

3

AN EMPIRE'S RUINS

“Clancy, if you tell them to ‘be careful’ one more time, I’m going to stick my hand through this transmission and put it right over your mouth.”

“Call me cautious then, Kathryn; not all of us are an Admiral who’s been onboard Borg vessels more than once and lived to tell the tale.”

“Mn; difference of perspective thanks to experience. What would you advise then, Mr. Hugh?”

“Nothing that hasn’t been advised already. Carefulness will certainly be paramount, Admiral Janeway— and I do thank you, Clancy, for your well wishes. If anything, however... we need *efficiency*, first and foremost; a trait I believe you yourself praised xBs’ excellence in, Janeway. Care is almost a given for the mission we’re about to embark on; wouldn’t you agree, Commander La Forge?”

“Oh— that and more, Director Hugh. My own offerings aside, we’ve got a great enough team already, thanks to Starfleet and the Reclamation Project’s pickings and choosings. We’ll do our best to keep morale up inside the sphere, *buuuut* adherence to Director Hugh’s advice on being carefully efficient will certainly help us set up shop.”

“Well— hell of a ‘shop’ we’re opening, then. Gentlemen, consider this

debrief complete, and we thank you today for the service both you and your team are about to embark on. Admiral Janeway and I will be awaiting your reports at your earliest convenience. We'll both remain on standby in case of emergency, and on behalf of all Starfleet and the Federation: we wish you utmost safety and care."

"Be careful. ... Oh, Commander La Forge— when you arrive back at Solstice, ask Commander Vorik to check in with the station's mail depot next he's able. Tell him it's 'on the house.'"

"Will do, Admiral. Thank you Clancy, Janeway."

"Thank you, Admirals."

The transmission ended in the tiny cabin's viewport, the sphere's hull looming closer towards them as Hugh looked to Geordi.

"No *pressure*, of course."

"Right? Right, no pressure," Geordi sighed, "none at all."

Stepping out of the runabout's navigational cabin with Geordi, Hugh had to pull his eyes *and* thoughts away from the sphere to the company that filled the small deployment airlock. Everyone present had donned EV suits: three xB Relays (one of them being Five's wife Two of Ten), Junctions Five and V'evik, and Crois were with three Federation Ensigns and Commander Vorik. Both Hagirian and Vorik were piloting their course towards the sphere's massive gash in its hull, debris and scrap metal floating past the runabout's viewports. Yet again, Hugh's sights were drawn to the encroaching sphere, though he was comforted to see the Reclamation Tactical Cubes still positioned on either side.

He knew it would be good to have them and the Juggernaut in such close supervision in case anything went awry, but Hugh didn't want to surrender to that attitude *too* quickly.

So instead, Hugh relished in the idea that their Cooperation starships were perched over it like guardians— sentinels watching over something that was lost, and may now be given new life.

"Two minutes, fifteen seconds until touchdown, Commander," Vorik said. "All readings and preliminary scans indicate the Borg sphere has had no internal nor external changes since Starfleet's initial discovery, and *now*, current approach."

"Thank you Commander," Geordi called, "set the *Eclipse* on auto-pilot

and come get your helmets and equipment. No use biting our nails over a shuttle hijack that shouldn't come."

Biting our nails?

Hugh puzzled over the expression before deciding to ask Geordi about it later.

Pulled out of thought, Hugh suddenly felt the stares of fellow xBs awaiting his command— even the Starfleet Ensigns eyeing the Director out of curiosity as touchdown ebbed ever closer.

"Well... I--"

The Director cleared his throat.

"Commander La Forge and I have... already debriefed you, before we departed *Solstice*. Everything in what we are to do, and what we may encounter. So instead, as the Reclamation Project's Executive Director, I leave you with *this*."

Hugh swallowed as he searched for some last-minute words.

"We enter the domain of a species that may *value* themselves as one unit, but they do not value *individual* life— nor the individual *bodies* that make that unit whole. But I believe I can speak for the group when I say we value *each life here*. I, Commander La Forge, and all your associates here today — Starfleet *or* Reclamation Project — enter that sphere as an equal unit. And despite whatever we may find inside, we are all here today— making the conscious choice to enter this ruin, this 'Artifact--' *despite* those risks. So I thank you. I *commend* you, even. To you, Starfleet: I will say that it is-- not *easy* for xBs, to re-enter these hallways. You are not alone, in your apprehension. But as Executive Director, and as a fellow individual, I will do my *best* to serve and protect you, as we aid each other inside. My best is bound by both my honor and duties as a volunteer to the Reclamation Project. And at times like these, our best is all we can do."

Crosis, Five, V'evik, their Relays, and the Starfleet personnel seemed to take that in well enough.

Before Hugh's anxieties would jolt him in trying to think of any more words to impart or steep in the worry that he'd somehow overstepped his boundaries, Geordi chimed in with his own wonderful thoughts and voice, the Commander putting a hand on his shoulder and giving it an affirming squeeze while he spoke.

That was nice.

"Well, you've got me beat for the 'rousing away team mission speech,' Director," Geordi mused as the Starfleet staff repressed smirks. "But I agree. And I would like to commend you all *too*, as Commander of the *Solstice* station. Your records will show that you chose immense bravery by accepting this assignment, and your personal character will carry this with you in unspoken esteem. Not only are we on the precipice of learning some incredible scientific breakthroughs, but there is one thing that the Director failed to mention, and I think bears repeating. There are 2,963 dormant drones inside that sphere that need the Cooperation's help," Geordi told them. "Nearly 3,000 souls that you're gonna help give another chance at life. And you all — Federation, Cooperation, whatever — you're helping make that possible. They may have a long road ahead of them to recovery, but... we can at least bring them to a good starting point. Even if that starting point is entering into a dormant, spooky-looking sphere with half its side blown off."

Except for Vorik, the cabin's entire complement chuckled at the comment.

V'evik managed a subtle grin.

And while Geordi's words were all reassuring, wise, and even *kind* for a Starfleet Commander, Hugh caught himself reeling over a small, yet important detail he noticed in Geordi's speech.

He actually remembered the *exact* number of drones that were on the sphere?

"You're being *reserved*, calling it spooky," Hugh humored the Commander.

Crosis' mustache ruffled. "Mm. I was waiting for someone in Starfleet to say it."

"Spooky, but quite *beautiful*, despite its purpose," Five hummed as the runabout slowed its approach. "How poisoned such simple architecture can become under such a violent influence."

"If you're, uh, talking about the *queen unit*," an Ensign managed, visibly swallowing his nerves, "at least she won't be there for long?"

Five turned to him with a gentle, tired look. "Yes," she agreed, "you're right. She will not. And then we'll be free to perform our duties."

"Alright everyone," Geordi called, "get into assigned ordering and in

the airlock. Let's keep formation until we reach the Queencell; Hagirian, Relay Four, you're home base here: keep locks on our signals at all times."

Both agreed with an "Yes Commander."

"Tactical Cubes *Theta, Iota*;" Hugh spoke with a pap to his suit's cubical badge, "remain on standby to anchor the sphere with tractor beams, and confirm Transporter Bays and Reclamation Medbay readiness to accept possible patients."

"Operations Primary Junction Twelve of Fifteen, reporting for Tactical Cube Theta; ready and on standby for both counts, Director."

"Operations Primary Junction Chiara, reporting for Tactical Cube Iota; ready and on standby for both counts, Director."

"Solstice station, Deck 4, Special Containment Chamber 1," Geordi requested his own Starfleet delta, "confirm chamber readiness to receive sphere Borg queen."

"At the ready, Commander: Reclamation and Starfleet personnel equipped and prepared to receive in pre-discussed procedures."

The *Eclipse* landed with a thud as the company donned their helmets and the airlock signaled an incoming cabin depressurization.

Hugh heard Geordi steel himself with a sigh. "Let's go."

Deep in the recesses of his memory, Hugh could remember the snow that dotted his face when his scout ship crash-landed: the day his life truly began. Broken bits of Borg spacecraft littered the crater around him, the bodies of his fellow drones were warped and mangled by the ship's rough impact... Hugh was not awake for long, after the crash— his body was pinned underneath a hull plating section, and its weight was making it harder to breathe. Before succumbing to unconsciousness, Hugh began his emergency hailing frequency back to the Collective, falling into an unknown expanse of frightening darkness and foreign loneliness.

Although not exactly a *pleasant* memory, Hugh savored and treasured it as one of his first.

He was unsettled, then, by how much wandering in this part of the sphere *reminded* him of that memory.

Out of the *Eclipse's* airlock, their EV Suits' mag-lev boots kept the group anchored to the flat debris plane they entered the sphere by—their helmet pilot lights creating tall, foreboding shadows from the sphere's shredded lunar "impact skid" gashes. Bodies of mangled, dead drones floated in space alongside wreckage of all shapes and sizes, some corpses bisected by the weak force field instilled by an instinctual AI life support, as Five would explain. Thankfully, Starfleet's tech allowed them to enter the same way that survey drones had been using to scan the sphere these previous weeks, each Reclamation Project and Starfleet officer helping the other inside to reach a more stable, less-zero-G part of the derelict starship.

As the company made their way deeper into the sphere, evidence of the wreckage outside grew less obvious, and the weight of the sphere's artificial gravity anchored each new step they took. Instead of dead bodies, *dormant* drones littered the sides of the hallways: peacefully sleeping in their regeneration alcoves, and thankfully boasting favorable life signs from their alcoves' interfaces. Each analysis Hugh made with his EV suit's helmet, tricorder scans, and his visual UI confirmed that they all were just deeply dormant, rather than dead or frozen—commanded into this void of a stasis before the Sphere entered through the wormhole.

Hugh noticed how the Starfleet personnel's phaser flashlights lingered on the drones' stoic faces a little longer than Reclamation Project members did.

Geordi made sure to remind them not to *touch* anything.

The Director had a hunch that rule would be an easy one to follow.

While Starfleet personnel gripped at their Type 3 Phaser Rifles, xBs held their Stun Batons at the ready. A standard-issue Cooperation defense weapon, the crooked baton was a physical embodiment of the pacifistic vow that xBs tried to follow. The highest damage a Stun Baton was capable of was equivalent to an average Starfleet phaser's stun setting, the Baton's "gimmick" being their electrical signal currents that

were developed to disrupt Borg Collective technology.

“Are we breathable?” Lieutenant Ha’arshov asked.

“Yes, but *barely*,” Junction Five warned. “When under emergency duress like this, spheres are kept at minimal life support for anyone other than drones. It is inadvisable to remove your helmets in any capacity until we have full control of life support.”

“At least we can hear environmentals and it’s not a *complete* vacuum,” Geordi commented, continuing his pace and the phaser at the ready. “Company: are we all getting the same energy pocket readings on the path up ahead?”

“Prognosis of this section would theorize that this is a regeneration alcove chamber for the maintenance drones in this wing of the sphere,” Croxis commented. “The further in we venture, the more we risk triggering alcove energy conduits.”

“Director Second Croxis is correct,” Vorik confirmed. “These are nearly identical to the scan reviews we performed before departing *Solstice*, but one of them seems to be fluctuating irregularly.”

“Thank you, Commander Vorik. Junction V’evik,” Hugh called, “advance to confirm it is not faulty cybernetic interference with our readings.”

“Yes, Director.”

“Ensign Smith, tail Junction V’evik: keep a cover no greater than six meters.”

Phaser Rifles lowered and Reclamation Stun Batons powered down as the group took the moment to recoup, Hugh looking about as he noticed Geordi frowning.

“It’s... *unfortunate* those drones couldn’t be counted with the other 2,963,” Geordi offered. “I’m sorry you all have to see them like that. They deserved a chance to meet the Reclamation Project, too.”

“I’m just sorry they had to endure a war they did not *ask for*, Commander,” Hugh said bitterly. “We will gather them, once we gain environmental control and begin cleanup. I am certain Ohniaka III will honor their deaths in the most appropriate way possible.”

“xB funerals,” Geordi mused, his tone cautious but laced with hope, “what are *those* like? Very meaningful ceremonies per individual, I imagine...”

Even under the helmet, Hugh grinned at Geordi's question— happy to lighten the burden of the mission at hand with fond recountings of home rather than constant dread and worry.

"They are different, depending on how much the xB wants to adhere to their other cultures," Hugh alluded. "But in recent years, common threads have begun to form on Ohniaka III."

"Tell him about the Wall of Entombment," Crois hinted. "It is not as macabre a discussion as some might find our cremation extraction methods."

"Good point."

"'Cremation extraction,' Sirs?"

"Ah, I suppose I must start with that, then... Ensign Smith— say if, in life, there was an augmentation the xB had that a loved one held in high regard— or loved ones simply wanted a piece of them to remember them by. After the deceased's body is cremated, those close to the deceased enter the room wit--"

"AAAAHH--!"

V'evik!?

Hugh bolted as he readied his Stun Baton, cybernetic eyes darting every which way to protect himself and anyone else from any organically-unseen dangers. The sounds of Phaser Rifles warming to their stun settings a particularly poignant sound as he motioned the team with a backhand to stay behind him. But just as suddenly as V'evik's holler had broken the silence, their panicking became more of a shudder over the EV suit intercoms, turning into panicked gasps as another raspy voice erupted over the Vulcan xB's horror.

"State this unit's designation!" the voice begged. *"State this unit's designation!"*

"V'evik--!"

As Hugh turned the corner, the Director's heart fell from his throat and into his gut.

"I cannot--" V'evik pleaded, "I-I cannot tell you it, I-!"

A navigational drone had pinned V'evik against the wall, Ensign Smith having fallen backwards with his Phaser Rifle smacked out of hand. The drone's full weight was leaning hard against V'evik's suit chestpiece thanks to a very serious leg injury, Smith either too stunned

to move or not wanting to lest he drone react to hostile actions. While the drone's nanoprobe tubules were deployed and horrifyingly close to V'evik as the drone gripped their EV suit. Hugh could tell that, if this drone didn't have the energy to heal their leg from a regeneration alcove's biochip restoration, then they certainly wouldn't be able to assimilate V'evik, much assimilate *anyone* thanks to the sphere's severance.

Though the drone initially recoiled from the group's extra light sources, they immediately abandoned V'evik and lunged for the closest member— Hugh falling to the ground under them with a hard thud.

“State this unit's designation!”

“Hold fire everyone--!” Hugh begged, one hand smushed between him and the drone and the other an open palm towards the team. “H-hold your fire, hold...”

“State this unit's designation!”

And so it was that the sphere's first Reclamation Reprisal began.

“Are you able... to state *your* designation?” Hugh asked gently.

“State this unit's designation!”

“Are you able to state *your* designation?”

“Sta--”

The drone stopped their repetition.

“This unit, we... we do not *know*, if we are able to state our designation,” they shuddered. “It has been so long since... since others have *confirmed* it; this unit has not had confirmation! And we have not confirmed *other* designations! State this unit's de--”

“Are there no other voices with you?”

“N... no--”

Hugh tapped his chestpiece. “Do you acknowledge *this* voice?”

The drone puzzled over this despite their panic. “We... this is, not,” they paused, “this voice is... it is not *within* us-- ”

“No,” Hugh affirmed, “*you* are correct. It is not.”

The drone paused, Hugh thankful to notice their breathing slowing and their mind engaging with something other than a feedback loop.

The concept of “you” was a big enough picture to grapple, anyway.

“State your designation,” the drone asked.

“Hugh.”

“This is not a registered Borg identification.”

"It is not," Hugh confirmed. "It was one *this* voice — a voice *outside* of the Collective — chose for himself."

The drone puzzled again.

"'Outside the Collective...' y-you do not *know* us? Are you *not* us?"

"No," Hugh confirmed, "though *I was*, once."

The "I" drop was one of the more revered verbal occasions for xBs to experience during the Reclamation periods of their lives. When interacting with newly-severed xBs, the element of the singular "I" incorporated into language had to be chosen very carefully, deliberately, and respectfully, as to not overwhelm the xB and send them into existential flurries and possible mental crises. Five, Crosis, V'evik (being calmed from Crosis' hands on their shoulders), and the xB relays guarding them all shuffled in place, tossing each other glances in reaction to what the Director had laid out.

"'I' is... *separate*," the drone put together, "than this unit..."

"Yes," Hugh pressed. "*This--*" he patted his chest again, "is Hugh. *I* am Hugh— it is my designation, it is my name that *I* chose. But yours," Hugh led on, "can you tell me your unit's designation?"

The drone fought through their anxiety-riddled thoughts.

"H-how can this unit tell if its designation is accurate... when it has not been *affirmed* by other voices for so long?"

This, admittedly, was unusual for drones to question their own designations so much. Typically, severed drones were more than enthused to repeat the number over and over, so Hugh surmised that he was dealing with two possible scenarios. His first idea considered the wormhole; perhaps there were temporal shifts with the sphere's unmooring in time, residually affecting the drones' sense of time... or, perhaps, the drone was simply *lonely*, these past few weeks, as solitary confinement takes its unique toll on people (even if this poor drone did not realize they were a "people" yet).

"What do you remember it to be? Can you tell me, Hugh," he placed his hand on his own chest again, "the *last designation* you remember?"

The drone was silent again.

"Third..."

Hugh swallowed, mentally bracing himself.

The latter could be any number.

[Stop projecting]

“Third... of Four. Third of Four. ...That was this unit’s designation.”

Hugh smiled.

“It is... good to *meet* you, Third of Four,” the Director assured, looking back at the drone’s bloodied, crumpled leg. “Can you stand?”

“This unit’s lower extremity is damaged,” Third of Four told him. “We were regenerating in this alcove to attempt to recover from the crash, but were unable to do so due to an outside obtrusion in the extremity.”

Hugh couldn’t put this drone’s life in any more danger than they already were.

So, shutting his jaw tight, he looked back to the group and decided this drone would be safer somewhere else.

“Alright,” he assured them. “Third of Four... I, Hugh, ask you to comply. I will send you somewhere to be treated by others to repair your lower extremity.”

The drone pondered, then nodded at Hugh.

“We will go.”

“Thank you. Even if I am not there, there are many others who will be there for you.”

“How many?”

Hugh’s grin returned as his hand dove into the EV Suit’s satchel. “Enough to care for you, Third of Four. Director Hugh to Tactical Cube *Theta*, Reclamation Medbay--”

“*Yes, Director.*”

“Prepare to receive one navigational drone for emergency surgery. Species scan indicates Wysanti, Nameless: lower left leg broken with regeneration alcove shrapnel embedded into organic and inorganic materials, and is beginning mental assessment of singularity. They will require immediate medical attention, as well as regenerative therapy and biochip energy conversion intake. I’m placing--” Hugh grunted as the drone’s chest exo-plating clinked against the Reclamation Project badge, “a spare badge on them; lock onto this activated signal.”

“*Understood, Director: Theta Reclamation Medbay is on immediate standby. I will inform Transporter Bay 2 to lock on in exactly 10 seconds.*”

“Those voices,” Third managed, “they are separate from you, too? Are those the ‘others’ you spoke of?”

“Yes.”

“How many other voices are there?”

“Many. Many, many others. Enough so that you will not be alone anymore, Third of Four.”

“...If this unit is just one, this unit would be... 'Third,'” they put together, “but the Four are no longer within proximity of Third. Does that make this unit... Third? Is this it?”

“If that’s what you want, Third of Fourth,” Hugh assured them. “Make your name whate--”

“Director Hugh: Tactical Cube Theta standing by to transport.”

“...whatever you want it to be. Ready, *Theta.*”

The drone, waffling between rattled and a stoic sense of peace, was bathed in the shimmering light of an energy signature, the only things left behind being the crumpled remnants of their leg and the blood spattered from their injury. Hugh’s chest heaved as he sighed in relief, struggling some to get up, but a rush pulled him back up onto his feet, one hand definitely Crovis’ and other foreign, Hugh unsure of wher-- ah, it was Geordi--!

“Come on, you,” Crovis urged, “off your leg--”

“2,962 left to go, if we’re not counting the queen,” Geordi offered. “Nice job, Hugh.”

“Director--” V’evik muttered, their voice strained from the earlier shock. “Thank you. I-- apologize, for my inability to de-escalate the situation and accommodate the drone’s mental needs.”

“Do not apologize, Junction V’evik,” Hugh assured, taking a deep breath. “You were thrown off typical confrontation protocol-- I wonder what I would’ve done if I was in *your* position. We’re just glad you’re safe.”

“Yeah, I think that would’ve thrown anyone off,” Geordi assured. “Ensign Smith, report?”

“Y-yes, Commander,” Smith managed. “I-- the drone, they knocked me back, it was--”

“They took us by surprise,” V’evik explained. “I simply pried into a hallway to try and pinpoint the location of the anomaly. ...and we ah-- *found*, said anomaly.”

“Use your EV suit’s extra pilot light next time,” Hugh told him, “but I

am glad that you both are not only safe, but unharmed.”

V’evik nodded uncharacteristically fast. “Me too.”

“Director, Commander,” Crosis noticed. “We must keep advancing before any other units possibly sense our presence from the transporter signature.”

“Good point. Let’s keep moving, everyone,” Commander La Forge agreed, “Lieutenant Ha’arshov, take up the rear again.”

“Yes Sir.”

“All Relays, pair up with Ensign disbursal. All Junctions, to the front with me,” Hugh declared.

“Yes, Director.”

As the group got back into formation, Hugh took one last look down the hallway where they’d found Third of Four. It was a rather dismal, unremarkable, dead end of a corridor— an uplink socket had been left open and exposed in the wall, no other drones or alcoves to be found...

Despite Hugh’s EV Suit airflow filtration, the corridor faintly smelled and tasted of mildew.

The next 3 minutes, 45 seconds were rather uneventful. It seemed as if Third of Four was simply an unlucky navigational drone that didn’t made it back to their alcove before the sphere’s memory-related collapse, unable to comprehend the silence surrounding their severed mind. As the company entered into and proceeded down a new catwalk, a sudden rattle ripped through the halls that stopped everyone in their tracks. Their green-tinged surroundings grew darker and a low rumble began to thrum through the floor’s grating, the buzz of infrasonic emanating in the direction of where the sphere’s primary queencell would be. This infrasonic warning was less of a report, however, and more of an “announcement,” that rumbling growing more frantic with each passing second.

“Uh,” Geordi stammered, “What is that?”

It was an internal operations sequence announcement, Hugh wanted to say.

Along the walls, timers in Borg letters flashed in repetition, changing its circular alphabet as fast as cortical nodes could track. A booming, bass-like klaxon ripped blared in sync with the flashing script. Every xB

knew there was only one unit on any Borg starship that could start this sequence at will, and every xB in the company gaped in horror as the color drained from Hugh's face.

"No--"

"Director Hugh, Ops Primary Junction Twelve, Tactical Cube Theta!" a comms channel barked, "we're reading a massive influx of energy from within the sphere gathering in a single location; what's going on, is this--!?"

"No no *no*-- she's started it, how did she--?!" Hugh clamored; then, regaining his mental footing, explained to the distressed Starfleet officers, "if the drones' Central Plexus is collapsed, the queen shouldn't be able to *reactivate* the sphere's internal network, but somehow s-she's started this sphere's self-destruct sequence!"

Everyone stared.

It appeared even Geordi was having difficulty choosing words.

"How... h-how much time do we *have*, before--?!"

"4 minutes, 55 seconds," Hugh managed, "she can't cut it any shorter than that, so we're guaranteed that much time--"

"And how much farther to her quencell?"

"Two minutes, two seconds at our current pace--" Vorik recounted, "possibly faster--"

"It must have been the transporter signal," Five deduced, "when Third of Four was beamed out. Perhaps it was the new-- *energy* frequency inside the sphere; i-it may have sparked an instinctual queen unit relay backup! She didn't do this for the Starfleet drones!"

"Can we stop it!?" Geordi pleaded.

The crowd was silent as Hugh could practically feel the xBs' minds try to formulate something, anything--

"I can," Junction five declared, "Junction V'evik and I can. We might disengage the terminals if Junction V'evik can undo whatever cybernetic interface the queen has come into contact with, while the Director deactivates the quencell and retrieves the data core- but we must go, *now--!*"

"We understand if all present Starfleet personnel would rather emergency beam-out while we shut down the sequence," Hugh offered, "we don't want you to--"

"Director Hugh," Geordi stated firmly, "Nobody wearing a Starfleet

badge will be leaving you or this group; I will *not--*”

Geordi stopped himself. “The only place we’re all going,” he resumed as he readied his rifle, “is to that primary queencell. Now let’s move: all Starfleet personnel, I want us in a top-down following flank formation, follow any and all dictations of Reclamation Project officers; is that understood!”

A cacophony of “Yes Sir!”s filled the hallway as Junction Five and V’evik led the way forward. Without missing a beat, the formation took off, the gaggle of officers and staffers rushing the corridor and closer to the infrasonic’s source.

“Commander La Forge!” Solstice’s Ops team begged, “requesting immediate status report of away team!”

“Can’t talk right now, Ensign!” Geordi called, “refer to Tactical Cube Ops *Theta* and *Iota* for correspondence debriefing on the situation at hand, please and thank you! Engage emergency shielding at max output capacity for any and all *Solstice* facilities, and recall any currently deployed drones or worker bees immediately!”

“Admirals Clancy and Janeway are on the line, Sir!”

“Give us two minutes, put them on hold- something!”

“I can’t exactly put two admirals on hold, Commander!”

“Oh, yes you will- by my order! Commander La Forge over and out!”

“Private channel to Commander Geordi La Forge,” Hugh requested his EV suit’s comms OS. When the channel blipped to life after his request was approved, Hugh’s voice sounded more worried than he would’ve liked it to be. “Geordi--”

“I’m not leaving you,” Geordi panted. “Don’t ever think, that-- we, that I’d-- ever *leave* you when things got too hot, Hugh. After all, I’ve-- faced my share of supposed self-destruct sequences, before--”

“Forgive me, Commander,” Hugh asked, “I did not intend to-- *underestimate* you or your officers’-- *dedication--*”

Despite the fog on Geordi’s EV suit helmet, Hugh managed to notice a smirk and hear the barest hint of chuckling.

“Forgiveness *denied.*”

As the group ran for 2 minutes and 19 seconds, they passed scores of dormant drones despite the blaring alarm above them- oblivious to

the imminent death sentences decreed by their queen unit. Predictably, the queencell's door was sealed both physically and by a force field's shielding, a multitude of Stun Batons crackling to life for their intended use. With their electric clubs, the xBs struck the sealed door in unison with all their might, lime-green veins of electric discharge bathing the eerily lit hallway. The nanoprobe-woven wall's makeup and sickly green shielding began to waver the further in they drove their batons, Hugh gritting his teeth past the rising ache in his left shin to push his baton in as hard as he could. Once the shielding broke down, Geordi urged every xB out of the way as Starfleet officers fired continuous phaser blasts at the door, the material finally melting and giving way to a hole cut in the chamber's side.

And with 2 minutes, 26 seconds left on the EV Suit's clocks before the sphere's destruction, a circular piece of sliced-open wall fell inside the queencell, and the sight inside was one no xB or Starfleet officer could say they had ever seen.

Behind the queencell's control console, smashed glass from a queen's rejuvenation tank littered the chamber's floor— nanoprobe stasis fluid still leaking where it had no doubt been a waterfall not minutes before. A crimson, black-and-green blood smear led up to the control hub and the queen herself: a mere head and shoulders splayed over the console, cybernetic tendrils from her exposed spine and cranial cables were utilized as uncanny, makeshift arms that might've drug her towards and up the console's stand. The queen's forehead was smeared with blood and encrusted with glass, dribbling out of a circular wound in the center of her bruised, nanoprobe-veined forehead. The blood contoured a wicked smile that spread across her ghastly-pale face; as the queen unit stared directly at Hugh, directly *into* him, Hugh remembered that she wielded a horrid reminder of what every xB once was: as if her smile was a scepter made of malice, hatred, and bitterness.

“Welcome home,” she spat wickedly, “*Cooperation.*”