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READING INTO THINGS

UNITED FEDERATION OF PLANETS

XENOANTHROPOLOGY DATABASE 2391, UPDATED V 13.2.1.5

- > SAPIENT SPECIES & SOCIETIES
- > NON-FEDERATION SPECIES
- > MULTI-QUADRANT
 - > SELECTED: **BORG**
 - > REFINE SELECTION: **LIBERATED**
 - BORG COOPERATION**
 - > SEARCH: 'OHNIKA III'
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"Observations of Ohniaka III: A One-Year Liberated Borg Cooperation Societal Documentation"

As According to Starfleet Lt. Cmdr. Dr. Amadeus O'Reilly (Edited and Co-authored by Reclamation Project Consultation Junction Horus)

Cooperation Dialects | LBSL (xBSL), Language of Information

Regarding the unique languages and dialects spoken by xBs of the Liberated Borg Cooperation

INTRODUCTION

It is known that, regarding certain former Borg, the infinite possibilities of assimilation-forced augmentations can manifest in implants that affix themselves over and/or into the mouth, deep in the throat, or altering senses of hearing: rendering some drones deaf and/or incapable of organic auditory speech. I have been told by xB cyberneticists that these implants are "given" to drones assigned by the Hivemind to technical maintenance or drone repair services— as there is no need for auditory speech in the Collective, and avoids the hazard of a drone inhaling noxious fumes during said repairs that could result in unit death. While there are xBs who are able to receive Reclamation Procedure surgeries to reconstruct their mouths/vocal cords and undergo speech therapy to verbally communicate once again, an equal portion of xBs are unable to, thanks to the deep physical and mental traumas of assimilation's instinctual ignorance to mercy.

For Reclamation Project Consultation staffers and the patients this department helps, these fixtures can be some of the more difficult augmentations for xBs to reckon with. The realization that a unit had a voice in the first place (and further extrapolation of that idea that one could "reclaim" it) can allow an entirely different voice rebuilt it to one's preferences, or permit an individual to communicate in an entirely new way due to what might've been taken from them. Communication, in any form, is essential for a people who've been stripped of a mental company that numbers in the billions, and they take refuge in many different languages.

LIBERATED BORG SIGN LANGUAGE (LBSL | xBSL)

For non-verbal, hard of hearing, and deaf xBs, communication can be done through "LBSL" ("Liberated Borg Sign Language," also known as "LBSL" or "xBSL"), or through visual text displays. LBSL is almost universally known throughout Ohniaka III, thanks to the xB ease of being able to download the solidified dictionary reference completed in 2382. While it bears similarities to Federation Standard Sign Language, it is imperative that future xenoanthropologists familiarize themselves with this dialect before commencing any long-term internships to

the Cooperation homeworld. You not only pay communicative respect to the large percentage of HoH/non-verbal xBs that reside on Ohniaka III, but you also ingrain yourselves further in the celebration of individuality-inspired dialogue.

Much like verbal speech for xBs, communication through xBSL is another casual, yet cherished act of expressing personality. Grammar is dictated through a litany of facial expressions, with inquiries and forms of tense utilizing various hand positions. But xBSL speakers place a heightened value in developing their own habits, traits, and "quirks" to physically-signed words— to say nothing of the importance of uniquely-given nicknames that only xBSL speakers may give others.

LANGUAGE OF INFORMATION (LoI)

The Language of Information is, oddly enough, a language that's not actively *spoken* by xBs, but it is one they're all inherently capable of understanding. Used as the "dialect" between the Collective's billions of voices, non-xBs will hear this language as a deep electronic humming that bears a faint semblance to speech, and thus cannot be spoken by organic xBs. Therefore, it is exclusively spoken by Borg and xB interfaces, AIs, and other Borg-originated programs— the language's words packed with so much information, that brains without Borg-given processors and drivers are simply unable to glean its meaning.

It is an electric, vast, and deep noise of a language— one that rattles the bones, shaking a non-xB to their core in scope and the magnitude of its sound. The Language of Information is an intimate, shared quality of unspoken binding; one that elicits the mortifying ordeal of being known to an entity that an xB was once a tiny part of. Despite whatever horror may linger from assimilation's cruelty, the Language of Information does provide a single, absolute truth: that no one outside the xB community will ever be able to understand these layered words, and there can be comfort in the certainty that other xBs understand it as well.

The Liberated Borg Cooperation does not have an observed state religion, as their decentralized multitude includes myriads of different species mythos and belief systems. Yet I have found the communal respect given to this language — one entirely indiscernible to my ears — equivalent to listening to a supernatural, ethereal, and calming voice that can quiet their minds: in all its complexity, richness, and unifying certainty.

**[EARTHEN CALENDAR - SEPTEMBER 20, 2391]
VESSEL SERIAL NUMBER S-4381, DESIGNATION L.B.V. 'ATLAS'**

“Commander La Forge?”

Halfway out of a maintenance tunnel with a coupler wand in his mouth, the hologram’s beckoning pulled the distracted Geordi out of his awkward emergence perch— suddenly realizing he’d been watching two distant xBs talking in xBSL longer than what might’ve been socially acceptable.

“Ruhn a diagnoshtic therhe fer me an’ shee ifh tha’ connecths,” Geordi managed, pulling himself out of the vent and taking the tool out of his mouth. “Bluh-- sorry. *That* should relink this tertiary’s power conduction.”

Atlas’ hologram momentarily mulled on Geordi’s words— probably trying to process what, exactly, the Commander had said over his garbled, tool-impeded speech.

“Initializing sequence.”

Atlas’ ethereal eyes began to glitter with static, intently studying the place where Geordi had been working. Three weeks into the newly-nicknamed “Atlas Project,” the AI had settled on both pronouns and a custom-made projection of himself, drawing “inspiration” from his initial manifestations as Geordi and Five. Wearing a long-tailed Reclamation Project coat with black boots and green circuitry-patterned shoulder pads, Atlas’ six-foot tall hologram bore a round face and stocky frame with a buzzcut and stubble— his eyes glowing the same black and green that had manifested in Hugh’s initial uplink. It was only within the past week that Atlas’ hologram had finally begun to appear more around his own hull and actually *interact* with personnel beyond the Atlas Project’s senior staff, Hugh and Crois having the honor of meeting Atlas at his own transporter pad for the first time yesterday morning. Audio-wise, he was getting there; since his voice was a custom pitch synthezation, Atlas’ smooth speech occasionally ebbed into the Language of Information’s deep rumblings— a static-like reverb accompanying whatever Federation Standard word he spoke for the first time.

Despite the technological dialect’s origins, Geordi was pleasantly

surprised to see how accurate the xenanthropology material he'd been reading was. Initially, the Commander expected Reclamation Project staffers to harbor some sort of fear, even trepidation at the prospect of regularly hearing a language they hadn't been forced to speak since their severances; Lord knew Geordi had to practically *promise* some of his Starfleet officers they'd be fine. But where fear might've governed the former Borg and risked their signature efficiency, Geordi watched the Cooperation xBs employ their signature adaptability instead: staffers who were triggered by the language were moved to work onboard other project sites, and some were given auditory deprivation devices to alleviate stress— Consultation staffers remaining on standby in case of any surprise reactions. Thankfully, neither Hugh nor any of the Junction department leads faulted Geordi for his assumptions— everyone's relationship with the Collective and the circumstances surrounding their separation from it were different. But the Reclamation Project's Director had recently confided to Geordi that, no matter what those relationships were, the Language of Information was a “nostalgic kind of sound” that reminded them of their immutable kinship, actually. It was data and information, true; but Atlas' vast, immense words and context was a world entirely unto their own, and a world that xBs and only xBs could understand the depths of.

After all, Hugh reminded him— once they were each other.

Now they were not.

And the sphere they currently worked inside of helped bring them closer together in ways no one could've expected.

The xB had been looking out over a catwalk as he confessed this to Geordi— the Commander remembering a wistfulness lingering in Hugh's mismatched eyes alongside a reflectively-beautiful smile.

As a result, the Commander *also* remembered how intently Hugh had stared back once he realized Geordi had been staring at him the whole time.

While the calculative static slowed in Atlas' eyes, Geordi sighed and mused a palm against his cheeks to hopefully rid them of a sudden, flustered blush.

Christ.

“Final scans indicate it is operating as desired, Commander La Forge.”

Geordi wondered if those scans would *also* be able to pick up the increased temperature flare in his cheeks.

“Good, good,” Geordi huffed with a shake of his head, “glad it’s working, Atlas. I can uh-- see why you couldn’t access it; the circuitry in there was melded together with a power conduit, so no wonder it was blocking your broadcast point.”

“Your suspicions fall in line with what my diagnostic sequence reviews. I will log this repair immediately as reference for any possible future encounters.”

“Good idea; makes both our jobs easier in the long run, anyway.”

Before Atlas continued, the hologram’s cubical eyes followed Geordi’s original line of sight— the xBSL-speaking staffers still talking as one pulled out an unidentified fixture they found during repairs.

“Were you observing these particular Reclamation Project personnel for a *reason*, Commander?”

“Uh,” Geordi cleared his throat, “yeah, I-- *was watching* them, admittedly; trying to see if I could tell what they were signing from here. I’ve been practicing xBSL on my own time, but it’s nice to see it in use and get an active reference. Probably should just-- approach them about it though, instead of... watching them from a distance like a weirdo--”

“‘xBSL?’”

“‘Liberated Borg Sign Language,’” Geordi explained, “or ‘xB Sign Language,’ in *that* acronym’s case.”

Atlas paused. “I do not know this sign dialect.”

Ah.

“Well, uh— here’s your first lesson... see that? There, the one on the left: that’s the sign for a technological kind of ‘server,’” Geordi explained as his cybernetic eyes zoomed in. “A furrowed brow expression indicates they’re asking a *question*, and uh... yeah— looks like their hands are moving between two sides with the sign for server. So they’re asking ‘Which kind of server is this?’, or something along those lines.”

Atlas’ face might’ve been rigid, but there was a thoughtful weight behind the hologram’s glowing eyes as he studied their motions.

“Do you have a dictionary database available to download?”

“Uh-- not one on me *right now*, no, but...”

Though Atlas’ expression did not change, Geordi had worked around

Vulcans long enough to tell when silence and the tiniest-possible downward glance could speak the world of someone's disappointment.

So, huffing a sigh, Geordi scrambled for whatever he could offer the starship brain. "I mean I-- can't exactly stick a Starfleet-cut *isolinear chip* into your consoles for technological incorporation," Geordi apologized. "You might lose some translation nuance in the conversion process. I can ask *Five* to bring a Cooperation-made data node that she can download into your library to get rid of my middleman, though... would you like that arranged?"

Geordi could've sworn he saw the hologram's green eyes glitter a smidge brighter.

"Yes," Atlas said with a nod. "By adding the knowledge to my program's active language indexes, my behavioral algorithms will learn how to better communicate with Reclamation Project staffers while they are onboard this vessel. ...'Myself,' as Director Second Croxis has offered in terminology."

The Commander grinned.

"I'm sure they'll appreciate that, Atlas," Geordi offered. "You're making yourself accessible in more ways than one."

"Elaborate."

Elaborate? On *accessibility*?

Geordi's eyes boggled.

He of *all* people had some opinions about that.

"Let's see, uh..." the Commander began as he collected his thoughts, "okay, well: not *only* are you learning a very important method of communication to the people you're helping... *and* housing, what with all these dormant drones— but you're also *connecting* with them more, right? Establishing... a *rapport*— a *dialogue* with the people onboard your hull! For some disabled or nonverbal xBs, xBSL is one of the only ways they can communicate, outside of screen displays. With your program learning xBSL, you're showing them respect and a willingness to offer equity within your own framework. It's almost like... you're a *distant relative*, Rec Project staffers haven't seen or heard from in a long time," Geordi tried to explain, "and your program being willing to reach out and accomodate them is the best sorta reunion they could've asked for. Besides: from what I've been debriefed by Executive Director Hugh,

you're the first intact Borg starship management AI that the Reclamation Project has been able to... *interact* with, right? *Talk* with, and all?"

"Correct."

"Right. So uh... this isn't a knock on *you* or anything, but coming back onto a Borg ship for the first time in how long might be a *little* intimidating. So instead of giving *into* that intimidation, the Rec Project staffers and my Starfleet officers are trying to see you as more than just a *place*. ...You-- still kinda *are* a place, in a way, but-- anyway, anyway. You, speaking and signing in a dialect that a good number of xBs use in their day-to-day life... I think that'll help you become a little more relatable, Atlas," Geordi assured him. "It won't happen right away, but-- reputations travel fast, in Starfleet. And I'm seeing xBs are a pretty close-knit bunch, too; so who knows."

The hologram puzzled.

"You consider my learning of LBSL to partly be... an enhancement to my *social likability*," Atlas concluded. "An interaction subroutine you theorize to possibly *influence* my original programming."

"That's the idea!"

Remembering how sensitive holograms could be about their core preservation, though, Geordi sputtered a cough before continuing.

"I mean is that-- something you're *okay* with?"

Atlas' puzzling seemed to fade into something more thoughtful.

"Yes, Commander," he relinquished. "Even if I am aware it is an *editing* of what my current... *functionality* is. My program's 'status quo,' as you might call it."

"Societies don't tend to grow unless you mix up the 'status quo' every once in a while, Atlas," Geordi reminded him with a light grin. "But on an *individual* level? Oh, buddy," he chuckled, "everybody changes. Everybody learns new things-- each and every day."

"Agreed. Even *now*, I am learning."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"I am learning that you are a very *approachable* individual, Commander. You are a good teacher."

Geordi allowed the comment to ruffle his ego.

"I try."

And getting an *idea* from the sudden ego ruffle, Geordi began to tuck

his PADD into his pants pocket. "Here: in fact," he said, turning to face Atlas who tilted his head, "here's your *second* xBSL lesson."

The hologram watched him.

Geordi motioned both his palms flat, then straightened his pointers and thumbs over one another to form a square in an empty space. His left hand suddenly made an upwards motion with all fingers drawn together in one point, rising above the larger-rendered "square" of a space. It was designed to mimic the Reclamation Project badge: a smaller, individual cube leaving the larger conglomerate, but wholly its own being and sign.

"This means 'I,' in reference to yourself. But it can also apply to referring to xBs as a group or society, depending on the context."

Atlas pondered for a second, his eyes glittering with a computational static... then mimicked the Commander's signing to a near tee, looking to Geordi for approval.

Geordi nodded in return. "Nice job. I'm not the final judge by any means, though; you're gonna have to make sure with an *actual* xB before anything."

"Will you be able to acquire a dictionary for my library before the day cycle's end?"

"I'll let Five know to get you patched in before the end of my shift," Geordi promised. "I'm sure Hugh will be delighted to hear you're learning xBSL, too."

"Delight," Atlas repeated. "This is an emotional state you presume Director Hugh's character would exhibit based on your prior interactions, history, and context with him."

The Commander did a double take. "Y-yeah?"

Atlas started puzzling again as Geordi's chest grew tight.

"Forgive me, Commander. I was verbalizing the process of verifying my uplink records to Director Hugh, and confirming that he is capable of the same presumptions regarding *your* character."

Geordi cleared his throat. "And?"

Atlas looked at him as if the answer should be obvious. "Do you not *trust* him to do such?"

A grin tugged at his lips. "I do," Geordi admitted bashfully, "It's just... a little funny-sounding, when you phrase it that way."

"Acknowledging 23 years of prior context with another individual can relate to *humor*?"

Geordi's grin spread into a chuckling smile. "Depends on what kinda context you're *asking* about."

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

Cooperation xB Societal Behavior | Sexual Practices and Culture

Geordi La Forge stared at the section title.

He eyeballed the Ready Room's doorway from his desk.

His eyes went back and forth from the screen to the door, back and forth one more time... and eventually, the Commander sighed, settling further into his seat and picking up where he left off.

Regarding practices surrounding intercourse and Cooperation xBs' "sex positive" in a post-Collective life

INTRODUCTION

The Cooperation xBs of Ohniaka III are, by far, one of the most *polite* cultures I have encountered when approaching the topic of sexual intercourse, and are certainly one of the most *candid*. In summary, perhaps it is due to the inherent value placed on the paradoxical "shared, yet individual experience," and "experiencing life's sensations through a unified, yet singular existence" as a society. But their frankness and unabashed lack of apologia for their own satisfaction of physical recreation lends sex to be a rather widely accepted,

celebrated, and positive interpersonal activity of self-discovery.

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS, CULTURAL CONTEXT

As a precursor to the rest of this entry, I will inform the reader that it is in poor, infantilizing taste to assume that xBs (and by proxy the Borg Collective) are inherently ignorant to sex. By their own repetitive admission, the Borg have assimilated thousands of sapient species' "biological and technical distinctiveness." This, therefore, also includes those species' methods of intercourse, understanding of gender/relationship dynamics, and those cultures' approach to sexuality. As I've been informed by Cooperation anthropologists and philosophers, the crux of any perceived "ignorance" from an xB regarding sex is related to a personal reckoning between the instilled information of the Collective, and what the xB themselves may find preferable and something they wish to pursue.

The sound of a cat's long, sweet, pathetic little meow interrupted Commander La Forge's Ready Room reading.

Geordi looked away from his desk's display to the Starfleet CMO's 8-year-old tabby cat Mimi, flicking her tail absently as she stared the Commander down.

"What."

The cat meowed again.

"Whaaaaaaat?"

Mimi screamed another long meow.

"WHAAAAAAAaaat?!" Geordi mocked with a sing-song voice.

In return, the cat met his gaze and then looked down to the floor, distracted by something that only a cat could be.

Geordi sighed again, rolling his eyes as she began to trot towards his desk.

"You've got lots more to say than *Spot* ever did, I'll give you that."

Using the excuse of catsitting CMO Bartholomew's tabby for a shift that ran longer than intended, Geordi used the time to resume his xenanthropological readings on xB culture. He probably shouldn't have been delving into the more *risque* portions of this publication during his shift, sure— but Geordi had already finished up his debriefing with

Lieutenant Ha'arshov, and had a half hour to do with as he pleased. After all: what harm was there in a little afternoon reading? *Especially* reading that could extrapolate on some musings Geordi had been toying with since a shirtless encounter a week ago with a hot as hell, cute-looking--

No, no— don't even get started.

But he was bored and any more work was bound to kindle a migraine, so Geordi crossed his legs and held his chin as he continued.

It is possible that xBs find the relation to other bodies in a sexually satisfying way a form of conquering Collective-instilled dysphoria, doubt, and perceived physical dysmorphia. As I've been told by my co-writer, there is something rather powerful in "reclaiming" and discovering one's own sexual identity, alignment, preference, and comfortable stewardship of their own, ever-developing bodies. Theories on how various species could impact xBs' sexual compulsions and libido notwithstanding (i.e.: a prolonged observation of a Vulcan xB's sexual drive vs. the demands of the "Pon Farr" phenomenon has been recommended to allot further scientific study), they are all unified by their common physical attributes of formerly being a part of the wider Hivemind— a concept that, inherently, does not despise the idea of connection to greater sensations and an even greater conscious.

Advancements

While romantic infatuation and commitment remains a very lofty, precious, and apotheosis-level societal treasure among xBs, typical approaches between xBs begin with a simple, cordial declaration of the other party's attractiveness, compatibility, consent, and orientation to see if the other(s) would be interested in further sexual activities. The most common phrases I have observed (and been told) are "I find you pleasing" and "I believe I would find you further pleasing somewhere else," or some other incorporation of the word "pleasing" that has woven itself into popular lingo and social cues. For the newly-Reprised xBs still trying to find their social graces months after emerging from the Reclamation Project and Cooperation's sexual education resources, "you are attractive to me, would you like to have intercourse" is a phrase that's not too farfetched, and it's one have seen rejected with polite smiles from older, more-ripened xBs who may

not prefer sexual intercourse by way of their own orientations (or accepted from other, freshly like-minded xBs).

Ohniakan bathhouses amidst their healing, regenerative waters are common places where these platitudes are exchanged, but can be exchanged anywhere from a living block's quarters lounge bed or on the emerald coasts of the Capitol City. Kink, unique sexual subcultures, and orgies are also made possible by these accepted advancements or community postings, and are well-managed, communal activities that cooperate with pre-determined supervision by a group and recreational structure as any "sporting event." These gatherings are hosted not just in the dark nor discussed only in hushed, fearful whispers, but instead held in beautiful chambers and hauntingly beautiful, brutalist suites. To my Junction minder and I's great amusement, it's been discovered recently that some residents and a small handful of visitors to Ohniaka III have begun sardonically nicknaming the events as "Borgies."

Geordi cackled out a laugh as Mimi jumped up onto the desk with a quiet little trill, Geordi extending a hand to the cat for pets out of instinct. He bookmarked the page, deciding he'd come back to *this* specific subject on his off-duty time, and began to scroll further through the chapter.

While these platitudes and actions are blunt, they are verbalized chances for the initiator to declare their intentions that align with the frankness of xBs as a whole, confessed either verbally or over exchanged PADD messages. Upon further reflection, it feels almost necessary to state the casualty with which this exchange are had, as many discuss this as unabashedly as a human would over a coffee date. Rejection, therefore, is not taken with personal laces of malice or ill-boding, and is rather a pleasant acknowledgment of differences between the involved parties: circling back to the celebration and valuing of individuality throughout all xB culture.

Medical Highlights, Factors

With a medical healthcare system so ingrained into the population thanks to the

Reclamation Project's eternal work and presence within xB society, contraceptives and intercourse-aligned/STD-preventative medications are freely available to the public. xBs also have the advantage of downloading information of how best to prevent STDs and determine interspecies' chemical compatibility (or whether or not conception could be a byproduct from the parties' copulation regardless of species). Should xBs choose to initiate a Tether during intercourse, it is a factor that must be occasionally minded for the health of involved parties: both in regards to how long parties may remain connected, or if the mind is willing to enter the headspace that a Tether requires.

The bell to Geordi's quarters chimed, and if Geordi hadn't owned a cat before, the reactive surprise would've both knocked him out of his chair and sent Mimi clamoring off the desk.

After his heart skipped about 10 nervously-internalized beats, he flicked the book off his screen, declaring a "Come in!" to whoever it may be, and-- oh hello, Hugh. The Director's face, once bearing a polite grin, suddenly froze and went wide-eyed at the cat, who'd flopped over on the desk as she accepted Geordi's scratches behind her ear. At first, Geordi wondered if Hugh's expression was out of... fear? Apprehension? God, he was starting to sound like *Hugh* with how much he went fishing for words-- but the xB's face eventually cracked into a wonder-tinged smile, slowly approaching as he raised a finger to point at Mimi.

"That's... not a *hologram*, is it?" Hugh asked as the doors shut behind him. Mimi turned her head to watch the newcomer, giving a loud meow as Hugh's excitement grew more palpable and charming by the moment. "Doctor Bartholomew informed me she had a cat, and this one looks *very* much like the pictures..."

"It's the little lady herself!" Geordi proclaimed with a chuckle. "Mimi's not too bad to take care of. The Doctor had to stay a little longer on her shift for a log amendment, so she asked if I could watch Mimi for her since she's been alone all day and their quarters' toys don't fill the void. You-- wait, how did you find out she had a--?"

"Doctor Bartholomew was kind enough to show me *images*, after a patient mentioned Mimi to me," Hugh murmured, Mimi still watching him with a cat's instinctual intrigue. "Admittedly, I have been *waiting* for

an excuse to see Mimi when it's convenient for the CMO, but I've been occupied at nearly every occasion..."

Hugh's hand began to reach out and, as if remembering invisible rules, stopped and looked to Geordi— to which the Commander was all smirks and smiles.

"May I, Commander?"

"Oh, *I'm* not the one to ask," Geordi humored, beckoning his head towards Mimi, "you gotta talk to *her*."

"Right, of course—" Hugh played along. Mimi, a smaller cat who couldn't be bothered to get up, leaned back in her "seat" as Hugh's hand reached closer towards her. She sniffed his hand, ran her whiskers over the fingertips... and finally, dubbing him "sufficient," tried to barter more pets out of his hand by mushing her face against his hand and showing Hugh just *how*, particularly, she liked to be pet. The xB's eyes sparkled as he felt cat fur for what might've been the first time in his life, and Geordi didn't know what was more charming: the way Hugh's whole face glowed as he logged a new sensation, or the way that Mimi leaned into his hand that did *not* want to get up and work for her pets.

"You're lucky we've got a *nice* one on the station," Geordi offered. "There's some cats that can get real finicky and skittish with strangers."

"Wow," the Director could only murmur, "I just... I didn't know they could be so... soft? And there is an, ah-- I can't quite explain it-- vibration? 'Trilling?' It--"

"Purring, yeah— I can feel it from here."

"So *that's* what that is!" Hugh exclaimed as Mimi wiggled herself up to get closer. "I'd *known* of the act, know what the word means, but-- alright, yes. Very different from what I would've expected."

"She's definitely one of the more *intense* purrers I've seen."

"And *you* would know... to my recollection, you had a pet cat at one point, correct?"

"Well, Spot was originally *Data's* cat," Geordi humored, feeling his face ebb towards nostalgia. "But by the end of our rounds on the *Enterprise*, she definitely had two dads— yeah."

"May I ask whatever became of her?"

"I, ah-- took her in after Data died," Geordi recalled, "I joked about Worf taking her at first, but she was a nice little reminder of Data to

have around. She passed away about... what— five years after he did? Just from old age. 17 is old, especially for a cat that led the exciting life in space like she did. Spot never minded hopping around with me from station to station, thankfully... got her ashes and collar in a little box in my storage.“

Geordi's smile grew heavier by the moment from the weight each word carried with it.

“Mementos are good to have around an office,” he offered, “but that’s not something I can ever really replica--”

The Commander was caught off by a sudden “*mnyeh!*” as Mimi squeaked out a meow, and Geordi’s was suddenly transfixed watching Hugh and the cat. Oh, this was just too much— Mimi had noticed where the ligament webbing augments Hugh's hand stuck out near the lower, outer base of his palm, proceeding to rub her cheeks at it like a small scratching post. Hugh’s hand, in response, was overwhelmingly gentle, elegant, and almost *hypnotizing* to watch as the xB cradled the cat’s head— motioning along with her little ears to maximize the best scratch for her scratch.

“Well,” Hugh breathed wondrously, his voice smooth but his eyes full of adoration. “Aren’t you a sweetheart.”

Geordi caught himself staring like a deer enraptured in the world’s most beautiful headlights.

“This is, uh... your first *time* around a cat, you said?” the Commander murmured as he emerged from his stupor. “Seems like you’re a natural already.”

“I have a faint knowledge of them from previous human assimilations,” Hugh told him, “but when interacting with sentient organisms one is already *aware of* from our Collective osmosis, we've found it's best to rely on one's *own* experiences, in partnership with context. Using those innate facts as reference, base knowledge... acting upon information without practice or personal experiences can be quite detrimental, wouldn't you agree?”

"Acknowledging 23 years of prior context with another individual can relate to *humor*?"

"Depends on what kinda context you're *asking* about."

“Yeah,” Geordi sighed, “I would, Hugh.”

As Geordi leaned up from his chair to watch Mimi and the Director, another different tone of memory skirted through his thoughts and into realization as he noticed something about Hugh’s hand. Mimi, after taking a particularly rambunctious pet and hearing Geordi shift in his chair, leapt down from the desk (much to Geordi and Hugh’s immediate chagrin). With Hugh’s outstretched hand unobscured by Mimi’s fur, the Commander noticed something, and impulsive instinct suddenly took over.

There, it had to have been--

Mumbling out a “wait, wait” before Hugh pulled his hand back, Geordi took the xB’s palm to examine *what*, exactly, Mimi was kneading her cheeks against. At the base of Hugh’s thumb was a three millimeter-wide port of an old Borg biochip coupling—bordered by faint lines that traced over and down to where assimilation tubules emerged from. The skin was made smooth by the long gone layers of exo-plating, of course, but roughened by time’s inevitable wear and tear...

Incredible to think Hugh had such pretty hands under all those layers.

“This was where your coupling access point used to be, huh,” Geordi mused absently, tapping some at the center of the protrusion. “Knew that looked familiar.”

“Y-yes,” Hugh said quietly, “yes it is. --was. You remember.”

“How could I *not*? I had *you* watching me like a hawk while I installed that energy converter and *Worf* holding a phaser on us like cadets on their first day of simulator tag...”

“Less ‘us’ and more ‘on me,’” Hugh teased. “I won’t be offended if you said so.”

Geordi knew it was true.

But oh, how he wished it wasn’t—now that things were different.

“I know, but-- it’s hard, sometimes, reckoning with that. Knowing how scary it must’ve been for you. I mean-- here’s four huge guys in the brig who were afraid of *one* severed drone, not even offering you anything in the way of someone to *talk* to...”

“I didn’t know any better at the time, Geordi,” Hugh assured him. “The circumstances were... very *different*, back then. And as *I* recall, I

was provided for by a ‘nice guy at heart’ that made my stay somewhat better.”

The Commander grinned as he absently traced Hugh’s palm.

“Still,” Geordi sighed, “I couldn’t forgive myself for not taking you at least *once* to Ten Forward, after Guinan talked to you. Bringing a *Borg* to a *bar* in 2368; now what would that have been like... I wish you could’ve seen more of that ship, Hugh. Observation deck, the cetacean chambers, the *botany greenhouses* we had? Augh-- she was beautiful.”

And that was when Geordi realized he had been tracing various parts of Hugh’s hand, palm, fingers, augments, and joints this entire time, and apparently Hugh was all too happy to let him do so.

Geordi swallowed.

“The sentiment is... appreciated, Geordi,” Hugh said quietly. “But the memories I have from my experience there remain among some of my favorites, despite the conflicted nature I have about my at-time conduct and ah-- state of mind.”

“What a coincidence,” Geordi admitted, “mine too.”

“But I was only there for a few days--”

Geordi allowed silence to elaborate his insinuation, and weakened his hold on Hugh’s hand for the xB to do with what he wanted.

There was something about the fact that he could strike an xB silent who so often looked for words.

“What are you up to for the rest of the day cycle, Director?”

“Ah... I--” Hugh mustered as he cleared his throat and slowly withdrew his hand, “I’m, ah, off to meet with *Theta* and *Iota’s* Medical Junctions and Project Junction Troval, to review the week’s Reclamation procedures. After *that*, however, I will be utilizing Deck 4’s Rec Room for some exercise at about 1700 hours. And you?”

“I have some engineering proposals to read over after my repairs onboard Atlas today,” Geordi rambled, “and here *I* am, taking a little break by reading even *more* things— go figure. A trip to the Rec Room *does* sound nice, though... you gonna practice your Capoeira you were talking about a while ago? I might head by around 1700 too; Doctor Bartholomew is picking Mimi up at 1600, and *I’d* like to do some elliptical exercises... not to mention I’m kinda interested to see what your routine looks like in person.”

“I could bring one of my hologram training SIMs and practice a couple of routines,” Hugh teased.

“Show off.”

“Ah, but I *am* good at it; I won’t undersell my self-made spectacle.”

Hugh hadn’t forgotten how he’d checked him out last week, had he.

And from the look of that smirk on his face, he certainly wasn’t going to *let* Geordi forget it.

“Would you mind if I... joined you, if work doesn’t keep me too long?” Geordi asked. “I know some people prefer to use the Rec Room by themselves, hence why I ask--”

“You’re more than welcome to,” Hugh assured. “Crosis is busy this evening, and he is usually the one that accompanies me. It will be nice to have someone else nearby... and an *audience*, apparently.”

Geordi gave Hugh a flat look as his cheeks flared up, the xB laughing with that charming, clear voice of his. Geordi’s head bobbed in his seat as he rolled his eyes with an “Uh-huh, okay,” Mimi yelling another long, impolite meow from where she was poised against a display stand.

“Whaaaaat, Mimi!” Geordi cried in jest, the cat flicking her tail as she stared at the two men. “What do you have to say!”

“I see Doctor Bartholomew wasn’t *joking* when she inferred her cat ‘loved to scream.’”

The two continued to look in her direction— waiting for something, *anything* else Mimi might do.

And as if in response to their staring, Mimi let out another long, droning meow as they both chuckled— the cat flopping over and whipping the tip of her tail back and forth against the carpet.

“I’ll leave you both be,” Hugh settled, “and *I’ll* message your PADD once I’m settled.”

“I’ll see you then, Director.”

“See you.”

Hugh trotted out of Geordi’s office, the Commander watched him leave as the doors slid open... and he caught Hugh wringing the hand Geordi had touched so carefully, thoughtfully, and laced with memories of days, years, and decades gone by.

Stop it.

Mimi meowed again.

“Whaaaaaaat,” the Commander begged, “what is iiiiiiiit!?”

For now, Geordi hoped he could substitute cat pets in lieu of wanting xB hand holds.

SPECIALTY OUTPOST STARBASE "SP-4852 SOLSTICE"

DECK 4, RECREATIONAL ROOM 3

Conclusion

This section regarding xB intercourse shall end with words from Consultation Junction Horus. I myself am not an xB, and merely peer into their world for our own education and a striving to understand others and uphold Starfleet's desire for connection across worlds. It would be far more fitting, then, to have an xB discuss what makes this form of connection for them so poignant, and his words encapsulate it far better than I ever could.

There is a phrase I have heard employed from human metaphor: the concept of "touch-starved," and upon further studies of its meanings I have not found another phrase to so aptly associate xBs as a people and society.

We are separate, above all else, and yet we yearn for connection. We are one in ourselves, above all else, and yet we are many- at a constant divide for individuality and cooperation between others who share our kinship and trauma. Be it physical, verbal, or emotional investment, premeditated interaction with specific individuals tells us more about ourselves, and how deeply we can fathom being known for who we are rather than the commandments of a Collective declare us to be.

Touch is key. Its very nature is personal intent, and it is spiced with personhood's uniqueness and the instinctual desire of want. Touch, to an xB, is the pinnacle in all sacredness and preciousness. In your relations with Reclaimed, if you are to touch

them and interact with them on a physical level, you must pay mind that you should not cheapen a beautiful meal of touch with fleeting casualness. To us, touch is a warmth that melts the icy cold of the Collective: a warmth that sends devastating cracks throughout its barren, unfeeling hull. It is a beautiful paradox- to be lost as a person in something so vast as a concept, that you become that very collective experience itself. When fed well-intended touch, xBs are not merely "no longer starved;" rather, they become a fire more radiant than any star could ever burn, infinitely fueled by the warmth you have decided to give them.

Our bodies are self-shaped temples — lovingly and laboriously built with tools we've Reclaimed from our Oppressors — and your respect paid to these vessels are what help fill them with the holy nirvana of perfection our societal captor so dearly sought.

Hugh couldn't stop holding his own hand for five minutes after leaving Geordi's office.

It was fine! It was fine; Geordi probably didn't know how sensitive his people could *be* to touch, in certain conditions. After all, Geordi was an engineer; he liked to see how things worked, and Hugh's implants could be no different to a man like him--

But Hugh was substituting that memory now for the vacant Rec Room, opening and closing his hand to settle his nerves.

["Knew that looked familiar."]

Hugh huffed a sigh as he approached the Rec Room's control panel, focusing instead on installing his Capoeira program into the hologram SIM to shake him from these thoughts.

The Director was 3 minutes, 58 seconds into his opening stretches when the doors whooshed open and Geordi entered— dressed in the same replicator-provided workout bodysuit Hugh wore. They were tight things, admittedly, but Hugh was thankful synthesized material didn't seem to irritate or discomfort his implants. On himself and Geordi, the suits showed off their bare arms and calves where it cut off at the knee;

for Hugh, his metal-laced and augment-lined musculature contrasted the dark pants where nodules and remnant ports made bumps and grooves in the slick material. For Geordi though, oh; how it showed off Geordi's bulky arms, his barrel-like chest and wonderful backside that--

"Hey you!" Geordi chimed as he popped open a Starfleet water bottle. "Got here before I did, I see..."

Hugh grinned-- if not to quell his own sudden bout of nerves. "All done for the day, Commander?"

"Thankfully so," the Commander sighed as he opened a locker cubby, "helps that Vorik is so damn thorough at filing reports."

"Does this come from *previous* work experience?"

"Nah; this is my first posting with the guy. But from what Janeway's told me, he's *always* been like this," the Commander mused. "Turns out when you're a Vulcan who cut his teeth on surviving for seven years in far-flung space, you get real good at keeping track of what resources you have. But no more work for now; no more," Geordi proclaimed, motioning his hand up and down at Hugh with a curious smirk, "I wanna see *this*."

Hugh smirked and stood up straighter. "Keeping me to that 'self-made spectacle' promise, I see."

"Damn right I am! And you've got a captive audience because I actually *need* to work out. Whatever you're doing there looks like some pretty nice opening stretches, though..."

"They are, actually; it helps my, ah..." Hugh trailed off as he motioned in the direction of his gnarled left leg. "Stationary stretching and ligament-orientated activities help keep my tendons and cybernetics' muscle strands primed, after long periods of sitting."

Hugh caught Geordi staring at his leg as he rambled.

It was similar to the faces Geordi made when staring at a particularly-beautiful view of T'Pol's sun.

"Can you, uh... show me?"

Hugh's chest felt tight as Geordi shut a locker door with a metallic clatter.

"What?"

"Your-- stretch routine? I-if you're alright with that," the Commander added. "Unless they're your-- secret technique or something..."

Where Geordi was concerned, Hugh had very little need for secrets.

So Hugh pushed himself up and off the Rec Room's cushioned mat, nodding as he met the Commander at equal level. "I would be honored to, Geordi."

Standing opposite to Geordi, the two men blustered in place as Hugh readied his stance, acting as the mirror where the SIM might normally be. "Relax your shoulders," Hugh offered, "and tighten your midsection."

Geordi tried to imitate him.

He was doing a good job *attempting* the positions, but he could--
No.

"Ah-- close," Hugh motioned his shoulders and rolled them back, "but looser, in, your..."

Geordi was trying to concentrate, it looked like, but there was something still off that--

"Hmm... almost there, but--"

"This?"

"No, you're--"

Hugh sighed and, after failing to point out a place of emphasis, offered out his other hand. "May I show you?"

Geordi smirked. "Not at all."

Alright.

As Hugh walked towards the Commander, his cybernetic matrices and visual UI were operating at 110.98% capacity-- trying to figure out how Geordi was reacting, what his ever-fluctuating pulse and temperature flares could mean in physical stimulus...

Hugh had some ideas.

But premature presumptions were hardly ever efficient, and Hugh wanted to see some concrete evidence for more reasons than one.

So, taking a stance behind Geordi, Hugh reached around to lay his open palm on the Commander's chest, pressing in until Geordi arched his back.

Underneath his sternum, a wildly-beating heart was protected by flesh and bone alone.

Hugh swallowed.

"Chest inward. ...Good. Keep it like that."

Encircling Geordi to follow his arm, Hugh traced the Commander's shoulder down to his fingertips, leveling his arm at an even eye level.

"Balance..."

Rounding him to stand Geordi's opposite, Hugh's hand ran along Geordi's upper arm, chest, throat...

Losing his microcalculations in the fluidity of his own motions, Hugh meandered to Geordi's front and met him near that outstretched hand, allowing his fingertips to run over Geordi's jawline.

Hugh's eyes met Geordi's and his mouth began to quiver.

"P-posture..."

xBs had captivating stares, it was known.

But oh— how enrapturing Geordi's *own* stare was, in return.

Hugh's fingertips, now under Geordi's beard, shifted to have his thumb hold the Commander's chin in a pinch.

Geordi did not refuse it.

"Like this?"

Instead of refusing, in fact, Geordi began to *grin* as his eyes bore a newfound fervor.

"Y-yes," the xB murmured. "Outstanding, Geordi."

Hugh's jaw shuddered before he spoke again.

"Outstanding, and... *'pleasing,'* even."

Thankful that Geordi had no context for that word beyond a brutally-honest truth, Hugh's microcalculations predicted that the xB would return his hand back to his side, reveling in the last moments of this soon-to-be memory.

But Hugh was shocked to see that a certain microcalculation's predictive result held far more merit than he ever thought possible, and the xB watched Geordi's eyes widen at Hugh's latter choice of words.

[*Was that wrong?*]

[*Was that too much?*]

No.

In fact, Geordi looked even *more* enthralled.

Finally, the Commander nodded, rolling his tongue inside his cheek. "Well... if *that's* true," Geordi crooned, "I don't imagine you'd be too opposed in showing me how the rest of this stretch routine is done, right?"

Hugh's mouth was dry as he tried to slow his breathing, blinking once or twice to regain his composure.

He let himself smile.

"Hardly opposed at all. *Excited*, even. Now," Hugh resumed, "chest and core. You want a centered anchor, for distributing weight..."

The next 31 minutes flew by, and the entire time Hugh felt as if his processors were functioning as fast as light itself. Geordi did eventually switch to the elliptical and watched Hugh trade a small sparring session with his holographic SIM, but there remained an unspoken weight between the two. An unspoken, wanton weight that grew more comforting the harder it pressed down. A wanton, unspoken, and *mutual* weight that was traded between little glances and hints of smiles that ebbed at the other's lips— that mutual weight finally taking a shape as Geordi and Hugh pilfered through their respective lockers.

"Well, that was a nice workout," Geordi sighed before taking a deep swig from his water bottle. "Anything other business you're tending to tonight, Hugh?"

"Unless anything *unexpected* occurs on the Atlas Project's grounds," Hugh mused, "I don't believe so. I might resume reading some periodicals from home, review some extraneous workplace requests and filings..."

Perhaps call *Crosis* once he was available, Hugh thought to himself.

But Geordi didn't need to know that.

"'Workplace filings,' huh..."

As Geordi shut his locker door with a clatter, Hugh's head turned to see the Commander with a towel slung over his slick shoulders, an elevated heart rate that Hugh's visual UI labeled as a *warning*, and a brow creased with the familiarly mutual, wanton, and formerly-unspoken weight.

"I-I, uh--"

As if drawing a shade to avoid the prying eyes of Starfleet security cameras, Geordi's hand reached around the xB to grab at Hugh's open locker door behind him to bring himself closer.

They spent 3.52 seconds staring at each other.

"Well, I'm-- sorry if you need to file a workplace *complaint--*"

And where the sudden trajectory of Geordi's head might've landed a polite peck on Hugh's cheek, spontaneity moved the xB to intercept his lips with Geordi's for a messy, savory, and indescribable 3.41 second long kiss.

What would the young man Hugh was 23 years ago think of himself *now*, he wondered?

Where Hugh might've been self-conscious at his awestruck loss for words, the Director quickly realized and took comfort in the fact that, by the look on *Geordi's* face, the Commander only required a very small, very specific formality from Hugh in this moment.

"No, I... I don't think I need to file anything like that, Geordi," he told him softly. "It's... it's alright."

The worry in Geordi's hopeful smile immediately began to subside.

"I-I'm--"

Geordi shuddered a sigh of relief with a quick and excited nod.

"I'm very glad, Hugh."

After shakily exchanging goodbyes and Hugh watched Geordi leave the Rec Room in a flustered huff, Hugh went straight back to his own quarters, his revelatory thoughts *far* too stimulated and aroused to glean any sort of logic from.

At the very least, he definitely knew *Crosis* needed to be called again.

But not a minute after emerging from his post-workout sonic shower, a message notification lit up Hugh's PADD screen.

Starfleet personnel.

He opened it.

It had been filtered into personal, non-duty related conversations.

Commander Geordi La Forge.

> May I request your presence in my quarters at 2100 hours?

Hugh's hands froze in a stupor as he stared at the PADD.

What time was it, then? Was his chronometer correct? 1804?

A mixture of... what was it—dread? Anticipation? Need? A slurry of weight-addled emotion filled his gut, Hugh's hands typing out a message before the xB's fears could catch up with him.

He couldn't wait that long.

- > Do you wish to wait that long if you're going to request my presence, Commander? I am currently unoccupied.

A pause.

The typing indicator appeared onscreen.

> 1900.

- > I will will arrive by 1900 hours. Thank you, Commander.

> Thank you, Director.

What was he doing, what was *Geordi* doing— did either of them truly realize the ramifications of what they were doing?!

Hugh sighed as he mushed his hand into the side of his head to grip at his freshly-washed hair.

For all his personal doubt, nervousness, and undeniable *excitement*, Hugh at least knew one thing in unwavering certainty.

He trusted Geordi.

Geordi trusted *him*, from what he had been told.

And that mutual promise of trust had to be enough for now, Hugh fumbling with both his outfit and a newly-kindled ache added to their earlier-shared weight.

