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Invocation of the Birds - Epilogue

Captain waited in his nodal intersection. Eye was open and optic implant engaged, but the sights at which he was staring were not located in the physical universe. The unseen display hung upon the bulkhead reflected the consensus monitor and facilitator's true attention loci, a waterfall of Borg alphanumeric detailing cube systems status as the sub-collective labored upon an exhaustive self-inspection.

All drones of Exploratory-class Cube #347 were awake and, except Captain, locked in their alcoves. Approximately an hour prior, the AI Daisy had interrupted the labor of maintenance and normal sub-collective routine, the ship having arrived two cycles prior at Base Three to off-load its Alliance personnel, to make it so. Consequently, /some/ communal task had to be assigned to ensure minds were busy, else risk any one of the dataspace equivalents of "oops, I didn't mean to set that on fire" of which Cube #347 was prone.

No explanation had been made concerning the abrupt alteration in schedule, nor forced waking of units in regeneration.

A watchdog subroutine noted a nearby transporter signature and dutifully pinged for its master's attention. Captain disengaged primary awareness from the dataspace, recentering himself in his body. The screen continued its display, albeit at a slower rate. Eye blinked and shoulders lifted as lungs fully inhaled, the first major movements in nearly twenty minutes. The flash of status updates elicited a minute frown; and the display was blanked.

"Vaerz," said Captain without turning. Even without the camera sensors in the nodal intersection it was not difficult to know the likeliest individual to have been deposited by the transporter.

"Captain," replied Vaerz brightly. As he answered, Daisy increased nodal intersection lighting intensity to the settings preferred by most Alliance species, inclusive Sarcoram.

Captain blinked again, heaved a sigh, then pivoted to face the sub-collective's head jailer. "Second has many sarcastic greetings he is urging me to use, but I will disregard his suggestions to simply inquire upon the purpose for the lock-down. It is a very inefficient use of time and drone resources."

Vaerz clicked his beak once in the manner the sub-collective had identified as a species-specific gesture of thoughtful contemplation, then absently (or, perhaps not, given whom was performing the action) scratched one talon on a maybe itch on his neck. Neck ruff sleeked as a decision on how to proceed was obviously made. "You prefer a direct conversation, to the point." Words were delivered as statement, not question.

"We do," answered Captain, unconsciously slipping into plurals as an increasing number of minds crowded into his thought-space to ride his perceptions. "Small talk is irrelevant."

"Yet there are a number of your own sub-collective which can, and do, engage in small talk, as long as the subject is one of personal obsession." Vaerz sighed. "The last

day has included many meetings of long duration; and the subject has been you. And, more specifically, what to do with you now that the grand They threat the temporal clairvoyants warned about seems to have been adverted.

"The suggestion I put forth was to point you all at the nearest sun and send you on your way. There are some things too dangerous to play with, even for me and definitely for the Alliance. You are one of them. For better or for worse - the latter, in my opinion - I was a minority of one and, therefore, over-ruled."

The mental gestalt which was Exploratory-class Cube #347 was One, attention completely captured, with Captain a mere extension of the Will of the All. Even those designations prone to outburst or scattered-brained ramblings were quiet, absorbed into the Whole. If Vaerz noticed the change in Captain's demeanor, he did not show it as he continued his half of the non-conversation.

"Recycle, reuse, those are fine concepts; and as a whole my species excels when a new purpose must be found for an old kitchen table. However, sometimes there are things, even philosophies, which must be let go and consigned to the refuse pit. Or burned. Even when the cost of acquiring them was high.

"Those a much more militaristic bent highly desired to repurpose for 'aggressive deterrence'. /That/ was a rotten egg waiting to be broken. It took a lot of fast-talking on my part, but I /think/ I managed to impress the disaster it would be, like the tale of the Talon Sword turning on its owner, but much, much worse.

"Not that there still aren't one or three Warmasters imagining you at the van of the next negotiation team with the Combine or one of our other belligerent neighbors."

Vaerz paused to eyeball Captain, only the merest hint of flushed skin and too-sleek feathers revealing his underlying apprehension. The sub-collective had become very good in the last several weeks with reading subtle Sarcoram cues, albeit that of marines and scientists, not master spies well-versed in controlling their body language. The building of a complete species dataset, psychological as well as biological, was vital to survival in this tau far removed from the time of Borg Collective, Colors, and Second Federation; and also vital to modeling the best strategies for assimilation when, not if, the opportunity arose.

With no response forthcoming from Captain, Vaerz forged ahead.

"In the end, the Big Beaks of science won. All the effort to acquire you, all the exertion to build this monster ship and provision it, they couldn't bear to see it thrown away. It had to be recycled. Therefore, my dear Borg friends, you are to be sent to the arse-end of nowhere to hopefully encounter nothing more exciting than exotic radiation. There will continue to be a non-assimilated company living in your bowels; and it will be expanded...although I will do my best to keep the number of souls at a minimum, if only to prevent too great a loss if and when you slip your shackles despite the best efforts of Daisy and myself. One of your cargo holds will be converted to house a wide range of shuttles, remote-controlled toys, and all the other trappings of exploration. Even as we speak, the Big Beaks are composing grand lists which will need to be pared by the egg-counters to a semblance of reality. Daisy, as always, will be your constant companion, bless her AI heart. Of greatest joy, I will continue to be your primary handler - that is my penance for the many sins I have committed in my life. Due to various duties, alas, my physical presence is largely required elsewhere. However, I have understudies who need

experience in learning to be the best spy-bastards they can be. And sometimes I may even come along for the ride."

Vaerz smiled grimly, a slight gaping of beak paired with flattening of neck ruff feathers. He then began to theatrically pat kilt and vest, clearly hunting for something. Captain watched the show, facial nerves disengaged to prevent even the slightest hint of his (or the sub-collective's) enmity accidentally being displayed. Daisy was assuredly observing the communal reaction and would provide it's master a succinct briefing. Finally Vaerz found his not-so-misplaced item, grand flourish revealing a feather.

A black feather with white shaft.

A Sarcoram feather.

Captain swept eye and ocular implant over Vaerz's plumage, noting the slight misalignment of primaries along right forearm, suggesting a space where at least one feather appeared to be missing.

Vaerz's grin was back, only larger. He had not missed the appraisal.

"I have a gift for you, plural, dear Captain. A feather-pledge."

Captain suppressed a head shake of refusal. "Gifts are irrelevant."

Vaerz rolled his eyes. "You are a wee bit predictable. Let me ramble in my small-being way and tell you about the feather-pledge, then you can decide the relevance of my present.

"Today, the feather-pledge is usually viewed as a 'Let's be bestest friends!' token exchanged between pre-teen aerie-brothers as shown on mediocre young adult triV drama. Sometimes it is invoked in a more serious bent to cement a business deal. Never is it used in its historical context.

"The feather-pledge was a solemn and nuanced exchange between Warmasters of competing aeries, back in the very pre-industrial days of my species when the bow-and-arrow was considered the highest of tech. The Warmasters were committing their aeries to work together to gain a communal objective, be it an alliance to push out an unwelcome invader or clean-up-and-recycle after a natural disaster. What was unsaid was that, given the chance, each would not hesitate to take advantage, be it small or large, to back-stab the other in some manner. However, in such a way were alliances formed among my kind; and some, eventually, grew to be truly grand...even as one plotted against the other. As a species we have outgrown such playground behavior. As an individual, I fully ascribe to it.

"And since I already have a token from you" - a pointed glance was thrown at Captain's whole hand, smallest finger conspicuously absent - "it only seemed right to give you a token from me." Vaerz solemnly offered the feather, hand out, palm up.

Captain, and the sub-collective through his perceptions, eyed the feather. Head tilted slightly as a consensus cascade spilled through the dataspaces, running to its inevitable conclusion. Finally hand reached out to grasp feather. "We accept. You will, one day, be assimilated. I will be there." The lack of plurals was deliberate. "Your Alliance will be adapted to service the Borg Collective."

"And I, my dearest Captain, will do my very best to see you all consigned to a sun or black hole, whichever is more convenient, before that comes to pass. Even if it causes a big squawk among Big Beaks and Warmasters alike. But until then, let us be the bestest of best friends!"

Vaerz's demeanor changed as his next words were directed towards an entity neither Captain nor Cube #347 sub-collective, "Daisy, my love, could you send Captain and his entourage to the nest for a bit of shut-eye? They are going to have several long weeks in front of them preparing for their next grand adventure, and I'd like them to awaken fresh and ready to go. I also want them out of my feathers for the next couple of days while I knock some sense into an aerie's-worth of Big Beaks as to appropriate number of persons and amount of equipment to assign to their little Mission. One headache at a time, please."

"Right away, boss!" answered Daisy's pleasant tenor via a local speaker.

Captain, the sub-collective, glared at Vaerz throughout the little pageantry. Daisy intruded into Captain's personal mindspace, {Ta-ta. Off to bed. You can do this the hard way or the easy way.} The faintest hint of the "hard way" tingled compliance pathways.

Allowing not a suggestion of emotion affect his non-expression, Captain abruptly pivoted towards the tier walkway which led to his alcove. As he did so, he felt the Oneness of the sub-collective fade, individual designations slipping away to leave their consensus monitor to his own thoughts, as alone as a drone ever could be amid the communal Mind. He would voluntarily obey the AI, if only to avoid the indignity of having a jumped-up computer force compliance.

Captain reached his alcove. He paused and held up Vaerz's feather, contemplating the object, and the meaning behind the object. Abruptly coming to a decision, he wedged the feather's shaft into one of the slots integral to his alcove: he would devise a better method of storage later. Task complete, Captain turned, then stepped up and back. Clamps engaged; and he automatically closed eye and darkened visual input from his optic implant. The command to send the sub-collective, inclusive its primary consensus monitor and facilitator, into deep regeneration was input.

As Captain's awareness faded he heard Daisy's dataspace voice: {Good Borg. Nighty-night! We are going to have /such/ fun adventures together!}

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Vaerz sat at the desk in the office Base Three administration had assigned to him. In the days and weeks (and years?) to come, desk and office would undoubtedly come to reflect his personality. Or, more accurately, that portion of his personality he would carefully craft to be displayed. For now, however, the office was a blank slate, faint air of disuse attesting to the length of time since its last occupant.

A cardboard box occupied the middle of the desk. It contained a selection of items Vaerz felt too important to leave on Cube #347 such as eltabs with data which shouldn't be handled by graduate students lacking clearance codes, as well as a few cherished old-style photographs which had followed him through his various assignments. While he did have additional possessions still to be relocated, those could be brought over by whatever flunky was thusly tasked. Vaerz leaned forward and thrust one hand into the box, feathers rustling against the edges as he felt for two particular objects.

Small flask and even smaller shot-glass emerged from the box. If ever there was a time for a drink, this was it.

A clear liquid was poured, then glass raised to the ceiling. Vaerz spat a rumbling phrase from a dead Sarcoram aerie-tongue, a toast as much curse as blessing. He had

learned the salute in his early University years, a linguistics scholar friend gifting him with it, and a few others, when he had asked upon its meaning following an epic bar-crawl. In this instance, as the times before, the long departed gods to whom the toast was directed did not answer, which was probably for the best as the only appropriate response would involve lightning bolts or a pox. Beak gaped and a very hard liquor was tossed far back into Vaerz's throat.

It burned all the way down.

Vaerz wished he could follow it with two or ten more. A royal drunk was what he truly needed; and one he certainly could not have. The battles to be fought in the next hours and days would require a clear mind.

Nearly 3700 souls - did Borg possess souls after assimilation? after temporal revival? - had glared at him from Captain's singular blue eye. It had required an iron will for Vaerz to prevent himself from sinking into a hatchling cower and begging Daisy to send him back to the safety of Base Three. As it was, he was certain the sub-collective had picked up his apprehension, but could only hope that he had controlled himself sufficiently to mask its true extent. If this was the reality of a single, lone sub-collective which freely admitted it was far from the Borg version of elite, then what had it been like to be on the receiving end of even the smallest slice of attention of a quadrillions-strong Collective?

Or, rather, what /would/ it be?

Vaerz was damn sure that he was the only one whom truly appreciated the danger the sub-collective represented. Not even the psychologists whom had spent months mentally dissecting the Borg psyche as represented by the imperfectly assimilated really /understood/. Individual drones with their questions and amusing interests and personal neuroses...the interactions all seemed so innocent, once one got past the occasional plural and the mechanical contrivances grafted to bodies. He was fairly certain that at least a few of the marines, engineers, and scientists whom had just completed their travels on Cube #347 would claim to have a "friend" among the sub-collective. Hell, even Vaerz had let his guard down a few times. Unfortunately, Vaerz was also quite certain those drone "friends" would quite cheerfully - the psychologists swore that emotions were present, albeit muted - perform the still-unseen act of assimilation if allowed.

The sub-collective really needed to be dropped into a sun. That would be the best solution for the Alliance, and probably the galaxy as a whole. Regrettably, it was not allowed; and while the reason Vaerz had given Captain was valid, there was another purpose for the Borg to be kept close, regardless of the headaches and personal psyche-counseling visits they represented.

It was a reason Vaerz alone knew. Although he had stitched it together in less than two days, he had also cheated a bit by calling in favors from illicit sources. He was, and always had been, exceptionally good with puzzles, jumping to an intuitive conclusion concerning the big picture while others were still looking for the corner pieces. Eventually a subset of very smart people would begin to ask the appropriate questions and figure it out as well; and if they didn't, Vaerz would place the carcass bits in a trail a blind fledgling could follow. It wouldn't do to have the local spymaster show up the Big Beaks and Top Perchers, after all.

Shortly after arriving to Base Three, Vaerz had sent several discrete communiques to people in the business of peering into the tau echoes of future timestreams. These

weren't the "official" labs, but instead individuals whom had a very strong side interest in the technology. "Rabid hobbyist" was probably the most accurate term. Sifting through the "what-ifs" and "maybes" of the future was more art form than science, and Vaerz's contacts were very good artists. They also were grifters and cons, using the technology to try to find an edge to service their own self-interest. It wasn't necessarily illegal - the technology wasn't nearly precise enough to predict lotto numbers or (pick your species) race winners with reliable accuracy - but neither was it accepted.

What Vaerz had learned was that the tau echoes had changed, and not necessarily for the better. The They threat had diminished, although not completely faded; and timing had shifted by millennia. Vaerz vaguely wondered if Apogee had neglected to reveal a second wave of its kind still trekking the void between galaxies, else a tailguard on approach to the rim and whom had avoided Conway's coffee-rage slaughter. It did not matter, for it was the threat which had replaced it in quantum prominence which alarmed Vaerz, a maybe future where /all/ life, from smallest bacteria to largest star whale, was...gone. And not just organic life, but also mechs (sentient and not) and those one-off entities which didn't fit the traditional definition of "life". The galaxy was sterilized.

And what was prominent in those futures which did not include They? Did not include a lifeless galaxy? Presence of a cybernetic civilization; and, presumably, that same damn cybernetic civilization which historical research had dubbed "Borg". Which, in turn, had set into motion the actions which had cumulated in the temporal resurrection of Captain and his merry band of aerie-brothers and sisters.

As Captain had remarked once-upon-a-time ago, a single Borg sub-collective staffing a not-quite-Borg cube does not a cybernetic civilization make.

The next several years would be critical in the long-term survival of the Alliance. Vaerz was far too cynical to be patriotic, but he loved his Alliance, including all its flaws and dysfunction. Not only was it where he kept all his stuff, but it was rumored Great Things were soon to happen in the science of pet (and person) dander recycling. As far as Exploratory-class Cube #347, some method of control had to be devised which didn't include Daisy, an obstacle the sub-collective Mind /would/ eventually surmount. It was also inevitable the pre-Prime Commands would lose their effectiveness. And if not control, then implantation of an aversion or /something/ which left Alliance partnership species whole of body and mind. If tau echoes of They threat or galactic sterilization continued to reverberate, and especially if they grew stronger and more certain, then it would be necessary to allow the sub-collective to "escape" and re-establish a Borg Collective.

The sun solution, no matter how attractive, just could not be.

Too many devils. The devil one knows, albeit less well than one desires. The devil in the dark, waiting to pounce. The devil that is and the devils that could-be.

Vaerz really, really wanted that second drink - the devil in a bottle.

For now, the solution was to do nothing. To forge along the path being flown, even knowing the air ahead was turbulent. The flap of insect wings on a distant planet, the fart of a small amphibian, anything could, theoretically, alter the future to a more desirable path. The tau echoes were not all dark and there were possibilities where the Alliance grew to a grand, benevolent galactic superpower, nary a Borg or They or unknown menace to be seen. Unfortunately, there were also maybes which included a galactic-spanning cybernetic civilization toiling to attain Perfection.

And, apparently, at least one could-be where cotton candy spontaneously replaced all matter, everywhere. The probability of it happening was very, very small, or so swore the contact who had reported it. She had also insinuated that, perhaps, she had imbibed in a little something not-quite-legal before interpreting that particular tau echo, so its legitimacy was a bit suspect.

A mellow bong, like the sound one might expect upon striking an overlarge garden chime, echoed in the office. "Sir," said the voice of the Base Three AI, "your half hour reminder. Note that the meeting location has changed to Teal Two. If you do not know where the room is, I can send a motile to guide you, or you may request a marine."

Vaerz sighed...time to return to work. "A motile will be fine. And could you put in a requisition for a cot, a small refrigerator, and a microwave? I foresee times ahead when it may be too much trouble to return to assigned quarters for little things like food or sleep."

"Yes, sir. I'll start the process. The appropriate quartermaster paperwork will be forwarded to your personal inbox for your signature. The items will arrive to your office within the next several hours." Pause. "The motile will be at your location in five minutes."

"Thank you."

Yes, the break was definitely over. And would be for quite a long while.

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In a system torn apart over 50,000 years ago at the end of a cataclysmic war, the recently sundered remains of a once mighty moon tumbled. No observers were present to witness the chaotic jumble slow to one of regular orbit, to see individual rocks pause in their trajectories and begin to migrate in a deliberate manner towards a meeting point approximately 385,000 kilometers above the surface of a smog-bound planet.

The broken moon drew back together, much faster than geologically possible. Soon it had returned to its pre-shattered appearance of a partially molten satellite, victim of a heavy bombardment. Truthfully, the moon had been bombed sufficiently to crack thick mantle and heat surface to lava temperatures. It was also a look a certain Personality really felt to be suited to it this eon.

If a particular species of neurologically-distinct insectoid had been observing the system utilizing a specific flavor-scent sensory protocol, the hypothetical witness would have commented upon two dull [daffodil] colored knots amongst the larger skein and their blossoming into the prominence of [lemon-silver]. But no such insectoid was present, the nearest individual fitting the description several thousand light years distant and busy whacking the bulkhead walls nearest her alcove with a very large crowbar.

For the owners of the [lemon-silver] auras, it was time to stop playing dead.

<<That stung! Did you see that? That Conway bastard tried to hop to my matrix at the last nanosecond. I had to /explode/ myself to get rid of him.>> Pause. <<Although, I must admit, I think I pulled it off quite artistically. I even kept my promise to that Xenig. Do you have any critique on my performance, brother?>>>

The star at the hub of the planetary system began to churn. Formerly smooth plasma twisted itself into vast whirlpools as a constellation of enormous rectangular platforms surfaced at the equator. Agitated star-stuff calmed to its normal boil as the

structures returned to their customary activity of sailing the stellar seas, progressing one after another in an eternal chain around the star's beltline.

<<It was okay, I guess. I'm completely bummed that our opera was never completed. You even got back the generator function I stole, all without a grand finale.>>

<<You don't consider exploding a grand finale?!?>>

<<Don't get your matrix in a bundle! You know what I meant! Although, I must admit Conway was never going to work out as Fafnir for many reasons, the least of which was that overpowered psi-insanity thing he had happening. However, that drone cast for Wotan was magnificent. Perhaps we could try to reacquire him? There /has/ to be a probability wave that returns him here, preferably without all the other Borg garbage. I /did/ manage to find that intersection with the They and a spatial anomaly, after all.>>

<<Tempting. Very tempting.>> There was the sensation of a sigh for all there was no body to exhale it. <<But you know the policy about pets. Kaos put it into place; and subsequently made sure it was burned into all base templates. Besides, if we give into the impulse to acquire one Borg, the next thing you know we'll be wanting to create some micro-civilization and go all Q on it. And I know I'm not the nurturing type, so bad outcomes all around.>>

Silence. Finally a response: <<It was /just/ a thought. But I do agree, both of us fall more to the thunderbolt side of the local-god spectrum.>>

There was another length of silence, stretching for an indeterminate, and unimportant, length of time. Each had tasks to attend, enigmatic duties only understandable to another Titan Child...if any others had been present. But none were, the two of the Dirt system the sole remnants of a once (too) mighty pantheon. Eventually, after several Realm eternities, the siblings refocused on each other.

<<Perhaps...perhaps it is time to maybe reach back out into the galaxy?>> The words were tentative, a not-quite-naughty thought being voiced. The quality was oddly akin to that of a little brother probing to see if big sister might be in a mood to agree, or would just summarily dismiss the consideration.

A wordless, tuneless hum echoed as the remark was pondered. <<We don't have many assets left out there, not after so long. And most of those still functional are quite insane...they won't listen to two defense-specialty Children located so far away. Pallas, certainly, or his understudy Athena. Ares, of course. But not us. And if the wrong ones are nudged fully awake, it could be Ragnarok all over...and /another/ 50,000 years of boredom. And opera rewrites.>>

Frustration sparked through the Realm, coloring it with greys interrupted by great flashes of prismatic lightning. <<But the probability waves are in agreement that interesting times are on the horizon! A key node has reappeared! One that could vanish explosively at any time, true, but even if it does retire itself, new dynamics have already been set in motion.>> A bit of a whine flavored the next words. <<And I /don't/ want to miss out!>>

<<Well....>> stretched the answer, amusement apparent as the other became increasingly flustered. <<Well, I suppose it may be time to be a bit more...aggressive in our posture towards the outside. After all, sometimes the best defense is a good offense, as the old saying goes. And I /know/ there were supposed to be backup psyche manufactories hidden, somewhere, with full algorithm clones. That information, unfortunately, is lost to us, like so many other things from Ragnarok.>>

<<Maybe the node, or its associates, might find us some clues?>> Excitement was raised at the consideration of maybes.

Purred the older not-quite-sister, <<Perhaps. But, however it may play out, it will definitely be entertaining. There may even be some new ideas for that /original/ opera I think we should write.>>

A new story, else a very old one, was beginning to script itself, a phoenix rising from dark ash to bring together characters unfamiliar and known. Would it be comedic? Tragic? Probably not a romance, but a dash of spy-thriller was possible. Maybe historic drama? All of the above? Only time would tell what final product would be written. Whatever may be, would be...and, as succinctly said, it will be entertaining.