It is estimated that we will prevent Conway [Foe] from possessing us long enough to allow planet buster deployment. By our sacrifice, the opportunity to reconstitute the Borg Collective will be retained [and this Abomination be destroyed].}

And, then, the unexpected data transfer commenced.

Heavy-class Bio-Ship #1 strongly, pathologically, desired to be useful to the maybe-future Borg Collective, beyond that represented by his forthcoming death. If he could not survive as an echo within the Collective (or a soul of the They swarm), then at least a portion of the

information held in his diminished, yet still vast, archives would survive. The method of data transference was poor: a distal nerve cluster leading to direct nanotubule interface and, thence, a single drone connected to its sub-collective. While Heavy-class Bio-Ship #1 was now willing, as Apogee had not, to open itself to Cube #347 via nanite-built organic neural transceivers, else employ subspace broadcast utilizing the equipment forcefully installed at the They graveyard, to do either might alert Conway as to the presence of a non-They entity. As Captain could not hope to hold even a fraction of the unleashed data torrent within installed hardware or modified wetware, he simply allowed it to wash through, a passive organic communication node.

Revealed at the forefront was that the They swarm from which Apogee originated was only the forward expedition of two (or more) hordes. Unless Conway did away with all They everywhere during his tantrum - and Heavy-class Bio-Ship #1 did not believe such to be true - then there should be a follow-up force about 3,000 to 5,000 Cycles (time translated to Borg-standard) from the Milky Way galaxy rim. The second swarm would have started about 50,000 to 60,000 Cycles after the first expedition left, with the purpose to bolster what should have been a well-begun foray into the target galaxy, an attack expected to require at least 100,000 Cycles for full Pacification (and domestication of sentients) to the Chaos vision of Perfection. However, the initial swarm had procrastinated amongst the rim, paranoid of Borg/Order and assimilation for so long that there had been great debates happening within the Body. One side advocated to wait until the secondary horde entered communication range, while the other urged a plunge into the galaxy, acting upon the great body of evidence that Borg were long extinct. Many millennia of deliberation had commenced to lean to the latter option...and then Conway had happened.

And, as an aside, Heavy-class Bio-Ship #1 now understood, as Apogee/Chaos had not, that ultimate Perfection and Oneness of Mind required the melding of organic AND machine, so as to include all facets of unique sentience striving into a Whole. Therefore, Borg was obviously superior above They.

The very disquieting revelation of additional incoming They - not immediate, but a definite threat to a future Collective - segued into data concerning They Themselves. Divulged were unit types - ship and non-ship; biology; strengths and weaknesses; even genetic blueprints upon which a They unit type could be reconstructed, given the correct support devices. If the long-lost Borg Collective had ever held even a portion of the revealed information, it had been lost upon temporal resurrection, reduced to a Prime Command against They and a subset of salient details hardwired to every Borg drone. The data was priceless, a nexus point around which resistance to They became possible, perhaps even bringing them into the Collective.

An alert chime captured Captain's attention, prying a substantial portion of his awareness out of the information tsunami and the frantic classification and storage happening upon Cube #347. Cube #347 was well within optimal transporter range, and had been for several dataspace eternities. Much more relevant was that the moon impact timer had ticked past five minutes and stasis lock was at ten minutes.

Captain took stock of his personal situation, then injected into the communication stream, {Why was this drone not retrieved when transporter range was achieved? Get us out of here.} Plurals from the situational stress colored Captain's dictation. He quested towards transporter controls, but found his designation blocked, added to the register of units restricted from transporter use for one reason or another. While he knew he had the skill and experience to shred the code sufficiently to extract himself from the list, there was insufficient time to do so.

Replied Second crisply, {There are still several minutes to spare and your most useful function at this time is as a relay node. Since I do not want to inherit the primary consensus

monitor label, I have been weighting the ongoing consensus cascade upon when to retrieve as heavily as possible to ensure you are recovered. But you know how things go...someone sees something shiny and it is prune, prune, prune, else who knows what inane thing we'll decide to do. Not to mention Daisy noticed the return to activity of my designation and "requested" my cheery presence to liaise with our best friend Vaerz. So, busy, busy, busy. As usual.} Shortly after escaping the treacle zone, Second had been successfully roused from forced coma and reintegrated into the sub-collective architecture. Unlike Captain, there had been no postponement permitted to him to reassume his usual position.

Following the exchange, Heavy-class Bio-Ship #1 inserted, {Final approach locked in. We have initiated dissolution of planet buster organs for optimal detonation upon impact. Even if Conway were to fully possess ourself at this junction, there would be insufficient time to locate brake or steering functions. Destruction is guaranteed. Therefore, risk is minimal at this time if we continue data transmission via transceiver and subspace functions. Our remaining assault units have captured several key bags of coffee beans; and while internal architecture is taking extensive damage from the counter-attack, it keeps Conway too focused to realize his imminent danger. Conversely, there is clear benefit with two streams broadcasting at a higher rate than that possible via a single drone interface.} All echoes of Apogee were gone, that persona fully, as it put it previously, mind-dead.

A renewed integration request was received by the Cube #347 sub-collective, a request which was accepted. Heavy-class Bio-Ship #1 formally became the first, and only, They member of Borg. Unshackled by the pre-Prime Commands, the living ship could have been key to levering Cube #347 from Alliance chains. The living ship also could, had it been of mind, have easily set itself as the Prime Node of a renewed Borg Collective. But neither outcomes were fated to come to pass.

Data continued to flow.

Captain jerked his hand back. Nanotubules retracted. Head swiveled to unerringly gaze in the direction of Cube #347, unhindered by either distance or bulk of intervening They flesh. Moon impact: 2.3 minutes; stasis lock: 7.4 minutes. {Transport this drone.}

{Well...} hemmed Second, {there are a few units whom believe that a close-up view of this organic-based planet buster variant would be instructive.}

Captain relented to sub-collective demand and allowed the full mantle of primary consensus monitor and facilitator to descend. The transporter controls were eyed. The lock-out to his designation remained in place; and, as before, there was not enough time to force them to disengage. {Transport this drone. Now.}

Transporter locked and engaged.

Cinematic planet busters and world-sundering death rays are, almost universally, exciting affairs. Mounds of pyrotechnics and lavishly designed special effects produce the grand explosion a viewing audience demands in their favorite hunk of doomed rock. The reality, as usual, is quite a bit different. For one thing, it can be boring or, at least, not the type of cosmic demolition which makes for rave reviews on the big holoscreen.

The scientific definition of a standard planet is three-fold. First, it must orbit a star (and not be a star in its own right). Next, it must be sufficiently massive for its own gravity to collapse it into a spherical shape. Finally, the object must be big enough for it to have cleared objects of similar size from its orbit. "Dwarf" planets are similar, with the exception that their orbits remain cluttered; and some moons are sufficiently large to be considered planets if they weren't already

in orbit around an even larger object. What this all means is that even the smallest celestial object able to be called a “planet”, legitimately or otherwise, is big...or at least bigger than the ships which may swarm around it or the creatures who clamor upon its surface or in its atmosphere.

Most weapons specialized to destroy a rocky planet focus on literally shaking the target to death. Deep core processes are activated or enhanced, breaking apart the planet from the inside out. Volcanos, magma flow, earthquakes, many catastrophic events occur until the planet has crumbled. If there are any explosions, they are inadvertent, associated with pockets of volatile gasses or instable minerals. Complete demolition requires days to weeks, depending on weapon type and delivery, not the cinematic convention of moments. Even antimatter, strange matter, and singularity-based munitions, although often energetic upon deployment, do not produce instantaneous results.

Therefore, the explosion of Dirt’s moon, large enough to be classified a planet if it hadn’t been gravitationally bound to its primary, was completely unexpected.

On the other hand, it /was/ very dramatic.

Upon impact of Heavy-class Bio-Ship #1, the regolith at the collision site cracked and deformed inward; and even more so as the planet buster component of the vessel ignited. The directed blast dug deep into the moon, precipitating fountaining lava eruptions along suddenly opened fissures. The organic remains of the once living ship now, er, splattered within the new crater vanished under magma as molten rock welled up from below, birthing a fresh lake to add to the others smoldering darkly across the moon’s surface.

Any sensors trained upon the moon - and many were in regard to Alliance-built Cube #347 and four Xenig - would have noted the tectonic shiver that resonated through the satellite, out of proportion of the projectile which had ended its existence upon its surface. Sensors of a more discerning quality may have further remarked upon the [lemon-silver] knot which centered within the moon, and the sudden fluctuation that culminated with the unseen force darkening to a washed-out shade of [daffodil]. In this case, unfortunately, those precepting sensors were not active, else they may also observed the central star to have similarly lost its luster.

The moonquake settled. The fissures continued their flashy show. Either the planet buster wielded by the They had failed, else the moon would break up over the next several weeks, leaving behind a vast ring of rocks. Those rocks, in turn, would not only bequeath Dirt a spectacular celestial ornament for the next several millennia, but also violently deorbit along the planet’s equator, heaping more abuse to its already tortured existence. Whatever the conclusion, it was clear Heavy Bio-Ship #1 had been successful in ending Conway’s existence as the personification of coffee-fueled revenge rage.

The show was over. Except it was not.

The moon abruptly exploded.

It did not crumple. It did not seismically rip itself apart. It did not self-destruct in any of the ways that were dictated by reality.

The moon exploded...an explosion as good, if not better, than any big-budget cinematic masterpiece.

Left behind, once the nova-esque light cleared, was a mass of tumbling rock liberally spiked with blobs of cooling lava and hot gas clouds. An extremely large amount of refined metals, ceramic-based materials, and crystalline compounds comprised the debris field. Many of the materials radiated exotic signatures; and a significant portion matched nothing in Cube #347’s databases. Perhaps some debris may have been familiar to the Collective-That-Had-Been, but the pitiful imperfect Borg remnant of this now only had Alliance-based knowledge and a few

nuggets of past-data retained within drone onboard storage. However, even without comprehensive data, it was quite clear to the Mind which was the Cube #347 sub-collective that the moon had been much more than just a hunk of rock bombed during an ancient war.

An amorphous globule of hot gas and churning plasma, one of many, arced in a trajectory towards the north pole of Dirt. One of the Xenig audience abruptly, almost eagerly, broke orbit, speeding towards the mass. Without hesitation it entered blob; and the remnants of a They light tactical unit was swiftly broiled and scoured away, leaving behind a clean(er) hull...or, at least, one free of an undesired organic ornament which was decidedly /not/ in fashion this era. Task complete, it returned to its compatriots. A few beats later all disappeared from the local ken, swept elsewhere by folded-space drives.

Almost as an afterthought, treacle and subspace ripple fields vanished throughout the system. An echo of an echo, one which suggested “oops, my bad,” whispered within the minds, and Mind, of all entities present. Except, of course, such was ridiculous, clearly a hallucination, and, thus, summarily dismissed.

Aboard Cube #347, the sub-collective primary consensus monitor and facilitator was not present to view the tragic final scene of the final act with Heavy-class Bio-Ship #1’s sacrifice and moon explosion, nor Xenig epilogue. Technically, Captain was present, at least in body. Mind, on the other hand, was suspended in deep, non-lucid regeneration with attendant body locked into a support alcove in Maintenance Workshop #5, recovering from dangerously depleted reserves and high levels of metabolic poisons. Captain had literally been minutes from stasis lock when recovered from Heavy-class Bio-Ship #1. While drone maintenance could minister to some of the injuries acquired via a misadventure that ended with ramming by a They heavy tactical unit, there was damage that would have to wait until sufficient stabilization had occurred to allow surgery on the greater convenience of a bench. For instance, upon insertion into the stable environment represented by an alcove, nanites had begun to emergency repair the right ankle break in a manner which would significantly decrease mobility. The joint required to be rebroken, bones realigned to their correct locales and new tendons inserted. Truthfully, the best option was simply to replace it, thus increasing Captain’s already heavy cyberism. However, due to a lack of species-appropriate joint replacements within the pitiful stores overseen by drone maintenance, the less efficient and more primitive technique was necessary.

The fact that there would be greater pain using the alternate methodology was, as always, irrelevant.

Once Captain was awoken and damage repaired, a partition of a dozen media-minded units would ensure that there was a multi-media masterpiece of moon explosion and aftermath for meme review. There would even be an exciting music track, courtesy of the Alliance entertainment files. Copyright and trademarks were for small beings.

Second projected his likeness through the holomitter system into Vaerz’ office. With Captain unavailable to be at the spymaster’s beck and call, Second was defaulted into the liaison role. Or, that had been his fate upon reactivation from forced downtime following a too-abrupt translation out of the Realm. Why the Sarcoram continued to insist upon a variation of “in-person” of the unit “in charge” when any drone could act as sub-collective mouthpiece was unknown, but was hypothesized by the portion of the sub-collective tasked to build psychological racial/individual profiles to be an irrelevant dominance display. At least he wasn’t required to be tangibly present in this instance. Perhaps 8 of 8, standing in a corner of the office, still occasionally twitching in a vaguely disturbing manner, had made Vaerz reconsider the merits of a physical presence.

“Are we done here? Can we leave this ancient warzone before something else wakes up and decides a Borg cube, even one as piss-poor as this one, looks like an enticing snack? Or do you have any more irrelevant small being obsessions to pursue?” Second did not both to censor either comments or attitude, the latter leakage from the Whole entire, as well as a facet of his imperfect personality. “And, no, you still cannot talk to Captain, not for at least two cycles, possibly longer. Consult with your AI as to necessity and estimated timeline to reinstatement of higher cognitive processes. You have to put up with me; and I have to put up with you.”

Vaerz’ rolled eyes and sarcastic beak scrape succinctly conveyed his opinion upon Second’s words. It was also obvious that a headache from the Realm-to-Real transition remained very present. An arm with ruffled feathers was waved. “Whatever. I think this shake-down cruise is done. Neither They nor Conway are a threat to the Alliance, not anymore. But...take a somewhat round-about way back to Base Three. I need at least ten days to get my nest in order.” Pause. “First, before paperwork is shuffled and preened for the egg counters, I need a good sleep. I release you to do whatever it is that you do when I’m not a bastard making unseemingly demands.” A second pause. “And could you get this drone out of here? Pretty please with well-aged carrion on top?”

Second’s response was a withering stare, possible only by a Borg whom had a significant percentage of his sub-collective riding his perception stream. The communication thread was terminated. As an afterthought, the compulsion which had been lain on 8 of 8 during the emergency was severed, allowing her to retreat to her alcove. Elsewhere in the bowels of the ship, an address was inserted into the slot of the Xenig trainer drive. Cube #347 folded to its destination, leaving behind an abandoned, hard-used, and war-torn solar system to whatever fates may befall.