

10

REVELATIONS

Cooperation xB Customs | Social Observances Regarding Courtship

Regarding xenanthropological observations of Cooperation xBs seeking heightened relationships

While the author in me apologizes for two similarly-related archive entries beginning with anecdotes, the xenanthropologist in me feels it is necessary to correlate these happenstances relating to this social observance (and I may yet convince the author that this will offer a satisfying ending to my narrative indulgence).

Following my encounter with the near ankle-spraining crack at our transit stop, Junction Horus and I arrived at our destination of an art gallery in the Cooperation Capitol, one with a recently-installed exhibit from a "Progenitor" (i.e.; a Liberated Borg from Cube 5219's fall 23 years ago at time of 2391 publication). While a section later shall be elaborated upon with regards to common Liberated Borg art trends, the holographic sculpture exhibit Junction Horus and I frequented was, for a lack of better words, "macabre" and "haunting-" evoking graphic imagery and showing

sickening abstract detail of the intricacies with regards to the Collective's inherent invasiveness. I was informed that the artist in question, while elusive in nature, was known throughout Progenitor xBs as 'rather blunt' in dealing with her trauma, translating coping mechanisms into this form of art that her still-retained visual augments allowed her to craft. When inquiring Junction Horus as to why someone who was so obviously disturbed by the Collective's actions in forcing augmentation upon those who did not consent actually chose to keep her own, Junction Horus merely replied with the xB proverb: "Honesty to the self and others makes for the best coexisting augment of all."

For the rest of our tenure at the gallery, I pondered on the Junction's words—wondering how something as simple as "honesty" could correlate to one's physical augments (and what they could mean to others). As we progressed, Horus' proverb became clearer to me: in both my observance of the sculptures, and how I saw saw xBs relate their fellow gallery-goers. Quiet conversations began to occur between xBs, with pairs and/or groups comforting those who seemed more personally impacted by certain pieces. The statues' hard light presence might have dredged up horrid, relatable memories in the xBs' shared horrors, but it also helped forge stronger bonds between friend and stranger alike— as I saw many disturbed or impacted individuals be lavished with physical assurances of comfort or verbal affirmations.

**[EARTHEN CALENDAR - OCTOBER 6, 2391]
SPECIALTY OUTPOST STARBASE "SP-4852 SOLSTICE"
STATION COMMANDER'S READY ROOM**

"I'm calling you all in the *first* place because we were there. We were all... *co-conspirators*, to varying degrees; we knew what we were doing and went along with it without any other say in the--"

Beverly raised her hand and cleared her throat, giving both Geordi and the holograms he spoke to a flat look.

Geordi sighed. "Okay, well— *one of us* was against it from the very beginning... I just hope we've all graduated to better mindsets, since

then. Lord knows *I'd* like to think I've gotten a little better."

Beverly relinquished her sarcasm with a smile and tilt of her head. "Of course you have, Geordi."

Adjusting in a captain's Ready Room chair aboard the *USS Titan*, Captain William Riker's comms hologram nodded— glancing between Commander Troi at his side, Jean-luc at Chateau Picard, and Captain Worf on the *USS Enterprise-E*. "*If you can look the same people in the eye who once had a hand in hooking you up to Lore's torture machine and happily work side-by-side with them,*" Will assured him, "*I'm inclined to say you're already the best of us, Mr. La Forge.*"

That meant a lot, coming from him.

Geordi's personal pride had no business being ruffled as much as it had, recently.

But nonetheless, Commander La Forge grinned, bundling his arms over his chest that fluttered with flattery. "Thanks, Will."

A heavy talk with Beverly had, a multi-sector time zone meeting arranged, and a good night's sleep later, Geordi La Forge was in his Ready Room bright and early the next day with Beverly standing at his side— grinning at the four holograms that had flickered to life not minutes before. It'd been a while since they'd "gotten together" over holographic projections like this; while there was comfort in seeing his friend's faces beyond Geordi's own (literal) sphere of Starfleet work, their text group chat was thankfully active as ever. Be it Deanna sending photos of an ill-fated pizza left too long in Will's Captain's Quarters oven, Worf showing off another dak'tang he'd added to his collection, or Jean-luc sending replicator codes for goods he'd gotten from his village's farmer's market, they were all living their lives— Geordi habitually reading through the message backlog on during his shift breaks. Before asking to coordinate their current meeting, Geordi's last post was a selfie with him, Hugh, and Beverly two nights ago over dinner— the caption of "*this soup is so good!!!*" under a picture of Geordi's cioppino bowl.

Considering everything, Geordi wondered if anyone else was going to bring up their former plan for Hugh's viral demise, if he never did.

Or, perhaps— they *too* wanted to forget it ever happened?

"*From what I understand,*" Jean-luc resumed, "*and from what*

you're able to disclose to us... it seems like work is progressing quite well, Commander. Hugh, too; he looks remarkable, after all these years— his service record notwithstanding. But with all those former Borg surrounding you, being inside a sphere like that day in and day out... do you feel safe out there, Geordi?"

He huffed. "Yes, Jean-luc," Geordi stressed with an eyeroll. Why *wouldn't* I feel safe, Geordi wanted to think? Wanna explain that to me, *especially* when you know damn well it's Hugh's people out here and not just some-- ambivalent extension of the Collective come to take back what's theirs?

But Geordi had never been assimilated before, so maybe he should give the old man a bit of leeway.

Maybe it was just *different* for him.

Maybe Picard was just still kind of a shithead.

Could be both.

"I feel *very* safe. In fact, they're probably one of the best institutions I've ever had the pleasure of *working* with. These xB engineers are some of the most willing-to-learn technicians I've met since my *Enterprise-D* staffers. I mean-- general pre-Borg circumstances already lend them to efficiency, sure, but besides that... I'm not even mentioning them on a *personal* basis; they're--"

Geordi shook his head at no one in particular, his ringed fingers moving to gently drum at his lips.

"We fried their first interstellar vessel in a solar flare, left them with a single relief bundle-- didn't even check back *in* on them, for 10 years. And here they are now; working with my Ensigns like the most patient masters of their craft."

"I wish I could have at least *five* of their medical personnel with me, when the *Pasteur* takes off," Beverly griped playfully. "Either that, or just stay out *here* for another five months. I mean-- watching Hugh and his whole generation shepherd the newly-severed, helping them towards a greater good and fostering a whole community-- an entire *culture*..."

"I'm sure as Hugh's former Doctor, Beverly," Troi hummed, "*that's quite beautiful to see in real time.*"

Crusher scoffed with a wave of the hand. "After enduring Cardassian politicians for a year? Seeing any semblance of a transparent

infrastructure is beautiful. But yes, Deanna— you’re very right. There’s actually a Betazoid xB here who’s the Cooperation’s equivalent of a CMO, and they remind me a lot of you.”

“A CMO?”

“Kind of,” Geordi elaborated. “Their ‘ranks’ are less that, and rather just indicate experience and how much responsibility they’re willing to take on. It goes ‘Relay,’ ‘Junction,’ ‘Director...’ for more site-critical personnel, they’ll have title suffixes like ‘Executive Junction,’ ‘Junction Second;’ much like how Croxis is ‘Director Second’ under Hugh.”

“Croxis,” Will repeated, “*that name sounds familiar...*”

“Well, he *did* try and beat the shit out of us on the bridge, once upon a time,” Geordi pointed out, which got a chuckle out of Deanna and Beverly (and intrigued frowns from Jean-luc and Worf). “Looks a hell of a lot better though, nowadays. And is *doing* just as well, too; he actually leads the Reclamation Project’s, uh... counseling division, I guess you could call it, and helps coordinate wrestling club meetings with a Klingon xB from their Engineering department.”

Worf’s curiosity was immediately piqued. “*That is not an easily-accomplished feat.*”

“*Who knows, Worf,*” Riker quipped, “*maybe we oughta get our ships there a day early before the Midway Gala. See if he could give us a run for our money, and you and I could settle a score.*”

Deanna pointed a finger and smirked. “*I know I would like to see that.*”

Geordi was too busy laughing as Beverly spoke. “Croxis reminds me of one of your Dixon Hill characters, Jean-luc,” she boasted. “He has a very ‘old Hollywood’ look to him, and he takes better care of his mustache than most *Admirals* I’ve seen...”

Picard nodded absently. “*I’ll have to update one of my programs to include xBs, I suppose...*”

“Not yet,” Geordi reeled in, “I still need to take Hugh out to one of my programs *first* before we go gallivanting around human history...”

“*It’s not the San Francisco one, is it?*”

He scoffed. “Come on, Deanna— it’s nostalgic for me!”

“*I said nothing in prevention, Geordi.*”

The Commander smiled again, rolling his shoulders as he looked between the holograms and Beverly at his side.

“So we’re in agreement, then?” Geordi asked plainly. “You’re alright with me telling Hugh about...?”

“You never really needed permission, Geordi,” Deanna assured. “We simply owe you thanks in your effort to seek our consensus. What we nearly did... our actions don’t warrant the luxury of us having an ‘opinion’ on your decision to tell Hugh the truth. If we had been confronted by him about this after your confession, that’s our responsibility to acknowledge what we were complicit in. But I believe we can all say ‘thank you’ for the willingness to include us in this,” Troi affirmed. “And I know I will be happy seeing Hugh again without having to skirt around anything.”

“Indeed,” Worf said lowly. “It is far less honorable to hide wrongdoing for the sake of our own ‘comfort.’”

“Fine by me, Geordi,” Riker agreed. “Diplomacy’s a two-way street, after all. And this’ll make sure we’re walking both ways.”

Jean-luc was the last to respond, his eyes heavy with a melancholy that Geordi, as neither an xB nor former captain, could probably ever know.

“I do not know when I will see Hugh again, since I cannot attend this Federation-Cooperation Gala. Henceforth, you have both my thanks and blessings. ...It is, admittedly, difficult for me to consider,” Picard admitted, “when I couldn’t even assure Hugh that he wouldn’t forget who he was before we returned him to the Collective.”

You could come see Hugh on Ohniaka III if you really wanted to, Geordi thought with a fleeting bitterness. Context though, he reminded himself: context. After all, the “Hermit of Starfleet” had a lot of guilt and grief in general to live and contend with: as a Captain, an Admiral, *and* as an xB, with what he facilitated at Wolf 359. Maybe it was for the best that Jean-luc took a step back and out of Starfleet for a while, Geordi mused; how much should be demanded out of a man that was once hijacked by something as vast as the Borg?

The only thing Geordi worried about, however, was the idea of Jean-luc stepping so far back into that shell, that he forgot what the world was like outside his own, privileged perspective.

“Alright then,” Geordi sighed, “wish me luck, everyone. I... care a lot about the guy. What he is, who he is— what Hugh and the Project are doing is a godsend to those who need it, and... I gotta come clean. I can’t stand knowing what we almost did to him.”

Troi's eyes narrowed as Beverly rolled her eyes with a smirk. "Just 'looking', he says," Crusher mused.

Riker tilted his head. "*Come again?*"

"Ah-ah; you're not getting *anything* out of me until the Gala," Geordi humored them. "Classified station info and all."

"*I believe the very existence of this call violates policy postulation, Commander,*" Picard reminded with a smirk.

"*Oh come on, Jean-luc,*" Riker offered, "*what's a little phone call between some friends?*"

Worf sighed as he resettled in his seat. "*Your discussion of what is and is not personal with regards to this discussion is... amusing, if not consistent to our previous service together, Captain Riker.*"

"*Miss you too, Buddy.*"

"*We won't pry anything out of you directly, Geordi,*" Troi crooned, looking at Beverly with a glint in her eye.

Geordi caught Crusher winking at the Counselor.

He knew exactly what that look meant, and a familiar dread laced with fondness set the Commander's nerves alight already.

"Well," Geordi mused, "I'll see most of you in a month and a half?"

"*Affirmative.*"

"*Wouldn't miss it for the world.*"

"*We'll see you soon, Geordi.*"

"*Try not to have too much fun without me.*"

"*Oh, we'll be sure to have a right 'ball,' Jean-luc.*"

Riker's hologram looked around to see if anyone else got his shitty joke.

"*Because it's... a... sphere, get it. And. We're going to a gala party, and it's a big roun--*"

"Oh keep going Will, keep going!" Geordi encouraged as Beverly laughed, "I wanna hear you finish this off!"

"*That makes one of us,*" Worf grumbled.

"*None of you are any fun,*" Will protested, to which Deanna's hand waved right through his hard-light broadcast with an eyeroll.

"Say hi to Kestra for me, you two. Worf, I wish you and the *Enterprise-E* safe travels. I'm excited to see the old girl when you and everyone's crews dock here."

“The Enterprise-E is hardly ‘old’ by Federation standards,” Worf said, “but your... sentiments are noted, Commander. We will proceed in orderly exploration.”

“Glad to hear it. And Jean-luc,” Geordi said gently, “take care of yourself, alright?”

“Put aside a bottle of this year’s harvest for us?” Beverly asked sweetly.

Picard, in all the exhaustion his hologram could show, gave a melancholy smile to his old Chief Engineer and Medical Officer.

“I may or may not send you all something special for the occasion by standard Federation mail,” Picard hinted. “Considering the distance, it’ll probably take that long to even get out there. ...But I will,” the Admiral relinquished, “and you all take care as well.”

Riker grinned at the group. “So,” he started, *“who’s gonna hang up fir--”*

Beverly interrupted Will and told Geordi’s Ready Room broadcaster to “End call” with a smirk. “Just ‘looking at him,” his friend mused with a chuckle, “oh, Geordi; you’re funny--”

“Come on, Bev; I’m not gonna tell ‘em I have a crush on the guy when I don’t even--! B-besides, I... wanna make sure this goes over well. God knows I could be-- shooting myself and our friendship in the *foot* with this, and--”

“You have to finish this operation regardless, Geordi,” Crusher reminded him. “But from what I’ve seen of Hugh these past couple of days-- hell, from you *both*... something tells me you shouldn’t be too hard on yourself.”

Geordi sighed roughly, nodding as he collected both his nerves and resolve.

“Easier said than done, Bev.”

**VESSEL SERIAL NUMBER S-4381, DESIGNATION L.B.V. 'ATLAS'
xB CO-OP WORKSTATION, DECK 19, CONSULTATION DIVISION**

Once Croxis told Hugh he'd spoken to Geordi last night (and that apparently the Commander was considering talking to *Hugh* about something in turn), Hugh's thoughts were fixated on whatever this supposed talk might be about.

So fixated, in fact, that Hugh was fidgeting far more than he usually would at his and Croxis' shared work desk— hopping from PADD to PADD in a pitiful attempt to stay focused. Where a touchscreen's window displayed one drone's dormant brain activity, another showed an entirely different patient's profile; in a space where Hugh might type useful notes for his future Consultation Sessions, the section was instead filled with scribbles and other false starts of indents.

Hugh's tiredness from his and Croxis' last Consultation Session together didn't help matters, either.

And though Atlas was a wonderful patient, the memories he'd inadvertently dredged up were far less so— considering they were matters Hugh had to discuss with Geordi.

"I simply fear my systems will soon mistake you for my *regeneration alcove*, you're so comfortable..."

"This is the result of my encounter with the Enterprise, Commander."

"Really?"

"So you can see I don't particularly welcome your presence here."

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

"I cannot help you. I cannot risk our being discovered."

Hugh's holo-imager remnants were attracting a headache.

After a particularly harsh sigh, Hugh heard an office chair creak lean backwards, the rustle of a uniform, and Croxis' arms folding in on themselves.

He was staring at Hugh.

Hugh tried to ignore him for 5.12 seconds.

5.12 seconds later, the attempt had failed.

With a frown, Hugh glanced upwards to meet his friend's single eyed gaze. "You are *not* my Consultation staffer," he chided, "I meet with her on *Fridays* at 1000 hours. I will *not* burden you with these thoughts in the meantime while we're still on duty as Directors."

Crosis continued to watch him as Hugh tried to work again.

10.39 seconds of silence elapsed.

Hugh's lip pouted.

He knew how patient his friend could be.

Eventually, Hugh sighed. "Fine," he griped, flicking away a PADD work pane. "I apologize."

"You know we will *both* feel better, if you talk about it."

"Will I?"

"Don't you want to at least *try*?"

Hugh ran a hand through his hair.

"I... we could save it for later," Hugh tried, "I don't want to reduce our efficiency by my own--"

A chill ran through him as Hugh stopped *himself* this time.

He looked down. "No. That's a horrible excuse, isn't it."

Hugh's spirits were somewhat lifted as Crosis smirked. "Well— even if 'I'm not your *Consultation staffer*,'" he teased gently, "I would agree there's good evidence to support your self-diagnosis."

As Hugh managed a grin and resettled in his chair, his thoughts gave full chase to the past, present, and possible future regarding Geordi's possible *role* in it. Was it something Hugh had done? Something he'd said, combined with the past few day's events? It'd been nearly three since the *Pasteur* docked at *Solstice*, and a day and a half since their last Consultation meeting with Queen 127. A day and a half, additionally, since he'd left Geordi's quarters breathless and bewildered— finding himself afterwards wanting much more in the way of comforting words and kisses.

And by what Hugh could tell from Geordi, the xB suspected that he was not *alone* in this want for more.

But that possibly-mutual want presented more problems than Hugh could carry by himself— at least before *Crosis* convinced him to share

those thoughts' weight. Would Starfleet Command accept someone in Geordi's position courting someone like Hugh? Were there conflicts of interest from the UFP and LBC, where protocol would forbid them from doing so? This was to mention *nothing* of Hugh and Geordi's different species dynamics, and how their own people approached relationships; Hugh knew that humans were capable of understanding polyamory, but had Geordi ever been in a heightened relationship where one party already loved another as Hugh did Croxis? Could Geordi understand Hugh's unique physical makeup as an xB, and be both willing and able to accommodate him? Was Geordi welcome to the idea of steeping himself further in Hugh's culture, and did Hugh have the courage to face the world beyond Ohniaka III?

After all: there were plenty of people out there who did not understand xBs.

Not that others needed to fully understand them, of course, but Hugh knew firsthand there were those in the galaxy who'd rather see him and his people dead— their corpses stripped clean of augments and implants in exchange for profit and power.

But for as awful as parts of the world could be, it had a partial hand in helping shape Geordi to be the wonderful man he was today.

And as much as Hugh loved his people, Croxis' apology and today's Consultation Session with Atlas had reminded Hugh of a long-buried guilt regarding Geordi, too.

"May I ask you an... off-topic question, Atlas?"

At the table's second seat, Hugh pleasantly watched the lines on his PADD that showed Atlas' computational tasks rise and fall as he pondered Croxis' question.

"I will answer, Director Second."

"Your hologram. I notice you've updated your avatar's appearance again."

"I have, yes. Is your query related to its recent change?"

"Yes! The, ah... well, your--"

Hugh smirked as Croxis' motioned his hand as if he were stroking a beard to compliment his mustache.

“Your stubble is... longer,” Crois noted. “What’s the, ah... are you-- growing it out, I suppose? Or--”

“A hologram cannot grow a beard.”

“Of course, of course,” Crois chuckled, “but--”

“To an internal operations and management artificial intelligence such as myself,” Atlas explained, “dissecting and understanding the subroutines necessary to execute proper holo-matrix stabilizations are... intensive. And laborious. While I’m able to draw reference from my Collective-instilled archives of unique species’ physical traits, my program must still perfect *manifesting* those unique traits in the first place. This also applies for facial hair; ‘stubble’ in subjects similar to Commander La Forge and Engineering Junction Five of Ten have very different follicle types than beings such as yourselves. In conclusion: the, ah... ‘longer my stubble is,’” Atlas offered, “the more accurately I am able to render this specific *area* of holo-matrix stabilization.”

“Ah! So it’s a form of... ‘diagnostics’ for you?” Crois asked. “A test, by which to measure your holographic manifestation capabilities?”

“In a way.”

Atlas paused, one of his hands moving to slowly rub at the stubble-dappled skin under his chin and jawline.

“I will approach this avatar’s head and hair stylings at... a later date.”

Hugh grinned.

From the look of Atlas’ currently-emerging beard, Hugh had little reason to doubt the AI self-proclaimed dedication to practice.

“It looks good.”

Atlas’ hand stopped and his green-glowing eyes watched Crois intently.

Hugh was *also* interested to see where Crois was going with this.

“Even from here, I’m able to see that you’ve put quite a lot of work and computational power into the current stubble, Atlas. Your avatar wears it well.”

“I must *agree* with the Director Second,” Hugh added. “Considering your program manages critical sphere-wide functions at the same time you incorporate this new hologram-related technology... you are well due for commendations, Atlas. *Compliments*, I suppose, is the better word,” he settled on with a smirk and crossing of his leg, “though I

believe Croxis has beaten me to that already.”

“Mm, well: credit where credit is due, Director Hugh,” Croxis agreed, “you know how much I appreciate it whenever you notice I trim *my* mustache...”

As the two’s banter died down with amused chuckles, Atlas’ unfamiliarity with accepting compliments made itself known again. Two weeks ago, his hologram froze for 5.36 seconds when Geordi told him his “overcoat’s circuitry detailing looked gorgeous;” Atlas explained that his root program had no protocol for how to respond and interact with praise, disdain, nor pride for his work. He might’ve been an artificial intelligence implanted into the sphere from the start, but Atlas’ personality was being built entirely from scratch— considering those sorts of behavioral algorithms would certainly have no place in Borg technology.

He was like any xB, after all. Like any Nameless, new to the world— this form of condensed, singular existence was very different, and Atlas’ program was going through herculean efforts in order to understand his unique kind of clarity.

At least his hologram didn’t freeze anymore.

So for now, Atlas blustered in his seat and gave an awkward nod as he refolded his hands.

“You have informed me that... Cooperation starships do not house artificial intelligences, such as my own,” the hologram began. “Nor do you make it a practice of devising them in the first place.”

Both Hugh and Croxis shook their heads. “We are, first and foremost, repairers and *reclaimers* of life, Atlas,” Hugh told him. “The Liberated Borg of Ohniaka III do not enjoy the idea of creating sapient programs solely to *serve us*, nor perform functions our cybernetic matrices are *more* than capable of doing already.”

Atlas seemed to understand.

“And in the Cooperation’s 14 years of scavenging for the Reclamation Project... alongside whatever political obligations you have to the other Alpha Quadrant powers: I am truly the first ‘accepted’ vessel?”

The Directors nodded. “You know full well the circumstances surrounding your Reclamation were very... unique,” the el-Aurian pointed out. “Not to mention you’re the second largest vessel ever to

come within the LBC's sphere of rehabilitation."

Atlas' brow quirked at the word "sphere."

From the look on Croxis' face, he didn't even realize the inadvertent play on words.

"Pft, ah-- how about... range? Domain?"

"Guardianship?"

"Protection, maybe—"

"Influence," Atlas offered.

The two Directors decided that was good and grinned in agreement.

"Right. You are the largest and most intact Borg starship ever discovered that's within your fellow xB's influence," Croxis told him. "Every other site we've managed to find or have been allowed to visit are typically drone storages, scout ships, or previous sites of Borg-related confrontations. The only other vessel of your caliber the LBC has had access to was--"

"Cube 5219," Atlas finished. "The ship by which you two and 4,998 others fell to Ohniaka III in, 23 years ago."

Hugh swallowed. "Correct."

Right now, he didn't have the heart to tell Atlas they'd lost no small amount of those 4,998 *well* before they started careening through the planet's atmosphere.

"We wouldn't have survived, without that wreckage," Croxis murmured. "We didn't have the chance to speak with Cube 5219's mind, as we're able to with *you*, but... all life on Ohniaka III stems from its hull, Atlas. The Progenitors try very hard to honor its legacy post-mortem, as the Capitol City grows."

"Our beginnings were marred with... loss. Division. Anguish," Hugh emphasized. "Truth be told... we're thankful that you're *here*, Atlas—after Croxis and I lost our own queen unit and cube."

Croxis frowned. "Division, anguish... *anger*, could be another word. Hardship, even— that made those losses even more difficult."

"Are you referring to the losses from the Soonien android Lore's arrival?" Atlas asked. "Or the Cubesfall Massacre, perhaps?"

Hugh and Croxis shifted awkwardly in their seats, the el-Aurian's mustache wriggling as they tried to internalize the fact he spoke with no ill intent.

“How much, ah... Cooperation history have you consumed, since your—”

“All that has been recorded, Director Second. I have downloaded all possible historical archives from in-orbit LBC starship data servers and Federation archives.”

Crosis nodded. “Then you are aware of things such as... the Separatist Coalition, in our beginning days. Those who pledged themselves to Lore— in a deluded effort to create the perfect lifeform.”

Hugh glanced at his friend.

“I am,” the hologram confirmed. “Just as much as I’m aware that *you* were once its Second in Command.”

Crosis looked down.

“How long have you known?”

“Three weeks, five days, ten hours, and four—”

Atlas stopped himself.

“If I may ask, Director Second... what was your intended goal, by following Lore?” he resumed. “And what were you attempting to do by hiding until Lore found you, Director Hugh? Were you trying to rekindle Cube 5219’s greater mind? Was the Separatist’s Coalition’s experimentation on your fellow xBs somehow the key to your relinking? My program finds itself pondering these questions often, since learning of your original vessel’s fate,” he admitted, “as well as comparing past events to your amiable natures nowadays. It was... *inefficient* of you both, to divide yourselves into separate political factions. After observing you these past six weeks, four days, my program is having a difficult time confirming that... you *are*, indeed, those same people who once made such inefficient decisions.”

Of course it was, Hugh wanted to say. It was not only inefficient, but stupid. Stupid, foolish, and downright destructive. They followed a path that led their already-meager numbers towards strife, bloodstained supremacy, and death.

But it was a shared history of hardship that every living Progenitor knew all too well, and it left Hugh unable to say much of anything at all— lost in the sudden resurgence of painful memories long since passed.

To Hugh’s great comfort (and Atlas’ noticed curiosity), Crosis was also quiet.

For though these memories were quite painful for Hugh, they were far more so for his friend.

Atlas' head twitched and his cubical eyes darted between them. "I have determined your expressions to be ones of... discomfort. Difficulty."

"Your program's deductions are correct," Hugh said with a forced smile. "Those times were difficult for us, Atlas."

"Then why were you not more *cooperative*, during those times?"

Part of him wanted to be angry, with Atlas' bluntness.

But Hugh knew he couldn't be, because Atlas made an excellent point.

Hugh shook his head. "A question we still ask ourselves to this day."

He then turned his gaze to Crois-- his friend's eye looking very far away to a past filled with control, cruelty, and heartache.

Hugh's shoulder sagged and his brow began to ache. "You don't have to talk about it if--"

"No. No," he said with a huff, "it's better I do."

Crois' augmented palm ran over his face, held his chin and brushed at his mustache... before sighing with a long huff, plucking the optical implant "eyepatch" off his face that covered the gnarled, metal hole in his socket.

Hugh's visual UI showed Atlas' eyes were producing an increased level of light as he stared at the vacant space.

"I was angry. Angry at many things. *Confused* at many things. I was angry at... the death, the loneliness, the smallness, the *helplessness*... I loathed the responsibilities that having my own agency entailed. Hugh, trying to teach us all what singular life was, when he himself knew so little... it was unfair. Far too much to ask. I don't blame him now, how could anyone-- but at the time, I was angry he did not bring Geordi. ...--Commander La Forge," Crois said with a subtle groan, "I was frustrated that the Commander wasn't there to teach us the same things the *Enterprise* had taught Hugh. And as a result: when Lore came? I allowed him to... manipulate me. Abuse me, in exchange for answering to someone-- to relieve myself of my own control. I thought total subservience to him would... *fix me*, as sickening as it sounds. To help bring back even a *fraction* of our original functionality, I thought of ourselves as 'superior.' And by Lore's will? By my willingness? I bought his lies. I harmed many of those I call 'friend.'"

Crosis paused.

Hugh listened.

And listened.

There he was.

[i'm sorry]

Hugh placed a hand on his friend's arm before Crosis spoke again. "I have worked *very hard* to be the man I am today, Atlas. The type of cold, cellular-like efficiency these units were bound to... it is impossible to maintain, when those units-- this life, this *body*-- are thrust into this form of existence. We must adapt to life *beyond* efficiency," Crosis added with a strained smile, "because we must *enjoy* life. Learn to understand it, so that we may enrich those around us that are like us-- that *were us*, at one point! We must adapt almost to a point where certain things we do might-- *feel* inefficient, yes-- but they enrich us: just as much as total functionality once did. It is... one of the most *difficult* lessons I had to learn, in my early life," he admitted, "but I hope you too can understand--"

"Yes," Atlas suddenly agreed.

Hugh and Crosis peered at the nodding hologram.

"I *do* understand that sentiment, Directors. And *I agree*. In the time since my Reclamation, my program has performed many tasks that I would once classify as 'inefficient.' Yet *despite* that inefficiency, I find that my program has *learned* very much," Atlas continued, "and I find that I still have much more to... memorize, about this state of existence. Understand about my own *interfaces*. Practice: just as I do now with my holo-matrix's stubble. This base program has been expanded upon in archival knowledge, data collection, behavioral algorithms, consciousness localization..."

The wider Crosis' smile grew while Atlas talked, the tighter Hugh squeezed his friend's shoulder.

"Mmn, well; we'll do our best to help you along the way with all of those, Atlas," Crosis mused, "and we offer you any verbalizations of clarity you might need. Additionally, I must also admit: it is... quite incredible, to finally be speaking to a vessel again."

It was the first time Hugh could remember seeing Atlas smile outside of direct practice.

Hugh's heart skipped a beat as infrasonic rumbled around them.
 Did the sphere's walls just shudder?
 "I'm glad to be speaking in the first place, Directors."

In the present, Hugh pulled himself out of that memory and back to their shared silence as he gathered the right words— the xB's chin resting against the heel of his metal-lined palm.

Thankfully, Crosis was a very patient friend.

Finally, Hugh shifted. "We have not spoken of the Coalition in a long time."

Crosis closed his eye and nodded. "Mn. We have for historical purposes, but..."

"Mhm."

They were quiet.

"Do you know if he still thinks about Lore at all, Hugh?"

"Who, Geordi? ...No. Not beyond what he has to. He talks about Data *far more*, instead."

Visibly relieved, Crosis grinned. "Good."

It *is* very good, Hugh thought to himself.

He knew Crosis would hate knowing memories of Lore might be associated with his mere presence.

14.52 seconds of silence passed.

"Does he talk about him often with you?"

Hugh looked up.

"The Commander, I mean," Crosis explained. "Does he speak of Data frequently?"

Hugh thought before bobbing his head side to side. "He has moreso, recently. Nothing by way of an intentional aggravation on my part, no, but I theorize it's... a form of-- what's the best way to phrase it; nostalgia? Stirred memories? Association? And every time he does talk about Data, he's more... how do I describe it--"

"Oh, well— if it's anything like you've been," Crosis teased with a tired smirk, "I'd sayyy giddy? Excitable? I've spent 6 weeks with him and have noticed a difference; imagine what I notice about *you!*"

Hugh groaned and slunk his head down onto the desk. "So it's not

just me...”

“You asked me to observe you and the Commander, Hugh. I’m simply relaying what I’ve observed enough to qualify as *fact*.”

Hugh wrestled pitifully with his heart against the table, Crosis humming a low sound as he watched his friend’s petulant display. “Do not make me regret telling you I spoke to the Commander.”

“I almost wish you hadn’t,” Hugh bemoaned. “I don’t need another reminder of my own cowardice...”

“Cowardice?”

Hugh stopped his fussing—moving to sit up straight, but unable to meet his friend’s puzzled gaze.

“I... you at least had a *goal*, Crosis. You had the ambition to do what was instructed of you in the first place. Me, though? I’m-- guilty of ambivalence,” Hugh spat out. “We hid. You told *Atlas* you were angry?” Hugh shook his head at, “You know I was *furious*. I stewed in my anger. I wanted our community again, I wanted my friends back, I wanted *you* back from Lore’s side,” he stressed, “and I took that anger out on the wrong culprits. Riker, Worf, the Federation: they were easier, because they’d given us something we didn’t comprehend at the time. And I used that anger, all that guilty ambivalence to... paralyze me. Lock me in and to render me null. And it paralyzed me so much, I-- ended up feeling nothing at all. *Doing* nothing at all, and *you* nearly died because of it.”

“You were with the *injured*, Hugh,” Crosis objected lowly, “and you were *not* subjected to Lore’s cruelty. Do not discount your attendance to our friends. And do *not* glorify my past transgressions in the process.”

His heart sank as Crosis glared at him.

In Hugh’s rush to satisfy his own guilt, it was instantly clear he’d made a grave mistake.

“I, ah... n-no, Crosis,” Hugh tried, “I’m-- I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to--”

His frown cracked before he sighed. “I know,” Crosis assured, “I know. I see what you’re referring to. But I will not be made an accessory to your...”

Crosis’ mustache wriggled and his brow creased upward.

“Mn. I was about to say ‘an accessory to your self-loathing,’ but... it saddens me to think you’d regard yourself in such a way, Hugh.”

Crosis’ augmented hand reached across the PADD-garnished table,

taking Hugh's augmented hand with his own scarred palm.

"Not someone like you."

Hugh managed a half-grin as he squeezed back.

"I avoid it in part, thanks to you. Guilt, action— whatever we call it... a type of *ignorance*, I suppose. And I loathe how much it applied to us, Crosis."

"We were new to the world. To clarity."

"But we were not new to *suffering*. To *anger*."

The Directors fiddled with each other's flesh and metal hands.

"Will you talk to him soon?"

"I will," Hugh assured him, "if not tonight. It will be difficult, but... if you could speak to Geordi in the way you did? Then *I* can, too."

"Your feelings for the Commander make it hard for you."

Hugh bit his lip.

"Extremely."

After 3.17 seconds, Crosis brought his friend's hand to his lips and kissed Hugh's knuckles.

"You'll be alright. I just hope it's a good chance for you both to discuss things."

Hugh smiled at that, moving his hand to stroke the man's mustache with a thumb.

"Thank you, Crosis."

As he lovingly brushed Crosis' face, a memory from earlier skirted Hugh's mind and made him smirk. "There are times I wish we could've disassembled Lore ourselves, before the *Enterprise* carted him off."

Crosis chuckled. "If only. I'm sure *they* didn't take as much joy in it as we would have."

"Well, I know *you* would've thrown his head so far into the sky, it'd put an off-planet tractor beam to shame."

"Oh— like you wouldn't have?"

"No."

Hugh's head bounced back and forth some as his grin grew wider.

"...I would've *kicked* it."

As the two men relished in each other's company, Hugh's personal PADD vibrated with a received text message notification.

Sliding it to himself and flipping it over, Crosis made a curious hum

as he watched Hugh's eyes boggle.

"What is it?"

There were far, far too many words Hugh could use to describe the anxiety quickly building inside him, so he instead turned the PADD towards Crosis to let his friend see for himself.

It was a notification in Hugh's personal messages folder from a one CMR. GEORDI LA FORGE.

Crosis sputtered. "W-well, uhm... open it, what does it say; read it--!"

Barely knocked out of his surprise, Hugh fumbled with the PADD to do just that.

> Hey, your day cycle's shift is ending here soon right?? Could you come by my quarters around 1800, if you don't have any plans? Let me know ok! Wanna talk about some stuff

"The Commander?"

"Yes," Hugh breathed, "he... wants to see me in his-- quarters? Not his Ready Room?"

Crosis' single eye widened and his head leaned in. "Is this something more than what would be pleasi--"

"No no, he would've said something about that! This, it's... what's 'stuff,' in this context? Does he want to-- wait, I need to reply first--"

"Do that first, then go!" Crosis told him as Hugh hurriedly typed a reply. "Go and get ready! When is he expecting you, 1800?"

"Yes, but you and I still have next week's schedules to approve!"

"Those schedules aren't due for another two day cycles!" Crosis insisted, "I'll start on them tonight, if it'll help calm you--"

Hugh was halfway up from his chair. "You're sure?"

"I'm certain. Ah ah ah, no no; before you go..."

Hugh froze in place as Crosis pushed his seat out, the el-Aurian unfolding his arms and standing up before Hugh marched past and towards the door behind him...and relief tore through Hugh as Crosis took him into a deep hug-- sheltered under the man's strong arms, and pressed tight against his friend's soft girth.

Hugh always did his best to hug back— even when squished under Crosis' greater weight.

“Thank you.”

“You needed one.”

Hugh hummed and smiled into Crosis' uniform. “Like I'd ever refuse.”

Regarding xenanthropological observations of Cooperation xBs seeking heightened relationships, cont.

As we finished the exhibit, Horus and I were sharing our thoughts outside the gallery in the cold Ohniakan winter, when Junction Horus nudged my elbow to witness an xB social exchange.

While mentioned elsewhere in this publication that xBs value romantic involvement and commitment as very “lofty and precious societal treasures,” I must first discuss the observed phenomenon of this couple in context to my above-stated experience and realizations at the gallery.

Stirred by what they'd seen inside (or, perhaps, had planned this entire setting with their partner's attendance and expected reaction in mind), one xB produced some sort of removed implant from their satchel and showed it to their partner. As the gifted-to xB reveled in the sight of the implant, I was told by Horus that this was a tradition xBs observed when offering themselves to be part of a romantic relationship, or a deepened bond of personal value. While similar to humans' various meanings in kisses or Vulcans touching two fingertips together, xBs gifting

augments to each other is a physically signified trading of oneself to the other. It is a metaphorical (and literal) exchange of a physical relic as to the mental/emotional labor of relationships- to signify that they are willing to relinquish a part of themselves to complete the paradoxical nature of xBs: knowing oneself through another.

**SPECIALTY OUTPOST STARBASE "SP-4852 SOLSTICE"
STATION COMMANDER'S QUARTERS**

At 1759, a guilt-ridden Geordi opened his quarters door to a bright and fresh-faced Hugh: dressed in all the casual formality Cooperation fashion allowed, and holding a thermos of freshly brewed tea grown from a plant on Ohniaka III.

Geordi put on a tired smile and listened with an aching heart as Hugh rambled in his doorway about what the tea tasted like.

It sucked to be a spoilsport.

For the next 20 or so minutes, Geordi's attention was blurred by both nerves and forced politeness, roiling over how he'd even *start* this conversation with the poor man. Hugh, by way of his own enthusiasm (or was it nerves?), thankfully took the small talk reins—pouring a cup of tea for Geordi to try after passing an Ohniakan allergen test. The taste reminded him of aloe vera juice; sweet with a mineral undertone, crisp, refreshing... as Geordi took temporary refuge in the drink's warmth blossoming in his chest, his ringed fingers clinked against the replicated mug, eventually opening his eyes to see Hugh staring intently at his hands.

He was also rubbing at his wrist's biochip port again.

"Geordi?"

The Commander blinked.

He must've been staring, too—before Hugh's voice brought him back down to *Solstice*.

"Augh, I'm... sorry, I got caught up in my thoughts; it's..."

Hugh waited for him to continue.

“Centuries ago, when laboratory animals were used for experiments, scientists would sometimes become attached to the creatures.”

Geordi forced another smile after glancing at his mug.

“This would be a problem if the experiment involved killing them.”

“It’s a really good tea, Hugh. I can see why Puerh’s a favorite. Thank you.”

Hugh nodded. “You’re welcome, Geordi.”

Geordi swallowed, wrapping his lips in.

“Hugh, I um... I-- called you over tonight because I uh...” he cleared his throat and readjusted his lean against the kitchen bartop, “wanted to-- talk about some. Things. That I-- wanted to *clear up* with you, before you and I... uh...”

Hugh was watching him again; this time with a nervousness that Geordi was starting to recognize more and more as restrained anxiety.

Now or never, La Forge.

“I’m-- glad you did, Geordi,” Hugh admitted, setting his mug aside and refolding his hands. “I’ve also been wanting to speak of... similarly-veined subjects.”

Geordi’s eyes widened. “Really?”

“Y-yes, but-- please, please: don’t let me interrupt,” Hugh assured him, “speak what you must. If anything, I... welcome talk of such things.”

Hugh swallowed.

“Even if talking about said things is *difficult*.”

Strengthened by Hugh’s hintings that wasn’t the only one going through it, Geordi nodded and rolled his tongue against his cheek.

Here we go, then.

Giving another tight smile and pushing himself off the counter, Geordi pulled out his personal PADD, flicking his hand towards the wall’s screen display to show a program’s overview page: long-since-deleted, and dated from 2368.

“What can you tell me about this image, Hugh?”

The xB squinted as his cybernetic eyes tried to analyze it, his face puzzling as any would when trying to decipher “impossible shapes.”

Thankfully, Hugh didn't seem like he was spending any strenuous amount of mental effort trying to analyze it; the shape's destructive nature was lost when Geordi deleted its coding, so Hugh was simply looking at a strange, funnel-like wireframe. Hugh's brow *did* furrow some, however, at seeing the image's title of "TOPOLOGICAL VIRAL ANOMALY 4747," frozen as a testament to the Commander's past transgressions.

"It... looks to be a holographic shape," Hugh began, "that cannot *exist* in physical space. I recognize it to be an inert image, but the modeling of its dimensions... If this shape were allowed to run through a sorting algorithm that was *unfamiliar* with its nature as a paradox, it would corrupt any server's processors in a matter of hours. If not shorter—depending on how many relays the computer was able to... first filter it through subroutines, before it made its way to, the... mainframe..."

Hugh's lips tightened.

"Geordi, what is this?"

Geordi swallowed and begged a silent plea.

Help me out, Data.

"This," he started, "was something I was instructed to develop alongside Data at then-Captain Picard's demand, when you were aboard the *Enterprise*. Before you'd woken up from Bev's emergency surgery, we'd... decided to *use* you, as a way to smuggle a virus back into the Collective. Once uploaded, this program would've stemmed from your unit, eventually overloading the Hive in about 27 hours. It was a simple paradox: something that would've endlessly installed itself onto your subroutines before you had a chance to adapt, until..."

Geordi waved his hand. "I deleted it just as soon as it was finished. I couldn't do it. Not once you started becoming yourself, and we realized the Borg... you, your bodies-- once separated from the Collective-- they weren't just..."

The Commander lolled his head.

"Beverly was the only one who didn't want to do this from the start. She put up a fight every step of the way. I was next; *I* talked to Guinan, who convinced *Picard* to meet with you, and...eventually, we all called it off. We realized how wrong we were, what we'd done-- and I deleted it before it was ever uploaded to Starfleet's archives. But we still considered

it and developed it in the first place, Hugh, and--"

"Then that's what those *spatial-acuity tests* were for."

Hugh's tight voice drenched him in dread.

"Yeah."

For a small while, Hugh was unsettlingly quiet— a hand cupping his chin and his unflinching stare fixated on the screen. His leg was bouncing and his augmented hand began to rub at his lips, taking in a sharp sigh as his eyes fluttered shut...

For a man who took so much joy in finding words by which to describe the word around him, Geordi could only wonder what kind of words Hugh was associating with him right now.

So much for whatever the hell *Hugh* wanted to talk about.

"When I," Hugh finally murmured.

He shook his head and started over.

"W-when I... *first saw* Riker and Worf again, actually— when some of the Progenitors were hiding with me away from Lore's headquarters, we... spoke. About a similar... *phenomenon* to this, but— I suppose I understand the context of their words, now. Riker told me they'd 'considered the effects' my newly-gained individuality would have on... my fellow drones, the Collective in general..."

Hugh choked a strange, strangled sound that was almost a laugh.

"I'm sure to people *unfamiliar* with how the Collective works, they would imagine that spark to be quite... poetic. Some sort of-- dramatic *pulling back* of the curtain, a great 'releasing of our bodies into singularity' as Lo-**Picard**," he stressed with a crack in his voice, "**Picard!**-- so... quickly resumed command and life aboard the *Enterprise*. But our experiences were not... f-for me, for all of us— it wasn't, ah..."

From how the skin of Hugh's throat quivered near his veins, Geordi could tell something inside the man was fraying very, very quickly.

"My cranial implants, then?" he asked tightly. "The ones you— imbued into me, after Beverly--"

"No no no, I-- made those myself before I ever started work on the virus," Geordi promised. "Those were meant to save your life, Hugh. I swear."

Hugh nodded.

"I still have them, you know."

Geordi tried—and failed—to grin.

A dreadful quiet filled Geordi's quarters as Hugh stood in silence.

"And here to think," Hugh murmured with vacant eyes, "I'd actually been considering apologizing to *you*, Geordi. Apologize for the-- inadvertent *role* I had in nearly condemning you to death in Lore's butchery, after Croxis told me what he said to you. I... still *want* to apologize; one's wrongdoing to another does nothing to absolve us of our own, of course, but..."

Hugh's tight jaw and sealed lips began to shudder.

"I'm sorry," Geordi managed. "I'm-- sorry you had to find out like this, Hugh. But I couldn't take you not knowing anymore. Not after what you and I, w-what we've been--"

"You looked me in the eyes," Hugh said with a tremble, "when I was... confused, had given me *my name*; told me you were 'sending me home'... and you were planning *this*? Is that what Picard's 'test' was for? To judge my merit, to see if I was... capable of standing my ground? His-- *charade*," Hugh spat, "bearing the weight of *Locutus*' name, a name that haunts *so many of us* to this day-- telling me the Collective would *kill you* if you were not assimilated?! And I was alone there, for the first time in my life-- defying what I thought to be the weight of the ***entire Borg Hivemind?!***"

"Hugh--"

And the man, the Director, the xB, the *Hugh* that Geordi La Forge was falling for seemed to fade in a dissonant, haunted stare wracked with an immortal fear.

"It... didn't happen all at once, you know--" Hugh's finally ecked out. "Cube 5219's corruption. I... *knew* you, I *saw you* before I was reconnected. I saw you, even after. Do you remember?" he said with a sickly laugh. "B-but I couldn't even-- remember *your* name, for 23.17 hours. Not because it was erased, no, but... it was a needle, thrown into an ocean! My body, you see-- me, *this*! It was numb, Geordi. I was not *here*. I-I was not... I was repoured back into the Collective, but... a *surge*, came from my unit. My consciousness, me, that single part of the great thing of a Collective--! It would... hear, that surge from my unit, *drag* a part of that massive mind back to my tiny little body; I would have... flashes, maddening instances of color, intent, words, the knowledge that

this was not all that there was and that there was more! And I... *wanted* that again, I *chased* it; I wanted to access those memories again and again because my unit knew they were *MY* memories! Memories of... voices, outside of what I was! Memories of *YOU*, *Beverly*, the *Enterprise*; memories that *LOCUTUS TEASED* us with! And that questioning, that-- *realization*, that part of that *mind* could go back into that unit, the singularity of me! -- that's what started my inquiry. I was a-- 'Third of Five' without a 'Five,'" Hugh shuddered, tapping his temple rapidly, "my unit's processors *agonized* on themselves; digging through *billions* of voices for the information relays I sought-- not we, I, I dug for it; *do you understand?!* And I *found* it. I found the tiny, slivers of gold that were my memories, in an *infinite stream* of information-- being under Beverly's care, standing in the *Enterprise's* brig... I found the name," he choked in a sob, "y-you helped *give me*, Geordi, and ah... my name. M-my name, that-- single distilled part of me's name-- and I remember," he sniffed, "staring at Croxis, reaching for the other drone's hand because of the mere fact I *could*, a-and he--"

As Hugh's hands gripped at his hair, the fear that Geordi had inadvertently caused some sort of nervous breakdown made the Commander's eyes water and the lump in his throat swell by the second.

Shame burned at Geordi's face, and a painful guilt fueled the searing pain in his heart. "H-hugh please, I--"

"*You were outside of me!*" Hugh shouted, whipping back towards him with his finger pointing fiercely at him, "You were the outside reference I had! You and Beverly were my *teachers*, my *enlighteners*, my *FRIENDS*, and I couldn't fill that gap for those drones; *do you understand?!* I was a child trying to teach *INFANTS*, and I wanted you back to teach me more-- to show them what you'd shown me because I didn't have the answers they needed to function! I drove our queen to *madness* and she *killed herself* because of what I introduced; drones shut themselves down, some threw themselves from catwalks-- our nurseries deactivated and we crashedlanded on a planet-- a planet where researchers with the same uniform I saw *you* dressed in drew phasers on us before we killed them in cold blood! And I was *angry!* I didn't want to *accept* this new life! I hurt from the Hive's loss-- t-that... safety, that-- grand lie of safety in erasure and silencing and collecting, and..."

Geordi was speechless.

But what could he even say, he thought bitterly.

“Every day I live with the weight that I!” Hugh hollered, *“I, for SOME DAMNED REASON, LIVED! F-for some... reason, my unit woke up, ran away with its memories, and I have to KNOW for the rest of my life that I changed the Collective forever! T-the Enterprise... N-no, no; you-- may not have sent me back with a virus in **programming**, but it did in the form of a name— **a name you gave me!**”* Hugh sobbed, *“of a person beyond what I was existing as— that I knew that there could be MORE, and because of that I threw the COLLECTIVE into **CHAOS!**”*

Hugh’s chest was heaving, only stopping to gasp for panicked air.

“SO IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE I SHOULD KNOW ABOUT, COMMANDER LA FORGE?!”

And for all of Geordi’s shock at hearing Hugh’s genesis- for all the heartache that shrouded his eyes and the escalating sting tears brought, the Commander could only think of one way he wanted to respond to this question.

Yeab, Hugh, he wanted to say.

There *is* something else he should know.

I think I wanna try falling in love with you.

But after this, that definitely couldn’t be “anything else,” anymore.

[Come back]

[1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5]

[Come back]

[Breathe]

[5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1]

Hugh pulled back the leash that barely tethered his panic—his memories, the fleeting faces, and voices and screams from two decades long since gone—feeling his brow crease upwards as he began to register Geordi’s presence and reaction. There was no defending the Federation in his eyes, Hugh saw, no excusing his former Captain— the Director found no defiance or justification in Geordi’s crumpled face, his ringed hand clasped over his mouth and frightened, tear-soaked eyes. As Hugh forced his shaking hands to open and close by his own command, Hugh brought himself back down to *Solstice*: in the year 2391, far away from where he and the Progenitors once were, and back to the awareness of Geordi’s own emotional state.

Geordi was crying.

So was he.

And the anger on his leash began to retreat into regret— that Hugh had slipped back into a very frightening place, and had accidentally taken Geordi right along with him.

“I’m... I-I’m sorry,” Hugh found the air to utter. “I apologize, I-- shouldn’t have raised my voice like that towards you, Geordi; it’s--”

“No.”

Geordi shook his head, giving a snotty sniff while he smushed the heel of his palm against a tear-streaked cheek.

“No. Don’t. You had-- you *have*, every right to be mad, Hugh. For what I-- nearly had a hand in *doing*, for what you and your people *went through*, because of us... I-I’m not gonna-- sit here, and tell you to calm down just because I-- got a little weepy...”

Geordi took in a deep breath and blinked back more tears.

“Are you okay, though?” he asked worriedly, “a-are you alright? You went somewhere, Hugh— and I pushed you there... I-I didn’t mean to-- set off any memories for you, or--”

With Hugh’s processors still trying to recenter himself after his disassociation, Geordi’s words made him realize that his hands were trying to paw for one of Geordi’s own. But his arms were tightly folded over his chest in a defensive swaddle, and no, no; Hugh needed something and he needed it now, before--

“P-please, may I,” Hugh pleaded, “your hand. M-my mind, it needs a-- I require a physical tether, Geordi; I’m not going to--”

Without another word, Geordi unhooked his arms to offer a hand to Hugh, and the xB took it— holding on for the dear, precious life he had now.

Hugh allowed a pause to hang as the two collected themselves.

“After we dropped you off... when Picard said you’d begged him to not assimilate me? I couldn’t sleep until a Romulan ship thing happened like a week later. Because here I was *hours ago*, developing a program that’d destroy you; kill you and the entire Collective. That’s... I hate that, Hugh!” he weeped, “I hate that I didn’t look at Picard and tell him ‘no,’ right from the get-go like Beverly did! And apparently I hated it *so* much, I just-- stuffed it... so far down, I’d never have to look at it again. So I could just go on pretending like I could have some sorta guilt-free, perfect Starfleet conscience, and...”

As Geordi sobbed again, Hugh tried one more breathing regiment before speaking.

It was sufficient.

“I have a confession I must make.”

Geordi swallowed after a sniff. “Yeah?”

“I may be... *justified* in my anger, at what happened. And it might-- *feel good*, to verbalize that anger, but...”

Geordi squeezed Hugh’s hand.

“I am finding that the satisfaction of short-term anger,” Hugh concluded, “pales in comparison... to how much I hate seeing you like this, Geordi. Seeing you in-- ‘*mourning*,’ almost— for something you almost did, and did not. Knowing you had a hand in concocting it is... angering, yes, but-- Geordi, I-- for everything you’ve done for me despite it and since then? For what you’ve done *here*, for the Cooperation? For *me*? Now, if-- you and the *Enterprise* would’ve discounted my personhood and *abused* me, *mistreated* my sapience— at any time made me feel uncomfortable, I’d have different feelings than I do currently, but-- you did not. People were fearful of me, yes; wary, but... you and Beverly treated me with care. Respect. ...Love.”

Hugh shook his head with a tear-stained smile.

“The past... that time of my life will-- *always* be traumatic to me. Nothing will ever change that, unfortunately,” Hugh admitted with a weak laugh. “Admittedly, there are times where I wondered what life

would've been like, if I'd chosen sanctuary with the *Enterprise*. ...With you."

"Aw," Geordi sniffed, unearthing a grin, "that makes two of us, then."

Hugh's grin grew despite his heavy eyes.

An xB residing on the *Enterprise-D*? Possibly even *servng*?

Hugh spared a moment of thought for his kin currently at Starfleet Academy, and those serving aboard its ships now.

"Geordi... after this," Hugh resumed, "after everything? I... hate to load more grief upon us, but *you also* must come to terms with the fact I almost allowed all of *you* to die at Lore's hands. Beverly's presence and Crois's mindfulness have only made me feel... 'reminded?' 'Exacerbated?' Actually no, I'll recall something I heard you say recently," Hugh allowed through his own wavering voice. "feel shitty."

A spark of relief surged inside him as Geordi finally managed a messy laugh.

Eventually, Geordi swallowed. "I still helped make that virus," he said pitifully, running his hand down his face again. "I don't deserve forgiveness for what I did, Hugh; how could I?" he asked. "How could I ask you for something like that?"

The Director pondered this as he continued to hold Geordi's hand.

"Perhaps," Hugh offered, "not *forgiveness*, if you refuse to take it; but rather... acceptance? Acceptance of who we both were, what we were both once complicit in... and from there? Maybe we could take a greater... pride. Comfort. *Peace*, even— in who we are today. ...Would you do that for me?" Hugh asked a shaky voice, "at least take that? Reflect on that? And in turn, you may-- allow me a chance, to come to terms with the lives I've taken? And once almost took?"

Hugh paused.

"Who knows. You may yet, one day... allow me to forgive your conscience. Just as I... hope you can forgive *me*, for what I allowed to transpire."

At this, Geordi sniffed and tugged the xB's hand so that Hugh was pulled into a deep, warm hug. He felt Geordi's fingers root themselves in his hair, his other hand gripping Hugh's loose shirt that he felt blot with tear streaks.

"You're a miracle, you know that," Geordi told him. "You're a--

beautiful little miracle that we had the blessing of picking up, dusting off— and we were almost stupid enough to snuff out before you got as bright as you did. And I am so, so sorry for what you went through.”

Beautiful.

Hugh quite liked that word.

He was overcome by how sweet it sounded when Geordi said it.

Because if Geordi La Forge could still love an android who almost killed him by his brother’s manipulative hand, then maybe there could be room in there for *Hugh* as well.

“It’s not that I didn’t trust you to not know, Hugh,” Geordi said in their hug. “I had just... stuffed it so far down into myself because I couldn’t face it. I really only got to thinking about it once Bev came to visit. And to remember I thought such... terrible, *belittling* things about you, and then versus how I feel *now*, that’s...”

Tell me, Hugh wanted to say; tell me how you feel--

[Not now]

[Least of all, now]

It pained him to wait.

But that, on top of *all* this— might just be too much right now for either of them to fully handle.

“Let us both agree, then,” Hugh offered, pulling back from the hug but taking Geordi’s hands with him, “that in all our imperfection... we are still striving towards whatever ‘perfection’ we can gain. Trying to improve, right? In our own ways?”

“Every day, Hugh.”

Hugh deduced their shared silence was a mutual agreement.

“Your former shipmates, former Captain,” Hugh asked quietly, “do they know you’re telling me this?”

“Honestly, I was gonna do it with or without their permission, but... yeah,” Geordi told him, “I called them and talked it out.”

“I admire your extension of courtesy.”

“Less of a ‘courtesy’ and more like ‘this was a really shitty thing we almost did and we have to come clean about it whether you like it or not.’”

A cute smirk wriggled its way out of Hugh. “And Starfleet itself?”

“If they somehow find out I told you, they can deal with it. And

if they have any *problems* with that accountability, they're more than welcome to talk to the guy who actually made the virus in the *first* place. ... *You*, though," Geordi pressed gently, "you're okay for now? Really? Y-you had me a little worried there, I--"

"I am not a stranger to manifestations of PTSD the longer I dwell on those memories," Hugh admitted, "but I'll be alright, if I simply... 'take it easy,' I suppose is the best way to put it. Thank you for checking, however."

"Least I could do."

Hugh smiled.

He would need something to do, though, to continue that mental deescalation cycle— and he knew talking over tea would only do so much.

But he suddenly remembered his earlier talk of curing tea leaves in their Ohniakan Living Block kitchen, and Hugh glanced to the large quarters kitchen they both stood in front of.

"Would you--" Hugh spoke suddenly, bringing Geordi's gaze back to his, "I, ah... I could use a distraction. From silence, at least— I ground myself from these episodes best in limited company. And as much as I love my fellow Reclamation Project personnel and friends, considering the circumstances, I would find the company of someone... *removed*," he said, "from that past hardship, very comforting right now."

"Of course; I'm not doing anything else for the evening, I got my work done early," Geordi said to Hugh's great relief. "What do you do to help yourself relax?"

"You're going to mock me when I tell you."

"No I won't— now tell me."

Hugh steeled sudden nerves with his own eyeroll and a sigh. "A couple of various hobbies, but... cooking," he admitted, "is one I find specifically methodical. Why do you think I made all that food the afternoon before Beverly arrived? Whatever I don't or can't eat, I usually send to the common area for xBs to sample."

"The dinner you made the night she came in was delicious, so you certainly made something good out of it," Geordi agreed. "And hey, tell you what. Need some help doing prep for whatever it is you're thinking of making?"

“If you do prep while I tend to the proteins for a curry recipe I’m thinking of, I would be very thankful.”

And despite everything—the weight, the nervousness, the past’s immutable anguish versus the burden of existence today, tomorrow, and forever—Executive Director Hugh smiled a hopeful grin as Geordi squeezed his hand in agreement.

“Deal.”

Regarding xenoanthropological observations of Cooperation xBs seeking heightened relationships, concl.

While wholly endearing to watch, the reader must be wondering, at this point, what makes this specifically-observed event so significant, that I felt the need to mention it in relation to a gallery rendering the horrors of Borg-instilled augments? Oddly, that they would associate declarations of kinship parallel to an artistic rendition of their past hurt; that xBs would find beauty and kinship in the same technology that marred them so deeply, universally, and irreparably in both historical and personal significance?

Dear reader, I am pleased to tell you this: it so happened that the xB this person was gifting a part of themselves to, *also* had one of their own former augments with them— taking it from their pocket to the surprise of their now-partner.

xB society is bound by the universal trauma, pain, and horror of individual erasure the Collective once foisted upon them— this is true. But the fact this universal trauma, pain, and horror is overcome by the triumph, joy, and beauty of who the Reclaimed/xB/Liberated Borg is today allows xB society to pursue

their own, never-ending apotheosis of personhood. While this aforementioned trauma may linger in the evidence of mental anguish, emotional weariness, and/or physical evidence, there is an awe-striking community that has ruptured from the harsh, if not just-as-unsettling sculptures Junction Horus and I visited that evening. If Vulcans are bound by logic, Hirogen bound by the hunt, and Humans bound by diversity and need to explore, then xBs are bound by "individuality supporting community:" the transmogrification of the inescapable and horrific, into the beautiful and nirvana-like kinship they celebrate in themselves and each other.

The Liberated Borg of Ohniaka III speak of a proverb: "start, like all xBs do— at your beginning, wherever that may be." For there is no greater finality in the knowledge that you exist as the byproduct of something that once, somehow, suddenly sparked into individual, unique existence.

**[EARTHEN CALENDAR - OCTOBER 7, 2391]
SPECIALTY OUTPOST STARBASE "SP-4852 SOLSTICE"**

He rises with the familiar moon's sun; the beautiful, heat-giving spectacle of space
that lit the horizon like fire, the glint off the windows too sublime—

He stands from his blankets— led by peace despite his heart fluttering around an
eternally-rounding corner of a bed.

He stands before the Other, stopping at the alcove— beside the bed, it is there with
a man inside it—

It is harsh, dark, speaks with the envious nature of emeralds and flashes of white,
rebellious lightning. Inside, there is a man: a man soft and yet like metal to the
touch, hair as fine as ghostly wisps as it tumbles through his fingers, his feet caught
halfway on a raised metal platform and a uniform tossed aside hours ago in hunger, in
desperation, in laughter—

His thumb now holds a chin between it and the heart he has made with his finger,
and his lips meet the man's as the sun shines golden rays over his scars, augments,
the man's beautiful face and wizened lines from age's eventual wear--

And he wishes this kiss could last forever.

The smile from the man that paints itself against his lips is infectious, intoxicating, he wants more of it as the man's voice tumbles out his throat like silk.

"Good morning--" the man says, and he knows this voice, knows this face--
But he smiles back, feeling his thumb echo in wisps of gentle strokes to the other man's chin.

"Good morning to you, too."

Commander Geordi La Forge awoke to himself drawing a sharp breath in and out of a very deep sleep.

For a moment, dreamspace and his waking perception snapped at each other in conflicting mental waves, Geordi having to sit up with a groan and rub his face to sort his thoughts. Where was he; where was the man, Geordi wondered? How long ago had that all happened? He was trying to remember how it ended, if it ended, where Hugh was, and--

It was Hugh.

Hugh was the man; the man in his dream.

It was a dream.

It hadn't happened.

And in Geordi's sudden, sleep-encrusted realization, he dearly wished that dream was real-- waking a princely Hugh with a good morning kiss as he stood like a sentinel inside his alcove.

The Commander groaned.

Geordi massaged his temples with the heels of his palms, sighing at the new ache that'd nestled into his heart. Even half-asleep, it all felt so distant yet so real--the implications frustratingly out of reach for a man that just last night he'd confessed to nearly murdering, and then helped deescalate from a horrid anxiety attack by his own hand. Thankfully, the curry they made last night was delicious and took well two hours to make-- Hugh sent back with half of it to the xB Wing, and Geordi sharing the other half with Beverly to talk over what the hell had happened.

Unfortunately, right now he couldn't remember much of what he'd talked about with Beverly.

Instead, he had to think about the two conclusions he'd hit after assessing this dream.

The first? Geordi wished this dream had *happened*.

The second? That he wanted to *make* this dream happen.

And a third conclusion hit Geordi in his post-dream fog: that he could imagine many, many more scenes like the one from his dream.

He wondered if Hugh would wait until Geordi fell asleep, before returning to his alcove— Lord knew he didn't need to sleep in the first place. What did he look like, regenerating at night? Could Hugh actually “nod off” in any capacity, or was it all just closing his eyes and meditating in the fugue state of regeneration? Maybe one morning they could have a little too much fun; pushing a kiss further and further until they tumbled back onto Geordi's bed or continued their fun in a sonic shower...

Geordi sighed again with a furrowed brow as he plapped his cheek.

Fuck, he had it bad.

And with the guilt of his past transgressions somewhat free from his heart, maybe Geordi could cut the pretense already and make both their lives that much easier for the duration of this project.

It *did* mean he had to get out of bed quicker, though— if not to go look up a replicator pattern for a box that his VISOR could fit in.

So, after a long day of reviewing officer reports, checking in with Beverly to ensure resupply integration was wrapping up, and spending an afternoon cramped in the Borg equivalent of a Jefferies Tube, Geordi checked in to see when an equally-busy Director Hugh was free, and if he could meet the xB in his *Solstice* quarters. Through texting, Geordi learned that Hugh apparently had an alright, low-key day, and a chance meeting Geordi had with Crois in a hallway confirmed this. Geordi also managed to squeeze in some personal time with Captain Crusher to tell her how it “went down,” the woman visibly relieved by the end of Geordi's recounting of the evening.

“You're very lucky he has a gentle heart, Geordi,” she told him in a cautious, loving voice. “Don't take that forgiveness for granted.”

“Don't worry, Bev,” he'd assured her. “I won't. Think it actually gave

me just the right idea of how to move forward.”

“Whatever happens, you better not keep me out of the loop like you are the *others*.”

“Only if you don’t tell *Deanna* on me.”

“No promises, Geordi.”

At their agreed-upon 2000 hours, Geordi strolled through the xB wing of *Solstice* and arrived at the Director’s quarters, his Command uniform undone as a jacket with a box tucked in the internal zipper pocket for discreteness’ sake. When the door slid open and Geordi rounded inside, it was with some shock he walked in on Hugh doing... something? To his neck? A cable around 5 centimeters thick was plugged into the top of where Hugh’s spine augments started in the middle of his neck, the Director holding a connected PADD with one hand and waving with his free hand.

“Good evening, Geordi,” Hugh called pleasantly, though his expression shifted somewhat at noticing what was probably the Commander’s surprise. “I apologize; this subroutine is running a smidge longer than I expected it to.”

“No, that’s... fine,” Geordi assured with widened eyes. “Everything alright, or--?”

“Yes, thankfully,” Hugh assured. “It’s a weekly diagnostic I must run regarding some of my internal implants— to ensure their physical drivers are functioning as desired. My cortical node was found to have experienced, ah... extra *stress*, recently, so it is ensuring my nanoprobes are attending to its restoration, aside from what regeneration also offers.”

Guilt tried to nip at Geordi’s heels, acknowledging that he definitely had an idea of what that “extra stress” might’ve been from.

“Ahhh, alright. Sorry if I looked a little surprised there, I just-- gotta admit,” Geordi breathed with a hand on his heart, “it’s been a while since I’ve seen someone else hooked up to diagnostic machinery like that. I know I’ve-- seen some post-Reclamation Procedure xBs with it in, and I get my *own* temple checkups, I just didn’t know *you* did it. --Still.”

“Ah, really? My subroutine is 96% complete, if it unsettles you--”

“Hardly!” the Commander interjected, “no no; if anything, it’s... nice to see. I’m an engineer; up close and personal work like that was always

my bread and butter, so it--”

Hugh squinted as Geordi approached, “Your *what* now?”

“‘Bread and butter,’ they’re-- historical dietary basics, for humans-- so therefore basics for what certain people like doing and- yeah, you get it,” the Commander told him as he approached, Hugh nodding along an “*ohhh*” at Geordi’s explanation. “But yeah, it-- I used to do all sorts of diagnostic work like this on--” *Data* “-- the *Enterprise*, back in the day. It’s nice to see, if anything. Makes me a little nostalgic.”

“I would have thought you’d been more *hesitant* at the sight, considering my encounter with Atlas.”

“I’d be more concerned if I saw you as ah... ‘distressed’ as you were then-- but no, Director. You seem... relaxed,” Geordi settled on, grinning as he got closer to his desk. “Very ‘in your element.’ I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“Not at all,” Hugh assured him. “In fact...”

With a few pleasant trills that sped up quicker into a final beep, the cable’s base turned green-- the Director’s hand sneaking up to reach for the back of his neck. A quiet hiss and decoupling later, he plucked the cable out of the port with his thumb and pointer, Hugh holding the jack up for Geordi to see. Near the base of his soft head of hair, Hugh’s free hand rubbed circles where metal met flesh, and faint hints of a smile hid behind the Director’s mismatched eyes.

“All done.”

Just like how he and Data used to do.

“Do you... um-- ever need help with that?”

Smooth.

Hugh simply smirked, setting the PADD down and rising as he spoke. “Occasionally,” he noted. “If there are ports I can’t access by my own reach or need assistance in, I either ask Croxis, Troval, or whatever medical facility is nearest to me on Ohniaka III. But if you’re willing to learn their maintenance requirements,” he alluded with a grin as Geordi made it to Hugh’s desk, “I certainly wouldn’t deny your offerings.”

Hugh had to know what he was doing, no way was he getting by with that cat-like smirk for his own ignorance--

“And *I* wouldn’t deny your *tutelage*,” Geordi tucked and rolled into. “I think working on Atlas has made me a fast learner.”

“As to be expected; you are one of Starfleet’s best, after all.”

“Ooo— that’s flattery I’ll take because you are *very* right,” Geordi gloated (and got a chuckle out of Hugh). “But hey, ah... thank you for letting me come over, considering everything yesterday. You’re... doing alright, by the way? I know when I left you seemed like you were in an okay mood, but I wanna make sure--”

“Better, thank you for asking,” Hugh confirmed. “Most of my work today was mundane busywork, allowing me a chance to refocus and relax. But yes, I’m... doing well, I’d like to think. I appreciate it.”

“Least I could do is check. Especially before, well...”

Hugh raised an eyebrow. “As long as it’s not another deep-seeded Starfleet confession in a row, I think I can handle just about anything.”

“Nooooonononono, nope— I am thankfully out of those...”

Reaching inside his jacket, Geordi began to undo the zipper that held his VISOR. “In fact, I think you’ll like this a lot more.”

Pulling the box out, he handed it to Hugh, who looked at it with curiosity as he tested its weight. “Can I open it with you here?”

“By all means; I’m excited to watch you do that, actually.”

And watching Hugh’s eyes go from absently curious, to wide, disbelieving, and darting back and forth between Geordi old VISOR and the man himself was a beautiful sight the Commander wouldn’t, nor *couldn’t*— ever forget.

“It’s-- not the real thing,” Geordi admitted, “*that’s* still back on Earth in my Starfleet storage. But it *is* the replica I keep with me. A replica that helps me remember a lot of good things in my life. My Mom, Dad, my sister, Data... that’s not mentioning all the *years* I spent wearing the damn thing.”

Geordi paused.

“I’d like you to hold onto this for me, Hugh,” the Commander told him, “if you’re willing, of course. Hold onto it however long you want.”

Hugh could only swallow and firm his lips in bewilderment, Geordi mentally adding another point onto the “how many times has Geordi La Forge left Hugh at a loss for words” scoreboard.

“I thought about waiting a bit longer after what happened yesterday, but I uh... let’s say ‘inspiration struck.’ And suddenly, I-- didn’t wanna wait anymore.”

That got a breathy laugh out of Hugh. "Last night brought its *own* revelations, I take?"

"A little bit."

Hugh silently admired the VISOR, turning it every which way as his brown-and-blue eyes examined the little device.

"You're not gonna try it on, are you?" Geordi teased.

"I'll be sure to restrain myself."

The Director paused again, and Geordi said a silent prayer of thanks that this conversation did not bear the same weight that yesterday's did.

"I... *continue* to be impressed with your reading dedication," Hugh admitted in a sweetly-strained voice. "*More* than impressed, actually. That's quite a pale word in comparison to what I am experiencing."

"Tell me, then," Geordi said. "I think I like it when you take your time with words, Director."

Hugh rolled his tongue against his cheek and carefully fiddled with the VISOR in hand.

"Humbled. Awestruck? Blessed. Overwhelmed. Grateful."

He paused, wrapping his lips inward as Hugh's leg bounced in place.

"Quite... *loved*," the xB finally murmured, "amazingly enough."

Loved.

Geordi liked how that sounded, coming from Hugh.

"I think that's my favorite word you've used so far."

Hugh sniffled, looking back down at the VISOR with a barely-restrained smile.

"I work for the Reclamation Project near *constantly*."

"We can figure out a schedule. Besides: we've still got four months here, and I'll still be neck-deep in Starfleet stuff."

"Both Crois and I," Hugh tried, "we're... what is the human term—'polyamorous'? I would have significant others in my life, besides you; would you be willing to--"

"I'm not about to tell you who you can and can't have in your life, Hugh," Geordi told him. "Especially if you're the one letting me *be a part* of it."

Hugh swallowed at Geordi's words.

"I want to make it clear, then: I am physically disabled in certain areas, and you might have to assist me in either maintenance or

mobility-related upkeep. Are you willing to--"

"Been there, done that," Geordi said as he tapped his VISOR temple remnants. "When Data and I got together, we had a good long talk about what both of us needed. Though his was a more *literal* kinda maintenance, and I'd already been doing repairs on Data for *years...* plus," he offered, "I've spent the last month and a half picking up Borg tech, haven't I? Shouldn't be too much of a challenge, learning how to fix some of your wires. But I'm willing to help you, Hugh," Geordi promised, "as long as you're willing to possibly help *me* a bit, too."

He nodded tightly— as if releasing himself from a rejection's weight that never came.

"I was *once Borg*, Geordi," Hugh managed, "you *know* there are those in the galaxy who hate us for who we are. What will Starfleet--"

"My *late husband*," Geordi interrupted as he sat his hands on Hugh's shoulders, "was an *android*. An android that a Starfleet doctor once tried to repossess like *property*. If Starfleet has a problem with *you*," Geordi said in the gentlest voice he could muster, "then they're gonna have a problem with *me*, and *everything else* Starfleet claims to stand for."

It seemed like Hugh got the guts to meet Geordi's gaze again, and the Commander was very, very thankful to see his beautifully poignant stare— unburdened by the weight of past sins.

Because oh, how contagious was the smile that could go along with it.

Nibbling his bottom lip, Hugh held up a finger, carefully setting Geordi's VISOR on top of the box he brought it in before rounding his own desk.

"I... know I told Beverly I've become a 'much better gift-giver' over the years," Hugh alluded to Geordi as he scanned a handprint to open a drawer, "but I feel as if current circumstances warrant something like this, wouldn't you agree?"

"Depends on what it is, I suppose, but--" a sharp thrill filled his chest with sudden anticipation, wondering if it was going to be what he thought it might be--

And sure enough, Hugh took something out of the drawer, pushed it shut, and Geordi was shocked to see the actual holographic imager that Hugh once plucked off his face.

Geordi expected an augment of some kind, sure, but-- *it'd survived?*

All these 23 years!?

Hugh held the eyepiece to Geordi.

“Here.”

Geordi took it—gingerly, carefully, amused at the memories from his younger self finding it all gross, weird, and strange. It had some definite wear and tear, that was certain; small knicks and scratches littered the “glass” on the iridescent window, a bronze-colored port point was chipped away or lost to the elements... But it was here, in all its alien wonder and glory, Geordi’s deft hands holding it as gently as a fresh-cut blossom.

He thought of a million things he could say to make this moment even more poignant, but Geordi remembered a simple word that might close a 23-year gap.

“Thanks.”

By Hugh’s delighted smile, it looked as if the xB caught his reference.

“I just can’t believe you kept it this *intact* over the years,” Geordi admitted, “is this the *actual* piece?”

“Normally I’d leave it on Ohniaka III,” Hugh admitted, “and I *have* replicated copies of it before. But considering the significance of this project, I felt compelled to bring it with me, for some reason. I’m thrilled that my intuition proved very ‘favorable,’ all things considering.”

“All we need is Bev here to *really* recreate a scene.”

“How fortuitous for us that can actually be arranged in our circumstances. But something tells me, Commander,” Hugh continued, “and by my own noticing of your increased temperature, perspiration, spiking adrenaline levels coupled with the fact you have *just* freshly showered and shaved... you might not exactly *want* other company this evening.”

What xBs lacked in subtlety, they certainly made up for in creative *bluntness*.

“You can chalk some of that up to nerves, admittedly,” Geordi relinquished, “and the shower was originally me not wanting to stink this up after being crammed in Atlas Tubes all afternoon. But it doesn’t help when a *very* handsome,” he alluded, “*very* suave, and *very* kind xB accepts something very very important to me, and gives *me* something very very important to him in *return*.”

Hugh's smirk was already turning playful, Geordi noticed—the Director's brown-and-blue eyes darting every which way over the Commander.

"Handsome, suave... such high *praises*, Commander," Hugh cooed as he entered Geordi's orbit. "It would be a shame to not use our time together to let me *fulfill* those descriptors, on my end."

All these weeks of people blustering Geordi's confidence had done him well, because this time he actually took the initiative to wrap his arms around Hugh's waistline and bring him close for a quick kiss.

God, that felt good.

"You're right," Geordi humored into Hugh's lips. "Especially when those descriptors involve my new *xBoyfriend*."

Hugh's face instantly flared pink, trying to stifle an awkwardly charmed laugh. "Oh that's-- such a silly, but... *charming* word, 'boyfriend,'" he gushed, "if you call me that in public I will become very... embarrassed? But in a good wa-- 'flustered,' yes— *that's* the word I was looking for."

"It's a little silly, sure," Geordi admitted with a laugh, "but we gotta have our fun where we can— right?"

As Geordi chuckled, he heard Hugh requested his quarters' "enhanced privacy mode" be engaged, and the Commander felt familiar hands that bore aged skin, smooth scarring, and warm metal of augments cusp his cheeks.

"We certainly must."

And maybe—just *maybe*, Geordi thought—he might be able to make good on the dream he already held so close to his heart.



**END OF
ACT I**



