



# Murder on the Rue Borg

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It had to be a dream. A nightmare, more precisely. Jean-Luc Picard was on a Borg Cube. Again.

His heart rate immediately began to race, and his breath quickened.

In the dim green light of the corridor, a figure approached. “Dix? Is that you?”

Picard gaped as Guinan appeared before him. She was not in her usual garb of a flowing purple robe and matching hat the size of a turkey platter but instead wore a tight green dress with shoulder pads, matching three-inch heels with ankle straps, and a fox stole around her shoulders with the head still attached.

“Guinan! What are you doing in my dream?” Picard said. “And dressed like that!”

“Gloria,” she said. “Remember, I’m your cousin from Cleveland. You sent a telegram, and I caught the first bus. Isn’t that the story you programmed in the holodeck?”

Picard shook his head. “I was in bed. Asleep. And the next thing I knew I was here.”

“But look what you are wearing,” Guinan said.

He did, realizing that his pajamas had been replaced by a charcoal and white pin-striped suit with wide lapels, a matching red tie and handkerchief, and that there was a fedora on his head.

*Was I sleepwalking? he thought. And ended up in the holodeck? But what about Guinan? Could we be having the same dream?*

But a tickle in the back of his mind told him that there were no Borg programs in the computer for the holodeck, that replicating a Cube and any semblance of the Borg threat would never be allowed.

*Then it’s a dream,* he decided. And he’d muddle through until he woke up.

“All right,” he said. “Why are we here?”

“That’s for you to answer,” Guinan said. “Your telegram said you needed help on a case and to come right away. But...” She gestured

toward the recharging stations lining the corridor, each holding an inactive drone.

“Why haven’t they noticed us?” she asked.

Before Picard could answer, the sound of metallic footsteps echoed in the corridor.

“Ixnay that,” said Guinan. “We’ve been noticed.”

The metallic clangs got louder and were accompanied by the hissing and whirring of cybernetic body parts.

Picard felt a chill down his spine, remembering all too well his last time aboard a Borg Cube.

“Captain,” a monotone voice said. “I am pleased to see you again.”

Picard peered through the hazy air. This Borg was not complete; that is, the ratio of metallic parts to flesh was decidedly less than that usually present on drones. In fact, other than the prosthetic right eye, the face and scalp were recognizably human.

“Hugh!” Picard said. “Is it really you?”

“Indeed,” the Borg said.

“What? How?” Picard held out his hands, palms up. “Weren’t you returned to the hive and the collective?”

“Correct, Captain. Your crew rescued me from the moon in the Argolis system, then repaired me and returned me to the scout ship. But before I was linked back into the collective, I concentrated on all I learned from my time on the *Enterprise*, all of my conversations with you, and Geordi and Data. Those thoughts and memories were the first to be transferred to the hive mind and were not erased. That knowledge then spread to the entire crew.”

“We hoped that would happen,” Picard said.

“It took a while, but my individuality spread throughout the Cube, with more and more Borg becoming self-aware. We quickly took steps to disconnect from the remainder of the collective, altering our ship’s signals to indicate an explosion in the core, with no survivors.”

“I see,” said Picard. “And since then?”

“We have been careful to remain out of sensor range of all ships. It has been difficult, but we modified our impulse engines to warp, and have hidden in nebulae, behind moons, and less traveled parts of the galaxy. We have had no outside contact since my return.”

“Until now,” Picard said, beginning to believe that he and Guinan were not in a shared dream, or a malfunctioning holodeck program, but actually on a Borg Cube.

“Since then, we have been traveling the galaxy, avoiding notice and trying to reverse parts of our assimilation.”

“Until now,” Picard reiterated.

“Until now,” Hugh’s metallic voice said.

“Proceed.”

Hugh focused his one human eye on Picard. “There have been murders on board.”

“Murder?” Guinan’s voice broke through the steam and hiss of the Borg corridor. She flipped one end of her fur stole over her shoulder and walked closer, her high heels clack-clacking on the metal floor. “Now you’re talking!”

Picard raised one hand, palm flat. “Stop,” he said.

“Come on Dix, isn’t this what the game is all about? Why we’re wearing this getup and in the holodeck? There’s a crime to solve! Let’s get cracking,” she said, digging a spiral bound notepad and number two pencil from her handbag.

Picard raised an eyebrow. Apparently Guinan had not entertained the possibility that this was real, and believed they were still on the *Enterprise*. No matter, he thought. Better that she play along, especially if they were actually on a Borg cube.

“All right,” he said, motioning her forward to stand next to him. “Are you sure it was murder? And not just a natural death?”

“Borg do not die,” Hugh said. “Given proper maintenance of our mechanical parts and regeneration in the charging modules, a Borg can live for hundreds, if not thousands of years. We do not require food or water; therefore, with a continual source of energy for the cube, which is self-perpetuating, and infusion of nanites, we are a constant.

“Within the past nine of our regeneration cycles, we have experienced the loss of two drones. We thought it was an accident, that during the reversion the pneumothorax apparatus became damaged, the coupling mechanism cracked, causing the regeneration fluid to leak out. The drone’s throat was torn open, wounds which we believed to be self-inflicted in an effort to return the fluid to the chest in order to survive.”

“However, just as we finished the examination of the drone and determined that there was no mechanical disfunction, another drone died. This drone worked in the repair unit and was discovered in her lab.”

“She,” Picard said. “I thought all Borg were gender neutral and that distinction between male and female had been deemed ‘irrelevant’ after full assimilation had been completed.”

“You are correct. However, on our ship we found a method to reverse the neutrality. We give each drone the choice of whether to return to the gender they were born to, change gender, or remain in a gender-neutral status.”

“How did she die?” Picard said.

“The first drone’s coupling tube was slit. A slit made by a sharp instrument with clean edges, not ragged as if it were snagged or torn. The damage to the throat was similar, but in a pattern of four long slices.

“The second drone had several sharp cuts in her cranial tubules, preventing the transmission of nanoprobes to the cortical node. With no such transmission, it was as if the node were removed and caused immediate death.”

Picard nodded, rubbing a spot above his left eye. He was well aware from his time as Locutus what removal of the cortical node would do.

“Rather than experience more deaths, we decided to risk exposure and seek out the *Enterprise*, and enlist your help,” Hugh said.

Picard frowned. “Why didn’t you just contact the ship and ask? Why resort to this shanghai and bring us here involuntarily?”

Hugh’s ocular implant whirled as it shifted to Guinan, who was tapping the end of her pencil on the notepad, and staring at Hugh.

“Yeah, buster, why the kidnap?” she said.

“I know that not all in Starfleet, including some on board the *Enterprise* believe that my species is capable of change, and do not believe that I in particular can be trusted. You do not share that opinion, Captain, and although your colleague has had a long history with our species, she has shown a willingness to open her mind to the possibility. We could not take the risk of being refused.”

“That may be true, but it does not explain this,” he said, gesturing to his outfit. “Why are Guinan and I dressed as if we were in one of my holodeck programs?”

“I am reluctant to answer,” Hugh said, “as I do not wish to remind you of your partial assimilation. Your neural impressions became part of the collective, and thus part of the hive mind. I remembered the program, and your ability to solve mysteries. It seemed advantageous to include Guinan as your assistant and proceed accordingly.”

“Very well,” Picard said, inwardly acknowledging that he was neither in a dream or on the holodeck. Real or not, the best thing to do was solve the mystery and be done. Then he could mull it all over with a cup of Earl Grey, hot. Or, more aptly, a single malt in Ten Forward with Guinan.

“Let’s get started. I would like to see the bodies of the victims.” He turned to Hugh. “Lead on MacDuff.”

Hugh cocked his head, and the ocular implant whirred once again. “I am Hugh. Who is MacDuff?”

Picard sighed. “Hugh. Lead on Hugh.”

Hugh took them to a turbolift set between two regeneration alcoves. The lift moved rapidly, first horizontally, then vertically. The doors opened on a square room, free of recharging alcoves, lined with navigation and engineering consoles.

They stepped inside and Hugh pointed to a large screen on one wall containing a diagram of blinking red dots, a handful of which were moving along blue connecting lines.

“This shows the status of every Borg on the ship, whether they are regenerating or performing a function.”

“Is that necessary?” said Picard. “What about the hive collective communication?”

“Our de-assimilation efforts have progressed far enough that each drone is allowed the privacy of their own thoughts. It’s not complete; we can still use hive mind to communicate within the ship, but each of us has the ability to block it.”

Picard recalled the sibilant whisper of the Borg Queen in his mind, and he shuddered.

“Dix?” Guinan said. “You copacetic?”

He frowned. The lingo. “Yes, doll. Everything’s Jake. What about other life forms?” Picard asked. “Can you configure the console to determine if any others are aboard?”

Hugh shook his head, a neck tubule pulsing. "As you know, Borg do not sense the presence of other beings unless they are a threat. That is what is puzzling. Whoever, or whatever, is causing these deaths should definitely be perceived as a threat and none have been reported."

"Show us the bodies."

Hugh led them to a door on the far side of the center chamber. They entered a long rectangular room filled with medical beds and monitors, each flanked by a regeneration console occupied by a dormant drone.

"Lights," said Hugh.

The two dead drones were on the nearest medical beds.

Picard quickly approached the first bed. "I see why you thought this could have been an accident. The tubule caught on something and pulled loose."

"But the marks on the throat. Smooth edges, not torn."

He turned to examine the second body. "This looks more deliberate, and the number of wounds if you will, would indicate intent."

Leaning forward, Picard pointed to a slender yellow thread caught in one of the slits, barely visible. "What have we here?" he said.

Hugh's ocular implant whirled and extended several inches from his face. "I do not know. It is definitely not Borg. And it appears to be organic in nature."

Hugh turned to a drone standing in front of a console. "Jean-Luc. Approach."

At his command, the nearest drone's eyes opened and disengaged its body from the regeneration pod.

"I am ready to assist," the drone said.

Picard's eyebrows furrowed and his gaze narrowed. Guinan made a choking sound.

Hugh tilted his head. "You do not approve? He chose his name as a sign of respect."

Picard cleared his throat. "Well, my time aboard a Borg ship is not one of my most cherished memories."

"Once the assimilation reversal process is complete, one of the first individual choices each drone makes is a name. Because we owe our salvation to the crew of the *Enterprise*, there are many tribute names. We have seven Geordis, eighteen Beverlys, and fifty-seven Datas."

“Ahem,” Guinan said, pulling the frame of her cat-eye glasses down her nose. “What? No Guinans?”

Hugh’s biological eye stared at her. “I am afraid not. Your initial reluctance to accept me has had a discouraging effect. Perhaps that will change with your assistance here.”

“Hmmpf,” Guinan muttered, and adjusted her stole around her shoulders.

“Back to business, dear cousin Gloria,” Picard said. “Hugh, instruct ‘Jean-Luc’ to analyze the fiber while we continue. Assuming that you are correct and the sample is organic, how did another life form get aboard the cube in the first place?”

“Good question there, Dix,” Guinan said. “Have you kidnapped, er, had, any other visitors besides us?”

“Let me check the logs,” Hugh said, moving to a computer console. “No one has beamed aboard since you returned me to the Cube.”

“Excuse me for interrupting,” said Jean-Luc, appearing at Hugh’s side.

“A Borg with manners?” Guinan said. “Now I’ve seen everything.”

“Hush!” Picard said.

“I have the results you asked for. The hair in question is from a *felis catus*, more specifically, a *felis domestica*.”

Picard pushed his fedora back on his head. “A cat? A house cat?”

“Yes, sir,” said his namesake. “*Felis domestica*, long a companion of humans throughout history, at times worshiped as gods. First domesticated in your year 7,500 B.C.E, *felis catus* are carnivorous animals belonging to the Mammalia class...”

“Stop!” Picard raised his hand. “You remind of Data!”

“How would a house cat be on a Borg Cube?” Guinan said.

“Data.” both Picard and Guinan answered at the same time. Hugh tipped his head to the side.

“Hugh,” Picard said. “I deduce that a further examination of your transport logs will show an unauthorized transport arriving since you returned to the Cube. A shipment that was made when the Cube was in range of the *Enterprise*, although not visible to our sensors.”

Hugh turned to the computer again. “You are correct,” he said. “When we were in the Alpha Quadrant near the Telarian sector, a



transport was received from the *Enterprise*. But there was no human life forms included.”

Picard began to pace. “But there was a life form, correct?”

“Yes,” Hugh replied.

“A cat. And I am guessing also a violin, a painting set, and perhaps a book of poetry?”

“Correct again.”

“Dix,” Guinan said, poking him in the shoulder.

“What?” Picard said. “I’m onto something here!”

“The other Jean-Luc is trying to tell us something.”

The drone was shifting from one foot to another, its sole biologic fist opening and closing.

Picard sighed. “Proceed.”

“The specimen in question is not, however, a pure *felis domestica*,” he said.

Picard raised an eyebrow. “Again, proceed.”

“There is evidence of nanobots and attempted assimilation.”

“It is what? A Borg cat?” Picard said. “How is that possible?”

“It should not be,” Hugh replied. “Assimilation has not been successful with non-humanoid species. It has been attempted, but never with positive results.”

“Indeed,” Picard said as he again began to pace. “Until now.”

“Dix, you’ll wear a hole in your shoe. Let’s think this through,” Guinan said, gesturing with her pencil. “Data identifies with Hugh, with the Borg in general and their limited focus of mind and lack of emotion. So, he decides on items he used himself in his quest to become more human. He wants to share these with the Borg to use in de-assimilating the crew. As Spot was crucial in Data’s own efforts and he sends one of her litters to the Cube.”

Guinan turned toward Hugh. “What happens when a transport is received? Would you be automatically informed?”

“No, not if the drones who discovered the transport could keep this information in their individual consciousness.”

“Hmmm.” Guinan’s stacked heels clack against the metal floor as she begins pacing. “A gift package is sent and received. The drones find something they have never seen before. A cat. What would they do next?”

“Presumably,” Picard said, “take it to the nearest lab for analysis.”

“And not report it,” Guinan said. “Disobeying procedure? What kind of Borg drone would venture that?”

“A young one,” Hugh said. “Or several.”

Both Picard and Guinan turn toward him. “Explain.”

“When you returned me to the Cube, the crew was not complete. There were several Borg who had been assimilated before they had reached adulthood in their species. Teenagers, I think you call them. They still required time in their maturation chambers before the process could be reversed.”

“There are three, and based on their status as adolescents, they are designated as Wesley I, Wesley II and Wesley III.”

“The Wesleys?” Picard could barely stop himself from gaping. “And there are three of them?”

“Yes.”

“Dear God,” said Guinan, “I don’t know whether to laugh or to cry!”

“And where could we find these Wesleys?” Picard said.

Hugh brought up a grid on the computer console. “Here.”

This time, anticipating the effect of the lift, Picard and Guinan braced themselves in opposite corners. Once the roller coaster ride was finished, they followed Hugh down a dim corridor, lit by a dusty orange glow.

“This is where we keep the drones who are only partially reversed,” he said. “With two hundred aboard, our progress has been necessarily limited.”

“There are lab stations on each deck,” Hugh said. “Where the reversal process occurs.” Hugh lifted the cover of a small panel and, with his human hand, entered a numeric code. Nothing happened.

He tried again, with the same result.

“We are being blocked,” he said, lifting his cybernetic arm. A six-inch protrusion whirled from his palm, sharp blades turning quickly. “Stand back,” he said as sparks flew from the small panel and the smell of burnt rubber filled the close confines of the corridor.

The door slid open, and they entered. Three drones stood around a metal table, tools in their hands. Hoses led down from the ceiling pipes, and in the center was an orange cat. Or what once was a cat, but now...

“What in blazes?” Picard said, stepping forward.

“I’ll be damned,” said Guinan.

The drones quickly dropped their tools and took one step back.

“Hugh,” they said in unison.

The creature on the table turned its head, an ocular implant over the left eye. Each leg ended in a metal paw, with five shiny claws protruding from each one. Two-thirds of the tail had also been replaced, the tip replaced by a cluster of retracted implements.

“We have improved this species,” the three said. “This species has resisted but it is not futile. We will assimilate.”

Picard and Guinan looked at one another, speechless.

Suddenly, Picard began to laugh. Not a chortle, not a chuckle, but a full-blown belly laugh that caused him to bend over, place his hands on his knees and his eyes fill with tears.

“A cat,” he said, gasping in between bouts of laughter. “A murderous cat!”

Guinan was not smiling. “And you find this funny why? These Borg show that they have not changed, that they still can’t be trusted not to assimilate anything and everything they come across.”

Picard took a deep breath and straightened. “I think Hugh can fix that, can’t you Hugh? Finish the reversal process on these three sooner rather than later?”

“Indeed,” said Hugh, and Picard thought he could hear an element of paternal disappointment in his voice. “You will explain your actions and then go immediately to your regeneration consoles where you will remain until further alterations can take place.”

The three drones nodded in unison.

“Explain!” Hugh said.

“We received transport from the *Enterprise*. This life form was included. It had not been assimilated. It did not respond to our demands. Its motor started making a strange low sound and began to vibrate. We took it to the lab for examination. And improvement.”

The Wesleys pointed to the table.

“As you can see, we added to its defense mechanisms, improving its sight and weaponry. We still have not been able to join its mind to our collective, and it continues to resist all efforts to control its behavior.”

“Just like a regular cat,” Guinan said, recalling Data’s efforts to make Spot respond to commands.

“And you let it loose on board the ship?” Picard asked.

The three Wesleys looked at each other, then down at the floor.

“No,” they said. “When we left to regenerate, it slipped between the door and our legs. The creature is surprisingly fast.”

“And how did you get it back?” Picard said.

“The transport included this,” they said, pointing to a clear jar on a shelf at the side of the room containing green leaves.

“We thought it was another form of its food, but it had the effect of first exciting it, which made the creature harder to catch, but then caused it to sleep.”

“Catnip,” Guinan said.

“You do realize that your actions have caused the death of two of the Cube’s crew?” Hugh said.

“We are Borg,” the drones said. “We are a collective of three. Resistance is futile.”

“To your chambers!” Hugh said, and the Wesleys left the lab in a straight line.

The cat hissed, drawing their attention back to the lab table.

“What will you do to it now?” Guinan asked. “Can you reverse the alterations?”

Hugh was silent.

“I’m sure Mr. Data believed he was doing the right thing,” Picard said. “Although I will have a discussion with him when we return to the *Enterprise*. But a cat, an unassimilated cat, that is, may be of great benefit to your species, as a pet.”

“That’s true,” Guinan said. “Data found Spot to be the first step in learning how to be a friend and a caretaker. You might consider it.”

Hugh nodded. “Your point is well taken. I will have the alterations removed, and entrust its care to the Wesleys, once they are deemed fit.”

“Well then,” Picard said, rubbing his palms together. “Done and dusted, I say.”

“You have my thanks, Captain. And you as well, Guinan. The *Enterprise* is in range and stands ready to beam you back aboard at your signal.”

He turned to Guinan. “Gloria, what do you say we return to the ship, er office, and mark this case closed?”

“Wait a minute, Dix. Not so fast. You haven’t told me why you were laughing so hard when we discovered it was a cat that had murdered the two Borg. What’s so funny about that?”

Picard gave her a wry grin.

“Have you never read Poe?” he said. “Energize.”