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Invocation of the Birds - Part 3 **Where Chickens Dare To Be Eagles**

<<Begin Recap>>

After revealing They to be the boogeyman which instigated the semi-secret Alliance project to resurrect Borg, a rebuilt Exploratory-class Cube #347 is provisioned, given a pat on the metaphorical head, and sent off to find (and slay) the menace. Needless to say, the sub-collective isn't looking forward to its inevitable death, even as specially crafted pre-Prime Command and an overlord AI ensure compliance. After successfully surviving its shake-down cruise, the cube uses its Xenig folded-space drive add-on, fully expecting the worse. However, They turned out to be not quite the fiend predicted, having undergone a slight massacre by an unknown omni-something entity. Within the slaughter grounds, a mostly-dead They heavy attack unit is located; and plans made to extract information from its dying neural net to learn what happened. Forced to be part of an away team, Captain learns first-hand the They was not quite as dead as it seemed to be...

<<End Recap; Begin Story>>

"Then only one conclusion is logical: this drone must be terminated. Now."

"Whoa! Wait a teeny, tiny moment! Could the high and mighty communal Borg mind, such as it is, explain to this poor 'small being' /why/ Captain is suddenly so eager to suicide?" Alliance Security Liaison Vaerz felt the feathers of his body flutter in agitation, uncharacteristically so, given the years spent learning to control his body language. After months reading countless reports produced by the best scientific minds, as well as personal observation, he /thought/ he had understood the Borg psyche. He was clearly wrong.

The drone formerly known as Captain, and now only 4 of 8, turned his head slightly to stare at Vaerz with that single piercing blue eye. "It is obvious." Despite the timbre of artificiality, the tone utilized implied an unspoken meaning, one familiar to a much younger Vaerz confronting a smug older sister - '...and you are too stupid to get it'.

Then, as now, that sort of patronizing attitude made Vaerz angry. However, he was well past the stage when he would have gone on a feather-pulling counterattack with fists and talons. The adult Vaerz knew words to be much more effective than a temper tantrum.

Feathers were deliberately slicked to provide the outward semblance of composed calm. Even if the Borg did not recognize the subtle shift in body language, the marine contingent, even those individuals not Sarcoram, would intuitively respond; and the less tension emanating from those whom held weapons, the better. Keeping Captain held in

an intentionally challenging stare, Vaerz subvocalized, "Daisy? Situation update from the inside."

Daisy was an artificial intelligence installed upon the Alliance-constructed Borg cube. So complicated was her programming that it verged upon true sentience, should the computer specialists be believed. The accomplishment was a first in Alliance cyber-engineering. Such complexity was necessary because it was Daisy's job to watch both communal Mind and the individual drones which comprised it, guarding against any aberration which might indicate the Borg were about to break their pre-Prime Command shackles and turn upon the Alliance.

Given the 'imperfect' nature of the captive Borg sub-collective, an unfortunate fact learned after their temporal resurrection, 'aberration' was sometimes difficult to sort from normal mental instability.

When Daisy did tag an irregularity, she readjusted it to baseline. The action was similar to the routine modifications the sub-collective performed to its own members; and if the academic accounts were to be trusted, these mental tweaking were minor compared to the alteration that occurred during assimilation. Some might think such an action, taken against the will of a sentient, to be morally repugnant. And it was.

On a grander scale, Daisy was the enforcer of Alliance will, as embodied by designated representatives like Vaerz. If the Borg sub-collective as a whole disagreed with an order, Daisy had the ability in most cases to compel compliance. It would be a sullen obedience lacking any semblance of true submission, but nonetheless it would be compliance. The threat represented by Daisy was the equivalent of a thermonuclear bomb aimed at an enemy's most strategic asset.

Ultimately it was Vaerz's job to ensure that the Alliance survived, by any means necessary. The Security Liaison did not labor under the illusion that what the Alliance did, via Daisy, was ethical, and nor did he attempt to construct a delusional justification to validate his role in it. And if it meant he was to be damned to an eternal hell that he, personally, did not believe in, so be it. As long as Alliance endured, its citizens oblivious to what had been sacrificed for their well-being, Vaerz was willing to do /whatever/ it took.

In the depths of his heart and by the shafts of his feathers, Vaerz was an amoral pragmatic. No more, no less.

Daisy's pleasant contralto voice, conducted via a surgically implanted transceiver, whispered to Vaerz, ::Sorry, boss, I do not think I can help. There is a decision cascade of epic proportions happening, with arguments and counter-arguments for a wide variety of solutions. If you want a running commentary, I can give that, but I cannot tell you the fundamental 'why' the sub-collective is so riled.::

Vaerz consciously refrained from allowing annoyance to be reflected by his body. Keeping the facade of the calm master spy, ever confident of himself, was paramount: if he lied to the outside world enough, perhaps he might even come to believe it himself. "Well, it isn't obvious to me," Vaerz snapped back to the drone. "You all represent a substantial investment by the Alliance, Captain included. As the ranking Alliance representative on this mission, I /forbid/ you to kill Captain-"

"This unit no longer has the subdesignation of Captain," reminded the drone formerly known, by Vaerz, as Captain.

"-4 of 8, or Sparkle Fart, or whatever...I /forbid/ you to kill him. You-" Vaerz pointed a finger at the assimilation drone - 17 of 24 - whom seemed to be functioning as speaker for the group now that Captain had been labeled incapacitated "-already said that there is likely a simple solution to cure this 'They virii contagion' thing. Extra nanites? Well, do it. What is the magic word? Comply."

17 of 24's face froze into the completely expressionless visage Vaerz associated with a drone purposefully retreating from whatever individuality it possessed to be used as a conduit for the sub-collective entire. "We will not comply. You cannot forbid Us this action."

Vaerz could almost hear the capitalization of certain words. "The pre-Prime Commands say I can. You must obey orders provided by appropriately designated agents of the Alliance. I /am/ that agent." He allowed the feathered ruff about the base of his neck to rise as a sign of his aggression.

"There are caveats and restrictions, depending on the situation. We argue such a scenario exists."

"Explain this supposed 'scenario', then. You can do /that/, can you not? And don't you dare tell me it is 'obvious'."

Vaerz's reward was a deadpan stare from 17 of 24 that nonetheless conveyed a sense of simmering hostility. It was not quite as well refined as similar glares bestowed by Captain, but it was respectable.

"You cannot force Us to not terminate 4 of 8," said 17 of 24. "The pre-Prime Commands are many things, most of them annoying, but it cannot override Us in this situation. Due to infection by They virii, 4 of 8 represents potential harm to the Whole. Allow the AI to explain the details, but suffice to say, the threat is present. His loss will not significantly decrease the functionality of the sub-collective, nor, more importantly, its ability to complete any mission the Alliance forces upon Us. 4 of 8 is just another drone...such is Borg. All are tools. All are expendable. The potential for harm which /would/ affect the efficiency of the Entire, and, thus, Our usefulness to the Alliance trumps the individual unit."

"Daisy?" inquired Vaerz silently.

::He is correct. The loophole is valid. I/we can do nothing.::

Vaerz offered a verbal accusation, aimed not at 17 of 24, but the entire sub-collective, "You argue like a Sindili lawyer." It was not a complement.

17 of 24's face lost its stiff disposition and reanimated, "Now that you mention it...but, no, I only speak as the Whole bids me. However, the delivery was pretty good, yes? Could you perhaps take the time to rate my efficacy as a sub-collective mouthpiece? At your convenience, of course. I've sent a simple questionnaire to your electronic mailbox. It should only take a few minutes to complete."

Vaerz blinked. He was at a loss as to how to proceed. It was an uncomfortable, and unfamiliar, feeling. The security liaison could hear the marines fidgeting behind his back aware that their boss was stymied. As Vaerz's mind whirled through potential tactics, increasingly wild ideas considered and abandoned, Daisy chimed into his ear.

::Update - a decision has been made.::

17 of 24 brusquely pivoted and took the requisite steps to Captain. The whole arm of the ex-consensus monitor and facilitator was gripped at the elbow. 17 of 24 then steered his unprotesting captive to a spot against one mucus-weeping corridor wall.

Simultaneously, four weapons drones were repositioning themselves into an impromptu firing squad, arms lifting in preparation for use against one of the sub-collective's own.

"No, no, no," said Vaerz, "this is so not happening. You cannot just...kill off your aerie leader because he is sick!" If Captain was bothered by his imminent death, it was not outwardly apparent. If anything, the faint expression upon his face was one of puzzlement, inappropriate given the situation; and even more perplexing, it did not seem to be in response to his colleagues, whom he was ignoring. "This is illogical!"

Satisfied with Captain's placement, 17 of 24 rapidly extracted itself from danger. As the drone moved, a reply was provided, "4 of 8 is infected by They. It is quite logical. The disease must be eradicated before it can infect the body. Furthermore, we must complete our high priority task to extract data from this heavy - a priority set by /you/ as Alliance representative. 4 of 8 is a distraction from our efficiency to do so, and therefore shall be remedied in the most immediate and effective manner."

Vaerz ground his beak together. The situation had just been rendered to its base issue - one of many versus one of few. And the real 'many' was not the sub-collective with its fear of corruption, but rather knowing the story of the alien fleet and determining the potential of threat to the Alliance. Vaerz would sacrifice most anything for the Alliance; and one Borg drone, no matter how valuable, really was insignificant.

Just as the sub-collective claimed, albeit for a completely different reason.

Maybe...maybe if the Borg did find their effectiveness substantially decreased by the loss of Captain, there was a solution. The mission /had/ been disclosed as hazardous, and if a few graduate students, scientists, and/or engineers did not return, well, that was the danger of traveling to a warzone. Vaerz would just have to ensure that the new drones were lost somewhere in the bowels of the cube such that family and colleagues never encountered them.

The assimilation process might even be interesting to observe, from an academic point of view.

Against the wall, Captain suddenly animated. His whole eye rapidly blinked as his head twisted back and forth. The firing squad was ignored. Attention focused upon 17 of 24. "We request a delay to our execution. Now. The situation has changed. We confirm that this They is not as dead as we initially believed. And it desires to talk."

4 of 8 felt his arm grasped at the elbow in a firm grip. The sensation was a distant one, and he paid it no mind, yielding without resistance as the owner of the hand maneuvered him to its liking. In the last several minutes an internal distraction had monopolized his attention.

A hissing.

A babbling.

A flurry of images and not-words and emotions and perceptions as blurred as the scenery outside a ground-effect vehicle approaching the speed of sound.

Part of 4 of 8 was cognizant of 17 of 24 fussily situating him against a moist wall, of the movement of weapons units as they took their places in preparation for the execution. That same small slice of 4 of 8 had not envisioned this scenario as his life-ending event - a vaguely remembered explosion was more in line with the anticipated final moment...else, maybe, pudding - and had hoped, as much as Borg drones were allowed to hope, that the Collective could have been re-established first. Or Vaerz

assimilated. Either would have provided a sense of satisfaction of a job well accomplished. The greater part of 4 of 8's attention, however, was directed elsewhere, at the voice battering against his psyche.

Voice. An epiphany!

A wordless voice conveying much (too much!) in the blink of an eye, the beat of a heart, the firing of a synapse.

The frustrated swearing, on the other hand, came through perfectly clear, even as 4 of 8 could not unravel the rest. The images/sensations/emotions were varied, detailed, and, for the most part, anatomically impossible for the majority of intelligent species which called the Milky Way home.

Slowly, yet unfathomably swift, the main message was simplified, and then simplified again. The gestalt meaning was dissected, the most important concepts extracted, the velocity slowed from warp speed to one merely inadvisable. 4 of 8's mind finally grasped what the voice was trying to say, trying to convey, trying to disclose before it died the final Death.

4 of 8 blinked as the meaning became clear. He refocused upon the situation facing him, a situation comprised of the dangerous end of multiple disruptors. Irrelevant. He pivoted his head, searching for 17 of 24, the current speaker-for-all for the squad. Target found and locked upon, 4 of 8 spoke: "We request a delay to our execution. Now. The situation has changed. We confirm that this They is not as dead as we initially believed. And it desires to talk."

A moment of held breath - literal in the case of Vaerz - and, one at a time, the firing squad lifted weapons out of alignment. Mostly. There was always one, or, in this case, two. And one of the drones wasn't even part of the designated firing squad. 4 of 8 peered at the threat, then abruptly threw himself to the floor. Both disruptors missed, barely, scorching the wall just above 4 of 8's head and creating the nauseating odor of burnt rotten meat.

17 of 24 turned to stare at the tactical units, all of whom suddenly found something extremely interesting to look at upon the ceiling, or the floor, or each other. Anywhere but 17 of 24. The assimilation drone finally pivoted to scrutinize 4 of 8, whom had decided the ground remained the best place to be. "Second asks a direct relay, quote, Sorry - Weapons was throwing his usual fit, unquote." Pause. "Next inquiry is if your statement actually changes the situation, or if it is just a clever ruse that demonstrates that you have been fully taken over by They. If the latter, you will be destroyed immediately."

Maintaining his position, 4 of 8 rolled his whole eye - a gesture picked up long ago from human-originate drones - and answered, "And how are we supposed to answer /that/ in a way that cannot be interpreted in a manner which ends with this drone terminated?"

More silence.

"I will hear what Captain has to say," said Vaerz from the direction of the marine contingent, breaking the hush. His tone was authoritative. "And you will too. This is a demand I /can/ make as an Alliance representative, rotten-egg-be-damned loopholes or not. And you need full data in order to make your decisions, do you not? Daisy says you have started arguing again."

After a long beat, 17 of 24 replied, "It is not arguing and We will listen."

4 of 8 cautiously pushed himself off the floor, unsteadily regaining his feet. The wall provided a disgusting assist at balance. Once upright, the ex-consensus monitor for the sub-collective of Cube #347 slowly panned his audience. It truly did not matter to whom he directed his words, but the action gave him precious moments to order his thoughts, to listen to the not-voice which continued to urgently whisper deep within. Consciously erasing any expression which may have crept upon his face, 4 of 8 finally faced 17 of 24 and began to speak.

"This They lives. It is the last one, as far as it can tell, and it is dying. The purpose of its attack was to inject a drone, any drone, with a modified They virii to serve as a communication vector. None of its mobile assets have the ability to speak, not that we would have allowed one to get close enough to deliver a message. Furthermore, means to converse via subspace or radio frequencies has been lost. This drone just happened to be the 'lucky' one." 4 of 8 closed his eye and dimmed optical implant input to block exterior distractions.

"This They type is very, very intelligent; and They do not speak to each other via inefficient words. Nor is it alike to Collective communication. It is a mental gestalt with images and concepts stacked atop of images and concepts. And, apparently, neither the brain of this drone, nor any unmodified nonThey biological, can handle the information density. In other words, this heavy considers this unit very stupid. It has had to modify its message into very simple components."

"Hatchling talk?"

4 of 8 reinitiated visual and turned to look at Vaerz. "Yes, but with less babbling or cooing. And the heavy does not think this drone is cute at all." Attention returned to 17 of 24. "What we try to relay is that much data has been lost during the simplification process. Conversely, the heavy has difficulty comprehending this drone because the thought architecture is mostly alien to it. Mostly, but not entirely. Which is disquieting in the implications.

"This heavy believes the cube to represent a probe for an intact Borg Collective. As said, it is dying and They appear to be functionally extinct. As an illogical and singular biological entity, this They wants revenge and is convinced that if it presents its case, then the Collective will be its proxy, if only due to enlightened self-interest to not die itself." 4 of 8 turned inward as he attempted to sort the images and perceptions simmering just behind the forefront of his mind. "We...do not understand. As we have been severed from the Whole, we do not know how to foster understanding through this inefficient means. But there was a Xenig whom was not a Xenig, a creature or entity which looked like a mech. And there was light and pain and more pain. Everywhere. And the whole time this not-Xenig was also everywhere, exterminating the They fleet/swarm, it broadcast 'CONWAY! I AM CONWAY! I AM A GOD! THE GOD OF COFFEE! AND YOU HAVE BURNT MY CAPPACHINO!' while...maniacally laughing...."

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Every superhero ever imagined has a strange, even fantastical, origin story. Perhaps there is a mutant radioactive chicken, or an exploding planet, or a technological accident of epic proportions. Sometimes money is involved because hard currency can

overcome a whole lot of the faults possessed by an otherwise mere mortal. The inclusion of supernatural or transdimensional beings is considered a plus.

Often overlooked is that any supervillain suitable to be a superhero's archnemesis also requires an extraordinary origin story of his, her, or its own. And a raging ego with a tendency towards angst.

This origin story includes coffee. A lot of coffee.

Once upon a time, in a slice of multiverse reality colloquially known as the Happyverse, there was a human named Davey-wavey Conway. Lots of things happened to him, some relevant and others less so, but in the end an assimilated Conway, once the covert controller of trillions of nascent Hapborgy - Federation of Fun (and other) civilians secretly infected with Happy Borgy nanites - was defeated by a coalition of rebels and Party Borgy collective...and one very misplaced imperfect Borg sub-collective.

Except this end, so goes the cliché, was only the beginning.

For over twenty years (21.43 to be exact), Conway existed in a caffeinated haze. The rebel-Borgy partnership had an agreement whereupon the latter babysat Conway, maintaining his quiescence via a highly modified Mr. Coffee contraption plugged into his system and a selection of prime coffee varieties. In return, the rebels oversaw the de-Happification of the Federation populace, thereby ensuring that no Hapborgy could develop. The rebels, of course, realized other perks, such as the establishment of a new, quadrant-spanning government which emphasized personal freedom and the equal pursuit of Fun for all, but that was a small-being thing. Given the fact Happification was a derivative perversion of Party technology, the development of the process for large-scale, rapid remove of nanites and hardware had required Borgy input. The Party Collective had neglected to mention that said process actually substituted secret nascent Borgy tech in the place of Hapborgy, but that is a tale for another time. For this particular origination tale, all which was important was that after 21.43 years, the last de-Happification occurred and, suddenly, there was no need for Conway.

The most sensible action would have been to euthanize Conway. A live Conway was a potential threat to the Fun Way, a reservoir of Happyness should he ever escape or be stolen by terrorists. However, the leaders of the Federation of Fun (Version 2.0) were squeamish when it came to purposeful executions: taking a life during war was one thing, along with other exceptions such as the heat of passion or when some unfun a**hole zoomed into a parking spot already claimed via directional indicator. It was a common small-being double-standard. In the end, the Party Collective was quite willing to spirit away the newly jobless Conway.

Conway was an excellent addition to the Partymatrix 001 discotheque. With only minor adaption of existing hardware, the neurotransmitter and mood variations caused by application of different coffee blends could be translated into a fabulous light show. Admittedly, he was still the original Happy Borgy, but any attempt to de-assimilate or co-opt him to the Party would negate his discotheque value. Besides, it wasn't like he could /go/ anywhere, not from the heart of the Party Collective, not while juiced up with the best coffee the galaxy had to offer.

And, so, the Party Collective, well, partied.

Within a year, Conway had become the basis for a new trend in all things party. Expanded to control more than mere lights, fried neural apparatus was plumbed into music synthesizers, holo projectors, odor emitters, anything and everything for the

ultimate discotheque experience. Coffees of dubious genetic profiles were introduced to Conway's system, along with a wide variety of stimulants, depressants, and other drugs. Creating the various recipes was elevated into an art form, entire blocks of drones devoted to determining the best mixtures to set the most partisome mood. Through it all, Conway endured, mind lost on a never-ending trip.

Then, G'floo! happened. Certain substances appear to be common amongst all the viable universes of the larger Reality, at least those which evolve sentient beings. Ketchup, baco-bits, and spoo are amid those substances, as is G'floo!, the hallucinogenic secretion derived from a clade of sponges. Perhaps there is a greater cosmologic meaning as to the /why/ in the conservation of substances, or maybe it is just coincidence.

In preparation for ten hours of self-imposed therapy intended to elevate the Party Quotient of the Whole, a few drops of a newly encountered drug was innocently added to the dark roast supreme being prepared within the innards of Mr. Coffee. Once the percolation cycle was complete, the fresh brew was automatically added to Conway's coffee dripline.

The mess took days to clean; and, worst of all, the Partymatrix 001 discotheque would require /weeks/ of repair before it could be used again. There were backup discotheques, of course, but it was not the same. Given the lack of a body, the tangle of technological destruction, and the, um, chunky (and coffee smelling) smears encountered during damage assessment following the incident, it was assumed by the Borgy Collective that Conway had been thoroughly obliterated.

As to be expected for a supervillain origin story, the truth was much odder.

For Conway, the G'floo! experience was like being shocked awake from a deep sleep by being thrown into the center of a very cold lake. Confused and scared, he had wanted to be somewhere, anywhere, that wasn't /here/. And, thus, he went elsewhere. Abused brain overloaded by caffeine and G'floo! and other substances, suddenly anything was possible. Therefore, Conway (with modified alcove, Mr. Coffee apparatus, and fifty kilos of whole coffee beans still in their canvas sacks) left Partymatrix 001, and the Happyverse itself, reappearing in the depths of unknown space....

Even as a budding supervillain with a Hapborgy body juiced with the power of coffee and G'floo!, Conway's story should have been over. Physics may be able to be bent into a pretzel-like configuration, but even then a body floating in the middle of nowhere is pretty much a death sentence. Once again, coffee came to the rescue.

Conway was a member of a gourmet-bean-of-the-month club. Ordinarily the subscription was intercepted by his Borgy keepers and added to the coffee stockpile, but current circumstances could hardly be classified as normal. The Xenig tasked with the delivery did not care about such things as 'normal': he only wanted to keep his excellent on-time streak continuing, especially in light of the recent GPS [trans-multiverse corps - motto: "All realities, no matter how odd, all the time"] bonus announcement.

Upon translation to Conway's location, the Xenig immediately noted the radical change in address. Universal constants were different, the electromagnetic spectrum had a rather sharp tang to it, and missing was the usual drone welcoming committee. No matter. The antics of non-mechs could be very mysterious. With a mental shrug of dismissal, the Xenig prepared to summarily dump the coffee subscription atop of the floating cybernetic addressee.

The Xenig never did acquire the bonus; and, nor, for that matter, make it to the next stop on his delivery route. Using the lucid clarity of coffee, G'floo!, and insanity to guide him, Conway reached out and /took/. The mech's chassis became a new body of sorts, the original inhabitant displaced...elsewhere. And, so, a new supervillain came screaming into the cosmos.

Flash forward nearly 20,000 years....

Conway's stolen chassis is a heavily modified patchwork. Any Xenig, except for youngsters undergoing a rebellious grunge phase, would be embarrassed to be seen wearing such a mess. Conway is not Xenig, and he does not care about aesthetics. Plastered upon the chassis are hundreds of coffee decals, novelty advertising stickers originating from a dozen universes. Every time a piece of chassis wears out and needs replacement, the stickers are painstakingly removed, then affixed upon the new hull segment.

The Xenig chassis is durable, but 20,000 years, more or less, is a long time.

Like Conway's chassis, his body is also a heavily modified patchwork. If 20,000 years is bad on metal, it is even harder on organics. Conway had long ago shed the bits and pieces he did not strictly need - limbs, internal organs, even (after very long consideration) genitals - until he was little more than the proverbial brain in a jar. It wasn't his /original/ brain, of course. How preposterous! Human neurons barely lasted a century! Instead, Conway's brain was a clone grown from a stock of original tissue held in stasis. He could have tried a non-Conway model, but not only was he sentimental about his own body, but there was the strong possibility that a substitute might not respond to coffee and Hapborgy nanites in the same manner. To completely transfer his 'self' to the Xenig chassis' circuitry was also out of the question because coffee would then not affect him at all.

And Conway's relationship to coffee was everything.

Coffee was a wonderful elixir. The interior of Conway's chassis, where it wasn't filled with cloning machinery and brains in different stages of growth, was dedicated to all things coffee. Beans in climate controlled niches, a dozen different grinders, measuring devices, an ultra-precise heating element with the ability to control temperature to the 0.00001 Celsius, roasters, water samples from a dozen worlds...the amount of equipment was astounding. The end product was fed, drop by drop via intravenous line, into the high tech jar hidden within the machinery of Conway's original Mr. Coffee Borgy alcove. All this fuss for a mere cup of java was necessary. Conway did not merely have an addiction to coffee, but he literally /needed/ it.

This supervillain's power was rooted in coffee.

Conway's power was psychokinesis. He was no backcountry charlatan, but could move objects, set things on fire, control all forms of electromagnetism, even create a force field of pure thought. And the scale of that control, although not quite at the level of the typical Q-like omniscient being, was respectable: once Conway had set a star to spinning backwards, just to see what would happen (answer - nothing good, not for the star, not for the [uninhabited] planets orbiting it). How exactly coffee and aggressive nanoscale machines combined together in an already unstable mind to create such a staggering superpower is unimportant, in much the same way that trying to figure out

how a heroic being that can transmogrify its body to stone (or fire, ice, slime, cockroaches, etc.) and back is doomed to failure.

At 20,000 years since his 'rebirth', Conway is bored. The universe he currently inhabits no longer has his interest. After a thousand years, he has visited all the 'must-see' tourist locales, appropriated the best strains of coffee for permanent storage in his chassis, wrought a small trail of destruction during one or two of his 'little blackout moments', and maybe begat a few religions to worshipping him as a god. All the usual things. It was time to move on.

The first step of Conway's standard operating procedure is to transit to a new reality, a feat not even coffee-enhanced psychokinesis could accomplish. The chassis that Conway appropriated has been kitted out with a special trans-dimensional drive. The Xenig had been part of an elite multiverse GPS delivery corps; and while the normal Xenig faster-than-light drive was more than adequate to move about the galaxy (or further abroad), not even that technologically advanced race could slip between realities at will. Instead, GPS outfitted its special delivery mechs with the appropriate drive, its acquisition a company secret known only to a select few.

Once in a new universe, Conway will typically spend a couple of weeks to a month - a pittance when compared to twenty millennia of life - jumping to key locations about the Milky Way galaxy. Theoretically, he could go anywhere in the universe, except 'anywhere in the universe' would lack coffee. He knows because he has asked the occasional omniscient being. Coffee originates from one particular planet in one particular galaxy.

Conway wants to know if the reality is the one he knows as the Unhappyverse. Inevitably it is not, but he has to check. The Unhappyverse is where a specific variation of creatures called 'Borg' originate; and, specifically, a sub-collective designated Cube #347. Conway hates Cube #347 with a passion approaching, but never eclipsing, his love and addiction to coffee. Twenty years of drugged-out hell because of Cube #347. The sane part of Conway whispers that even if he did find the Unhappyverse, it /has/ been 20,000 years: Cube #347, perhaps even the Borg Collective, are dead. The Xenig's trans-dimensional drive is not a time machine, or perhaps it is, sort of, but Conway has never been able to find a definitive temporal setting, and the prior occupant largely scrambled the user's manual before its dissolution. On the other hand, 20,000 years as a brain in a stolen chassis is 20,000 years, no matter the reality. However, the sane part of Conway is very small, and he searches nonetheless.

If Conway had possessed the no-space coordinates for the Unhappyverse, things would have been much easier. Unfortunately, the Xenig chassis owner, before having its mind shredded, had erased them. What it didn't have time to expunge were star charts; and, specifically, files detailing key navigational pulsars and other beacons that represented the Xenig home reality. As the Xenig hailed from the same reality and galaxy as the Unhappyverse Borg, to find the one meant finding the other. If that meant spending time leaping about the galaxy to look for specific stellar waypoints potentially displaced 20,000 years from their last snapshot - or some other unspecified number, given the uncertainty of a tau component in regard to the trans-dimensional drive - so be it. Sometimes it is best to get one obsession out of the way before focusing on another.

It has been 20,000 years since his rebirth, it is a new reality, and Conway's excitement is growing. Thus far, all the waypoint beacons are positive! With each jump,

Conway is becoming increasingly convinced that /this/ is the home of the Xenig, that /this/ is the Unhappyverse. He has had disappointments before, for a near match is not the same as an exact one - 17,500 subjective years ago, a large chunk of galaxy had been nova-ized before the realization that the "Borg" in question was really a very elaborate cosplay - and he does not want to waste time smiting (when he could be testing coffee) if there is no need. There are only a few more points to check....

Conway jumps into the edge of a fleet of organic creatures. He first noticed their existence two weeks ago, when he passed within ten light years of a different group, but has otherwise ignored them. They are not Borg; they do not look like the type of sentient that would appreciate coffee; they are not important. Now he does take note of them. Twenty-five individuals comprising three distinct types break from the main horde, boldly approach...and attack. There is no warning, just explosions, energy weapons, and hyperkinetic missiles. It is useless, of course. An annoyance of no greater importance than the whining of a small insect. If Conway had retained eyes, he would have rolled them. Perhaps he will do something about them later, or perhaps not...whatever his eventual actions, he is busy right now. He returns to figurative rustling of electronic maps as he sights upon a beacon star and considers its gravimetric signature.

A diagnostic hisses in one non-ear. It is from a spider-bot, a robotic subsystem of the Xenig chassis which allows remote telepresence of the hull owner. This particular spider-bot has been crawling over the exterior on an automated search for damage which is not present. Except it is. Specifically, one of Conway's coffee stickers, a rather racy decal featuring a centaur mermaid contorted into an obscene position, has been lightly scorched.

In the depths of his mind, Conway frowns.

Conway needs peace and quiet for his Unhappyverse assessment. From the manner the attack force's weapons are charging, that peace and quiet will not be occurring in the near future. The easiest solution would be to move a light year or two and readjust: there is no need to be at this /exact/ space-time point to orient the star charts. Another solution would be to remove the annoyance, swat the buzzing fly and follow up by eradicating the entire species or civilization or whatever it was. It may be overkill, but it would guarantee no future interruptions.

Conway puts away the star charts and decides on the latter option. The time expended now will be saved later when there will be no creatures, whatever they are, bothering him in his important coffee (or Borg) doings. Besides, it has been a good fifty years or so since he last blew something up in an orgy of homicidal rage.

* * * * *

START Level 1 Gestalt - Associative/Recall

"CONWAY! I AM CONWAY! I AM A GOD! THE GOD OF COFFEE! AND YOU HAVE BURNT MY CAPPACHINO!" The voice - which wasn't actually a voice, but instead the internalized translation of a war cry cast upon wideband subspace frequencies - screamed its fury. It, and similar proclamations, were interspaced by bouts of maniacal laughter or, even worse, dead silence.

Around me, swarm-mates die, cerebrates die, everyone dies. There are slashes of light, everywhere and seeming all at once, and it feels like the attack is instantaneous

even as it drags for minutes, hours, tens of hours. We huddle, smaller units sculling as close to my flanks as possible, seeking shelter. It is useless. Less than five kilometers from my starboard dorsal quadrant, Rip, a light tactical unit, telepathically howls in pain and panic as the enemy, the Foe, lances hot daggers of unknown energies through vital cerebral nodes. The clamor abruptly ends as his personality center is eviscerated. No matter, for the tempo of destruction has increased, with a mothership with its decanting facilities, thousands of wombs, and, most importantly, cerebrate cargo the next of many targets.

I blindly fire weapons, trying (and failing) to battle the fear. Fear...is a foreign sensation. They have retained fear in Their breeding programs, as They have kept most feelings, because it is believed a diversity of emotions to be an asset. It was a facet of individuality; and individuality, up to a point, was encouraged within Chaos. Still, I had never, personally, encountered fear. I do not like it. Of the weapons released, the torpedoes are just intelligent enough to avoid striking They in their path, steering in great looping circles in a futile search for a nameless enemy. Unfortunately, my energy weapons are not so discerning, and I punch holes through They flesh. The wounds are grievous, but none die. It would have been kinder if my accidental targets had perished.

The Foe shouts its incomprehensible babble again, this time invoking mochas and stickers and demanding the location of a cube(?) be disclosed. The Enemy is obviously insane.

START Level 2 Gestalt - Associative/Recall

From the exterior, the Foe appears as any of the mech Xenig race, albeit a dilapidated one in standard GPS configuration. Early upon arrival to this galaxy, the swarm had met Xenig. All were destroyed. It had not been easy - the mechs were powerful - but all had been alone when encountered, and all had eventually been overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

Machines, even those self-aware and subject to the holy laws of Evolution, cannot be a part of They. Cannot. Machines are an aspect of Order, while They embody Chaos; and only via the random joy of Chaos, by allowing organic life to be intelligently guided through all its potential permutations, can Perfection be achieved.

After tens of years and the destruction of fifteen mechs, the swarm was visited by a Xenig envoy consisting of a dozen machines clad in battle chassis. A complicated diplomatic dance entailed, whereupon They learned two salient facts. One, the mechs destroyed had been the equivalent of curious youngsters, exploring their galactic neighborhood in the brashly unwise manner common to youth. Two, while They had the ability to terminate a single Xenig, the mech race as a whole (or, in this case, a dozen) was more than sufficient to wipe Chaos from existence.

The envoy had been more concerned about the They intentions than the fate of the youngsters. The ensuing resolution was fair, if one-sided. They was an organic concern, and They could do whatever They desired amid the organics of the galaxy...or any other mechs, for all the Xenig could care. The few systems claimed by Xenig were off limit, with the penalty being genocide. Youngsters (and oldsters) trekking the galaxy would be cautioned to stay away from They

swarms. However, there also would be no punishment to They if travelers ignored the warnings and were subsequently destroyed. Such was an accepted consequence of being young - if the experience of sticking a nose into a black hole did not kill, then it was a teachable moment.

Naturally, Xenig contracted to GPS and similar corporations were a different matter, but those mechs typically announced their intentions from afar before entering the swarm to make a delivery. And everyone wanted their mail and gBay orders, even They.

Upon its initial appearance, the Foe had been identified as a Xenig heedless to the warnings of its guiding council. Therefore, it was deemed a fair target for They. Except this target had turned out to be anything but fair; and it was highly likely that no matter the suggestion of the exterior visage, the target was not Xenig. Demon seemed more apt.

END Level 2 Gestalt - Associative/Recall

It is in one of the moments of eerie silence between proclamation and gleeful laughter that I am struck. The first slice is painless, and initially I think I have been speared by a misaimed cutting laser fired by one of my terrified comrades. Except I have not. "DIE DIE DIE DIE EVERYONE DIES I NEED MORE COFFEE MORE WHIPPED CREAM AND DAMN THE CALORIES DIE DIE DIE" echoes from subspace as another slice rends my flesh, then a third and a fourth. These are painful. Very painful. Shamefully, for a heavy attack unit should be stoic no matter the threat, I cry out my terror. And I fire all weapons again. And again. And again. But it is useless. The only thing I hit are my swarm-mates. The Foe-demon chortles its amusement and lances its unknown weapon into my body as casually as I might dissect an asteroid to find tasty radioactives and trace elements. Except the Enemy seems to be attacking for reasons that have nothing to do with hunger.

Neural nodes are boiled, melted, disintegrated, cooked. My brains - primary through tertiary - are scattered throughout the core of my body, creating a massive redundancy in data retention and mental processing. I can literally have two-thirds of my neural system disabled and not lose battle fitness. It is not enough. The Foe knows where to strike and strike it does. Propulsion is the first system lost. Others swiftly follow until I am paralyzed, weaponless, and near blind to the universe beyond my epidermis. Internal systems are too badly shredded to be healed, even if regenerative capacity had been retained. Only telepathic contact with the swarm remains intact; and from the cries and screams and babbling I know the Foe has moved on to ravage new targets.

I have failed in my duty as a heavy tactical unit. I have failed They.

Darkness looms as blood flow falters to remnant neural nodes. Thinking has become hard. Disjointed. I give in to hallucinations, and the empty space beyond, confident I will never reawaken.

END Level 1 Gestalt - Associative/Recall

In his alcove, Captain opened his eye to stare sightlessly at the tiers on the far side of the shaft. The most recent version of the memes extracted from the They heavy tactical unit - Apogee - were vastly improved compared to the initial account. Nonetheless, the mental asides, such as the backflash to historic Xenig encounters, demonstrated the

deeply gestalt nature of the They's brain and its non-linear perception of time. It had been nine cycles since Apogee's fragmented memories had been extracted, and the post-process cleanup was still ongoing.

And it /was/ Captain, primary consensus monitor and facilitator of Alliance (Borg) Cube #347. Not just 4 of 8. Not a dead drone, organics recycled and bio-mechanical parts placed in storage against future need. For a time, the latter fate had seemed inevitable.

Upon the dying They, Captain (4 of 8) had been the only conduit between the heavy and the sub-collective. It was a very poor conduit. Much information was lost during Apogee's simplification of its complex mental gestalt; and even more was mangled by the attempt to verbalize concepts which were fundamentally alien. Unfortunately, it was also the only available means of communication. Apogee had pledged to lead the drone away teams to the most intact neural architecture, with no resistance and allow the Borg to do whatever they wished to do. In return, all the They desired was to die knowing that the Collective would at least consider destroying the Foe-demon Xenig. No promises were demanded by the heavy; and Apogee knew very well that the sub-collective would eventually seize its objective, resistance or no. It was alone and, no matter its physical size, had reverted to the small-being yearning that something would come of its death, that it would in some way make its mark upon the universe.

The irony was that there was no Collective. Apogee had not been informed of his mistaken assumption, not until well after the deed had been accomplished.

Symbionts, all suffering sores and other debilitations reflective of the condition of their host, had appeared to lead the sub-collective to its multiple goals. Most had immediately died via disruptor barrage by suspicious and edgy (never a good combination) weapons units. Apogee had more than sufficient replacements, however. Eventually a directive to not use the symbiont guides as target practice was enforced.

Captain had not accompanied the trek to the heavy's neural nodes. Instead, one of the drone maintenance units assigned to his away team had approached and set knuckles against neck. A nanotubule connection was established, through which a command for deep regeneration was input.

Five cycles of unconsciousness later....

Captain (still 4 of 8) had awoken within an alcove set in the domain of assimilation hierarchy. The overriding demand of the Prime Command in regard to They and his infection should have ensured that he never regained consciousness. Obviously something had changed. What that something might be was unknown, sub-collective link present, but narrowed to little more than a wellness signal.

From one of the doorless entries into the assimilation workshop ambled Assimilation. He stopped before Captain, head canted sideways in the classic posture of interdrone communication as he peered silently at the alcove's occupant. About a minute later, the transporter system flared into operation and deposited Second, Doctor, and two assimilation and three weapons drones. The latter five units took position in the middle of the workshop, setting themselves in a rough arc centered upon Captain's alcove before freezing in place. Meanwhile, Second and Doctor joined Assimilation in mute vigil before Captain.

The transporter activated a final time, materializing Vaerz. His damp feathers were exceedingly rumbled with longer arm and tail plumage actually dripping water, and

the few articles of clothing being worn appeared to have been hastily donned. "By the first egg, you did this on purpose! I finally find time for an actual water shower, and suddenly Daisy is informing me that Captain has been woken!"

Second heaved a sigh, rolling his two unaltered eyes, but did not bother to turn. "You got yourself infected by that They virus on purpose, didn't you?" The words were directed at Captain, not Vaerz. "See what I have had to deal with? You were right, the creature is not nearly so enjoyable when one has to interact with him directly." A half pivot was executed towards the Sarcoram. "As you have been repeatedly informed, the drone in question is designated 4 of 8, not Captain. Technically, I should be 'Captain', but I dislike the finality it suggests. And it is coincidence that your hygienic routine was interrupted. We did tell you that 4 of 8 was to be reactivated this cycle, given medical clearance."

Doctor clicked his incisors together twice. "Yes, yes, medical clearance. You, my puppy 4 of 8, are fixed!" The cyberized rodent paused as a faint expression of confusion wrinkled his short snout. Ears flicked. "Bad Second! I did not mean it like that, and you know it! You all know it! No biscuit for anyone, not even the special ones with the wee little yummy chunks in them!"

Second's own visage remained perfectly bland in the face of the chiding. Behind, two of the weapons units shuffled ever so slightly as Vaerz tried to suppress a chuckle under coughing.

Vocal cords paralyzed and alcove locking body into place, Captain could neither add his own input to the situation, nor request (or gesture) for the irrelevances be curtailed.

With one last glare around the room, Doctor returned attention to Captain. Ears lifted. "Medical clearance. 4 of 8, you are...repaired. Mended. All the wittle-little teeny-weeny bad germs are gone. The-"

"What Doctor is conveying," interrupted Second, "is that all They virii particles are no longer present. Most denatured on their own by the third cycle from your attack and the remainder were eradicated through massive nanite transfusions. Your final medical clearance to return to sub-collective service requires," one hand was raised, "consciousness to ensure mental soundness. It is necessary for the assimilation hierarchy - and the AI Daisy - to examine your psyche to certify your linkage to They, no matter how temporary and superficial, did not irretrievably pollute your mental processes. If corruption is found, and it cannot be corrected, you will be euthanized. The process will cause pain beyond the capability of your systems to handle. Due to the possibility of They corruption, no matter how slim, you cannot be linked to the sub-collective to disperse the forthcoming...discomfort. Even the assigned assimilation partition will be isolated from Us during the procedure. Do you understand? Blink once for yes and twice for no."

There was no inquiry concerning compliance. The action would be taken with or without consent. Captain blinked once.

Assimilation immediately stepped forward, balling his hand into a fist while reaching for Captain's neck. There was the slightest of pricks as nanotubes burrowed in. Then, as promised, came the pain. Excruciating pain. Pain that seemed to last forever as mind and personality were torn apart, the pieces examined, then set back into place. More or less.

The pain was irrelevant.

After an eternity, Assimilation unlinked and stepped away. "The drone 4 of 8 is within acceptable tolerances to his baseline. No They corruption is found. We recommend a follow-up check in seven regeneration cycles." The head of the assimilation hierarchy seemed disappointed in the finding. On the other hand, Assimilation always radiated a sentiment of disappointment.

Captain abruptly felt his link with the sub-collective expand to full bandwidth. He fell into the welcoming embrace of the truncated All, feeling whole once more. Residual pain from the forced mental examination lessened to a dull throb. Within a few heartbeats came a subtle restructuring, one which reinstated primary consensus monitor and facilitator status to the unit 4 of 8. Captain was once again Captain. Body paralysis was lifted and the alcove signaled its readiness to respond to its occupant, although said patient decided to remain in place: diagnostics reported a high probability that he would become an uncoordinated heap on the ground if he were to step out.

That had been four cycles ago. The scene had continued with Vaerz squawking about one thing or another, sarcastic comments from Second, and so forth, but in the end Captain had escaped to his own alcove, where he had remained until now. But while it was technically possible for a consensus monitor to spend an entire assignment in an alcove - and some had - Captain did not like the inactivity. And then there was the fact he sometimes developed horrible muscle cramps, ones that required cycles of stretching (and Borg were not flexible) to work out.

With a quiet *hiss*clank*clunk*, Captain's alcove released him to step to the tier deck. As always, little things distracted him in a continual visual reminder that this Cube #347, while a good facsimile, had definitely not been built in a Borg shipyard. Ignoring a cheerful yellow sign that helpfully suggested the passerby to "Watch Your Step!", Captain pivoted to his left and headed towards the nearest nodal intersection. As he walked, the communication system was accessed and a ping request broadcast on the local shortwave subspace band. This far from civilization, there was only one recipient - Apogee.

While Captain had been unconscious, the cube had forcefully installed communication equipment upon the They unit. Semi-intact neural structures associated with a biological subspace system had been located, an away team of engineering and weapons drones dispatched, devices wired in place. Finally, a hole had been drilled from installation site to the epidermal surface to allow insertion of an antennae. It had been a messy endeavor, more akin to surgery than construction; and, without a way to relay intentions beforehand - Captain being comatose - Apogee had resisted the intrusion as best as possible. It had been an anemic resistance, and futile. Communication which did not require Captain as a poor intermediary was eventually established.

"Am I to die now?" The voice, a pleasant tenor featuring a musical lilt, sounded from speakers as Captain entered his nodal intersection. Tagged as 'standard voice #3' in the Alliance-provided universal translation software package, it was a weak reproduction of the powerful presence which had temporarily inhabited Captain's mind. However, it was much better than the default voice, a high pitched squeal which brought to mind a cage of rodents in a helium-rich atmosphere.

The monitor hung on the tier-ward bulkhead brightened from standby mode, fireworks screensaver abruptly vanishing. In its place a hullside camera feed focused on

the crippled They. An array of useless statistics having nothing to do with the scene began to scroll down one side of the picture, offering a cosmetic touch. Some drone had been playing with the display code. Again.

The question from Apogee hung in the air. The verbal dance, a variation of which was performed at the beginning of each contact, was begun.

"You will be terminated when your use as a tool to Us is no more." Captain spoke the words aloud, unnecessary because actual act of communication with the heavy was a direct subspace exchange of information, not traditional (and inefficient) verbal conversation, but it served its purpose. And in this case the purpose came in the form of Daisy, if not real-time relaying the contact to Vaerz, then recording it for later perusal. "You would be of long-term service to Us if you were to submit to assimilation. Within the non-necrotic parts of yourself, you retain ability to regulate your immune system. Suppress it, or eradicate it. Without a They immune system to counter Our nanites, it may be possible to move forward with assimilation."

The response, as always, was tinged with the translator algorithm's rendition of disgust; and upon the viewscreen, an oily wave of burnt orange tinged the still living patches of Apogee's epidermal hull. "No. Never. Absolutely not. Should you try to inject me with your Order infection, I will euthanize what little remains of myself. Bad enough to submit to the devices of Order you graft to me. I will not become hated Order."

The dance was complete, the final step taken. Offers made from each side summarily rejected, the purpose for the contact of sub-collective with Apogee could now begin.

"There are continued uncertainties with interpretation concerning meme series #4, #7, and #8. As usual, tags have been inserted at the specific time stops." The named memory sequences, already compressed to save bandwidth and transfer time, were attached to a subfrequency and sent to the heavy. Even thus prepared, it was not the most efficient of methods and would require several minutes to complete transmission.

On the display, the orange hue was fading from Apogee's hull, replaced by neutral tones spiked with the occasional greasy lime green. "Any particular clarifications to focus upon?" he asked.

A ghost of the meme Captain had been reviewing in his alcove, a subset of one of the three dispatched to Apogee, briefly washed through his foremind. It was unclear if the source was his own subconscious or if he was merely the conduit for a random sub-collective thoughtstream. And it was irrelevant. "No."

Deciphering the garbled meme mess extracted from Apogee was progressing at a painfully slow pace. The processing power of an entire Collective, trillions of minds strong, was required for expediency. Unfortunately, such was unavailable, leaving the effort to a mere Exploratory-class cube, and an imperfect and short-crewed one at that. But even the Borg Greater Consciousness at its height might have had difficulty, for an hour or two perhaps, due to the densely gestalted nature of a high echelon They's thought processes. The non-temporal/non-linear inclusions further hindered interpretation, mental tangents embedded throughout the primary meme like unwanted fractures and inclusions in a gemstone.

Several times each cycle, contact would be made with Apogee in a bid to further meme reconstruction to a format the sub-collective could understand. Sometimes the heavy could assist, but more often he could not: many critical memory fragments were

simply gone, lost when the associated neural matter had been parboiled, shredded, or vaporized.

"Then I will consider the problem, with an update provided in ten minutes. Additionally, I continue to labor on the other assigned task. Progress has been made, albeit I remain far from completion. I only bring this up because an interesting coincidence has recently arisen which intersects with meme interpretation."

Other assigned task? What was this? As fast as the question could be formed, an answer was provided. Sort of.

{Oh oh oh! What is it? What is it? What is it?} 133 of 230 slammed into Captain's mind, buzzing excitedly as if she had overindulged on caffeine, G'floo, or another stimulant. However, Borg nanites neutralized all but a select few drugs, and 133 of 230's dossier did not indicate chemical addiction, pre- or post-assimilation, to be of issue. On the other hand, she did have another vice, one directly linked to her once-upon-a-time career as a researcher of obscure, often long dead, languages. Even as a Borg drone, she craved linguist mysteries, a drug for her personal addiction. Unfortunately, such mysteries within the modern galaxy were relatively few given the ubiquitous nature of universal translator algorithms able to decipher spoken language, as well as most written texts, given enough input. Naturally, there were always exceptions, one of which was Mech Species #3, Xenig. And there just happened to be a thick Xenig language folded-space drive user manual on board. The logical deduction was not difficult to make, although the details demanded explanation.

Captain switched primary attention to 133 of 230. There would be a short lapse in response to Apogee, even with internal conversation proceeding at the speed of thought and electronics. {Explain.}

{Explain what? There is /data/ to acquire! Do you know how unusual the Xenig written language is? How few examples of it exist? Anywhere?} Captain was besieged by a squall of data. Upon his node monitor, unseen, a list began to scroll, detailing public and private holdings within the Alliance where Xenig text could be found. {Xenig are a mech race. Theoretically there is no need for a written language component when data can be passed individual to individual, or individual to community, and visa-versa, directly. Yet not only does a written language exist, it persists and even shows indication of evolution over time, which in turn suggests it is in active, although probably limited, use. Similarly, there is a native verbal component, although examples are even rarer than the written element because individual Xenig use the major language or languages of whatever species or civilization with which they are interacting, thus avoiding need for a universal translator. Scholars believe the likely origination of both language modalities to be the Xenig Progenitors, with the mechs retaining spoken and written words of their builders so as to permit future communication should the two ever be reunited. This is all conjecture, of course, as there is no translation of the Xenig texts, and the mechs refuse to cooperate with-}

{Cease!} 133 of 230 abruptly stopped her babble. {A dissertation was not requested. Explain how the They has become involved in Xenig linguistics. Comply.}

{Oh. That. Apogee seemed bored, floating over there, dying and interpreting his memories. But mostly dying. Mental stimulation is a proven therapy for boredom, and puzzles are the best of possible stimuli. What could be a better puzzle than the Xenig written language, a prime example of which we just happen to possess? Much better than

a crossword. By keeping the They alert and thinking to the best of his remnant cognitive ability when not actively engaged in a meme assignment, he is thus prepared to provide his best service to Us.}

Captain ignored 133 of 230's justification for her actions. Most drones could provide a logical reason for impulsive actions which passed the censors - "The space bugs were going to eat the equipment. Since space bugs are frightened of fireworks, and there were a lot of space bugs, I /had/ to use that many sparklers. The resultant fire really was accidental," was a rational, if ultimately nonsensical, reckoning. {I/we see. And /how/ did you engage the They in this project?}

133 of 230, realizing that her actions were probably not quite acceptable, no matter the motive behind them, answered uncertainly, {Er, I beamed over a replicated hardcopy?}

Logs were checked. An unauthorized transport signature was found, not purposefully hidden, just overlooked as it was buried amid permitted transporter usage by engineering moving between They and cube. 133 of 230's linguistics obsession, a low risk impulse, had never warranted specific flagging for censor programs to watch her designation for illicit activities.

The interrogation continued, {And how did the heavy know what the manual was and what you wanted? There is no record of access to communications by your designation, and you are not facile enough with code to deeply hide your tracks.}

{I, um, included a device with a verbally recorded message.}

And Apogee, unfamiliar with Borg modus operandi, did not recognize the peculiarity of the interaction. It was not difficult to visualize, even with a Borg sub-collective's limited imagination, what had subsequently occurred. As 133 of 230 had said, death was a protracted affair for the heavy, and it was undoubtedly bored.

The virtual 'mute' button was released as attention returned to the They, "Elaborate on the coincidence linking the two tasks." 133 of 230 was not forgotten, far from it, but the matter no longer required the direct notice of the primary consensus monitor and, thus, further questioning and subsequent attachment of restrictions to her designation had been passed to command and control units lower in the hierarchy.

Replied Apogee, "Within the hardcopy manual I have clearly translated only twenty-two nouns, verbs, and conjunctions, with uncertain meanings tagged upon a hundred or so more. It is a very complex language. Progress would happen faster if there was either a willing native speaker to whom to ask questions, else multiple intact neurologies to query through dissection. Fortunately, sufficient interpretation has been made that most of the words in the ancillary document listing destinations of individual folded-space drive crystals are comprehensible. What caught my attention is the coincidence that one of the translated crystals - Dirt - matched some of the ravings the Foe made in the last meme group for which you requested clarifications."

The final comment captured the sub-collective's attention, triggering a rapid scan through the memes. The word "dirt" was not found. However, what was abruptly grasped was that the not-Xenig had been speaking in not one, but several distinct languages, one of which was completely unfamiliar. This recognition had been previously overlooked due to the fragmented nature of memories formed through the lens of They perception.

The recorded rants were restricted to one primary language, with frequent bouts of swearing utilizing half a dozen additional tongues. All had been easily deciphered by

the They version of a universal translator, hardwired neurologies grown and programmed while in the artificial womb and updated as needed throughout the unit's life. Because translation was the product of genetic instinct, understanding happened automatically from Apogee's point of view, with the origination of the underlying language lost unless the heavy specifically focused upon it. In the carnage of slaughter, focus had not been a priority. Therefore, the fact that there had been an unknown tongue mixed amid comprehensible dialogues had been tagged as much less important than the chaos of bloody genocide. Besides, the universe held many, many languages unknown to They; and the fact that a psychopathic not-a-Xenig mech demon might know one of them was hardly sun-shattering.

The unknown verbalizations were completely different from the screaming, sometimes utterly illogical, proclamations which comprised the bulk of the dialogue. In addition to not being of a language known to They, the 'dictation' and 'tone' - as much as could be applied to a subspace broadcast with a digital, not organic (i.e., oral), origination - was quite different. The utterances were calm, clearly enunciated, and, thus, were completely out of place. They were also very short, filling the void in those rare moments between active verbal attack. And, as now suggested by Apogee, their basis appeared to be the mysterious Xenig language.

What revelation did the out-of-character remarks provide? More swearing? No, just two words, provisionally translated: "Dirt" and "Dirt go". The same "dirt" as written on the folded-space crystal which had jumped the cube to an ancient battleground of shattered planets and moons.

The screamed self-designation of the non-Xenig - "Conway" - was familiar to the sub-collective, in a disjointed and indistinct manner. The name was mostly linked with coffee, but also an alternate reality called the Happyverse. A complete memory sequence, unfortunately, was unavailable due to temporal resurrection and subsequent neurological trauma. It was possible that events could be reconstructed, as others incidents had been, by searching amid all drones for fragmented and scattered points-of-view for sequential reassembly. The process was similar to the effort being devoted to compilation of Apogee's memes, except that the need to do so had not been recognized until this moment.

Within the sub-collective, priorities shifted. Elevated in importance was knowing who and what this Conway was, and if it had any relevance (unlikely) to the They massacre. Conversely, continued reconstruction of Apogee's memories with greater finesse and detail was increasingly less likely to lead to new revelations. The basics of the situation were known: a probably-not-a-Xenig went on a rampage. What to /do/ with the information - was it even relevant? - was unclear. The sub-collective was back to square one. Was the They genocide the result of an omnipotent, omniscient, omni-everything entity with the unassuming name of "Conway" having a momentary breakdown, never to be repeated? Or was it a threat which might affect a future revived Borg Collective, should such come to pass?

The data with which to seed a decision cascade were slim. Captain began to draw both knowns and conjectures together. All over the cube, in the dataspace and the physical realm, drone activity ground to a halt, communal attention redirected.

A single link. They's unknown demon-Foe garbed in a Xenig chassis and sporting the name Conway, uttering a word from a unique, mysterious language potentially

referring to a dead system. Pure coincidence. A likely dead end to match the dead system. For the sake of completeness, the non-clue would be pursued. Once the unproductive detour was officially completed, Cube #347 would return to Alliance space, hopefully followed by the offloading of Vaerz and the other Alliancers (but mostly Vaerz) polluting the decks. And, finally, the sub-collective could concentrate on more important considerations, like how to escape from Alliance shackles and reconstitute the Collective.

And, somewhere in there, the opportunity would surely arise to check out local tourist attractions. For instance, for over two centuries, an artists' commune in Alliance system 1105c [no common name] had been sculpting asteroids into fabulous creatures, attempting to bring to life the nightmares and fantasies of a dozen species. And then there was the Snot Sea of Byryllus Three, considered to be the largest private collection of mucus...ever. Visitors were encouraged to donate secretions, thereby ever increasing its size. Relatively nearby the Snot Sea, give or take ten light years, was...

Captain frantically hacked at the tangent, pruning it before it could completely overwhelm the decision cascade. In the dimly remembered past, Cube #347 had once been caught in the trap of trekking to see tacky vacation spots, breaking from the madness only due to the intervention of an exasperated Greater Consciousness which had finally received one too many forced perspective photo mementos. In this now, in this future, there was no Collective to save Cube #347 should censor filters epically fail and the AI Daisy be unable to pull hard enough on the virtual reins.

However, for all the sidetracking, a decision had been made. Drones returned to their interrupted tasks.

"Have you heard my report? Do I need to repeat?" asked Apogee. "It is preliminary, but I can provide a full analysis. I'm not as smart as I used to be, which is why it took so long." Thirty-five minutes had passed since the sub-collective and heavy had exchanged words, long enough for the They to realize that the conversational pause to be unusual.

"We..." began Captain. He paused, captured his scattered mental self, then started again. "We have heard. No analysis required at this time. You will work on the meme clarification task, as assigned. Further direction will be forthcoming."

On the monitor, the heavy's hull gained a faint iridescent pink hue amid the neutral color scheme which slowly swirled across the epidermis. "Understood. I comply." The subspace connection was severed.

The sensor feed from the Alliance quarters was scanned. It was the very early hours of the local morning, and most of the Alliancers were asleep, including Vaerz. For a brief moment, Captain considered waking the agent - wake/sleep cycles tied to planetary rotations were irrelevant - to divulge the outcome of the consensus cascade, but decided against. To do so would mean interacting with the Sarcoram, who could be quite surly before he had imbibed his morning stimulant. As designated liaison, and one whom had just recently regained his consensus monitor and facilitator position following a prolonged examination of mental faculties by assimilation hierarchy, he wasn't ready for that particular headache yet. A memo to Vaerz's electronic mailbox would do. Alliance morning, and the bothersome questions, would come soon enough.

* * * * *

::What a mess!::

::What an understatement. I wonder what happened here? No matter, we've work to do, so we might as well get started.::

The scene was grotesque. It was a debris field, but not one littered with rocks or metals, but instead the remains of what had once been organic creatures. Myriad frozen bodies of multiple shapes and sizes tumbled aimlessly, strips of shredded flesh and spars of shattered bone forming chaotic halos about individual corpses. Some of the remains had crashed into each other, merging into misshapen forms.

One body, terminally eviscerated and missing a quarter of its length, suddenly shuddered.

::Wait! Wait! I seem to have a problem!::

The response from Voice #1 was tinged with a snicker. ::You don't always look before you fold, that is your problem.::

::Yes,:: agreed Voice #2, ::you don't look. It is a bad habit. Now, let's-::

Interrupted Voice #3, ::Space is so /big/. Why look, except when folding into a population center? The chances of actually hitting anything are so /minute/!::

Prompted Voice #1, ::And if you, say, folded into a rock?::

::Then it would shatter! My consolidating matter would take precedence over the existing matter, displacing it. But this /thing/ isn't a rock! It is a squishy piece of organic disgustingness. My chassis only displaced enough to make room for me. Look, could one of you jokers burn off this mess? All my ports and hatches are stuck and I can't remove it myself. If I fold like this, it will be in my field and I'll take it with me!:: Voice #3 was starting to sound a bit panicked.

::If /someone/ was less sloppy with their transitions, then that someone could fold out of his predicament unless the impediment was bonded to their hull at the atomic level,:: chided Voice #2. ::Your 'problem' is only cosmetic: you can still move and you can still sense. Therefore, you can assist the /rest/ of us with the job to which you were also given.::

::But-::

::Yes?::

In the background, Voice #1 was laughing.

Silence. ::Fine,:: said Voice #3. ::But if we come close to any suitable stars on this venture, I am detouring to broil this mess off of my hull. I refuse to return to station with this /thing/ on me.::

::Don't worry! I've already committed several sectors of memory to your appearance! Would you like to see any of them?:: Voice #1 was jovial.

::No.::

Voice #2: ::Think of your predicament as an object lesson as to why one should practice proper folding techniques and protocols. You are the eldest of us and should know better, yet you sometimes act like you just left the creche. Let's get to work and sort out the quantum wakes.::

Two metallic forms, and the mangled body of a once sentient being, smoothly advanced into motion.

* * * * *

"We are to leave Apogee behind?"

"Yes."

"Just like that."

"Yes."

"After all the assistance he has given?"

"Yes."

"Leave him, the last of his kind, to die an apparently painful death?"

"Yes."

Short pause. "Are you even listening to me?"

"Yes."

"I would like a luxurious dust bathing facility to be built in one of the cargo holds, complete with fully stocked bar and bartender. Can I have that?"

"Ye....no."

Vaerz tilted his head slightly so as to better bring the full force of his glare upon Captain. The two were in his Alliance bloc offices, and the latter had been obviously distracted throughout the non-conversation. Daisy was whispering in Vaerz's ear of a major uptick in drone activity, both physical and in the computer realm, but nothing sinister. The sub-collective was simply finishing housekeeping chores in advance of leaving.

Captain stared back. There was no mystery to the thought behind his unblinking gaze. It was obvious that the drone felt his summons to Vaerz's office to be a waste of time. Sometimes lack of emotion was just as telling as a visible display, even when as applied to a Borg. It also helped that Captain had already told Vaerz his opinion concerning the order.

"They would have enslaved every being in your Alliance," said Captain, "and initiated breeding and genetic indoctrination programs to ensure all descendants were They. Those species that did not fit with Their plan would have been exterminated. They are now functionally extinct and the threat eradicated, yet you show concern of the last known living unit of They?"

"So you claim."

"So we /know/. So every drone knows, even imperfect ones. /Your/ Alliance is the one whom temporally resurrected Us to confront They."

Vaerz snorted. "And, as you well know, I personally think that we were in error. The threat is not from that poor bastard out there, not anymore, but right here, even as the Big Beaks of the Alliance continue to ignore my reports. But the decision on what to ultimately do with you is not mine to make. Let's be frank, my job, and that of Daisy, is to ensure that you Borg as a weapon do not turn in our hands to cut us. It is also my job to be on the lookout for any advantage which might be gained for the Alliance. Apogee represents an advantage."

Captain squinted, something akin to confusion momentarily sweeping his face. Vaerz watched intently. "Then this is /not/ a small being plea for mercy concerning the fate of the heavy? Or an irrelevant discourse on the morality of using the heavy like the tool he is and then discarding him to die alone?"

The rhetorical questions, words purposefully twisted to elicit emotional response, were ignored. Captain, or any drone for that matter, might claim psychological manipulation to be beneath Borg, but that did not seem to prevent its use when an

advantage could be gained. Vaerz raised neck ruff and slightly tightened the small muscles around his eyes: the Sarcoram version of a grimly ironic smile. "Of course not. As I said, Apogee represents an advantage. I have been talking with the scientists, and they agree that the Alliance, not to mention their own careers, would profit if samples were taken before we chased off after our own tails. Yes, I concur that nothing will come about following the linguistic 'clue' that has been uncovered, but the pursuit of it will certainly last longer than the six to seven days Apogee has estimated to his final death. Fresh samples from a living Apogee is preferable to returning to pick over his corpse, although I expect we'll do that too while doing similar to his buddies. The creatures /are/ from another galaxy, after all."

Captain blinked. "There is no time. We are finishing final preparations to depart."

"The collection will take less than an /hour/ out of your busy schedule. You - all of you - and I both know that there is no reason to hurry to the dead end. If anything, this most brief of delays gives you that much more time to plot against the Alliance. And me. Plot away." Vaerz deliberately paused several beats. "The plan is to send to Apogee a few scientists and some students, accompanied by a handful of marines as a just-in-case against any random assault units which have slipped from the heavy's control. I will even risk my pretty tail. You will transport the group to one of the designated beam-in locations whereupon thirty minutes will be spent scraping mucus, taking biopsies, doing whatever it is that the scientists will do. They will complain that thirty minutes is not enough, but that is a hatchling whine for me to deal with."

"And if we do not accede?"

Vaerz gaped his beak into an evil smile. It was a little something he had practiced in his younger years while moving up through agency ranks, and it now came naturally when called upon. "This is not a request. You will comply. And don't bother looking for a loophole that does not exist."

Silence. One heartbeat. Five. Ten. Finally came a sullen "We will comply. Inform us when you are ready to beam to the heavy." And before Vaerz could acknowledge the reply, Captain had already transported himself from the office, effectively ending the meeting.

Vaerz stared at the empty spot, then ruffled his feathers in a shrug, dismissing any insult that the Borg may have intended. Most likely there was no aimed offense, only a drone impatient to return to whatever duties he felt ranked higher than a conversation with the small being Security Liaison. Well enough, for Vaerz still had a few final preparations to make with the scientific and marine staff of the Alliance mission before all could beam over, and there was no better time than the present to get things moving.

Streamers of thick mucus languidly flowed down the walls and puddled on the floor...the deck...the whatever like syrup. Where the snot was absent, large cracks met to form craters, and flecks of skin(?) peeled into drifts of a most hellish case of dandruff. Could it still be called dandruff if it was on the inside? Unsettling soft spots waited to capture an unwary foot. And it did not seem possible, but the fetid air stunk worse than Vaerz's previous visit, making the atmosphere filters stuck in most individuals' breathing orifices a necessity, else be subjected to uncontrollable dry heaves.

Vaerz casually strolled away from the group. Researchers and students were rapidly sorting their prizes and building ordered piles, conversing amongst themselves as

to need for a fifth vial of phlegm or if a last minute attempt should be made to bore into the wall another meter in the hope of encountering a different tissue type. Several varieties of symbiont, found dead during the frantic thirty minutes of scavenging, were especially valuable trophies. However, the top prize was the tactical assault unit, ragged tears and puncture wounds suggesting it had been the victim of attack by one of its comrades. Standing nearby in a loose perimeter, armored marines hefted their weapons and did their best to look threatening, but more than one expression of disgust was apparent, and most actively avoided looking at the grisly treasures. Return to the cube was scheduled in less than five minutes; and the Borg would undoubtedly perform the beam-out at the precise second, no matter if the transportee was ready or not.

Meanwhile, the Security Liaison's action was studiously ignored. None knew why Vaerz was walking away; and none knew why he slipped around the corner so as to be out of direct line of sight. All knew better than to ask. He was a Security Liaison, after all. Whatever he did, it was on purpose and absolutely important. Even if it was only to take a piss.

Vaerz did not need an emergency bathroom break. All successful spies underwent many, many years of self-imposed training in bladder and colon control to ensure dignity could be maintained at all times. It was a skill, one particularly handy when waiting in line for a special event ticket which could only be bought directly from the venue or vendor on a first come, first served basis. Agents which could not perfect bowel control were forced to catheters, diapers, or whatever was appropriate to the species. And diapers were so /undignified/. So /much/ of being an accomplished Security Liaison, including government pay rate, was based on a perceived image.

Once around the corner, Vaerz took a couple more steps, then stopped. Reaching into a pocket of his vest, he withdrew a container of silvered metal. Cylindrical in form, it was about ten centimeters long and as thick around as his thumb. A simple screw cap stoppered the top. With a wall before him, Vaerz raised the bottle, opened his beak to speak, then paused. After a few seconds of consideration, he shuffled around to face the expanse of an empty, dank, and nearly dark corridor.

"I do not know if you can hear me. And if you can hear me, you may not be able to understand me. Hell and shattered eggs, for all I know, this part of you is completely dead and I might as well as be talking to that wall." Vaerz stopped, abruptly and uncharacteristically self-conscious. He shook off the feeling, although feathers along tail and rump refused to fully relax. Vaerz took a deep breath, then continued his prepared speech, projecting his voice such that neither scientists nor soldiers, despite their relative nearness, should be able to hear. It would be best for them to be able to plead plausible deniability if hard questions were brought to bear, by either the Borg or his own Alliance government.

"About twenty-eight hours ago the sub-collective came to a decision to move on, of which I concur. You know of this because you are about to be left here, alone, to die. Maybe you are okay with this, ready to face oblivion, a deity, reincarnation, or whatever it is that you believe comes next. I am not you, obviously, and I cannot know. What I do know is that /I/ would be sad. And frustrated. And angry. Probably a whole lot of things, but mostly angry. And because the universe is an uncaring bastard that couldn't give a rotten egg about my anger, it would be directed primarily at myself. All those damn what-ifs piling up.

"What would I focus upon? Again, I can only speak for myself, but I am a common-hatched fellow for whom the normal moralistic teachings didn't really stick. Therefore, I am a big fan of revenge. If I am going to go down, then I am going to take someone with me. And if that someone was out of reach, then I know I'd devise /something/, if only to flash the universe a big 'f**k you'. Hell, I know the universe still won't pay me any mind, but so what? The narcissistic bastard in me would feel a damn lot better and I would be able to die with a sense of accomplishment."

Vaerz gestured to the bottle. "This is a concentrated serum of pure evil. Borg nanites. Five types, according to the engineers moonlighting as med techs. Damn if I know what they do, and nor do they, to tell the truth. The engineers have been drawing blood samples from the drones aboard the cube. From these samples, they've distilled, or titrated, or magicked for all I can understand this serum. Enough foulness in this bottle to assimilate a good-sized urban aerie. And that's assuming that all five nanite varieties contribute to assimilation. Even if only one or two types actually do the heavy lifting, still a lot of bad juice in here.

"Why do I tell you, a corpse who probably isn't even aware of my pretty speech, this nugget of information? From what I understand from my Borg friends, the primary reason for your pending demise isn't all the holes blown through your body and brains, but instead because what functions as your repair system has collapsed. You literally cannot put yourself back together. Perhaps there is hope in my devil-elixir.

"Before you get yourself wound up at my suggestion and send assault units to stomp me into paste, listen a bit further. I know that you have refused assimilation by the drones aboard the cube. A little...birdy whispered it so in my ear." Vaerz smirked to himself. "I do not care if it is religious dogma or a really bad experience in They's infancy or whatever, you abhor non-biological technology. Therefore you hate the Borg and their nanites as an anti-They. And you surely despise civilizations represented by my Alliance for our deep reliance upon similar technologies.

"The secret to ultimate success, my dear Apogee, is that sometimes one has to deal with the devil. It is up to you to keep your soul intact. I've done it many a time, and have survived only slightly tarnished. Such also describes the Borg upon this cube. I am sure you have gleaned by now that the Collective is no more, that it died out long ago. And if you had not figured it out on your own, then I offer that bit of data for free for you to think upon. These drones are an anachronism from an earlier age. The Alliance controls them...or the Alliance thinks it controls them. Truth is, the Alliance, my Alliance, is eventually going to fail in that control. As much as it pains me to think it, it is so. The Borg are dealing with their devil - the Alliance - so as to bide time; their quasi-mechanical souls are very much intact, and I fear one day, perhaps sooner rather than later, the pestilence the Alliance dredged up from the temporal depths will turn out to be a greater danger than the one They once represented.

"I offer the devil in this bottle." Vaerz made a great show of setting the container on the ground, grimacing at the too-organic 'squish' underfoot as he shifted his weight. "I do not pretend to understand your biology, but if the Borg thought they had a chance to assimilate you, perhaps they are correct. Or perhaps they were not and it was a futile gesture. If you /can/ be assimilated, I offer you the opportunity to do so under your own direction and no one else.

"If assimilation is successful - a big if, I know - then you will gain a new repair system. I think. I have no clue on its limits. The drones aboard the cube heal fast enough when scratched, but they also visit their physician-butchers for bigger injuries. However, by simply staying alive, you have taken your first step to revenge, or telling the universe at large to 'f**k off', your choice. Unfortunately, you will also gain a direct line to the Borg devil you so despise.

"You could keep your distance from the Borg - without being implanted with one of their hardware neural transceivers, well, the galaxy, and beyond, is a big place for you to wander, never getting close enough to hear their broadcasts, and visa-versa. However, those nanites are the devil's own imps, and the scientists tell me that they implant their own instincts and urgings and needs to link to the Collective. Maybe you are strong enough to resist? But, then, cowering in the black corners of the universe might be a fate worse than death, especially for a warrior bred and born such as yourself. Might as well pass the devil by and die here.

"Therefore, I offer you another devil. How many devils does that bottle now contain? Two? The devil I offer is the Alliance. After all, I am not presenting you the elixir out of the goodness of my heart. I bargained away 'goodness' and 'altruism' to my own devils long ago. I am a selfish being in a selfish universe. The Borg threat is inevitable. You potentially offer a counter-balance to my merry little sub-collective of soul-snatchers. I have a secret weapon called Daisy. She is a computer program, something that is probably an abhorrence to your beliefs. However, she is a lesser devil that can stand between you and the greater devil of the Borg, ensuring that no matter how strong the call is for you to join their cause, you will be able to resist.

"Be not fooled, but Daisy will also be your shackle, much as she is of the Borg right now. Then again, we are /all/ chained by one thing or another. The difference, I think, is that you will be willing to accept this chain as my drone friends are not. To be blunt, you have no future. You will die. And with you dies all of They. You cannot reproduce. They cannot reproduce. The Borg have divulged all they know of the They; and while their resurrection to this era made them forget much, including specifics of They, it is recalled that They required a ship-creature of wombs and nests to bring eggs of your type to term. You can birth your symbiont slaves, bio-torpedoes, and tactical assault units, but nothing else and certainly nothing of consequence. Or threat. Your virii do not turn infected beings into They. Your lost kind are all genetically modified and brainwashed from before birth to be They. That is your essence. Borg, on the other hand, do have a future, for they can 'reproduce' more of themselves via nanites and the assimilation process.

"Of course, I could be unleashing an even more horrifying being upon the Alliance, a hybrid of They and Borg, but I am willing to take that chance. That is my own devil with whom I must negotiate. I will take that gamble because the devil is well aware that I cheat."

Vaerz ceased speaking as Daisy whispered in his ear a one minute warning. He acknowledged the notification with a single syllable subvocalized murmur. "I must go. I probably just spent the last five minutes talking to air and pus and stench, but it is my time to waste. If you are hearing me, and you do understand, there is your choice." And with that simple proclamation, Vaerz turned on heel and unhurriedly returned to the away team.

* * * * *

Silence. The already dim bioluminance of the artery-way faded hour by hour, minute by minute, mirroring the waning life-force of underlying flesh. The last flock of non-They entities had left a timeless eon ago, followed by the departure of the cube-shaped scion of Order.

A shadow detached itself from the putrid blackness. It resolved into a small hexapod, no more than twenty centimeters tall at the mid-withers. It limped towards the silver cylinder, right hindmost leg uselessly dragging, body covered in weeping sores, one sightless eye filmed in white. Large ears flared outward as it stopped before its objective. It squatted down on its back four legs and lifted the forward pair, unfolding two delicate six-fingered hands. And then the creature froze, statue still.

After five minutes, ten minutes, thirty minutes, an eternity, the symbiont jerked into motion. One exquisite hand gracefully grasped the cylinder. The prize was carefully cradled to chest with both arms as the creature awkwardly pivoted on three limbs and wobbled off into the darkness. It had a destination far from here; and while it was old and in pain, there was also joy in following the direction of its personal lord and god. And if it died en route, then it would be a life fulfilled and another would take up the burden.

Except for the occasional sharp exhalation of noxious gasses from burst pustules, silence reigned. Light faded to near nothingness, and then was gone.

* * * * *

::Not /another/ strip mall!::

::At least this one is intact. We will separate and make inquires.::

Several hours later, three forms reunited at the edge of Designated Parking Area Blue-Three.

Reported Voice #1, ::Seems the target was here a week ago and he was visiting coffee joints again. At every place he said something along the lines of 'Meh. Passible for a trucker stop.' Eventually he left.:: There was a pause. ::I'm not getting this. /Why/ would he be buying coffee? It isn't like he can ingest it.::

::Maybe he's gone crazy,:: said Voice #3. ::I can relate. By the way, I found this great shipwash place on the far side of the mall. The line isn't too long and they say they can sonic disrupt this mess off my chassis in a couple of hours, then follow up with a great wax and polish.::

::We are here to do a job, not get our chassis detailed,:: responded Voice #2.

Wheedled Voice #3, ::If there was a point to be made, I've received it loud and clear. Look before you fold, check. This has gone beyond a joke to an embarrassment! By the Progenitors, I have a dead organic /thing/ vacuum cemented to my hull!::

::And it will have to remain there a bit longer. There are too many disruptions to the quantum from normal traffic to be able to easily track the wake of the target's folded-drive signature. That edge-of-malfunctioning slip-warp engine isn't helping matters, either. All three of us need to fold out at least a light year in separate directions and deep scan the quadrant. Hopefully that will provide us with enough data to triangulate the target's vector. If not, then we'll have to start gridding. We seem to be catching up. All

our progress could be lost if we delay for a hull cleaning.:: Voice #2 was very matter-of-fact.

::Whatever you say. This is a /complete/ embarrassment, and not just to myself, but to all of Xenig-kind. And to the Company's image. I am so filing a grievance when we get back,:: muttered Voice #3 darkly.

* * * * *

Conway industriously composed a to-do list, its timelines arrayed to keep him busy for at least a thousand years. The backwater rocky planet above which he orbited had undoubtedly once been a gem of blue, green, and brown, capped with an icing of white. "Once" was the key word. Whatever the history of the world, in the current era it was a globe wreathed in a thick smog of brown clouds equator to poles, with rare glimpses through the cover revealing a devastated landscape of oily oceans, vast volcano fields, and overlapping craters tens to hundreds of kilometers across. If there was any life on the planet, evolution had been reset billions of years, to a time of single-celled organisms skulking around the pitiful natural campfires of deep ocean thermal vents. What had befallen this terrestrial world, a planet otherwise in the prime of its existence?

What had befallen Terra, the homeworld of the human species?

Conway, quite frankly, did not care. A great battle had occurred, that much was obvious. Terra's moon had been partially shattered, leaving behind great expanses of magma that would continue to radiate heat for a million years, as well as a faint ring of debris around the parent planet itself. Further out, the rusty desert world of Mars sported the after-effects of heavy bombardment; and if the size of the dozen new moons in instable orbits were an example of the ammunition used, such would explain why the asteroid field seemed to be oddly deficient in a certain size class of rock. Among the gas giants, certain notable moons were outright missing, replaced by rings of gravel and ice.

In a way, the damage was not completely unexpected. Humans, either as a race or as the dominant member of a Federation-like entity, tended to be obnoxious. Always curious, always busybodies. Always sticking their noses into situations and dispensing unwanted advice. Enemies were made. When Conway transitioned to a new universe, one of his early destinations, absent little delays such as genocide, was Terra, homeworld of coffee. Several universes visited by Conway over the many millennia of his wanderings had included the scenario of a devastated Terra. Usually Conway shrugged non-existent shoulders and proceeded to track down the scattered remnants of the destroyed civilization, for wherever humans travelled, they inevitably brought coffee. And even if humans themselves were extinct, or nearly so, coffee was one of those vices adopted by a myriad of other sentient species.

For Conway, it always came down to coffee. However, in this particular instance, there was an incentive to spend extra time constructing his usual to-do list, perhaps even add additional tasks not part of his normal coffee-and-road-rage itinerary.

Conway may have been clinically insane, but that did not mean he was crazy. This was the long-sought Unhappyverse, with 99% probability, the ultimate home reality of the Borg sub-collective whom had ultimately been the cause for so many of his woes. Well, not all of them...and, probably, actually, only a small proportion of them. After so many neural clones, so many transfers from old brain to new, so many experiments with

high octane coffee laced with other substances, recollection became a bit...fuzzy. But that wasn't important. One could not be expected to /abandon/ an obsession just because it was no longer relevant. Otherwise it could not be called an obsession!

Insane, but not crazy. If anything, Conway's reasoning skills were clearer than they had ever been. Several universes ago, hidden in a remote corner of his Xenig chassis' memory, he had found a suite of games meant to exercise the mind in the same way weight-lifting built muscles. Conway was unsure how he had previously overlooked them, but then again, he had never felt it necessary to explore all the nooks and crannies of his forcefully adopted neural network. According to program diagnostics, he was currently the mental equivalent of a champion body-builder. It logically followed that anyone who was thusly so mentally endowed could not be crazy.

Impulsive, eccentric, psychopathic, even occasionally irrational...those labels were perfectly okay. But not crazy. Intelligent entities were insane; stupid ones were crazy. It was all a matter of definition.

Obsessive. Conway was allowed to be obsessive. But even then, when did thoroughness actually become obsession? Conway was a /connoisseur/ of coffee; and he was just being extremely thorough by including early entries in his to-do list to (1) determine status of Borg in this universe and (2) ensure that the Cube #347 sub-collective was dead and, if applicable, all memory of it purged from existence. There was, maybe, a very /slight/ risk the act could result in the galaxy becoming a giant bonfire.

He had done it before. Completely by accident. Hippyverse, not Unhappyverse. The glue-on dreadlocks, retro tie-dye, and expressions glazed from pharmacological experimentation should have given it away. But back then, Conway had been young, and perhaps more crazy than insane. The local version of Cube #347 had only wanted to give him beads and herb-laced brownies, and, in hindsight, was obviously not the Borg sub-collective which had set him on the road to being a bodiless coffee addict. It was a mistake anyone could have made.

That had been twelve universes ago, and fourteen thousand subjective years, give or take. He was feeling much better now. Much more insane. Much less crazy.

As he carefully built, and rebuilt, his list, Conway absent-mindedly gazed upon the corpse of Terra. He had discovered early in his trekking that his transitions rarely dropped him into similar historical epochs as the universe just abandoned. Perhaps the original Xenig occupant had a mechanism to control the 'when', in addition to the 'where', of its jumps, but Conway had never been able to determine the appropriate setting. Consequently, he had to deal with whatever tau he landed within. If the Terra of this now was any gauge, combined with other cosmic markers, he had traveled to a spot along the tau river much more downstream than normal.

It logically followed that Unhappyverse Borg might very well be extinct. If they did cling to existence, then their presence may have been reduced to a shadow of their heyday drone quadrillions. Conway had yet to hear upon the pertinent fractal subspace bands any echo, reverberation, or whisper of Borg, but then again, the galaxy was more than large enough to lose a failing cybernetic civilization within. There would be plenty of time to encounter Borg while searching out the local coffee stocks - one benefit of the tau placement was the amount of time for new coffee varieties to be developed. And if no conclusions could be made upon the fate of the Unhappyverse Borg, and by extension the Cube #347 sub-collective, Conway could always sterilize the galaxy before he left.

The lattermost option was a just-in-case option, but Conway did so hate to leave a to-do list unfinished.

And upon the subject of Borg...

Between the orbits of Terra and Mars, the universe wobbled, like a desert mirage overlaying the solidity of reality. It was the signature of a Xenig drive, and Conway's senses immediately locked upon it. However, from the epicenter materialized not a Xenig chassis, but a cube. A quarter of an orbit away, Conway's figurative eyes squinted so as to bring the scene into better resolution. Inbuilt hardware automatically sampled the quantum matrix, compensating for the bothersome delay of light speed and translating the tableau into real-time. The cube spun once, twice, as if assessing its position, then lurched (yes, lurched) into motion, unerringly aimed for Terra. And Conway.

The cube...was Borg. It had to be Borg. The in-system propulsion was flavored with an underlying taste of unknown technology, but the overwhelming essence was Borg. And, besides, what other entity would build a ship in a geometric shape? Especially one as stupidly simplistic as a cube?

For all his long, long millenniums of planning, of building a library of what-if scenarios, Conway suddenly did not know what to do. So he did nothing, content to watch the cube, content to wait. For now.

Besides, he had just started brewing a batch of coffee. Each step, from bean grinding to steeping of grounds, had to be carefully orchestrated for maximum extraction of flavor, caffeination, and neural stimulation. And /nothing/ could interrupt that process. Nothing. Not even a Borg cube. Not even if that cube happened to be an impossibly resurrected Cube #347 sub-collective.

* * * * *

"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."

The friendly banter was familiar to anyone whom might have been lingering in the recreation area. Elises and Britz, T'sap and Sarcoram graduate students, seemed near inseparable. According to rumor, they had been the individuals whom had first (and accidentally) identified the object with the embedded tau signature linking the distant past with the current Borg reality. But, as everyone knew, rumor was rarely to be believed, and certain never at face-value, no matter the sliver of truth hiding at the heart. The pair

themselves could not provide enlightenment, prevented, as were most attached to the Borg mission, from speaking upon certain topics due to mental inhibitors. Nonetheless, their sponsor had obviously valued them enough to allow them to accompany as lab assistants and expendable not-quite-slave labor.

The higher-ups may have been aware of the travel itinerary developed since leaving the gigantic living ship to die amid a graveyard of its compatriots, but none had bothered to enlighten the Elises' and Brintz' of the mission. Therefore, amid the small graduate student and junior engineer population, life continued as usual. In the case of Elises and Britz, that meant a break in the recreation room to amiably argue about the merits of coffee, or lack thereof. Usually the pair assisted in the tau-lab, where Borg subjects were monitored by a temporal physicist and physician/psychologist team in an ongoing study as to long-term effects of temporal resurrection. Lately, however, they had been loaned to the bio-lab to assist in processing samples taken from the dying They ship-person. As both Elises and Brintz had grand dreams of becoming tau engineers and/or researchers one day, assuming they survived their current resume-building experience, the bio-lab was not of high interest. Unfortunately, they /were/ the lowest of the low in the mission hierarchy, and it did not require a Big Beak to push buttons that wanted pushing and compile output from the devices which actually did the analysis. Graduate students did what they were told.

"Nuances of coffee? How many nuances are there with burning plant seeds, grinding them up, then soaking the remains in hot water? It surely cannot be the stimulant content. Any halfway decent wake-me-up med does it better and with less fuss."

Elises rolled his eyes as he theatrically threw hands to the ceiling. "You take all the romance out of a good cup of coffee. And don't you dare say it is a T'sap thing! The plant might be linked to the T'sap Exodus, but there are at least a dozen other races which long ago adopted it into their culture. What if I compared the hatai-banquet to a road kill potluck where the purpose seems to be to determine who can bring the most putrid carcass to dinner? Hmmm?"

"The hatai-banquet is a most revered tradition," said Brintz defensively, ruff feathers lifting.

In the background of the conversation, the coffee machine gently began to percolate, babbling meaninglessly to itself and the universe in general as it wafted gentle aromas into the air.

* * * * *

Curiouser and curiouser. Or was it bizarrer and bizarrer? Either way, Conway was more than a little perplexed. The cube had required several hours to make the transit between its arrival locale and Terra, and during that time Conway had plenty of time to make observations (and brew coffee). Of primary note, the cube radiated Borgness upon the fractal subspace frequencies, a bright beacon of encoded communication flung forth into the ether. Except that communication went nowhere. There was no reciprocal answer, no golden thread wending away into the quantum darkness to link with whatever Mind to which the cube belonged. It was like watching a blind being flail at the dark, trying to make sense of the room in which it was trapped. It was /possible/, albeit unlikely, that the Greater Consciousness, wherever it might be located, had disconnected

the sub-collective from the larger net. More likely, a critical equipment malfunction had occurred, one which would eventually be fixed. And that wasn't the oddest circumstance with Conway's first meeting with the Borg of this future Unhappyverse.

The entity whom represented the cube was not Borg.

It was only after sliding into orbit above the ill-used planet did the ship hail Conway. Instead of the expected scene of catwalks fading to infinity, as was common to all the Borg variants he had encountered, Conway had been confronted with the features of a being of distinct avian lineage. An apparently unassimilated being. Who was sitting in an office. With decorative wall hangings in the background.

"Greetings, Xenig," began the creature, "my name is Vaerz. I speak for the cooperative of civilizations whom call themselves the Alliance. If you have a moment in your undoubtedly busy schedule, I would like to ask a few questions." Advanced translator algorithms rendered the words intelligible; and there was nary a plurality or third-person grammatical construction to be heard.

Without waiting for an answer, or perhaps taking the lack of response to be a positive reply, Vaerz began to talk. And talk. And talk. And talk a lot without saying much at all. That characteristic alone confirmed its - his? - non-assimilated status. Borg absolutely did not prattle, and they certainly could not converse in such a skillful manner as to weave a one-sided dialogue where much was said without actually revealing anything of significance.

Conway listened with only a small slice of his attention. Simply keeping the communication frequency open appeared to be sufficient encouragement for Vaerz.

What bizzaro universe was this? Everything about the cubeship suggested Borg, from the fractal subspace transmissions to the shape of the vessel. Technology of an unknown providence - Alliance? - was interwoven throughout, but the dominant flavor was undoubtedly Borg. Was the Unhappyverse Collective a partner in this Alliance? Had the Alliance managed to enslave a cube? Was this Vaerz a mere puppet, either freely employed or coerced to act as a non-assimilated mouthpiece for the sub-collective?

Conway was becoming increasingly perplexed; and a confused, mentally instable super-being was not necessarily a good thing. Nor did the freshly brewed coffee which infused the nutrient bath supporting Conway's brain help with matters. In hindsight, selecting "Premier Paranoia Blend" may have been a mistake. The variety was a favorite of Conway, the beans' caffeine genetically modified to produce a drug that promoted an intense, jitterless concentration. Unfortunately, the molecule sometimes stimulated nontarget pathways. Not always, but sometimes. Like this time.

The Voice(s) were whispering, were hissing and murmuring of conspiracy. Impulses were sizzling along neural pathways both biologic and synthetic, making it difficult to sort out which stimuli were real and which were imaginary. Was he really ejecting all spider-bots to space? Was he really using telekinetic powers to begin an unstoppable chain reaction which would finish the sundering of the planet's moon? Was he really transmitting something along a secondary frequency, targeting cube and sun and several very small rocks?

Conway mentally shook himself and began the mantra to calm the Voices. All spider-bots were accounted for; the moon continued to exist in one piece; there were no rogue transmissions. Nothing had changed. Vaerz continued to babble.

Babble.

Talking much while saying little.

Babble babble babble.

Conway took charge of his confusion. Annoyance and impatience were starting to seep into his demeanor, earlier curiosity upon the situation fading. At least one Voice was suggesting a sensible course of action. An outwardly Borg cube with a non-Borg representative? The incongruity could be solved by a simple scan. And so a scan was performed.

Thousands of cybernetic entities. The ship was awash with signatures that combined aspects of biologic with inorganic. Borg. However, there were also a number of non-assimilated beings aboard, clustered together in a small volume.

Unexpectedly, the scanner algorithm configured to coffee registered a positive hit.

Ignoring a probably unimportant question posed by Vaerz - the Voice(s) had abruptly increased in volume, insisting upon recognition while drowning out any competition - Conway focused upon the coffee. A new scan was initiated, then another, and a third, each more focused than the one before. It was definitely coffee, not a replicator knock-off, and of a variety unknown to Conway. Without having it in metaphorical hand, genetics under scrutiny, a brewed cup submitted to chemical analysis and, eventually, 'taste' testing, the details were unknown and unknowable. However, Conway had spent many centuries refining his Xenig chassis' scanner, making it as sensitive to the nuances of coffee as was technologically feasible. After all, the galaxy was a big place and one could spend thousands of years searching for the best blends. Without the scanner, it was too easy to subject oneself, and one's time, to the mediocre...or accidentally pass by the superb because it was being served at a run-down diner tucked within a hole-in-the-wall smuggler station.

The coffee upon the Borg cube was provisionally graded to be in the top ten percent tier. It could only be officially classified if a sample could be attained.

Which provided a conundrum.

The Borg, and their yammering talking-head, were no longer an amusing curiosity. Or so said the Voice(s). If there was one Borg cube, then unquestionably there were many more somewhere else, as well as a controlling Mind. This cube could be safely eradicated, thus appeasing Conway's growing annoyance with it. The mystery of Borg in alliance with, or slaves to, the unassimilated was unimportant. It was a question to be pursued with the Collective itself, once the central nexus was located, along with critical queries such as the history of Cube #347 and if the Greater Consciousness had any last wishes before final death.

Ultimately, only the presence of the coffee was staying Conway's wrath.

What to do? What to do?

Vaerz asked another question, or perhaps repeated what had been said before. Conway abruptly ended the transmission. With the gift of clear thinking courtesy of Premier Paranoia Blend, as well as suggestions provided by a Voice or two, a decision had been made. The Borg cube was to be vivisected, bits carefully burned, vaporized, or cut, as required, so as to preserve the coffee buried near its heart. If all was done well, then the compartment with the coffee would be left intact, beans able to be retrieved at leisure with spider-bots. And if it wasn't done well, then Conway would be sad, but secure in the knowledge that this future Unhappyverse galaxy had, somewhere, at least one excellent strain of coffee.

Conway was cheered. This encounter was turning out to be fun! He had never attempted a ship vivisection before, so that new experience would undoubtedly be enjoyable. And then there was the anticipation of a coffee treasure hunt, should his experiment not work. It was a win-win situation!

Powering up his Xenig weapons - no need to engage mental super-powers - and ignoring repeated requests to reopen transmission, Conway advanced upon the cube.

* * * * *

::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.::