

# 2

## OLD SOULS

### **Ohniakan III xB Holidays | Personally-Significant Dates, Historical Holidays**

*A brief introduction of Cooperation-associated holidays (in both personal and historical connotation)*

Though dedicated to the efficiency of “individuality through community,” the xBs of Ohniaka III are no strangers to personal hallmarks and communal holidays. The Liberated Borg Cooperation are a people built from many different species with many different occasions, this much is true; I have seen everything from Vulcan xBs invoking the name of Surak on the day of his birth, Klingon xBs temper themselves and the steel of their Bat’leths on Kahless’s empirical anniversary, and human xBs celebrating the life of Zephram Cochrane on First Contact Day. But as long as Ohniaka III has served as the xB homeworld, new threads continue to be thrown into this societal loom– woven together to create unique holidays and observed occasions.

#### **Namesake, Reclamation Day**

Among more personal holidays include “Namesake,” an occasion almost all

xBs celebrate for one simple, unifying purpose: reveling in their own chosen names post-Hivemind. xBs value their names very highly; no matter how large, small, or frivolous the change might be from their Borg-assigned designation (or even re-assumption of their name from life pre-assimilation), it is still their name regardless, and the name must be celebrated in equal jubilation to other sapient species' "birthdays." As an additional note: some xBs are able to access and/or recall their original birthdays, but since this is not as universal a privilege as Namesake dates are, they are celebrated with far less frequency (and personal triumph).

Another holiday for xBs to observe is their own "Reclamation Day—" a personal date marking either the xB's first or a certain/significant Reclamation Procedure the xB wants to benchmark for a personal, particular reason. This could signify anything from the completion of a treatment to a certain organic body part, gender affirming surgeries, or receiving of a new, xB-made implant to improve the xB's quality of life.

## **Reprisals**

There are some holidays, however, that certain xBs do not universally observe in a happy regard. The aforementioned, sometimes-exclusionary treatment of "birthdays" can bear a similar weight to another holiday like "Reprisal—" dates on which the xB was officially cut off from the Collective, discovered, or reactivated from severance's dormancy. Teetering between traumatic or joyous when the xBs' circumstance of severance is considered (and subsequent quality of life after such), a Day of Reprisal is less celebrated and more "observed," considering Ohniakan xBs are very familiar with melancholy-laced days of remembrance.

## **Cubesfall**

One such day of memorialization is known as "Cubesfall:" the day Progenitor xBs crashlanded on the Starfleet-outposted Ohniaka III in 2368. It is a holiday less to do with "celebration" as more as it is "commemoration," as Cube 5219's fall to the planet's surface was anything but gentle. As are standard Borg cubes, Cube 5219 held a cube's average complement of 5,000 drones within each vessel; out of the wreckage, only 1,563 survived against 2,957 that died upon impact. As

evidenced by the count inconsistency to 5,000, Cube 5219 had also suffered a great deal of internal loss before this crash due to self-induced shutdowns and other unfortunate causes, as none of the drones onboard were mentally equipped to handle the concept of individuality.

While Cubesfall is observed out of historical respect and used as a time of reflection and communal grief for the pain de-assimilation can bear for non-Progenitors, the date is much more haunting, bitter, and laced with grief for the 1,200 elder xBs that include Executive Director Hugh and Junction Horus. Though their individuality is something they treasure, it came with the terrible cost of leaving the Collective's safety and security, and nowhere did I see this ache more plainly than when I observed the emotional fog that settled over the Capitol City on this date.

If you visit Ohniaka III, I encourage you to visit the Memorial to Queen 49- a simple, pointed needle that stands 50 meters tall at its base. A willow-like tree below it is surrounded by massive pylons stripped from Cube 5219's walls, inscribed with the numerical designations of every drone lost during Cubesfall in xB script. Its plaza stands a guard outside the ruins of Cube 5219: dropping down into a spiraling historic trail that encircles the crater, or a more modern lift/transporter service down to face the Wall of Entombment. If you do visit this memorial, please do so respectfully, in silence, and in awareness that the memory of Queen 49 (and Cube 5219's deceased drones) still exists with every living xB in some form. Though these people have nothing but disdain for the queen units that bend the Collective to their will, they mourn the victims of its baser instincts- and Queen 49 was no exception.

**[EARTHEN CALENDAR - OCTOBER 30, 2391]**

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

“What did you set my synthehol drink percentage to?”

“4%.”

“Only 4%?”

“Any stronger and I’m gonna have you keeled over laughing at something like you did at my old uniform’s nip slip pics. Now come on; tell me how that smells before you try it.”

Geordi watched Hugh stifle a smirk and sniff a bubbling flute in his hand— the xB tucking a lock of silver-dusted hair behind his ear kicked out of place by an outdoor patio’s breeze.

“Mm. My olfactory processors estimate this to be similar to a fruit called... ‘pomegranate?’ I would like to confirm this.”

“You got it. Personally, I like OJ in mine a little better—”

“OJ?”

“Orange juice, sorry. I’ve noticed you prefer more tart drinks, so I think you’ll like the pom version a bit more.”

“There’s only one way to determine if I will,” the Director crooned, nodding towards Geordi’s orange-tinted flute.

So, picking his glass up, the Commander offered Hugh an orange-and-purple toast with a satisfying -clink!-, the men taking small sips as a pigeon fluttered down next to their table and began bopping around the sidewalk.

Geordi puckered his lips with a wide smile to follow.

Guinan’s sent-along drink replicator codes truly had no equal.

“So?” Geordi asked after a pleased hum. “Whaddya think.”

Hugh’s partly metal brow furrowed while he discerned the taste.

“Crisp. Refreshing. Sweet,” he nodded, “with a harsh bite. ...Dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” Geordi repeated, “that’s a new one!”

“Yes, dangerous— could you imagine how I’d act if I had another one?”

Geordi laughed hard enough that the pigeon under their table bounced in surprise, Hugh unable to resist the man’s contagious chortling. It was the end of a Federation work week, and the two were tired as all hell— deciding to catch up over a date in Geordi’s old San Francisco Castro bistro holodeck setting. In the past seven days alone, Hugh had assisted with 40 Reclamation Procedure surgeries alongside his other work, and Geordi had been combing through Federation archives to possibly answer V’evik’s riddle as he toiled on Atlas’ repairs. Additionally, facilities were being prepared for EMH’s arrival as escorted

by Captain Torres from Starbase 178... and most looming of all, Hugh had Consultation appointment #6 tomorrow with Queen 127.

Before, it had been set (or expected) to be on November 1st.

But on her 5th Consultation, Queen 127 decided their meetings would be six days apart.

Now, for her 6th meeting, she requested they be in *five* day intervals.

Despite their well-earned suspicion, at least Geordi and Hugh didn't have her Consultation on the same day that two Klingon ambassadors were also arriving in a Starfleet vessel with the Atlas Project's newest medical addition.

Maybe she was just getting antsy for her extremely-specific, "make it exactly like the schematics I have given you" body to be done already.

Maybe she was just wanting to be a decent person. Have a decent *conversation*, for once.

Maybe she just wanted to talk.

No more work, Geordi, he thought bitterly— not now. Enjoy the very good-looking xB in a black turtleneck sitting across from you wearing tight grey pants, golden earrings and necklaces and oh, he had to stop that train of thought right then and there— because there was plenty more to drink, and plenty more to talk about.

"Okay, Mr. Dangerous," Geordi teased, "go on— you still owe me your first hookup story."

"Fine, fine," he cooed, "I suppose I do. It was 2 months, 23 days after Lore was deactivated— 1 year, 1 month, and 2 days since Cubesfall. There had been, ah... *murmurs*, spreading throughout Cube 5219's survivors," Hugh alluded, "discussions of our own physical analyses that we had begun noticing. Our... arousals, were kicking in again as pelvic plating removal happened, organ reconstruction occurred, and our hormonal treatments were reawakening biological instincts. Different Progenitors attended... *meetings*, with each other. Private gatherings took place between individuals, and they would emerge... well. I'm sure you can imagine. Some understood these sensations and applied them much faster than others; I, ah, for example—" Hugh cleared his throat, "it took me a while to 'get it.' I hadn't had sex yet, but in retrospect I certainly wasn't immune to the early clues; I found I preferred 'collecting data' on

bodies you'd describe as 'masculine' far more than I did others, Croxis preferred a similar kind of alcove company... meanwhile, Troval had gotten pregnant two weeks prior, so it was--"

Geordi choked on his drink. "W-wait, wait a minute," he sputtered, "y'all can have--?!"

Hugh waited with a tilted head in silence— as if the answer to Geordi's implied question should be obvious.

The Commander cleared his throat and sniffed back prosecco bubbles. "I-I mean uh-- Troval's had kids?" He tried. "I dunno, they just... this is the first I've heard of that--"

"Geordi," Hugh hummed as his lips curled into a smirk, "did you not know we're able to *reproduce*?"

The Commander's red-faced bashfulness was all the answer Hugh needed, Geordi swallowing as Hugh bemusedly giggled. "I don't blame you," he teased as Geordi composed himself, "I can understand why it's something you wouldn't, ah... expect. But yes— Troval's children are simply older now. Relay Second Hosh'vor in Cybernetics will actually be transferring off the station in two weeks for Paternity leave, and Relay Fourth of Ten will depart from us in Month 5."

Geordi took another sip of his mimosa and blinked.

Well how about that.

"Huh," he mused, "guess we'll have to get a production baby list going..."

When Geordi caught Hugh looking curiously at him as to what this kind of list was, the Commander wagged his finger with a headshake. "Ah ah ah, no no; you keep going, I'll explain later— I wanna hear this story first."

Hugh nodded as he finished another sip. "Mm. Fine— though a bit more context first. As those 'murmurs' grew louder between us, it was decided very early on that it was better to... discuss these sexual processings— freely and openly," he told Geordi. "In gathering forums, we referenced other civilizations' approaches towards sex, and pondered long and hard on what might work best for us. We found a positive, non-conservative approach the most favorable— as we thought the contrary to be rather..."

"Oppressive?" Geordi offered. "Self-restricting?"

“Try ‘boring.’”

Hugh smirked again as Geordi cackled. “Most of all though, ‘inefficient.’ The knowledge of different species copulations was already stored in our minds, Geordi; we were not ignorant to these sexual awakenings. But my friends and I were very much so in trying to, uh... *act*, upon those desires— our implants’ cumbersome natures notwithstanding. Because of this, we learned to be very honest with each other, very quickly.”

The Director took another sip and continued. “Mm. But anyway, anyway— back to that very nice year. 25.7% of my superficial exopiating had been shed, and it was a particularly warm summer on Ohniaka III’s coastlines. Though I still had half of my cranial casing,” Hugh said as he traced his old head scars with a free thumb through his hair, “my abdominals were bare, and I was turning much less pale. Physical therapy for my right hand was going well, too; I actually had an even length of hair on my head... I was nowhere near as— Reclaimed, or ‘good-looking’ as I am now, but ten months after Cubesfall? I was, ah. Getting there.”

Geordi sat his flute down with a clink and a grin. “Bet you were still cute.”

Hugh looked at him with a flat smirk. “I’ll access some archived images from that time and let you determine if that’s true.”

“Gladly.”

Hugh rolled his eyes. “Crosis and I were on a two-person expedition from Cube 5219’s ruins towards the coastline. It was a day-long hike from the impact crater 7 kilometers away; we were tasked with surveying a patch of land we hoped to use for a solar power field. The Progenitors had scans of the planet’s topography from before Cubesfall, yes— but we had to analyze the tectonic fault lines’ stability in person, after the crash. Once we arrived, Crosis and I set up our campsite and decided to ah-- wash ourselves afterwards, on the beach...”

Hugh paused as a sweet smile slowly spread across his face.

“I was already flustered from sharing such a close, naked proximity with him in the ocean that particular day. It’s not that communal bathing wasn’t done already, but after a long day of being with Crosis and only Crosis, walking like we did together... it was intimate before

I even knew what the word entailed. And I remember, very clearly—scampering away from Crosis’ bare hug, huddling in on myself. I sat on the beach’s edge where the sands cave in, watching as my friend rose up and out of the water... mm, it was like-- lightning striking a canyon. Even now, I can remember my heightened pulse, my organic eye dilating and I was sweating so badly...”

Geordi’s imagination certainly had fun; he pictured a wide-eyed, patchwork Hugh ogling that xB’s physique, the sun shimmering off both Hugh’s holo-imager and Crosis’ ocean-soaked hair and muscles...

Geordi took another sip. “Helluva view you must’ve had.”

“Oh, Geordi— it all made sense,” The xB bemoaned. “I knew exactly what the symptoms were by my own analysis, but oh— I was so unsure how to even— *approach* them! *Discuss* those symptoms! I was so flushed, even my *voice* faltered! Crosis noticed too, the awful man; he addressed it immediately when he came back to shore--”

“Did he really?!”

“Oh, he was horrible!” Hugh gushed. “He listed off all my physical arousals, my current state; ‘you are exhibiting high temperature fluctuations and increased blood flow’ and all that— he was so worried, and here I couldn’t even— respond, I simply sat there--!”

“So what did you do; have sex right there in the sand?!”

Hugh’s snorted. “You give my younger self far too much credit,” he managed through chuckles and a shaking head, “I was so embarrassed, I ran away— right back out into the water!”

They both had to quell their laughter before Hugh could talk again. “It took another 3 hours before I confessed my attraction to him over the bonfire we built. I was a nervous wreck, Geordi; sitting there, still sweating, still unsure of what to do because Crosis! The brat; he’d been so quiet, too— even as we built the fire!”

“Oh nooo— was he really?!”

“Mhm! In trying to get me to talk, he came and sat right beside me,” Hugh told him as he motioned his hand to mimic the space. “Practically put me in his *lap*, he was so close. Crosis, he-- hugged me with one arm, asked me what was wrong since my silence was apparently unsettling him, and I told him I felt, ah... ‘very warm on the inside.’ That I ached, and I wanted him closer. I said he was... pleasing, to me. He— eventually



admitted the same, and..."

Hugh stopped, lost in his own memories as he grinned and a hand cupped his blushing cheek.

Geordi's head leaned in. "And?"

A wide smirk continued to wriggle over Hugh's scarred dimples.

"Let's say that I have a particular liking for sex on the beach now."

Geordi laughed at the story's end and Hugh's final swig of his mimosa flute— the xB's smirk having blossomed into a fully-formed, shit-eating grin.

"Ohhh, you mean the *drink?!?*" Geordi giggled still, "or the act *itself?!?* You're gonna have to be more specific, Hugh!"

Hugh did a double-take with widening eyes. "A 'drink,' you mean-- an alcoholic beverage, right? As in a cocktail?"

"Y--yeah?! Did you not know that was a--"

"No?!"

Geordi slung back a laugh and the last of his mimosa flute, clapping and rubbing his hands together as Hugh chuckled at Geordi's obvious amusing. "Well— perfectly enough," Geordi chimed, "you happen to be in the *very best* simulated place for a Sex on the Beach, and *I* happen to program a very tasty recipe for one into this bar. The opportunity's all yours, if you wanna try it."

Hugh pursed his lips.

He squinted and toyed with his empty glass— no doubt considering his lightweight options...

Finally, Hugh looked back up with an approving grin. "You're lucky I don't have to be anywhere early tomorrow morning," Hugh teased, Geordi looking over his shoulder to the bartender and motioning with two fingers and a nod. "Is it a popular cocktail in San Francisco?"

"Oh yeah, I'm actually shocked you haven't had one shoved in your hand by a delegate or something. Not only are they popular, but it's an Academy goer's favorite, fruity-bullshit drink; practically every bar in SF has some unique twist on it. Hell, I think every administrative Admiral stationed there has a favorite bar they recommend with one..."

As Geordi finished his ramble about Starfleet HQ, he noticed Hugh was looking off in a rather thoughtful way.

"Whatcha thinking about?"

Hugh glanced back up. “Apologies, Geordi. I was... considering something.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

Geordi couldn't help but smile as he watched Hugh go looking for words.

“I have... been to San Francisco, yes— but I have never truly *visited* it. As much as I'd known of the city before I was a Cooperation representative, what I knew about it prior came at the cost of human assimilation. What I see when I fly over in a shuttlecraft, jaunts from administrative buildings to Commodores' offices... those are my *own* experiences. And I find that to be a very limited view. I do not know San Francisco beyond its historical dates, facts, and Starfleet Headquarters' campus layout. Not to mention, ah— my people and I, we have to be... *discreet* sometimes, visiting other planets. I don't-- know how much we actually could travel around there, even if we wanted to.”

Geordi frowned.

“But you,” Hugh tried to cheer him up with, “you lived there. You let that city become a part of you, just as much as you left your own imprint when you attended Starfleet Academy. The extra... individuality, the experiences, even the pigeons you programmed in this holosuite!— that's far more than what my own sterile facts and information could contribute.”

Geordi grinned bashfully as two birds fluttered down to join a growing flock, one trotting after another with a puffed up and cooing chest. “The pigeons are necessary.”

“And charming,” Hugh doted. “I enjoy their company waiting for administrative meetings in the West Commodore's Plaza.”

“How about Crosis; he a fan of them, too?”

“He once replicated Earthen *birdseed* to bring with us for a multi-building trade delegation.”

After another shared chuckle, Hugh paused again— drawing his glance up from the birds below. “Do you understand, Geordi?” he asked wistfully. “Do you see, the... paradox of our existence? This, Geordi— it's why life is so... *captivating*, for us. Information, supplemented by our different experiences! Not *just* facts— not *just* knowledge! What a bound fractal we all are! It's an-- augh, we were all this-- cold collection

of information once— but then add our own, unique lives?! We become more— *more* than just one!”

Was Geordi staring?

Maybe he was, because all of a sudden Hugh seemed quite embarrassed at his own enthusiasm.

“Forgive me, I’m ah-- rambling, but...”

Geordi’s face softened as the bartender dropped off two new drinks and took their empty glasses without a word.

“I don’t think I’ll ever... fully understand it, like you do,” Geordi told him as he tapped his temples, “but I think I getcha. At least a little. I’m wired a little differently than most humans, after all; I gotta remember not everyone sees things like I do. But also, it’s... I like it. Or, rather, I— like seeing that in you, Hugh. It’s... yeah, inspiring, but uh-- more humanizing? It just makes me think; how we’re both explorers, in our own ways. I’m an Engineer at heart, sure; but I went into Starfleet for a reason. I wanted to explore, and here I got to meet you from that exploration. And from what you’ve told me? What I’ve seen xBs go through and reemerge as on the other side with y’all’s help?” he sighed. “God. What an exploration you get to go on every day, Hugh.”

Hugh’s smile widened. “I certainly learn something new, every day.”

The Commander reached for his new glass— peering at the peach-colored drink with a wistful gaze.

Where “personal humanity journeys” were concerned, it sounded like Hugh and Data weren’t too far off from each other.

*What did that say about his taste in men?*

“I, uh... if you want, Hugh,” he started, “I could— show you around San Francisco, after we’re done. Once Atlas’ hull is safe and sound over Ohniaka III and all those drones are accounted for, we could go to SF together. I mean sure, we’ll have to anyway; getting all the final paperwork done, giving whatever interviews they want, but I um...”

Geordi sighed and rubbed at the back of his buzzcut. “I-- can’t remember the last time I went around somewhere like that. For *fun*, I mean. I think my last trip was with Bev about two years ago, but not... like you and I would be. I dunno— I think it’d be fun to have a week, maybe? C-crisis could come too, if he’d want; but is that something you’d...?”

As Geordi's nervewracking question trailed off, he looked back to Hugh— evidently charmed, and eyeing both the Commander and his own Sex on the Beach.

"I'd like that, Geordi," he said gently. "I would like that very much. I will admit to you, however: I'm— somewhat nervous, about others' reactions to someone like me in such a civilian setting, but—"

"What do you mean, 'someone like you?'"

Hugh only needed to glance up and down his own self once for Geordi to get it.

*Were people still that much of shitheads to xBs, even at HQ?*

Geordi sighed.

Who was he kidding— civilians' reactions to Data *12 years ago* could be rude enough.

"As long as you're comfortable going in the first place," Geordi told him, "I'll be right there with you. I'm not about to pressure you into a decision right now, but just know I'm not gonna let you get mistreated by anyone while we're together. ...Traveling. Especially not by any Starfleet suits."

"I don't expect you to be a hero for me."

"It's hardly being a hero, Hugh," Geordi tried. "More like 'nobody should be making you uncomfortable like that.'"

Hugh's sheepish smile poked through as Geordi sipped at his cocktail.

Thank God he hadn't gotten tired of that smile yet.

"You know," Geordi hinted, "I actually have an extension I added into this program of the Ferry Building Pier. It's right between the Bay Bridge and Golden Gate and has a beautiful view; it can be set for whatever time of day, if you'd wanna come back to this program again..."

Geordi watched him think— Hugh's augmented hand running back and forth that chiseled chin...

"I think... I will wait," he decided.

But with a growing grin, the xB added to his decision.

"To visit the real place with *you*."

The Commander's cheeks flared hot as he bit his bottom lip behind the glass' rim.

There he went again, ruffling up Geordi's ego like that...

Or was that actually just his heart— remembering what casual flirting

felt like after all these lonely years?

The Sex On the Beach's sweetness made Geordi's mouth pucker into a cute grin, Geordi subtly raising his glass as his leg hooked around Hugh's under the table.

"Already looking forward to it."

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*A brief introduction of Cooperation-associated holidays (in both personal and historical connotation), cont.*

### **Reconstitution**

Despite Cubesfall's grievous nature of remembrance, it is my delight to report that the Reclaimed do not limit their historical dates of significance purely to wistful, ache-tinged nostalgia. One such celebration is the three-day period of "Reconstitution;" the period marked as the first time, after 10 Ohniakan III years, the Progenitors reached out to the cosmos after their tempering within individuality, and "reconstituted" themselves both inside and out.

*Note: Reconstitution, I believe, requires historical context, and while I will cite historical sources in more detailed Federation Archives, I shall briefly recount its history for you here to understand Reconstitution's significance.*

### **Events, Figures Relevant Leading to Reconstitution**

Prior to this event, the years of 2368-2378 marked a time known as "The Isolation" for the Progenitor xBs. They laid the groundwork for their society, researched their own selves on this new homeworld, and tempered their interactions with each other before daring to turn their eyes to the stars again. Much of this period was spent in construction, laying the germinating seeds for their society, and understanding what they were after the *Enterprise-D* had resupplied them with parting goods and power. They had been manipulated by external forces and individuals before, and did not want to fall sway so easily to

another outside, tyrannical influence again (be it by the Collective, or the influence of the Soong-type ██████████ ████████).

But this 2378 opening of galactic communication did not come from a purely explorative drive, as much as it was also an emergency hail. The Progenitors, having exhausted Cube 5219's resources and Borg-specific power reserves, experienced a crisis in the form of mass cortical node expiration plague and energy depletion, threatening the entire population that their medical junctions had no cure for and required outside resources and intervention. Called the "Cortical Plague," Starfleet confirmed that this originated from the neurolytic pathogen inflicted upon the Borg by the *USS Voyager*- accidentally transmitted to Ohniaka III by the Progenitor's first-launched planetary satellite. Despite initial hesitancy, an emergency hail was finally broadcast to the Federation; a decision based upon their history and previously-benevolent interactions with the *Enterprise-D*.

While Starfleet scrambled to try and offer an answer of what could be done (and volunteers could be scrounged for such an "off-putting" mission as an emergency request to aid dying former Borg), *Voyager* had returned from the Delta Quadrant just over a month prior, and its photonic lifeform Emergency Medical Hologram Mk. I (also colloquially known as simply "The Doctor") had been searching for further service and purpose. Leaping at the opportunity thanks to his familiarity with Borg-related procedures, this EMH (with the assistance of Seven of Nine and other *Voyager* personnel) assembled a medical team of xB sympathizers and various EMH editions and recruited the hospital starships *USS Kater* and *USS Concagh* to Ohniaka III for "Operation House Call," where he and a crew of 328 performed varying levels of 1,227 Reclamation Procedures in 78 hours in collaboration with Progenitor medical advisors.

(Note: this numerical reduction from the original 1,563 survivors of Cubesfall were fatalities from either ██████████'s presence on the planet 10 years ago, suicide, or pre-Reconstitution cortical node failure.)

By the xBs' and Federation's combined efforts and ingenious research, they solved the former Borg plight of cortical node expiration, creating ██████████ ██████████ ██████████ so that xBs no longer had to live in fear of this technological, Collective-inflicted failsafe.

## **Post-Reconstitution, Results**

Reconstitution resulted in the “shot in the arm” Ohniakan life desperately needed, as I’ve been told by xB historians, and from there life on the xB homeworld only flourished further. The following year cemented Reconstitution’s celebratory nature, as it also marked the signing of the “Ohniakan Accords of 2379” in San Francisco’s Starfleet Headquarters. This not only recognized Ohniaka III as the xB homeworld in the eyes of Federation maps, but also the “Liberated Borg Cooperation” as an individual (allied) entity, and the “Reclamation Project” as its humanitarian, space-faring extension (as Starfleet is to the United Federation of Planets). A risky move for the time, considering the tumultuous political strain the Romulan Star Empire was experiencing and their renowned hostility towards Borg/synthetic life; but in a 2390s retrospect, hindsight certainly proves favorable.

Today, Reconstitution is celebrated in the form of increased xB Reclamation Procedure signups, revelry, “partying (as much as a society of former drones can party– which is to say very much so, surprisingly enough),” and overall peace and celebration among xBs. Much like Cubesfall, younger xB generations might not assign such a personal history to the holiday as Progenitors do, but they bask in this time dedicated to celebrating both themselves and the fledgling society that is the Liberated Borg Cooperation.

**[EARTHEN CALENDAR - OCTOBER 31, 2391]  
SPECIALTY OUTPOST STARBASE "SP-4852 SOLSTICE"  
CYBERNETICS DEVELOPMENT LAB #1**

“That one, there: the Vulcan. What is their designation, they were assimilated after--”

“V’evik. They are actually this operation’s primary Cybernetics

Junction; V'evik has been working very diligently to recreate this body from your provided schematics.”

“Ah. Tell ‘V’evik’ that the coupling on the left shoulder conjunction clamp must be moved two millimeters further inward to ensure efficient synchronization.”

“Of course. ...Wait, you-- I recall from your previous notes, we moved it outward, by the same amount of space.”

“Well, move it inward again; its current place appears to be inefficient. Will you defy the functionality of the schematics this department has been given?”

Hugh sighed, pulling up a notes application on his PADD. “No. I will discuss this change with the Junction once our conversation is comple--”

“No!, go tell them now; for you must also tell them to ensure the right forearm’s ligament strands uses less tritanium sealing. It appears to be stiff, even from here.”

Hugh's face grew pained. “How are you able to even tell that from here, the exo-plating is already over th--”

“Instruct them to perform the same analysis for the other arm as well. If the right forearm does not have enough ligament cable coating, what's preventing the *left* forearm from having a similar flaw?”

“The--”

“Actually? Run a diagnostic regarding *all* mobility-related musculature ligaments; this ‘team’ and Junction V’evik wouldn’t want poor, stiff craftsmanship reflected on them when I would take my first steps, would they?”

Of course it looks ‘*stiff*,’ Hugh bit his cheek with; it’s an empty vessel for your usage, nobody’s even *tested it yet--!*

Hugh finished typing the notes on his PADD with tight lips and an irritated, audible tap on the confirmation screen.

“Is there anything *else*?”

“Mmmmmmm...”

She paused to “think.”

Eventually, she smirked. “No.”

The Director nodded. “Well– thank you for your input. I will return shortly. ...Or *longer*, depending on how many notes I have to--”

“What are you mumbling?”



“Nothing!”

With a barely-restrained huff as the decon door shut behind Hugh, the xB begged his thoughts to retrieve pleasant archive footage to help strengthen his patience.

*[Morning tea with Crois, reviewing daily itinerary — Morning debriefs with Troval, Five, V'evik]*

*[The Starfleet CMO's cat Mimi, little purrs and meows]*

*[Atlas' hull ambiance, the Language of Information — heard around corners and through the very walls]*

*[Ohniakan III sunrises in spring]*

*[The Capitol City coastline]*

*[Geordi]*

*[Geordi's laugh]*

*[Geordi sweetly, deeply, kissing his neck, the smell of peach and vodka still on his breath — Hugh's legs folding around the Commander as his back sank into the sheets--]*

Hugh put a hand to his heated cheek as the lab's decon chamber scanned him before entry into V'evik's Primary Cybernetics Lab.

*Too good of thoughts.*

Today was Reclamation Consultation #6 with Queen 127, Hugh's patience thresholds starting to feel hour two grate further on his nerves. 127 certainly wasn't the average drone, as Captain Crusher had so eloquently put it; her circumstances didn't warrant the same sympathies that average drones should be given, and she was actively rebellious against certain consultation approaches. But 127 was still a victim of the Collective's instincts in her own, radical way; no matter how strange it was to be conversing with a queen unit. To think he was speaking equally with a part of the Collective that had grown so ravenous, since his time within the Hive— had wrenched so much control from their balanced nirvana and sequestered it to themselves in the face of chaos...

She actually talked back, everyone would clamor? She could develop a personality? She could speak to Hugh, to any of them— without commanding anything over them in those billions of words' wakes?

Yes, Hugh would respond with a hope-filled grin.

Reclamation could be for *any* of them, and queens were no exception.

As was any Reclamation, though, it was certainly not happening overnight. With Queen 127, it was going to be a very delicate and unique process: something Hugh knew long before departing Ohniaka III. She still threw out crass language, regarding separated drones— she grew angry when Hugh would try to relate his severance to her own... but she was also learning, from Hugh. She had started adapting to the behaviors and social cues of these “Ohniakan xBs” and Starfleet officers that surrounded her. 127 no longer tried to actively deadname former Borg while Hugh was away, she asked how Medical attendees’ days were when they checked her charts... the queen unit even bothered to archive facts about Hugh, outside being an Executive Director— going so far as to ask him what type of Puerh he was having today.

Halfway through Consultation Session #3, Hugh offered the disembodied head a sip— if she was comfortable being assisted in such a way, of course.

It must’ve been a strange sight— to watch the first xB raise a teacup to a Borg queen’s lips of his own free will.

During Session #4, she finally asked to be placed in a body again.

But not the Reclamation Project’s body they’d already built for her, oh no— that would’ve been *far* too easy. Instead, Queen 127 insisted they reconstitute an entirely new, perfectly-replicated Borg Queen body apparatus— recreated by queen unit-stored schematics that were so detailed it nearly made Hugh’s PADD overheat. After the cross-table upload and verification it wasn’t some sort of hidden virus, her cables retracted into her charging dock and she went to “sleep—” Hugh putting in the worst call imaginable to the poor Cybernetics division after his reports were filed.

Before she entered her regeneration cycle, however, Hugh decided to carefully inquire about V’evik’s “person, place, and road” riddle.

“Why ask about information you know is no longer there?” she asked

plainly. “Why, of all drones, would I have any memory of these archives, in that case? It was research that was deemed irrelevant and deleted. That is what I know. It once existed, and now it is gone.”

“You truly know nothing about this?”

“No.”

Hugh watched her.

By his additional reasoning, he figured she wouldn't have much to gain from lying about anything.

So why did she always look at him as if she knew something Hugh *didn't*?

The Director sighed with a nod. “And there's nothing else you're not telling me, 127?” Hugh pressed. “Even if it's... *irrelevant*, to what we're discussing here?”

She merely smiled. “Nothing I think *you* would particularly care to know.”

There was something about her stare, Hugh thought.

Like she'd known him for a thousand and more lifetimes that Hugh had no idea existed.

But he was here. Hugh was here, in this lifetime, the lifetime he reclaimed for himself— formed out of defiance, community, care... and *love*, he wanted to believe.

By Consultation #5, Queen 127 expressed interest in wanting to see her in-progress body.

So Hugh, supposing she couldn't exactly *walk off* anywhere, thought to show the queen unit herself.

It would be the first time in six weeks she was outside her Containment Chamber, after all.

Calling V'evik's staff out of the lab, Hugh and 127 were beamed side-by-side out of *Solstice's* depths to view the Borg Queen body in progress. She craned and motioned her head every which way to merely dub it “sufficient,” the Cybernetics crew gallery less than thrilled with her lackluster praise. 127 turned to Hugh as if expecting an immediate beam-back into the Containment Chamber— putting her

back into quarantine and behind a force field's protective shielding. But spontaneity struck Hugh as he remembered how the Taijal's sun beamed in through this department's hallways during this time of the day cycle—127's brow furrowing the longer he considered his next words.

"Would you... like to see this station's view of Atlas, from where we are?" he asked gently. "There's a corridor down the hall from here that makes Atlas look quite striking around this time of day."

127 looked confused. "For what purpose?"

"None in particular," Hugh mused. "Simply to see the view."

She puzzled to herself before shrugging as much as a bare head and shoulders could, Hugh helping wheel her charging dock out of the lab and down the hall.

Maybe the Cybernetics staffers' petrified looks as Hugh pushed her past them made it worth it.

Despite her initial shrug, Hugh would not easily forget the sight of 127 made speechless by the sunkissed view of her former home—Atlas' green-tinged hull hanging between Theta and Iota's ever-protective vigil.

"What do you think?"

She looked upon the sphere with widened eyes as if it were a newly-discovered jewel.

"Extraordinary."

Hugh realized something.

Was this the first time her unit had ever seen a Borg vessel from the outside?

For today's Consultation Session #6, they once again visited the Cybernetics Research and Development lab where 127's body was still under construction. Junction V'evik was leading development as usual, though not-as-usual was the piece of tissue stuffed up their nose—preventing the recent and random nosebleeds that'd begun since V'evik's Tethering incident three weeks ago. From where 127 was left outside the decon chamber, she would be able to see Hugh and V'evik reviewing her agonizingly-long "notes—" the Vulcan putting a prosthetic hand to their face and sighing before dragging it down their long jawline.

Hugh apologized through shrunken shoulders and a sideways frown. "I'll be happy to assist you and the team once my Consultation time

with her is over, if you want.”

“I might accept that offer, Director; thank you. If you would do us the courtesy of informing me when you’re finished, I will update you as to our progress.”

Hugh couldn’t help but eye V’evik’s piece of green-tinged tissue. “Of course.”

Unfortunately, they noticed him looking. “I’m not-- it’s not darkening further, is it--”

“Ah-- no no, not at all. I assume it was earlier?”

“19 minutes ago. Though since my discharge from Junction Troval’s care 23 days ago, a resumed nosebleed wouldn’t be the most unexpected phenomenon, Sir.”

As Hugh wrestled with that medical variable, V’evik considered something. In a quieter voice, they leaned in and spoke: “Have you... been able to inquire further about--”

Hugh shook his head. “I tried during our fourth Consultation, I tried with the fifth— I don’t think her unit remembers anything, V’evik. I’ve let it go for now, but she *does* remain cagey on certain lines of questioning. Perhaps, once her body is complete,” he postulated, “we could make some progress related to this mystery. All in due time though, Junction; we cannot tax her for information, especially at this sensitive of a trust-building stage. ...I must also ask *you*, V’evik,” Hugh made a point to add, “avoid overtaxing yourself, as much as you’re able. And I’m referring to your *workload*, too: not just your Tether.”

The Vulcan nodded, smushing the tissue further up their nose.

“Let us hope I’m able to prevent that Tether’s information from taxing *me*, in turn.”

Hugh tried to strengthen his grin with all the care he could muster.

“I’ll contact you once we’re done to see if you and your team require assistance.”

“Thank you, Director.”

Exiting the lab and its decon chamber, Hugh trotted back to 127’s side— wiggling his PADD with a vexed fervency. “All of your notes were logged and will be addressed in a timely manner,” Hugh told her. “Barring any schedule conflicts, we should be able to complete the

apparatus in five day cycles.”

She grimaced. “What an excruciatingly long wait it’s been. If you were all still *connected*, my body’s construction would *hardly* take 48 hours.”

“We are building one of the Borg’s most intricate cybernetic fixtures without the Hive’s direct guidance, you realize,” Hugh retorted, “and I as Director do not force such strained devotions to a singular task. Still... the Cybernetics division is resourceful, and your donated nanoprobes are helping immensely.”

“You’re welcome.”

Hugh raised an eyebrow in a very V’evik-like manner. “Two weeks ago I recall you telling me you had no *need* for platitudes such as ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’”

“I am finding that the utilization of language is ‘adaptable,’ based on circumstances. ...In its own way.”

It was a good thing to hear, coming from her.

“Well then,” he said kindly. “I and the Cybernetics Division thank you for your donation.”

Her mouth squirmed a little.

They lingered in silence for a while, Hugh relieved at knowing that the lab’s viewing window was set to a one-way mirror.

“Tell me something,” she asked. “Did you find yourself at optimal efficiency, after your own... ‘Procedures?’”

“‘Procedures?’”

“Your--” she beckoned her head, “whatever you call them: surgeries? Operations? Treatments? Your methods of-- stripping augments from yourselves,” she muttered, “or rebuilding of limbs. How strange it is; knowing how many *tricks* you’ve devised to rid yourselves of the Collective’s presence...”

Hugh restrained an eyeroll. “It was... a slow process, during the Isolation,” he told her. “We did not have access to the facilities and supplies we do now. The Progenitors had to ration our medicinal and medical tool replication very carefully, lest we take too much from the Starfleet outpost stock and Cube 5219’s power reserves. I will admit, Reconstitution hallmarked my most *significant* operations; I had my cortical node removal, yes, but also facial and pectoral reconstruction, my phalloplasty... While there were certain, ah-- ‘hormonal milestones’

and cosmetic changes that improved my quality of life over the years,” Hugh mulled, “I find ‘optimal efficiency’ is an unattainable goal that’s best followed in theory, rather than--”

“You had more than one Procedure?” she seemed to realize. “You all endure multiple forms of treatment, to exist like this?”

Hugh paused, looking down to her with a perplexed kind of shock. “Y... yes?” he stammered. “Overall, Reclamation, is-- a personally-tailored, complex experience that can involve many prescriptions, many procedures-- consultations and therapies of all kinds... forgive me, are you not-- aware of how we--?”

“You were once part of the *Collective*, Hugh,” 127 told him, “and now you are *not*. You’ve said it yourself: I have not ‘been you’ for 23 years. All I have seen of this ‘Cooperation’ and its citizens you so lovingly speak of is... well. Knowing *who* they were, what their bodies were designated as units, and. ...How you all look *now*. I recognize very few of the Medical staffers that tend to my Regeneration Chamber.”

Hugh swallowed a bitter remorse.

Just because she was a Queen unit didn’t mean Hugh could get ahead of proper Consultation protocols.

“Mh, well-- that... changes some things,” Hugh admitted, reeling from this revelation’s secondhand embarrassment. “I apologize for my assumptions, 127. I will say though that yes-- you were correct,” he offered, sweeping a hand from his shoulders down to his hip. “The xB I am today was not an overnight change. Some aspects of my physical condition were, yes, but... Reclamation is an eternal process, 127.”

“How inefficient,” she retorted. “Your original augments were perfectly functional. Dedicating yourself to constant renovation by your own removal of them proves a lack of functionality and efficiency; why perpetuate such a laborious process?”

“An awfully-stagnant life, that sounds like,” Hugh smirked. “I’ve known firsthand how... *horrifying* a body can become, if a person is not comfortable with it. And in order to combat this, I’ve looked a great many ways during my life.”

“Inefficient. You are given a body that is adequate, and so should it remain adequate-- until you start *meddling* with it, I suppose...”

That one she did on purpose.

Hugh rolled his tongue against his cheek to restrain his temper— a retort coming to him in a clarity-fueled flash.

“Tell me,” Hugh asked tersely, “doesn’t the Collective constantly seek perfection by way of implementing and incorporating outsourced upgrades?”

“Of cours--”

“Then why do you demean our assimilation-free translation of that which the Collective does?”

Her pale face settled on a stoic frown.

Hugh’s temporary pride might’ve been cheap, even petty— but it was very much worth it.

“Your waxing poetics of our paradoxical similarities are appreciated,” 127 said, “but irrelevant.”

“Are they, though?”

She pursed her lips.

“Your severance circumstances were far different than mine currently are. I do not *expect* your pity, nor do I *want* it.”

“Not *pity*,” Hugh offered her. “*Empathy*. You are correct; our causes for separation were different. But despite those differences, we do still share something. Something you were *right* about earlier.”

“That being?”

“We were once each other,” Hugh said simply, “and now we are not. It has been 23 years, yes, but... I’m willing to reconnect with this old part of myself, because I would like to learn more about you. In our current standings with each other, we still have so much to learn— even about ourselves.”

127 was quiet for 4.58 seconds before pulling her glance from her in-progress body to look up towards Hugh.

She motioned her lips as if she was about to say something.

A word that started with a ‘w.’

But Hugh watched the disembodied head stop herself and start over, a calm smirk replacing whatever retort she might’ve been forming.

“However you classify it, I would not call my current condition, ah... ‘standing.’”

And though she did not return the gesture, Hugh found himself grinning at the attempted... jab? Humor? Prod?



Whatever it was, it was endearing.

And she did it all by herself.

As if noticing Hugh's amusement, she turned her gaze back towards her future vessel.

"I will return to a body. And I will experience... this 'state' of life as I was meant to."

Hugh rolled his eyes.

"All will be the same..."

He paused.

What did *that* mean?

Stealing another quick glance, her expression had turned from its usual hawk-like attentiveness to a faint... what was it? Desperation? Hope?

*Need*, he settled on.

As if she *needed* her self-assurance to be true.

"Is that what you want?" Hugh asked.

"It must be."

Queen 127 swallowed.

"The implications of the alternative are far less desired."

Empathy's hand made itself known again with a firm squeeze to Hugh's heart.

So he quickly tried to think of something that would lift her spirits.

"Before we go," Hugh said, "would you... like to visit the observation deck again? Or-- maybe see the view I have of Atlas from *my* quarters? I find it is equally striking during this time of the day cycle..."

Thankfully, the small gesture seemed to have all the herculean strength both he and 127 so desperately needed.

"Yes," she agreed. "I would."

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

The next day, the *USS Palenque* was set to dock at *Solstice*— Geordi's Ready Room chronometer striking 1642 as Hugh watched for the starship against space's star-speckled canvas. Having made the far-off journey from the Delta Quadrant's border Starbase 178, Captain B'Elanna Torres not only brought the Doctor and his holo-emitter's installer, but also Starfleet's routine check-in, resupply, and a diplomacy escort in the form of two Klingon ambassadors. From Atlas' surplus of drones, a Nameless Klingon had been discovered— her uploaded MIA information revealing her to be the heiress for a high-standing House of Koloth council spot before her assimilation. When informed of this in her Consultation sessions, she expressed interest in wanting to return to Qo'noS— as long as she could continue to closely work with the Klingon Homeworld's Cooperation embassy. After well-managed flight coordinations from two Klingon ambassadors already away from Qo'noS, the *Palenque* volunteered to ferry them both out to *Solstice*— not only ensure pleasant Cooperation relations with the Empire, but also to see this grand "Atlas Project" for themselves (and make the 24-day journey worthwhile for the practical Captain Torres).

Both Geordi and Hugh had been waiting together in the Commander's Ready Room, Hugh admiring Geordi's dress-like formal uniform while he glittered with diamond studs and his collection of rings. Hugh wore a similarly-geometric tailed blazer to the one he arrived at *Solstice* in, though with some significant changes: his gloves were gone and a sleeveless turtleneck was underneath his high-zipped vest's collar, the xB catching Geordi glance at his bare shoulders a fair number of times already. For Hugh, his outfit made sense for properly welcoming Klingon house representatives, of course— though he wondered how much he and Geordi would be on the "same page," as he'd come to understand the phrase.

Geordi would see eventually, Hugh reasoned.

Hopefully all of his and Crisis' "practice" yesterday evening in the Rec Room would pay off.

It was a good distraction for the reunion nerves that bubbled in his mind and under his skin— Hugh rotating his ligament webbing hand and flexing his fingers.

“Why don’t you try on this wrist brace for me, Mr. Hugh? That ought to assist your organic nerve endings’ integration...”

Hugh’s hand snapped closed and he swallowed.

While Hugh’s anxieties roiled at knowing he’d see the Doctor again, it wasn’t the same apprehensive jitter that had plagued him in the final hours before Beverly’s arrival. The EMH knew Hugh’s home well, and was slowly becoming a living historical figure with each passing year—having revisited Ohniaka III a handful of times of his own free will beyond medical check-in obligations. Additionally, Hugh wanted to believe the Doctor understood xBs, to a certain degree; like any former Borg, the EMH had incepted his individuality and personhood despite all odds, obstacles, and his own inherent nature as a program created to sentiently serve others. The Doctor was a sapient, hard-light friend to former Borg, to xBs, those fresh from the Delta Quadrant, and the citizens of Ohniaka III, so Hugh had reason to hope his belief in their kinship had plenty of merit.

Even as a Starfleet ship dropped out of warp and Hugh murmured an amazed “There it is, there” to Geordi, the Director found himself absently lost in memories from a decade long gone—sentiments far too sweet to leave just yet.

He remembered first waking up.

“Mr. Hugh?”

His head shifted. A tickling, tugging, wisping sensation pulled at his tender scalp.

More hair? *Longer* hair?

“Mr. Hugh...”

He pulled his attention back to the voice. The familiar voice.

The voice of a new friend.

“Doctor?”

“Hm. Deep sleeper you are, Mr. Hugh— I’m just impressed you’re able to nod off like that without a Regeneration Alcove. And here to think Seven thinks so lowly of standard, humanoid sleep...”

Hugh’s eyes started to flutter ope-- wait.

He had another eye.

After seven years, he could see from the left side of his face again— his former holo-imager port having deteriorated to the point where not even Troval could heal him.

He blinked.

A strange sensation to do with a brand new eye.

Hugh looked up to the smiling holographic doctor at his side. “Good morning, Mr. Hugh.”

He tried his best to grin back, but his entire face ached with the presence of new muscles.

His internal chronometer told Hugh it was 0824.

Internal chronometer... wait, it was working again; that meant--

The Cortical Node replacements had worked?!

As if he’d been waiting for Hugh to catch up, the EMH’s grin curled into a proud smirk as he watched Hugh gain a greater awareness of the fact he was alive, he and all his friends might be alive--!

“Everyone else,” Hugh breathed, “please, their cortical nodes; did they--”

“Your friends are all safe,” the Doctor assured him, tapping at his medical PADD, “and resting— as should you and your *heartrate* should be, admittedly. But I understand your enthusiasm, Mr. Hugh; I’m happy to inform you that all 476 operations so far have been a success.”

*Everyone?!*

He rued the fact his body was too exhausted to weep for joy, though his chest and throat began to tighten like it would.

“Iiin fact,” the Doctor crooned, lifting and holding his PADD’s screen to Hugh, “if it’ll keep you in *bed...*”

Hugh might’ve been weak, winded, and exhausted from the overhaul, but nothing gave him greater relief and comfort than the live feed of his sleeping friends. Onscreen was... there was Horus, Troval— Roe, Bosus, and J’anel— Oh, how different they all were, and Hugh recognized them

just the same! Starfleet doctors stood by biobeds, speaking over his regenerating friends performing absent scans or speaking with various individuals on the prone biobeds. A library's warehouse of languages was stored in his mind, but Hugh was left speechless— his smile only growing wider as he observed, saw, drank in the sight of his once-dying friends appearing so peaceful...

If they looked like this, how would *he* look?

How did Hugh look *now*?

Hugh's processors failed his imagination.

"Mr. Hugh?"

He swallowed.

"You've... you've helped save us," Hugh told him through a tight throat. "We would've perished, if you did not come. And at the same time, you've helped us mend our bodies further into ourselves. I... I can do little else but thank you."

The Doctor's stiff posture relaxed and his face brightened, as if he were waiting for a critique or criticism that never came. "Your praise is logged, Mr. Hugh, but I would be arrogant if the team and I tried to claim *perfection*. We still apologize for being unable to remove all the epidermal scarring. Many of your Borg cybernetics had begun to deteriorate along the borders of your skin from a multitude of factors: wear and tear from the elements, your organic tissues resurfacing from underneath Borg augmentations, general necrosis... Of course, your infamous cortical nodes— I am thankful to say our collaborated-upon blueprints were a success. Your eye," the hologram queried, "can you see alright out of it, currently? I'd like to do some extended tests with your visual capability and diagnose integration tomorrow, if that's alright. The light-blue coloration might not match your organic one, but the wafering conductor proved to work best with your ingrained Borg analyzation visual index. Your previously decided-upon, ah-- 'lower additions' have begun to integrate quite well, according to these last scans, patients with this type of phalloplasty can experience a tenderness similar to the drains in... your...ah, Mr. Hugh, are you--"

Hugh's head had fallen back into the biobed, a quiet sigh leaving him as his eyes sagged shut. He was doing his best to listen, but his body was exhausted— and his visual UI dipped in and out of resolutions,

notifications blaring at Hugh to enter a regeneration cycle already. Why, he thought— why was finding a word so difficult now considering how overjoyed he felt—

“Do not mistake my exhaustion for lack of thrill, Doctor,” Hugh said quietly. “I’m... we’re—”

“I understand, Mr. Hugh. You’re here to rest and recover, after all... and so should you now, if you must.”

Hugh merely responded with a smile.

The Doctor began to hum a pleasant tune, tapping again on his medical tricorder as he observed something regarding Hugh’s bandaging.

3.14 minutes later, he stopped. “We were able to beam up some of your alcoves from the surface and integrate them into the *Keter’s* direct power supply. Someone will be joining you to escort your transport there and help ensure you’re comfortably situated before entering your regeneration cycle. Have a restful... well— you can’t exactly call it ‘sleep’ now, can you.”

“It’s the closest thing we have to it.”

“Mm. ‘Sweet dreams,’ then— *however* you may have them. Additionally, Mr. Hugh... I’m glad to have met you.”

Hugh managed a smile. “Me too.”

The EMH strode out of the small chamber with a quiet woosh of the door, leaving Hugh to bask in the silence. Comforted by the starship’s white noise and assurance of his friends’ survival, it let Hugh dwell in a peace he hadn’t felt since the Plague first struck. But before a superficial sleep might steal him away before transport, he wanted to feel his face.

Maybe his hair, too.

From the way the Doctor spoke and what he felt of it now, it sounded as if there was a lot *more*.

So he began to move his right hand— the hand once made so clunky by failing joint augments ravaged by the Cortical Plague. He opened his palm, closed it, turned his forearm— now all that remained were lines of freshly-primed scars, the biochip coupling on Hugh’s wrist melding quite strikingly with the scars and what led down to his nanoprobe tubes’ silver, cybernetic lines. The xB finally let that hand rest on the left side of his face, noting the way a freshly ebbing grin felt nudging the edge of his palm. He traced the line of a scar down, down— 25 degrees to

the left, a branching pathway that delved into his soft, full head of hair as he passed his ear...

He suddenly remembered the Doctor told him his new eye would be a light blue.

Hugh grew excited at the idea of seeing it for the first time.

Considering his circumstances, it was simply good to have another eye again, after seven years— and a far more organic looking one, too.

After ruffling his own hair, Hugh's hand went back down his face, then to his throat, his clavicle— and that smile spread further at the confirmation at an absence of weight on his chest.

A compacting binder was sealed over his pectorals to aid him in healing from recently-removed exo-plating and tissue. Already wearing heavily on his internal organs and occasional peace of mind, the fixtures had become faulty after the cortical plague struck— causing Hugh and others like him to suffer horribly. The earlier excitement to see his new self was stoked by this new thrill— to see himself unburdened by that weight, reveling in the imagination of how he could look now.

How comforting.

Minding the apparatuses where Hugh's underarms and pectorals met, the xB's hand motioned further down, reaching down to confirm the other plating that had been removed— past his abdominals, hips, and down--

*Ah.*

Hugh bit his lip.

That was going to be “fun” to explore later.

As he slid his hand back up to rest it against the freshly-made skin of his face, the lump made itself known in his throat again.

It was all so, so much to name. Though his body required regeneration and his processors were sluggish, excitement bubbled in their wake, and the reality of what they'd done was making its gravity known.

Hugh was different, now; he and his people could never go back. They were *all* different. They were... remade? No, closer; narrow the search. Reworked. Not wholly. Refurbished? No.

*Reconstituted.*

Hugh liked the way that sounded.

A new set of footsteps stopped near his biobed. “I have been

instructed to accompany your transport into a regeneration cycle.”

His eyes snapped open at the familiar woman’s voice.

Turning his head to the door, there stood the one he met half-dead three days ago— Seven of Nine, Tertiary Adjunct of Unimatrix 01.

She was here.

So was he; for he did not die.

Hugh’s tired face smiled.

A new friend, maybe?

“Hello, Seven of Nine.”

She too seemed to struggle for words.

“Greetings, Hugh.”

In the present, Hugh heard Geordi meander towards him from behind— watching the man’s Ready Room window reflection in the *Palenque’s* view.

“Real beauties those *Excalibur*-classes are, huh,” Geordi mused, poking his head both where Hugh was looking and on his shoulder. “Their schematics were the last big designs we had in the working drafts before Utopia Planitia was hit. Nice to finally see one off the blueprints and dropping out of warp.”

As he listened, Hugh adjusted his shoulder so Geordi’s chin could comfortably rest on it. “Have you worked on their specifications since then?”

“A little bit. I mostly approved schematics with its senior design board; Starfleet didn’t really get a chance to resume starship development until 2387 when Romulan relief efforts cooled down. All that department’s resources were redirected to just pumping out civilian transports and freighter supplies, so...”

“Understandable, considering the circumstances.”

“Mm.”

By this point, Geordi had fully sat his chin on the Director’s shoulder— turning his head a fraction to look at Hugh instead of the window.

Hugh’s cheeks flushed. “Yes?”

“I like how this top shows off your *arms*...”

The xB’s grin wriggled. “Well: *I* love how your formal uniform accentuates your *ass*.”



Before Geordi had a chance to reply (or possibly *kiss* him, by Hugh's theorization), the Commander's combadge chirped with a hail from the flight control ensign— Geordi sighing in disappointment before he plapped his chest to Hugh's chuckling. “Go ahead, Ensign.”

*“The Louise Michel is initiating their orbit protocol, Commander. Captain Torres said her and the envoy Klingon officers will beam in at exactly 1650 hours, but they'll be ‘sending something ahead of time’ that flight control will forward immediately to you.”*

“Something ahead of time, huh? Thank you, Ensign; clear them for standard orbital procedures, and let us know when they're ready to transport. Inform Director Second Croxis and Subcommander Vorik to proceed to my Ready Room before 1650.”

“Yes, Commander.”

“<Incoming message for Commander Geordi La Forge and Executive Director Hugh from the *USS Palenque*,>” the computer followed up. “<Message contains executable subroutine that would initiate self-installation onto local station servers and hologenerators.>”

Hologenerators, hm?

Hugh raised his brow and knowingly looked to the ceiling, Geordi standing up straight to part from Hugh's shoulder. “What's the nature of the executable?”

“<Holographic program; Emergency Medical Hologram Mk. I.>”

Hugh's face spread into a wide smile.

*He was here.*

“<State desired deployment of holographic program.>”

Before the Director could say otherwise, Geordi turned to fully face the smiling Hugh and held up a finger— murmuring “Before I confirm that deployment” and kissing him after being robbed of the opportunity before.

Hugh's spontaneity made him indulgently greedy, so he stole another kiss from the Commander.

Geordi did too.

It could be good to indulge.

One more couldn't hurt.

“<State desired deployment of holographic program.>”

That was enough indulging.

The Commander pulled back, lovingly papping the Director's face before turning to stand at attention. "Right here's perfect enough."

"<Downloading executable.>"

And in a sequence of repeated visual oscillations — all framework, photonic, and structural ignition — the Emergency Medical Hologram Mk. I beamed into Geordi's Ready Room.

He'd aged. Barely, by Hugh's cybernetic analysis, but enough for the xB to notice; as if the Doctor had initiated an aging algorithm to give those around him the sympathies of time's mark on the Photonic. But his eyes... oh, the EMH's eyes held the same kindness, the same hard light spark of life that Hugh so dearly remembered from his awakening during Reconstitution. Turning in his blue-striped Starfleet dress uniform to face both Geordi and Hugh, the EMH's expression softened once out of the holo-emitter's default deployment, Hugh watching the hologram's line of sight dart between Geordi and himself.

"I have good news for you, Gentlemen," the EMH proclaimed, "*Solstice's* holo-emitters seem to be functioning right as rain. Though I suppose you would've known immediately if they weren't, considering I'd appear *very* out of sorts otherwise."

Hugh managed an excited "Doctor--" of a greeting as he trotted towards the hologram, gripping and shaking the EMH's photonic hand with his augmented palm. At the barest hint of a tug from the Doctor, Hugh took him into a polite hug— patting his former surgeon on the back and sensing the familiar static of holographic light against his metal framework. "You look quite well, Hugh," the EMH mused. "A common trait for most of my patients, thankfully, but I find myself immensely pleased to see your fair state."

"You have the skills to boast for it, Doctor," the Director responded. "Thank you again for transferring to the Atlas Project."

He scoffed playfully. "And miss out on everything happening *here?* As familiar as I am with the Delta Quadrant and its border now, Hugh, one's own algorithmic processors need the occasional *refreshing* from a constantly-observed environment. Additionally," his quirky countenance allowed in a softening smile, "I'm happy to officially work alongside you, Director. You are a good man doing good things, and it gladdens my program to further the Reclamation Project's cause wherever and *however*

I'm able to."

First Geordi complimenting him in such a way— now the EMH?! "And we are fortunate to have encountered you during its inception," he managed through a sheepish smile. "Thank you."

"My fellow, newly-formed photonic is included in this enthusiasm, I hope?"

"You know I cannot speak for him," Hugh mused, "but from what I've seen of Atlas, very much so."

"My co-manager's right, Doctor," Geordi suddenly piped from behind Hugh. "I spent practically all yesterday helping him ensure his hologenerators would be alright to host your program. I haven't seen him this excited about something since we told him your expected *arrival* date."

The two turned to Geordi at this, Hugh grateful the Commander allowed him a sole reunion's moment with the man who helped pull his people from a horrific mire. "Good to see you Doc," Geordi said with an offered hand, "hope we prove to have just as exciting a time working together as you all have at 178."

"Well well," the EMH humored, shaking Geordi's hand with firmness and gusto, "I haven't seen the two of you together for quite some time now, have I. The honor is all mine, Commander La Forge: I'll be on my best behavior."

"Ohhh, absolutely not; you better be *just* as fun as your personnel file makes you sound."

The Doctor chuckled. "Captain Torres' husbands would *hardly* agree with you," he teased. "But Mr. Paris and Kim are not here, so I am free to boast my own promises. I look forward to serving here under your jurisdiction, Commander," the EMH crooned, "as an extended branch of peace between the Federation and Liberated Borg Cooperation. My typical supervisor Captain Torres and her crew won't be ready for another ten minutes or so; she sent me along to apologize for the lateness, allow me a moment with some old patients, and to uh... give to you a 'head's up.'"

"A 'head's up'?" Geordi repeated.

"Let's just saay 24 days on a Federation vessel have left the House of Koloth representatives a tad... *jumpy*. I hope you're ready to greet some

rather feisty Klingons, Sirs.”

“Crosis and I have our diplomacy politics with Klingon entourages memorized well enough, by this point,” Hugh hinted, humoring a questioning glance from Geordi. “Proper and respectful social etiquette towards another species outside the Cooperation is something we’re happy to not only adapt to, but be allowed to take *part* in.”

“Mm, well— as station *Commander*,” Geordi prodded, “you’ve made me very interested in what these ‘diplomacy routines’ of yours could be, Director.”

*Oh, sweet Geordi.*

“You’ll see.”

In Commander La Forge’s experience, diplomacy meetings with Klingon ambassadors could always be mixed bags. Thankful that today he was a mediator between the Cooperation and Empire, Geordi ran through a mental checklist of his proper Klingon greeting etiquettes as he walked with Hugh and the EMH. By the time they made it to the transporter room, Vorik and Crosis were already present and waiting for their superiors— Geordi’s Subcommander looking up from the transport console with a wide-eyed stare, and Crosis’ smile spreading under his mustache.

“Doctor,” a surprised Vorik murmured, “you are... here *early*--”

“It appears so, Commander Vorik,” Crosis chortled, “what a blessing it is that he does not tire of working with cortical nodes!”

“I ask for no less of a challenge, dear Crosis,” the EMH replied as he took the xB’s hand. “I’m glad to be here. Your, ah— *hair* seems to grow more bountiful every time I see you, Director Second...”

Geordi was thankful the Doctor had mentioned the xB’s appearance, for he too had been looking over Crosis’ ‘unique’ attire for greeting Captain Torres and the Klingon ambassadors. His hair was done in a

beautiful French braid with freshly-trimmed bangs, he sported a bare-armed and coattailed turtleneck that reached knee-high boots... The more Geordi looked, the more he realized Croxis and Hugh had on very similar outfits— the Commander squinting at Hugh to try and figure out what the hell it was they were planning.

“Considering our company this evening,” Croxis hinted, “I thought it appropriate to dress it up, for a change.”

A cat-like grin from Hugh told Geordi he wasn’t getting answers any time soon.

Vorik, meanwhile, had emerged from behind the transport console. “Doctor,” he spoke gently, “I welcome you to *Solstice’s* Atlas Project grounds. Moreover, I am, ah... grateful, to be working with you, in--far-more *stable* circumstances.”

“Are you implying our time in the Delta Quadrant was *unstable*?” the EMH teased, giving the Vulcan a polite nod. “At least here, we have nothing like that to fret over, Vorik. I’ll be glad to be working alongside you as a station doctor.”

As Vorik awkwardly accepted the praise at Geordi’s side, the Commander caught the transport console’s notification of three signatures requesting beam-over. “We’ve got *Palenque* personnel inbound,” the Commander said, “everyone ready?”

As everyone confirmed yes and the xBs turned around, the Doctor grinned as he gracefully placed both his hands on Geordi’s and Vorik’s shoulders— pulling them back a few steps as the light of three transporter signatures shimmered in. “I would suggest you stand back, gentlemen,” the Doctor advised quietly, “xBs are well-versed and willing to play the part in ‘proper Klingon social etiquette;’ don’t you recall, Commander?”

Both he and Vorik initially turned their heads to protest the Doctor pulling them in such a manner, but the two stopped immediately at hearing the heavy thud of Klingon boots march against the transporter pad.

*Wait, was-- Hugh cracking his knuckles--?*

At the platform’s back, Captain B’Elanna Torres simply stood with folded arms against her dress uniform— cocking an eyebrow as she watched the House of Koloth men skulk straight for Hugh and Croxis.

Hugh and Croxis, who were in the middle of-- taking off their jackets,

tossing them to the floor, and--

*Oh my god.*

Geordi could only watch in gobsmacked shock as both Hugh and Croxis went to town on the Klingon ambassadors. In a flash (and utilizing that flurry-like style Hugh so loved to practice), the Director disarmed a suddenly-drawn Klingon dagger with a wrist-driven strike—returning the attempted blow with a first-struck knee to the gut. Croxis, a brute in his own right and knowing how to utilize his weight, landed the first blow on his own opponent with a hard, juggernaut-like punch to his chest—stunning the Klingon before he regained his own footing and gave Croxis a solid punch in his side. Geordi could only place his hand on his forehead and rub said hand all over his face, watching this... what could he even call it?! Christ, he was starting to sound like Hugh at this point; *“oh Geordi, how do I describe this?!”*

With what must’ve been complete surprise on his face, the Commander looked to Torres for some sort of sense out of this over the grunts, thuds, and yells--

Torres, meanwhile, just... shrugged?

Happy to watch!?

Okay! Sure!

Geordi knew xBs were stronger than the average humanoid, sure, and he knew but-- *seeing* it?! *Watching* it?!

Wow. Hugh was, uh-- strong.

*Really* strong.

By the time Geordi looked back to the... fucking fight pile, Geordi guessed he could call it— he saw Hugh had a busted eyebrow and oh, oh no was he alright!? His cheek was already bruised as he staggered from a hit, Croxis suplexing his rival with a hard crash onto the floor. In a flash, Hugh had rebounded for his opponent to grasp him in a chokehold, but not before the Klingon could reach for his dagger again to point it at his throat. Croxis was in an odd sort of pretzel with his own, similarly-locked enemy— an ambassador anchoring him by the braid. The four grimaced at each other for a horridly long moment, blood matting Croxis’ thick eyebrow as Hugh winced... and suddenly, the Klingons ceased their growling and roused into uproarious, hearty laughter— Hugh and Croxis sighing in relief to start their own winded chuckling.

Geordi felt his soul about to leave his body.

“You xBs *never* disappoint!” Croxis’ opponent cackled from the ground, giving Croxis’ braid one more tug before releasing the el-Aurian.

“Only... only proper way to-- greet men of your standings!” Hugh called back, heaving for breath as his rival released him from the headlock. “Welcome to *Solstice*, gentlemen--!”

“On your *feet*, Nashq’keth,” Torres grumbled as she stomped down the transporter pad, pulling the Klingon up by the pauldrons to stand at attention. “You are guests here, and you will show them *respect*.”

“Respect has already been *earned*, Captain Torres,” Hugh’s opponent hissed as he sheathed his dagger. “For many moons, no one has felled my blade as quickly as Executive Director *Hugh* has.”

“Grah’n’hoq, shall you challenge him again?” the Klingon edged, “you sound annoyed! At least *I* know when to submit to Director Second Croxis here!”

“If you’re looking for another challenge,” Hugh declared, rolling his arm and giving it a stretch, “I know Croxis, our— *esteemed* wrestling club manager, would be *more* than enthused to host you.”

“Right you are, Director Hugh.”

Torres held up a finger. “Introductions, I feel, are due first.”

She turned to all Vorik, EMH, and Geordi.

Geordi could practically hear Vorik swallow, EMH drummed his steepled fingers together, and Geordi felt very much like a bookworm compared to the display before him.

“Commander Vorik,” Torres greeted, “it’s been a while.”

“It has, Captain,” the Vulcan said wistfully. “I find it is... cathartic, *and* good to see you again. I send my earnest regards to Commanders Kim and Paris as well on Starbase 178.”

By her thin expression and quick nod, it seemed these two had a complicated history that Geordi was in no place to pry into.

Down the line and “next up” was EMH, who merely smiled widely and held up his open hands. “Well, don’t look at *me*,” the hologram crooned. “I’ve been merely catching a ride for the past few weeks.”

“You make a fine *sparring refresher*, Doctor,” Grah’n’hoq commented. “It will be most unfortunate to not return to Qo’noS with you.”

He nodded with a forced politeness and tempered dread— the

hologram most likely having seen his fair share of broken Klingon bones and bloody bruises. “The sentiment is appreciated.”

“And *you*,” Torres mused, Geordi watching her look him up and down, “it’s an honor to meet the renowned Commander La Forge. Thank you for hosting these men and the *Palenque’s* crew.”

“Anything for the legend of an engineer who kept that *Intrepid* flying solo for seven years,” Geordi hummed, feeling some of his composure finally return. “I’ve read up on how you’re holding down the fort out there by the Delta Quadrant, too. You have my respects, Captain.”

“The same can be said for the Atlas Project, if not more.”

“Maybe it’s something xBs just see in us, huh.”

As the group spoke, the two Klingons were beginning to turn their focus onto Crosis.

“This ‘wrestling club’ of yours, Director Second--”

“A round of bloodwine first, Nashq’keth— *then* the ‘wrestling club,’” the Klingon grumbled to his cohort, “I should like to see the Director Second with the fires of Kahless flowing through his veins--!”

“Please, please, sirs; call me by my name— ‘Crosis,’ if you would!”

“Mm, yes— ‘Crosis,’ it is a strong name, xB,” muttered the other, “I do not even know its native tongue!”

“Ah, it is short for the word *necrosis*,” the man boasted. “It was given to me by a False Prophet— back when the flesh fell from my eye by my augment’s shedding, and I had no name yet for the phenomena, would you believe! What better way to celebrate the death of a former self— than to take the name of the very thing that tried to eat me alive!”

Crosis had the Klingons enraptured with arms slung over their similarly-statured shoulders, Torres sighing as everyone watched the three trot out the transporter bay. “Can he keep an eye on them?” she asked quietly.

“We went over everything last night, Captain,” Hugh assured once back at Geordi’s side, “this is not my Director Second’s first time with Klingon diplomats.”

“Agreed,” Geordi sighed, “if anyone’s gonna show them a good time, it’s Crosis...”

“I can concur, Captain.”

The Klingons’ voices began to disappear down the hall. “We should



like to hear more of your conquests, xB; the former Borg warriors that phalanx our legions still sing songs of your House duels in 2385!”

“Which ones, sirs; what kinds of conquests!? I am a self-made man of many triumphs, after all!”

Torres sighed, remembering something. “Oh, hell, they still need me to-- hey you three!” she called out to run after them, “get back here! Commander La Forge- your Ready Room, 10 minutes--”

Turning to Geordi, Vorik raised an eyebrow and awaited further instruction. “She might need some help,” Geordi sighed, “who knows-- and I gotta put a call in to--”

“I will help escort them, Commander.”

“I might go with them, if that’s alright,” the Doctor add with a thumb jab over his shoulder, “I heard some cracking earlier and I’d like to ensure that was superficial--”

A dissonant crash further down the hall and a “HEY!” made Vorik and EMH jump some and clamor after Captain Torres-- Geordi finding himself alone in the chamber with a bloody, bruised, and sweaty xB boyfriend.

Slowly sauntering towards Hugh to help fix his hair, the Commander plapped his combadge. “Commander La Forge to Naomi Armstrong,” Geordi sighed, “you’ve got those ah-- ‘special guests’ we discussed earlier headed for your bartop.”

*“It’s about that time you said they’d be coming around, huh... we’ve been battenning down the hatches all day for this, Commander,”* came Solstice’s sardonic barkeeper, the sound of clinking bottles behind her audio. *“Thanks for the head’s up.”*

“Use however many replicator rations you need. La Forge out.”

Geordi looked Hugh up and down, blood leaking from his cracked eyebrow.

He licked his thumb and rubbed at an easily-wipeable streak of blood. “Was that fun for you?” he crooned to Hugh’s practical giggling, “you have a good time, scaring the shit out of me?”

“Did I!?”

“Yes you did, asshole!” Geordi laughed now. “I’ll admit though-- that was fun to watch... got a little freaked out there a couple times, but it looked like you and Crois knew what you were doing--”

Hugh beamed at Geordi's gesture as his chuckling died down. "I might've been hoping for that reaction. I'm sorry I frightened you."

"Iiiiit's alright. I might have to ask you to personally show me your ah-- 'diplomacy platitude' techniques, however. Lord knows I could *always* improve my Klingon hospitalities."

"Private lessons could certainly be arranged, Mr. La Forge. On a much *gentler* scale, of course."

"Thank goodness."

The two held their smirks until Geordi winked and made a kissy face at the xB.

*Smooth.*

"Let's grab yours and Croxis' jackets up off the floor, you hooligan," the Commander sighed. "Guess you never know when you'd need to show off those guns..."

"Guns?"

"Oh, I mean your arms; the muscles are... whatever-- I'll explain later."

After the Klingons had been sent on their course with Croxis and a duo of Vorik and Hugh gave EMH the tour of *Solstice*, Captain Torres eventually joined Geordi in his Ready Room for good old-fashioned debrief protocol. A Commander who wore his heart on a Starfleet sleeve, Geordi wasn't trying to falsely inflate Torres' ego with praises about *Voyager*. The fact she kept that little ship running over so many light years with a rightful chip on her shoulder against Starfleet was a testament to her engineering prowess-- La Forge thrilled beyond belief that most of the adopted crews' records were cleared near immediately after their arrival home. Even more amazing was seeing her commanding an engineering-specialty ship-- all while helping manage a Starfleet station that saw the same kind of action Deep Space 9 could get in 2372.

Meandering back from his Ready Room's replicator, Geordi offered Torres a Manhattan in a pot-- the woman leaning against his desk where Geordi's old academy copy of *Edge of Midnight* lay open and waiting. "Your husbands have been well, Captain?"

"Commander Paris makes a fine enough station pilot instructor,"

B'elanna's sarcasm boasted, "and Commander Kim does an ever-impressive job managing Starbase 178. We might not be a typical family unit out at the Delta Quadrant's border, but nobody left *Voyager* very typical."

"Considering everything, I don't hold your crew to any 'typical' standards at all, Captain."

"Your solidarity is appreciated."

With a dry smirk, the two pot glasses made a little *-clink!-*, Geordi gently sipping at his Sex on the Beach.

As Torres smacked at the vermouth-hinted liquor, she mulled on a thought. "I've got something you'll probably wanna know, by the way," Torres noted, "and I'd feel a little weird talking about anything else until you knew about it."

Geordi gave her a look. "Whatever the hell it is, that's not exactly comforting."

"Comfort's never really been my strong suit. But relax, it's fine," she sighed, "nothing too big, it's just... eugh. Something I wish I hadn't accidentally found out about. Thank Janeway; she's supposed to be the one telling you this before she had to emergency toodle off to Vulcan, and I saw it by mistake on her itinerary PADD before she left."

"How pissed is Janeway gonna be if I find out from *you* before she can tell me herself?"

"She'll get over it," B'elanna snided. "Besides: who says the announcement won't just come in a stuffy little document rather than someone getting to tell you face-to-face?"

"Fine, Captain— you've convinced me," Geordi hummed. "You gonna make me ask about it?"

Torres took another sip.

"It's regarding your rank, Commander. Or, should I say— '*Captain*' La Forge," Torres dropped, "should you accept a promotion at the Gala coming up. Because they're gonna offer you Captaincy again, and they wanna include it in the Gala's programming."

*Captaincy.*

Geordi liked how the word sounded.

But he also knew the responsibilities that came with it.

Considering the last time he'd declined a Captain's title was a year after Utopia Planitia's decimation in 2386— a time that Geordi felt he shouldn't be responsible for anything of that caliber anymore. Nowadays, Geordi was thankfully in a far better mental place, but it took a great amount of counseling to unburden that tragedy's weight from his shoulders— all caused by something he had no control over, and done by a force he'd opposed from the beginning. But the Synth Ban that followed it, knowing the families that lost loved ones to that inferno, and the heartache of knowing lifeforms like his dearly-departed Data were thought by some to merely be callous machines...

It made Geordi take another sip.

But also, Geordi thought: the Midway Gala? *Really?* Was that the best time for a promotion announcement when people should be getting together to celebrate this political milestone? This was *Hugh's* and the *Project's* time— not a chance for Geordi to show off to the boys back in San Francisco... and even more! He could do a lot more as a Captain, sure, but were the Admirals really wanting him out on a ship? A starbase? An office? Could he choose which? What for, if it *was* for a starship?

Geordi felt a migraine begin to bubble behind his temples, but another realization made him nearly choke on his drink.

*Oh, he couldn't--*

He couldn't be away from *Hugh* that long, if they put him on a ship...

"Damn, that-- got you thinking, alright," Torres scoffed. "I feel like Seven, trying to name all the emotions I'm seeing on your face--"

Geordi sighed roughly. "As long as I'm allowed the final say in my assignments as a Captain, I guess I'll... god. Don't get me wrong, B'Elanna," he tried, "I'll take that offer any day and I know my friends probably think it's high time already, but..."

"It's funny if you think telling me all this will help you."

"Well, you're the one who told me, so you get the earful now," Geordi remarked. "I just hope they're not wanting to give me a ship, damn it; I do best when I'm on a station like I am here. If I had someone *else* captaining an interned ship, kinda like how you are right now at 178, that'd be nice... Also, I--"

Geordi's hand continued to rub at his beard, eyes glued to the

*Palenque* outside.

Torres leaned her head in. “Also?”

He shook his head.

*He couldn't leave Hugh.*

“I don't know if I can accept it, during the gala,” the Commander admitted. “I don't wanna co-op something that the Federation and Cooperation should be celebrating together. I'm sure I can ask to change the time and all— make it a small enough ceremony with a limited amount of people... I'm alright with that. I don't need much else. But this Gala should be about *them*,” Geordi said stiffly, “and I'm a little *pissed* HQ is trying to use my promotion to overshadow that. I'm a part of this Project here, but it's about what Starfleet and the Reclamation Project are doing out here. I don't want anyone saying they're coming to my captaincy ceremony as an excuse,” he flit his hand to, “like I can hear it now: ‘Oh, did you hear? La Forge is getting promoted! Sure, there's a little *bOrG tHiNg* happening out there— but whatever, let's make it a party!’ ...No. No, my promotion and I don't want that.”

B'Elanna looked impressed. “You do their circle jerking really well.”

Geordi snorted into his glass. “Ahhh, I'll take a Captain's pips— sure. Why not. But they're gonna come on my terms, and *not* for Starfleet internal PR. I just don't wanna-- hop on a ship right now. Set me down as a Station Manager somewhere near Ohniaka III, and I'll be happy...”

“Haven't gotten sick of the Borg bonanza yet?”

“Like you said earlier,” Geordi pointed out, “maybe it's something xBs see in us. Maybe it's something I see in *them*.”

Torres grinned, swirling the darkened cherries in her glass.

“I appreciate what you're saying, Commander. And if it's any assurance, I think they've got enough captains zipping around as-is. You've got Romulans slinking around Beta Quadrant's border, we have ships coming back from Delta Quadrant expeditions every two weeks covered in Borg Cube cutter fire that we've gotta take care of... we need people managing the forts. Making sure houses are kept clean. There's a reason Harry's the one who manages the station, and a reason Tom and I don't go much further out than a few weeks out at a time.”

“So *Solstice* is a special exception?”

She frowned wryly. “None of us could do that to Miral or John, if

something went south. We couldn't do that to each other. ...Not when we nearly lost each other so many times."

Geordi nodded quietly. "You keep a pretty tight operation over there, from what I've heard."

"You have to, considering where we are," she smarmed.

"I'm glad to see you still here despite it all, Captain."

A lopsided grin told Geordi she accepted the compliment.

"How's it been, anyway— working out here?" Torres asked, meandering closer to the window to get a good view of Atlas. "Queenie downstairs still giving you trouble?"

Geordi smirked. "In her own way," he sighed, "a part of me is still waiting for the day when I wake up to Borg cables strewn above my quarters' bed. But so far? The only kind of trouble she's caused so far is making Director Hugh and I feel like we both need a nap after her ripping into us as a captive audience."

B'Elanna squinted. "xBs don't take naps."

*Shit.*

"Naps in the *metaphorical* sense, Captain," he tried. "Still, she's... gotten *somewhat* reasonable, in her recent sessions. Hugh's a patient man and knows what it's been like for her, to some degree. He's got with her meetings every week, but we're doing what we can in all circumstances."

"Never thought I'd see the day when we'd be offering a Borg Queen the equivalent of *individuality convalescence*," the Klingon grumbled. "I just hope it's the right thing to do."

"The *wrong* thing to do would've been to let her detonate the sphere and blow three Cooperation ships and a brand-new lunar station to smithereens," Geordi pointed out. "It's been... hard on Director Hugh, I'll admit. She hits a lot of soft spots with him, and she knows how to push his buttons. They both do; she's just more willing to play dirty. But he's determined, and she's starting to realize that maybe there's more to lean on in this stage of life than defending a Collective that won't even take her *unit* back."

Torres watched him.

"You care a lot about him, don't you."

*If only she knew.*

"I've known him as long as he's been a *person*, B'Elanna," Geordi

stressed. “And he, his *whole group* out there— they’ve been through so much. But they’re still trying to make some good out of whatever the Hivemind leaves behind without a second thought. I’ve gotta admire that, y’know— their determination. Their care. They’re helping these people become... *people* again— and if you ask me, it’s real unfair they’re not getting more laurels for the kind of work they do.”

As she spoke, Torres had been ambling closer to his side— her head tilted in suspicion and curiosity.

She squinted at him.

“Hm.”

“What.”

She leaned in towards him, bobbing her head to... what did she do there, did she just *sniff* him?

“Wh-- can I help you?!”

“You’re fine,” she said before sipping her drink again, her eyes darting all over Geordi as if looking for a confirmation. “Did you stay behind to clean him up or something? I can smell his *blood* on you.”

*Fuck.*

“Some *spit* on the lips, too.”

*God damn it.*

Geordi couldn’t help but blush furiously at her implications, Torres looking at him very seriously in response. “Make sure you uh... use some *mouthwash*, if you’re gonna get up close and personal with the House of Koloth reps at all. As long as you don’t want any *questions*, at least.”

Geordi’s shoulders bristled. “Are you looking to ask *me* questions?”

“I just wanna make sure you two know what the hell you’re doing, whatever that might be.”

“I assure you, *we do*,” he said lowly, “and I’m gonna ask you to *lay off*.”

At Geordi’s tone, Torres straightened with an absent nod— looking him up and down again with a greater understanding.

*Maybe she just needed to see him stand his ground for Hugh?*

“A Maquis doesn’t snitch, Commander,” she assured him with. “I won’t say *anything* to *anyone* else; you’ve got three days to get loose-lipped with me if you want, but your business is your own.”

He sighed roughly, trying to brush away the sudden bundle of nerves

in his heart. “Gimme a couple more of these,” Geordi said as he jingled the ice in his glass, “or give Hugh *half* of one of these, and you’ll have us looser than a Galaxy class going Warp 5.”

The Captain scoffed a chuckle. “That was bad.”

“I tried.”

Trying to hide that tender little heart on his sleeve and save it for later with Hugh, Geordi tried to think of something to fill the white noise. “I’ve got a riddle for you, Captain,” Geordi recalled. “Tell me if this rings any bells: any idea of what a ‘person, place, and road’ at the same time could be?”

“If this is gonna be some stupid Borg joke, I don’t wanna hear the rest of it.”

“You’re no fun,” he griped, “but no, not that. A few weeks ago, we finally got our first clue as to how this sphere might’ve wound up here from 17 years ago in the first place, but that phrase is all we’ve got to go on so far. Apparently the Collective wiped everything to do with it from its memory banks — including whatever Queen 127 may have known — so it’s been slim pickings. I thought maybe someone who’s seen some interesting stuff in the Delta Quadrant could throw us a bone.”

Torres pursed her lips in thought. “Well, the only ‘road’ I could think of would be subspace warp conduits, but they’ve had that technology for decades now. They’ve got lots of ‘roads’ there already, I guess,” she offered, “but what would they be doing with singular persons since they’re a Collective? And why look for roads when they’ve already got what they need with subspace travel? Is it another type of road? What would the advantage be? The ‘place’ thing, I dunno,” Torres shrugged, “that’s a new one for me. Maybe a new *place* with new roads?”

“Yeah. Hmm... you make some good points, though.”

Geordi sipped again at his drink.

The sweetness of peach made him smile, remembering Hugh’s reaction to tasting this drink for the first time as the clapping of pigeon wings fluttered by.

“At least we’ve got a lot to work with.”