

3

PREMONITIONS

The Reclamation Project | Overview

A brief overview of the Reclamation Project and its Four Internal Divisions

While I've already discussed my observations regarding Cooperation life on Ohniaka III, I feel as if I've only begun to scratch the surface of its space-faring presence in the galaxy: the Reclamation Project. Although only ratified in the Federation's and her allies' eyes when The Ohniakan Accords of 2379 were signed, xB historians argue the Reclamation Project was technically founded in 2368: when the Progenitors first peeled back their augments and found their bodies were, as Junction Horus has described to me, "self-made temples in their own Reclaimed images."

As Starfleet spontaneously birthed and weaves itself into the United Federation of Planets, the Symbiosis Commission coexists with the foundations of Trill society, and the Klingon Empire relies on its 11 houses as the High Council's galactic might and honor, so too does the Liberated Borg Cooperation extend itself into space and its people with the Reclamation Project: in history, lineage, and "reclamation" for all xBs.

The following material under "The Reclamation Project" category will examine this organization in the following manners: a brief overview and its mission statement, intent for galactic venturing and Cooperation-aligned colonies/ settlements, and then be dissected per its four divisions. All official inquiries and desired internships can be freely made to the Reclamation Project's Administrative offices or Cooperation government- so long as you are willing to work with a slew of xBs and be immersed in this fledgling society.

For my Federation/Starfleet colleagues on Earth, you will know Cooperation delegates (or civilians) visiting San Francisco by a number of qualities: their geometric and dramatic sense of dark fashion, the gleaming gold and silver badges bearing the diamond-like LBC sigil, and the scars and augmentations that litter their bodies from head to toe. The latter is not carried in anguish or self-hatred, but are instead accentuated by their fashions- highlighting their unique Reclamation , as cracked pottery would be repaired with gold.

The Reclamation Project houses four main divisions: Consultation, Medical, Cybernetics, and Engineering, and its overall goal is the "The willing Reclamation of every former Borg that has been Liberated from the Collective" (to complement the Liberated Borg Cooperation's motto of "Individuality's Needs, Community's Many"). Seasoned politicians will notice there is an absence of "Military" and/ or "Security" within these branches; the xBs of Ohniaka III, while possessing planet-wide defense systems, starship armaments, and primarily defense-based technology, attempt to adhere to a principle of pacifism, and have yet to actively instigate any recorded instance of intergalactic conflict, other than destabilization of opposing starship weapons systems or individual agitators. An administrative subsection is dedicated to affairs that deal with communications between the Cooperation government and Reclamation Project staff (both on Ohniaka III and affiliated micro-communities off-world). Much like Cooperation societal intent, the Reclamation Project is removed from Starfleet-tangential structures of hierarchy, and relies purely on cooperative decision-making and processing of productive, individual-enriching intent.

In comparison to Starfleet's motto of "Ex Astris, Scientia ("From the Stars, Knowledge)", the Reclamation Project lays its intent bare for not only the galaxy, but its own staff: "Know Thyself" (and by Latin translation: "Temet Nosce").

[EARTHEN CALENDAR - NOVEMBER 1, 2391]
SPECIALTY OUTPOST STARBASE "SP-4852 SOLSTICE"
STATION COMMANDER READY ROOM

Commander Geordi La Forge (soon-to-be *Captain* La Forge) watched Hugh take in the news of his promotion— charmed by the xB's enthusiasm and rapidly-spreading smile.

"Captain!"

"That'll be me!"

"Hmm— 'Captain,' then..."

"Whaddya think."

"I think I could get used to that, '*Captain*' La Forge."

Who the hell taught him how to flirt like that!

Put it back in his court, La Forge.

"Well I happen to like when you *say it*, Director," he clicked his tongue with. "How about that?"

Geordi smirked as Hugh's proud grin faltered into sheepish flattery.

Regaining his mental footing, a still-flustered Hugh picked up where he and Geordi had left off. "Your request for a different decoration date other than the Midway Gala is very appreciated. ...Captain."

"I'm not gonna let them use me to take the spotlight off what we've been working on, Hugh. HQ needs a reminder that you and the Reclamation Project aren't just some... backdrop they can use for a big setpiece," he said with a grimace, "and that we've been out here working. Working to bring people to a new home, a new life— hell, maybe even make some *discoveries* along the way. An Admiral can get here a day or two earlier to promote me," Geordi assured, "and considering what I've done for Starfleet in my lifetime? The least they could do is give *me* a say in where I wanna be stationed as a Captain."

"And where might that be?"

Anywhere near you.

"I-- have some ideas," Geordi teased with a nervous smile. "Ideas I think you'd like. But is it alright if we save that for later? Nothing I don't wanna talk about with you," he rambled, "I just-- wanna keep focused on the Admiral tonight. Make sure Atlas and the EMH are ready for

installation tomorrow. You get it, right?”

“Of course.”

Hugh nibbled his lip while he looked for words.

“I’m very proud of you, Geordi,” the xB told him, “*happy* for you, even. I’ve seen what captaincy means to Starfleet officers, and I know you are above and beyond qualified for the position’s responsibilities. I’m almost... curious, admittedly,” Hugh pried carefully, “as to why you weren’t promoted already--”

“They wanted to, in 2386,” Geordi finished for him. “A little after Utopia Planitia’s bombing, for getting as many people out of there as I could. But I, uh... I couldn’t take on a captain’s chair or station desk then,” he admitted. “Too much pressure. And after a loss like Mars, it was... eh. I didn’t trust myself with a whole lot, back then.”

Geordi’s sad train of thought ground to a stop as Torres barged back into his Ready Room— B’Elanna’s eye-rolling frown and wave of her hand all the context they needed to know in regards to how the commotion that caused her absence had gone. Before Torres and La Forge could call Janeway and get into their official debrief, B’Elanna’s combadge had chirped a clearly-rattled barback requesting an intervention— one of the Klingon delegates heard in the background demanding Torres’ audience to be a “fair referee.” An aggravated Captain Torres apologized and promised to return in at least an hour while the Doctor and Troval finished installing his mobile emitter charger on *Solstice*— or she would *make sure* the match would end by an hour’s time.

Introducing the EMH to Atlas, of course, would be its own special occasion tomorrow.

“Hi, hi, alright— sorry,” Torres sighed. “Now that that’s all done, let’s actually get down to a debrief...”

“How’d it go, Captain?”

She shook a finger at Hugh. “Your guy,” B’Elanna started, “Crosis? First off, he’s good; I haven’t seen someone put Grahn’hoq in a headlock that quick in a long time. Second of all, he might need to take a shift off tomorrow— or at least be sitting for a majority of the day. You xBs might be stronger than the average humanoid, but I feel like he’s gonna be at least a *little* sore.”

"If it's any comfort," Hugh offered, "I can assure you Croxis has been somewhat excited for this rendezvous; he's missed competing in his wrestling clubs back home. ...As long as the Director Second isn't... seriously injured, is he--"

"Other than some bruising, nah," Torres assured, "Doc didn't find anything broken or too serious on him. ...At least, that's-- what it looked like, before I left."

Hugh made a face. "Mn. Well, as long as it's not as bad as our diplomatic ventures to Qo'noS in 2385..."

Geordi paused. "'Diplomatic ventures?'"

"Yeah-- I'm kinda curious about that myself."

Hugh's face morphed into a rather smug look. "Our alliances with the Klingon Empire certainly weren't earned by the Cooperation's pacifism," he alluded. "We forged it in combat as any ally would gain honor and merit in the Empire's eyes not to mention our Klingon diaspora would accept nothing less. It was the most... *rigorous* alliance we've had to work for," Hugh admitted, "and I take no joy in enacting violence upon others."

"Didn't have to kill anyone, didja?"

Thankfully standing behind Hugh, Geordi made a face at Torres as the xB shook his head. "No, thankfully. The High Council *wanted* to be disappointed at that, but... I'll vouch for Croxis when I say we'd, ah-- given them enough of a fight *already*."

As the imagination filled Geordi's mind — a bloodied, gladiator-like Hugh standing in the middle of a Klingon's arena with a d'k tahg raised above his head — the Commander's face flushed a bright red.

Oh, and Hugh was gonna have to call him '*Captain*' soon?!

Geordi ran a hand down his face and cleared his throat— feeling Hugh watch him with a widening grin as Torres scoffed and muttered something to herself. "Well-- that's a very. *Inspiring* story, Director," Geordi tried to laugh off, meandering towards his desk to punch in the subspace comm. "I'd like to hear more later, but-- we should probably go ahead and uh-- give the Admiral a call, right?"

"Agreed, Commander; very observant."

"Riiight."

Before Hugh and Torres could continue to bully him, the Starfleet

delta on Geordi's screen fizzled out— Admiral Janeway taking its place on the windowed display. *"Good evening my fair Captain, Commander, and Director,"* Janeway crooned from her side of the quadrant. *"My my— it's all smiles and smirks tonight, I see..."*

Geordi tried and failed to restrain another smile. "Good evening indeed, Admiral!" he chimed in return. "Don't mind us; just having some fun catching up..."

"By the look of it, I assume the Palenque's crew arrived in one piece?"

"All present and accounted for, Ma'am," the Commander confirmed. "Captain Torres here docked two hours ago, Director Second Croxis is keeping the House of Koloth representatives pleased as bloodwine punch, and our photonic transfer is acquainting himself with *Solstice*. I have Captain Torres to thank for her safe escort services, and my station co-manager to thank for his ever-diligent preparatory work."

"I'm glad to confirm. I see the Doctor is absent, from the looks of it," Janeway noted, *"has he ventured onboard the sphere, or--?"*

"He won't be meeting with Atlas until tomorrow morning, Admiral," Hugh spoke up. "He's taking the evening to install his mobile emitter's charging dock, first. Both Atlas and the Doctor will be entering diagnostic cycles tonight to ensure Atlas' hologenerator is prepared to host the EMH's program for nearly four months."

"Excellent. Captain Torres," the Admiral chimed, *"I again thank you and your crew for escorting the Doctor and House of Koloth representatives to Solstice."*

"Our timing worked out well enough," Torres shrugged. "The pit stop to Qo'noS should be fun before coming back for the Midway Gala."

"Try not to have too much fun on the road trip."

From a quick and cursory glance, Geordi could tell Torres was chewing on words and debating on whether or not to spit them out.

Thankfully, she made that decision rather quick. "Well, I've kinda put a damper on things here already," B'Elanna said with a frown, "so we'll see how far I get on 'fun.'"

"Why, what did you--"

Janeway's furrowed brow looked to the Commander. Geordi, firming his lips to make a rather "angelic" smile, bemusedly watched on as the Admiral realized what her old Chief Engineer had done. *"Really?"* she

scoffed a disappointed sigh, "*did you have to?*"

"Look, it was gonna bug me the entire time I was here," Torres shot back, "that's what *you* get for not locking your PADD before leaving conference rooms."

The Admiral rubbed at her temple with a groan. "*Fine, fine,*" Janeway pained herself to say, "*I get it. If you're going to air the laundry, I might as well hang my own...*"

She sat up to look directly at Geordi. "*Commander, keep in mind that neither Clancy nor I have presented this promotion timetable to the council yet. She was the one that proposed it, and we planned to message you the offer first so we might convene once Captain Torres and the Koloth ambassadors arrived.*"

"Who says the announcement won't just come in a stuffy little document rather than someone getting to tell you?"

Geordi was almost impressed with her accuracy.

"If anything," the Commander assured, "I'm at least grateful I had the chance to discuss it with Captain Torres and Hugh here, first and foremost. Additionally, I'm glad to let you know that I've accepted a promotion to Captaincy," Geordi confirmed with a smirk, "but with a few conditions. ...Thank you, by the way."

Janeway smiled gently. "*Everyone felt five years was long enough since you'd last turned down the offer.*"

"Yeah. Mars, ah... it still weighs heavy on me," Geordi said, "but time's brought its own kind of healing. Clarity, thankfully."

"*I know it's rather soon to be asking, but has this clarity offered you any of those preliminary 'conditions' for your Captaincy, Mr. La Forge? It'll be good on my end to know what exactly it is you'd be presenting to the council...*"

Geordi nodded. "Well, first and foremost," he started, "I want my promotion to be done and certified *before* the gala— not *during* it. We need every positive eye we can get on what the Reclamation Project is doing with Starfleet, and we don't need to override that with our own in-house business. My becoming Captain shouldn't be outweighing the work that's warranted it, y'know? And that means I'd like the Gala's focus to be all in on our partners with Reclamation Project. Is that

understood?”

It looked like Janeway was listening— if her furrowed brow and the hand on her chin were anything to go by.

But the Admiral took her time chewing on some words, too— though these seemed far more guarded. *“I see your logic, La Forge,” she admitted, “and I wish I could agree in full. But I suspect there’s a reason why Clancy wanted to have it occur during the gala... a problematic reason, to say the least.”*

“Problematic?”

Janeway’s frown deepened. *“Starfleet is having personnel express... discomfort, at the idea of attending such an event,” she said bitterly. “It’s rather pathetic, in all honesty— especially considering the Cooperation’s hospitality during the Atlas Project. We’re nearing ever closer to the date, Commander, and confirmations of attendance have been... slim. I believe Clancy is wanting to utilize your promotion as a way of enticing more senior officers towards the Gala, La Forge,”* the Admiral tried to offer, *“so they could celebrate one good man in the company of others who deserve just as much respect.”*

Geordi felt a migraine coming on.

Starfleet bureaucracy at its finest: Good intentions laced with an arrogant, gilded morality that could make even the strongest of diplomats’ stomachs churn.

The feigned ignorance didn’t help much, either.

As the Commander rubbed his chin to mirror Torres’ awkwardness, Geordi’s eye caught Hugh with a balled fist to his lips as he rubbed at his old biochip port.

“Hugh?”

Someone was looking for words, alright.

Hugh swallowed and clasped his hands together. “Admiral,” he said quietly, “I would... I would only hope that you — the Admiral that oversees our Project — encourage her colleagues to explore... *openness*, in this regard. Compassion. The spirit of that supposed... exploration, that Starfleet administration so often boasts of. In solidarity with my project co-manager,” Hugh said as bravely as he could, “I will see to it that his conditions are observed and honored; we will not approve of any Starfleet-submitted itinerary change requests regarding this

subject. Though I cannot speak for my fellow staffers, I suspect both the Cooperation and Reclamation Project would hate to be used as ‘rivaling spectacles’ for what should be a ceremony of Geordi’s own accord. I remind the gathered here that Commander La Forge has a very significant place, in our people’s history,” Hugh pointed out. “We are, therefore, inclined to both oblige and lend credence to his wisdom.”

If Hugh’s sheepish reaction told Geordi anything, it was that the Commander must’ve looked quite humbled by his reminder.

“Well, I... thank you, Hugh,” Geordi said warmly. “I don’t need a big ceremony, Kathryn; just gimme a room full of good friends and officers to watch another pip go on the collar. And the Gala? If uh— any Admirals or invited personnel have questions or ‘extended queries’ about us and what the hell we’re doing out here,” Geordi said firmly, “tell them they’re welcome to read up on who these people are. It’s a pretty easy Federation database search.”

“And if they *must*,” Hugh added on, “inform said personnel they are also welcome to speak directly with the Project’s Executive Director. Or, perhaps, any of the 63 Reclamation Project staffers stationed here who were once Starfleet officers, in another lifetime. I theorize my peoples’ diplomatic committees might be somewhat... *disappointed*,” Hugh alluded, “if they knew Starfleet superiors aligned us with similar feelings of distrust and fear we ourselves hold towards--”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Janeway tried, *“it’s more like...”*

The three of them waited for Janeway to finish that thought— the Admiral’s wrist rolling her left hand as she tried to conjure an excuse... until she stopped its motion— pausing to look at something on her thumb? Palm, maybe?

It suddenly hit a wide-eyed Geordi that she was frowning at the same place where Hugh’s Tethering tubules would erupt from on his wrist.

Oh yeah.

Did Jean-luc still have his, all these years later?

Janeway surrendered with a harsh sigh and refolded her hands.

“Nevermind. Continue, Director.”

Hugh nodded in response. “We must already fight for so much, Admiral,” he said sadly. “We must fight for our own... stability, respect, our inner peace... I don’t want to also fight for *attention*. Much less

against a man who deserves an audience's undivided attention of his own *choosing*."

Geordi's dimples were getting in a good workout.

Thanks, Hugh.

"Well," Torres sighed with a puffed cheek, "looks like you're gonna have a lot to talk about with Clancy..."

"Don't rub it in, B'Elanna."

Janeway finished at the back of her neck with a heavy sigh. "...*You're both right*," she conceded, "*you're right, damn it. I can only extend my own apologies that I didn't reflect further on possible conflicts of interest. La Forge, you have my word that I'll do what I can to ensure your promotion will be your own. Hugh*," the Admiral continued, "*I'll see to it that Cooperation and Reclamation Project demos will have priority focus on itinerary finalizations.*"

Hugh looked pleased enough. "Thank you, Admiral."

"I appreciate it, Kathryn. I'm still a *little* peeved, admittedly," Geordi huffed, "but at least we snuffed this out now before it got too far out of the planning stage. And tell Clancy that uh, in the future— she might want to consider *my* input first, regarding things like this. My promotion won't be some... I dunno, hell; this feels like wedding seat appeasement."

She managed a shrug. "*I'll give her an earful in person if I have to.*"

Torres smirked. "Wish I was there to see that."

"Not with Clancy you don't; that gets messy. You just want me to be a rulebreaker again."

"Well, I know you have the guts to be one."

On the other side of subspace, the Admiral settled into a nostalgic grin.

"Well," Janeway sighed, "*If I have to fly out there myself and do the endowment beforehand, I might as well do it. I don't want to stay past my welcome on Atlas before or after the festivities are done, but you'll have Captain's pips to show off for the gala. You're really alright having a small ceremony?*"

"I can rub it in my friends' faces when they all get here," Geordi affirmed, "and I'm quite alright with that— thank you, Ma'am. Think I got a good chunk of the company I'd want right here, anyway."

“It would be wonderful to give you a tour of our facilities a day before the events as well, Admiral,” Hugh offered. “As I’m certain you’ve read in our reports, progress is continuing quite efficiently here.”

“*So I’ve read, Director Hugh. Regarding Solstice’s spherical neighbor and his riddle,*” she pried, “*have you made any leeway yet?*”

“Captain Torres has offered a few new perspectives of approach towards it,” Geordi replied, “and Director Hugh has allocated any and all resources he and the Rec Project have towards research. Nothing concrete yet, I’m afraid— but we’re trying.”

The Admiral nodded. “I only wish your guest downstairs would be more willing to divulge what she knows.”

“If it’s any assurance, Admiral,” Hugh offered, “I believe she speaks somewhat truthfully when she says her accessible memory of what transpired was erased. She’s given no clues to lend us the suspicion that she’s lying. Ignorance to information-based knowledge is *not* something a queen unit would readily admit,” the xB pointed out, “that in itself is a terrible acceptance of inefficiency.”

“*I notice you say ‘accessible’ memory, Director,*” Janeway noted. “*Is there a possibility that whatever information was lost or deleted could be recovered?*”

“It’s a possibility; I can’t make any promises at this stage. Though it is a theory the Reclamation Project and I, in cooperation with Starfleet, shall nonetheless pursue.”

“*I’ll take that over nothing; keep at it as best you’re able. Regarding your promotion, Mr. La Forge; provided I don’t run into any trouble along the way,*” the Admiral resumed, “*I’ll aim to be out there at least 4800 hours before the gala begins. Does that work for you?*”

“Fine by me, Admiral.”

“*And on behalf of Starfleet, Gentlemen,*” Kathryn continued, “*I apologize once again.*”

Geordi tightened his lips to allude an accepting nod as Hugh sneakily bumped his hip.

An unamused Torres looked between them and the Admiral. “You’re lucky they’re so forgiving, Kat.”

“*I’ll take it as an external perspective and accountability.*”

“As you should,” Torres quipped, “God knows we put *you* through the ‘perspective wringer’ enough for seven years.”

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss that wringer sometimes, B'Elanna."

"Miss you too, Ma'am."

Janeway straightened in her seat with a smirk. "So," she sighed, *"Anything else I can do before you all get down to business?"*

"Nothing my station co-manager hasn't already said eloquently enough," Geordi chimed. "Captain Torres?"

B'Elanna shook her head. "My itinerary is good to go."

"Then safe travels and circumstances to you all. Commander La Forge, I'll be in contact with you before 0800 hours tomorrow for those 'Captaincy Conditions.'"

"Understood."

And with a murmur of goodbyes, the call ended— Geordi sighing as the conversation's weight unmoored itself from his shoulders.

"Y'see what being out in the middle of nowhere does to you?"

B'Elanna teased. "Makes you confident. Bolder. My own experiences aside... other officers I know wouldn't have even mentioned that like you two did, so I-- appreciate that gutsiness, from you both. I like seeing people set their boundaries."

"You know xBs try to be an honest people, B'Elanna," Hugh reminded her. "Almost to a fault."

"'Rude' is another word for it."

Geordi stifled a snort as B'Elanna's commbadge chirped. *"Doctor to Captain Torres? Doctor to Torres— come in, please."*

"What's up, Doc."

"Junction Troval and I are nearly finished installing my mobile emitter's charger in Sickbay, but I have some subprograms I'd like to prepare for my defragmentation tomorrow into Atlas' hologenerator calibrations. I'd appreciate your assistance, if you have a moment?"

"It'll take about an hour; can it wait 15 minutes after Commander La Forge and I go ove—"

"You can go on and help him, if you wanna," Geordi said in a hushed voice, "give the crews a chance to offload everything—"

"You sure?"

"Mhm."

"Scratch that, Doctor," B'Elanna spoke up, "I'll be there in five."

"Ah! Wonderful; We'll enjoy the view in the meantime."

"See you then; Torres out." Turning to them both, she asked: "That's enough time for when dinner was supposed to be, right? The Koloth boys should be pretty tuckered out by then, I think--"

"We have a two hour timeframe to work within, Captain," Hugh assured. "See you soon."

Torres firmed her tough smile. "Thanks."

As Geordi watched the Excalibur-class captain go and his Ready Room door slid shut, whatever thoughts he might've had went straight out the airlock by the ghosting, then *sliding* sensation of Hugh's hand running down the back of his head. The induced shiver rekindled the earlier embers of arousal from watching Hugh in the transporter room's Klingon scuffle, Geordi's throat tightening as Hugh's hand held his shoulder, squeezed it-- pulled him closer into his side and into a cuddling embrace--

"Hehehehhh, yeah?" Geordi giggled, "Hello, youuu... God, at least lemme turn on 'enhanced privacy mode' first--"

Hugh's laughter rang in Geordi's ear as the room's UI chirped in response. "I caught your cheeks' earlier temperature flare-up as I recounted my Qo'noS trip," the xB gushed. "I exerted a great deal of self-control, keeping myself from kissing you then and there--"

It was Geordi's turn to wrangle a kiss out of Hugh as the xB kept chuckling, the Commander squirming in Hugh's embrace to start wagging a finger at him. "First you come out there wearing an outfit like *that*-- showing off your arms like *this*," Geordi crooned, "then I get surprised with a story about you and Crois beating the shit out of some ambassadors? How do you *think* I'm gonna react?!"

Hugh's voice was lower than normal as his shoulders blustered with pride. "You flatter me."

"What can I say; you're a fun one to flatter, baby."

Hugh's eyes always sparkled a smidge brighter whenever Geordi called him that.

"And what do you suppose we do about that flattery, Commander?" Hugh asked, the heel of his palm kneading the divot between Geordi's uniform-bound pecs. "Oh, apologies-- I should start calling you '*Captain*' now, shouldn't I..."

"Aw now, you heard the Admiral; there's still a few weeks till my

promotion!"

"True, but— your cheeks spike another .34 degrees in temperature every time you're called 'Captain'... If I'm a fun one to *'flatter,'* Geordi," Hugh pointed out, "then you're a fun one to *'praise.'*"

As Geordi felt his face flare ten different shades of red, his mouth suddenly grew very, very dry.

The tightness in his pants lent him some ideas on how to remedy his parched lips, and a quick glance at his Ready Room desk confirmed that its top was free of any cumbersome clutter.

For the most part.

"You uh— want a quickie?"

Hugh tilted his head. "You'll have to clarify that terminology to me, Geordi."

Whoops.

"Ah. W-well, I-- come on, come on— desk first," he guided Hugh in between kisses with, "I've got some ideas."

"As long as your bed could be the follow-up? After, *mn--* after dinner, maybe?"

Geordi smiled and laughed into Hugh's hot, shuddering breath—gripping the man's strong arms with a newfound resolve. "Oh yeah."

**[EARTHEN CALENDAR - NOVEMBER 2, 2391]
SPECIALTY OUTPOST STARBASE "SP-4852 SOLSTICE"
TURBOLIFT 01 TO TRANSPORTER BAY 03**

Dinner for Commander La Forge went well, the post-dinner "festivities" went far better, and the morning after seemed to be clicking right along as Geordi watched the Atlas Project's newest staffer adjust his Starfleet badge in the turbolift's metal reflection.

It was back to business while the *Palenque* held her temporary stay at *Solstice*. Captain Torres' crew was only staying until the Command Juggernaut returned tomorrow from its monthly ferry of freshly-reclaimed xBs back to Ohniaka III— the Excalibur-class restocking what was needed in both medical supplies and replicator rations. After that, V'evik's senior cybernetics team had three more days until Queen 127 made her "autonomy debut" with a completed prosthetic body, and Five's sphere-wide repairs were only ever hampered by hers and Geordi's occasional theorycrafting to try and solve V'evik's riddle.

As back to business as it might've been, Geordi wondered if anyone else in the turbolift felt the same giddiness regarding the face-to-face meeting that was about to happen. Crammed between Five, Hugh, Croxis, and Vorik, Geordi bounced on his heel as he watched the Doctor fiddle with his delta and pips— recalling the amount of subspace transmissions he had to log between Atlas' hull and Starbase 172. The AIs looked to be quite the chatterbugs, and as an engineer, Geordi didn't know what was more exciting: the idea of two sapient programs talking between each other in their own dialect, or the fact that Atlas was about to meet a new friend.

A cocked brow and head tilt from the Doctor's reflection, however, made Geordi realize he was staring.

"Is there something you notice amiss with my uniform, Commander La Forge?"

A chuckling Geordi shook his head as the turbolift slowed and its doors wooshed open. "Apologies, Doctor; got lost in my own thoughts. Maybe it's the contagious excitement," he humored to a similarly-grinning Five, "Atlas has been awful excited to *meet* you, after all."

The EMH blustered with a pleased hum as they all walked, Geordi noticing Hugh smirking to himself with Croxis close behind. "My holomatrix must be adding to the collective *static*, then," he mused. "I too am excited to meet my new photonic friend. Though I'll be even *more* excited when my program will have finished successfully installing itself into his hologenerator..."

"Atlas and I spent last night ensuring the remaining Federation processors in his hologenerator were compatible with your program, Doctor," Five promised. "After your vessel-wide calibration is complete,

you'll be able to transfer yourself between here, *Solstice*, and your mobile emitter near instantly."

"I thank you for your both's diligence, Junction Five," he admitted, "it'll be my first time installing myself into any Borg machinery, after *all*. Or, at least-- installation on a Borg vessel. Outside of UI projection displays, hologenerators were hard to come by on cubes and spheres, in the Delta Quadrant..."

"The Collective, thankfully, is not known for its holographic drones," Vorik noted.

Geordi tsk'ed. "Yeah, well-- don't give them any *ideas*..."

"Before the *Palenque* arrived yesterday, Doctor," Croxis spoke up, "during our Consultation Session, Atlas mentioned that he was preparing for your stay by, I quote, 'partitioning new space in his social protocol subroutines.' Is that... purely to do with hosting your program?" he asked. "Is this something that will possibly impact his cognitive functions?"

The EMH's lips curled into a wry smile. "My defragmentation installation will actually be one half of a *trade*, Director Second," the EMH began. "Once you've all transported over and *I* officially begin installing my program, I will have something to *give* Atlas. It is, partially, a token of my appreciation for him housing my program... but also," he alluded, "it was something he asked for. Something he could not download from his Federation hologenerator, nor from any *Borg* archives he had access to. At least-- not something in the same capacity that I've sharpened in my two decades of existence. And it appears, unfortunately, the Collective saw any sort of similar subroutines as '*irrelevant*' to install in their vessels."

As the EMH waxed poetic, Five and Geordi glanced at each other as the group neared the deck's transporter bay.

If they were alone, Geordi thought she might've even shrugged.

"Well, that... sounds like that's quite the gift, Doctor," Geordi noted. "Any hint as to what it could be?"

The EMH must've been enjoying this-- chuckling to himself as he stayed behind at Vorik's side and watched everyone tromp up the steps. "You'll see soon enough, Commander," he promised, "as will everyone else. I assure you, it's nothing harmful to the Atlas Project's

productivity... nor anything detrimental you need to ‘watch out for,’ Director Croasis.”

“If you say so,” Geordi sighed, folding his hands behind his back. “Vorik, we’re ready to transport?”

“Yes Sir; Atlas’ channels are open to receiving transporter signals, and ah,” Vorik turned to the Doctor at his side, “he’s ready to begin installation for you.”

“Thank you. Well, everyone,” EMH alluded, steepling his fingers with a tilt of his head, “I’ll see you all on the other side.”

Geordi nodded to indulge the man.

He had to ask Torres if he was always this dramatic.

“Happy trails. Vorik: send the Doctor off first,” Geordi told the Vulcan, “then energize us afterwards. Let him get downloaded in through Atlas’ signal buffers before anyone else.”

“Understood.”

Emerging through a familiar wash of light, Geordi hated that the first thing he did for the occasion was frown.

He’d simply expected to wake up in Atlas’ *transporter bay*, was all— *not* in his converted Command Center.

“Afternoon, Atlas,” Geordi called. “Did you, uh— switch our beam-in coordinates, or was that--?”

“The Doctor’s program is beginning his base installation within the hologenerator behind me, Commander,” Atlas excused. “It would have taken far longer for you all to have proceeded from the nearest transporter to my Command Center. He will be able to begin broadcasting shortly, and...”

Atlas paused.

“I did not-- want to wait.”

Geordi mulled on that.

He supposed it *would* be bad manners to keep a fellow holoprogram holed up for their walk’s sake.

“Fair enough.”

“He was actually telling us he has a ‘gift’ for you, apparently,” Croasis offered, “though he would not tell us what it was...”

“I cannot speak for the Directors’ friend, Atlas,” Five said, “but

whatever he has for you, I believe he is excited. Both to meet you, and exchange whatever this i--”

Something flashed from the hologenerator’s direction— Atlas standing at attention and turning to stare at the pillar behind them. Geordi squinted his cybernetic eyes to catch the raised electrical activity... and much like the EMH had phased into Geordi’s Ready Room last night, his hologram appeared cycle by cycle— his blue-striped uniform shining against the green light of Atlas’ chambers and... his *eyes?! Were black and green?! Why did they look just like--?!*

“Ahh, there we are,” the Doctor crooned as he trotted down towards the crowd. “One room down, only 5,999 to go!”

“Doctor, your ah--” Geordi tapped under his left eye, “you know you’ve got--”

“A temporary side effect as I install myself, Commander,” he promised with a wink of his cubical gaze. “Before my program completes its calibrations and localizes my holomatrix onto his servers, I am seeing through my ‘host’s eyes,’ for the time being.”

“Mn; a digital ‘piggybacking’ over physical circuitry, huh?”

“I *suppose* you could call it that... but speaking of my host,” the Doctor hummed, “hello, Atlas. It’s good to finally meet you— face to photonic face, if you will.”

Atlas’ reaction to the EMH reminded Geordi of a shy little kid, despite his size— the hologram fiddling with his hands and stuffing his chin downwards in a bashful pause. As the Commander looked Atlas over, he noticed Atlas looked a smidge burlier and taller, since Geordi last saw him— remembering Croxis’ notes about how Atlas would respond to different descriptors of his hull during Consultation sessions. A more *curious* Geordi might’ve taken the opportunity to test this, but for now “business Geordi” had to take the wheel— knowing how poignant a moment like this could be for both holograms.

Atlas nodded stiffly, his processors no doubt still wrangling with the compliment. “It is... odd, Doctor,” Atlas said, “to be conversing with your program directly now, rather than over subspace transmissions.”

“A ‘good’ sort of odd, I hope?”

Atlas’ jaw faltered. “I...”

He struggled for words— just like they all did, Geordi supposed.

“Yes,” he decided on. “Is, ah... is my hologenerator meeting your performance requirements?”

“It will take some time before my program is fully calibrated to all of your surface broadcasting points,” the Doctor told him, “but yes; meeting my needs and more. I’m currently predicting the full installation to take... 6 hours, 58 minutes.”

Atlas nodded in agreement. “I have a near identical estimate, Commander.”

“Well,” the EMH proclaimed as he turned to Atlas, “now that that’s taken care of... I believe a proper introduction — and *exchange* — is in order?”

The EMH extended his hand for what Geordi assumed was a shake.

“I’ve been looking forward to this.”

And as Geordi watched Atlas’ hand flex open and closed, it was at this moment the Commander realized he’d never actually seen Atlas *shake* anyone else’s hand before.

In a flash, Geordi pondered further.

Much less... *touched* anyone else— in any sort of way.

If Hugh, Five, and Crosis’ quickly-morphing faces were anything to go by, this realization seemed to be dawning on *them* all as well.

A subroutine that the EMH had said he developed himself for almost two decades. What did he mention— “physical parameters that non-sapient holoprograms might not have upon initial startup?” A tactile sensation that Borg AIs would deem “irrelevant,” something Atlas’ Consultation staffer might be wondering about...

It had to be *that*, Geordi decided.

Something as simple as a detailed sense of *touch*.

What would it be like, the man wondered— for a starship’s mind to learn what million-and-one things felt like in the blink of an eye?

Before Geordi or Five could mutter between each other as engineers, Atlas finally took the EMH’s hand, and...

Nothing happened.

In the four’s hurried traded looks, perplexment followed a similarly-shared sentiment of not... really... knowing what anyone was expecting. Should they have started glowing? Recalibration of their holomatrix’s avatar appearances? What would— no.

Geordi did see something in the green of Atlas' eyes.

Atlas' face was frozen in a computational blankness. The light that filtered out of those glittering emerald squares was littered with haze— the same kind of static that sparkled in his hologram whenever Geordi asked him to log a repair or memorize a sequence. Eventually, Atlas opened his mouth, only to shut it again as he wrench his head in tandem.

The EMH began to smirk. “You’ve finished downloading it, I see?”

Atlas said nothing.

Instead, his free hand rose to rest on top of the Doctor's palm he still held... and squeezed it— bringing himself to meet the EMH's expectant gaze.

“I... yes,” Atlas muttered in a tight nod. “Yes I have, Doctor. I... apologize for my lack of prompt response time; I seem to have underestimated the vastness of your copied catalog.”

“It took me nearly 20 years to collect everything in it,” he offered, “I'd be more than impressed if you absorbed it any quicker. Now be sure to unpackage it slowly, but ah-- tell me: what do you *think*?”

“Processing.”

Once again, Atlas was silent as actions carried him forward. His face went stony and his eyes glittered again as the hand that held their clasped palms began to move— sliding upward to feel the fabric of EMH's simulated Starfleet uniform. Atlas' fingers pinched near the EMH's wrist, rolling the black and blue-striped fabric as if to memorize its texture along the cerulean stripe...

“This is... simulated standard Federation-replicated synthetic wool. Gabardine fabric. ...Seam line.”

“Very good.”

Atlas blinked, bearing to pull his hand away and as he touched his own face.

He took particular note at pulling his hand across the ever-“growing” stubble.

“Atlas?”

The spirit of the Borg sphere looked up at Crosis' gentle call.

His eyes were as bright as stars.

Geordi scoffed in disbelief. “All this time,” he had to say, “you mean

the Federation hologenerator didn't... --that thing would be standard onboard any Galaxy-class' holodeck-- even down to emergency personnel fill-ins! It didn't have any baseline reference for touch recognition?!"

"Those protocols are for pre-programmed, holographic *pressure* recognition, Commander," the EMH pointed out. "It lacks any detail that programs such as ourselves are able to formulate based on *experience*. They do not contain the subroutines that one might program into a cybernetic limb for sophont touch recognition and association. Subroutines like... temperature, texture!" the EMH sighed, "you'd be surprised at what Federation holoprogrammers deem 'sufficient!'"

Geordi came very close to asking "not even for other Emergency Medical Holograms that might need a sense of touch for their patients?," but decided instead to keep his mouth shut.

He supposed *they'd* know best, of all people.

"Why did you not tell V'evik's department, Atlas?" Five asked, "or anyone from engineering? We would've begun researching patching these sensory lackings for you--"

"Would you like us to let you process this by yourself with the Doctor?" Crisis concurred, reaching a hand out for his shoulder, "we could come back and--"

The moment Crisis touched Atlas' arm, the hologram's eyes burst with light, and his holomatrix exploded in a wash of glittering green photons.

As everyone uncovered their eyes and unfolded their arms from the shattered field, they saw the EMH still standing there with Atlas' green and black eyes-- seemingly just as surprised as everyone else.

Geordi cleared his throat. "I'm gonna guess you, uh... didn't expect that, Doc?"

"I would've warned you all if I *had*, Commander."

"Wait wait," Hugh breathed, "look--"

Hugh pointed to up and around them-- the unbound photons in the Command Center not having dissipated yet from the shattered holomatrix shell, instead floating absently in place. It reminded Geordi of the starlit view outside his *Solstice* office-- a green-tinted firefly field, and a dust-sprinkled nebula simmering with life. Even the EMH seemed somewhat awestruck at Atlas' capabilities, Geordi beginning to hear a familiar linguistic rumble rise and reverberate throughout the room.

“Back, back,” Croxis urged with a tug to Geordi’s shoulder, “allow him space--”

The photons slowly smeared backwards in the direction they erupted from, gaining speed and cohesion until they snapped back into shape. Atlas was not shaking, nor panicking as Geordi half expected; he acted as any hologram frozen in its computational cycle would— catching up on his backlogged registries before regaining his senses. Blinking rapidly, he opened and closed his hands again before looking down to Croxis, then Five— reaching gathered with a faint hope in his brow...

Croxis was the first to offer his hand.

It was the widest Geordi had ever seen Atlas smile.

“I... apologize, for my lapse in containment,” he said as that smile faltered. “Ah, I... it is— ...I am having difficulty verbalizing these sensations, but--”

“No need to apologize,” Croxis told him. “Comprehending consolidated touch can be a difficult task for us all, when removed from the Collective. And yet for you, to be doing it now as you are— condensing your immense self into this holomatrix with it?”

Five, meanwhile, simply smiled and offered Atlas her palm— her dimples growing darker by the second as she allowed the hologram to memorize her grasp. “How strange it is,” she mused quietly, “to think I have supervised the repairs to your hull for two months... and only now, do you know what my hands feel like.”

Atlas’ eyes were shimmering again as he processed something new. “I believe my program has a basis for understanding your... previous sentiments, Croxis,” he said. “What you and Director Hugh have told me, in our sessions. You have said that former Borg ‘value intended touch very highly’ in your society, and... I see why now.”

Though Geordi saw the Directors looking at Atlas like he was a falling star, something gave Hugh pause as he stood at Croxis’ side. “I am elated for you, Atlas,” he breathed with a step forward, “but I must know— is it... just your *hologram*, that’s able to identify these sensations? We are well aware of your technology’s conduit transfers and feedback receival capabilities; is your hull currently able to--?”

“No!”

Everyone looked at him.

Atlas' eyes darted between them all.

"I, ah... no. At least, I have not activated those channels yet. My program attempted to simulate what that would... 'feel,' like, and I--nearly. ...Lost my containment again."

Geordi's lips wrapped inward and he tried very hard not to smile.

It wasn't working.

So instead, he cleared his throat and held a fist over his wriggling dimples as Croxis cleared his throat. "Well, ah... Director Hugh and I have Consultation appointments today with our patients," the xB started, "Commander La Forge and Five are assigned to your repair supervisions, and the EMH has almost seven hours on his installation... why not go with them?" Croxis offered. "Let his gifted packet incorporate itself through your systems, ask them if you have questions, need advice... is that something you'd want to do?"

Atlas blinked, turning his head to look at the two engineers and the Starfleet hologram at their side. "Well, don't let *me* be the final say," the EMH crooned, "but I know I would much rather have my projection out and about during the process, if I can't work with Troval yet. Besides!" he chimed, "I would like to explore whatever I can of my new friend's home. ...Body. --However you choose to see it. I'm installing myself within it; only proper I--"

"You call me 'friend,' Doctor?"

Everyone was quiet as Atlas looked hopefully to the EMH.

Geordi let loose the smile he held in earlier as the Doctor, straightening his proud shoulders, simply grinned and nodded his head. "Any entity as large as yourself that welcomes a program like mine into his photonic hosting? I'd like to hope that's at least the *beginning* of a friendship, Atlas."

The Commander smirked as Atlas' sheepishness made itself known again.

Today oughta be fun.

LIBERATED BORG COOPERATION
VESSEL 0013 "COMMAND JUGGERNAUT"
OBSERVATION DECK 01

Since the Reclamation Project's beginning days of galactic outreach, Hugh never wanted to "play favorites" with his patients.

There were, however, some patients more "memorable" than others—especially when a First Discovered was involved.

It had been observed that the first drones Reprised from a newly-discovered extraction site had unique connections to the places they were pulled from. In the 12 years he and his people began searching the quadrant for those cast out by the Collective, staffers had found these drone and site kinships could vary wildly—depending on circumstance and situation, of course. From a drone's enhanced spatial awareness that helped Project staffers navigate the Reprisal grounds, or a sentimental fondness Starfleet officers might have for their assimilated vessels, those "First Discovered" from dormancy's sleep often exhibited a special bond with their former homes.

For the Atlas Project, nowhere did this trait seem more consistent than with the former navigational drone Third of Four: the first xB pulled from Atlas' figurative ribs, and now known as 'Hyades.'"

A name she had picked for herself, Croxis had told Hugh.

After she'd learned what Atlas' name was taken from, the xB had begun to fill her days and nights with reading, avoiding the at-times overwhelming silence of singularity.

And reading was where Hugh found Hyades today, post-augment checkup: curled up with a reading PADD in a cushioned Observation Deck chair, and looking at him with a piercing brown-and-blue stare as she heard Hugh come in.

For this operation, xBs were ferried back to Ohniaka III aboard the Command Juggernaut once a month for further societal integration and medical assistance on the Cooperation homeworld. As Hugh was

informed by administrative personnel, however, Hyades had chosen to return to the Juggernaut for the second time— unwilling to permanently separate herself from Atlas and the Reclamation Project staff that cared for her. Even only two months after their initial encounter, she was a far cry from the panicked drone she once was; a wide-eyed Wysanti underneath the left half of cranial exo-plating, her formerly-damaged leg had been replaced by the Cybernetics Division's masterful prosthetic work— the shine of its metal peeking through the dark fabric of her tissue-regenerative bodysuit. Despite the thumb hole long-sleeve and cloak-like Reclamation Project patient gown, Hugh noticed faint evidence of future freckles on the back of her thin palms— much like the ones that dotted her pale face and trailed off into a short ginger buzzcut.

If this was only two months, what kind of person would time ripen her further into?

"Welcome back," Hugh greeted gently, "I look forward to hearing about your trip to Ohniaka III, Hyades. May I interrupt your reading for our Consultation session?"

Her jaw quivered before she could reply. "Y... yes," Hyades confirmed, setting her PADD aside before standing to greet him. "Ah, I see— it is 1059. You are early."

"Yes; I am only sorry to take you away from your reading," he humored. "Are you ready for our appointment?"

"I will be able to leave for *Theta* once my shoes are--"

"Ah, actually," Hugh stopped her with, "I thought we could have it here, if that's alright with you... and if you *wanted* to, of course. After all: it was you who asked to return in this vessel, to the Atlas Project," he pointed out, "why separate you from a place of comfort so soon after a journey?"

Her freckle-littered dimples rounded out with a nervous attempt at a smile. "Yes. I will be able to process our meeting more efficiently here."

Hugh smiled back. "Efficiently?" He asked, taking the seat opposite and turning the chair to face her. "How so?"

She took 7.12 seconds to think.

"I will not be as focused on cataloging a different environment where I would rather invest my current processing capabilities on our meeting.

This is a location that boosts my cataloging performance rate.”

Hyades swallowed. “Based on this evidence, I have classified it... deemed, it, as-- ‘good.’ It is a *good* place, Observation Deck 01. ...Using a similar root of sample judgment for my algorithmic filtering, I... deem this meeting. ...Reunion. To be good, too.”

A smile peeked through her anxious brow again. “It is good to see you again, Director Hugh.”

Hugh's heart fluttered for the love of his people. “As it is you, Hyades. I must ask— has your new leg been functioning efficiently?”

“Yes,” she confirmed, unfolding it from under her chair so he may see. “Cyberneticist Junction V’evik and their department have been very helpful in servicing my new prosthetic. Primary relay Six of Ten is also Wysanti, and was able to supervise my nerve endings’ refurbishment.”

“I am glad to hear this,” Hugh said. “Since you’re much more ambulatory than you were during your first visit... did you venture anywhere on Ohniaka III this time? I’m curious to hear how your trip was, before returning to the Atlas Project...”

She puzzled. “Why do you request this information?”

“I want to hear the words you use to describe your visit. I’m interested in your experiences, Hyades. Additionally, I... miss home very much,” Hugh admitted. “Hearing you talk about your visit would make me happy, because it helps me remember... things, events— *memories* I value very highly, that've happened on our homeworld.”

Hyades seemed to ponder his sentiments, looking off at the Observation Deck’s window towards Atlas in the near distance.

Eventually, she spoke. “I. *Did*. Go to Ohniaka III’s surface. Comparatively, on a Borg ship, you know, Director— there are not as many... *colors*, as there are on Ohniaka III. There were many visual differences in individuals, environments... many more variances than a... Borg ship interior.”

Hugh was quiet. “It is possible you experienced some form of overstimulation.”

“That would be congruent to my at-time data.”

Hyades paused to think.

“The atmosphere... Ohniaka III’s sky,” she remarked, “I... liked those colors. I saved the images of that atmosphere in the highest detail I

could capture.”

Hugh grinned. “It can be quite beautiful, yes. What’re some words that you would describe the skyline, those clouds as?”

“Large. Captivating. I *particularly* remember... descending in our shuttle, from Command Juggernaut 0013. It was 1832 hours in the Cooperation Capitol City. I learned from synchronizing my chronometer to the LBC networks that it is 48 days into the planet’s spring cycle. The sunset... against the Capitol City’s architecture, and its naturally-occurring geography...”

She struggled for words.

“It was beautiful.”

Hugh settled further into his seat. “I’m glad you were able to see such a view. Cube 5219’s ruins during that time of day is an incredible sight.”

Hyades nodded. “I... want to tell Director Second Crosis about it. It was-- just now, I--” she continued, “repeating this instance to you... just as Director Second Crosis speaks to me, and I speak to him, I find it. Helps. ...Organize my own internal dictation. Classifications. Verbalizations, to these experiences.”

“I’m certain he will want to hear about it. My friend has always been a very good listener.”

She paused. “Director Second Crosis has also called you ‘friend,’ Director Hugh. He speaks very... *fondly*,” Hyades went with, “of you.”

A flustered smile seeped out of a chuckle. “My friend flatters me even when he’s not *here*, how about that... if-- I may ask, Hyades,” Hugh reapprached the topic with, “what brought you back to us again? To the Project’s site, rather than staying on Ohniaka III?”

Her eyes wandered back towards the deck’s window. “I wanted to watch... us. Them. It caused an internal conflict of interest when I pondered the concept of... departing, when I had not seen this Collective, this--” she shook her head, “this... these, people, ‘xBs,’ still here. I want to see them all. I do not want to leave them. And I was the ‘First Discovered,’ as you have told me.”

“You are not them anymore,” Hugh tried to offer her, “but you are concerned with their status? You want them to be accounted for?”

She nodded.

Hugh smiled. “Then you care about them.”

“Is that what it means? To care?”

“I want to believe in part, yes.”

It seemed as if Hyades had followed his trail to the conclusion he wanted to teach her.

“I can empathize, Hyades,” he spoke softly. “Cube 5219 was my own home. My unit was awakening to existence outside the Collective, but my connection to the rest of my vessel’s complement was still there. It was a strange duality. And even in that... very dark place, I was concerned for the others, I--”

“We remember,” she spoke.

Of course she did.

That brief spark of life, personhood, and singularity Hugh flung like a skipping stone across the Borg’s infinite Hivemind.

It was a weight Hugh would have to carry every day of his life.

“The drone units still being excavated from Atlas,” Hyades went on, “they are dormant, but I... believe we understand your situation’s context better, Director Hugh. If it’s permissible, we woul--”

In her excitement, Hyades suddenly stopped; hyper-aware of the pronoun she just used. Her face locked up and posture began to stiffen as avoided eye contact with Hugh, her blue-and-brown eyes wavering as her jaw began to wobble...

“That is... not-- *correct*,” she managed. “I apologize; I should not be *making* this mistake any longer--”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” he insisted quickly. “It took me months, *years* of catching and correcting myself when clarity came to me.”

“Even *you*?”

“I and all my friends. I promise you when I say you’re not the only one who does this, Hyades,” Hugh assured, “growing used to a new way we view ourselves is... well, in our case— is hardly instantaneous”

“I want it to be. And I wish it did not feel so,” she faltered, visibly struggling for a word, “...’bad,’ each time I fail in this area of speech.”

“Try not to assign it as ‘failure,’” Hugh told her, “and see it more as an... adjustment. A period of calibration. Calibration requires manual adjustments, after all, and I admire your current capacity of ‘manually adjusting’ the way you refer to yourself.”

“You do?”

“I do,” he affirmed. “Even if you didn’t prioritize this factor, your acknowledgement of your chosen pronouns to both yourself and me is a form of self-affirmation. It is informing me who Hyades is. You are able to correct yourself to be the ‘you’ you want to be known as. That drive to do so supersedes any lapse you may have along the way,” Hugh told her warmly, “because as you know, calibration requires supervision.”

“And calibrations that require supervision aren’t *instantaneous*,” she followed.

“Exactly. We all stumble, Hyades, but the continued effort after our stumbles is what matters. And it makes me glad to be part of your own continued journey.”

Hyades was quiet, Hugh offering his hand from the neighboring chair armrest.

And she took it—turning his palm over and under to inspect his augmented, tubule-laden hand.

“I appreciate your voice, Director,” Hyades steadied herself in. “It is helpful in helping me sort these emotions I process by myself now. You are wise.”

He felt his cheeks dimple from flattery. “‘Experienced,’ more like; I find I still learn new things every day. But thank you, Hyades,” Hugh allowed himself, “I am excited to see what you and the other 2,962 Nameless from Atlas learn.”

Hyades nodded, still focused on his palm as she inspected his ligament webbings.

Eventually, she swallowed. “Director,” Hyades asked timidly, “my three tertiary members... has the Reclamation Project been able to Reprise them yet?”

Hugh frowned. “No, unfortunately,” he admitted, “and we have not found them yet, either. We will keep looking, but we must account the possibili--”

“They’re not dead.”

Hugh sighed.

It would be wrong to string her along on a false hope, he tried to reason.

But did he have the heart to crush that hope with nearly four months

left on the Project, Hugh thought? Could they rule out the possibility of three missing drones while dozens died from Atlas' skid across Taijal's moon?

Should anything be truly ruled out, in an anomalous situation like Atlas?

"A count of 2,963 survivors is incorrect if you scanned living, dormant drones, Director," she insisted again. "You must account for a possible 2,966 able to be Reprised."

"Have you been able to remember where they might've been, when Atlas and those of you inside him were displaced in time?"

"They should have been *near* my alcove. Our alcove tertiary. That is all I remember."

"But... the alcoves near yours were all *empty*, when we found you..."

"Yes; hence why you must account for their absence."

Hugh pinched the bridge of his nose. "Do you know if they might've been deployed on the original host cube, perhaps? Or do you know, for certain, they were within the sphere?"

"The sphere. I believe I was still connected to the central plexus when Queen 127 erased our circumstantial data, but I was severed from due to my injury when they were. Taken. ...Somewhere."

"But not somewhere outside the sphere," Hugh tried to follow.

"No. They had to stay here. They could not leave before whatever it was that happened."

"And you truly think they survived?"

Hyades stared absently out to the Command Juggernaut's core. "I cannot say for sure. But I think that... Atlas would not have been able to arrive here if my *tertiary* did not survive— even if only briefly. I... wish I knew what happened," she stressed, "how we got here... all I remember is the lightning. The flash. I remember no technical details, she took all that away; I--"

Lightning? A *flash*? What were the Borg doing— what did they require four specific navigational drones for?

"Speak of it only if you want to," Hugh urged her as he pulled himself from his own thoughts, "please. Your mind is worth more than chasing this knowledge for now. It will come to you. You are already very brave," he told her, "being here with us, speaking of these frightening times..."

She was silent.

Her hand was quivering on the armrest again.

So Hugh turned to face Hyades fully and laid her hand over hers.

"I promise you we will continue to do our best to find them. ...If we *do* locate these three," Hugh alluded, "and you are still here... do you want to be notified of their reactivation? Even come and see them?"

"Yes--" Hyades said suddenly, "yes; very much so. I-- know they were separated, around the same time as I was... Before. But I was injured, so we were separated on purpose, and that causes me much-- discomfort. To think they were alone like I was, too."

So instead, Hugh gave a tired grin. "You, I, the others..."

"xBs?"

Hugh's grin grew into a smile. "Yes. We are resilient."

"Yes," Hyades agreed with a timid nod. "It seems that is true."

I also seemed as if this "resilient people" had some further exploring to do.

**VESSEL SERIAL NUMBER S-4381, DESIGNATION L.B.V. 'ATLAS'
DIAGNOSTICS LAB 03**

"Ooo, no, wait, go back Atlas-- what was that word."

"Which one, Doctor?"

"The one where your pinky-- no, before then. Back. Keep going-- ah yes, there, there we go- that one; what is it?"

Next to Junction Five, the edge of Geordi's sight watched Atlas repeat a motion as the holograms practiced their xBSL— pulling apart his hand's two pinched fingers and looping one around a mimed cylinder shape.

"Conduit."

"Ah," the Doctor hummed as he mimicked the sign, "thank you. The dictionary must have received an update since my last utilization of it. What version do you have installed?"

"1.15.3v2; updated 74 Ohniakan days ago for incorporation of new Cooperation technologies and various species linguistic referrals to therein."

"May I access your copy of the dictionary while I am here?" the EMH asked politely. "I would rather not be ignorant to any personnel I might communicate with."

At this, Geordi looked up from his console.

From the way Junction Five also glanced towards the two holograms, he wasn't the only one interested in where this might go.

"I house a *much* larger amount of information compared to what you might be used to, Doctor," Atlas spoke evenly.

"Your previous 5,645 chambers' cyclic processors I've sorted through didn't already make that clear?"

Atlas blustered in place. "If you would like to wait, *Solstice* would have the file readily on-hand for you in a Federation format once Junction Five is finished studying your mobile emitter..."

EMH scoffed playfully. "Hardly. Besides! It's good for me to get out of my comfort zone of cushy, Federation programming. I could pause my current installation level and open a seeding to where the information might be located..."

Atlas looked at EMH, and then to Geordi and Five— as if seeking some sort of administrative approval from the fleshy engineers.

"Well, don't look at *us*," Geordi humored with a shrug. "Junction Five and I've got our own circuitry, sure, but you both are your own keepers."

"The Commander is correct," Five noted calmly. "And perhaps the EMH is *also* correct, Atlas; interacting with a program of an entirely different genesis point could, perhaps, offer further insight into how the Doctor operates. ...And vice versa."

"Besides— didn't the Doctor just give you a copy of his whole touch sensory catalog, Atlas?"

"Yes, but..."

Atlas pondered Five's proposal, his striking eyes darting in between Geordi, the Junction, and the EMH's batting black-and-green lashes.

As his tight shoulders slouched, Atlas nodded. "Pause your installation, and commence an advanced seeding in Chamber 6013. From there, proceed to Memory Bank Subsection 4519: newest index V1.8."

The EMH nodded with a cat-like grin. "Thank you. This shouldn't take too long."

Geordi brought up a timer on his PADD. "You got an ETA for something like this?"

"When I stop *staring forward* like I'm waiting for my holomatrix to load in— how about that."

Geordi scoffed and held up his hands in a mocking feign while the Doctor went rigid and quiet— indeed staring forward as his "borrowed sight" glittered like Atlas' own eyes.

Atlas, meanwhile, observed him as one would circle a window dressing's mannequin. "Such a *small program* he is, by comparison," he murmured. "Small, but... filled with so many memory data streams..."

Going off Atlas' comments, Geordi assumed the EMH couldn't hear any of them and decided to speak freely. "I'd argue he's not so different from Five and I here, if we're talking 'about small, singular things packed with memories.'"

"Your program might actually be able to experience a similar sensation soon, Atlas," Five pointed out, "though in a much, uh-- *better way*, than your former interaction with V'evik. Now that I have in-person scans of the Doctor's mobile emitter, I am ready to present my experiment hypothesis and its schematics."

"You got everything you needed?"

"That and more, Commander."

"Good, good Geordi commended, straightening his back with a few cracks and an "oof" as he approached Five. "Let's see what you've got."

Five beckoned her head to her computer terminal, typing at a few keys to initialize a holographic diagram. "Observe."

The shape that manifested looked to be the size of a large, oblong backpack— dwarfing the scans of the EMH's mobile emitter Five had at its side. Labels and descriptor lines in both Federation Standard and Borg/xB script branched out from certain joints and circuitry cutaways,

bridging the EMH's device to Five's own blueprints that showed her veins of reference. "For context's sake," she began as Atlas crept towards the two's console, "I will firstly recount an incident that marks my 'inspiration' point for Atlas' mobile emitter, since we cannot replicate the Doctor's by conventional means. Do you recall when Commander Vorik informed us of an occasion when, due to a false judicial policy ruled over *Voyager's* Delta Flyer that brought about an incorrect impounding, he downloaded himself into the xB Seven of Nine's cranial implants for temporary sanctuary?"

Geordi hummed in acknowledgement as he scanned over the blueprints, nodding while his free hand absently stroked his beard. "I remember from V'evik's incident, yeah... How long can an xB's cranial implants handle carrying that kind of program alongside their conscious processing?"

"It depends on the make and model of the xB host in-question," Five offered. "I currently estimate a standard xB has no more than 36 hours before the host's matrices start to destabilize with the 'rivaling space,' as it were. But the Doctor was able to safely navigate back to *Voyager* within Seven's processors while acquiescing his holo-emitter for further examination, and his program went undetected."

It couldn't have been *that* easy or mundane.

He'd have to remember to try and wring the entire story out of the Doctor later.

For now, Geordi mulled on her words— the engineer's mind grinding his gears on the problem at hand. "Remote storage of a holographic program like Atlas' away from the hardware, then," the Commander followed along. "And you're sure we can't just quarantine his program inside the hologram You're wanting to build essentially a... 21st century 'USB stick' for Atlas, is it? And then let one of you interface back with the machinery itself again?"

"Correct; or at least, bypass and shut down whatever so violently tried to consume V'evik. I believe, Commander," Five elaborated, "that what caused V'evik's poor interfacing was a protective subroutine. A 'recall,' if you will, to bring Atlas — the Sphere's base function AI — back towards V'evik, and try and block or disrupt the intruder— both physically and mentally, from accessing anything in that area. Obviously, Atlas is far

more than a simple operations AI," she nodded in his direction, "which explains not only his duress, but *also* V'evik's, since they were not a drone that originally came from this vessel."

"It would also explain why Atlas can't tell us much about what happened," Geordi mumbled as he rubbed his chin, "nor whatever information holes V'evik might've brushed. "After all, the Borg don't typically like to *erase* any kind of archived information, if they can help it; that goes against the Hivemind's very nature of collection, assimilation, archiving... so what'd be the idea behind erasing this, then installing a *recall* protocol?" Geordi asked absently. "What causes something like that? What's so detrimental they don't want even the vessel *himself* seeing?"

"My questions exactly, Commander. This might be the Reclamation Project's first time onboard a former Borg vessel of Atlas' caliber, but that does not explain the..." she motioned her hands towards Atlas, "predicament, that we're faced with."

Atlas was watching them intently. "I only regret it happened in the first place."

"My theory is," Five continued, "if we separate Atlas' core program temporarily, completely from the physical hull itself, and allow ourselves to interface with the machinery..."

"...Then maybe we could figure out what it was that set that particular access port off... or see why the interface port activated that protective subroutine," Geordi followed, "and also possibly discover the source of the tachyon/ionic disturbance still in that area. Not to mention preserve Atlas' program as we explore that section of the sphere."

The Commander's grin spread a little wider at the thrill of scientific pursuit. "Not bad, Five."

"I only regret it's taken 25 days to adequately reach this hypothesis in between my other work."

"Regret nothing on your end," Geordi assured her. "Something like this might take an entire *quarter* for certain Starfleet department officers, and you're presenting me *physical schematics* with the hypothesis. How confident are you to present this at the next Junction Division meeting?"

"Very confident. I could finalize the device's plans after Queen 127's bodily deployment tomorrow, and have the device synthesized in less

than 48 hours after receiving Junction committee and Engineering division approval."

"And *mine*."

Geordi and Five looked up to the hologram staring down at them.

Whoops.

Five cleared her throat. "You would be able to broadcast a hologram from this device, Atlas," she tried, "and you'd be able to transfer and reupload yourself right back into the system, once our experiment is completed. It's not as advanced as the Doctor's mobile emitter, but it is very close and custom built just for you."

"We're not gonna keep you away from your body forever, Atlas," Geordi chimed in. "This isn't us 'trapping a djinn in a bottle' or anything like that..."

"What you ask of me is a great ask for my *program*," Atlas said lowly, "to... *compress* myself into something like the Doctor's mobile emitter, a device that condenses my program..."

"Yeah, well; not like we can stuff you into his device anyway, *Tiny--*"

The hologram whipped around and loomed over the two with an accusatory finger jabbed in their direction. "**Do NOT--**"

Atlas huffed and his warbled voice began to still.

"... call me *'Tiny'*."

Five's side-eye gave him a look as Geordi tried very, very hard to restrain a laugh.

Atlas frowned and lowered his finger while he looked away.

"It is-- not *accurate*."

Now *Five* was the one trying not to laugh.

The hologram straightened up and rolled his wide shoulders. "Considering the risks it posed to V'evik," Atlas continued, "is this... something we should even be *exploring*? Whatever data it was," he tried to reason, "I have no recollection of it, and its absence poses no threat to my functionalities."

"We don't know that for sure," Five pointed out, "there could be some critical infrastructure unique to you that we need to know about. There's been some different exterior configurations as compared to a typically-built Borg sphere from the 70s, and we need to understand why they were built in such a way..."

“I operate perfectly capable as-is: with or without the knowledge,” he tried. “What if this was removed for my and the dormant drones’ protection?”

“Or what if someone tries what *V’evik* did and gets themselves hurt again? *And* you become compromised once again?”

“Atlas, if you’re just nervous about doing this again, you gotta tell us now,” Geordi added in, “or else... what: is there something you’re not telling us?”

“*No*, Commander; or-- yes? Augh, this--”

“*Atlas?!?*”

The three’s argument stopped as they looked to the EMH—staring dead ahead with a clear amount of fear in his black-and-green gaze.

Geordi instantly moved out from behind the console with Five and Atlas in tow. “Doctor?” he called out, “what’s going on?”

“I... I have to pause here Sir, before I continue; I--”

“What’s wrong,” the Commander pried to a fizzling holomatrix, “come on, keep talking to us; it’s not a feedback loop is it?”

“Atlas, can you find his seeding poi--”

“No no, no!” the EMH insisted, “Don’t... don’t direct your program here, Atlas; I don’t know what this might do to you if you’re unaware of it--”

“Describe what you’re... well it’s not-- ‘seeing,’ I guess, but-- what is it?!” Geordi demanded, “what’s your program next to on the software organization?”

“It is... *empty*,” the EMH managed. “That’s just it, Sir. A void, where a large chunk of programming clearly once *was*. Something very important, to... to the way this vessel *functions!* Whatever it was, it branched out everywhere, into *everything*... I-if I had to describe it,” he nodded, “it’s... it’s as if a great-- *hole* was punched into you, Atlas—and all the roots were bleached along with it. These memory circuits... they’re blank! Unformatted!” the EMH cried, “I have nowhere to go but forward and there’s not very much of ‘forward’ at all!”

Atlas looked shocked. “I... I have, no— awareness, of this--”

“Of course you wouldn’t!” The Doctor barked, “how would you know something’s been stolen from you when you were made to forget it in the first place?!”

“Where are you, Doctor,” Geordi tried, “do you need us to recall you to your last point or create a reordering for you?”

“P-please, yes; I don’t want to look at this anymore--”

“Give us a programming location,” Five barked as she brought up multiple panes, “a seeding area, Chamber, anything--!”

“I’m at... I’m at Chamber 5872; pull me straight to 6013, that should be enough!”

Five’s eyes widened, but she shook it off by nodding quickly. “Tasks reorganized– target that partition move now, Doctor.”

As Geordi watched his tricorder readings between the stabilizing avatar, he glanced up to Atlas with an unfortunate mix of emotion. “And here we had to go and jinx it...”

“I would not hide anything from you or the Reclamation Project, Commander La Forge,” Atlas said quickly, “that would reduce your missions’ efficiency. My program... *I*,” he stressed, “I-- am *apprehensive* of experiencing what I did again.”

“We’ll prepare for it as much as we can,” Geordi told him, “make sure it’s as painless as possible, if none at all. We’ve done it once, now we know what to watch out for, and both Five and I have a plan. But it’s like a human getting a tooth pulled,” he told the Borg sphere, “it’s gotta happen eventually if there’s a problem, and we don’t you or anyone else getting hurt the longer we wai--”

“Successful in forwarding the EMH’s program to Chamber 6013’s broadcast point!”

“Bring him back online!”

The EMH’s shape flashed and solidified back into place, staggering in place as he blinked his still Atlas-influenced eyes. His chest was heaving and he glanced quickly between Geordi and his fellow hologram, mashing a hand against his face and over his hair-graced temples. “Well... glad to have you back after that,” Geordi sighed in relief, watching his tricorder and the EMH’s photon count. “Looks like you’re stabilized to continue site-wide installation. Five’s quarantined that area for your programming, so you’re safe to continue.”

With a rapidly-agreeing nod, the Doctor made the chin-anchored hand motion of saying “thank you” in xBSL.

At least he got that dictionary, Geordi figured.

"And you don't 'see' anything unusual inside your prompt list from 5872, Atlas?"

"No, Commander. It-- looks near identical to Chamber 5873's data packet."

"Alright, well... guess we start diagnostics on Chambers 5872 and onward," Geordi sighed, "schedule some site tours... wait, no-- we've already been there; that was--"

"--where V'evik's accident happened," Five followed along with. "And Chamber 5871 was where we found Hyades."

Geordi frowned back at Tiny.

Considering that would've been in Atlas' equator, it looked like they had some journeying to do to the center of an earth.

**[EARTHEN CALENDAR - NOVEMBER 4, 2391]
SPECIALTY OUTPOST STARBASE "SP-4852 SOLSTICE"
STATION COMMANDER QUARTERS**

"You're quiet tonight."

"Mm."

"Just thinking?"

Hugh's head rustled against the fabric of Geordi's command uniform as the xB sunk further into the loveseat's cushions.

In turn, the Commander ran a thumb over Hugh's opposite shoulder while he pondered an answer.

"Yes."

Getting comfy didn't need a whole lot of justification.

And considering the strenuous day they'd have tomorrow overseeing Queen 127's first steps in a new prosthetic body, Geordi was determined to stockpile all the comfiness he could.

The Commander took a long sip from his whiskey pot, ignoring the PADDs on his work desk that held their comparative notes from what happened today between Atlas, Hyades, and the EMH. "I think I get it," Geordi sighed, an icy stone clinking against his replicated glass. "If I was in your position, I'd be a little nervous about tomorrow, too."

"And you're not already?"

"Tch— well, that's an understatement... but I think you've got different reasons for it, though. Little bit more... pressure, in your department of things," Geordi tried, "considering everything."

Hugh grinned. "You're doing a wonderful job attempting to offer me peace of mind, despite it all."

"You sure about that? I uh— did just kinda bring it up again; it looked like you were about to nod off there..."

"Speaking of it so casually helps balance my adrenal levels. Serious conversations, those weigh my thoughts much further... I regret I can't offer you the same sort of comfort you give me."

"Aw now— what makes you say that?" Geordi cooed, craning his head over to kiss Hugh on the head. "Don't sell yourself short. Getting a chance to relax together the night before is all I need."

"You're certain?"

He nodded into Hugh's hair part. "Mhm."

With a smile, Geordi took Hugh's gentle hum and his cozying further into his chest as a kind of acceptance.

For a while, it was quiet again— the rumble of *Solstice's* far-off power generator humming its bass-like white noise. "I only wish we could've talked more with Captain Torres before she and the *Palenque* left," he mused. "Perhaps she would've shared stories from her time onboard *Voyager* in the Delta Quadrant..."

"She'll be back here at the end of the month," Geordi offered, "and you'll have her husbands in tow to gloat about it, if she won't."

"Have you ever met them?"

"Commander Kim I did once, at an engineering conference. He gave

some talks on team supervision when adapting alien accelerators on plasma coils; I can't imagine the kind of shit they might've had to graft onto that little Intrepid. Paris, nah— not yet," he said through a yawn, "though I've been in a couple of holoprograms he puts up on the open Federation novel servers. Still amazes me how he's apparently got time to write those things, and teach piloting lessons out on a Starbase."

As Geordi rattled on, it felt like Hugh had gotten comfy again.

Good.

"Before I read your official report... can I ask how 127 was this evening?" Geordi asked gently. "Off the record, of course."

When Hugh responded with a long and quiet sigh, Geordi again motioned his head to place a kiss on Hugh's head. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

From Geordi's point of view, he caught Hugh's dimple made from a half-smile. "127 is being cordial. Her unit is forming a personality, whether she wants to admit it or not. But she was surprisingly... *unremarkable* tonight," Hugh mullied. "More... contemplative. Thoughtful. I do not know if a queen unit like hers is able to comprehend this particular emotion at this stage of her Reclamation yet, but... she seems *nervous*, Geordi."

"Nervous, huh," Geordi said with bugged eyes and a swig of whiskey. "I uh... alright, yeah— wasn't expecting that. What's she have to be *nervous* about? Not like she's the one building the body and putting its pieces back together to start walking again..."

"You're correct, but... it's not the same as her initializing the assembly of her body on a Borg cube," Hugh explained. "We've replicated the design, but it'll be deployed on much different circumstances. Walking on her own— out of the Collective, separately and without a rope of drones by which to follow..."

Geordi saw Hugh's throat bob with a swallow. "We will all be there supervising her, yes. But our presence is not the same as the Hive's. I know from experience, Geordi, that it can be... frightening— walking by yourself. Moving as something independent, something so—" Hugh motioned his hand, "comparatively small, considering what we once were. Ever since we beamed her to Solstice, she has been dying, in a way... dying to what she once was originally part of. A leaf cut from a

plant's stem. And from someone who's refused to acknowledge there is life after the Collective, that there's a possibility for life to flourish after the stem has been planted once more... that must be very *frightening*, for a unit like hers."

"Even if she'd never *admit* that to any of you."

"Mhm."

The Commander sighed and looked straight forward.

It made sense.

"So," he relinquished, "guess we're *all* nervous together, then..."

"It seems as such."

Geordi surrendered by lolling his head against Hugh's.

At least he had a couple sips of whiskey left.

"If it helps... and stop me if it doesn't," Geordi offered, "but that band-aid was always gonna have to come off. At least you're not delaying it."

"Oh, we hardly *could* delay it; if anything, she's been wanting us to *rush* V'evik's department into finishing her apparatus."

"Exactly," Geordi chuckled to a tiredly-smirking Hugh. "You all knew she was gonna be a hard one from the start of things. And nothing's gonna change the inevitable of her getting another body, right? I guess my point is, well... some people are terrified of change," he explained. "Terrified of facing new things that challenge who they were, or what they once thought might've been the right way of doing things. That kind of fear— it doesn't get you far in Starfleet. At least-- not out in the field; HQ's pencilpushers are their own deal. But I've seen that fear on new ensign's faces," Geordi admitted. "That fear of change, fear of death: personal or literal. I've seen it in allies, enemies, people opposite my phaser or crewpeoples getting console sparks flung in their faces... And yeah, I'll be the first to admit: it's a little terrifying. The idea that something could happen and it'd-- snuff you out, just like that."

Geordi swallowed again, resting his head further on the xB's. "I'm a widow, Hugh. And I changed, after Data died. I don't know if for better, for worse... but I changed. Inevitably. So even if that change is inevitable, that doesn't make it any less scary when it happens."

His heart felt heavy.

I hope you're proud of me, Data.

Geordi took another swig of whiskey.

Wordlessly, Hugh turned against Geordi's arm and looked at him with those big ol' blue-and-brown eyes of his— the Commander suddenly aware of how long his ramble went for. "Sorry," Geordi mumbled, trying and failing to avoid eye contact. "Didn't mean to project there. I just, um... being with you like this, Hugh, it's-- made me realize how much I changed. How I got used to being alone, in that way. And in retrospect, I... I dunno how much I like that change I've had to make."

Hugh laid his palm flat against Geordi's sternum. "I'm sorry if I've resurfaced any unfavorable memories."

"No no no, don't be sorry for that," the Commander urged. "I guess, uh... thanks for letting me talk about him. Or not-- being *weird* about it, whenever I do."

"I would never do such," Hugh said without missing a beat, "especially now. Your grief from Data's absence is hardly irrelevant to our shared metaphor."

It wasn't often someone had the bravery to call Geordi's heartache what it was by name.

Much less 12 years after the fact.

Hugh allowed a pause to hang.

"For everything that you've said," the xB spoke quietly, "I am glad you're here, Geordi. That I'm allowed to be part of *you* being here. Be part of... another *change*, I hope. A change you end up *liking*."

That got Geordi flustered enough to start cracking a smile. "Well, I think we both know it's a little more than 'liking,' at this point," he teased quietly, moving to sip his glass between their shared space. "But thanks, Hugh; I--"

He stopped as Hugh's augmented hand wordlessly stole Geordi's tumbler with a playful smirk— the xB taking a small sip before his lips wrenched and warped into hard blinking that made the Commander laugh. "You gotta swallow it *faster* than that, baby!"

"Mn-- I've had it before from the sips of whiskey *Seven's* given me, but--" Hugh smacked again, "*augh*. It's been a while."

"You just gotta adapt again, is all; get used to the taste... wanna finish it for me?"

"Well, the-- warmth it sends through me *is* quite nice..."

Hugh made a cute and curious face at the glass before jostling its contents, looking between its rim and Geordi behind it... and slugged the rest of it down in one, shot-appropriate gulp.

Hopefully Geordi wasn't giving Hugh a hangover for tomorrow morning.

After a while of lazy makeouts that tapered off into couchbound snuggling again, Hugh's head stirred with an almost disappointed sigh. "It's late," he murmured. "I should retire to my quarters for an adequate-enough regeneration, considering everything tomorrow."

Geordi agreed with a yawn. "Can I walk you back?"

"I would welcome it, if you can pry yourself from this seat."

As Hugh spoke, Geordi stretched his arms up and over the xB— slowly and sleepily bringing them back down and around a laughing Hugh with an "*of coooooourse!*" and parting squeeze.

The couch was the last thing Geordi would have to pry himself from.

Eventually, the two arrived at Hugh's quarters and bade each other goodnight— happy to settle for polite smiles and bows of the head in front of possible onlookers. Heading back to the Starfleet wing, Geordi marveled and wondered at how the hell his younger self did it for so many damn years onboard the *Enterprise-D*— when he'd walk with Data and let him slip alone into his quarters after a long shift's work, and Spot would emerge from her cat tree to bid her android hello. In the early days of his crush, Geordi could remember the ache of wanting to trot in after Data and just... *talk* to him? Watch him perform his nightly routine? Dwell in his presence until... *what*, Geordi would think— ask him if he "wanted to make out" or some other boyish indulgence?

You were head over heels for him, dummy, Geordi wanted to jump back in time and say. You were smitten for the guy long before you had the courage to tell him— and even then, it took you fake-dying to get it through your thick, stubborn skull that you oughta tell him how you feel. It was a little odd, then, to only have beaten around the bush with Hugh for a few weeks before coming clean and indulging in the xB's heightened company— as if Geordi were somehow cheating Data's memory, and the memories of their shared lives as colleagues, friends,

partners, and eventual husbands.

As Geordi returned to his empty quarters and the doors slid shut behind him, his fist fiddled in on itself and he caught his thumb rubbing at an absence on his ring finger.

His mood saddened some as Geordi nibbled his lower lip.

He thanked his past self for deciding to bring the real, non-replicated thing with him in its box.

As Geordi settled in for the evening, he tended to an hour of business before the pleasure of sleep: PADDs were sorted, reports were reviewed, and correlation notes were left for his future self to look over post-Queen 127 “appointment”—whenever the hell that decided to end tomorrow. Filing a finishing note to try and explore possible links between Hyades’ insistence and EMH’s “episode” from a couple days ago, he rose from his desk for a sonic shower—donning nothing but briefs, socks, a durag, and his evening sash robe while he tended to evening rituals. Placing his rings and gold hoops in his old Utopia Planetia trinket tray for morning retrieval with a pleasant jingle, he locked up his evening workstation—save for a drawer he had to type a passcode in to open. Sifting past his ID satchel, he rummaged inside for two steel tins both large and small—kicking the drawer shut as he found and placed them both on the desk.

Inside one was Geordi’s wedding ring wedged between a cushioned slit: still fitting just the same as it had 12 years ago.

They never found Data’s in the *Scimitar’s* wreckage.

In the larger, more-recently replicated box, Hugh’s ocular implant laid on a soft surface that reminded him of velvet. Carefully plucking it out, Geordi held it both hands as he hunched forward over the desk—his cybernetic eyes reeling through a list of possible metals the exo-plated barrier. The glass-like material on its front caught a flash of yellow in Geordi’s quarters lighting, shimmering with every color of his visible spectrum while it clung to the gold.

It then glimmered black.

Then gray.

Onto a silver.

A similarly-shaded silver to the late 2370s combadge.

Geordi pondered on that color for a while.

And the Commander's memories took him back 13 years ago: to a turbolift aboard the *USS Keter*, where he and his husband were about to visit a dear old friend.

"You seem *nervous* for this encounter, Geordi."

Geordi huffed a sigh as he meandered into the turbolift, his cheeks puffed and arms crossed tightly over his chest. "We haven't seen the guy or his 'friends' for ten years, Data," Geordi quipped. "Patient Observation Deck 01. Not to mention circumstances weren't exactly the best when we *did* last see him..."

"You are correct," Data agreed. "I will sympathize when I say my behavior at the time is rather... displeasing to recollect, considering he stopped Lore from attempting to murder me."

"Yeah, see: tack another one onto the things to be nervous about board... plus, I-- well, I dunno: you don't feel guilty at all about showing up without any of the rest of the *Enterprise's* crew, do you?" he wondered aloud. "Bev I get why, she literally can't; being CMO's got its responsibilities, but... and even if I put my foot down about you and I's reassignments from HQ, I'm--"

"Captain Picard's hesitancy to assist with Operation House Call is not your responsibility, Geordi," Data offered. "Though I am able to find correlations with reasons as to why you might be experiencing guilt. Perhaps even 'embarrassment,' if I were to use another word."

Geordi's frown soured further at Data's "other word."

But he certainly wasn't wrong.

The engineer huffed against the turbolift's quiet hum. "We didn't check in on them for almost *10 years*, Data," he muttered. "The guy called me his 'friend' when his brain was first turning on, and I didn't give Hugh another passing thought as to how he or his own friends might be doing. And then we find out that not *only* are they still alive all these years later, but Starfleet debated on whether or not they'd let them *live* for a damn week, and then I drag *you* into a fight with Jean-luc about getting transferred off the *Enterprise* for a while..."

Geordi sighed, running a hand down his face before balling it into a

fist against his lips.

“We’re here now. Five days after the *Concagh* and *Keter* got here, sure, but we made it.”

Data nodded in agreement. “And I am glad to be visiting Hugh with you, Geordi.”

Underneath a balled and frustrated fist pressed tight to his lips, Geordi couldn’t help but smile.

“Don’t lemme forget we promised Beverly to say ‘hi’ for her.”

“The request is partitioned under my priority one itinerary list.”

The two ceased their banter as they felt the turbolift slow to a stop—the cabin’s light above the door signaling their arrival as the door slid open to Patient Observation Deck 01. As a 140 year-old starship retrofitted for the Dominion War, the *Keter* hosted only so many physical therapy decks— this one being its most spacious and scenic with a wide-windowed view of space outside its aquarium-like walls. The *Keter’s* current orbit had set the deck’s sights on Ohniaka III’s amber and pink-colored horizon— a few former Borg conversing with each other on benches, or intently reading PADDs given to them by attending nurses and Starfleet suits. But Geordi’s sights were fixed on only one former Borg in particular— the meek-looking man dressed in naught but a dermal biosuit, a sickbay gown, and compression socks with slippers: all while gripping an arm brace that held his left forearm up by a strong grip and a prayer.

It was... Hugh. It was honest-to-God, mostly de-Borgified Hugh— one whole decade later.

Amazement made the Lieutenant Commander’s heart roil as the shock wore off and he saw more of Hugh’s face than he ever had before. Two organic-looking eyes? A full head of well-trimmed hair? Healthy-looking skin, unstained by the pale half-life of Borg-influenced flesh and bone?! As Hugh’s doeful eyes widened and a partly metal brow knit upward in thrill, his rapidly-growing smile knocked Geordi out of a stupified fog.

“*Geordi?*” Hugh uttered, his jaw shuddering as his eyes darted between him and Data. “And... Commander Data, I’m...”

“Hey, Hugh,” Geordi managed, a strangely-familiar thrill pulling his cheeks into a smile. “I, uh... sorry we’re a little late--”

“Our shuttle could only arrive so quickly for this reassignment,” Data

agreed. "Hello, Hugh. It is good to see you."

Much like Geordi, Hugh's shock had also been shifting into a smile as they spoke.

And if Geordi's quickly-rising laughter was a testament to anything, it was that Hugh's smile proved to be infectious.

After an attempted trot on Hugh's behalf that led to a small stagger, Geordi caught and hugged him with all the strength he could offer. As he rocked the former Borg in that embrace, Geordi tried to pay mind to his possibly-tender body— able to feel the indents in Hugh's... what was that— his spine? Hydraulic cable remnants? Prosthetics, plugs— maybe even old Borg ports? It took everything in Geordi not to ponder further on those niches and nodules underneath Hugh's gown, pushing him back by the shoulders to behold the man so recently at death's door.

10 years later, and Hugh was still alive— *alive*, and by Geordi's report reviews, even thriving; who would've *thunk it!* Despite a face full of joy, the former Borg was panting— regaining his balance from the sudden physical effort, but looking all over Geordi with a tired laugh and blue-and-brown eyes of his--

"I do not want to forget I am Hugh."

By everything vested in him, it looked like Hugh sure as hell didn't.

"God, hey you--" Geordi choked, surprised at how hard it suddenly was to get the words out. "Look at you, Hugh; you're--!"

"Geordi, it's so..." Hugh faltered in a breathy laugh, "your VISOR; where is--?"

"You're not the only one who got a fresh pair of eyes since 2368," Geordi admitted with a hard sniff and smirk. "I had cybernetics work for implants put in about 5 years ago. My eyes were in a position where I could get it done and, well..." his thumb brushed under a now-wet eye, "I figured then it was now or never."

"I see... and-- Data," Hugh said shakily, "I am so glad to see you; it's been so long--"

"It has," Data greeted kindly, "and it also gladdens me to see you healthy and recuperating. I notice you seem to be staggering," the android noted, "would you like assistance either standing or sitting?"

“If... augh, yes please,” he relinquished, Hugh trying to lean on his brace as Data and Geordi swooped in on either side to support him. “The Cortical Plague spared no expense on my musculature and physical resilience.”

“How long have you been on the *Keter*, Hugh?” Geordi asked as they helped guide him towards the nearest bench. “When did you get out of surgery?”

“52 hours ago,” he told them. “My procedure itself lasted 12 hours.”

Geordi scoffed and did a double take. “And they’re already letting you walk around like this?!”

“In small amounts,” Hugh confirmed as he sat with a huff. “The Doctor believes it will help rekindle my strength and ligament fortification once my scheduled physical therapy sessions are assigned.”

Geordi was at a loss for words as he listened to Hugh. “I, ah... Hugh, you’re— Christ, I’m sorry if I sound so... *surprised?* Y-you look amazing; we’re glad to see you and all, but I just... I didn’t know you and the other Borg c-could-- could, uh--”

Hugh stared quizzically at him— his head tilting much like Data’s would whenever he’d wait for Geordi to explain himself.

With a huff, Geordi decided to spit it out. “I didn’t think you could *look* like this. That you, uh— had that much *skin* on you, under all your exo-plating. I dunno why, considering-- Picard healed up alright, and...”

A tired understanding settled across Hugh’s smile. “Most of it actually fell from us over time,” he explained, “and we developed techniques in the meantime to help their removal, if our bodies required assistance in the process.”

“Yeah, I saw your emergency hail broadcast... so your face here— that’s all...” Geordi motioned his hand in a wipe over the left side of his face, “they did all that in 12 hours?”

“Yes; isn’t it wonderful? The Doctor gave me the same model of eye he originally made for Seven of Nine... and, ah— it’s even colored like yours are, too!”

Geordi’s icy-colored eyes blinked and a hand instinctively pawed under his cheek.

Huh.

Guess they were.

He blustered and winked with a little chuckle. “Well, how about that... yeah, I was going over the reports they forwarded to us on the way here, and man— we’re amazed at everything that holoprogram’s been able to log,” Geordi mused with a turn towards Data. “His reports are already filling in a lot of holes for Starfleet’s Borg-related medical science...”

“Indeed. It is very fortunate for you and your comrades that the *USS Voyager* returned from the Delta Quadrant when it did.”

Geordi’s lips thinned.

To say the least, babe.

Watching Data realize he should probably avoid describing a scenario as compared to if *Voyager* had *not* returned when it did, Geordi saw the android’s face shift to a more relieved expression.

“...And it is even *more* fortunate that you and those on Ohniaka III have a caring, knowledgeable staff helping steward your recuperation.”

As Hugh laid his brace across his lap and dwelled in their company, his eyes suddenly widened. “Beverly... Beverly, how is she,” Hugh asked, “was she able to--”

“She’s alright, Hugh,” Geordi assured. “I’m sorry she couldn’t come with us and see you. Captain Picard wanted to hold onto the *Enterprise’s* CMO, and she’s also helping manage the Terrelian fever outbreak where we came from. Bev said to say hello, actually— to you and everyone here.”

“Indeed; as well as Captain Pica--”

Data was cut off by the chime of his combadge, hitting it with his left hand and hearing their shuttle pilot escort. “Proceed, Ensign.”

“Commander Data, Captains Hethlin and McKinsley are requesting your analysis review capabilities for a tactical debrief. They will both be aboard the Concagh at McKinsley’s Ready Room in 5 minutes; do I have permission to beam you over?”

Data looked to Geordi as if to request permission, and the Commander nodded. “Call me if you need anything.”

“I will be certain to. Hugh,” Data offered, “I will return shortly. Inform me if you have any requests from either Captain before I depart.”

“I will. See you soon, my friend.”

Plapping his combadge and requesting “one to transport,” a humbled-

looking Data beamed out— Geordi left by himself with the former drone in the ambient atrium.

“Data is... wearing a *ring* on his fourth left digit,” Hugh broke the silence with, “and so are *you*, Geordi. This is a new observation, since I saw you both last, and you two appear to be very close. I am aware of the significance this custom has among human culture through my instilled knowledge; have you and Data...?”

If Data was humbled, then Geordi was rendered utterly sheepish by Hugh’s insinuation. “We did,” he said with rosy dimples. “Feels like our three-year anniversary was just a couple days ago.”

“I congratulate you, my friend,” Hugh said warmly. “I hope you were able to celebrate the occasion?”

“A month of Shore Leave on Bajor was just what we needed,” Geordi sighed wistfully. “Data and I got invited out there and stayed at a place where people try and rebuild solar sailers using ancient Bajoran methods— all while you’re supervised by Bajoran Science Institute folks. We had a whole bungalow and workshop to ourselves, finished it with a week left to sail around the Bajoran solar system... hah, good fun. The best kind of vacation is one where I can also put my hands and brain to work.”

As Hugh listened, the former Borg held onto his smile with tired eyes. “We have both experienced many things, in these ten years,” he mused softly. “So much has changed for us, it seems.”

“Aw, well— not everything, I hope,” Geordi quipped back. “Just what happened naturally, right? Plus what you and I wanted to change, I guess. And whatever *needed* to change. And if anything: this, being stationed here for a bit... it looks as if it’s as good a time as any to start getting to know you as a better friend, Hugh.”

A proud little grin wriggled onto Hugh’s lips.

But despite that smile, the former Borg’s brow began to falter— swallowing and hunching further over his brace.

“Before the Cortical Plague came, the geo-mapping satellite we launched was made with partial intent to update us of what the Collective might’ve been doing, during that time,” Hugh admitted. “If our cube’s ‘loss’ in this sector was compensated for later on, in some way. We did not seek to return to the Collective after you took Lore into

custody, but— we *did* wonder what further actions they might've taken in the Alpha Quadrant. And when we saw what all had been wrought... the invasion on your homeworld, the attempt to sabotage time itself—the war they waged against beings from other dimensions in the name of perfection...”

Hugh gripped his brace's cane.

“Even if this is not the same Collective we once knew, even if we're no longer part of the Borg... I fear it will be very hard for us to make friends in the galaxy, Geordi.”

Hearing that broke part of Geordi's heart. “Hugh,” he tried to coo, “you're not... you, everyone here— you've all been isolated for *ten years!* You and your friends have been... building your own world, tending to your people, your crops, your little harbor out there; why would anyone...”

As the gas ran out in Geordi's tank for a feel-better fib, his head lolled forward while he bit the inside of his cheek.

No sense in sugarcoating it too much.

“You're *not* the Borg, though. You've been impacted by them, sure, you came from them— but I wanna hope that a lot of jerks in the Palais de Concorde will start to understand that difference, once they meet you and your friends. It's gonna be hard, but you'll have people supporting you as best they can. Even who I'm looking at now, Hugh— you've become so much more than what the Collective could've ever hoped to use you for. You're you. To look at you now compared to the guy I first met, it's... hell, Hugh; it's amazing what you've all built. I'm at a loss for words, honestly.”

Hugh smiled. “My friends and I experience a similar phenomenon. We've created an affirmation to follow, in times of self-doubt: if you ever find yourself lacking words... start from the beginning. Start, Geordi, from yours: wherever it might be.”

Turning his head to return Hugh's gaze, Geordi looked at him. *Really* looked at him. Sitting so close, the Commander could see all the details on Hugh's face; the type of pupil dilation shutters in his sky-blue, cybernetic eye, the rivets of scars bordering where his head was once encased in exo-plating, the new flesh knit together to create the person that was always there underneath... it was framed by the same brown

eye he remembered from ten years ago. An eye once filled with fear, confusion, and apprehension was filled instead with hope, wonder, and a desire to become more than mere survivors of a deadly plague.

The absent hum of the starship's impulse engines lent them another shared silence.

"Alright, then... well, if I'm gonna start from the top: are you... happy, Hugh?" Geordi had to ask. "You're okay?"

Hugh pondered on Geordi's question for a while.

His jaw trembled some.

"It will take me a long time to grieve the friends we've lost. It will take me even *longer* to process the horrors I witnessed from the Cortical Plague. I was delirious and in excruciating pain, 5 days ago," he rambled, "and within 12 hours, my body had been irreversibly changed. Though it was for the better, it is still a life-altering change I must accommodate to. A change I must grow with, and one I must accept as part of my new self. Yet despite it all, I... yes," the xB said softly. "I am happy. I am happy that my people and I have a future. Now, even moreso," Hugh said shakily as his augmented hand took Geordi's, "now that my friends are here."

Hugh sniffed.

"I'd missed you, Geordi."

And Geordi squeezed Hugh's hand back— his wedding ring glinting under the observation deck's light.

"Happy to be here."

In the present, Commander La Forge absently turned Hugh's old holographic imaging augment in his hand— a nostalgic grin on his lips and a thumb rubbing against the implant's metal.

He should be thankful he had this, Geordi supposed.

Not like he got anything from the *Scimitar*.

Geordi motioned the scuffed-up augment to catch Taijal's light in its spectrum-like lens, his heart fluttering some when his wedding ring clinked against the exo-plating.

He swallowed and held the xB's implant a little tighter.