

8

REVERENCE

The Reclamation Project | Internal Workflow and Staffer Organization

A brief summary of varying Reclamation Project responsibilities

One aspect of Cooperation society that continues to fascinate me is its attempts at society-wide decentralization. Paradoxically, this kins them with their original Hivemind, yet also resists the idea of the individual-suppressing Collective that the queen units speak as. With the absence of currency and/or capital made on any generated goods, nearly all forms of work or employment are communal, with all available to freely study and access. Thanks to inherent information given to them from the Collective, learning a trade or skill can be a temporary knowledge, and becomes more of an experience for the first time. The Reclamation Project Board is carefully evaluated in a communal setting, and each member only lasts one Federation Standard year; Capitol communal organizers are constantly evaluated in their efficiency and well-being towards the selected community of peoples, reporting to a network of Relays, Junctions, and Directors that compare and contrast each other's behavior towards their citizens. While the xBs have no formal military or police force (instead utilizing communal group watches), much like Trill

society with the Symbiosis Commission, their highest societal regard is being able to work with the Reclamation Project, and it is where the following titles are given.

While xBs have terminology that indicate enhanced responsibilities in certain departments (i.e. titles in equivalence to "Commander," "Lieutenant," etc), this "higher rank" is less of a society-demanded respect of authority, and simply addresses the individual's prowess or experience in the subject within the Reclamation Project. The term "Junction" implies a connecting, joining, or intersecting point, and Junctions are proven to simply help "connect" capable workers with other knowledgable Relays or Junction Seconds in a department. To take on the title of something like Relay, Junction, or Director is an assumption of responsibility the individual must be willing to take on for the community; the very nature of their duties implies subservience to the greater populous you are connecting.

To illustrate in a simplified, observed example: in all my years of xenanthropologic studies, rarely have I seen someone in an equivalent position of power to that of a Starfleet Admiral resubmit themselves to the mundane (and sometimes gory) labors of a Medical Ensign, with as much grace, humility, and willingness as Reclamation Project Executive Director Hugh does.

[EARTHEN CALENDAR - OCTOBER 1, 2391]

"TACTICAL CUBE" SERIAL NUMBER 32, DESIGNATION "L.B.V. THETA"

10 days after Hugh and Geordi had a rather "pleasing" encounter, a wonderful efficiency had settled over the entire Atlas Project.

It had been an antsy first few weeks, for the Federation and Cooperation officers. Though there were misconduct reports and personal xB gripings gossiped between each other about the lack of outsider understanding, project efficiency seemed to be spreading to the other half of *Solstice's* crew. Hugh noticed more Starfleet officers were willing to try and start up casual conversation with their xB collaborators— the Director quietly enjoying small talk's white noise as

xBs were drawn out of their cloistered shells to talk back. Additionally, he was thrilled to hear from xBs who might've once served in Starfleet begin to grow more comfortable interacting with a former part of their lives; at one point, Five told Hugh how she found herself as lead storyteller to a half-circle of enraptured Ensigns over glasses of synthehol, the officers anxious to hear more about the starship's AI whose shadow they worked under. While certainly not perfect (there'd been a handful of instances where Hugh had to correct casual microaggressive phrasings), Starfleet was far better than others in the galaxy, and most were at least *trying*—stoking the embers of hope for xB acceptance that Hugh tried so desperately to keep warm.

This was to say *nothing*, of course, for how well he and *Geordi* seemed to work together after just a single month.

Six weeks, if Hugh included their preparatory collaborations.

But who was counting.

Queen 127 still had to "wake up" for their second Consultation, anyway.

Despite the looming dread her presence hung over Hugh, even Director Second Croxis had noticed a palpable energy increase in his friend (not to mention noticing the amusing amount of *hickeys* Hugh had been left with a week ago). But Hugh insisted to the man it had only been *one* time, *seven* days ago, after all; it wasn't *just* because of their encounter. So what was it then, Hugh pondered? A greater level of trust? A boost to his confidence, now that a border Hugh timidly skirted around beforehand had been crossed in good faith on both sides? Even he had to admit: they had become far more... "playful?" "Teasing?" What could Hugh call it when the Commander dramatically gave him a PADD with a twirl of his hand without even looking up, he himself sneaking winks to Geordi after a sip of Puerh tea? How Hugh had begun to memorize Geordi's little habits after adapting to him, logging the microexpressions in his face and cybernetic eyes—waiting for the Commander in the morning Mess Hall to review the day's itinerary with Starfleet...

This month-long crescendo of friendship was topped off by a wonderful evening where they both caught the setting sun in Hugh's *Solstice* quarters, the men toasting the human month "September"

complete and welcoming in the next while bathed in backlit, privacy-filtered windows.

They *may* have had a little bit of synthehol, to celebrate the month's end.

And that little bit of synthehol *may* have led to another pleasing night with the station Commander.

Perhaps Hugh *did* have some updating to do with Crisis.

In any case, Hugh felt well rested and regenerated as he donned his Reclamation Procedure protective wear— the Director snapping gloves onto sanitized hands while his breathing evened out behind a mask and face shield. He was scheduled for medical assistance today, since there were extra Consultation staff needed in PT and had to be pulled from the Reclamation Procedure floor. The stripped augments of Atlas' xBs were far older than what most newer Reclamation Project staffers were used to working with, and it was beginning to wear on their supplies in the form of faster-depleted dermal regenerators and a greater consumption of power. The Director and Commander both submitted an early resupply request to Starfleet HQ that morning, and Hugh could only hope that the Federation would be willing to accommodate.

For now, Hugh had more important tasks at hand rather than worrying about a reply he couldn't expedite. A xB known as Eight of Eight had been found to have a facial apparatus that was able (and they were wanting) to be removed, this being Hugh's 10th assisted Reclamation Procedure of the day. Junction Toval was lead operator today, the Betazoid xB an unmatched artisan in the realm of preparing patients both physically (and mentally) for difficult procedures such as this. In most operations regarding mouthpiece removals, patients had to be conscious during this phase, as the team required full muscular and cognitive awareness to have xBs kickstart their own first breaths free of invasive or organically-rejected implants.

"Team for Patient 510 'Eight,' gather 'round," Troval sighed, cracking her knuckles as she rounded to where Eight's head rested. "Trachea tissue underneath technology 412.3135 subclass-C Borg fixtures has been reconstructed and airways are clear. Are we ready to pull?"

The crowd of four plus Hugh replied with "Yes, Junction."

Nodding at their staff, Troval turned back to Eight, placing a hand

to cusp the top of the xB's head. Their organic tissue had begun violently rejecting their Borg implants within the past few days— follicle stimulators allowing a head of dark hair to begin sprouting from freshly-woven skin at the hands of a dermal regenerator and removed cranial platings. After some intensive hour's worth of study, personal Consultation sessions, approval, and a guarantee that Eight could have the mouthpiece removed without complications, the procedure date was set, and now the former technician drone was laid out on the biobed alcove.

“Are you ready, Eight?” Troval asked. “We will begin after ‘one.’ On the count of one, we will need you to start a deep, long exhale— until the apparatus is completely out. Alright?”

Shutting their eyes, the xB nodded quickly and signed a reply.

“<I will comply. Proceed.>”

At this, one of the staff retrieved a tool designed to anchor the other end of Borg mouth fixtures as a handle to pull them out with— leading it down the line of nurses to Troval as the Betazoid hooked it to Eight's piece. Confirming with both their visual UI's analysis and the biobed's status monitors, Troval finished attaching the “handle” to Eight's augment and watched a red light slowly blink on their apparatus's end. The rest of the staff was ready and waiting, Hugh watching the Cooperation technology's red light blink faster and faster... until it finally turned green with a beep, Troval taking a stance and priming their hands.

“Internal tissue decoupling confirmed, Junction.”

“Thank you.”

Hugh watched Troval take a breath.

“Three... two... one--” and seeing Eight was exhaling, Junction Troval tugged, “pull--!”

The apparatus was wrenched free of the mouth, throat, and down the line of medical technicians— the column of invasive Borg tech erupting out of Eight's mouth like massive roots unearthed from deeply entrenched soil. The Medical staffers escorted the discarded augment back as Junction Troval pulled, down, down, and down into a tray for later study or discarding, Eight coughing, gasping, and sputtering as more of the augment left their throat. Once Troval's hands were free,

the doctor was handed a hypospray to sedate Eight after asking some questions for proper reparative healing therapies... But as Troval turned back, the crew paused for only a second, concentration broken by an escalating, coughing gasp from Eight, then a shudder, and then--

All at once, Eight let out a yell that shook the operating room's walls.

The sound Eight made was not a holler, nor a yelp— but a long, defiant cry that broke the operating room's silence, the sound just as haunting as it was both awe-striking and inspiring. As a swimmer would break water's surface or an infant would take their first wailing breath, so too did some xBs pierce the veil of their own imposed silence, Hugh pleased to see facial reconstruction might not be so laborious should they pursue such. After their yell, Eight broke down sobbing— their free hand pawing over where the mouthpiece used to be after so many years of subjugation. Under their mask, Junction Troval's eyes creased in a smile, the Betazoid looking quite peaceful despite the auditory startle: as if they were listening to titanic waves crashing into Ohniaka III's seaside cliffs.

"Eight," Troval spoke gently as their weeping slowed, "Nod your head 'yes' and shake it for 'no.' Can you breathe?"

Eight's fingertips continued to trace over their shuddering jaw as they nodded, a few cracks of a voice trying to eck out of their throat.

"Does your breath feel constricted or blocked in any way?"

"N--"

The xB shook their head.

"Do you--"

"A-ah," Eight gasped, "h--th--"

"Eight," she reminded, "you may have *access* to your vocal cords again, but they are very weak right now— as are the rest of your speech-related muscles. Don't push yourself; let your voice rest," Troval told them, "you have many things to speak with it, later."

The xB nodded again, mouth quivering shut as Hugh read their xBSL.

"<My voice sounds,> they paused with shaking hands to find a word, <good.>"

Troval watched him fondly. "It sounds strong."

Hugh grinned under his mask, beginning to utilize his own hands for the sake of camaraderie.

"And you'll get to hear it as much as you want once you're recovering.

Troval is going to sedate you so we can begin deep tissue reconstruction therapy in a specialized alcove,” Hugh told them, “Is this alright?”

“<Acceptable. I will have a regeneration sequence begin once the sedative has taken full effect.>”

“Thank you, Eight.”

Troval nodded, placing a hand over Eight’s own as they hyposprayed the xB’s neck. Their body began to relax as Hugh watched Eight’s hand go limp, Troval giving it one more squeeze before disposing of the empty hypospray. After some collaborative instruction, it was decided that the other four staffers would attend to cataloging the procedure and preparing for the next patient, while Troval and Hugh would transport Eight on a mag-lift gurney to the medical Regeneration Alcoves for further healing.

Hugh rolled his shoulders as he helped pull the sleeping Eight along. “I forgot how deep these older respiratory models went, admittedly.”

“They’re certainly more antiquated,” Troval sighed, “I haven’t seen fixtures like this since we first started getting migrants in ’78. I’ll have to let Junction V’evik take a look at it for further study, actually; they’d probably appreciate having active reference for some of these older pieces...”

“You would know best, wouldn’t you.”

“Hardly,” Troval teased, “do you see me wearing a *Cybernetics* sigil on my harness?”

Hugh grinned. “You and your team are doing amazingly, as usual.”

“16’s our preferred daily target and we have 6 more to go,” the Junction griped playfully, “but you are too, Hugh. I’m glad to see you haven’t lost your *healing touch*, in all that administrative work.”

“You flatter me, Troval. I could never surrender such valuable skills in favor of resigning myself to bureaucratic pencil-pusher work.”

Troval quirked a brow at him from under their mask. “Pencil-pusher?”

“Ah-- a human phrase Commander La Forge recently taught me. A pencil is--”

“I know what a *pencil* is and what it’s meant to *push* in this context, Director.”

“You do?”

"Mhm," the Betazoid crooned, "I just wanted to confirm you heard it from the same Commander *I* did."

Troval snickered as Hugh scoffed.

As the two pulled Eight up to a horizontal biobed alcove coupling, Hugh's Reclamation Project badge chirped.

"Commander La Forge to Executive Director Hugh--"

Hugh looked to Troval. "Can you--?"

"I've got them, go ahead--"

"Director Hugh here," chimed the xB with a plap to his chest as Troval attended to Eight, "what can I do for you, Commander?"

"Looks like Admiral Janeway called us back already with news about that resupply request. Could you meet me in my Ready Room on Solstice by 1500?"

Checking his internal chronometer, Hugh verified it was 1450...

He looked back to Troval for confirmation as they signed in response. "<Go on; if it's good news, Medical wants to hear ASAP. I can get someone to cover you.>"

Hugh nodded and spoke to his badge. "I can, Commander. I'll be returning and changing from Medical work aboard *Theta*, but I will be there before 1500."

"Thank you, Hugh."

Once the line cut out, the Director returned to helping Troval align Eight inside the alcove. "Let's hope it's good news," Troval said dryly. "I don't want to have to resort to 'roughing it,' as I believe the phrase goes."

"We'll hope for the better."

At the mention of "roughing it," a certain memory came back to Hugh as they affixed Eight with the proper devices to aid their healing.

It was not long after Lore had been deactivated, perhaps a day or two; Hugh had been cleaning the research facility that Lore had left derelict, full of dead or injured or frightened others. Another drone, Troval (not Nine of Fifteen), had holed themselves inside after complaining of a deep pain and terrible ache in their face, an inability to see— trying to combine Cube's 5219's technology with that of the facility's medical resources to see if they could remedy the problem. Hugh and the others

had left Nine, Troval, in the chamber by themselves— but he suddenly heard a loud, pained holler from the west wing where the Soonien android once performed his medical experiments.

Hugh scrambled towards the sound of the scream.

He hoped he could help.

Troval had been the one to save Croxis' life, after all.

Could he help them the same way, if they needed it?

Reaching the chamber, Hugh found Troval.

From this point on, all Cooperation records would come to know this moment as the first-recorded “Reclamation Procedure.”

Holding up a leftover Starfleet... Hugh's holo-imager identified it, the item was a “dermal regenerator,” up to their, her, face, Troval was stimulating new flesh around where their cortical implant and exo-plating shell... was gone?! Troval's teeth were bared as they peeled the rest of the augment off, streaks of blood lining their face from the implant's border. Clicking the regenerator off as she, they, reached the top of their face and Hugh's exo-plating clattered noisily in the doorway, Troval turned back to him— with one less augment, an open socket, and... Hugh recalled his shock: Nine's face, it was more flushed, had *color!* It looked different than how she, they, were, but different--

“What are you doing?!” Hugh cried, stepping towards them and only stopping when they held up a hand. Hugh was struck silent by her... what was a word: glee, excitement, enthrallment as the dro-- Troval, it was *Troval*— as Troval laughed, relieved, their organic eye bleary and just as red as the raw, tender, new flesh under a removed exo-plating chunk of their, her, face.

“D-do you see,” they shuddered, voice weak and wavering with a fading vocal processor, “Hugh? Yes? These,” Troval said, “are our bodies. *Ours*. Not Lore's. This is... m-my body, it-- rejects this--”

Troval's hand that held the augment began to clench.

Their augmented palm crushed the facial implant as easily as clumps of Ohniakan soil would crumble in their hands, dropping the plating to the floor with a blood-spattering clatter.

“It caused me pain. And now it does not.”

Hugh remembered wondering all those years ago if he could make himself different, too.

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

"Gentlemen, thank you for coming; apologies for my delay in response. Turns out playing 52 pick up with a slew of medical freighters made it a bit harder than I initially thought to find you a replacement."

Geordi La Forge was all smirks as he stood beside Hugh, his eyes scanning the video feed's background of what looked to be a deeply-forested area behind a window.

Admiral Janeway was also in a cozy turtleneck— tending a mug of, most likely, black and bitter coffee.

Someone was *definitely* comfy— and definitely indulging their workaholic side when they *shouldn't* be.

"You're still well within our day cycle, Admiral," Geordi assured. "Not like you rang at 2 in the morning..."

"Commander La Forge's sentiments are correct, Admiral," Hugh agreed at Geordi's side. "We merely thank you for expediting our early restock request."

"Although I *will* say," Geordi hummed, holding up a finger between him and a now-smirking Hugh, "and I hope I have your shared *sentiments*, Director— this isn't quite the conference background we last saw you in; nor did I expect a response from a cabin in the Pacific Northwest..."

"It's called 'Bainbridge,' thank you very much," Janeway grumbled playfully, "and it happens to have a lovely scenic comfort with its plethora of

nature trails. But I am this venture's assigned Admiral overseer; like hell I'm about to let its requests get swept into bureaucratic nightmares while Clancy's out near the Beta Quadrant."

Geordi merely smirked. "Your dedication is admirable and appreciated."

And Janeway looked up with cocked brow after her sip.

"It's too early to be flattering me before the caffeine's hit, La Forge."

Hugh made it to Geordi's Ready Room at two minutes till 1500, the Commander and Director practically jumping right into a call with the Admiral on the other end. During those two minutes, however, the Commander managed to engage Hugh in some playful ribbing, with a "regenerate well?" from Geordi and Hugh returning with an "as well as I wager you *sleep*." Considering the responsibilities the two shouldered and the pressure they were under, it was nice to gloat, revel, and have *fun* in the fact he and his station co-manager could interact like this, much less *continue* it and not have that fun dampen their relationship as station managers, as Commander, Director, and... what. A friend? Of course! Hugh *loved* those; look at how *good* he was at making friends!

But maybe Geordi *could* find another word to describe their relationship, if he let himself.

Later. Far, far later.

Right?

No.

Maybe.

Still business time, La Forge.

The Commander shared a cute grin with Hugh before continuing.

"So who did you find?"

"Well, *I've got a couple*," Janeway sighed, bringing up a screen UI on her side of the call, "*But my first choice? You're not going to believe it, Commander. First though, context: have you kept up to date with the recent Federation-sponsored medical aid to Cardassia Prime, by chance?*"

"If I recall correctly, there's an active operation happening to help research a cure for Yarmin Fel Syndrome: right?"

"Correct, Commander. One of the interned starships there has concluded its allotted time there early, now that a vaccine has been approved for mass

production. They were en-route with a medical resupply that went to... well, not 'waste,' per-say, but timing worked out so they'd be traveling home with just as many goods as they initially arrived with."

"So we be receive them *instead* so they don't have to haul it all the way back to Sector 001!"

"To my knowledge, Yarmin Fel Syndrome is a disease that features symptoms of epidermal necrosis," Hugh audibly realized. "This means there'll be... a *plethora* of what we require for Reclamation Procedure equipment!"

"*Correct as well, Director Hugh,*" Janeway beamed. "*My major blockade would be getting the rest of the Admirals overseeing operations in that area to permit the resource repurposing, but it's something I'm willing to dig my administrative heels into for your sakes.*"

"I'll be available all afternoon should you need help with some additional *convincing*. I do have to note, however," Geordi pointed out, "you said I 'wasn't going to believe this' when I enquired as to what *ships* were available... so the one doing the restock— who is it?"

Admiral Janeway smirked as she slunk back in her chair.

"*The USS Pasteur.*"

The Pasteur?

Bev's ship?!

That USS Pasteur?!

"Are you--?!" Geordi scoffed in disbelief. As Janeway nodded in confirmation, the Commander let out a song-like laughter, running a hand over his beard and rejoicing audibly: "ohhh, how about that; you're *kidding!*"

"*I didn't kid Director Hugh about your assignment together; what makes you think I'd start now?*"

"Forgive me," Hugh asked meekly, "I am, ah-- *ignorant* to all of Starfleet's captaincies, admittedly; may I ask who is--"

"Oh, Hugh, if I didn't know the *Pasteur's* captain myself, I wouldn't have the slightest idea who it was either," Geordi assured the xB. "But when a hospital starship's got someone like *Doctor Beverly Crusher* in charge, I tend not to forget!"

Hugh's smile proved infectious as his widening eyes and palpable excitement made Geordi's dimples start to ache.

"I-I..." Hugh stammered, "oh, that's--"

"Exciting?"

"It's, I'm, ah... v-very much so--!"

"Perfect?"

"Yes!" Hugh finally laughed, the shock wearing off and realizing they still had an Admiral on the other line. "Ah... Janeway, I-- ask you understand my reaction; Doctor... or, rather, forgive me- *Captain* Crusher saved my *life* as a young man, and has a... very *respected* place in not only *my* history, but xBs overall, and--"

"*You owe me no justification for your excitement, Director Hugh,*" Janeway affirmed. "*May I just assume that both of you would prefer this vessel to restock Solstice?*"

Geordi and Hugh responded with a cacophony of "oh yes" and "please."

"*Perfect for me; don't even have to hail the Caduceus, then. I--*"

Geordi and Hugh watch Janeway suddenly sit up at the sound of an opening door, looking towards the other side of whatever cabin office she was in. As she rose in her seat, an authoritative voice could be heard saying "*Kathryn, you have left the coffee pot on for 23 minutes; would you like me to deactivate it, or did you want another cup?*" Looking as if she'd been caught in the act of something, Janeway's eyes finally fluttered shut with a sigh as a hand rested on her temple, the same voice as before asking "*Is that a Starfleet communications channel?*"

And just as the Commander (and Hugh) had come down from the high of realizing Crusher would be here soon, Geordi watched the Director at his side perk up like he'd just seen a blip on a sensor screen.

The xB's head tilted some towards the call, as if to ensure and double-check his own hearing.

"S... Seven?"

Quick steps could be heard approaching Janeway's desk. "*Hugh--?*"

Janeway's hand was covering her rapidly-reddening face by this point, and Geordi definitely did *not* expect his first meeting of the infamous Seven of Nine to go like this.

The xB rounded the Janeway's desk, Seven seemingly in some sort of outdoor wear for... hiking? Something to do with nature, considering the tracksuit-like turtleneck and her dirty blonde hair pulled up in

a ponytail. It explained why Janeway looked both cozy and ready to tackle nature with the scenery behind her, an augmented hand leaning against the top of Janeway's desk to peer at them both. Like any xB, Seven of Nine had a piercing stare and a sharp sense of analytics— but her expression softened towards Hugh who was all smiles at seeing, what Geordi could only assume, to be a friend with a bond that ran deeper than mere acquaintanceship.

“So this is what you were doing in here.”

“Special circumstances, special people, Seven,” Janeway pleaded as she pulled her hand away from a facepalm, *“let me have this— just this one iota of productivity before our walk...”*

Seven rolled her eyes, but returned her attention to Hugh and Geordi soon enough.

“I knew the Atlas Project was under Admiral Janeway's supervision,” Seven said evenly, *“but someone is supposed to be on mandated Shore Leave for a week. Still, however... it is good to see you, Hugh. Commander La Forge,”* Seven greeted with a tilt of her head, *“I have heard many favorable things spoken about you in particular— from Starfleet, the Cooperation, and Hugh has his own favorable recountings. It is a pleasure to finally meet such a well-renowned friend of former Borg.”*

Lord save him; Hugh gossiped about Geordi to *Seven of Nine?!*

“I appreciate the compliments, Seven,” Geordi allowed himself to bluster. “Hope Shore Leave is going well for you.”

“It is only day two, and I seem to notice the Admiral is already exhibiting symptoms of the phenomenon known as ‘cabin fever,’ Commander.”

As if she could sense the excitement radiating off Hugh, Seven's face finally softened and turned her attention to her friend. *“Hugh,” she said warmly, “it is very good to see you.”*

“Seven, my friend,” Hugh pleaded with a wide smile, “it is so good to see you. I cannot speak for the others, but Ohniaka III and the Project staff here send their warmest regards. To my recollection, and forgive my current ignorance to your current situation, but-- I thought you were out with the Fenri Ra--”

“You are correct,” Seven confirmed, rigidly bashful at Hugh's bluntness. *“I typically would be, in the Beta Quadrant. However, the Admiral informed me that she would be on mandated Shore Leave for a*

week, and the Rangers decided to assign me to--"

"Vacation," Janeway finished for her, *"which I technically am on right now, too. How about that— what a coincidence."*

"Yes: and that means not communicating with a highly-sensitive operation site how many dozens of light years from Earth."

"It's just a little paperwork to tide me over," Janeway pleaded, *"I can't go completely cold turkey. Besides, I wouldn't do this for just anyone, Seven; I think we can all appreciate the fuller context here for these two fine gentlemen... and to my recollection, you were also 'on the phone' last night to a certain group in the Beta Quadrant, too."*

Seven's eyes darted back and forth between the viewscreen and Janeway.

The xB was obviously *some* degree of exasperated, but there was an unspoken patience in her eyes that Geordi guessed Seven allowed for very few others in her life.

"Fine. In exchange, you're not looking at another communication's screen until we begin our hike today, Kathryn."

"It's a deal, Seven. Now: you two."

Geordi and Hugh stood at attention with a unified "Yes Ma'am."

"I'll contact Captain Crusher and fill in the Pasteur on their new itinerary. Barring they have any unforeseen obstacles, they should arrive at Solstice innn," she calculated, *"50 hours, if that's acceptable."*

"Far moreso than having to wait 11 more day cycles than what was expected," Hugh assured. "Thank you, Admiral."

"Of course, Director. And I'll handle Clancy if she says anything; I predict the Sector 001 admirals will be wanting the Pasteur to return to Earth through Bajoran space so as to not look like we have too many irons in the fire, but I'm hoping for an understanding of circumstances."

"We hope so too," Geordi sighed roughly. "You're all gonna be here in two months for the Midway Completion Gala, anyway; might be fun to have to some future guests get an early preview and all..."

"Exactly, Commander. And youuu are coming with me— right, Seven?" Janeway asked in a sing-song voice, looking up to Seven with the most doeful eyes she could muster. *"It'd be lovely to catch up with everyone while celebrating what Starfleet and the Reclamation Project are accomplishing together..."*

Seven's herculean patience visibly resurfaced, the xB's eyes darting in between Geordi, Hugh, and Janeway in a sudden flare of blush.

Maybe Geordi oughta think about his *own* date already.

The Commander's eyes widened when a haphazard glance at Hugh told Geordi the xB might also be pondering an unspoken, similarly-veined idea.

Seven cleared her throat to break the silence, saving Geordi from having to overthink how fast his heart was beating. "*We will discuss this over the extra kilometer I am making you hike, Admiral.*"

Janeway simply smirked, accepting Seven's challenge and returning her attention to the screen.

"*You would think, Gentlemen, with as much exploring our old crew did,*" Janeway mused as she clutched her coffee mug, "*that I'd be the last person to say 'it's a small world.' But here we are regardless, and I'm glad Solstice's joint-operation crew is willing to accept the Pasteur's resource surplus. May I do anything else for you two before our next weekly review?*"

"Nothing I can think of, Admiral," Geordi confirmed. "Anything you have to add, Director?"

"Simply to have a lovely Shore Leave, you two," Hugh chimed brightly. "I offer my greatest thanks as Executive Director for you taking time out of your vacation to assist us, Admiral. Seven," he added, "it was good to speak with you. Also, I-- do not wish to pressure you or your schedule, but... it would make me very happy to see you at the Gala, my friend."

Seven gave Hugh a very loving grin— something Geordi suspected the xB did not give lightly.

"*I will consider attending, Hugh. Take care.*"

"You as well."

Janeway winked. "*Happy planning.*"

As the call ended, Hugh's shoulders sagged and his boggled eyes blinked slowly, folding his hands in front of his lips as if he were in silent prayer. Geordi, meanwhile, wrangled with his own nerves and fidgeted in place, chuckling to himself as the two reeled in all amazement, humor, delight--

"Wow," Geordi sighed with puffed cheeks and a gobsmacked stare, "so that's Seven of Nine, huh? I'll be damned..."

“Beverly...” the xB murmured quietly to himself, “Beverly, s-she will— Doctor Crusher! It’s... oh, it’s-- been so *long*, Geordi! W-what will she think of the Reclamation Project, of the Tactical Cubes-- the *Medical department’s* work?! Of me, of *Crosis?! Augh*, I-- I have to tell him, right away— I have to prepare, we must sufficiently welcome her arrival! Her *and the Pasteur’s* arrival, of course--”

Much like his smile, Hugh’s excitement proved to be infectious— Geordi’s nervous chuckling blossoming into a beautiful, bubbly laugh as the Commander was struck with a sudden sense of *deja vu*.

Data always fussed before Beverly visited, too.

[EARTHEN CALENDAR - OCTOBER 3, 2391]

SPECIALTY OUTPOST STARBASE "SP-4852 SOLSTICE"

49.12 hours later, an ambassadorial-dressed Hugh stood with Geordi in Solstice’s primary Transporter Bay, puffing his chest as Geordi straightened with the xB’s uniform’s combadge.

Thankfully, *Crosis’* idle tapping at the transporter console was a welcome white noise that rivaled Hugh’s flurry of thoughts.

The xB forced a nervous breath.

But before Hugh’s mind could wander any further down anxiety’s path of nervousness, Geordi’s voice broke the transporter pad chamber’s silence.

“You’ll be *fine*, Director.”

“She’s a *Captain*, Commander. ”

“You talk to Admirals every Monday, Hugh!” Geordi teased brightly.

“I don’t see what’s makes you so nervous about Bev being a *Captain*. ”

“The Commander has a *point*, Director,” Crois added smoothly, smirking to himself as Hugh wanted nothing more than to stare daggers at the man. “I must admit, Hugh: it allows similar comparison of how you’ll *boldly* defy megalomaniac androids for our people’s freedom, and yet *I’m* the one who has to take the Ohniakan clicker beetles outside if you find them in your office...”

Hugh was going to throttle Crois later.

Lovingly, of course.

Geordi’s lips were squirming with obviously-restrained laughter.

“I just... don’t ever want to *hurt* them by accident,” Hugh admitted, “and one *did* pop right in my face when we first arrived on the planet. I’ve been jumpy of them ever since, you must understand--”

“Don’t worry,” Geordi told him, “I getcha. One time I found *snakes* in the *Enterprise’s* warp core console, so both Worf and I have been extra jumpy of them ever since.”

“*Snakes?* In a Galaxy-class’ Engineering department?”

“It’s a long story.”

Hugh’s anxieties found respite in Geordi’s softening grin.

It suddenly occurred to him that there was no way Geordi could still be fixing Hugh’s supposedly-crooked combadge.

“What gave my nervousness away, Commander?”

“Well... you *asking* me about it, first of all,” the Commander mused, “but there’s a couple other things. You’ve got this habit where your thumb starts rubbing at your wrist’s old biochip port, your prosthetic eye is dilated *5 millimeters* wider than your *organic* eye... aaand whatever the equivalent of a ‘*heart*’ is for you,” Geordi explained, “is thudding pretty damn hard inside that chest of yours.”

The Director nibbled his lower lip as he glanced to the transporter pad.

Had the *Pasteur* secured its orbit yet?

A wink from his friend told Hugh that they both still had a little more time to spend alone.

“Geordi, it’s been... over *20 years*, since I’ve last seen her,” he fretted. “You must acknowledge: I-I was-- *hardly* the person I am now. Will she even... *recognize* me, I wonder? Will she ask where I am, ‘who is this’ at your side? What will she *think* of me? I mean-- I was excited to see *you*,

after Reconstitution, but-- this is the person who saved my life, Geordi; someone who saw me as-- a-and I know anxiety is causing me to deduce evidence to the contrary based on your previous assurances, but--”

“If I know *Bev* at all, Hugh,” Geordi interrupted in a gentle voice, “and I’d like to think that I do... she’ll be a lot happier getting to know the Hugh I’m looking at right now. If anything? I think she’ll be *proud* of you. And you’ve got a lot to be proud *of*, Hugh.”

Hugh felt his face split into a wide, bashful grin at the praise, trying desperately to regain his professional footing.

“You are always... so *generous* with your compliments, Commander.”

“I’ve got a lot to give, Director. Go figure.”

With a smirk and a tap to Hugh’s chest to signal Geordi was done “straightening” his badge, Hugh turned to face the transported pad, glancing at *Crosis* once more for strength and assurance.

His friend, meanwhile, was simply smirking.

He was going to lovingly throttle *Crosis* later.

“Director, Commander,” *Crosis* called over a UI notification, “the *Pasteur* is ready to transport.”

“Energize.”

At Geordi’s command, Captain Beverly Crusher of the *USS Pasteur* shimmered into existence.

Crusher’s pips shone against the crimson red of her Command uniform, made radiant by the bright blue CMO coat she wore even into Captaincy. Her silver hair was flecked with remnants of ginger, bundled into a simple ponytail to compliment her sharp features. Even all these years later, Hugh could still see the kindness in Beverly’s eyes, a meekness overwhelming him catching her radiant grace as she approached. Alongside his own frantic heartbeat, Hugh noticed *Crosis* straightening at his post, and he wondered if Geordi could realize how humbling it was to be in the presence of two people that gave their people life in the first place.

“My, my: what friendly faces to greet me on my first mission in a year away from Cardassia Prime,” Captain Crusher proclaimed. “Commander La Forge, dear; you’re looking marvelous as ever.”

“And you’re looking as beautiful as always, Captain Crusher. Welcome to *Solstice*: Starfleet’s first sentientarian joint-operation with the

Reclamation Project.”

“I and my crew are wholeheartedly thankful for the opportunity, Commander. This dashing *Executive Director* here, however,” Beverly said with a bewildered face, “Hugh, my God; it’s been so long..”

“It has, hasn’t it,” the xB sighed bashfully, his smile finally managing to crack through nervousness. “But it is-- very good to see you again, Captain. W-while I cannot speak directly for my fellow former Borg, know that your presence is very much welcomed here. I was-- wondering if you would recognize me, admittedly; most of my recognizable augments from that time are gone, a-and it's been so *long* that I--”

Without another word, Beverly’s hand reached to cusp the side of Hugh’s face. Almost instinctually, the xB allowed his head’s weight to rest against the Captain’s palm. Hugh knew of the human “hands of a surgeon;” how those hands could be analytical, calming, gentle, and observant all at the same time, deducing this descriptor could fit Captain Crusher perfectly alongside his memories of Beverly. As her sharp features and gentle eyes scanned over Hugh’s scars, implants, and the “spider web” that anchored his jaw, Hugh recalled his time spent with the *Enterprise’s* former doctor— as frightening and humiliating his own ignorance was.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was scared.”

Though Hugh once had no names for the emotions that roiled through his freshly-severed brain, he would realize much, much later that she was not wrong.

And all these years later, Beverly’s eyes still held the same kindness that she looked at him with behind the walls of an invisible force field all those years ago.

“Look at you, Mr. Hugh,” Beverly cooed, Hugh unable to stop smiling at the woman before him. “Seems like just yesterday you were giving Commander La Forge here a holographic imaging system plucked straight off that handsome little face of yours...”

“Oh, I’m-- happy to report that I’ve become a *much* better gift-giver since then,” Hugh boasted as Geordi chuckled, “and a little more *handsome*, I want to think. I must admit however, I-- have *tried* to

prepare for this moment, Beverly, but I must plead my own... lack of words, awe-- *ignorance*, I suppose," he tried to settle on, "how do I adequately greet the woman who once saved my life?"

With a newfound smirk and nostalgia creasing her brow, Beverly Crusher shook her head with a "tsk tsk" and papped his cheek.

"Ohhh, just like this, 'you'--"

And very suddenly, Captain Crusher swept both Hugh and Geordi into a hug-- the two men laughing as they accepted and returned Beverly's embrace.

"Gonna make me get all bleary-eyed Bev, come on," Geordi tried to protest. "We got all nice and ready for you--"

"*Not* on my nice uniform, Geordi," Beverly teased. "We have *images* to maintain around personnel, after all."

"If we are haranguing the images of higher staff, Captain Crusher," Crois called from the transporter console, "I certainly have some *stories* to recount about the Executive Director."

Oh, Hugh was *definitely* going to (lovingly) throttle Crois later.

"C-Captain! Please: may I introduce *Crois*," Hugh boasted, "the Reclamation Project's Director Second, and my dearest friend from Ohniaka III."

"It is a pleasure and an honor, Captain Crusher," Crois told her. "I only regret my *own* time aboard the *Enterprise* was not as benevolent as Hugh's was."

"Your own time?" Beverly repeated, "forgive me, Director Second Crois: have we *met* previously?"

"Not directly, I don't think," Geordi assured her. "Crois here was one of the xBs *Lore* sent to hijack the *Enterprise* and then turn Data against us. Since then, he's done a lot of good for building the Reclamation Project's beginnings, and remains a vital part of the Consultation Division."

"A very appreciated, *extended* way of saying 'I got better.'"

"It would seem so, Director Second," Beverly crooned, impressed by the man's size and apparent strength as she shook his hand. "Lovely to be meeting you in your 'better' circumstances."

"The pleasure is all mine, Captain. You have both a significant and *kind* place in the Cooperation's history."

"Oh, all of you are going to make me so red my *hair* will change color on me," she sighed with a flattered smirk. "Will you be joining us for administrative talks, Croxis?"

"Perhaps later, Captain. My duties require me elsewhere, but I know I will join the senior xB and Starfleet staff to welcome the *Pasteur's* arrival over dinner. If I recall, the Executive Director has a wonderful dish he wanted to prepare for you; did you know he makes a lovely cioppino with Andorian clams?"

"Does he really?! Oh, tell me more!"

Hugh was absolutely, definitely, going to (lovingly) throttle Croxis later, and then toss himself right out the airlock afterwards.

"*Captain Crusher*," Geordi thankfully interrupted with, "ready for a station tour?"

Beverly nodded at Geordi with a teasing smirk. "Very much so, Geordi."

"Then I shall take my temporary leave, Sirs," Croxis said with a polite nod. "I will see you all for dinner."

Hugh stared those loving daggers at Croxis from behind Beverly, Croxis giving him a smarmy sword of a glance in return as he left.

"What a charming fellow your friend is," Beverly murmured. "Forgive me, Hugh, it's just-- quite incredible, seeing you as you are now with my *own* friend."

Flattery threatened to overwhelm him again as Hugh and Geordi led Captain Crusher out of the transporter bay. "The-- continual comprehension of ourselves and expressions therein is one of the greatest societal treasure we have, Beverly. Trust me when I say there are fewer things that xBs love to gloat about more than their own unique traits."

"Moreso than *Croxis* boasts about your cioppino?"

Geordi chuckled. "That was supposed to be a *surprise*."

"How was your stay on Cardassia Prime, if we may ask?" Hugh questioned, Beverly letting the men guide her as she followed them starting towards the turbolift. "I have not yet visited the Cardassian homeworld, and I've only met a meager amount of Cardassian xBs in my clarity."

"Oh, the people? Lovely. Wonderful. But the government?" Crusher scoffed with an eyeroll, "I could do without *that* xenophobic mess for a

good year or two. There's incremental change happening, thankfully, but Rome was not built in a day. It'll take a while; we've finally orchestrated universal distribution of the antidote and its recommended follow-up treatments, and at least city councils and governors were willing to work transparently with us. But *enough*, enough talk of Cardassians," she sighed, "I want to hear *all* about how *you* both have been until the *Pasteur* has to shove off."

"Welllllll," Geordi picked up effortlessly, "it's already been a productive first month. Most of the Reclamation Project Medical Procedures take place onboard the resident Tactical Cubes *Theta* and *Iota*— whereas most of the *collaborative* research, thesis work, political rendezvous, and Starfleet admin work happens here on *Solstice*."

"Indeed. The sphere, meanwhile--"

"Which is called 'Atlas,' correct?" Beverly asked, "I understand the artificial intelligence *named* itself this?"

Hugh smiled with a nod. "He very much did. *His* hull is home to joint Starfleet-Reclamation Project Engineering Division research, all while we excavate and reawaken dormant drones amongst his many regeneration alcoves. The largest of our vessels, the Command Juggernaut, is where most Cooperation administrative affairs are handled, and provides Atlas' xBs both temporary lodging and a once-a-month ferry back to Ohniaka III. As you might've already seen by your arrival, it is currently *gone* for its first monthly excursion, and shall return in two days time by transwarp conduit."

"How many were on that first ferry ride, Hugh?"

"521, Beverly. Out of our original 2,963 count, we are making excellent progress."

She hummed pleasantly to herself as they walked together.

"You certainly seem to be running a tight operation here, gentlemen... tell me: Commander, Director," Beverly asked, turning to face them both as they waited for the turbolift. "Life in collaboration and recreation has treated you two well?"

Hugh couldn't help but smirk at "recreation."

"Very well indeed, Beverly."

"Shockingly so, Bev."

"Yes— even, ah-- *despite* our 'guest' downstairs who refuses to 'get out

of bed,' as I believe the metaphor goes.”

“So I’ve been debriefed,” Crusher conceded as the turbolift opened. “How long has it been again since you’ve spoken with her?”

“18 days,” Hugh griped once inside the turbolift. "'xB Wing.' All her vitals are normal, stable, and she’s for all intents and purposes ‘healthy’—but she does still have the ability to choose when to reemerge from stasis. The Reclamation Project does not and *will not* take agency from its patients, under any circumstances, and we will not place her into an Queen’s prosthetic body she might not want. Still— it has been... *tiring*, waiting on her.”

“Patience is a virtue, Director Hugh,” Beverly offered, and Hugh quite liked how his name sounded when Beverly said it. “Who knows— maybe she’ll have a bad *dream* and want to talk to somebody about it.”

“Dreams of an xB,” Geordi mused, Hugh watching the Commander out of the corner of his eye as they continued to walk. “Wonder what *those* are like...”

[Chaos without the focus of an alcove]

“That is an existential conversation that could go on for many, many hours, Commander La Forge,” Hugh alluded playfully, “and I believe we would *much* rather spend that time introducing Captain Crusher to our facilities here in the waking world. May I deduce my assumptions are correct?”

“I’d like to return to that ‘existential’ conversation later, Director,” Geordi teased with a smirk, “but yeah, sure— your assumptions are pretty on-point.”

Hugh’s visual UI caught Beverly’s eyes narrowing by 2.71 millimeters as she looked between him and Geordi.

Her hands were folded against her chest, and a thin finger was tapping at her bicep.

“Well— let’s not waste any time, then,” she hummed with a pleasant smile. “I’d like to see as *much* as I can before we get down to resupply business.”

Hugh wondered to himself just what, exactly, Beverly was wanting to see besides the Atlas Project’s work sites.

“It’d be our pleasure, Beverly.”

Commander La Forge spent an hour and a half touring the other three vessels with Hugh and Beverly. Wrapping up with *Solstice* first and foremost, the Commander and Director allowed Beverly to see the chasm-like interior of Atlas' catwalks, and then onto the brutalist medical halls of *Theta* and *Iota*. Geordi's friend was more than impressed with the harmonious natures of the different Reclamation Project departments; it was rare when cybernetic prosthetics, physical therapy, psychiatric care, immediate surgeons, and long-term treatment facilities all worked so harmoniously, and no small amount of xBs were starstruck at seeing *the* Beverly Crusher grace their labs. Even Troval was dumbstruck as they shook the Captain's hand aboard *Theta*, with sparkles in the Betazoid's augmented eyes and Klingon xB blood on their smock.

Finally, the three reached the end of their tour at Geordi's Ready Room— the Captain and Commander having Starfleet-specific business to attend to.

He also had some *friend*-specific business to pry into Bev about as well— mainly why the hell she kept smirking at him like that when Hugh wasn't watching.

"I will be sure to pass on your extended praise to Junction Troval, Captain," Hugh told her. "The Reclamation Project would hardly be what it is today without our dedicated Medical personnel."

"Thank you, Hugh," she hummed, "I'll be delighted to converse with them again over the cioppino dinner you've promised..."

"I've been dying to try this damn soup for days too, Hugh," Geordi had to add, "what's the difference Andorian clams make, anyway?"

"Texture, pure and simple. The coloration is also a fun visual contrast. The harsh clash of... what kind of red is it calle-- '*crimson*,' yes--" he said with a snap and waggle of his finger. "The crimson broth rivaling such blue clams is very amusing to me."

Geordi failed to restrain a wide, adoring smirk.

He paused when he felt another set of eyeballs on him.

God damn it, Geordi could feel her *looking* at him again--

"Have a good rest of your day, Hugh," Beverly told him sweetly.

"Don't work too hard."

"I'll try. And a good rest of the afternoon to you too; I shall see you-- *both* of you, for dinner at 2000 hours."

And as Hugh walked away and Commander La Forge's Ready Room door slid shut, Beverly folded a hand over her chest as she turned back to Geordi, her face awash in gobsmacked amazement and flattery.

Isn't he something else?

"Told you," Geordi started off, "they've got those stares and smiles that'll drill *right* in your soul and make you feel like a stack of fresh-pressed latinum."

"He looked at me like I was a *reverend* when I beamed in, Geordi," she mused. "And he's so-- oh, I pulled up pictures of him before we arrived, but to see him *now--!*"

Geordi barked a proud laugh as he plopped down into his office chair. "He's a handsome little shit, isn't he! Finding out it would be the *Pasteur* to resupply us? Oh, Bev-- he got a little misty-eyed in front of me after the call with Janeway," he fawned, "and please do *not* tell him I said that! Watch: he finds out, and he'll be a flushed little wreck for an hour--"

"And his *First Officer*, too!" she exclaimed with him. "Oh, that Croxis looks like he popped right out of Jean-luc's Dixon Hill holoprograms-- like an old film actor come back to life..."

"Well, as Hugh tells me: 'Reclamation Procedures help bring out the best *you* that was already there,' and all that jazz."

"He's so... oh, what a lovely man Croxis might mak--"

"He's gay, Bev."

Crusher squinted playfully as she hissed an audible "oogh!" with a snap of her fingers, Geordi unable to hold back a laugh at her hopes getting shot down by a greater fate.

“Oh, well— I’ll take his flattery, then. Maybe even a *hug* later on.”

“Well, you’re in luck; he *is* a hugger.”

“Actually— tell me Geordi, purely out of medical curiosity: his and Hugh’s scarring, on their--” Crusher asked, her hand motioning over her face where Hugh’s and Crovis’ ocular implants lines once were, “that’s not from--?”

“Oh, no no no— nothing *you* had a hand in, Doc,” the Commander assured. “Apparently, it’s from an irreversible kind of necrotic damage: particularly at the ‘edge’ of an implant’s epidermal eruption or merger site. You got to Picard *right* when those augments were fresh and he’d just been severed from the Collective. He didn’t get much in the way of major physical remnants, or anything a standard 60’s-era dermal regenerator couldn’t handle. Hugh, though— he had *all that* on his face for *three years* before his holo-imager broke, and he didn’t even get a new *eye* until Reconstitution. But yeah: just a combination of a severed drone’s biochips losing their regenerative quality when not given guidance by the Collective,” Geordi explained, “and all the nanoprobe death that follows. Their augments and implants don’t just fall off from magic, y’know.”

The entire time Geordi rambled, he could feel his friend watching him. Watching him with a smirk as the Commander explained all those little facts about xB history, biology— all the little details about a very specific someone and the people he worked and lived among...

Facts that Geordi had, somehow, memorized in the span of a *month*.

Technically six weeks, if Geordi counted the arduous prep work involved for this project.

Who else could’ve been counting, anyway?

So Geordi said nothing, leaning his chin on a fist and drumming his unclenched fingers.

He squinted at her. “You’ve been *watching* me.”

“*Observing*, Geordi.”

The Commander felt himself blush. “Observing, uh-- *what* now?”

“It’s just *interesting*, Geordi,” she commented. “Watching you both, even being with you for a couple of hours together... it reminds me of how well you used to get along with a certain someone, too. Another certain mechanical man...?”

Geordi's heart sagged with a newly-realized weight.

Oh, Data.

"Yeah, I-- I can see that," Geordi admitted. "But-- Bev, my god; you have to understand how just-- *fascinated* I am by it. By *him*, I mean! 'Captivated', actually-- yeah, that's an even *better* word. I'm captivated by knowing that's the same man, the same *drone* we almost sent back to firebomb his own people, and here he is now, just..."

The weight around his heart grew a bit heavier.

"Seeing who he is *today*? The... spectacle, the *game changer* him and his people have become in just 23 years?! I mean look at this, Beverly!" Geordi exclaimed as he threw a hand to the window, "look at it, look at all that! Hardly *two decades* and they've got themselves an entire subsection in the Federation xenoanthropology archives! Ships, holidays, naming conventions-- even fashion, you should see what he looks like even out of that formal uniform!"

"That was a uniform?!"

"Exactly! He's got a-- whole *slew* of his own people now, separate from the Borg — a planet, a favorite tea, cooking skills — he's got a whole new *face* for crying out loud! How amazing is that?"

"Geordiii..."

With a groan, Geordi held his face in his hands as he heard the woman chuckle her pretty, loving laugh.

"What am I gonna do, Bev?" he bemoaned. "I'm in charge of... hmm, let's go down the list--"

He dramatically frowned at her as he held up a single finger. "One: a project and its workplace I haven't cared about as much since Utopia Planitia. It's something that matters a lot to Hugh, and one I actually am happy to support and help make work, how about it. Engineering and mechanical science combined with humanitarian work? Who would've thunk it. Two:" up went another finger, "almost 700 lives involved with this project on the Cooperation's and Federation's sides: not even *counting* the thousands of drones still sleeping in that sphere. Three?" the last finger went up, "I have a *Borg Queen head* sleeping in my station basement that could wake up at *any* time, bang on the door for a house call-- making my life and *Hugh's* life as miserable as possible! And here *I* am, here *we* are," he exhaled, leaning back in his chair, "fucking around

with each other. ...Pft, yeah-- that's... appropriate, actually."

Geordi smiled as he shook his head.

"He's perfect to work with, Bev. I couldn't have asked for a better posting. And he just... knowing how-- good this job feels now, I feel like-- I dunno, I'm, it's--"

"A little *too* good?" she asked gently. "Almost *too* perfect?"

Geordi looked down again.

The weight around his heart had grown so heavy that it threatened to dip some old, much-heavier grief.

"Can I tell you something, Bev?"

"Of course, Geordi."

He nodded tightly as he bobbed his leg.

"I'm-- too old to lose someone like him again," he let himself admit. "I can't afford to mess a friendship like this up because I'm lonely, and then something happens to Hugh that I can't do anything about. Friends like you, like *Hugh*-- we don't get a whole lot more like those at our age. And I... I can't go through mourning another Data, in my life. I'm happy being friends at all-- we picked it right back up when I saw him last, but I just... I'm feeling selfish. I want more. *Something* more, but I don't know what to *call* that something."

Geordi swallowed.

"Or I *do*, and..."

He shook his head.

"How about *that*, y'know," the Commander realized. "Here I helped him with *his* name... and here *I* am, scared of naming something of my own."

Geordi could tell that, for all her graceful snark, Crusher was listening to him intently. She loved Data too, in her own way-- all their friends had their own ways of loving that android, but widows had a certain understanding between them. Now that Geordi had a quiet place to think on it, Data's journey was similar to Hugh's own experiences, he supposed; where Data had been blessed with the Soong-type birthright of an individual's tabula rasa, however, Hugh had to fight for the very right to his *own* blank slate. The xB had to wade through waters of ignorance, then in and out trauma's depths-- matching innate Borg knowledge to his own unique instances, experiences... Whatever Hugh

wanted to emulate, he had to figure and carve out the 'Hugh' he wanted to be from the harsh, blank rockface of the Collective...

Data and Hugh walked two different journeys, it was true.

But who was to say those paths couldn't cross, every now and then?

"Well— be *safe*, if you're going to 'fuck around,'" Crusher teased, Geordi chuckling with a smirk as he sat back and listened. "And second... I think this could be good for you, Geordi. You deserve someone in your life who you know would... *support* you, *be there* for you, and give *you* space to pursue your own Starfleet business. I miss him too, Geordi, but Hugh doesn't have to be a 'second Data,'" she pointed out. "You can have... *similarities* you see in people: preferences, even 'inspirations' I suppose, but-- let this be your *own* relationship with Hugh. We'll always have Data in our hearts, but *you* were the one who loved him, Geordi. And what *your* heart wants--"

--is what the heart wants," Geordi finished. "Yeah."

"I was *going* to say 'is the most *important* voice in how we honor Data's memory,' but that works too."

Beverly paused after they exchanged little smiles.

"Are you happy with him as it is now?"

"Absolutely."

"Then perhaps there *could* be more. But at your *own* leisure. After all: you've got another five months with the man," she noted, "use *that* time to make sure it's not a heartfelt, fleeting crush the *Enterprise* was so plagued with."

"You can say *that* again. ...But can you just-- I dunno," he sighed, "while you're here; watch us, for the next couple days? Get another pair of eyes on this? Some sorta-- outside confirmation I'm not overreacting or wanting to put expectations on him?"

Crusher sat back in her chair with a freshly-painted smirk on her lips. Not like she hadn't been watching him *already*.

"I'm going to call a certain *Betazoid* and say I'm taking her job; using a doctor like a *Counselor*," she ended with a "tsk tsk."

"No, no, ohhh no don't you *dare*— I do *not* need Deanna or Will — *especially* Will — prematurely playing *matchmaker* with me," Geordi warned with a chuckle. "Next thing you know I'll have *Worf* pulling up in the *Enterprise-E* and asking me if I've written Hugh any poetry yet..."

“Ooo—I bet he’s got a pretty little tongue for poetry.”

Geordi’s soul projected out of his body as if a Vulcan suplexed a mindmeld with him into space.

That’s not the only thing it’s pretty for.

“Who knows.”

“*You* could, Geordi,” Crusher reminded, “you could be the one to find that out. But I’ll keep my eye out, dear; it’s the least I could do for such an *esteemed* member of Starfleet... and a very dear friend of mine.”

The Commander’s chair creaked beneath him as he warmly looked his friend over.

“Thanks, Bev.”

