

1

DEBRIEFINGS

“Director’s Log: Stardate 68699.76.”

A UX’s chime from Hugh’s desk confirmed his PADD was recording.

“Following up on the classified Starfleet subspace transmission on Stardate 68693.49 to request an in-person meeting, Admiral Kathryn Janeway’s runabout is scheduled to arrive on Ohniaka III at 1000 hours. Details on subject matter prior to the confirmation of this meeting were, surprisingly, scant; especially considering Starfleet’s typical reliability for an *overabundance* of bureaucratic details. The fact that Admiral *Kathryn Janeway*, of all people, requested to meet us *in person*... well. It was enough for both myself *and* the Reclamation Project’s administrative offices to be called more than ‘*curious*,’ and to accept Starfleet’s invitation. By the subject’s tease of a ‘large, beneficiary opportunity for the Reclamation Project’s mission and reputation,’ I postulate it is either extended commendations for our recent completion and integration of the Sontobus II xB Reclamations... or something far, far more interesting than a simple ‘congratulations.’”

The Director paused— pursing his lips in humored, musing thought.

“Regardless of my own pride towards the Project and its accomplishments, I await to see what the Admiral brings with her to Ohniaka III. To think that we will have the Delta Quadrant’s ‘Usurper’ here, after all: in person, among many who might look... ‘kindly,’ upon her arrival? I could call it ‘anticipatory.’ Or even intriguing-- no, no- I know what to call it.”

Hugh smiled.

“‘Extraordinary.’ ...End Director’s Log.”

A quiet ping signaled the completed and archived Director’s log, Hugh’s hand fiddling with the Reclamation Project badge resting on his chest. Its metal, burnished gold and silver formed in the shape of a single cube rising above a larger Borg fortress, shone brilliantly against Hugh’s black turtleneck and identification harness. Nerves for the forthcoming meeting manifested in him suddenly tending to a stray piece of swooping, dark hair, the Director checking his reflection over and over to make sure everything was right. Everything on him *seemed* right, at least: his ocular implant remnants were still shiny as ever, his visual UI was functioning at optimal levels, his hair was coiffed and his skin was freshly primed after a long night’s regeneration...

He was Hugh.

And he was feeling quite handsome before a very important, very intimidating meeting with Starfleet’s Admiral Kathryn Janeway.

No pressure.

Looking back to his office’s window of a wall, the skies of Ohniaka III were rather clear today, welcoming Janeway’s arrival despite the horizon’s typically wild nature. While its colors could be an odd gradient of muted green, weathered rust, and strange streaks of yellow, the palette was a highlight against Ohniaka III’s pinkish, fluffy clouds, the Capitol City’s striking architecture a beautiful silhouette against the early-morning light. Against shadows of brutalist highrises and the view from Hugh’s Reclamation Project’s Headquarters office, wisps of broken clouds trailed off after recently or long-departed spacecraft, the Director squinting at a newly-forming streak in particular.

The size of a Starfleet runabout, it looked like.

His badge chirped a communications request.

“Hugh here.”

“Director,” came a voice, “Admiral Janeway will be landing in approximately two minutes, 27 seconds onboard the USS *Ithaca*. She is reported as accompanied by two Starfleet Security Lieutenants.”

Security officers, Hugh thought?

Hopefully they would be staying *inside* the runabout.

“Yes— I believe I see it coming now,” Hugh confirmed. “Thank you. I will proceed to the docking bay now to greet her before touchdown.”

The call ended Hugh gave himself one last lookover.

He swallowed.

No pressure.

As Hugh made it outside, the *Danube*-class runabout began its descent into Headquarters' primary docking bay, the Director standing at attention to try and gather up his nerves. The edge of his sight noticed almost every xB stop and observe the *Ithaca* drop ever slower towards the ground, the gust from its impulse engines rustling nearby foliage and Hugh's perfectly coiffed hair, much to his dismay. He'd successfully swept that one piece back exactly four times now— would it be rude to unfold his hands and fix it? Especially considering who was about to *emerge* from that runabout? He bristled in his boots as the *Ithaca* touched down, the shuttle's neon blue engines cooling and simmering into a winding-down standby. Hugh's processors dismissed the data that he'd subconsciously collected on the starship: recent repair noticings, observing its shielding capacity from the tiny particle remnants the *Ithaca* left in the atmosphere around them--

Suddenly, the runabout's doors slid open, and there stood Admiral Kathryn Janeway.

It had been noted that a common trait among former Borg was their enrapturing, captivating stares. Non-xBs had described to Hugh's people that their gazes were piercing, even “anchoring;” that the stare of an xB could lock someone in the current moment in a way that other sapient life who'd never known the Collective could not. Xenanthropologists who'd interned on Ohniaka III postulated that this could be due to an xB's severance from the Collective; as a separate, autonomous being, the mere sensation of conversing with another entity was a celebration of

individuality itself. Once Hugh was made aware of the trait, he became quite fond of the gesture's concept, amused at different types of looks he would receive from offworlders compared to other xBs. He must have been doing it now, to Admiral Janeway; for she — a fellow xB, an Admiral, and a Usurper — looked right back at him in that familiarly-pointed way, and even a smirk to accentuate.

As Janeway emerged from the *Ithaca*, her gleaming Starfleet badge and Admiral's pips caught the Ohniakan sun, rivaled by her silver hair shining against a crimson command uniform. Two security Lieutenants — a Vulcan and Betazoid — flanked her and stood at the runabout's entrance as she made her way towards Hugh, the Director thankful to see they *remained* with the runabout. Janeway was just as striking as he'd remembered her— she held her head high, bore intent in her gaze, and carried an air of worn, world-weary wisdom (or perhaps the weight of an unspoken truth or announcement).

"Admiral Janeway," Hugh greeted, "welcome to Ohniaka III. While I cannot speak directly for my fellow xBs," he humored, "it is the Cooperation's — and Reclamation Project's — honor to host you."

"The honor is all mine, Director Hugh," she assured him, offering her hand that Hugh met for a shake. "I had been meaning to make an ambassadorial trip out here for a while, admittedly, but present circumstances have granted me that opportunity quicker than I expected. Thank you for hosting me."

As Hugh's hand released Janeway's and he began to guide her inside, his eyes darted back to the two Security officers at the runabout's entrance, noticing their firm grips on the Type 3 Phaser Rifles.

"They won't be escorting us, Mr. Hugh," Janeway assured. "I apologize for their rigidity; Starfleet wouldn't send me with anything or *anyone* less."

"Is that typical protocol for diplomacy-venturing Admirals?"

"Clancy wanted me with *five*. I told her any more, and we'd have to 'set up a picnic with a basket full of precautionary apologia."

The Director chuckled at this, though relief swept through him at hearing the shuttle's doors shut with the lieutenants inside. "I must say I'm rather... impressed? Surprised? No no: 'curious,' that's a better word," Hugh settled on, "that you chose to have this conversation in

person. I am glad to see you face-to-face again, Admiral.”

“I’ll be the first to admit that Starfleet officers occasionally need reminding about the importance of in-person meetings,” Janeway agreed, “much less the *respect* it helps generate between differing parties. You call someone over subspace? Cordial; necessary, if distance is a circumstance. But from my experience, if you’re able to do it in a timely manner, it shows you’re not quite willing to meet face-to-face. Holograms? Bit of a step up, of course. But as far as I’m concerned, xBs deserve quite a bit more *respect* than what some of the galaxy’s current mindsets have to offer,” she alluded, “and I am *more* than happy to make the venture out here.”

Hugh was both flattered and surprised at her frankness, the doors sliding open as he led the Admiral further to his office. “In turn, I will be more than happy to thank Starfleet for helping provide us the planetary defense systems that help... *defend us*, from those 'less-than-favorable' mindsets.”

“Installing the orbital shielding routers didn’t give you too much trouble, did they?”

“It took some figuring out how to incorporate our own resources with what Starfleet delivered,” Hugh told her, “but we finally developed something unique to help keep out unkind visitors.”

“You haven’t had any visitors like that *recently*, have you?”

Hugh’s lips thinned. “Not beyond what we’ve reported.”

“Mm. At least none have made it *planet-side* since installation, then.”

“At least.”

As the two proceeded through the Reclamation Project’s headquarters, the edge of Hugh’s sight caught a few staffers stopping to watch Admiral Janeway. “Watch,” perhaps, may have been the wrong word; many slowed their paces— some to a halt, as they beheld the woman who so cordially spoke with the Director in their home and workplace of solace. The Usurper, as some xBs called Janeway (and some further “The Liberator”), might’ve been able to *feel* those stares— Hugh noticing the tiny changes in Janeway’s posture and tightening of her expression. The Admiral carried a heavy mantle of her legacy with the Borg; no one could deny that *Voyager’s* crew had altered their history forever with their actions in the Delta Quadrant, and Hugh wondered to himself if this

journey to Ohniaka III was more difficult than she let on.

"I meant to tell you," Janeway commented while passing under a wall installation of the Reclamation Project's cubical emblem, "or whoever created it... I admire the sigil of your foundation, Mr. Hugh. It's quite striking."

The compliment pulled Hugh out of his train of thought. "Thank you, Admiral," he said warmly. "We presented it at the Ohniakan Accords signings of 2379, true, but it was actually finalized in 2376."

"Two years before you made yourselves *known* again, to the Alpha Quadrant... would you call its creation a renowned event, in your history?"

Hugh scanned his thumbprint on a doorframe's PADD as they ventured further inside. "In a way," he offered. "Remind me before you depart to give you a collection of the artist's other works. She is a friend of mine, and quite well known on Ohniaka III for her iconoclastic designs."

"If she's capable of similarly-elegant works, I certainly wouldn't mind having an artbook from her out on a coffee table."

A coffee table? What was the efficiency of designating a table *just* for coffee? Hugh furrowed his brow as he puzzled over this, drawing his eyes back the Admiral who was chuckling at his obvious confusion.

"It was an old human term for a specific type of display furniture," she crooned. "Nothing in ill will, I assure you."

"Isn't coffee a detrimental liquid one wouldn't *want* around an artbook, for fear it might damage the book in question?"

Janeway smirked. "I'll explain later. And who knows; you might already have one and just not know it."

Where office organization was concerned, Hugh's administrative space was both welcoming and alien to most species' diplomatic setups. With simple walls bearing gleaming lines of green xB user interface technology, one side was a solid window, the other hosting various artworks of xB memorabilia and personal artifacts. While the room itself was cozy in the moodiness of its construction, the real eye catcher was the difference in table setup: or, rather, the perfect circle of a "desk." Directly in the center of Hugh's office, the area began to

manifest two chairs from its side's nanite constructs, Hugh “drawing” and tapping twice on the tabletop interface to indicate the need for two chairs. xB meeting places rarely settled on a typical front or back-facing arrangement; as conversation would progress, the seats would stay exactly opposite to each other, but there was no “head of the table” in xB delegations. People were free to lean, negotiate, point out, or take charge from whichever direction they felt most comfortable in, and henceforth the other party would be on an equal visual playing field. Cooperation-hosted diplomacy gatherings had been referred to as the “topsy turvy conventions” by some Federation delegates and, throughout Hugh's experience, it was always the Human officers who ended up the most amused (much to Hugh's own amusement in turn).

“May I offer you any refreshments, Admiral?” Hugh asked, his chair's assembly nearly complete as he led her to take a seat. “Our replicators are programmed with a wide array of Federation species-compatible drinks, foods...”

“No no, I'm quite alright,” she assured him, “thank you though, Mr. Hugh. I would typically take my coffee black, anyway.”

“You have a stronger constitution than I do, it seems,” Hugh noted as the doors shut behind them. “Coffee is an Earthen beverage that can be quite strong on me—Vulcan and Earthen teas have proven more to my liking.”

“You're not the *first* former Borg I know who has difficulties with coffee. And to your credit, it's not a drink for everyone... thought the same former Borg I speak of can now drink straight *whiskey*, so who am I to talk.”

Hugh smirked. “Sounds like a former Borg drone *I* might know as well.”

“One rock, neat, straight out of the pot?”

Hugh chuckled. “The last time Seven visited, she had to *teach me* what the phrase 'pot and rock' meant.”

Janeway thought fondly on that imagination. “If you see her next before I do,” she mused, “I ask you send her my regards and well wishes. I know Ohniaka III's proximity to the Beta Quadrant isn't *ideal*, nowadays, but it makes me glad she has *some* friends closer by than Sector 001 is.”

Hugh nodded. "I will be sure to do so."

As quickly as his relaxation came and went, Hugh watched Janeway prime herself as he took his seat, a professional sense of calm washing over her shoulders while Hugh tried to hide his anticipation.

"So..." Hugh sighed once settled in the chair. "To what does Ohniaka III, the Cooperation, and the Reclamation Project by proxy, owe a visit from Admiral Kathryn Janeway?"

Janeway sat up and folded her hands. "Well— I'll get right to it, Mr. Hugh."

She took in a deep breath.

"A new joint-venture opportunity has arisen, Director," the Admiral began, "one that Starfleet is interested in supporting, hosting, and collaborating with the Reclamation Project involving Borg-related research and rehabilitation matters. You and your peoples' involvement would not only be integral, but also *pivotal* in scientific, engineering, and technological supervision, and Starfleet would be *more* than grateful for your expertise as a Federation-sponsored sentientarian organization."

Hugh realized he must've looked quite impressed by the way Janeway held a newfound smirk, the xB regaining his mental footing after the immense proposal. The Cooperation and Reclamation Project had official recognition of their autonomy and xB-related relief efforts, certainly, but an "integral" entity? The Reclamation Project supervising an even larger-scale project than the last micro-community his people facilitated?

Were they ready for this?

Was *he* ready for this?

So Hugh nodded, mulling over Janeway's words. "That's... quite a pitch, Admiral," Hugh replied, "and one that the Reclamation Project would *definitely* be interested in. Trust me when I say that I'm-- *more* than enthused at the idea of forming our own..." Hugh motioned with his hand to try and conjure a word, "*reputation*, for a chance to work alongside Starfleet— and extending the Project's outreach capability as a whole."

"I'm glad," Janeway replied, pulling up her PADD to access some data. "Xenoanthropologists are already writing glowing reviews of your organization's practices, even in preliminary analysis."

“Oh, it’s-- only been three groups so far, Admiral,” Hugh blustered, loathing the bashful smile that crept onto his face at her praise. “Though it does help when relief efforts have *actual* xBs leading counseling sessions...”

Janeway smirked again. “‘Only three,’ he says,” she humored, “*conveniently* leaving out the fact those three settlements total to just over 2,000 lives total. ... You’re doing good work, you and the Reclamation Project. The Cooperation should be very proud of that, Director.”

“I prefer comfort, myself,” Hugh noted, “but I will accept pride, if it helps further our cause. Thank you. If I could make an observation, Admiral: it seems that you’re familiar with our... what have I heard it called? ‘Information-focused humility.’”

“Do *not* try that with me— I’ve worked with your ilk before, Mr. Hugh,” Janeway chuckled. “xBs are some of the most hard-working, hard-headed, empathetic, and *stubborn* people I’ve ever had the honor of helping broaden my perspective on... well, quite a number of things, really. A ‘focused work ethic’ is certainly among those qualities.”

“Empathetic,” Hugh repeated. “Not a quality I hear often, in reference to us— and I appreciate it all the more.”

“Some of you have tough shells in the beginning, that’s for sure,” Janeway teased as she continued typing on her PADD, “both literally *and* figuratively. But they all peel back in such wonderfully-unique ways.”

Janeway laid her PADD down to sync with the desk’s holographic broadcaster. “What I’m about to show you is to remain confidential until further notice, Director Hugh.”

“Understood, Admiral.”

And with a few taps of the PADD’s UI, a rather striking recording bathed Hugh’s office in a wash of holographic light.

The top of the table shone with the round surface of a smaller, barren planetoid scarred by a deep crater. The likenesses of runabouts and other smaller crafts were in motion, taking off from or landing inside an exploratory *Akira*-class starship’s cargo bay. Eventually, the desk’s hologram completed manifesting Janeway’s full showcase, and the sight of what could’ve brought Starfleet to the Reclamation Project’s door ceased any and all other thought for Hugh.

Above the moon's surface hung the remnants of a Borg sphere. From what Hugh's innate knowledge told him and what the Cooperation's current information was on modern Borg tech, it appeared to be an older model— perhaps 20 years or so, if he could look past the bottom's nearly blown-out hull from an impact skid against the planetoid's surface. Like some ancient sentinel whittled upon by time and nature, bits and pieces of the sphere hung freely in its orbit over the low-gravity moon. Hugh could see that the sphere was left severed and dormant— abandoned to float in the cold vacuum of space, not unlike how his own cube was left cut off and quarantined from the Collective.

Leaning further into the hologram's details, Hugh could tell there were still drones in this sphere. A *lot* of drones— if not a standard Borg sphere's max capacity of 3,000. All the immediate signs were clear: the way outer paneling positions protected regeneration alcove bays, the manner in which hull plating was shielding itself for subspace travel before the sphere was... what was that— cut off? Re-routed? Even if the craft *itself* was around two decades old, the hull shielding was trying to tell an interesting story, but its structural context was certainly missing for the Director.

Despite the initial awe he felt at the sphere's sight, more and more factors began to trouble Hugh. While he hoped the multitude of drones inside would still be in stasis, experience and the hull's damage itself told him that some might be dead, and some might be existing in questionable, haunting circumstances of dormancy. The longer Hugh looked at the sphere's odd arrangement, the more a horrible conclusion dawned on him and morphed into a feeling that, somehow, even through a hologram, the sphere was less of an orb, and more of an eye: an eye filled with sleeping wrath, simmering anger, and programmed lust for vengeance.

This eye did not break Hugh's stare.

Something was watching.

“There's...”

Hugh paused, Janeway's face both curious and expectant.

“There is a *queen unit* inside of this sphere, Admiral.”

And Janeway, unable to offer a full smile, simply nodded. “She said you were smart.”

Hugh's head immediately whipped in her direction. "She?" She *who?* Had Starfleet begun conversing with a severed queen unit, had they thought they could--

"No, not--" Janeway tossed her hand as if to flick the accidental implication away and rubbed at her temple. "My apologies, Hugh: I wanted to imply our previously-discussed mutual acquaintance. I, ah-- put in a call to Seven before meeting with you, about this situation. I was going to tell you about our talk afterwards, but now that the surprise has been blown... Seven sends her *own* regards. And courage."

Relief washed over Hugh and his shoulders eased immediately, though he found himself strengthened by Seven of Nine's compliments.

"If the Reclamation Project is going to be rehabilitating severed drones with a *Borg Queen* in immediate company," Hugh began, "the sentiment is very much appreciated. I can assume from your own experiences, Admiral, that you know this-- isn't the *easiest* of propositions. Even if she *is* disconnected, there's..."

Janeway mulled on his words. "From what initial scans and exploration of the sphere prove, the queen unit has remained dormant."

Hugh watched Janeway carefully. "Is she contained?"

"She hasn't moved since our initial discovery."

"Are her and the sphere's armaments disengaged?"

"From what we can tell, to the best of our ability."

"Is she hostile?"

"Inert, more like. They're not even sending out any subspace homing beacons to the Collective to request retrieval."

Hugh nodded. "And the sphere is completely severed?"

"No connection whatsoever. And from what we've observed, the Collective has no desire to connect *back* with them, either."

Some sort of memory-related collapse within the sphere, then.

They would have many Nameless to help counsel.

"I can tell here," Hugh continued, reaching towards the hologram to run a finger along the hull, "that defensive protocols were initiated *before* evacuation procedures were completed, in its host cube. This means they were in an emergency situation, and taking hull damage at the time of their memory collapse. Or, perhaps, the cube had a reduced unit complement? Unfamiliar subspace travel too, by the way the outer

paneling is organized towards the front for precautionary protection through subspace, rather than typical subspace deflector array patterns. It seems as if it had a rough crash, obviously; skidded off the moon, caught by the moon's microgravity, and..."

He paused.

"Admiral: what happened to this sphere," Hugh asked seriously, "that made an entire Borg craft— a Queen's practical *escape pod*, no less, become... *haunted* like this?"

Janeway gave him a somber look.

"How familiar are you with the Species 8472 War, Mr. Hugh?"

His gut plunged into an abyss.

Hugh's jaw snapped back shut, holding back grief for the innumerable of drones lost to a terrible, foolish war.

"Familiar enough."

"Then you'd know the ramifications of what that sphere and its denizens have been through. ...Even if they don't quite know it *themselves*."

Janeway pulled up some scrolling text and scans for Hugh's observation from her PADD, Hugh pooling all his concentration to focus back on the briefing at hand. "By analyzing the levels of tachyon radiation that are around the immediate proximity of the sphere," she told him, "we can conclude that, via simulated subspace/wormhole routes and analyzation of impact debris, the sphere somehow managed to jump almost *two decades* ahead of its former point in time after trying to escape Species 8472's fluidic space. Our theoreticians are compiling a hypothesis that the sheer force and suddenness of this severance from the Collective, alongside the time-space venture and foray into their enemy's dimension, is what's left this to be an 'artifact' from the Borg. If you don't mind the *nickname*, of course."

A former Borg vessel being called an "artifact?"

The term could apply.

The Admiral looked up from her PADD, and Hugh saw her eyes had grown so much heavier since the mention of...

[*Murderers*]

"Do you understand why Starfleet want you and your people for this joint-opportunity venture, Mr. Hugh?"

Very solemnly, Hugh nodded.

“The Reclamation Project, would... certainly have its *work* cut out for us.”

“Do you feel this is work you’re willing to do and accept going forward?”

Hugh thought for 5.45 seconds in silence.

Eventually, straightened up with a sigh. “Well,” he hummed, “You were the one who said we were *stubborn*, after all.”

Janeway’s face seemed to regain some of the warmth it had when she’d talked about Seven.

But her expression quickly shifted into the necessities of business— so Hugh focused, folding his hands together on the desk.

“You mentioned theoreticians and engineers previously with ‘Federation and Federation-aligned factions,’” Hugh picked up for her. “Who would be the overseer of Starfleet research while the Project and I are stationed in your company?”

“Mostly it would be considered a research operation,” she told him, “one that will only host Starfleet officers on-site, but its unclassified details will be shared with open libraries and scientific institutions once peer-reviewed. But as for the site’s *manager*,” Janeway ambled, and in which she bit her tongue with a grin, “it’s not me. I’ve reviewed, advised, approved the selection, though. And admittedly, Director,” she humored, “I’ve been waiting to get to this part.”

Hugh raised an eyebrow.

What was she getting at?

“Would the supervision of a certain Commander Geordi La Forge appeal to you?”

Commander Geordi La Forge?

That Geordi?!

Hugh felt his eyes widen and train of thought stop entirely, realizing with an extra layer of blush that Janeway *definitely* noticed his reaction. While Hugh so often searched for words, he was suddenly at a *loss* for them, recalling their last visit together almost... what was it now— two years ago, of course! But to be officially *working* alongside him? The idea of Borg research and rehabilitation going hand-in-hand, by someone who helped rehabilitate *him* in the first place?

[*His friend?*]

“‘Appeal’ is... a rather *pale* word to adequately describe my, ah,” Hugh fumbled through a barely-constrained smile, “what *is* the right word, then? Excitement? Surprise? Is it improper to say ‘delight?’”

The Admiral seemed rather proud of herself as her smirk grew wider. “I don't think so, Mr. Hugh. Commander La Forge's own impressive record and genius on an engineering-level aside, he qualifies to lead due to his familiarity with Federation cybernetics and improvisations with Borg technology. I don't suppose I have to mention his impressive experience with handling Borg interfaces for the compatibility of ex-Borg drones and non-Borg sapient either, do I?”

“Hardly at all, Admiral,” he gushed, Hugh's boot swiveling under the desk. “This experience that came from my incident aboard the *Enterprise-D*, I assume?”

“That and more. He is currently being informed of this assignment as we speak, no doubt, and something tells me he will be willing to accept.”

Hugh, grinning, paused to give the Admiral a small nod. “What a strange whiplash it will be, Admiral,” the Director mused, “to be confronted with the faces of our Oppressor and *Liberator* in the same venue.”

“I hope it makes facing the Oppressor a little easier.”

“Undoubtedly. Queen units, from what the Cooperation knows— they don't... ah, that is to say; they don't exactly care for the Reclamation Project. Me, or-- my '*unit*' in particular, from what transmissions we've managed to intercept.”

“They hate you, Mr. Hugh,” Janeway offered, Hugh bitterly thankful for her honesty. “They want to ignore what you've built. What you and the Cooperation have been able to accomplish despite their domain. Something pushed the Collective to go beyond their baser instinct and into something more, and... it's something that stays with oneself, unfortunately. The memory of that hunger.”

Janeway forced herself out of the thought with a grin. “But I admire the fear you seem to strike at a tyrant's heart, Director.”

As much as Hugh loathed superficial pride, he couldn't help but let that one warm him to the core, showing itself in the form of a meek and humble smile.

“I would like to see if I could work with this queen unit towards a mutual, beneficial goal while helping the drones,” Hugh proposed as he tried to stifle the flush on his cheeks, “hopefully even rehabilitate her, too. The Cooperation and Federation could possibly learn about the Borg’s original intent regarding Species 125’s assimilation, after all: as of now, we only know queen units’ Borg designation number and that’s it. It’s no coincidence very little information exists about the Queens’ species pre-assimilation. The...” Hugh shook his head in disbelief, “*possibility* of being able to glean what the circumstances were upon their assimilation, warping a completely equal-bodied Collective into a hierarchical structure... ah. I’m sorry, I apologize; you-- must understand how immense a *discovery* something like that could be. ... But I will warn you, Admiral. We would be stepping, quite literally, into a nest. A sleeping nest, true; but something that sleeps is still alive, and might reawaken in ways the Cooperation wouldn’t be able to predict or prevent— though we will try to avoid conflict at all costs. I... cannot guarantee this project will go smoothly to its very end, though we would certainly do our best for everyone’s sake and safety.”

Janeway nodded. “I appreciate your acknowledgement of this situation’s realities. Rest assured: all Starfleet personnel would be thoroughly debriefed on this assignment’s risks, and Reclamation Project staffers will be given seniority status when collaborating on technological procedures.”

This surprised Hugh. “Seniority?”

“Indeed. xBs are the most familiar with Borg technology, after all; no use in letting Starfleet officers to assume seniority just because they’re Federation officers as opposed to Project participants. You will answer to Commander La Forge, and so shall he answer to you.”

“I... the sentiment is appreciated, Admiral, but I don’t have to remind you of the Cooperation’s reputation, of-- xBs’ reputations with peop--”

“I couldn’t give less of a damn, Director,” Janeway told him. “And if they do, officers are more than welcome to closemindedly decline or refuse the work, and not bother the Federation or Project’s presence with such bigotry. Furthermore, we are offering any xBs that will be onboard the Project’s staffing roster immediate Federation citizenship if they do not have it and desire it— just let us know before you all arrive at the

Station. Furthermore, if there are Starfleet officers that *do* give you hard legislative time, they will have to take it up with one of Starfleets' admirals who is also an xB: as much as they would like to forget, sometimes."

The sincerity and conviction behind Janeway's words honestly silenced Hugh. He could feel himself sitting there, reeling at her words- all the while the sphere's holographic eye bore down on their conversation. Janeway had an "axe to grind," as the Human metaphor went; with whom, exactly, he did not know.

Though all circumstance, context, and *history* with particular characters could certainly be candidates for her righteous ire and anger.

"Admiral," Hugh started, "I... thank you. It's good to hear that affirmation from an outside source once in a while. And while I thank you for the support, we will be the ones out in the field. *We* will have to be the ones facing that prejudice. Your sentiments will not be shared in *totality*, most likely."

"I will do my damndest to ensure it is from where I'm at," Janeway offered. "And from what I know of Commander La Forge, he'll be selecting Starfleet officers who'll do their best to shun that prejudice."

Hugh forced a grin and saw what she was trying to do.

"Thank you. I trust you and Commander La Forge. You have... spoken today in sincere, earnest ways that I feel only someone such as myself could notice."

Janeway snuck in another smirk. "Not much gets by a good old cortical node, does it."

And Hugh winked back with his cybernetic eye. "Not at all."

In his humor and return to optimism, a fluttering excitement returned within Hugh at the fact he'd be working with *Geordi*, of all people. Not merely visiting, but working with! Engaging with on an equal level! Not just some lost drone behind a brig's force field, but aware of himself- aware of others, actively *engaging* with Geordi's environment beyond just friendly visits! Seeing an old friend like this, out in fields they both enjoyed and were actually *good* at: a place to work together and watch Geordi succeed and shine in somewhere like helping repair a Borg sphere...

The eye of the queen was still staring at Hugh, but the burden was made a little more bearable knowing he and the Project's workforce would be in good company.

"So, Mr. Hugh..." Janeway offered as she sat up in her seat. "Can we work out an agreement for the first official Reclamation Project-Starfleet joint venture?"

The Director's chest puffed with a deep breath before replying—in all excitement, apprehension, and delight.

"Let's get to resource allocation."

"A *queen*?!"

Hugh flinched.

The xB across from Hugh sighed, crossed his leg, and rested his chin on top of a fist—reeling in the news as he looked Hugh over.

He was mulling, obviously, but Hugh was firm in the belief it wasn't steeped in ill faith.

Finally, Director Second Croxis spoke. "You *know* Troval isn't going to like this."

"I'm not certain many *others* will at first, either..."

"At first,' hmm?" Croxis chuckled. "Alright, Hugh; I admire your confidence."

Hugh managed a weak smile. "That's all we have sometimes, isn't it?"

The Director's face brightened at the sound of Croxis' continued laugh, amused at how charmed the other man could get from a good play on words. Nearly two heads taller than Hugh and far more broad-shouldered, Croxis was one of Hugh's oldest friends— as well as his right

hand man for Reclamation Project affairs. As Executive Director Second, the el-Aurian was a patient listener, and his experience as a former member of Lore's cult assisted many xBs comprehending individuality. Once a pale and sunken-eyed drone, Croxis now boasted rich complexion, his strong arms and a soft gut unhindered by hydraulic tubes or augments. Long, dark hair was intricately braided down his back, soft bangs framing the scarred ocular implant blotch on his face with a metallic patch covering a long-ruined eye socket. At times, Croxis' rugged beauty still took Hugh's breath away 23 years later, and now was no exception as his dimples caught the Ohniakan sun.

"Who would we be working with, Hugh?"

"Onsite? Only Starfleet personnel will be helping us repair and study the sphere's technology," Hugh told him, "but a few supplemental factions will receive transmissions related to standard research cataloguing. The aforementioned Starfleet medical cyberneticists and technical engineers, Klingon contingencies seeking new research on propulsion and firepower, Ferengi trade commissioners, a few former Talarions sending their own research teams..."

"Romulans?"

"They have access to those same open source research catalogues."

Croxis groaned with an eyeroll. "You *know* how they are in Borg tech markets..."

"I know, I know— I discussed it with Janeway before she left. Hopefully if they *are* making money off of," and Hugh made air quotes, "'sensitive technology finds that could best be researched at Romulan Free State centers and *oh*, Cooperation, this *must* be sent off-site for safety precautions,' it *won't* be at the expense of drones that are taken advantage of before full sapientcy emerges."

"Fine, fine," Croxis sighed, "let's hope that yields some effective work parameters. Who'll be the Starfleet manager?"

"A few notable officers with their own impressive records, but the project *manager*?" Hugh chuckled. "You're not going to believe it."

"Oh? That leaves me with a lot of guessing room; there are many Starfleet officers out there, Director."

Hugh smirked. “He was a *very* certain Commander of a *very* large section of the former Utopia Planetia Federation Shipyards. A manager that actually happens to have a *very* decorated history in Starfleet...”

“Mhm?”

“Served on one of the most famous Starfleet flagships history...”

“Yees?”

“An engineer that served on the *Enterprise-D*,”

“Go on?”

“Actually happens to *sympathize* with xBs,” Hugh teased as he stepped from the window, Crois beginning to catch on while watching Hugh's bravado rise--

“You joke with me! Truly?!”

And as Hugh admitted a sheepish “Yes” through his chuckling, Crois was laughing again, the Director trying and failing to hide a smile behind his rubbing palms.

“Ohhh,” his friend sighed, “aren't we lucky.”

“I haven't seen Geordi in *years*, Crois,” Hugh admitted, “I couldn't be more thankful...”

“Someone *had* to have set that up.”

“With how Admiral Janeway spoke, I suspect she had more of a hand in orchestrating the personnel than she initially let on,” Hugh offered, “but I do not doubt Commander La Forge's capabilities—*nor* the fact he must have glowing service records to be selected before any former *Voyager* staffers.”

“Familiar, and *good* with our technology. He built you that energy convergence port in an hour and barely knew you *or* your augmentations beforehand.”

Hugh snorted. “I wouldn't call that time of my life the most *collaborative* for either of us, really,” he admitted, “but he...”

The Director fidgeted with excitement and ran a hand down his face. “He'll be perfect. I wouldn't trust many others in the face of a possibility like this. I mean...”

A spark of unnamed wonder surged through Hugh, biting his fist as he rubbed at his thumb. “Just imagine, Crois... a former *queen* rehabilitated? Deprogrammed? Think of what we could... *learn*

from her— perhaps we could finally discover what her species might have been like before their assimilation? Maybe we could come to understand the current nature of the Collective *itself*; what sparked the recent *hunter's* instinct; all from one of their own queen units helping us, realizing what they *do* to people, embracing *consent!*”

“Will she *want* to, though?” Croxis posed. “Will she be able to even *access* the information we seek in the first place? We can't just *use* her, Hugh— how do we know she'll cooperate with us, much less *listen* to us? All she'll know is that we're coming in there to empty the fallen nest and ransack the barren husk. I'm not trying to deny your optimism, my friend,” he warned, “but she'll see what you're doing. And she'll try to *use* you. Manipulate you. All of us, really, but... *especially* you, Director.”

Hugh sighed.

Director. This queen unit would hear that name, that title of authority— and dive right for Hugh's jugular in every demeaning, culling, jealousy-driven way possible.

“How about for the drones, then,” Hugh offered with a solemn glance. “We do it for the 2,963 dormant units in there who need us.”

He watched Croxis ponder his words, the man's mustache wriggling before a hopeful grin disappeared under it.

“I still don't think Troval will like this.”

Hugh let a somewhat-relieved grin skirt his cheeks. “Now *that*, I can manage.”

Croxis was about to offer another point when Hugh's office combadge chimed. “Hugh here.”

“Director, there's an incoming Starfleet subspace transmission requesting a video conference with you.”

Did Admiral Janeway forget something?

“From who?”

“Federation Starbase 386, sir— it's from a high-rank Starfleet Office: Commander Geordi La Forge--?”

Oh.

Already?

He and Croxis stuttered before Hugh found words again.

“I, ah-- send the call in to my office and tell him I will answer in

exactly a minute, thank you,” Hugh spoke, hand waving Crois out of the meeting room.

As Crois scooted out, the xB gave a far-too-excited-for-his-Director-friend thumbs up, and he shooed him away with a wave before he remembered the Relay still on the comm channel. “Thank you, Thirteen.”

As Hugh heard the door shut, he scrambled over to his reflection and preened himself before greeting the Commander. He fixed his hair, examined his implants, and adjusted his blazer; soon enough, Hugh was bouncing lightly as he took in one last look over Ohniaka III's horizon and counted down the seconds. Why was he so antsy about this, Hugh wondered; what made him squeeze his hands in expectancy and practically pace the office? Midway through an anxiety-driven yawn, the alert ping sounded that Hugh's minute was up and he had five seconds to prepare, plopping down in his seat with a stiff back for the man on the other channel.

And there was Geordi La Forge: as bright, beautiful, and individuality-inspiring as ever.

“Geordi!” Hugh exclaimed. “Ah, I mean-- Commander La Forge, I deduce you've heard the proposal already?”

“Just got out of my debriefing,” Geordi chuckled back. *“Getting to study a sphere like that up close, working with the Reclamation Project, and seeing you again after how many years?! Accepted immediately: wouldn't be anywhere else.”*

Hugh's smile turned more playful, settling back into his office's seat as he folded his hands. “That's not typically peoples' *first* reaction when being told they're going to work with *former Borg*, you know.”

“Well, those other reactions are wrong, then,” Geordi teased, Hugh unable to hold back a quiet laugh. *“I haven't been able to sink my teeth into anything as substantial as Utopia Planetia since it's, uh... on fire, until futher notice, so yes: call me eager to pick my own research team underlings, study cutting edge subspace warp tech, see one of my oldest friends...”*

What made the words “Geordi” and “friend” in such close proximity to each other spark such a surge of delight in Hugh?

"I... agree, yes," Hugh said, running a hand over his chin. "Admiral Janeway was very thorough in her discussions."

"*Woah woah woah, you got Janeway?*" Geordi humored. "*You failed to tell me you had Admiral Janeway show up on Ohniaka III's doorstep.*"

"Oh?" Hugh took the bait of the question, his smirk growing at Geordi's enthusiasm. "And who came to tell you?"

Geordi sighed with an eye roll. "*No one as exciting as that. Clancy is in charge and I appreciate her bluntness, sure, but my own disappointments aside...*"

"Clancy is exciting, from what I know!"

"*Says you. But in all seriousness Hugh, I'm-- excited to be officially working with you on something like this. Genuinely.*"

It took a moment to collect the right words as Hugh suddenly fought through a bundle of nerves.

"Thank you," he told him, "you too, Geordi. It's good to see you, by the way; my updated ocular implant is able to see better over these types of displays, as of recent. I like the extra beard."

That bundle of nerves surged back as he watched Geordi's expression morph into... what was a good descriptor-- shock? Surprise?

"I," Geordi cleared his throat, "*thanks! I think-- your hair's gotten a bit longer since I last saw you too, huh?*"

"It has, yes!" Hugh confirmed. "The shorter version was easier to manage, but I have been experimenting with this styling."

"*A ponytail might look good on you.*"

Hugh tilted his head. "A, what?"

Geordi rolled his eyes at himself. "*Right, you wouldn't-- okay, okay: do you know what a pony is?*"

"Yes Geordi, I know what a *pony* is: a smaller type of a large Earthen mammal, relat-- ohhh," the realization hit Hugh as he recalled the animal and the relevant application as Geordi laughed on the other end, "Pony, tail, the-- alright, I understand. That... hmm. I'll think on it, that might be acceptable."

"*Just an idea.*"

"I may see how that idea plays out."

Hugh paused, looking back up to the video feed. "I appreciate it, by the way," the Director began, "you making our initial talk light despite

who'll be in our onboard company. Queen units aren't exactly known for their 'hospitality.'"

Geordi sighed in defeat, puffing out a cheek as he bore down for this inevitable talk. "Yeah," he started, *"I wouldn't have accepted if I wasn't aware of the consequences. But I trust you, the Project, my own judgment in putting together a team... and considering my own history with the Collective, I can at least kinda trust myself to hold my own. But I won't lie, Hugh- it's... the idea's little intimidating."*

"That's a fair emotion to have, considering. You're sure you're alright with this?" Hugh asked. "Borg tech, it's... certainly its own beast. Not to mention what you'll have to see in my department as drones undergo reclamation counseling. You have been around some nastier incarnations of the Collective, but our work is taxing in its own way. It can be... tiring."

Geordi's face crumpled; not from Hugh's grim frankness, but more out of genuine reflection— the Commander firming his lips and running a hand over his cheek. A quiet huff went through the subspace channel, Hugh worried now that he might have prodded too far.

"No," Geordi finally said, and Hugh let out a sigh he didn't realize he was holding. *"No, I'll be alright. Like I said: I've been wanting to plug myself into something, and there haven't been a lot of big engineering developments on the Federation's side of things. Utopia Planitia kinda brought a lot of projects of mine to a standstill, so... it'll be good for me."*

Geordi seemed to notice something, however, and he looked at Hugh carefully with those striking, icy eyes of his.

"You asked me, now I ask you: are you sure you're gonna be alright?" the Commander asked, *"you and your group? From what I was told, this would be the Reclamation Project's biggest assignment yet, and what I know of and have dealt with Borg queens, they're..."*

Hugh waited, interested to see what Geordi had to say.

The Commander swallowed.

"You said it best. Not exactly known for their 'hospitality.'"

"You're not alone in that sentiment, Geordi. But we'll do our best to prepare accordingly," the Director sighed. "Our first priority is to the xBs' health: offering them counseling, rehabilitation, all the guidance we give before our procedural doctors begin any sort of operations or

post-surgery physical therapy and recuperation... The queen's dealings, I predict, will fall mostly onto my shoulders."

He noticed Geordi was watching him again. *"Do they... I mean, Queens: do they know about you?"*

They hate you, Mr Hugh.

"In the vaguest of senses, yes. If anything, they... well. They know of me, of course; every xB has that lingering, almost... ethereal knowledge of each other, and queen units far moreso than the average drone. They are our 'ambassadors' for a reason. But queen units do not *know* me, as I am now: although from what intel the Cooperation has on the Collective... they're certainly not the biggest fans of mine."

Geordi chuckled again, Hugh smirking right along with him as he sat up straighter on his desk. "Well," the Commander offered, *"consider me a fan in their place. And extremely excited to see you: I can't believe in two weeks we'll be cooped up inside a Borg sphere, of all things."*

"Do you want advice for staying longterm on Borg spacecraft?"

"Please."

"Bring a seat cushion," Hugh offered, and he got a lively cackle out of Geordi, "your favorite. A relaxing chair, good shoes— replicator patterns of *anything* ergonomic! The Collective's interior design pays no considerations to the concept of personal comfort: you must remember."

"I'll keep it in mind. Oh, one more thing— would you be willing to collaborate on some preparatory research for the next two weeks before we all arrive? That could probably get us nice and ready, caught up to speed and all--"

"I'd be delighted to," Hugh affirmed. "Send me whatever inquiries you have, and Reclamation Project staff will respond as best we can."

"Thanks, Hugh. I'll be in touch."

"You as well, Geordi. My talk today with Admiral Janeway made me realize I had missed you, my friend."

Geordi paused. *"I-- you too,"* he said back. And before doubt had a chance to rile up Hugh's anxieties, Geordi ended the call with a hopeful smile. *"Excited to see you, Hugh. Talk soon."*

The call ended to a bewildered Hugh's relief, leaning back to ponder on Geordi's words and implications. For as much as the operation's implications inspired excitement, the reality of the queen's presence

still weighed heavily on the xB's shoulders. But after 23 years of individuality, Hugh wanted to believe he was ready. Personhood had taught him many ways to use the tools he was given in order to help others, and Hugh had an arsenal of not only personal experience, but the support of his fellow xBs, Starfleet's official backing, and now a *friend* in a managerial high place.

Besides— like hell Hugh could flub anything up around *Geordi*, of all people.

Hugh's hand began to fiddle with his bangs again.

Did Geordi *really* think his hair looked good?

