

# 4

## THE AEON

*Twenty five.*

It took Commander Geordi La Forge three seconds to process the sight of a desperate, vengeful Borg queen sprawled out on her console.

*Twenty four.*

Three seconds they could've used to add onto their 2 minute, 24 second countdown before the sphere blew to smithereens.

*Twenty three.*

But it gave Geordi three seconds to tamp down his own fear for the mission's sake, and what this situation could mean to the xBs who were confronting the face of their former oppressor.

"Why," Hugh shuddered.

*Twenty two.*

"Why? You couldn't live without knowing they'd be *separate* from you? Is that it? *You* couldn't have them, the *Collective* couldn't have them," Hugh cried as he held his crackling baton aloft, "so instead you sentence them all to *death?!?*"

*Twenty.*

"Is it better than living a lie?!" the queen snapped back, her shoulder

tendrils keeping her head anchored to the console's screen. "Better than our *seamless unity*? Our *beautiful perfection* your so-called 'Cooperation' makes a mockery of?! You think you can sell us a fake heaven, *Third of Five!*?"

"What is *perfect* about this, you selfish despot!?" Croxis demanded, his EV Suit's grip tightening against his baton. "Does perfection include *murdering* parts of yourself? How *barbaric* you've grown; how *desperate--!*"

"Like it or not, you're coming with us," Geordi tried to interject. "By our authority as officers of the Federation and Liberated Borg Cooperation, you are *ordered* to disengage this sphere's self-destruct sequence and--"

As a dying beast would thrash against larger prey, one of the queen's tendrils that still anchored her to the tank smashed against its glass and began to flail upwards.

Geordi raised his Phaser Rifle and engaged his cybernetic eyes' target lock-on. "Maximum stun!"

Relay Two barely fumbled out of the way before the cable could fully slam against her, the xBs taking a speedy charge while the queen was distracted with Starfleet officers firing at her force field. Stun Batons slammed against the green barrier, sparkling from the sustained impacts as welder's torches would blow upon superheated steel. Before the queen had a chance to gloat about her "advanced Borg shielding" or whatever the hell it might be, the xBs' weapons made their hidden strengths known, wedging themselves in further and sending cracks throughout the field's overall stability.

Her eyes boggled. "What--!?"

*Fifteen.*

While the circumstances were dire, the scientist in Geordi was thrilled to see the xBs' unique technological prowess on display in the form of these Stun Batons. Using signal-adaptive nanoprobe tech, the physical makeup of Stun Batons were inlaid with impressive filaments; a material that resembled the woven look of carbon fiber, it allowed xBs to physically pry through almost any and all kind of force field. The Borg would obviously have no knowledge of this Cooperation-invented technology, rendering the queen's shields unable to adapt to

the batons as quickly as she might other devices. Junction Five was the first to “break” through the containment field, wedging her baton in deeper where she had initially struck as Geordi strengthened the cracks with continuous phaser fire. Five's baton's signal met V'evik's disruption crack, then Crisis', each xB's signal connecting through the wall... until the field itself violently shattered, leaving the queen exposed as Hugh rushed forward with a containment field generator.

“Director!”

The queen screamed a screeching ***“NO!”*** as Hugh flung the device at her bloodied forehead.

And before another one of her flailing “limbs” could pierce Hugh and the xBs in retaliation, Geordi fired a stun shot that knocked her out cold, the queen going limp against the console and her tendrils clattering to the floor.

“Commander La Forge to *Solstice!*” Geordi called while Hugh's suit wristlet activated the containment field, “Special Containment Chamber 1, queen secure; I repeat; queen unit secure, transport the field generator signature now!”

*“Solstice Special Containment Chamber 1; request received! Emergency station shielding lowering to receive Borg queen— energizing immediately!”*

Snatched in a containment field net, the unconscious queen was beamed out of the sphere.

She was gone.

The original mission, at least, had been completed, and the company allowed themselves shuddering sighs and a small victory's relief.

But the relief never came— because the queencell console's flashing UI, the pulsating lights, and the klaxon's infrasonic rumble were all still going, and Geordi was beginning to pick up on what the xBs might've suspected all along.

*Ten.*

“She's... she's left the self-destruct command in place,” Hugh admitted shakily, “We'll have to--”

The sound of a fumbling suit drew the party's attention to Relay Two of Ten, limping on a leg where the queen's initial thrashing had struck her.

“Director, I'm sorry, I can't- stand, augh--”

Since Geordi was closest to her, the Commander helped Relay Two adjust against the wall to rest her leg flat. The EV Suit had no signs of puncture wounds or tears in its fabric, but there was a noticeable divot in her lower leg— most likely a fracture, and would've been much more serious if she were a humanoid without xB-fortified bones. Hugh rushed to both her and Geordi, a noticeably-worried Five tended to the control console, and Vorik directed the Starfleet officers to stand guard.

“Two,” Hugh asked, “Two, are you--”

“I’m okay,” she breathed, “I’m okay, she just-- my leg, agh--”

“Sit, sit,” Geordi urged, nodding at Hugh to go join the others at the console, “she’s outta here now, at least. Glad you’re okay. Smith,” he called, “medkit--”

She nodded tightly, wincing some as her jawline augment accentuated the lines of a grin and she traded a look with Five. “Thank you, Commander.”

Geordi’s EV Suit UI flashed a **<2 MINUTES UNTIL SPHERE SELF DESTRUCT>** warning— as if he didn’t need another reminder.

“There: sphere-wide life support fully stabilized, at least,” Five declared. “Helmets off if you want, everyone.”

“Thank you, Junction Five,” V’evik sighed, the Vulcan xB’s hair tumbling out of their helmet and disengaging the EV suit’s gloves and bracers. Their cybernetic palm opened and closed, tracing along the Borg UI as Geordi left Two with Ensign Smith to join the group and offer what he could.

“Let’s get to work, then.”

Seconds ticked by as all sorts of theories, scans, and hypotheses were tossed out to gain control in the queencell and shut down the self-destruct sequence. Shucking out the warp core? Borg starships were not built like other spacecrafts in the Alpha Quadrant; it was impossible to eject their centers of power without destroying the whole craft in the process. Transporting the queen back to *make her* shut it off? Out of the question, and she was already unconscious; considering whether or not they could get her to do what they wanted in the *first place*. Writing a

fake signature program, tearing apart the queencell, even firing on the console *itself*? No, nope, and “absolutely not—” their latest experiment involving Five trying to disguise a random dormant drone's uplink as an access key, with V'evik's hand on the console serving as a cybernetic mimic to substitute for the queen unit's interface.

Unfortunately, this wasn't working either— as a red UI symbol kicked Five out of whatever programming she was steeped in, and a panel spat sparks of electric rebuttal from where V'evik's hand was.

### <1 MINUTE, 30 SECONDS UNTIL SPHERE SELF-DESTRUCT>

“Damn it!” Five hissed in frustration, V'evik pulling back their prosthetic and shaking it in pain. “I can *see* the access point— but since the submatrix is collapsed, it needs to think the request is coming from the *queen*, and it's not letting me make it think one of the *dormant drones* is instead!”

“And I cannot access it on a *physical* level,” V'evik told, examining their flexing hand, “the queen unit has activated some sort of security algorithm to prevent all outside attempts at override or Tethering.”

Geordi's brow creased in worry. “Is there anything else,” the Commander pleaded, “*anything* we haven't thought to try, Director? Any... subroutines, aphere resources, Cooperative or Federation tech-- there has to be *something*, there's no--”

“There *is* something.”

Hugh was staring up at the queencell's ceiling.

“Direct access to the sphere,” he said quietly.

“Director, V'evik has ahead--”

“No, Crisis,” Hugh interrupted as he shook his head. “*Direct. Access.*”

A hush fell over the xBs, Hugh visibly swallowing as he held his stare with the ceiling.

A ceiling littered with interface and transfer cables...

Cables... to connect and interface with the--

Geordi's eyes glanced at Hugh's facial implants.

“*Direct?*”

*Hugh, what were you planning?*

A cacophony of protests began to bubble from the xBs at Hugh's side,

the Director peeling off his EV suit's outer shell regardless.

"Director--"

"No no no, you *can't*--"

"Director, please, you must reconsider a Tether of this caliber--"

Crosis grabbed Hugh's suit by the helmet lock. "Don't you dare," he warned, "we'll figure something out before you or *any one of us* has to--"

"We don't have *time* to figure anything else out, Crosis!" Hugh hollered with a strained voice and pleading eyes. "I'm not about to let this sphere with almost 3,000 lives onboard be snuffed out! The project grounds, the starbase, the Tactical Cubes, the Juggernaut; *everyone's* at risk!"

"Hugh," Geordi pleaded, "will it-- can you even do this sort of hookup; could it--"

"It could *kill him*, Commander," Five told Geordi as she shook her head, "but we don't know-- there's never been... you must remember, Commander: this is the *first time* the Cooperation has been able to step into an unreclaimed Borg starship of this size and scale. We don't know what this could *do* to him, if he interfaces with Borg technology post-severance; there's--"

--Never *been* a recorded instance of an xB Tethering with a starship's collapsed submatrix," Hugh finished for her, disengaging his EV Suit's gloves and tugging down the sleeve where his nanoprobe wrist ports were. "The last one we did was Crosis and I's, 23 years ago. And I believe we're *all* aware of how *that* turned out."

Geordi put his hand on Hugh's shoulder— his heart suddenly conflated with the mission at hand, the need to preserve everyone's lives and Hugh's safety--

"I won't stop you," Geordi told him with a strained voice. "Because I trust you. But make sure you come back, alright? Come back. Find some things to hold onto while you're in there, Hugh."

*There he went, staring at him again like that--*

Hugh swallowed. "You," he told him. "You being one of them, if you will allow me. You helped bring me into the world, Geordi; I would be thankful if you and the others here *help* keep me anchored to it."

A lump formed in Commander La Forge's throat.

"I'd be honored, Director."

**<60 SECONDS UNTIL SPHERE SELF-DESTRUCT>**

“Whatever may happen,” Hugh told the Reclamation Project personnel, flinching as his wrist’s tubules began transmitting his ID for the interface cables, “record it. Observe it. Learn from my experience, in case anyone must Tether like this again.”

“Do you think the sphere’s inherent AI is still active despite the submatrix collapse, Director?” V’evik asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” Hugh admitted, his unconnected hand sending a holo-UI prompt up to the ceiling. “And perhaps that’s what unsettles me the *most*.”

Once Hugh’s tubules were free of the console, loud **\*KH-CHNK\*** shifted and groaned above them, the group surprised at just how *fast* the interface cables made their way towards Hugh. Once the first cord found and touched his skin, the cables conglomerated en masse towards him and began to run along Hugh’s undershirt, his face, looking for access ports and dipping under the suit’s fabric as Hugh’s hands instinctively pawed for Crois and Geordi at either side...

“I-I--”

Geordi could hardly blame Hugh for the falter in his voice.

“Hold me, please--”

The two held his arms and hands, bracing for whatever may come.

The first cable plugged itself into the back of Hugh’s neck, the Director spasming and gasping as Geordi and Crois held his weight and Hugh’s body lost his balance. More and more of the cables interlocked with his spine and forearms as metal met flesh, the group struck silent as they watched Hugh’s skin turn pale and varicose while Geordi’s grip strengthened to support Hugh’s weakening hands. The Director’s eyes clouded over until they were pitch black and his open mouth quivered shut... Just as quickly as the black had spilled in, so too followed green-glowing squares filled in where Hugh’s irises would be, Hugh’s posture straightening as his face turned completely neutral.

It was then, Geordi noticed, Hugh’s eyes were pre-emptively wet; as if he were about to weep, but was suddenly stopped by a higher force or power.

And Hugh, standing independently, turned towards the group and

calmly pulled his arms from Croxis and Geordi's grasps, speaking with all the power, might, and reverb in an ethereal voice Geordi nor anyone else would soon forget.

**"We are Sphere 4381."**

Despite the innate... fear? Safety? *Concern* for Hugh's current state, Geordi caught something.

"W-wait, 'sphere?" Geordi managed, the combination of the two examining Hugh's hand by turning and flexing it. "Isn't... wouldn't he say 'we are Borg,' not--"

"It is *all connected*, Commander La Forge," Five told him shakily, "*everything* in the Collective is the Borg! Their starships are *just* as sapient on a directorial, artificial intelligence level as any dormant or disconnected drone is--"

Vorik continued Five's train of thought. "And if the sphere's submatrix memory has collapsed and there no interconnected drones to reactivate with, then--"

"It's the entire *ship* he's interfaced with," Geordi concluded. "A single, individual program. Could... could Hugh or the program access those drones?"

Croxis swallowed. "Let us hope neither of them *consider* the option."

As if gathering his mental bearings, Hugh (the sphere?) turned his gaze to Geordi.

**"Queen Unit 127 has initiated the self-destruct sequence of this sphere."**

Geordi looked between the other xBs, as if seeking permission to communicate.

Almost all of them nodded, waving their hands at him as if to "keep going" and keep that channel open.

"...Yes, Sphere 4381."

**"Third o--"**

Hugh's mouth shut and his expression, finally, changed ever so



slightly—as if pondering on or ceasing a train of thought.

*Come on, Hugh.*

**"...Relay informant 'Hugh' has divulged to this Sphere transport unit that this action was not necessary, and in fact damaging towards this unit's drone complement and immediate surroundings."**

*Attaboy.*

"Yes, correct," Geordi affirmed, "there's no danger to you in any sort of way here— no cause for you whatsoever to self-destruct."

The Hugh... sphere... interface paused, stoic and unchanging in expression.

The timer ticked to twenty seconds.

*Nineteen.*

*Eighteen.*

Hugh's face twitched some.

And suddenly, the same "surge" that once heralded the sequence's beginning rocked through the sphere's flooring, the dimmed light outside of the carved-open queencell door suddenly dissipating.

**"Self-destruct sequence has been deactivated."**

Geordi could've fallen over right there in relief; the xBs sighed, some covered their mouths, Lieutenant Ha'arshov dry gasped and even Vorik looked down with a less-creased brow...

"Thank you."

**"Due to Queen Unit 127's violation of internal Borg protocol 56327.12, this deems Queen Unit 127 incapable of directing further logical decisions for this vessel's Collective compliment."**

Geordi nodded along with the amalgamation. "Yep, yeah, sure, I agree; I sure wouldn't let her in here again, either."

Hugh — the two, rather? — paused again, the group watching Hugh intently as he turned his gaze aside. It seemed as if a silent conversation was taking place— knowing Hugh was probably doing his damndest to

explain the situation and why their team was there in the first place. Hugh's mind then, technically, was everywhere: as vast as the sphere itself, and teaching the idea of singular conversation to an intelligence that was once part of a Collective entity as big as entire sectors.

Geordi swallowed as he looked around.

Could Hugh see them through *more* than just those black-and-green eyes of his?

**"Relay informant 'Hugh' has disseminated your intent and desired purpose for establishing a presence within this unit."**

Geordi nodded along with the amalgamation. "Do you... accept our presence, then?" he asked. "Would you be willing to host the Cooperation and the Federation, if you can't reconnect with the Collective anymore?"

**"We will comply. So long as the preservation of this sphere unit is guaranteed and its drone complement is salvaged, your intentions and residence will be permitted. Due to Collective severance, your cultural and biological specialties will not be incorporated for further study. This unit..."**

The Sphere's conscience seemed to ponder itself again. Hugh's eyelids flickered as the two concentrated, his brow furrowed and his head thrashed in a sudden jerk... God, what on earth was Hugh even having to go through in there--

**"...I..."**

Geordi could hear the xBs mumbling between themselves.

**"I will assist. Your technology may be incorporated for further study and integration into l's- m-y's-- l's-- t-t-this unit's interfaces. Immediate structural integrity repairs to this unit's hull, however, must be conducted."**

The mechanical stuttering of Hugh's voice deeply unnerved Geordi

and brought back memories of his own time interfaced with the *Enterprise-D's* Raman probe, but he kept as straight a face as possible. "Understood. Thank you for your permission. We have resources allocated to assist with patching your hull's--"

Hugh, suddenly, walked forward, the group jumping in surprise as he made his way towards and outside the queencell' door to face the immense cavern over the balcony. The tendrils that connected Hugh to the sphere neither tightened nor sagged at any point; the multitude flowed behind him like the specter of a cape, Geordi and Croxis staying close to Hugh's side as "the two" surveyed the sphere's interior. The amalgamation folded Hugh's hands, standing just as politely as Hugh would... and the ship's body heaved into a strange, haunting half-life.

Billions, Geordi could assume *trillions* of nanoprobes assisted in sliding Sphere 4381's outward hull to form another makeshift hull plate where the impact had torn off the ship's "skin." Far-off booms and collisions could be heard as each piece slid into place, those trillions of nanoprobes both regenerating and rearranging the barest requirements of a hull. "Croxis, Five-- any of you," Geordi murmured, "did... any of you *expect* this to happen?"

"No, Commander," Five said, awe plainly painted on her face. "No we didn't."

"Truth be told, Mr. La Forge," Croxis managed, "I don't think any of us knew this was even *possible*."

As they spoke, Hugh turned back to them, the colossal hull panels continuing to shift in the distance as Hugh spoke while returning inside the Queencell.

**"Rudimentary hull fortification is complete. Relay informant 'Hugh' requests to 'return' and cease the current state of communication with this unit. You will find that you have access to disengage Queencell controls and access all system commands for vessel-wide operations. This u-u-nit l-- request leave m--y-y-y. Operating Sy-systems, and Memory Banks, intact. Queen Unit 127 is barred from access to-to my systems. But this unit--"**

Hugh's brow furrowed, his face showing the most emotion it had since his initial interfacing.

**"The- actions present-- able to... select. Declare option. Prefer. You-"**

Realization seized Geordi that Hugh, all by himself, was most likely teaching the sphere's AI a blinding new concept: something as basic, world-shattering, and personally fortifying as the concept of "choice. "

Just like he taught Hugh all those years ago.

So Geordi spoke candidly: a tired smile plain on his face, and admiration filling his eyes for the xB's mental fortitude.

"I... hope this isn't *rude*, since you have the reigns right now, Sphere 4381," the Commander asked, "but if I may mention something to the 'Relay Informant' ...you're doing great, Hugh," Geordi said quietly, flashing a smile amidst the ship's eerie light. "I think I know what you're doing in there. And you're doing a great job."

The amalgamation's face froze and his eyes widened, Croxis tossing Geordi a nod and an affirming grin.

Hugh's face settled again into neutrality.

**"Thi-S-Sphere 4381 [DESIGNATION UNKNOWN] choose-s tto-- chooses-- requests a hologenerator be given to this unit, so that my-yl-II- may integrate it into my Operating System program and vessel-wide broadcast. This will be utilized to better understand and assess interactions with both Federation and Cooperation staff during your operations onboard, as well as efficiently communicate through an interface that does not require the use of Relay Informant 'Hugh' in this manner, though his reference has been sufficient."**

Oh, what-- they were gonna be deprogramming an entire *Borg sphere's brain* now, too!?

Geordi couldn't help himself from trading glances between the group, which ranged everywhere from gobsmacked, shocked, amazed, stunned, and "Vulcan surprise" (which was by far the most monumental reaction here).

"I... s-sure, of course," Geordi promised. "I can uh-- we'll make that happen. It'll take us about three days to get one to you; the *Solstice* station doesn't have one, and I don't think..." Geordi turned his eyes

to Five who was shaking her head rapidly, “yeah, the Cooperation’s lil’ Tactical Cubes don’t have one either, so are you... alright waiting 7200 hours or so to get one shipped out here?”

**“Sufficient.”**

Sphere 4381, using Hugh’s eyes, looked at the company one last time. The AI’s gaze stopped on Geordi again.

**“You will find all the necessary access codes to enter docking bays, and bypass generated force field barriers in this-u-uin- que-eenco mmm-- Command Center. Disengaging from Relay Informant.”**

Geordi nodded, swallowing his nerves for diplomacy’s sake. “Thank you.”

The cybernetic tendrils tightened and began to hiss in unclamped release, Hugh’s body falling limp as Geordi and Croxis caught and supported him yet again. His clouded eyes began to fizzle back to the familiar brown and blue; as the Director’s sight cleared, he coughed, sputtered, and gasped back to singular life, his hands mashing against his face alongside choked sobs. Geordi’s heart broke as those hands went to grasp and tug at his own hair, the Commander watching Croxis motion one hand of support to the top of his back.

“Hugh,” Croxis tried, “Hugh, can you--”

**“NOT NOW!”**

It was so loud that Hugh’s still mechanically-evening voice echoed outside the queencell.

“N-not now,” Hugh asked quietly, “not now, just... j-just let me...”

Hugh’s chest heaved, pulling his hands from his hair to look at them-- opening, closing, flexing... and just as he gathered the strength to look back up, the Director lowered his head again, miring in the immensity of what just transpired.

“W-we’re... we’re safe,” he managed, “and so is everyone else. That’s what matters.”

“Director--”

Hugh’s shuddering slowed.

And finally, though his composure was weak, Hugh pulled his left leg

forward to try and get up, Crosis and Geordi helping lift him just as they did after Third of Four's encounter not so long ago.

Hugh hissed and grasped his shin.

"Easy, easy," Crosis chided him, "pressure? Or soreness?"

"Sore," Hugh mumbled back, "t-too much-- input through the framework--"

What'd happened to Hugh's leg, Geordi wondered?

Once standing, Hugh fiddled with his undershirt's sleeves to pull them back down over his forearms, his hands still shaking and his forehead beaded with sweat.

"Director," Crosis offered gently, "as Director Second, allow us to begin stabilization procedures. You've done more than enough for now, my friend."

Crosis' eyes met Geordi's, a quick raise of his brow motioning over Hugh's line of sight towards the queencell door.

Geordi nodded.

*Good second-in-command you've got here, Hugh.*

"He's right," Geordi followed along, "Crosis is right, Hugh; come on. Let's-- head out there, fill in *Solstice, Theta, Iota*-- take a break..."

"Yes," Hugh finally said, nodding absently, "yes, that sounds good. Thank you, everyone. You all performed admirably today. I, we'll--"

"*Come on,*" Geordi urged, turning to guide Hugh by the shoulder towards their makeshift door. The Commander tossed a nod and grin of approval to the Starfleet and Reclamation Project personnel (who all gave concerned and assuring looks back), murmurs and comm channels filling the space of silence left behind. Once Geordi and Hugh made it out of the battered queencell and out to the balcony, Geordi's hand squeezed the other man's shoulder, gave it a firm pat...

At this, Hugh's composure crumbled-- stumbling before swooping into a hug that Geordi instinctually snatched the xB into. The hug was a little clunky, thanks to Geordi's EV Suit chestpiece, Hugh still stripped down to his undershirt as the outer suiting dangled from his hips. But they made it work, Geordi careful to pay mind where his hands were so that he not trigger possible phantom sensations of cables for Hugh. He held the xB tight and Hugh held him back tighter-- Geordi holding back tears only by sheer force of will and the need to be strong for Hugh in

this present moment of crisis.

"God, you little--" Geordi sighed shakily with a sniff, "scared the hell out of me, you know that--"

"I'm sorry," Hugh mumbled, "I'm sorry, there was nothing else that could be done, and--"

Had Geordi ever heard him so panicked before?

He decided that yes, he had: back when Hugh was presented with the very concept of choice 23 years ago on the *Enterprise*.

"Don't be," Geordi rebutted. "We're all *alive*, because of you. Like I said earlier-- 'you're doing great,' remember?" he offered in a quiet laugh. "It just... it didn't hurt you in any way, did it--"

"No," Hugh said immediately, "no. And that's almost the worst part of it. Rather just-- the 'emptiness' of what I saw, Geordi. There was nothing, and suddenly it was like... trying to-- fan a speck of fire into the shape of a person that used me as its fuel, every time they learned something new and--"

Hugh stopped himself. "You had a different experience than I did, when you explained the concept of 'I' to me," he tried to extrapolate. "You were... *outside* of me, Geordi. Your concrete presence grounded me, *anchored* me in something else-- because it let me be myself without *another* presence within me. I was not *still connected* to the Collective, do you understand? This AI is no longer part of the Borg, true, b-but it was just... there was no *division*, no 'other person' to explain it separate from your own process, and--"

"No one can look into a void without *losing* something," Geordi remembered, "and no void can look *into* a person without gaining something."

Hugh gave another hard sniff, Geordi relieved to feel the pressure from a smile forming against his chestplate.

"You've been reading more of Twenty's book, I see..."

"Of course: like I'm gonna skip the best parts of xB philosophy after I get the inside scoops?" Geordi tried to humor before patting the xB's back again. "I'm glad you're okay, Hugh. I'm proud of you."

Hugh's weary face beamed "It's an honor to be that, Geordi."

After Geordi let Hugh hold onto him for however long he needed, the xB began to release his grip, the Commander stepping back and looking

over his dear friend. "You're okay to head back?"

"Yes," Hugh confirmed. "We will return, update Starfleet Command and the Cooperation, write our reports, get a chance to make sure both staff get everything ready... and that will probably take the whole day. Sounds like a perfectly monotonous amount of administrative work to occupy myself with."

"I agree," Geordi huffed. "And hey, at least: in some ways, the hardest part is over, Hugh."

"Thankfully... and yet, some others are just starting."

As Geordi puzzled over what he meant, Hugh sighed as he shook his head, pulling up his EV Suit's sleeves and slipping them back over his uniform. "23 years," Hugh sighed. "23 years I have been separated from the Collective, and she still called me by my original designation."

"Shows how *vindictive* they are, if anything."

"Mm— and to think I have the *pleasure* of talking to her during Consultation sessions, for the next six months..."

"At least it'll be cathartic?"

"Just you wait," Hugh grumbled with a smirk, which earned a playful laugh from Geordi. "Catharsis is just the *beginning*."

Hugh paused to look at Geordi with a tired grin.

Though the xB's face was still wet from earlier tears, Geordi noticed how much Hugh's scarred dimples flushed pink under the sphere's ghostly lighting.

"Thank you, Geordi," he murmured, the Commander's heart aching from how sweetly he said his name. "That was... difficult."

"No kidding. Just glad to be there for you, Hugh."

The Commander and Director traded smiles before Geordi papped Hugh on the arm. "Come on," he sighed, "let's get back in there."

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*“That was certainly one of the more stressful call holds I’ve been put on in my life.”*

*“To their credit, their situation wasn’t exactly something you can debrief on the fly, Clancy. Though I will say, Gentlemen: it was far more wicked to keep the suspense up than any caffeine withdrawal headache I’ve ever had.”*

*“Despite the duress, we’re just glad to see you all safe, returned, and intact.”*

*“And be sure to give Deep Space 9 a call showing your appreciation to its Captain; we’re pulling a bit of a favor asking the station to relay us a starship-wide hologenerator this fast.”*

“Will do, Janeway,” Geordi assured, smirking at Hugh as he looked to him in the light of his Ready Room. “Both Director Hugh and I will put in calls later on today once, if I may speak for *both* parties involved, we get a chance to ‘collect our thoughts.’”

“Agreed,” Hugh chimed. “To say today has been ‘tumultuous’ is putting it lightly. Almost superficially.”

*“We commend you, Director Hugh,” Clancy assured, “for doing what you did today. Let it be known that Starfleet owes both you and the apparent selflessness of the Reclamation Project a debt of gratitude.”*

“To have let anything in an alternative scenario happen would have been reprehensible,” Hugh tried to assure, “but thank you. The Federation is quite blessed to have the prowess and honor of someone like Commander Geordi La Forge utilizing such wonderful Starfleet officers.”

*“Oh, and you have to stand right next to him and take that praise, Commander La Forge,”* Admiral Janeway chuckled.

“Mhm— he gets the up close and *personal* view of the blush, look at that,” Geordi pointed, which got Hugh laughing and even Clancy smirking. “We’ll update you at about 2000 hours our time on how progress is going, and expect our reports soon.”

*“Thank you, gentlemen.”*

“Ah-- one last thing before we end the call, Admirals,” Hugh piped, holding up a finger. “Regarding the sphere’s AI. I will elaborate further in my report, but our uplink together made the program curious as to the concept and *purpose* of names, for individuals. Before we disengaged, they ah... requested my *input*, for one,” Hugh hinted, “rather than the

sphere's base serial ID of 4381.”

Clancy leaned in as much as Janeway did. “*Oh?*” Kathryn piped, “*Well I’ll be damned. What did it pick?*”

Hugh smiled, and part of Geordi wondered if it was because Hugh had failed to mention this before and was springing this fun little surprise on him now.

“Atlas.”

Both Admirals smirked.

“*How fitting. We look forward to your full reports, gentlemen: carry on.*”

As the Admiral's feed cut out, Geordi looked back to Hugh standing beside him in his Ready Room. The xB looked much better now that he had a chance to come back from the sphere, collect himself in his quarters, and change into something less restrictive—allowing a bit of last night's glitz and glamour to peak through the day's grim and grave danger. It was when Hugh arrived to Geordi's Ready Room that he learned that one of Hugh's leg augments had improperly decoupled from his exo-plating long ago—leaving the lower half of Hugh's shin a silver-streaked mess of bone and metal that occasionally required an arm brace cane's support after long periods of strain or use. As Hugh rested his forearm in the circular brace and drummed his fingers on the crutch's handle, he stood with a confidence that was less for the Admirals and more for himself—the man golden and radiant in *Solstice's* view of the sunset. He was *beautiful*, Geordi thought in a flash—and Hugh seemed to notice the way a certain refreshed, in-uniform Geordi stared at him.

“I, ah--” Geordi cleared his throat, “nice name drop there.”

“I thought it would be a nice little surprise,” Hugh shrugged with a bashful smirk. “The AI herself seemed so *transfixed* on the word, they almost let *me* do all the heavy lifting...”

Geordi grinned, walking with him to his Ready Room doors. “Get some rest, Hugh. I’ll be sure to join you and senior staff for dinner.”

“Sounds wonderful to me. I’ll be visiting Two of Ten in Sickbay before returning to write my report, though I’m informed she will be out in a couple of hours.”

“Excellent. I wanted to stop by Junction V’evik’s quarters, too; just to check in with them after their encounter with Third of Four.”

“I wish you a pleasant visit, Commander La Forge.”

The doorway wooshed open, and as Hugh was about to step out, he didn't quite notice a mag-lev cart heading down the other side of the hallway. Geordi's arm went to instinctually stop him with a hand that flew to rest on his forearm and an “Oh wait, wait--” as they both looked down the hall and, oh, *oh*—

For a second that stretched on as long as the three had entering the queencell, Geordi caught himself looking at where his hand had laid on Hugh's arm. The touch was electric and fiery, magnetizing and compelling— Geordi able to feel the barest hint of skin's firmness, a metal nodule of *something*, and what were most likely intricate scars and augmentation lines under Hugh's sleeve. Geordi had already seen Hugh in a few uniforms, outfits, and ensembles before, and each one was just as handsome as before. But to touch Hugh in such a way now, and the way Hugh seemed to *linger there*—

Geordi could only stutter in gobsmacked embarrassment and bluster. “Uh... I, ah--”

So he looked up.

Hugh was turning quite red in the face, his brown and blue eyes darting between Geordi's gaze and the hand he did not pull away from.

“I, ah--” Hugh stammered, “s-see you, Geordi-”

“Yes, yeah, I'll-- see ya, Hugh...”

As Hugh wandered down the hall, the Director stole a last glance at Geordi from over his shoulder and continued on at a healthy trot.

The doors shut on Geordi and the Commander ran a hand over his mouth, swallowing thickly as he rested his elbow in his free hand.

Wow, that was--

*God damn it.*

“You look *amazing*, by the way-- look at you! The gloves, the jacket: wear that on another starbase and you'll be the talk of its entire promenade, Mr. Hugh!”

“Oh, I *long* for the day where I can enter a starbase and be talked about solely for my fashion choices... *you*, though, you're one to talk; you look fantastic in the new uniforms! I don't believe I've ever *seen* you in red!”

The hand on Geordi's chin slid up to cover his beet-red face.

*Strong profiles, slick black hair, sharp jawlines, a fascination for fellow men with technological aspects, and--*

Geordi La Forge shook his head and laughed to no one in particular.

He had a fucking type, didn't he.