

6

ORIENTATIONS

[EARTHEN CALENDAR – SEPTEMBER 13, 2391]

**SPECIALTY OUTPOST STARBASE "SP-4852 SOLSTICE"
TURBOLIFT 4 TO [CLASSIFIED LOCATION]**

The quiet hum of *Solstice's* turbolift continued to dive downward, a grin on Director Hugh's face as he listened to the conversation play out behind him and a thermos lid popped open.

"Mm, that's a strong-smelling brew... you take anything in your coffee to cushion that, Commander Vorik?"

"None, Commander La Forge."

"Not even sugar?"

"No."

"What about your tea, then; same treatment your coffee gets?"

"T'larik honey for Vulcan teas," Vorik noted, "not *coffee*. I don't want to even *consider* that sweetness with this flavor."

"T'larik," Crosis repeated, "that's the variety of honey that's made from a Thorned T'larik tree on Vulcan, correct?"

"Correct, Director Second; I appreciate your knowledge on the subject."

"I have *Director Hugh* to thank for my awareness of it; both of us once sampled some paired with cups of an Earthen tea called 'Puerh.'"

"Indeed," Hugh spoke up. "Coffee doesn't agree with my systems

often, so Puerh tea it is a welcome substitution— and T'larik honey is a wonderful *compliment*.”

“Come to think of it Vorik, I haven't seen you often with coffee,” Geordi realized. “Is that a special brew you're holding onto, or--?”

“Yes, Commander. *You* were actually the one who informed me of its delivery, so I have *you* to thank in particular.”

“Informed of its deliv--' ahaaa, is *that* what Admiral Janeway was talking about a couple weeks ago?”

“Precisely. I will admit: it was a rather *welcome* surprise, after our mission onboard Atlas that day.”

“Coffee is a rather strong drink, even for humans,” Hugh noted. “How do you like the Admiral's gift?”

“Mm.”

Vorik was in the middle of a sip.

“Apparently, this blend is from a roaster located near Starfleet Headquarters that Admiral Janeway particularly favors. But the drink *itself* is... bitter. Harsh. Edges of floral notes, only to be overpowered by its sudden, almost *overwhelming* strength.”

“And yet you still consume it, Commander?”

Vorik pondered on Hugh's words.

“I hate it, but yet I want *more* of it,” the Vulcan concluded, Hugh unable to hold back a smirk as Geordi chuckled. “I can see how humans became *addicted* to its conflicting nature.”

“At least it'll keep you *awake* for a while.”

“It did so for my former Captain many, many nights in the Delta Quadrant.”

Hugh was thankful for the casual small talk.

After all: Geordi, Croxis, and Commander Vorik made for much better company than Hugh theorized a Borg queen's first ever Consultation session would be.

Two weeks after Queen 127 was removed from Atlas' queencell, the Borg matriarch finally emerged from her regeneration stasis at 0802 hours: understandably shocked, frustratingly ornery, and predictably angry. The fact she was alive at *all* was already acknowledging "defeat," the queen unit lashing out all kinds of verbal assaults to the shocked

Starfleet and Reclamation Project personnel in her Containment Chamber. After Hugh insistently thanked the staffers for their patience despite her vitriol, the Director requested permission to read the Medical reports, debrief the Starfleet commanders, and conduct his first ever Consultation Session with the first ever xB queen unit.

"Director," Junction Troval had groaned over his badge, *"Just know that you're going to be talking to a head on a spinal cord stick the entire time. She's refusing the Cooperation-built bodily prosthetic the Cybernetics Department had on standby for her."*

Of course she would refuse it, Hugh figured.

As if she'd accept anything *less* than her former body's Collective-constructed perfection.

"I'm not surprised," he grumbled. "As frustrating as it may be, we must let her adapt to new stimuli at her *own* pace. If I must speak to her like this *now* so that it might strengthen her trust in us *later*, so be it. For now, please contact Commander La Forge and Croxis immediately to debrief them on the situation, and tell the Commander I will be ready to debrief him and Commander Vorik at 0900 hours."

"Understood, Hugh," they bade him farewell with. *"Prepare yourself accordingly."*

Stepping out of the turbolift and heading down the corridor, the four made it to *Solstice's* specialized Containment Chamber, greeting Troval at the observation room's control console. They were still dressed in their medical scrubs from the queen's earlier emergence, their teal gloves and mask contrasting dark uniform scrubs and the Junction's cubical badge. Troval filled in their fellow senior project staff; Medical crews not only managed to stabilize the queen unit after a two week-long slumber, but also verify her unit's compatibility with the pre-made (and subsequently refused) Cybernetics Division's prosthetic body. She was not only the Reclamation Project's unforeseen patient, but also their political guest; more cynical, grossly-honest critics could even call her a 'hostage,' but Hugh considered their circumstances the key context in this situation.

As the debrief concluded and Croxis unpackaged his and Hugh's Consultation notes for their sessions, Hugh felt as if someone were

staring at him, but Hugh could do little else besides stare at the chair and table inside.

“You think you can sell us a fake heaven, Third of Five?!”

“Hey,” Geordi greeted with a hand on Hugh's shoulder. “You're alright to do this on such short notice?”

Hugh swallowed and gripped his PADD tighter.

“I'll *have* to be, won't I?” he tried to joke, taking in a sigh and straightening his shoulders. “Thank you for asking, Commander. It helps knowing I have some support out here to make my time with her easier. This certainly isn't my *first* Reclamation Consultation, but... it's certainly a first of its *caliber*.”

“Then no better person to *conduct* this Consultation session than the first of us xBs *himself*,” Crisis chimed from the console, uploading the Containment Chamber's holosuite environment. “I only wonder what a 23-year absence will have made of a queen unit's heart. Fondness, unfortunately, is *not* something I predict her directional algorithms would've graced her.”

“You speak as if they *have* hearts to begin with.”

Hugh's throat tightened again, looking to Geordi with eyes full of hope and thankfulness.

Though he so often loved to look for words, Hugh was troubled by how much he currently was at a *loss* for them.

It seemed Geordi, however, had just enough to offer Hugh.

“You're gonna do great.”

Hugh smiled. “Thank you, Geordi.”

“What a strange whiplash it will be, Admiral,— to be confronted with the face of our Oppressor and *Liberator* in the same venue.”

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

“Junction Troval, Crisis,” Hugh called, “I'm ready to proceed. Inform the Medical staffers to prepare Queen 127 for transport into the chamber.”

“Understood, Sir.”

Hugh left Geordi's side to proceed down the tiny hallway, passing a loving slap of support from Croxis to his back as the Director affixed a private comms device into his ear.

"Initiating Consultation Rehabilitation holosuite program," Troval called through Hugh's earpiece. The room's black and yellow-lined walls fizzled into a darker, ambient, and much more familiar setting to both Hugh and the queen unit. Lighting accents drenched the room with both the signature green of the Borg and the Cooperation's warm, golden UI, designed to relax the patient and acclimate them to a more comfortable, familiar surrounding. The holoprogram was even equipped with the ambient sounds of a Borg vessel— fixtures chittering quietly in faux distance and the droning "language" of mental Borg communication rumbling far off down a faux hard-light corridor. Though the observance window's force field was no longer visible, Hugh looked to where he knew Geordi, Croxis, Troval, and Vorik would be watching, offering a nervous smile to the blank wall.

What a beautiful sensation, he thought to himself as he adjusted his microphone of an earpiece— to broadcast sentiments like empathy and support *beyond* transmitted data.

"Empathetic." Not one I hear often, and I appreciate it all the more."

"You've all got tough shells in the beginning, that's for sure— both literally and figuratively."

Perhaps the earlier discussion of coffee wrought the ghost of Admiral Janeway more than he expected.

"Are we ready to transport, Hugh?" Troval asked.

He looked up, adjusting himself in his seat. "Yes, Junction. Proceed when ready."

"Energizing."

Opposite to Hugh, a shimmer of light beamed in Queen 127: the head and shoulders of a demiurge slowly shifting with slick and pale skin from her recent regeneration.

By what information the Reclamation Project had on Delta Quadrant unit variances, she looked the same as any typical 2370s-era Borg queen

unit. Every queen the Collective produced came from Species 125's carefully-curated gene pool— manufactured by way of cloning, cellular combination, and augment scavenging from pedigreed Species 125 labor drones that took brief flights of usage before their units' eventual disassembling. The star-like impact scar in the middle of 127's forehead was currently her only noticeable difference, her sinewy skin congealing over the once glass-encrusted wound in spite of Troval's dermal regenerator treatments. Slowly, 127's eyes opened, blinking to try and make sense of her surroundings as her camera lens-like irises and pupils adjusted to the light...

As she grew more aware of her predicament, so too did her anger rise the longer she stared at Hugh— brandishing her frustration like a lance aimed for his throat.

"*You.*"

And as if to affix a shield's grip to his arm, Hugh nodded, his lips tightening into a reserved confirmation.

"It's 'Hugh,' actually."

She stared venom at him.

"This term is not a Borg identification."

"So I am aware. What is *your* Borg identification, then?"

"We are Queen 127."

"So I am *also* aware, admittedly. Though I am relieved to make your acquaintance in far *better* circumstances."

127 squinted at Hugh, her eyes scanning the holosuite Containment Chamber they sat in.

"We recognize we are no longer onboard Sphere 1023-8341. This concludes that the self-destruct sequence was not successful. We have *also* observed Starfleet personnel and altered Borg units in the same proximity, attending to our physical retention. Identify our location, Third of Five."

Hugh's blue eye twitched.

"You are located at Specialty Outpost Starbase 'SP-4852 *Solstice*," he explained thinly, "in a special containment facility 15 meters below the surface of its moon. To be even *more* specific, I welcome you to your first post-severance 'Reclamation Consultation,'" Hugh offered. "Thank you for not retreating back into another regeneration stasis before I arrived."

"We do not theorize this unit model is a part of 'Reclamation Consultation's' *typical protocol*."

"Yes, well; you're not exactly a typical *case*, if that's what you want me to admit."

"We can theorize that as well."

"Right. Ah, please, before we begin— allow me a formality:" he said before tapping his PADD on the table, "Stardate 68675.11: Reclamation Project Executive Director Hugh presiding. Consultation Session Meeting #1 with Queen 127 from S-4381 in SP-4852 *Solstice*, Deck 00, Special Containment Chamber Interview Room. Starfleet and Reclamation Project personnel present, and in observed attendance."

Hugh smiled the same tight expression he gave 127 earlier.

"Thank you. I like to declare precise events and context, before every Consultation Session: for both documentation's sake *and* my patients' benefit."

"We had no idea your unit had potential to be such an efficient recordskeeper, *Third of Five*," she noted with an extra sneer. "If we had known this, your body would've been allocated to a *much* more useful purpose when Queen 49 took you back in."

Hugh grimaced.

"Please refrain from calling me Third of Five."

"Why should we not?"

"It is no longer my name."

"Mm, well: *Director Hugh* is not a Borg identification. And ah, please remind us: what are 'former Borg' again?"

Alright.

"Hm. Well," Hugh mustered as he cleared his throat and stood up with a huff, "since it's *quite clear* you have the capacity to talk to me as a coherent individual, have *heard my name*, *understand* the concept of names, and instead *choose to not* to use my own, I'll simply..." he jabbed a thumb at the door and nodded, proceeding down the hall with a wave, "I will return when you address me *appropriately*, 127."

Hugh gave her a flat look with a squinting, sardonic smile as he left.

While the doors slid shut behind him and he proceeded through the chamber's de-con light, Hugh sighed as he rejoined the observation room's group. "Fulfilled displeasure" was one way he could describe the

emotion that he felt crawl over his brow and worm its way into a frown; what else was he hoping to expect from her, anyway? Before anyone had a chance to offer any sort of consolation, Hugh acknowledged the situation with a hand wave and eyeroll, taking a place between Geordi and Crovis to watch her.

"I am not *surprised*, unfortunately," Hugh settled on.

"Still doesn't make it *acceptable*, by any means," Geordi bemoaned, "but at least you were prepared. So you're just gonna. ...Leave her in there like that--?"

"Oh--" the Director laughed incredulously, "I *absolutely* am! She can talk to me like a mature 'Queen' when she's good and ready."

"How long do you theorize we will be waiting, Directors?" Vorik asked. "Should we prepare for a long observance interval?"

"Ohh, it won't be long, Commander Vorik," Crovis mused. "Queen units demand their attention, after all; she's going to get very bored, very quickly."

Hugh rubbed at his chin. "I'm giving her three minutes."

Crovis bundled his arms over his barrel-like chest. "Two."

"Two and a *half*?"

"You're on."

So they waited.

At first, the queen unit rewarded herself with a well-earned smirk, eyes closed and happily dwelling in the observation room's silence for the first minute. But as one minute ebbed into two, her expression grew bored, creeping towards annoyed at the two minute mark.

Crovis gave a quiet "Hrm" as his bet was exceeded and the timer ticked onward.

Hugh didn't know what he and Crovis were exactly "betting" in the first place, but the Director was sure they could collaborate on something later.

At 2 minutes and 30 seconds, Queen 127 sighed, and 10 extra seconds later she finally rolled her eyes while bemoaning "*Alright, 'DiReCtOr 'HuGh!*" over the speakers.

A smirking Hugh snapped his fingers— amused to hear all Crovis, Troval, and Geordi chuckling.

"Round 2, Director," Crovis told him with a smack to his back, "good

luck in there.”

“Less luck,” he called, “more *patience*.”

Enduring another de-con cycle, the chamber doors slid open to a annoyed-looking queen unit, the Director all smirks and smiles as he retook his seat.

“Well,” Hugh sighed, “glad we could come to that agreement.”

“You seem to put quite a lot of *weight* on this new designation of yours.”

“Oh, not just weight,” Hugh noted, “it’s *significance*. A new designation, a new *name* can be the first step towards a new identity. You *are* able to just change a name, actually— it’s quite a liberating experience.”

“It is *known* to us that most Federation species align multiple *segments* of names per-designation of a single unit,” the queen unit told him. “Tell us: have you picked anything else out besides just ‘Hugh’ yet?”

Hugh made a dreadfully-flat face while he let 127 wallow in her petty little victory.

“Point being,” Hugh resumed, “that you have the chance to... reevaluate your *existence*, as it currently is. You are no longer tied to the Collective: you are not bound to the Hive’s vastness. Despite queen units having the most... *focus*, let’s say, the Cooperation can find no recorded instance of singularity happening to a queen unit.”

“None, at least,” she uttered, “that we would allow records of to *exist*.”

A cold chill ran down Hugh’s spine.

“So, then: we’ll take *you* as the first.”

“You’ll ‘take’ this unit,” the Queen noted, “a notable choice of words. Is this the Cooperation’s idea of freedom? Keeping a sapient part of a greater organism separated from the world it belongs in? Sealed and locked away from a life we know? How hypocritical,” she spoke thinly, “how very ‘noble’ of you, to be filling the shoes of your beloved *Federation*. If we didn’t *know* better, we’d say the *Cooperation* is just as good at assimilating its supposed *patients*.”

She was certainly trying, if anything.

But 23 years worth of individuality had prepared him for this moment, so Hugh straightened in his seat and folded his hands on the table between them.

"I hope you realize you'll have to get better *material*," Hugh said, allowing a smirk to poke out of his scarred dimples. "We *both* know you cannot return to the Collective: as much as you might *want* to, and as much as you may try to *convince* me. Even if you somehow *reached* an access point, the Collective would not take you back; it would not accept a queen unit that has tasted individuality and existence beyond the Borg's realm. Either that, or you *would* be accepted," Hugh pointed out, "and immediately subject the blinding, overwhelming sensation of individuality onto whatever part of the Collective your data was assimilated into. How very cruel — almost ironic, it would be — a Queen unit to return to her empire," Hugh mused, "only to have her citizens wake up and retaliate against self-instilled monarchy to steal back the wealth of singularity she dined on."

The Queen quietly ground her teeth.

"You call *this* wealth."

"I'd like to think so, yes. Though it depends, of course, on how you *spend* that personal wealth. Myself— I like to spend my individuality on... hmm: helping other xBs acclimate to personhood, learning the Earthen instrument called a 'cello,' reading, gardening, having sex," Hugh explained, smirking at hearing Geordi's raucous laugh and Crovis snort over his earpiece. "Ah-- cooking, too; cooking's a fun one. I make a *very* lovely cioppino with Andorian clams. *You*, however:" he resumed, "so far you've spent your individuality on... oh, let's see: attempting the destruction of 2,963 dormant drones and all life in the sphere's immediate vicinity, attacking Atlas Project staffers, verbally threatening a the *very* patient Reclamation and Starfleet doctors who've stabilized your body..."

Hugh paused to temper his bitterness.

"Individuality is best spent on supporting and enriching the community around oneself, 127," Hugh told her. "N whenot hoarded on delusions of unit exceptionalism by demeaning others."

"You think you're *better* than us because you know how to prepare biomatter you don't even need to consume to *survive*?"

"Oh, I'm not the one who said 'better,'" he teased. "Just merely... comparing how we've spent our time separated from the Collective. Granted, I'll acknowledge I have the *privilege* of being separated far

longer than you have, but... I think, despite everything, look what happened," he affirmed. "I think I've turned out alright."

"Yes, look at what happened to you, Hugh," the queen hummed. "You speak rather *boldly*, for a murderer."

Hugh frowned.

Alongside the earlier deadnaming, he felt that one was coming too.

Hugh heard Crosis sigh on the other side of his in-ear intercom, Geordi murmuring a quiet "*murderer; what now?*"

So Hugh, his heart aching from the weight of this sudden memory, pinched the bridge of his nose and recollected his thoughts from an immediate, possibly *angry* rebuttal.

"The Collective's upload of my experiences onboard the *Enterprise* was not something I could *control*, nor was I *aware of*," Hugh explained, "and it is something the denizens of Ohniaka III are *well* aware of. We do not deny our own genesis— so that we may learn from the past and how to avoid further loss of life."

"You were going to be *dealt with*," she hissed, "after your little brush with separation. As unfortunate as it was, you were declared a defunct resource, but acceptable for further labor usage. Queen 49 would have directed her cube's complement to incorporate you, should any further trouble have arisen; your cube's very walls would have purged your unit and all other corrupted units you sprea--"

"We did not want to *die*."

Hugh paused.

"*We will die! We will die for what you have wrought!*"

"Sometimes I wonder what she would've *been like*, as a person," Hugh admitted quietly. "I want to believe our queen unit deserved a chance— just as much as her cube's population did. Instead, we were... left falling into a planet's *atmosphere*, until we crashlanded. We were *alone* with the corpse of a queen unit who abandoned her units in her own confusion."

"We are certain you were *quick* to dispose of her."

"No," Hugh corrected. "When we emerged from Cube 5219, before the influence of the Soonien android Lore, we... buried her. There is a *grave* for her, on our planet; it was the Progenitors' first funeral.

No place is more appropriate to contemplate the finality of death, I suppose,” Hugh mused, “and also *celebrate* the miracle of individuality.”

“It is much more efficient to repurpose deceased units to supplement your resources, wouldn’t you agree? Rather than to spend time with or on a body that no longer functions?”

“Efficient, yes,” he admitted, “but at what cost?”

“This individuality you call a *miracle*.”

Hugh sighed.

“It is... *unfortunate* to me,” Hugh settled on, “that you decide to spend your emotional labor on taxing my former traumas, instead of learning how to reconcile with what you could be now. With what *is*, now— in the form of the Liberated Borg Cooperation. Maybe we could both... *learn*, from one another— figure out how you arrived out of Species 8472’s dimension 17 years later, maybe strive to know--”

“What more is there to *know* about us, *Hugh*?” The Queen asked rather plainly. “We are Borg. We are Queen 127. But we are no longer with the Collective. That is our current status.”

“And what do you *want*, 127?”

“Want?”

She sputtered as if stunned by the question itself.

“We do not want. What we *want* is irrelevant. We do not *want* to convince you of anything. Though if you *force* us to respond to a requested compliance query, then most imperatively,” she decided on, “we want to *die*.”

Empathy’s hand plunged into Hugh’s chest and grasped his heart.

“There is no longer any *purpose* for this unit. We are without *use*. Any further use of this unit’s operation would lend itself more information to those outside us, but the Collective no longer requires us active. This unit cannot be resynced without risk of network infection. Therefore: termination of operation would be the Collective’s most efficient outcome.”

Her face tightened.

“We want the *opposite* of this. This... lonely, pathetic, *hollow* existence you call ‘individuality.’ What a vacuous, *empty* stillness it is. How *silent* it all is. Henceforth, and by conclusion: this unit’s only appropriate course of action is to have its functions terminated and *die*.”

Hugh swallowed.

This was always the hardest part.

It was not uncommon for xBs to display contemplation of suicide symptoms immediately post-severance. While official Liberated Borg Cooperation mental states and condition diagnoses were still being studied en-masse in enough cases to form solid treatment methods, this ordeal was a common experience. Like a node unplugged directly from its source server, the drone is terrified, confused, and entirely unfamiliar with this new state of existence. In certain cases (and unlike the sphere's entire Nameless complement), certain drones were able to access memories of their lives pre-assimilation quicker than others, which could lead to higher stress levels and states of panic. Created from the Borg's Maturation Chambers, Hugh had no life before the Collective; but for those who were? Those he spoke to and were only subjected to the Borg for weeks, even mere *days*?

Hugh wondered something before replying.

What kind of memories would a queen unit have— if any *at all*?

The Director sighed tightly. “I cannot allow your termination.”

“Then you are *no better* than the unit you sit before and accuse of tyranny.”

“You *cannot* make that comparison.”

“We *can't*!?” She suddenly spat. “You! The *first* from us to depart after they took *Locutus* from us— you sit here and accuse this unit of a cruelty you invented from your— *disturbance* of individuality!?”

“My presence here is not a *delusion*,” Hugh said thinly, “the identity I worked very hard for is not some *flaw*--”

“Yes it is!” she cried again, “for *who* you are, *what* you are, yes it is! You were not meant for this! This existence is not natural!”

Anger tightened Hugh's jaw.

“And who is to decide what I *am* and *am not* meant for, now that I and *so many others* are outside of the Collective!? Who are you — who is outside of me, my singularity — and yet still claims sovereignty over me? You tell me you *know* me? You have not *been* me for 23 years!”

Hugh paused.

“Do not want to think about yourself? What *'yourself'* could even *be*? Do you not want to accept your loss of control, your inability and

unwillingness to accept input from those who once called you 'Queen?'"

She sat and leered at him through clenched teeth.

"We tire of this talk. Grant our request and allow this unit to die."

"I cannot honor this request."

"Then you condemn us to a pathetic half-life of wretchedness."

"I condemn you to *nothing*," Hugh reminded her, "you condemn *yourself* with your-- *prideful refusal* of our willingness to help you. The body apparatus is still available for you at any time, and will remain so as long as you're here. We have no intent to harm you, and you will be provided for in all forms of biochip energy conversion, healthcare, stasis chamber maintenance. If your behavior were observed to be more *benevolent* towards onsite staff, you might even be permitted to traverse the station, one day."

"Where does our behavior rank *now*?"

Hugh narrowed his eyes with a fake smile. "Not good."

"Shocking. In that case," 127 sighed, "we will spare you our audience and will wait in stasis until our request is fulfilled."

"That... will not *happen*, but alright," Hugh groaned. "Again, you are free to do as you like: even if that means *sleep*. This operation will house you and will continue to provide your life with sanctuary-- not force you to remain a body not of your choosing or comfort."

Something gave her pause.

"Why keep us in this condition?" she asked. "This unit's regenerative habitats require large amounts of energy. The bodily apparatus would be more efficient, and you could have performed this transference while this unit was in stasis."

"Yes, but... we wanted to give you that agency to *choose* a body. That is not something we will ever choose *for* you. A body that does not synchronize with its individual's ideal of self could be its own form of imprisonment, if you did not want it, and in case you... preferred something *else*."

"Preference is *inefficient* for the Collective's greater function."

"You will notice," Hugh mused, "that we are no *longer* the Collective. Not anymore."

The end of something usually implied the beginning of something else, Hugh figured.

So it was that Queen 127 ended their first Reclamation Consultation session, her face visibly stiffening and her docking apparatus resuming regeneration procedures.

Hugh sat quietly and looked at the queen unit's inert head.

"Hugh?"

"Reclamation Project Director Hugh to *Solstice* Containment Room personnel: have Queen 127 transported back to her regeneration tank."

"Acknowledged, Director Hugh: energizing in five seconds."

Queen 127 disappeared in a transporter beam's twinkle, Hugh trying to think of something, *anything* to say next.

Ah— of course.

He still had a recording to cap off.

"I am merely grateful she spoke to me at all," he told his PADD.

Hugh swallowed.

"...Statements end. Director Second Crisis, please end the Consultation holosuite interface."

The holo-paneling went dim, the room fading from the ambient xB lighting back into the familiar black-and-yellow stripes of a holosuite.

"All readings, scans, and diagnostic logs are holding steady," Geordi's voice came over the earpiece. *"No outside signal interference detected; everything's being logged into local Solstice servers and should start transferring to Theta and Iota soon."*

"Good. Hopefully it will sound just as acceptable *later*, when we start comparing the data to previous Reclamation Consultations," Hugh admitted, reclining further back in the chair with eyes screwed shut. "I can't yet decide if that can be called as going 'well' or 'tense.'"

"Both, Director," Geordi chimed, *"You can have both for this situation."*

"The Commander is right."

"Agreed."

Hugh heard a thermos tab pop open after Vorik spoke.

"Though I suspect I will require more coffee to adequately file my report tonight."

The Director was thankful for a spontaneous, tired laugh.

"Ohhh, I could go for some tea."

Thanks to how the rest of the day panned out after 127's inaugural Consultation, Hugh never got the chance to rendezvous with Geordi to discuss a brand new batch of repair proposals.

It was a petty dismay, perhaps, but he allowed himself to skulk in exchange for negating dwelling on sadder, more destructive thoughts.

After the four reemerged from *Solstice's* underground Containment Chamber, Hugh had to send detailed reports not only to Ohniaka III's Consultation staffers, but also to the Federation— Starfleet chomping at the bit to know more about the queen unit sleeping in a lunar starbase's practical basement. As excited (and borderline demanding) as they were to receive the Director's detailed logs, Hugh had to step away from his desk multiple times to recollect himself after typing a particularly-poignant quote or summary, trying his best to strengthen his nerves and put old, resurfaced memories to bed. Coupled with the venomous things she said to Hugh, seeing a queen unit again after 23 years had taken a lingering toll on the Director's functional clarity— unsettled by how similar 127 looked to Queen 49 before her violent, explosive death.

A selfish part of Hugh hoped 127 would sleep for another long while as he prepared himself accordingly.

20 pages of paperwork filings, 3 mugs of Toucha Puerh tea, and a midday snack dropped off by Croxis later, Hugh's skin felt clammy and tangentially burdened from the lingering stress— resolving for a quick sonic shower in his *Solstice* quarters. The healing sanitation of Regeneration Alcoves typically filled the need for hygienic regimens non-xBs had to adhere to; showers, spas, and baths of any kind were viewed as luxurious self-care when not related to physical therapy treatments, resulting in the development of beautiful bathhouses on

Ohniaka III. But Hugh always felt far more relaxed after a refreshing shower before a regeneration cycle, and he treasured a dearly-held amusement at how boyish his hair looked when wet.

As he was drying off, Hugh's quarters door chimed.

1803 hours in *Solstice's* xB Wing, someone at his door; who could it possibly be?

If this was Crois again with another snack, he swore--

The doorbell pinged again.

"Ah, one moment--!"

Pulling on his socks and his sweatpants, Hugh jogged to the door as he papped the towel to his drying hair and face. The door slid open as Hugh spoke, his voice muffled by the thick cloth: "Crois, for the *last time*, I'm--"

Hugh pulled the down from his face and oh-- no, oh, no it was actually *Geordi*.

Encountering anyone else like this? Nothing to be socially repulsed or startled by-- xBs were one in the augmented, scarred same to each other, and xBs in general had very loose definitions of modesty. But with *Geordi*? It was the reaction, the *face* the Commander made to indicate he was not only *looking* at Hugh, but ogling, spying: *checking him out*, Hugh could even call it! In moments only milliseconds long, Hugh's visual UI noted each and every microexpression Geordi made: the rising flush to his face and increase in temperature, the heightened blood flow and dilation of his cybernetic eyes...

By the direction of Geordi's eyes, Hugh could tell Geordi was checking out his chest. A well-defined, somewhat-plush chest and abdominals lined with silver-black rivets of metal blended with flesh; surgical scars like cracks of weathered pottery ran under his pecs and muscles where Reclamation Procedures had occurred and exo-plating had fallen away, a few plugs and sealed ports dotting were cables once erupted from implants...

It took 3.28 seconds before either man could stand to say something, and Hugh wondered if Geordi had also thought of the time he touched his arm two weeks ago.

"Ah... *h-hi*, did I--" Geordi stammered, suddenly jabbing his thumb to the side, "come at a bad time, or--?"

“No,” Hugh tumbled out, “n-no no, I was just... preparing for my evening regeneration cycle. It’s-- been a long day, Commander, and I wanted to retire early, so--”

“R-right, right, yeah. ...Hugh I didn’t know, you uh,” Geordi motioned with a hand waving up and down as he cleared his throat, “do you work? Out? Or is that just-- normal physique for xBs?”

“Oh! I-- equally, regularly-- I mean, I some of both,” Hugh told him as he fiddled absently with the towel. “Regeneration cycles keep former Borg in next-to-best physical condition, but for the past few years I’ve been studying and practicing an Earthen style of martial arts called ‘Capoeira.’ The stretches do wonders for my leg. You must be aware, ah-- typical bathing conventions are not *necessary*, with how we regenerate,” Geordi mumbling a “right, right” as he nodded along, “but most xBs find an, ah, *calming* sense of peace with showers. Baths. Whatever their preferred method of. Cleaning. ...is. Ohniaka III is home to very elaborate bathhouses and submerged regenerative therapies.”

“Really! R-really, wow, and it... yeah you look. Great, a-and uh--”

Geordi took in a deep breath and seemed to start over.

“Look, I uh-- wanted to come by and make sure you were feeling alright, after today’s meeting. I was almost done with my report filings, and I-- had to take a walk, remembering some of the things she said. You have a lot more patience than most Starfleet officers that I know,” Geordi pointed out, “and I can tell she tried to dig up some bad memories to get at you. ...Guess I had to-- come here myself and make sure the Executive Director was okay. Would’ve felt wrong not to at least check on my *friend*, after everything.”

Geordi was at his quarters door, laying compliments at his feet, checking out his chest, and looking very flustered while doing so.

To say that Hugh was aroused was putting it *lightly*.

“Those... you’re right,” he admitted, “she-- *did*, say hurtful things. And the events she made mention of will *always* be difficult past traumas. But I wouldn’t have been able to face her today, without you there. --Crosis, Troval, *and* Vorik too, of course,” Hugh added with a nervous laugh, “everyone. That support will continue to make conducting her sessions easier for me. For *both* of us, hopefully.”

“Being faced with someone like *her* for the first time is always the

hardest part," Geordi deduced. "I get it."

Hugh swallowed.

Did he though?

"Indeed. I just-- thank you again for coming to check on me, Geordi."

"Of course, Hugh."

Geordi's lips wrapped in on themselves.

"So do you... always? Answer, the door? Without a shirt on after 6?" the Commander finally asked. "Is that a custom xBs are used to, or-- wait, if you don't technically sleep, do you even-- *have* pajamas?"

Geordi wasn't going to let it go? He went *back* to the topic, even?

So Hugh decided to indulge his spontaneity-- a flirtatious smirk wriggling across his lips.

"These are *technically* what you could call my pajamas," he explained. "Regeneration can extend to certain types of clothes, if they're logged into the alcove's registry, but fabrics can be rather stiff by the cycle's end. Also, Geordi," the Director crooned as he slung the towel over his shoulders, "you-- *do* realize I was technically *naked* the entire time I was onboard the *Enterprise*, right?"

Geordi's face went through about 24 registered human emotional responses in the span of 4.12 seconds.

He opened his mouth to object, then held his own chin-- furrowed his brow and motioned his hand as the Commander deduced and contemplated...

"...Yeah," Geordi conceded. "Yeah okay, I-- wow. Huh."

"Hadn't thought of it like that, had you."

"No not really, no."

"Forgive me."

"Forgiveness de--"

Hugh objected with a quick "don't" and a fingerpoint to a now-laughing, still-blushing Geordi.

"Alright, you," the Commander wrapped up, "glad to see your spirits are a little lifted."

"In no small part thanks to *you*."

Hugh rued his visual UI for being able to notice Geordi checking him out one last time.

"Glad I could help. I have to finish my Station Manager's Report

before the night cycle's end, but-- take care of yourself. Have a good evening, okay?"

"You too, Geordi. Thank you."

And as Geordi trotted away and the doors slid shut, Hugh was left standing there, mashing the towel into his very red face. He groaned to an empty room, shivered despite a newfound warmth, and he suddenly needed a glass to quench a sudden dry-mouthed thirst. Hugh's eye twitched as his implant's UI brought up a "blood flow increase" notification, trying to clear his thoughts as he headed back into his vanity room to wrap up his skin care routine and take his prescriptions.

Two minutes later, a certain pressure only made bearable by his baggy pants wasn't going away.

Three minutes later, static-like phenomenon clouded his neural paths.

Three minutes, *49 seconds* later, the pressure was starting to get annoying.

And at *five minutes, 3 seconds* later, Hugh sighed roughly, plapping the off-duty Cooperation seal badge on his plushy house robe and lied back on his quarters' lounge sofa.

"Secure channel, Hugh to Crosis," Hugh said quickly, "are you *available*, Director Second?"

"*Crosis to Hugh!*" the xB chimed, "*good evening, my friend! Yes, I was actually just retiring for the evening; how are you?*"

"Do you have any other, ah-- engagements tonight? Or-- no, you just said you were *retiring* for the evening; my apologies. I--"

That was a dead giveaway right there, Hugh stumbling over his own words like that.

Oh, he could see the smirk growing on the other man's face now--

"*Ahhh, could you repeat that, Hugh? My Reclamation Project badge might require some fine-tuning; you seem to be having some interference...*"

"How would you feel about some Project-relevant *collaboration*, Director Second?" he huffed.

In response, Crosis scoffed. "*Oh-- with me, Director Hugh? I'd be honored! What kind of collaboration? Scientifiic, delegatoryyy... oh, perhaps Consultation Department scheduling! That's it, that's it-- I know Commander La Forge was enqui--*"

"I would find your company rather *pleasing*, Director Second," Hugh

stressed, knowing full-well Crosis was dragging this out for his own amusement. “Not only *pleasing*, but extremely *appreciated*.”

Crosis, meanwhile, was already chuckling. “*It has been a while.*”

“To say the least; I have been *very* busy, Crosis--”

“*That’s Starfleet’s influence, is it not? ‘Business before pleasure’ and such?*”

“They host the same species that coined the phrase ‘all work and no play make so-and-so a dull’... whatever, I can’t even remember it right now--” Hugh sighed, hearing Crosis lovingly chuckle on the other end. “Fine: its terms and descriptors are *interchangeable*, then. Please, my friend, tell me if you’re willing or not; I could be persuaded to beg *later*, but unfortunately I am *not* in the mood to do so now...”

“*Abhh, but aren’t you already?*”

A cute grin curled Hugh’s lips. “Maybe...”

Crosis chuckled again. “*I’ll be there in three minutes, Hugh. I owe you from before leaving the Capitol, anyway.*”

“And I owe *you*, now. Thank you, Crosis.”

The combadge chirped off.

Three minutes.

Two minutes, 59 seconds to flatten the large conversation couch in the main lobby of his quarters and lay out its extra cushions and sheets.

Two minutes, 58 seconds to make certain he had supplies on hand and privacy mode was properly pre-engaged.

Two minutes, 57 seconds to keep his augmented heart pumping at the same, constant rate.

And two minutes, 56 seconds to store the emotions from today’s Consultation into a mental compartment to unpack at a much later date before his dear friend Crosis would arrive, shove him against a wall, and act on whatever pleasing thoughts crossed their beautifully-singular, yet still-synchronized minds.

"Aha, ha! Ohhh, well *done*, Hugh!"

Crosis was panting with a smile on his face as Hugh crumpled, caught his breath, and fell beside his friend in absolute bliss.

Crumpled, perhaps, was generous.

"Plopped over" was a more appropriate descriptor.

Although winded, Hugh began to laugh in satisfied exhaustion as he felt the Director Second pap at his cheek, Croasis' other hand slinking over Hugh's shoulder to rub circles into his augmented spine.

"Feel better, I hope?"

"Yes... ohhh, *so* much better--"

"Are you sure? Perhaps I should perform diagnostics! It's been two weeks, after all," Croasis proclaimed, "come closer--!"

Hugh's tired chuckling resumed as Croasis snatched him in a hug against his burly, fuzzy chest— the body heat against Hugh's back both a wash to his sobering senses and a post-coital comfort. True to Hugh's imagination, Croasis made good on Hugh's predictions and more; just as he called for the room's "enhanced privacy" functions to engage as Croasis entered, the tall man scooped the xB's face into his hands and pressed him tightly against the wall, Hugh's robe falling to the floor as Croasis' hands ran through the Director's wet hair. Hugh felt a need to be the more active lead tonight (with Croasis more than happy to play along), though the Director Second *did* prelude their evening by tugging Hugh's sweatpants down to partially relieve him of his irritatingly-ignored pressure.

By the night's end, Hugh was spent and Croasis was equally tired. Hugh instinctively balled up whenever his friend took him in his arms like this, Croasis' mustache nuzzling into the crook of Hugh's shoulder and kissing his neck to elicit gentle and song-like sighs. The sensation of Croasis' facial hair touching him in such a place was a feeling that Hugh, in all his 23 years of singular life, counted as one of his favorite.

"Thereee you go," Croasis hummed after another kiss, "*now* how are you feeling?"

"Wonderful," he sighed, "mnn, thank you Croasis--"

"I should be thanking *you*," he said after another kiss, "I'm going to be *exhausted* until I regenerate..."

"Ah, good: that means I performed adequately."

"*Adequate*, he calls it--!"

They laughed again as Hugh turned over in Crosis' arms to smother the other man in a new round of kisses.

Eventually, they parted and settled into each other's embrace.

"Apologies I called *today*, of all days," Hugh tried to offer, "but--"

"No need to apologize," his friend assured. "It worked out; it was a good distraction. My mood was somewhat dour *too*, before you called—so I am thankful."

"I'm glad I could be an inadvertent spirits lifter. ...Not to mention it's payback for how dour *I* was when I found out the *Theta* engineering staff organized a get-together and I wasn't *invited*..."

"You were busyyy!" Crosis defended, adjusting himself as he sat up with Hugh and leaned against the Director's back. "Come now, it was *just* once, *one* week ago; I haven't had that much free time either!"

"Right. More important tasks to tend to, and all."

Hugh allowed a silence to hang between them, his eyes shut against the orange light of Taijal's faraway sun as Crosis' augments poked against his skin.

"You did well today, Hugh."

"Thank you, Crosis."

"I know it was difficult."

"Mhm."

"But I *also* know," Crosis chided sweetly, pausing to place another kiss behind his ear, "that is not *all* you're thinking about, my friend."

Hugh's lips thinned.

"And I've *seen* the way you've looked at the Commander during our stay here so far."

His chest tightened and a lump formed in his throat, heavy seconds passing as words came back to Hugh's rattled mind.

"Am I that obvious?"

"I have known you as long as I've existed, Hugh. I felt it in our Tether tonight. Forgive me if I've seemed to memorize a friend's *habits*."

Hugh pulled his knees closer to his chest.

"I am... nervous. Nervous at what might be or *could* be. I mean I... I told you what happened-- I can't doubt what I saw! The way he *looked* at me tonight, the way he's *touched* me-- I've let him do so every time and *liked* it! --Oh! Oh, and I didn't tell you *this!* After we initially boarded Atlas? In his Ready Room? Crosis, he stopped me before I ran into someone leaving his office and his arm, it-- *lingered* there," Hugh mimicked what happened, "like *this!* And I *let* him! Geordi looked so *flushed*, and with the significance of this project I don't think I'm--"

"You are pouring so much of yourself into these questions, Hugh," Crosis stopped him with. "Do you still have enough left for your *own* peace of mind?"

Hugh mashed the heel of his palm against his forehead as Crosis spoke, wanting to retreat further into the strong embrace of his friend behind him.

"I mean I-- do you think this is *wise?* To just... see? Ask? I don't want to be presumptuous, but I already know Geordi likes masculine individuals by Earthen cultural definitions--"

"Oh, *who* was the one tonight who asked if you 'worked out?' Remind me again? Hmm?"

Right.

"Oh, yes," Hugh mumbled, "that's... of course, ah--"

"Your memory has *always* failed you in moments of flattery."

Hugh bristled and pouted, muttering an "Oh, you complete--" as Crosis laughed and Hugh papped behind himself with a cushion. "Fine. I'll consider it."

"It's been a *while* since I've seen you so hesitant on something like this, Hugh," Crosis noted after another nuzzle. "What hinders you?"

"Oh, it's either the fact I could be sinking *any* political goodwill towards the Reclamation Project and myself," Hugh grumbled, "or I... how do I say this, Crosis; what are the words, where do I even--?"

"Use as many words as you like."

Hugh stopped himself and nodded.

Crosis always knew how to bring his friend out of those spirals.

"Alright. I feel... ignorant. Childish. Lost. ...Dumbstruck, awed, overwhelmed, completely *confounded* and at a loss for words beholding something that I... *think* is there," Hugh managed, "what I *suspect* is

there, and I observe the patterns and compare them to my own inherent knowledge, and my conclusions are--”

Crosis squeezed his shoulders as Hugh sighed and held his head up.

“I will approach him. See how it goes from there. If it's just for *recreation*, that's perfectly acceptable. Maybe I'm just... *frustrated* from not knowing, and feeling like I'm ignoring patterns to follow a lead I'm *missing*. If compatibility is there and proves itself to be engaging and dynamic, then I will pursue this train of thought, but for now... thank you for at least allowing me to verbalize it, Crosis. It's-- as if I *know* it. But I have not--”

--felt it yourself,” Crosis pressed, “or *experienced* it yourself?”

“Yes. Yes to both.”

Crosis slung his arms over Hugh's shoulders again, pulling the Director closer to his chest and squeezing his bicep. “Does the Commander *trust* you?”

“I just... want you to know you can *trust* me. All the same as before.”

“Yes. He told me so himself.”

“And you trust *him*?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Then start there, Hugh. Start with trust. Start, from your beginning-- like all xBs do.”

Hugh lost himself in thought at what could be, what *might* be, and the concept of something so vast he tried desperately to think of where to start at.

Eventually, Crosis began to massage his shoulders. “I hope this doesn't dishearten your mood further, Hugh, but... what you said today about Queen 49 was very gracious. I have not thought about her in such a way for a long time.”

Hugh turned his head. “Does 127 remind you of her?”

“No,” Crosis said as he shook his head, “no. 49 feels like a lifetime ago, Hugh. I can still *remember* everything, certainly, but it's like watching through another person's eyes that aren't mine anymore.”

“Well-- you are *far* different than the Crosis you once were.”

“Thankfully.”

Hugh nodded with a sudden lump in his throat.

"I meant it all, Crosis," he said softly. "I meant *everything* I told 127. I wish 49 was still here, just to... see where we are *now*, see what we've *built--*"

"See what she would've been like?"

Hugh nodded.

"I wish she could've realized, that-- there was *more* to life, beyond our temporary suffering. That she *didn't* have to grieve our severance. Maybe she could've... I don't know, individuality might've--"

"You *know* it's not your fault she did what she did, Hugh."

Hugh hunched further in on himself at Crosis' inference, his brow creasing upwards as he vacantly stared forward at the pullout mattress' blanket.

"Right?"

"*We will die!*" Queen 49 screamed, blood dribbling out of her nasal cavity. Her eyes-- what was the word?-- leaking, draining, allocating saline resour-- crying, it was *crying*, he had forgotten because she was *separate!*, "*We will die* for what you have wrought, Third of Five!"

"Don't! Do not die, please-- you *can't* die, you must not!"

Separate voices surrounded him as they repeated "don't--", drones holding other drones, dragging them to Cube 5219's queen unit to conduct hopeful repairs--

"This cube's navigational schematics are still tied to Queen 49-!"

Crosis said, *begged* from behind Hugh-- he was not Crosis then, as Hugh remembered, but Fourth of Ten, a Namesake still not had--

"Y-your navigation authorizations-- *we*, not you, we as in I, us-- *ugh!* Cube 5219 will not *respond* to us! P-please, we can't--" no, he was not them, he was *Hugh!*, "I can *help*, help you understand *Hugh--!*"

"What does it matter!?" she yelled, hollered, cried, sobbed,

"Inefficient, Third of Five; your usefulness has *expired!* We are not one! You are not within us! You do not feel us! You will not respond if you are not within us; you will *never* fulfill your--"

And despite *not* being within her, Hugh *did* respond to the death he saw before his eyes.

Queen 49's connection cables dragged a sizzling circuitry wire down to the tank where her body was regenerating, and the the electrical reaction was immediate: sadness, grief, horror, screaming— screaming in both the auditory sensation and labeling of emotional senses— all applicable for this situation, a fear at what she was doing as the liquid sparked before Third of Fi-- *Hugh's* eyes and bursts of bubbling, crackling flames flung his body, his unit, *his body* back against the chamber as flames exploded from her queencell and her voice wavered and perished alone--

“Hugh?”

His eyes opened after Crosis' careful hands moved from his massage.

And Hugh thought of Ohniaka III's memorial plaza for the self-immolated Queen 49— her burial plot of a breeze-tousled tree, the great needle behind it, and Cube 5219's titanic wreckage that scraped the green and pink twilight sky.

“I know.”

