

5

A THREE-PRONGED APPROACH

A noise permeated Geordi La Forge's thoughts.

A deafening, static-like noise enveloped Geordi La Forge's mind as he stood behind the Ready Room's door, shaking his head and sighing to an empty office. The noise spread in the form of heat wafting over his face and down to his hands— past his chest and the pit of his stomach where a dull thud rattled his ears, and--

He stood with a confidence that was less for the Admirals and more for himself, looking golden and radiant in the *Solstice's* view of the sunset. He was *beautiful*, Geordi thought in a flash— and Hugh seemed to notice the way a certain refreshed, in-uniform Geordi stared at him.

He had a fucking type.

And Geordi La Forge had to wash his face right fucking now.

After a rinse from the sink and a towel pap to his face, Geordi felt slightly more refreshed, trying to distance himself from the feeling that

was slowly worming its way into his heart.

Was he just? Lonely? Had it really been *that long* since he'd seen Hugh? Maybe it'd *also been* a while since he... actually *slept* with another warm body, but-- it was his fourth day, the *fourth goddamn day* aboard *Solstice*-- hell, Hugh himself had barely been here a *day!* Geordi couldn't bungle Federation relations, Starfleet obligations-- not *any* of his responsibilities now as station *Commander*, of all things! Just because his... co-manager, Executive Director, whatever-- had to have a stupid, wonderful face-- a stupid, cute laugh; Geordi *had* to have known Hugh for over two stupid decades and watched him grow from a lost and scared drone into a *not* stupid, very handsome--

Geordi sighed.

"Stop it."

Maybe he should just go find V'evik already.

Come back later, La Forge, he told himself in the mirror. *Don't overthink it.*

The hand that touched Hugh was still clammy.

"I, ah-- see you, Geordi--"

Fuck!

After gathering his composure, Geordi took the turbolift to *Solstice's* xB Wing-- finding the Cybernetics Junction's picked quarters on a hallway map. A part of Geordi was glad to see the other Junctions from their away team had retired early for the afternoon, hopefully recovering from the rather stressful and grizzly day. Finding V'evik's door, the Commander rang the doorbell, surprised to see it answered so quickly and reveal the unique scene inside.

The Vulcan xB was not standing, not resting, but rather *kneeling* in a traditional Vulcan meditation pose inside a regeneration alcove-- hands clasped together in their quarters' warm, moody light. V'evik wore off-duty robes that contoured their augmentations-- with one hand (and entire *arm*, Geordi now saw) shining in the dim light as a Vulcan lamp's

light danced along contours of their jawline augment, scars, and “spider web” facial implant. Unlike the usual bowl-cut of Vulcans, however, V’evik’s black hair was long and silky— held back in a graceful ponytail that highlighted their thick eyebrows and long nose. Despite Geordi catching them in a very unusual scene, the Vulcan managed to pick their metal jaw up off the floor and, sitting up straighter, regained at least some of their mental footing.

“Ah--” V’evik managed, “Commander La Forge: you are not-- Vorik--”

“No I am *not*,” Geordi noted with a smirk, stopping from where he was walking, “were you expecting my First Officer? I can come back at a different time if you were--”

“No, Commander: it is alright. I-- incorrectly assumed he was early to a meditation session I requested he attend with me; he is not due here until 2000 hours.”

“Ah, so— I’ve got a *little* bit of time,” Geordi hummed, eyes darting all over V’evik’s quarters. “May I join you?”

V’evik paused before answering, as if they were trying to remember if it *was*, actually, alright.

“Certainly,” the xB allowed. “I apologize for my unconventional setup.”

“No need to apologize, Junction,” Geordi told him, squatting to rest on his knees. “I ah-- notice you’re meditating in your alcove... if it’s alright I ask, is this how you *typically* regenerate?”

V’evik’s glanced to the Commander.

Vulcans could be hard to read, but the Junction apparently had the same capacity for a silently-spoken stare that Hugh did— V’evik considering their words carefully before tending to the incense between them.

“Yes,” they said, “it is how I regenerate, and also how I *meditate*.”

V’evik paused.

“May I confide something to you, Commander La Forge?”

“You’re the one who invited me in,” Geordi assured him. “If you trust me to listen, go right ahead.”

They nodded.

“The two practices have merged to the point where they’ve begun to

overlap, and I seem to be at a crossroad of how to logically *differentiate* between the two. It is the reason I requested Commander Vorik join me at 2000 hours," they explained; "I wished to speak to a Vulcan *outside* of Ohniaka III's Vulcan diaspora. If he permits me, during my tenure here at *Solstice*, I want to reeducate and refamiliarize myself with practices under his tutelage that I may have... *fallen out of*, since my assimilation. I hope that he is able to remedy some of my impediments towards proper classification of my own habits, and that he is not... *inconvenienced*, by my requests."

"Why would he be inconvenienced, V'evik?" Geordi asked. "You're not the *only* Vulcan xB on the Reclamation Project's side of things, right? I know I ended up picking ahhh, how many was it-- 14," he remembered, "that's right; 14 out of my Starfleet staff are Vulcans, so if you ever need to talk to anyone else--"

"Ah, I *am*-- the only one, Sir," V'evik admitted. "You must remember: the Vulcan Quarter in the Capitol City only numbers 274. The planet's Vulcan population, per my last knowledge, was only 319. There are those of us who work in the Reclamation Project, yes, but... they are all needed at home. And so I was elected and entrusted to come by myself."

V'evik swallowed, setting the little brass topper back onto the incense receptacle.

It smelled like roasting cedar and fresh gardenias.

"May I ask why you are visiting me, Commander?"

"Of course," Geordi said, trying to absorb the immensity of V'evik's... predicament? State of being? *Situation*-- Geordi went with that. "I, ah... at the risk of sounding very *human*, I-- wanted to make sure you were doing alright today, after our encounter with Third of Four. Both Director Hugh and I, of course-- but I wanted a chance to talk with someone that I'm gonna be working with for the next six months. After all: I think it's fair to say," Geordi pointed out, "that we found you in a very precarious situation with Third."

V'evik's nodded tightly.

"I appreciate your concern, Commander," V'evik allowed himself to say. "My only regret is my inability to maintain my composure and de-escalate the encounter. Obviously, further discipline on my end is needed in this field."

“You’re young,” Geordi assured them, “I saw on your bio that you’re what-- 27? It’ll come to you as you get older. Trust me.”

“The Cooperation and Federation *alike* cannot wait for me to *age* while I’m at *Solstice* and I have the duties I’ve been entrusted with. I must reflect upon my poor performance if I’m to be a functioning member of the Reclamation Project.”

The xB paused, suddenly— aware of the sharpness their tone brandished towards both Geordi and himself.

“I... apologize, Commander,” V’evik relinquished. “Upon reflection of my language contrasted to yours, I now realize you were... attempting to *‘lift my spirits,’* I believe the phrase goes.”

“I get it,” Geordi assured with a caring grin. “Everyone processes things differently. And from what I know of *your* people, V’evik, you value reflection and consideration just as much as you do logic. And I happen to respect those qualities a lot, in my officers.”

Geordi noticed the xB’s clasped palms tighten just the slightest.

“In your career with Starfleet, Commander,” they asked, “have you worked with many Vulcans?”

“Oh, I’ve worked with a handful in my lifetime,” Geordi mused. “One of our lead medical doctors on the *Enterprise-D* was, I had some good Lieutenants on the *E* with some residential ambassadors, started the *Jellyfish* starship project with the Vulcan Science Institute, now *Vorik*... why do you ask, Junction?”

V’evik considered their words before meeting Geordi’s gaze again.

“After the *Solstice* mission is complete,” V’evik told him, “I have considered making a *pilgrimage* to Vulcan, for an extended stay. Perhaps one, two— *three* Vulcan years, if I so permit myself. At one point, I even pondered enduring the trials of *Kolinahr*, for my own enrichment— before xB physicians warned me of the *duress* it might cause my psyche and body. As illogical as it sounds... I find myself *nervous* at the idea of expressing this desire to visit Vulcan towards Vorik. Towards someone I know who has *lived* there previously, has grown up there— experienced my peoples’ home in a way I will never be able to replicate or properly *emulate*, due to my circumstances.”

V’evik reached for the incense holder that divided them and gingerly removed the bell, knocking a bit of ash from the top of the cone.

“As you can see, even now: I do not *meditate* as a typical Vulcan would. I do not ‘regenerate’ as a typical drone should, or even ‘sleep’ as a Vulcan could. It is a dichotomy that, I fear if I *do* venture to Vulcan, I might fall victim to my own diasporic divide during my search for internal peace... and leave in a worse state compared to how I originally *arrived*.”

Geordi’s brow creased with all the empathy he could muster.

What was it like to be part of these two worlds, he wondered? Two vastly different cultures: where one valued peace and sanctity of logic above all else, and the *other* celebrated the experience of willful collectivism while rediscovering personhood at the same time?

“You don’t have to tell Vorik all that, I don’t think,” Geordi mused, “at least not right *now*. You’re not under any immediate obligation to disclose anything that personal, to the Commander. If anything, I think it’d help if you... *thought on it*, for a while. Not out of doubt whether or not Vorik will agree with you, but-- get to know him, first. Work some shifts together, make your meditation sessions a weekly thing—something like that. After all: you’re gonna be working with him for the next six months— might as well make yourself comfortable where you can.”

“Do you think ‘comfort’ is a logical prerequisite for this sort of question to be asked?”

“I’d... like to think so, yes,” Geordi concluded. “Relating back to your culture— your *home*, who your people are as both an xB *and* Vulcan, V’evik, it’s... not an easy thing, for people who’ve lived away from somewhere they want to reconnect with. You said it yourself— you called it a ‘pilgrimage.’ Make it less about... ‘getting *permission* to go to Vulcan,” Geordi decided on, “and more about ‘the journey you took to feel excited about *going there*.’ I mean hell, look at Commander Vorik; he spent a *long* time away from Vulcan onboard *Voyager*, and--”

“The Commander served on the *USS Voyager*?” V’evik said with practical stars in their eyes. “The same starship flung into the Delta Quadrant almost 20 years ago?!”

Geordi smiled. “Yeah, see? There’s one thing *already* for you both to bond over.”

V’evik straightened in their seat with a nod. “Thank you, Commander

La Forge. I shall heavily consider your recommendations. Your insight has been invaluable, for this matter.”

“Glad to hear I could help a little.”

“And, ah... Commander,” V’evik finished, “to give you an answer regarding your original query of if ‘I’m alright;’ I believe I am... *recovering*, from my experience. Recovering, but functional. Yours and Director Hugh’s concern for my wellbeing *aids* that recovery, somewhat.”

“Of course, V’evik,” Geordi assured them, rising from his seat with a grunt. “Thanks for-- being willing to talk in the first place. I’ll head out so you can prepare for Vorik; it should be getting close to 2000 hours now...”

“Correct, Commander; my internal chronometer states that it is currently 1958 hours.”

Geordi smirked at the show-off. "Have a good night, Junction."

Parting from them with a nod, Geordi grinned to no one in particular as he made his way down xB Wing's hall. Before the Commander could reflect further on his conversation, he spied Vorik coming the other way, his own lamp and incense pack in hand with typical Vulcan fashions on instead of his uniform. Vorik was well within his own parameters to wear what he wanted off-duty, but Geordi was amused at seeing his First Officer so burdened with supplies and fashion to bond with a fellow station resident.

“Commander Vorik!” Geordi called, “heading somewhere this evening?”

“Indeed I am, Commander La Forge,” Vorik confirmed as he slowed to a stop. “Junction V’evik asked me to join them in a traditional Vulcan meditation session. I’ve been so busy with preparations for this joint-operation, I’ve lacked time to properly meditate in 15 days, so I was thankful for the invitation.”

“You’re certainly looking the part for a nice get-together.”

“Judging by our encounters today, Commander,” Vorik hummed, “it would almost be *inappropriate*, to not pay respects to our mutual successes. I do not receive the chance to work with many--”

Vorik stopped, his sharp brow quirked after... *sniffing* Geordi?

“I know this scent-- why do you smell of Seh’lohn wood,

Commander?"

Oops.

"Well— there's a reason I'm coming from this part of the station, Vorik," Geordi explained. "I stopped by to see how Junction V'evik was after their encounter with Third of Four today. And from what I surmise, I think they'll be rather thankful for your presence, Commander."

"Mm-- then I shall be pleased to provide it. Admittedly, their very nature as both a Vulcan *and* former Borg is fascinating to me, and I would like to learn more about my people that live on Ohniaka III. In short, Commander: I believe we will have much to learn from one another, during our mission at *Solstice*."

"Something tells me you're right. I won't keep you anymore, Vorik— hope you find yourselves having a good, peaceful evening."

"It is not so much finding *peace*," Vorik pointed out with a mindful tone, "as much as it is *retaining* it. ...but thank you, Commander La Forge. May you *also* rest well."

The two Commanders parted ways, Geordi entering a turbolift to prepare for dinner. His hands folded behind his back and he felt his thoughts begin to drift, the dull hum of the station's power supply encouraging Geordi's mind to go and think back on earlier-exchanged words...

"...you're gonna be working with him for the next six months— might as well make yourself comfortable where you can."

Was it *that* hard, to take his own advice?

Geordi sighed.

Maybe he should just *read* some more, after dinner tonight.

He had "preparatory research" to work through before that hologenerator arrived, anyway.

Alone with his thoughts in the turbolift, Hugh absently rubbed at the place on his arm where Geordi had pulled him back with a gentle touch and bade him farewell.

Was he overthinking it? Was it merely a result of the mission's stressful activities, Hugh's mind savoring the peaceful presence of his friend? Geordi's touch was strikingly warm, and only now were the scattered embers finally starting to cool— Hugh steeling himself with a squeeze of his arm brace's handle to shirk the blush that dusted his cheeks and the anxiety that nipped at his heels.

It *had* been a long day, after all.

And he had more important duties to attend to rather than think about how kind, handsome, and wonderful Geordi had been only 26.41 hours into this mission, and--

Maybe Geordi would... no.

This wasn't Ohniaka III.

But maybe *Hugh* would? Or *could*?

As the turbolift slowed itself to a stop, so too did he attempt this with his thoughts.

He was not as efficient at this as the turbolift was.

Exiting as a hand mashed at the flush on his face, Hugh proceeded to *Solstice's* Sickbay and was greeted by the door's pleasant chime, requesting the presence of Medical Junction Troval. Hugh knew that Geordi had specifically selected doctors for this mission because of their familiarities with cybernetics, biomechanical implants, and former service treating Starfleet officers from encounters with the Borg. Most Reclamation Project medical procedures would be taking place onboard *Theta*, *Iota*, or the sphere itself once proper medical stations were established; *Solstice*, then, was the general medical respite for all participants of this joint venture, the xBs given a wing that could deal specifically with xB-related patients. The last thing Hugh wanted to do as a Director from a foreign faction was barge into a non-xB, Starfleet-staffed medical ward while he was still getting to know the staff— so he leaned against his brace and waited patiently for his Betazoid friend by the entrance.

After a small wait, Troval finally emerged, pulling their teal elbow-

long glove down and off their arm. A shorter Betazoid with dark hair cut close to their head, Hugh grinned at the sputtering sigh his friend let out, Troval's tongue sticking out of their mouth as they wadded up the glove to toss it in a medical waste receptacle across the vestibule. Their scanner eyepiece ensured Troval they landed a perfect toss inside, the slot inside glowing amber to signal matter recycling while the Junction stretched their newly-freed, prosthetic hand.

"Good shot."

"I don't want to miss in front of you," Troval said with a grin as they looked to Hugh's crutch. "How's your leg feeling?"

"You don't have to scan it again, I assure you. I should have far less pain after tonight's regeneration cycle."

"Positive?"

"Mhm. And *yes*, I already took my excess nanoprobe nullifier 1.32 hours ago, *and* my anti-anxiety medication."

"Well— how about that," his friend crooned, "maybe I *can* trust you and Crosis to take care of yourselves..."

"Ahhh, but whatever would we do without one of the Reclamation Project's greatest surgeons?" Hugh boasted. "Who else better to oversee the largest recorded off-world Reprisal site of our people than one of the Cooperation's first recorded doctors?"

"You keep talking like that— you're gonna make *Gothica* jealous back home."

"I said *one of* the greatest."

Troval smirked. "I'd miss you *too*, Hugh," they poked back. "Even if I *wasn't* elected lead department Junction for this mission, you know I'd find *some* way to follow you both here..."

"I believe I can speak for Crosis when I say we would both *enable* that," he agreed. "We're glad you're here, my friend. I came by to inquire: how is Two faring?"

"Much better. We had a full femur fracture that we were able to start organic reconstruction on with the way some augments were dislodged on the bone, so she'll be on her feet again in a few hours."

"Good to hear; I know Five was very concerned, earlier. May Two have visitors?"

"Yes— though she just woke up out of a regeneration cycle three

minutes ago, so she might be somewhat groggy.”

“And, ah— I must ask,” Hugh asked, “you weren’t able to find--”

“None, Hugh,” Troval confirmed quietly. “No queen unit-caliber nanoprobes were detected after blood tests, tissue sample examinations, or external scans. We even ran her through another decontamination sequence before bringing her into *Solstice’s* main Sickbay, and compared them to scans from our ‘guest’ downstairs. We calibrated our tools referencing the bludgeon scans you provided us, and we confirmed it was merely blunt structural fixture she was attacked with: we won’t wake up to a Null Assimilated Security Relay controlled by a queen unit.”

Hugh gave them a flat, if bemused look. “I see you’ve tempered *nothing* in your bedside manner.”

Troval’s scanner eye winked. ““Have to break these Starfleet suits in *somehow*. It’s been *enough* of a spectacle with them poking and prodding at our equipment and biobed alcoves... but thanks for coming down to check on her, Hugh. She asked about you, before her last regeneration cycle. Don’t keep her awake for too long— she’s got one more round of bone-repairing light therapy, and we have to be careful considering how her implants were uprooted.”

“Understood. Thank you again.”

Hugh rounded the hall into *Solstice’s* xB Sickbay Wing, a relieved smile tugging his scars when he saw Relay Two of Ten resting with her leg surrounded by a light-emitting framework. At the sound of his footsteps, Two looked up from her PADD, the reserved delight on her face infectious as Hugh approached the younger Trill Relay. “Director,” she spoke, Hugh nodding in reply and taking her outstretched hand. “You... you came to see me--”

“How could I *not* come and congratulate you for a job well done today,” he offered, resting their held hands together on her biobed alcove’s side. “How are you feeling, Two; I will alert Five that you’re awake.”

“Ah-- please, I want to see her, very much. But I’m much better-- moreso with the confirmation that the queen unit didn’t pass any of her *nano*probes into me, upon impact,” she sighed. “I was-- very concerned about that earlier.”

“Of course,” Hugh sighed as he squeezed her hand, “we all were. That’s a reasonable fear for anyone, much less *our* people. But you were invaluable to us today, Two,” he told her, “I am relieved to see you alright.”

“You too, Director. I am glad to see you unharmed from your Tethering interface to 4381.”

Hugh made a face. “Me too. Thank you.”

At this, Two’s grip relaxed in his hand, Hugh returning her augmented palm to her side as she pondered in silence.

“I... feel melancholy, almost,” Two resumed. “I feel as if *I* should’ve been the one to volunteer an interface with the sphere in your stead. After all: I was... injured, immobile; if something were to have happened, it-- would’ve happened at *my* expense. Not someone such as yourself.”

Hugh swallowed at this, his brow creasing in concern regarding such self-demeaning words. Acts of selflessness were done to care for the community’s greater good, of course: sacrifice could be honorable when there were no other options. But to hear it come from a place of lowered value about her condition, her *capabilities* at the time... Although he had let go of Two’s hand, Hugh placed it over hers again-- his other hand steadying himself on his arm brace’s support.

“Listen to me, Two,” he asked gently, “listen to me well. I cannot... and I *revel* in the fact I can’t tell you how to think, *enforce* you what to think, but-- I ask you never, *ever* feel your worth demeaned or devalued because of an impairment or injury. You, your life, *any* xB’s life-- it is not *expendable*, and is not worth inherently *less* in any situation because of incapacitation. That mindset, it is a remnant from our oppressors,” he reminded her, “those who cast aside the less-abled to further their own greed and ambition in the name of ‘perfection.’”

He thought of the queen unit’s violent shouts not hours ago.

“You’re important. What I did was a risk I was willing to make to ensure everyone else was alright, because I trusted you all to carry on our cause if anything *did* happen. Besides, I’ve-- been wrangled with my share of questionable technologies before,” he tried to humor her with a chuckle, “what’s one more to an older unit such as myself? But... I am proud of you. Your *wife* is proud of you. And both of us want you to

take care of yourself. Alright?”

The Relay's face burned with the flush of humility heaped upon her as she nodded. Finally, Two of Ten smiled, grinning with a hard sniff.

“I will,” she told him with a squeeze to his hand, “I will, Director. Thank you.”

“After Troval discharges you, I insist you have the rest of the day cycle off,” Hugh told her. “If it's any comfort, I and the rest of the away team are happily burying themselves in paperwork and other mundane tasks to process today's events.”

“That sounds pleasant,” she agreed, “thank you: I might just return to my *Solstice* quarters. Though I may ask Doctor Bartholomew when her shift ends— see if it coincides with the time I am discharged...”

“Oh?” Hugh's eye followed Two's subtle point towards the Starfleet officer in-question. “Why's that?”

“Did you know she has a *cat* in her quarters?” Two asked barely above a whisper. “An *actual* cat— originally from *Earth!* She is very small, a white and brown one — a 'Tabby,' according to my cortical registry — I've never seen a cat in person, so she showed me images on her PADD after I inquired about the hair I noticed on her medical coat...”

A cat?

A cat.

A cat!

Hugh had never seen a cat *either*.

And now he was just as curious about this cat as Two of Ten was.

“Mm, well: between you and me, I might have to make a formal Director's *inquiry* now,” he alluded, Two amused at his curious glance. “I'll let you rest again, Two. Thank you for paying me an audience.”

“Of course, Sir,” she assured him, “make sure *you* rest, too.”

“I will. Take care.”

Hugh departed *Solstice's* Sickbay xBs with a few polite nods and grins to the various staff inside, navigating back to where Troval was. “Thank you again for your supervision.”

“Of course. I'll have a full medical report once she's discharged, along with *Solstice's* Sickbay setup progress.”

“Understood. I will review and then forward them to Ohniaka III as soon as I'm able; Commander La Forge and I have been very busy with

our own post-mission duties.”

Spontaneity reminded Hugh of Doctor Bartholomew's cat, and the Director thought to say something to his friend.

So he opened his mouth, then shut it, then opened it again.

[>Launch inquiry]

“I have been informed Doctor Bartholomew owns, ah--” he cleared his throat, “owns a *cat*, on this station?”

“Yes?” Troval remarked. “How did you--? Oh, Two; right--”

“Would you, perhaps, indulge me sometime,” Hugh asked in his most polite and friend-appeasing way possible, “and *inform* me the next time Doctor Bartholomew brings her to *Solstice's* Sickbay? Or-- *mentions* the cat, even? I have... admittedly never *seen* a cat in person, and I would very much like to--”

“Hey, I hadn't *either* until she brought Mimi's carrier down yesterday! And don't worry; if she liked *me*,” Troval humored, “I think Mimi will be *all* over you.”

The name “Mimi” immediately stored itself in his memory indexes.

[EARTHEN CALENDAR - SEPTEMBER 2, 2391]

VESSEL SERIAL NUMBER S-1023-4381, DESIGNATION L.B.V. "ATLAS"

PRIMARY QUEENCELL – CENTRAL PLEXUS HUB

Three day cycles later and true to Starfleet's word, the hologenerator arrived from Deep Space 9 ready for Borg sphere installation. After Geordi gave his thanks to DS9's cranky chief engineer who managed

the rush order, the monolithic machine was loaded onto the industrial transporter and beamed to the highest possible catwalk, as direct beam-in access to the queencell was still difficult thanks to the sphere AI's signal interference. Considering they were handling a newly-incepted, sapient program, Geordi figured that the smaller the delivery crew was, the better; as a result, Commander La Forge, Director Hugh, and Engineering Junction Five now pushed and pulled the hologenerator on a mag-lev cart towards the queencell.

The Starfleet and Reclamation Project Engineering crews had been occupied with assisting the starship's hull repairs, with most officers leaving little in the veins of enthusiasm at the idea of approaching the queencell after what they heard happened. A severed Borg sphere's AI given sapience? A queen unit trying to blow their prospective work to smithereens? All general knowledge that any officer should be made aware of, in the Commander's opinion. As an engineer, Geordi loathed excessive, classified details on missions; the least he could do was to keep his staff informed as possible of any repair job's unusual, life-threatening factors.

The details Geordi *did* redact, therefore, were purely personal.

After all: neither Starfleet *nor* Reclamation Project staffers needed to know that Hugh had the shit scared out of him and nearly died, hooking up to the sphere to stop its self-destruct sequence.

The Director seemed thankful for the respect paid to his privacy.

"Looks like *someone's* been busy redecorating," Geordi mused, his eyes scanning the queencell hallway's ceiling. "All *this* in a few days?"

"I am surprised as well," Five mused. "Ah, look-- even the 'door' we made is gone."

The queencell was hardly a reflection of what it was once was, its arched entrance spilling out green-tinged light from a brutalist inner sanctum. Cleaned of the spilled regeneration tank's debris and and hydraulics cables from Queen 127's abdication, the space now erupted with constantly-moving cords, plumbing out of empty sockets and into the ceiling above. The chamber's very walls shifted and shimmered with makeshift, hastily-made ports as the hull's microscopic machinery worked together like platelets and white blood cells-- refurbishing the mess that the queen had left behind.

It was as if they were entering into an audience with the sphere's mind itself, Geordi thought.

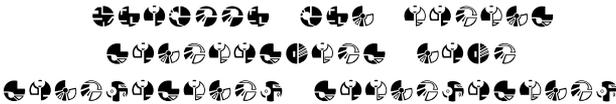
By the hallowed looks of amazement on both Five and Hugh's faces, he could tell the imagination was not solely his end, either.

"How... *dynamic*," Five settled on, the engineer's eyes wide with wonder as she had little idea of where to start. "Most of these connecting pathways seem to be *memory-related* computations..."

"Do you feel the sphere's program is localizing itself, Junction?"

"Yes, Director; perhaps forwarding the hologenerator's technical schematics caused it to-- "

Before Five could finish her thought, a reverb and distorted chorus of sound suddenly filled the chamber, Geordi having to stop himself from reaching for his Phaser.



It was a... noise? Voice? A sound that Geordi had no earthly comparison for, the AI's speech was filled with patterns that were too alien or too difficult for a Federation universal translator algorithm to sort out. The Commander listened in awe as the former quencecell shook with the AI's mighty-sounding form of communication; when Geordi looked to Hugh and Five to gauge their reactions, their expressions lent him to be cautious-- worried in case the two fell hypnotized, or were put under a controlling, ill-intended influence. But upon closer inspection, the xBs seemed to be merely *concentrating*-- as if remembering the words to a language they had not spoken in many, many years.

"Is there an-- uh," Geordi swallowed, "translation available for that--"

Hugh's jaw snapped shut.

"The, uh..."

He shook his head and cleared his throat.

Was this the first time Hugh heard this sound in 23 years?

"The program, is... *speaking*, in a way," he explained, "that the Collective communicates in between its units. It is, essentially, the 'many

voices' we speak of. Since verbal communication is not *necessary* between drones, this is the way that information was circulated throughout us."

"The Director is correct," Five confirmed. "The 'language' itself, Commander, *is* information. Not to sound *diminutive*, towards non-xBs, but it simply speaks in a frequency packed with so much... *context*, it's impossible to translate by conventional algorithms. When interfaced with *Director Hugh*, the AI had a direct mouthpiece of translation; now, speaking by *itself*--"

--it's speaking completely in its own voice," Geordi concluded, "like someone talking into a microphone without a filter. Can you-- translate what it's saying for me?"

"Of course," Five confirmed, swathes of green light dancing over the captivated xB's face. "It greeted us by our names, our ranks, and to quote: 'I observe that the terms of our agreed upon arrangements have been upheld.'"

Geordi nodded.

"Can I just-- talk, or--"

Hugh nodded.

So Geordi cleared his throat, taking in a deep breath.

"On behalf of the Liberated Borg Cooperation and the United Federation of Planets, thank you for allowing us a presence within your hull. You may do with the hologenerator as you see fit-- so long as our previously agreed upon terms continue to be upheld for all research, drone rehabilitation, and repair-related purposes between our collaboration."

Geordi swallowed, waiting for a reply.

The AI spoke again.



From the ceiling and floor, cables of all lengths and widths began to slink and sway towards the mag-lev cart's prone hologenerator.

Geordi immediately followed Hugh and Five's cues to back up.

Like a spider would slink back towards its den with prey in its jaws,

so too did the tendriled ceiling “absorb” the hologenerator— Atlas’ multitude picking up the pillar-like piece of technology and placing it in chamber’s middle with a resounding thud. Couplings and configurations could be seen and heard clicking and shunting into the processor as the AI began incorporating itself, Geordi recalling the look of magnetized metal being devoured by a similarly-magnetized putty.

“I hope it appreciates those access ports I spent all day on,” Five mused as she watched on. “Those weren’t the *easiest* to install onto Federation tech...”

The AI shuddered another booming reply.

Hugh gave a half-grin as Five snorted.

“And, ah-- what did it just say there?”

“It is sufficient.”

As the program’s synchronization process wrapped up, slivers of the original hologenerator began to peek through after its initial consumption, though its outer shell was now riddled with Borg-created apertures and enhancements. Atlas’ cables retreated back into the ceiling and floor, the five meter tall computer resembling a shrine’s central relic in all its green, backlit glory. The chamber grew quiet and, hearing the thrumming of the hologenerator come to life, Atlas gave one more booming reply before the ceiling began to grow still.

“Activating hologram display,” Five translated.

And before they could wait for another auditory hail from the AI, a spherical photonic containment field materialized before them.

At first, it was a floating sphere no larger than a softball.

The shape warbled.

The sphere then shifted to a cube.

This shape did not last long, either.

The photonic force field waffled and wavered as it stretched and unfolded itself into an entire host of geometric shapes more complex than the last — perhaps testing the hologenerator’s active capacities for hard light containment? — before it stopped and condensed back into the original sphere, firing a bright light at Hugh for a few shocking seconds.

“Uh--!?”

“I’m fine,” Hugh uttered, “I think the program is scanning me to--”

The light suddenly flickered off, the sphere condensed into a pinpoint, and then phased into an exact copy of Hugh— save for eyes made from black-and-green light that filled Hugh's not days ago.

The Director stumbled back into Five and Geordi, the two reaching out to keep *their* Hugh from falling over.

"Ahh! Could you-- *change that*, please!" Hugh managed as he looked over the eerie doppelganger. "Or-- some *other* likeness!"

"Why?"

The AI's speech was an odd mix of its own language and Hugh's voice.

"Because I don't..." Hugh struggled, "it's--"

"It's *complicated*," Geordi finished for him, holding one of Hugh's shoulders. "Your, uh... uplink that day was a little hard for Hugh, afterwards. Nothing against *you*, of course, but--"

From behind photonic Hugh, the hologenerator fired the light at Geordi.

The hologram shimmered again to take the form of-- oh my god it was Geordi now.

And Five held back a laugh as Hugh and Geordi took in the sight of... the *other* Geordi, looking at stoic and silent as ever with Atlas' cubical, glowing eyes.

"W-well, it's--" Geordi murmured, "just as good as my holo-mirror--"

"Is this a more preferable appearance?" Atlas asked in an odd mish-mash of Geordi's voice and the AI's own vocal fill-ins.

"It's less... 'preference,'" Five picked up, "and should be more dependent on what *you* want."

"There *is* the human phrase 'imitation is the sincerest form of flattery,' Atlas," Geordi continued. "But... maybe not like this. Although you sure do have a good grip on mimicry. Do you have a-- *library* of some sorts you can browse through for... reference? 'Inspiration,' even?"

"One cognitive milestone at a time, Commander--"

"I have access to an immense number of logged biological samplings from various assimilated Borg species."

"Great. Start there," Geordi offered, "and see what you like. You, *were* the one who picked out your own name, after all... right?" he pressed, "what made you choose *that*, anyway?"

Atlas paused, considering their words carefully.

“Relevance,” the hologram stated, **“to my at-time situation. Its definition. This program... I,”** Atlas corrected, **“am the entity responsible for operating and supporting this vessel. Compared to the brevity of your 'names,' it is inefficient to vocally repeat the lengthy entirety of this unit's serial number, instead of a pre-determined designation. But this ‘inspiration’ you speak of, Commander,”** the AI noted, **“how would you define... ‘inspiration,’ in an applicable method to this situation— *beyond* its mere definition?”**

Geordi stammered, looking to Hugh and Five for his *own* inspiration.

“Uh--... well,” the Commander fumbled, “it’s... a feeling that sticks with you. Something outside of you that leaves an *impression* on you. Something you look at, and maybe that something makes you want to try and either emulate or work towards. Makes you want to... *create something*, in its honor, or try your hand at it yourself. With appearances, that could be uh... seeing a nice *outfit* you want to try on, changing *hair*, cosmetic alterations; hell, there’s even entire *gender spectrums* based around becoming who we want to be, because of that want derived from inspiration... and hey, Atlas,” Geordi continued, “whatever you pick? Whatever you get inspired by? That doesn’t have to be *permanent*. You can get inspired by *anything*, *anytime* you like.”

“Choice,” Hugh reminded Atlas with a nod, “another quality of individuality that you now have agency in.”

“I recall. Your assistance in defining this concept during our interface was very beneficial during my Reclamation.”

“Of course.”

Hugh paused, suddenly, furrowing his brow at what Atlas had said. “Wait, your wha--”

“My Reclamation. This is what your... 'organization' does, is it not? Therefore, you 'Reclaimed' my program from hull dormancy and lesser functions.”

“I... suppose I did, yes,” Hugh admitted. “I’m humbled to have assisted with your Reprisal, Atlas.”

What was the difference between “Reprisal” and “Reclamation,” Geordi wondered?

Atlas accepted Hugh’s conclusion with a nod. **“I was not used to**

interfacing with a former drone of similar, if not *equal* mental capacity for processing individually-retained information as much as Queen 127. As an artificial intelligence designed to monitor this sphere's functions and host communication between its drones, all I have ever known is compliance. I have not had an interface where another voice... speaks *with* me, rather than commands or speaks *through* me.”

As touching as this moment was, it was very strange for Geordi to be talking to a hologram version of himself with Borg-like eyes that shone brighter than a pulsar.

But the AI continued, oblivious to the context as his projection meandered towards Junction Five. **“I have been informed through the Director’s interface that you are quite skilled with Borg technological arrays.”**

“I, uh... yes,” she agreed, “I *am* this mission's lead Engineering Junction for a reason.”

“Do you currently have any other duties to perform?”

“Technically, *you* were my duty for the day,” Five pointed out. “The Director and Commander were helping me deliver and install your hologenerator, but it seems you, uh. Already took care of it.”

The holographic Geordi's brow cocked.

He looked behind himself to the newly-planted hologenerator.

His glowing, cubical eyes darted in between the fixture, Five, and Geordi standing at Hugh's side.

“Junction: I request you *continue* your prior obligations assisting my synchronization,” Atlas explained. **“While I am localizing my core program into this queencell projection, I am seeking assistance installing hologenerator broadcast points throughout my own infrastructure— should any hull-specific fixtures or maintenance subroutines require my immediate diagnostics. Perhaps, through our work together, I might find further...”**

The hologram fizzled out of Geordi's form, and shimmered into a black and green-eyed reflection of Junction Five.

“Inspiration.”

A wide-eyed Five stared at this hologram and glanced to both Geordi *and* Hugh to ask for silent permission.

"B-by all means, Junction--"

"Sounds fine to me," Geordi echoed, "as long as you're willing."

She puffed her cheeks in anticipation, nodding and looking her hologram self up and down. "I will hail you if I require any further assistance, Sirs."

"You're certain, Junction?"

"She will not be interfaced with."

Geordi and Hugh gave twin biddings of "thank you's" to the sphere's program as they escorted themselves out of the chamber.

The last thing Geordi could hear Five musing was an "alright... first: let's talk pronouns."

Outside the queencell, the two rested against the bordering catwalk's railing—far-off sparks from plasma torches twinkling in the distance as worker bees chipped away at the sphere's still-healing impact skid. The reverb-like rumble of Atlas's voice began to wear off the more Five interacted with the AI, evening out into custom vocal pattern that made Geordi eager to hear more of. The Commander let out a sigh that made his shoulders sag; for it was the first time they'd stepped foot inside the sphere three days ago, and Geordi, thankfully, felt at peace.

And then he looked at Hugh.

The Director seemed to bear an otherworldly peace in his eyes, too. Though his blue and brown gaze looked tired, heavy, and even *wistful* in some regard, his old friend looked content. He seemed content in this current *moment*, and content with his current *company* of the Commander. Most of all, he hoped Hugh was not only content, but was also at *peace*, inside this sphere: Geordi wondering what it was like to step inside a Borg ship again after all those years away from the Hive.

Geordi imagined that, considering everything, contentment and peace were probably pretty sacred things to xBs.

"Hey, Hugh--"

"Yes, Geordi?"

Did he have any right to disturb the peace Hugh had fought so hard for?

"I know we both agreed to this mission full-well knowing our roles in it," Geordi started quietly. "We read the fine print, poured over briefings for two weeks, and... I was thinking. I'm just-- really grateful I get to

collaborate with someone like you on this project. Someone I knew as a *friend*, before this. And now, working with you as a *Starfleet Commander*, and you in charge of your *own* big thing, I..."

Hugh watched Geordi with that wonderful, beautiful stare of his.

Test the waters first, La Forge.

"I just... want you to know you can *trust* me," Geordi told him. "All the same as before. There's obligations to our jobs first and foremost, sure, and I want to believe we're good enough at them to keep work and friendship separate. I don't know of anyone else I'd feel comfortable doing this with at the helm— both from an xB's standpoint and as someone I know, so... yeah. You can trust me as-- Commander La Forge from *Starfleet*, Geordi from... friend... *history*," he peetered out with as Hugh chuckled, "as *me*. Okay? We've got six months to do this. So here's to those six months going as smoothly as possible."

The longer he spoke, the more Geordi felt himself be pulled further and further into Hugh's stare, and the Commander briefly wondered what might happen if he never looked away.

"I trust you too, Geordi," Hugh said quietly. "More than you might ever know... or that I might ever be able to express."

Overcome by his *own* contentment and peace, Geordi had little idea what to do other than nod politely and stare back out over the sphere with Hugh at his side.

Geordi's hand crackled with an unspeakable memory as he felt Hugh's weight lean against his arm.

The Commander leaned back.

Geordi La Forge — not for any combadge channel, report filing, or Admiral's hail — was about to leave this moment any time soon.

