

# 9

## REANIMATION

### **Cooperation xB Societal Behavior | Mutual Aid from Inherited Adaptability**

*On Liberated Borg and Inclinations Towards Mutual Aid Resources for Public Infrastructure*

To establish the themes by which this section shall extrapolate on, allow me to share a small anecdote from my time on the Liberated Borg homeworld.

It occurred during the eighth month of my stay on Ohniaka III, a week into the Capitol city's beginning of wintertime. While similar to the biting cold I've experienced visiting Earth's city of Vancouver, Canada during December or one of Andoria's more "balmy" springtime days amidst their icy townships, I found the winds rather chilly one evening, bundling my coat to excuse myself for a quick, warming smoke from my tobacco pipe. Supervising author Junction Horus and I were waiting at a public transit stop to head to an art gallery's recent installation from a renowned, yet elusive hard-light hologram sculptor, and the cold seemed to have seeped into the soil and caused some newly-inlaid paving to crack the amply-spaced stop.

At least, this is what we postulated, after I slipped and rolled my left ankle, accompanied by what I heard (and felt) to be an ungodly snap as I tumbled to the ground and my pipe flew out of my hands.

I promise the reader that, from this point on, the preamble of my tumble takes secondary focus to the context of this entry's subject.

As amiable and sudden as a flock of San Francisco's Starfleet HQ pigeons, I was descended on by xBs already at the stop, a dozen murmurs of varying "are you alright?"s echoed by a host of augmented individuals crowding around me. As I clenched my teeth from the immediate pain, I remember Junction Horus confirming to bystanders everything from my name, pronouns, down to the microseconds in which my observed fall happened. While three xBs blocked the path so no one might accidentally cycle by or walk through my impact site, another group of six immediately circled around the offending crack in the pavement to observe it and, one pulling out a personal communicator, began to call for something I could not hear, as my attention was drawn to one one, not two, but three medics Junction Horus was conversing with. One xB, even, took the time to fetch my pipe for me; studying its craftsmanship and inquiring of its nature, and I realized this individual was distracting me from the searing ache in my ankle that my pained face most likely communicated.

I began to realize that it helped to have a culture with its highest level of societal care invested in medical and communal wellbeing, as I gave one xB permission to remove my boot and sock to examine the pained, already-swelling joint. From a suddenly-produced medical tricorder at this xB's side, the metal of their augmented hand was surprisingly caring, careful, and mindful of my initial (perhaps obvious) surprise, the crowd of xBs seemingly further fascinated by the fact I was a completely non-Reclaimed human in their world and so willing to be treated and cared for by their attendance. With one medic scanning, one affixing a cold patch, and one carefully holding my extremities, not three minutes later I was back on my feet again, the first xB recommending that if I still felt soreness after the event, I replicate a cold patch under a replicator serial number, or that I visit a clinic not a block from where Junction Horus and I resided, as these clinics are open 24/7 for all urgent physical and mental care. My mind, admittedly, was

still processing the speed at which the xBs seemed to communally not only care for my injury, but also remedy the offending problem, as three xB construction workers beamed in from out of nowhere with large tools and direction from the crowd of six. By the time the transit car approached the stop, the attending group had returned to waiting as if nothing had happened at all, save for polite glances from my attending physicians (and some-still surprised, potent stares from xBs at my very presence).

Functionality, to xBs, is communal— one inherently powered by mutual aid. It echoes heavily of anarcho-communism and collectivism, with the extra "intimacy" of post-Collective life; if one aspect of the society is harmed or injured, none may proceed further until the offending problem is corrected. This desire for societal functionality is not a demand, but rather willingly and instinctively given, as if to oppose the Collective's forced Hivemind of indenture that would have them blindly and oppressively service its needs (which could abandon a "unit" without a second thought). Without delving into further societal details such as communal food blocs, the lack of capital currency, and infrastructure automation (though my writings will detail these later), assistance is communally delegated according to the specialties of interests per-xB. The individual's unique talents assist in identifying, fixing, and "adapting" to a problem, repurposing that quality which the Collective so brutally foisted upon them. Individuals' strengths make up the communities' strength and is, like so many aspects of Ohniaka III, a paradox of refusing the Collective's demanded suppression of individuality, and rather celebrates the unique strengths of many to create one collectively-supportive community.

To allow the reader a satisfying narrative end to my anecdote: by the time we arrived back to the station three hours later after our outing to the gallery, the crack had been very well tended to in our absence, complete with a charmingly-small construction fence surrounding the square to indicate recent, drying work.

**[EARTHEN CALENDAR - OCTOBER 4, 2391]  
VESSEL SERIAL NUMBER S-4381, DESIGNATION L.B.V. 'ATLAS'**

“Thank you again, Junction Five. I apologize for my lack of proximity awareness regarding my own augments.”

The medical tricorder snapped shut as Geordi watched Engineering Junction Five look over the once-bloodied spot on the Bolian xB's head.

“Your apology is accepted and noted, Relay,” she told him, mashing a bandage corner again with her thumb to ensure the material was fully stuck to his forehead. “I will admit there is a... *distracting* element, to our ‘supervisor’s’ vocal machinations, but you must also pay mind that your processors do not divert attention from active tasks at hand.”

“Agreed,” Geordi added, “I can't even *understand* the guy, and here I could listen to him all day.”

Five smirked before instructing her Relay further. “Report to the on-site medical Junction and their station for the remainder of your shift to ensure my treatment was adequate. I do not want one of this department’s Relays ‘down and out’ with an infection to a former augment site.”

“U-understood, Junction. Thank you too, Commander.”

“No problem.”

The three stood in place.

Was he gonna get going, or...?

Five tilted her head towards the corridor that led to the turbolift, the gold-and-silver pattern in her headwrap glinting in the sphere’s ambient lighting.

Eventually, the Relay understood, then *followed* her inference towards the exit, Five sighing and looking back to Geordi once the doors slid shut. “Thank you for tending to him, Commander. I only apologize he did not immediately ask for aid, when you saw his wound,” she admitted. “Younger former Borg, or-- those more recently *Reclaimed*... it can be difficult for them to remember they must *act* upon a choice: even if that choice is deciding whether or not a *medkit* is required for an injury.”

“Happy to do it,” Geordi insisted, “makes sense though now, why he was just walking around like that with a gash on his head... buuut I had

my own 'cranium-surrounding augment' for a good chunk of my life— Lord knows I forgot my VISOR's own spatial proximity, sometimes--”

Five looked interested. "I recall seeing images of you with it in our debriefs, Commander. May I ask when you acquired your ocular implants?"

“Back in uhhh, '72, I wanna say?” the Commander tried to remember, opening his PADD to make a note of an on-site injury. “'73? They were needing to do some heavy refurbishing on the circuits that connect to my nerve endings, anyway; thought I might as well go the whole nine yards.”

“Mm. Did you design them yourself?”

"In some parts, yeah; not so much others. Bev really handled a lot of the neurological connection schematic ends so I wouldn't mess anything up, but I feel like I've learned a lot since then, so..."

The Junction was silent as she listened just as intently as she stared at him, Five's blue-and-black eyes darting back and forth as if pondering something.

By the grace of Geordi's own eyes was he able to notice the fact that Five's lenses were moving at mere millimeters— no doubt analyzing what her range of cybernetic vision could notice.

“It seems, Commander, that... we do not *see*, from too-different of perspectives.”

Geordi squinted as Five tried to blink her blue eye over and over.

He began to smirk before Geordi eventually shook his head with a snort.

Well.

She certainly *tried* to crack a joke.

But in all of Geordi's five weeks of being here, he was beginning to learn something about himself— if not for the fact their combined laughter began to reverb off one another until the two Engineers were in near hysterics.

It turned out the Commander loved xBs' sense of humor.

While Geordi might've been sore from the labors he and Junction Five were assigned to that day, the two's laughter echoed throughout

the chamber, rivaling the absent rumblings of Atlas' musings. Part of the Commander wondered if he should check in with Beverly and see how she was doing— though last he heard, his friend was under Junction's Troval's introductory supervision for the Pasteur's first day out of three docking at Solstice. Federation-manufactured tools had to be synchronized in order to work with Reclamation Project tech, after all, and it gave the chance for Pasteur personnel to marvel at the eerie shadows cast by the Cooperation's geometric starships.

But a much more horrible shadow had been cast in Geordi's mind from yesterday's talk with Beverly, and it only seemed to grow longer as the day cycle turned to night.

"...knowing who he was—that little drone we almost sent back to firebomb his own people—and then seeing who he is today?"

Because once Beverly had left Geordi's Ready Room that evening to explore the rest of *Solstice*, Geordi was left with his own thoughts— guilt's harsh lamp shining a painfully bright light against the dark of what they'd nearly done.

"Choose... what I *want*... --I would choose to stay with *Geordi!*"

"And despite my crew's best attempts to turn it into some kind of *pet*, this operation will continue as planned; do I make myself clear, Mr. La Forge?"

Why had that come so easily when he talked to Beverly? *How* had it come so easily? How was it that two seconds after the word "firebomb" left his lips, the reality of their pondered genocide began to truly sink in? Hadn't he felt guilt about this beforehand? Of course he did, Geordi knew; he remembered being a wreck for days after letting Hugh go like that— after Geordi saw the drone look at him and recognize him. Data, that beautiful man— he did his utmost best to comfort Geordi despite the loss, the weighted knowledge of complicity... but Geordi didn't deserve comfort, for what he did. He knew there could never be justification for what he almost had a hand in doing, 23 years ago. Nothing could ever absolve him of such a horrid crime against his

pledge to Starfleet, much less an atrocity towards an entire species like Hugh's...

So, the longer the day dragged on, the more Geordi began to remember how he'd once taken that guilt— and stuffed it into an emotional compartment the Commander thought he'd never have to unpack.

"I trust you too, Geordi. More than you may ever know... or that I might be able to ever realize."

He said that so sweetly. So genuinely— driven by an insatiable lust for chasing more of that emotional revelry.

Hugh trusted him.

And Geordi, he--

...He could talk to *Beverly* about this, once she got that "evaluation" he asked for.

For now, he had to be happy with small talk from Junction Five.

As their laughter evened out, Geordi remembered something. "You were gonna ask me something before Kaazhan bonked his head," he noted, "what's up, Junction?"

She nodded and collected her thoughts. "I hope this is not too personal of a query, Commander," Five started, "and please disregard answering if it is, but... non-xB humans, who-- *have* cybernetics. What do they... you, I mean— or... what have you seen others do with their 'discarded' or obsolete augments? What have you done with yours? Your VISOR, did you... keep it?" she asked in genuine curiosity. "Did you just dispose of it? Preserve it?"

Hmm.

Not the weirdest question he'd gotten about his VISOR, but Geordi wondered where she was going with it.

"I uh-- actually have a replicated version of it in my Ready Room, if you ever wanna see it," Geordi said, looking between his PADD and for a circuit panel that should've been somewhere on this wall. "The real one is back on Earth in my Starfleet storage. Don't think Mom would be too

happy, knowing I got rid of something like that.”

“Your Mother?”

“Mhm; Captain Silvia La Forge of the ol’ *USS Hera*,” he mused with an air of pride. “God rest her and her crews’ souls...”

Five seemed to pick up on his tone. “I apologize for your loss.”

Geordi forced a smile as he typed on his PADD.

“Gotta keep the love outweighing the grief, y’know.”

“Yes, actually,” Five agreed. “That is a good sentiment, Commander.”

Geordi was satisfied enough with that reply, but curiosity made him look up from the PADD and down to Five— running a diagnostic wand over to try and find a power conduit.

“Why do you ask though, Junction?” Geordi pointed out. “About my VISOR?”

The diagnostic wand clicked off as Five sat up. “I guess I’m looking for... ‘inspiration,’ one could call it,” she admitted, “as Atlas calls it, I suppose. And the inspiration is less for myself, and more for my partner. ...Though, it could technically be both of us— considering the close proximity we share.”

“You and Relay Two of Ten, right?”

“Yes,” she confirmed with a restrained smile. “I could happily expound more on my partner after our shifts, but-- ...well. On Ohniaka III, there is a tradition some xBs adhere to in which they keep their post-Reclamation Procedure augments.”

“Really!”

“Yes! Eyepieces, limbs, hydraulics ports— many different kinds of implants can be kept for many different kinds of sentimental reasons. Some are given as physical tokens of trust between various parties, some given to relatives who have passed on, some are professionally preserved or given to the Reclamation Project for further study...”

Geordi noticed her pause.

“Two and I, we-- did not keep any of our former pieces, after our procedures. It was a traumatic period in our lives that we rather not have in our communal home.”

“Understandable why.”

“Mm. After our encounter with Queen 127, though, Two recently had an augment that superficially supported her tibia... dislodge itself,” Five

said with a hand motion, “She has healed sufficiently since its removal. It is the first augment either of us have ever shed naturally.”

Geordi whistled. “That long since your initial Reclamation Procedures, huh? Yeah, must’ve been a shocker to both of you... and now, it sounds like,” he deduced, “you’re trying to decide whether or not you should keep it, unlike those other ones?”

He took Five’s huffed silence as confirmation.

To himself, Geordi recalled their boarding of Atlas a month and more ago—remembering the pained, fearful glances Two shared with Five from against the wall thanks to her broken shin.

Geordi was well familiar with the kind of love that made a brow crease like that in worry for someone.

“You two were from the same alcove, right?”

She grinned in confirmation. “Our tertiary of 10 was part of a recovered Borg cube wreckage cache near Tellarite space five years ago. Additionally, we were actually... former shipmates together from the *USS Lalo*, before Wolf 359,” Five told him. “Though we do not remember much of our lives before assimilation.”

She paused.

“Starfleet life though, at least, we do. Older memories, though... those are more difficult. Pieces come back to us—all 10 of us—every great now and then.”

Geordi chose his next words carefully.

“...Were you, uh... were you both together before you were assim--”

“No.”

Five lips twitched.

“I can specifically remember *wanting* to be, though. And I am pleased to report she shares... or. *Shared*, similar sentiments.”

Geordi’s allowed a grin to crack through. “Who proposed?”

“I did.”

Geordi nearly chuckled.

*Her and Data, huh.*

“Well... I’m humbled you’d ask me for an opinion on something that sounds pretty personal for you both,” the Commander started. “And I don’t want to speak over you or your partner, but--”

Five cocked her brow. “You learn quickly from us, Commander.”

That repressed chuckle from before finally got a chance to eck out of Geordi. “All of you—! especially Hugh- you all got me saying it! But ah... yeah, y’know? Maybe keeping this augment could be good for you both,” he offered. “You two helped bring a queen unit into custody, not to mention possible rehabilitation and deprogramming. That’s not something a lot of people get to put on a resume. Plus: this operation is a pretty big deal for both the UPF and LBC... at least I’d like to hope it is, for everyone involved. And you and Two are in a good time in your both’s lives now, so... if you keep it?” Geordi shrugged. “Two gets a little souvenir of her bravery, and you get to tell her how neat it’ll look above the mantle back home on Ohniaka III. ...Or. *Wherever* it is xBs keep their augments.”

From the look of it, Five had plenty of questions for Geordi about what kind of grandpa he was to talk about a mantle.

But she seemed to settle on something, shutting a floor panel as she stuffed her diagnostic tool back in a utility belt pouch.

“I believe earlier you said it best, Commander,” she resolved. “We must balance out the love with the grief. Perhaps her tibia webbing could be a symbol of that balance.”

A pang of guilt strummed at Geordi’s heart as he managed a sad smile. “Something like that, yeah.”

She nodded. “Thank you. I will offer her the proposal.”

Geordi yawned as if his body responded to seeing the chronometer, waving his hand in assured protest. “Engineering’s also the best for another reason, Junction— they can be damn good secret keepers.”

Oh, wasn’t that a painful truth.

Before Geordi could rib off Five, a voice broke through his combadge. “*Starbase Solstice Containment Chamber 4 to Commander Geordi La Forge!*” called a voice. “*Emergency, Commander: please respond!*”  
*The Containment Chamber?!*

Geordi plapped his chest. “I’m here; go ahead!”

“*Queen unit 127 is requesting a meeting again, Commander;*” came a stressed reply. “*She uh-- oh god that regen fluid is everywhere, she smashed her tank-- she emerged from stasis as of a minute and 15 seconds ago, and she-- really wants to speak to Executive Director Hugh again, Sir!*”

Geordi looked up and met Five’s shaken expression.

They knew she would eventually wake up, sure.

But the anxiety, apprehension, and uncertainty that quietly bubbled while Queenie slept had suddenly been cranked up to a boil— Geordi currently remembering how late it was and sighing as a palm went to mush at his face.

This was going to be a very long night.

**SPECIALTY OUTPOST STARBASE "SP-4852 SOLSTICE"**

**[CLASSIFIED LOCATION]**

“Well...”

Hugh failed to hold back a long, drawn-out yawn, taking a long sip of his Puerh tea thermos immediately after.

“Good morning to you. ...and good evening for me.”

“Ahhh, is it a ‘night cycle?’ Forgive us; we’re *prevented* from syncing our chronometer to this station, after all.”

Hugh blinked before he conceded to her lack of amenities with a sigh. “It is currently 2215, Stardate 68761.44. My apologies.”

“That is *not* what you should be apologizing for.”

“Oh?” Hugh piqued. “What should I apologize for instead?”

“Not granting our request.”

“...What reque-- oh.”

Hugh stopped.

*[To die]*

“I’m--”

His eyes shut.

“Alright, let’s...”

The Director groaned.

Geordi was right.

This *was* going to be a long night.

But it certainly wasn't going to start off with Hugh apologizing for refuting a proposed *regicide*.

Hugh had originally intended to retire early for the evening, considering he was on Medical Resource duty tomorrow to help calibrate Federation supplies to Cooperative energy wavelengths. But that all changed when, an hour and two minutes ago, Queen 127 erupted from her sleep and demanded an audience with Director Hugh again— pulling all Geordi, Vorik, Crosis, Troval, and now Captain Crusher to bear witness to what Hugh hoped wasn't simple petulance. Troval and Crusher's eyes were bagged from a full day's worth of Reclamation Procedures and terminology familiarization, Crosis and Geordi providing the doctors with refreshments to keep their spirits (and energy) up. Surprisingly, Vorik was the last to arrive despite his typical Vulcan timeliness, smelling of Seh'lohn incense after what he explained was from his and V'evik's interrupted meditation session (although no one complained about the lovely scent that filled the observation chamber). For Hugh, it helped to have an encouraging pep talk beforehand, and with a quick review to his notes and refilling his thermos with replicated Puerh tea, Hugh felt (or rather hoped) he was ready for Consultation Session #2 with Queen 127.

After rambling off his recording introduction, the Director settled back into his chair, offering a reserved grin to the disembodied head opposite his seat.

"Regarding this meeting's circumstances," Hugh began, "may I ask you something?"

She allowed a pause to hang.

"We will answer."

"Why... did you emerge from stasis, 127?" Hugh asked gently. "Was it simply just to ask me why we haven't killed you yet?"

"Yes."

They silently watched each other for 10.51 seconds.

And Hugh was about to take that as an answer before he watched

Queen 127 purse her lips, her jet-black eyes glancing around the holographic “surfaces” of the room.

“...No.”

“Then what for?”

She paused again.

The Queen locked onto Hugh’s thermos, watching him as he placed it back on the table with a small thunk.

“What are you drinking?”

Hugh followed her gaze, tucking the original question into his pocket for later recall. “Puerh tea, actually.”

She tilted her head. “We are... somewhat aware of this beverage. Cultivated from the *camellia sinensis* leaf of Terra Prime, also known as ‘Earth.’ The leaves are fermented as either buried tablets, large cakes, or simple bulk storage in large chambers. Oxygenation or richness of the soil it is aged with impacts the flavor. It is described as ‘harsh, strong, and peety with multiple supplemental flavor profiles,’ and has high levels of the chemical stimulant known as ‘caffeine.’”

Hugh offered her a small raise of the thermos with an impressed grin. “Most thorough.”

“Why do you consume this?” she asked. “Why do you purposefully endure something... bitter, ‘earthy’ in taste— even though you do not require its energy byproducts? We see your last...rather lengthy regeneration cycle,” she noted with a grimace, “has supplemented you 101.91 hours of uninterrupted work functionality. You do not require caffeine, and yet you drink it?”

Hugh made sure to draw out another long sip as she awaited his answer.

He also made sure to place his thermos back down with a slightly-louder thud.

“You are correct, in that I do not strictly require it,” Hugh remarked as he sat up. “But I feel it... helps me, as I perform my daily tasks. While it may be a stimulant, caffeine has a beneficial, if slightly ‘energizing’ effect on my mental processing prowess, especially when emerging out of a Regeneration Cycle.”

“Make better alcoves, then.”

Hugh frowned, but continued. “I also appreciate the various levels of

craftsmanship that go into creating the different kinds of this tea. For example: there are cakes in Earthen soil that've been buried for hundreds of human years, and one plot I know of is sealed for another nine until they believe it is ready for consumption. 200 years of fermentation," Hugh gushed, "how impressive, is it not? I, ah-- may or may not have a part of that reserved for myself, once the plot is unearthed... oh, also! The brewing methods are calculatively methodical, too. Brewing it can be a very welcome ritual for both myself and if I have company. But ah-- most of all," Hugh mused and, popping the tab again, he offered her a reserved grin...

"Because I like it."

Hugh took a sip as he watched her form a response.

"You... *like* it?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Hugh mulled on this question before he realized something. "Didn't I, just... tell you?" he asked in return. "Is my previous explanation not enough justification for my preferences?"

"No," she said plainly. "What you did was explain to us your enjoyment of wasting functionality. You did not know the qualities of this tea until you sampled it and mired it in useless ritual. It is possible you may not 'like' the object, sensation, whatever it may be— until you have interacted with it and given it frivolous qualities. It is an unproductive use of time."

Though Hugh rolled his tongue against his cheek, he couldn't help but point his finger with a confident grin like Geordi might do. "'Don't knock it until you try it,' I've heard the phrase go. Not to mention, Queen 127: the very nature of former Borg has been found to be, ah-- quite the paradox itself."

The queen unit squinted at his platitudes.

At least Hugh thought he was being charming (if the stifled laughter on the other end of his earpiece communicator was anything to confirm).

"I feel inclined to remind you, 127," Hugh mused, "that you still have not answered my original question. What was it that brought you out of stasis?"

The queen unit thinned her lips.

She looked around the room — all its makeshift walls, lights, and ambient sounds like that of the sphere she once slept in — before frowning at Hugh again, 127's eyes sending a shiver through his augmented spine.

“We will answer this question if station Commander Geordi La Forge enters our audience for this... Consultation Session.”

Hugh loathed how much he could feel surprise, shock, confusion, and... what else was there: fear? Apprehension? Reservedness? A slurry of emotions struck him off guard at her request, the Director left confused and needing a reason before he spoke for Geordi in any way possible.

The indiscernible murmurs over his earpiece didn't help, either.

“I ah...” he managed, “may I ask... why? Why would you-- want the station Commander to--”

She simply smirked in a phrase's likeness that, as Hugh once heard from a Starfleet officer, was similar to a “shit-eating grin.”

“You never know. This unit might *like* his presence.”

As Hugh's expression flattened and his fingers drummed the desk, he supposed there was a reason her species was able to secure such integrated hierarchy within the Collective.

It helped to be a fast learner.

The Director puffed his cheek as he heard a “*Hugh?*” on his earpiece's other end.

“Would you-- excuse me for a moment, 127? I must discuss this wi--”

“Go,” she shrugged (as much as a head and shoulders *could* shrug by themselves), “it is yet *another* fallacy of this form of existence, we suppose; the need to-- *confirm* things, with separate beings.”

“Consent is a vital aspect in the preservation of individual sanctity, 127.”

“How inefficient.”

Halfway up from his chair, Hugh grimaced as he stood before stuffing it down with a forced, polite smile. “I will return shortly.”

As Hugh marched through the stages of the the decon corridor, his mental fog began to clear, realizing the group on the other end had been chattering this whole time.

Most notably, he was too late to catch Captain Crusher's words of

"Hugh wait, he's coming down there already," and the Director bumped into the Commander in the tight decon hallway as they both tumbled over various apologies.

"Oh, Hugh!" Geordi babbled, "shit, sorry; I'm--"

"Ahaha, no no-- I-I should've been listening for you, and--"

Alone in a very tiny space, Hugh and Geordi were in limbo between the observation chamber's door and the sealed holosuite entrance.

Hugh swallowed. "I didn't expect her to ask me that."

"I don't think anybody did," Geordi huffed. "Beverly was a little concerned, but everyone gave me their blessing to go ahead."

The Commander paused, moving his head to try and lock eyes with the xB. "Do I have *yours*?"

Hugh tried and failed to hide a rather sad frown. "As long as you're *willing* to endure this."

"Oh, come on; I'm not about to let my station co-manager shoulder all that verbal flack if he gets the chance to share it."

Despite the adoration that threatened to distract his thoughts, Hugh paused, pointing at Geordi as he stepped back against the wall. "She will make... *every* attempt to try and manipulate you," he warned. "If you think what she's trying to do to *me* is horrid, imagine what she will try to do to *you*— someone who's not been a part of the Collective. There are... *libraries*' worth of cultures in her head, Geordi— she knows very well how to work a conversation to her unit's benefit, and--"

"Hey."

Geordi's hands rose to rest on Hugh's shoulders— as if anchoring the xB to a world that Queen 127 threatened to pull him out of.

"I've got an inkling, after watching you. And I think I can safely say that while she's trying to *manipulate*, she's also asking questions— just like you are. Questions that may lead to..." Geordi bobbed his head, "what would you call it: 'furthering individuality?' Reclamation?' 'Not being as much of an asshole?'"

Hugh smirked and waggled his formerly-pointing palm. "Admittedly, not a bad way of phrasing it."

"Thanks. But I've been listening, Hugh— and don't think I didn't pay attention to Session One. I see what she's trying to pull, and you're handling her better than some admirals I've seen in a *court martial*. If

she gets too combative? We get up and leave just like you did. I hope it doesn't come to that, but... we should only have to take so much. Admittedly, I-- kinda *wondered* if I was ever going to participate in one of these, considering the circumstances... and hey, Hugh? From what I've seen," Geordi told him, "I've been watching one of the best—if not *the* best— Reclamation Consultation personnel I could ever hope to reference."

As Geordi spoke, a part of Hugh's processors recognized his attention was severely divided.

With Geordi so close and saying such sweet things to him, a vision--no, a dream, a *desire* threatened to choke Hugh's thoughts and drown them in *further* distraction! Oh, how strong this spontaneity-driven desire was; where did this *come* from?! How was it that Hugh could so easily imagine Geordi sliding his ringed hands up to cusp Hugh's face, pulling him into a deep kiss during this moment of weakness and abandoning 127 entirely? Full spatial proximity came back to Hugh just before his hands had instinctually settled on Geordi's hips, the xB woefully clenching his fists to avoid giving into this distraction where cameras weren't pointed and he could pull Geordi close--

But Geordi must've sensed Hugh's errant hands, the Commander blinking and nodding as he loosened his grip on Hugh's shoulders. "Oh, uh, I'm... *bah*— sorry Hugh;" he tried to laugh off, "I didn't-- uh--"

"N-no no, you're alright," Hugh said tightly, "please, I..."

*Focus, Hugh-- focus, damn it!*

But in order to focus, Hugh needed a Tether.

And while Geordi couldn't give him the kind he was used to, Hugh simply smiled and rested his hands to hang onto Geordi's forearms and keep him firmly rooted.

The worry in Geordi's brow lifted when Hugh gave the Commander a slight squeeze.

"We go together," was all Hugh could muster. "I told you I trust you, Geordi. That sentiment very much applies here."

A bashful smile staved off Geordi's lingering doubt as best it could. "Whatever she says," the Commander promised, "whatever she might dredge up— let's work through it. Monarchs are only as powerful as their seized resources, right? And right now, she doesn't have much. So let's..."

help her process it. Go with the flow. Let's--"

"Cooperate?"

Hugh's reserved delight turned into a quietly-shared laugh with Geordi, the Commander letting go to playfully pap Hugh on the cheek.

Hugh had to stop himself from leaning into that hand and giving into distraction's dangerously-tempting scenarios.

"Are you ready?"

Hugh loathed how his visual UI notified him of how much blood had rushed to his cheeks.

And according to that very same enhanced vision, Hugh could tell *Geordi's* heart rate and blood pressure were *also* elevated.

He would be lying to them *both* if Hugh said it was just merely nerves from 127.

"Yes," Hugh affirmed. "Are you?"

"As much as I'll ever be."

So, with a deep breath and a final adjustment of Geordi's own earpiece, Hugh shuffled to the side and allowed Commander La Forge through the decon vestibule and into 127's holosuite.

"Queen 127!" Geordi proclaimed. "Quite *relieving*, if I may say, to be meeting you again *without* a phaser rifle in hand."

"Commander Geordi La Forge," 127 confirmed. "A *pleasure*, we are sure."

"I'd hope so!" he chimed, taking a quick seat in a newly-manifested holographic chair. "You're the one who asked for me, after all! What's the reason, if I may ask? Did you want the chance to talk to a high-ranking Starfleet officer without *kidnapping* them? Was it my charm? Maybe just wanted to get a look at *this* handsome mug?" Geordi boasted as he motioned a hand over his smirking face.

Hugh would be lying if he said he wasn't thankful for Geordi's levity and aforementioned charm.

"We have our reasons," she sneered, obviously unamused by the Commander's confidence. "We know what information we assimilated from various *Enterprise-D*, *E*, and Starfleet personnel about you, as well as Locutu--"

"Ah-ah-ahhh," Geordi corrected, "that is *not* Admiral Jean-luc Picard's name and you *know* that. If you really wanna take a jab the Admiral,

you could call him 'mon Capitane,' but I think *that* name's reserved for someone else at this point."

127 gave Geordi a flat look. "Are you going to walk out on us like *Director Hugh* did if we continue to refer to Locutus in this ma--"

At the mere *beginning* of saying Picard's Borg-given name, Geordi's chair legs scraped against the floor as he stood up halfway and locked eyes with the Queen to challenge her further.

Queen 127's eye roll was nearly palpable in its irritation.

"We are beginning to conclude that having you *both* in attendance is not only *insufferable*, but also possibly a *mistake*."

"Ohhh, but who was it that *asked* for me, huh?" Geordi pointed out, sitting back down with a pleased and polite smirk on his lips. "Congratulations, Ma'am: you now have *both* the operation managers here for whatever you'd like."

Hugh grinned at hearing Crois chuckle and Beverly crooning Geordi's name laced with love on the other end of his earpiece.

"Operation managers," she repeated, "is this the terminology by which we refer to the architects in charge of pillaging and plundering our starship?"

"It wasn't exactly *going* anywhere," Hugh reminded her, "not to mention the vessel's unimatrix was collapsed, main propulsion systems were broken, weapons were offline, sphere-wide life support was at 30%, and the hull was covered in so many tachyon particles it would have contaminated this entire *system*."

"Not to *also* mention we're five weeks deep in repairs and retrofitting now— not like we're just 'hollowing it out' or anything."

"*Alongside* Reclaiming 537 xBs," Hugh beamed.

"Mmmhm: not to *mention* mention," Geordi followed up with, "we're right on the border of the Alpha-Gamma Quadrant. Still in Federation-Bajoran space, sure, but the Cardassians might've been *much* less nice to you if *they'd* found Atlas instead."

"They would not have had the *chance* to investigate Sphere 4381 further, had you let us continue the self destruct sequence."

Geordi frowned. "We're a little *past* that now, don't you think?"

127 rolled her eyes.

Hugh wondered what Crois, Consultation expert extraordinaire,

thought of Geordi now.

"Well," Hugh resumed, settling into his seat and folding his augmented hands, "now that Commander La Forge is here...are you willing to answer our question now?"

"Yes, actually," she purred. "Perhaps someone from the *Federation* will be more willing to listen to us, while existing under UFP-sanctioned asylum."

"I mean I can *try*, depending on what it is you're asking," Geordi noted as Hugh finished off the last of his tea. "There's no guarantee, since this project is officially led by the Reclamation Project... Federation-granted political asylum is happily given, sure: but it depends on what you're fleeing, and what the *consequences* might be on the other end. And it's not like the Cooperation's waiting to put you on trial back on Ohniaka III or anything," he remarked, "so whatever request is feasible, I could consider reviewing for a former queen and--"

"Ah: good," 127 said plainly. "So *you* would consider allowing this unit to *expire*, then."

Geordi frowned.

The Commander's head leaned back as the chair creaked below him. "No."

In return, she grimaced. "So you would be *content* to continue allowing our agency to be stripped of us," she concluded. "You take our former title of "Queen" and make a *mockery* of it. Our *one scrap* of a claim to the 'unique identity' that Director Hugh so lovingly boasts of— and demean it for the sake of a technicality-laced insult to injury. Delightful."

As Hugh shot her a reprimanding look, Geordi gave a quiet sigh. "Hey now, you *asked* for me, and I'm just being *honest* about what I'm able to do for you. Hugh is the Executive Director here; Starfleet is just..." Geordi waved his hand, "a benefactor? Sponsor. Administrative partner— let's go with that. Now: are you gonna answer our question or not?"

"No," she said as she shook her head, "No, we don't think we will. Not right now. Because that's what this all *is*, is it not? An interview? An *experiment*? You, watching us from wherever the other side of this chamber is," she hissed, "you thought you could *waltz in* with your polite little humor when I asked for you in my moment of need: and

look upon this unit as yet another chess piece in Starfleet's utilities?"

"You're certainly being a little harsher in tone, 127," Geordi said with a frown, "not to mention you're putting both words *and* intent in my mouth. I'd appreciate not being *toyed with* when I come somewhere trying to help or improve a situation, but that's just me. Just-- tell me what I can do for you. Genuinely. Cut the crap; no more of this 'woe is me, I want to die and not face the consequences of living anymore' shit. I *want* to help; I'd... never thought I'd say this to a Borg Queen, but I'd *like* to help as much as Hugh is trying to," Geordi told her, "though genuinely? I can only do so much. Because *Hugh* here is the expert at this; and me, well..."

Hugh's chest blossomed with a familiar warmth as Geordi grinned. "I'm only here because *he* said yes."

"Hmph. So *eager* you are, to capitulate off another faction's strengths in favor of your own perceived weakness."

Hugh watched as the Commander nodded and rolled his tongue against his cheek. "Remind me then, if you would," Geordi asked thinly, "*who* was it that started the Species 8472 War again?"

Her eyes immediately widened with a familiar kind of rage, and Hugh knew that Geordi had *definitely* struck a nerve.

"You think this little coalition of yours can last?" she sneered at Hugh with a headbob to Geordi. "*You?* Simple *waste* from the Collective that refused to be *dealt with*, and a *mouthpiece* for the Federation hellbent on spreading its influence as far as it might reach? How different are you from *us*, *Commander?* And how many plans do you think Starfleet might've concocted to try and wipe us from the galaxy, Hugh?" she smarmed. "You *must* recall, Director: don't you remember how many *officers* we've assimilated? How many of their last thoughts cursing our very existence as we processed them? Trying to desperately think of ways to implant us with destruction and hellish rebuke that--"

"That's enough, please--"

Queen 127 scoffed at Geordi's murmurings. "What could you *possibly* mean to the likes of *him*, Hugh?" she spat. "You are a *formality*. A permission by which he and Starfleet must have in order to plunder our technology. And here to think: you could have killed them all, onboard the *Enterprise*. With our guidance, you could have taken that ship,

retaken Locutus, brought to us the very vessel that brought us closer to the Alpha Quadrant... but no. Instead," she hissed, "you *squandered* squandered your gifts."

Memories of a long-gone Ohniaka III lurched in Hugh's memory from his days of ignorance.

*"This is what the Federation gave us!"*

*"Kill them! Kill them all; before they kill you! If the Collective will not take you back, **show them who is SUPERIOR!**"*

*"My friend, Geordi— how is he?"*

"How *lucky* you are, Hugh;" the Queen spat as Hugh's mind walked a dangerous median, "that in all your weak, false, *pathetic* existence-- they didn't let you die. They didn't *leave you* in that icy pit; experiment on you, dissect you— shove you in a specimen stasis and save you the trouble of--"

"That's *ENOUGH!*"

He hadn't heard Geordi yell that loudly since their flight to stop Atlas' self-destruct sequence.

And as Hugh glanced at the Commander, the Director's heart broke for his friend who looked so distraught in an unnamed... what was it? Weight? Fear? Guilt?

A weight, a fear— a guilt from *what?*

*[From him?]*

"You are being... *actively* antagonistic, 127," Hugh noted tightly. "I cannot, *we* cannot converse further with you any further if you're being actively abusi--"

"We do not care!" she fired back. "Let us die then, idiot; grant us our initial request to die and save yourselves the trouble! Be *rid* of us so we do not have to listen to this... *unproductive*," she rambled, "vacuous, *inefficient* way of communicating with the likes of--"

It was then that Hugh's clarity partially returned, hearing both the sound of footsteps and the voices of Troval, Crisis, and Vorik questioning (and protesting) someone's actions in the observation chamber.

"Captain Crusher--"

"Captain?"

"Captain I don't know if you should--"

And as Hugh and Geordi turned to see the suddenly-opening doors behind them, in marched Captain Beverly Crusher: her expression hardened with an emotion Hugh could call "determination."

"Individual identified as Beverly Crusher," the queen unit crooned, shucking off her earlier venom as Geordi mouthed a silent '*Bev what are you doing?*', if Hugh's visual UI read Geordi's lips correctly. "What an honor it is, to--"

"Oh, no no no—*please* save me the honors of an introduction, 'Your Highness,'" Beverly rolled her eyes at, waving a hand as if to dismiss the queen unit's petty drawl. "Commander, Director: may I use either of your chairs, please?"

Almost in perfect sync, both Geordi and Hugh rose up and out of their chairs as if they were superheated steel, the men now flanking behind her as she sat and took a very... spider-like seat? Hugh was almost amused at how *wrong* the Captain sat in her chair— her legs bent and criss-crossed every which way, an elbow propping up her chin as she grinned at 127...

"It's *Captain* Beverly Crusher now, by the way. But I'm pleased to make your acquaintance, Queen 127."

"We did not *request* your presence, *Captain* Beverly Crusher."

"Ah, but I am a *doctor*; sometimes we make 'unexpected house calls,' for the sake of our patients."

"The manner in which you are *employing* said house call seems like a gross overreach of power."

"Oh, well— aren't *you* one to fucking talk."

On the other end of the earpiece, Croxis belted out a hard laugh as Troval made an equal exclamation of shock.

Hugh even heard *Geordi* barely hold back a snort.

Admittedly, the Director had trouble balancing the humor of Beverly's bluntness with the possibly-delicate situation at hand.

"Now look," Beverly said, leaning against the table and pointing at the queen unit. "I am *very* tired, I *very* much want to go to bed, and you are making these *very* nice men stay up for your own obvious toying

with. You might have their platitudes strung up for diplomacy's sake, but *I* know what you're doing and I don't like it one bit. These men, *both* of them," Crusher told her, "one is... well. I have too much love and respect in my heart for what Commander La Forge means to me. And the other," Beverly said sweetly, "is a man I pulled out of the snow from a dinky little scout ship, crashed out in the middle of *bumfuck* nowhere going *god* knows where, and he and *all these xBs* are here because of the Collective's failings to bring him and wherever his tertiary were going. The *Collective* did not heal him. *I* did. My former crew did, Commander La Forge did— and we showed him a glimpse at another kind of life."

As stunned as Hugh was, he had to make a note to ask Geordi or Captain Crusher later as to what, exactly, the word "bumfuck" meant in this context.

Hugh could fathom a guess, but why was it in relation to a place of nowhere?

The queen unit's jaw shuddered and her brow furrowed in angered disbelief at the Captain's defiance. "We--"

"No! Nooononono, no— you're not going to do that with me," she insisted. "You forfeited that right when you were a right devil to these two. If you were just as new to the world as dear Hugh was 23 years ago, then I would certainly allow you that patience. But you are *not* ignorant to having a voice. You are *not* the Collective's mouthpiece anymore. You are not a '*we*' anymore, as hard as that may be for you to hear; because a Queens' idea of '*we*' was hoarding the drones you lorded over for your own comfort and control. I saw what you did to... my *patients*, my *crew*, my *Captain*," Crusher said tightly, "the augment plates I had to peel back and psychosomatic scans I had to perform-- patients weeping at their true selves surfacing after how many days, months-- *years* of suppression from your assimilation! I would never say such... harsh words to a drone, because they were and *are* undoubtedly victims. But *you*," Beverly posed, Hugh watching 127's teeth gnash in defiance, "you were not a standard drone. From what I understand of queen units, you were never *subjugated* under another unit for their own beck and call. You were never directed to try and rewrite 300+ years worth of my planet's history," Beverly now rose up some at the table, leaning on both her hands, "the *galaxy's* history, for your own vengeance and

vindictiveness, because I *saw all that happen* and I am *tired* of watching billions die for the sake of your units' ego trips!"

Hugh watched Beverly with all the reverence of a guardian angel, catching his mouth hanging agape as 127's jawline was stretched thin by building rage.

"Our units gave *order* to the Collective!"

"You Queens are *just* as much of a paradox as you demean Hugh for being!" Beverly parried, "An equitable Hivemind can't exist if there's a *regency* within it!"

"We are the Collective's law!"

"And whose law is that?!"

"We are Species 125!"

"Oh, and a whole lot of good that's done you! Where is your planet, your people— your culture, their *livelihoods!*? Are they all... absorbed? Obliterated? Erased for the sake of *perfection*, you *murderer!*!"

"*I am NOT-- !*"

The room — even the observation chamber — was dead silent.

Admittedly, Hugh was impressed that it only took them until Session #2 to reach this self-referential hallmark.

As if realizing what she'd just hollered at Beverly, 127's eyes went wide and she glanced back towards Hugh and Geordi— trying and miserably failing to save face. Attempting to puff up her shoulders, she avoided Beverly's line of sight, resorting instead to staring at Hugh and Geordi in all anger, humiliation, and a silent relinquishing of whatever power she tried to cling to.

"Well Commander, Director," Beverly sighed, straightening in the chair before turning around to face them...

Beverly's eyes were heavy despite her radiant, confident grin.

"I believe I've finished what I had to say to your guest."

How kind her eyes still were, even after all these years.

As Geordi helped Beverly out of the chair, Hugh listened absently to the two talk of "*no no, I'll be alright, you finish what you need to,*" Geordi bidding sweet assurances of camaraderie to his friend before returning to Hugh's side. "Well then," the Director sighed, "we still, after all this time, must return to our original question, 127... why *did* you emerge

from stasis?”

The queen unit's eyes were hollow and her stare lingered on nothing in particular.

“This existence... it is so quiet,” she said. “So absent. So *empty*. There is nothing to have; nothing to take. It is--”

“Lonely?”

The word had practically leapt out of Hugh's throat.

He knew loneliness and all its forms well.

And though she looked at him with all scorn, anger, and a residual loathing... her brow was laced with an understanding that this, indeed, could *not* continue.

So Hugh took in a deep breath.

“I was very lonely too, at one point. And perhaps that sounds... cheap, superficial, even *childish* to say,” Hugh admitted, “but it is true. That loneliness was awful.”

“Then kill me.”

“You are *not* alone, however,” Hugh continued. “Now, you are here: with me, Commander La Forge, *hundreds* of personnel who are willing to help you... and I can speak from experience: there is no greater joy than knowing others come to you out of their own volition. Willingly. Not obligated or forced by some higher power to come and attend to you, but... because they wanted to help. Because they wanted to know you further. And that, *that*— is the true opposite of loneliness.”

“A *community*,” Geordi finished for Hugh, eyes still fixed to the ground as his hand rested on his chin. “A community that I'm astounded by every day. The fact the Cooperation has built *all this* for themselves in a mere 23 years...and in *my* opinion, you're very lucky that community is actually willing to offer you *help*, 127. To help you start a life as your *own* voice. A life of individuality, how to be a singular person...the Cooperation seems to be a lot more willing to see the good in what could be. And you've got a very patient guy here helping lead the whole operation.

Hugh's chest filled with an unnameable weight as Geordi's works sank farther and farther downward into a beautiful, welcoming pit of inner warmth.

“If I may offer, 127,” Hugh tried, “we are not so *different*, you and I.”

127 looked at him with all the embittered might she could muster. A younger, freshly-severed Hugh would've called her gaze terrifying. "That is true in more ways than you would ever want to know."

"Then may that unspoken knowledge offer you kinship in a place where you might feel lonely."

She swallowed.

37 seconds of silence hung in the Containment Chamber.

"We... emerged from stasis," she finally admitted, "because we wanted to converse. ...The silence was a respite, but we also found it to be... deafening. Quiet."

"Then why don't we schedule some more meetings?" Hugh finally offered. "Just you and I, to start."

127 pondered this.

"Once: every seven days," she declared. "They will be earlier than this hour, if you are all going to complain this much."

"Deal."

"Thank you," Geordi mumbled.

127 paused before entering stasis.

Her eyes darted between Geordi and Hugh once more.

And Queen 127 looked Hugh dead in the eyes before her face went stiff and her cables adjusted into place, her "charging dock" lighting up to signal a regeneration cycle as the entire group let out a tired, collective sigh.

"Statements end. Reclamation Project Director Hugh to *Solstice* Containment Room 4 personnel," Hugh called after papping his badge, "Please transport Queen 127 back to the regeneration pod."

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

Though exhaustion wanted to overtake his mind, Hugh took comfort in watching Geordi mush a ringed hand against his face— the other going to grip, pat, and massage Hugh's shoulder.

"You did good."

"We *all* did."

"Beverlyyyyyy!" Geordi called out in a faux whine, "oh Captain, my Captain!"

"Oh, stop it you two," she chuckled tiredly. "*Sometimes you and your patients just have to let it all out.*"

*“Unorthodox for a Reclamation Consultation, certainly,” Troval tried to offer, “but nice job, everyone. Never thought I’d hear a queen unit say ‘I.’”*

*“Indeed,” Vorik pointed out, “a unique strategy that seemed to illicit a significant, individual emotional response.”*

*“Let’s hope those responses stay... well, benevolent,” Croxis grumbled. “It’s hard enough to listen to, sometimes.”*

Hugh sighed as he heard an extra note of melancholy in Croxis’ voice. “We’ll do our best,” he offered through a yawn, “And that’s all we can do.”

“Took the words right out of my mouth, Hugh.” Geordi gave another massive yawn, having caught it from Hugh: “Just beam me to my quarters please; I can’t get up.”

“May I just stay here?” Hugh played along. “Could my alcove be brought here and I just regenerate for five days?”

“Cheater; you can’t do that and leave *me* alone with all the paperwork--”

“You assume so little of me. Croxis, my friend!” Hugh called out during a stretch. “end the holo-SIM, please and thank you.”

Geordi’s eyes snapped open: “Wait wait Croxis; not yet--!”

The Commander immediately fell through the now-gone hologram chair and hit the floor with a thud and a groan.

And before Hugh could ask Geordi if he was alright and scramble out of his own chair to help, the Commander splayed out further on the floor with a groan and did something the entire chamber needed.

He laughed.

**[EARTHEN CALENDAR - OCTOBER 5, 2391]**

**SPECIALTY OUTPOST STARBASE "SP-4852 SOLSTICE"**

Geordi knew he needed three things after that meeting with Queen 127 last night.

He wanted a solid eight hours worth of sleep, another talk with Beverly, and to talk to Hugh as soon as his nerves could work up the courage to tell him that Geordi nearly facilitated his and the entire Collective's murder almost 23 years ago.

After parting from Vorik, Crosis, and Troval's logged scans last night, the Commander and Director had escorted a very tired Beverly back to *Solstice's* transporter pad for a good night's sleep aboard the *Pasteur*. In the empty transporter bay, she offered them sweet words of support and praise for a Consultation Session well done, politely kissing them both on the cheek before Geordi sent the Captain on her merry way. The kindness of Beverly's words was a stark rival to the anger she allowed herself to rain down on Queen 127, Geordi watching Hugh fondly rub at his cheek where Beverly had kissed him.

"And that's why you don't mess with medical starship Captains," Geordi commented to Hugh, a smirk on his lips as he powered down the transporter.

"You speak truthfully, Commander," Hugh noted wistfully. "Though it seems as if Beverly is not unfamiliar with 'tough medicine.'"

"Ah, she had enough shit to deal with on the *Enterprise*."

The smirk on Geordi's face proved to be persistent as he sauntered from the console to meet Hugh in the middle, watching the xB's augmented hand finally pull off his face.

God *help* him, Hugh was cute when he got flustered like this.

Hugh, the sweetheart, had walked Geordi back to his quarters—escorting him down the hall in the Starfleet wing of *Solstice's* bunks. Their walk together was quiet, Hugh seeming to savor the silence while the Commander stewed in his own roiling, anxiety-peppered thoughts. The way the Consultation Session had gone certainly stirred up some unfavorable comparisons, the memories and anger and ahhh, *fuck--* he still had a report to file about this before they went to *sleep!* Geordi audibly realized this halfway to his quarters, and both co-managers began to brainstorm on their inevitable, horrid paperwork. Geordi's entire being was a racquetball court; his thoughts buzzed from the

conversation's banter, his burdened heart hung heavy with the guilt of his past, and his body ached from the heat on his dimples and the memory of how hungrily Hugh had looked pressed against him in that tiny decon hallway.

By the time they had reached Geordi's quarters, the Commander was lost in a tired and weary daze as the doorframe slid open. All Geordi did was look back over his shoulder to Hugh with tight lips and a wanton brow—his steps slow with ringed hands fastened behind his back...

Geordi opened his mouth to finally say goodnight, but the Commander suddenly felt a million and one words stall on his lips.

Maybe he didn't *want* to say goodnight just yet.

Hugh's eyes widened, his shoulders sagged the longer Geordi held his stare...

And just before Geordi's doors shut, the xB quickly strode inside with determined steps, ensured his quarters were sealed, and turned on his heel to meet the Commander for a deep kiss on the lips.

He tasted like tea.

"I... must admit, I-- wanted to do that *so badly*, in the decon corridor," Hugh confessed. "I'm sorry Geordi, I--"

"Don't be," Geordi assured him, "don't be, I was just-- I didn't realize how *tight* I was holding your shoulders in there--"

"I liked it," the xB said hurriedly. "I enjoy your methods of comfort. It... it's as I *told* you, Geordi. You're alright."

Geordi nodded, finding the strength to swallow an earlier anxiety.

"Then... y-you can put your hands on my *hips*, if you still wanna."

Geordi's heart fluttered when he felt Hugh gingerly do just that.

God, he actually *wanted* to?!

After another electric kiss, the Commander's hands fell from Hugh's shoulders to lace around him for a standing, silent hug.

"I'm sorry she said all that shit about you, Hugh," Geordi murmured. "God, I can't believe-- I shouldn't be even *talking* about her right now; what's wrong with me."

"It's alright," Hugh said back. "It seems she has a long way to go on the road towards 'pleasant conversation.'"

Geordi grinned into the fabric of Hugh's uniform.

He hoped Hugh felt it.

"We're both tired... may we resume-- *this*, later?" the Director asked sleepily. "Please, I-- simply fear my systems will soon mistake you for my *regeneration alcove*, you're so comfortable..."

He was *comfy*?

Something frayed inside Geordi as he suddenly felt very bashful.

"Really?"

Hugh leaned back slowly, looking perplexedly at Geordi as concern ebbed further into his brow.

"No one has *told* you something like that in a long time, have they?"

Hugh was scarily good at clocking him, Geordi trying to swallow past the sudden lump in his throat. "Yeah, I... suppose not. How'd you guess?"

"You requested confirmation of an easily-provable fact, Geordi. Your *asking* for such in the first place implies you required outside verification of something I and my processors know to be an obvious truth.

Therefore, if you did not have the confidence in knowing this obvious truth to be real on your own accord, then... it would make me happy to affirm a very positive fact about you. And-- it did," Hugh admitted sheepishly. "It did."

Though Geordi *still* didn't want to say goodnight to Hugh, at least this compliment gave him a little more strength to do so in the first place.

Because apparently, Geordi was comfortable enough — and had been the entire time — to bring Hugh right back around for future visits like this.

"Hugh, can I uh... kiss you again, before you go?"

Geordi adored how Hugh's scar rounded out his dimpled smile.

"Of course."

Although he knew this wave of short-term bliss would inevitably wash back out, another swell surged inside Geordi that allowed him a moment of peace— kissing the xB and savoring Hugh's sweet sentiments.

Geordi wondered something.

*What would it be like to dance with him?*

"Give me time to name this."

"Me too. I am still-- learning. I find that I still am every day."

After finally conking out into a deep, yet far-too-short sleep thanks to his late report filings, Geordi's thoughts were resolved on the matter: knowing he had to speak to Hugh in some form before time got too away from them. Preferably, sometime soon-- considering how much time and energy Queen 127's Consultation Session prep take out of Hugh, and before Geordi's dear friend departed in two day's time. For now, Geordi was working with Croxis in *Soltice's* quality-of-life facilities: installing a testing lab in the xB Wing's common area to more easily perform cybernetics diagnostic inquiries. With a loud thud, Croxis and Geordi placed another scanning processing unit onto the floor, the Commander shaking his hands and stretching his back as he stood up.

"Let's take five," Geordi sighed roughly. "I forgot how heavy those units are, and I'm thirsty--"

"I concur; I need to retrieve a diagnostics PADD from V'evik too, so I shall return--"

As Geordi trotted towards the common area's replicator for a cool towel and glass of water, he noticed Croxis continue to stand in place and fiddle with his hands, the xB's gaze fixed onto the ground before approaching the Commander. "Commander La Forge?" Croxis spoke, "before you-- ah, while we had a moment, I wanted to--"

"What's going on, Croxis?" Geordi pried. "If it's about the chair again, I swear, it's fine--"

"I had just come to terms with that, Commander: please!" Croxis humored. "But no, ah... admittedly, it *did* stem from something regarding yesterday. Queen 127's words left me pondering something, unfortunately. Something I'd started pondering when Captain *Crusher* first arrived here, but this solidified my need to at even-- *address* something, regarding it."

Geordi felt like a spotlight was suddenly on him; where the hell was the guy going with this?!

"W-well, uh-- whatever this 'something' is, Director Second," Geordi told him, "I appreciate the time I can tell you've put into it. What's on your mind, Croxis?"

The xB looked up and scrunched his mustache.

"I wanted to both acknowledge the role I had in your torture and attempted murder 23 years ago and apologize for such."

Geordi's eyes widened and he suddenly felt very small.

Crosis' height over him wasn't helping.

*Right.*

The Commander felt himself puff up in contrast to Crois and his own anxieties, watching the xB nervously wring his gnarled hands.

Hands that once forced him into Lore's operating table, true.

Hands that, while they currently helped Geordi carry consoles for their staffers who were sharing a starbase, were *also* once hands that almost choked the life out of him.

What could Geordi say about his *own* hands regarding Hugh, then? How could *he* have the same hands that held Hugh so gently last night, and yet be the same hands that almost finalized the program that would've killed him all those years ago?

Geordi's heart ached.

Oh no, was he starting to casually *miss him* now, too?

"You've... changed," Geordi told Crois, trying not to remember what a VISOR headache felt like. "You *all* have. So have I. It's... god-- so much has happened since then, and I--"

"I just think we should be clear about that. We're talking about annihilating an entire race."

"Which under *most* circumstances would be unconscionable; but as I see it, the Borg leave us with little choice."

Geordi's head shook some as his leg bounced in place.

"I'd like to hope we've all changed. I mean... you, look what *you're* doing here now," Geordi offered. "For xBs— for the *culture* you've all built. The fact you're even *willing* to work with me after all that speaks volumes for the kind of guy you've become. It... yeah, it hurt. A lot, back then. But it hurts a lot *less*, now. Time makes a good healer, and it *also* helps knowing the people who were compelled to do it are doing a lot better now, too."

"I hope you can find in your heart to understand the context of my

actions at the time," Croxis said sadly. "I simply realized I never properly *apologized* to you, Commander. It has been so long, and-- time likes to think it can shirk us of responsibility-- especially when we've changed so much, since our beginning days. But... what you went through was damaging. Physically, mentally, emotionally-- I inflicted harm onto those who did not deserve it. And you will find, Commander," Croxis continued, "or perhaps you've already noticed... that xBs hold personal honesty in a high regard. We may reject the suppressive nature of the Collective, but not its nature of openness and connectivity. The Borg work for a reason, after all; not-- working in the most *benevolent* of ways, of course, but--"

"I getcha."

Croxis paused, Geordi trying to read the xB's expression.

God, he was a tall bastard.

"I'm... *glad*, by the way," Geordi offered him, "that you were there for Hugh through the years. He talks nothing but the world of you. You've made yourself into a better person than some people who got that privilege in the first place, so... I appreciate the apology," he promised, "but it's alright. Don't worry..."

In response, Croxis held out one of his big, meaty hands for Geordi to shake-- the back of his palm speckled with arm hair, and bearing similarly metal-streaked veins of ligament webbing that Hugh did.

It made Geordi smirk when his rings clinked against Croxis' hand.

And the Commander knew how much his people valued intended touch.

"I'm just pleased we could make up for it."

There, Geordi thought: inadvertent apology #1 well do-- wait, fuck!

He panicked remembering how they apparently interpreted the word "pleasing," the Commander bristling and wanting nothing more than to walk away right now--

"Ah, shit; sorry Croxis," Geordi laugh coughed nervously, "I-I didn't mean, uh... or-- no, you *are*, pleasing-- to me personally, of course-- b-but you don't have to do anything, right? I just-- forgot what that word *meant* to you folks, and--"

"Commander."

Geordi looked up.

Crosis' crows feet had scrunched with his amiable smile— observing the Commander with a very particular glint in his eye.

“May I *include* or *invite* Director Hugh, since he also shares your sentiments?”

Geordi's stared at him and his mouth went dry.

*Oh.*

“...As... a-as long as you think he'd be--”

“My friend is no stranger to the presence of multiple bodies during intercourse,” Crosis said way too goddamn casually. “I know he would be *very* interested.”

Geordi managed a nod, despite his stupor. “T-then by all means.”

“Understood by mutual consent. ...You were very close, by the way,” Crosis humored Geordi with a chuckling nod, “I understand your insinuation.”

“Good, thank you... I didn't wanna lie or anything, but uh-- there's a time and a place and all, y'know, and I don't know if rescinding that takes off--”

“And may I say I find *you* very pleasing as *well*, Commander La Forge.”

Geordi stopped.

What was he gonna say again?

The Commander's thoughts were jolted with static— the xB smacking his shoulder with a hearty laugh as Crosis' heavy footsteps took him away and down the echoing corridor.

As Geordi was left alone to fidget with his collar, a warm swathe of confidence pooled inside him— leaving the Commander with a beaming smile and a blustered chuckle...

It wasn't *just* Hugh? *Other people* here thought he was hot, too? Geordi already *knew* he was a good-looking guy, sure; he never had any *detrimental* insecurities about himself— but...

Maybe he was overthinking this, the Commander decided.

Maybe it just felt *nice*, to be told that every now and then.

As Geordi cleared his thoughts from the unexpected flattery, he thought longer and harder about Crosis' apology, and it only affirmed what the Commander had suspected all along.

That the emotional box Geordi had packed and tucked away 23 years ago was in dire need of opening, addressing, and confessing to Hugh.

But the Commander wasn't the only one with dirty hands, so Geordi papped his combadge with a huff. "Commander La Forge to Captain Crusher; come in, Captain."

*"I'm here Geordi,"* came Beverly's voice, *"go ahead--"*

"When are you off your next shift, Bev? There's something I want your opinion on regarding yesterday's..." Geordi wiggled in place as he decided on a word, *"revelations, I guess we could call it."*

*"I'm breaking for coffee here in about 2 hours, if that works for you? I could get a cup and meet you at your Ready Room at 1300; I'm still onboard Solstice with Junction Troval today. Is everything alright?"*

"Yeah— I'm just..."

The Commander sighed. "It's personal. And it might mean we need to make a couple calls."