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MEET AND GREET

10 LIGHT YEARS FROM NEAREST CIVILIZED BAJORAN/FEDERATION STAR SYSTEM

[EARTHEN CALENDAR – AUGUST 27, 2391]

**SPECIALTY OUTPOST STARBASE "SP-4852 SOLSTICE"
BARREN MOON TO L CLASS PLANET "TAIJAL"**

What does it mean to be 'perceived,' then— and what does it mean when this phenomenon occurs between an individual and a hivemind? Is perception by a single being's own eyes the antithesis of collective thought when viewed through one lens, or is it the paradox of being known by something greater than yourself when that collective perceives someone in return? How different is it than when one stares into an abyss— "something" that is, paradoxically, "absolutely nothing"— and return that nothingness with our perception, our very presence and acknowledgement of our existence by mere proximity? Do we give part of ourselves to the perception of nothingness, leaving an eternal or beheld presence upon the void's emptiness? What do we take from nothingness, and what does nothingness take from us? We must reach a crux point, then— in our extrapolation of this present train of thought. We must end this endured, perhaps-infinite repetition of self-realization as an exchange between void and individuality; to not lose ourselves to an abyss of collective thought once more. The

"Commander La Forge; Behr from Ops. "

Geordi tore his attention from the PADD's book. "Go ahead, Ensign."

“The Reclamation Project will be dropping out of warp in 3 minutes, 27 seconds. Their fleet complement is confirmed at the pre-declared 3 ships: 2 Tactical Cubes, and 1 ‘Command Juggernaut.’”

A grin tugged at his dimpled beared and mustache.

Finally.

“Thank you, Behr. Inform all incoming vessels they’re authorized to set up anchor orbits relative to the station, and have Commander Vorick meet me at Transporter Room 1 in five minutes with Commander Bartholomew and Lieutenants Ha’arshov, Tal’Wen, and Hagirian. We might have work bright and early tomorrow, but let’s keep the Ambassadorial intent tonight; the Reclamation Project’s traveled quite a ways for all this.”

“Understood, sir.”

As the badge ceased its chitter and his PADD bookmarked the current chapter, Commander Geordi La Forge rose from his desk to amble towards his Ready Room window. Protocol with *Starfleet* taught him he ought to be trotting off to the transporter bay already, and experience in *diplomacy* told him he should be there at least *three* minutes before the Cooperation arrived. But the *engineer* in Geordi beckoned him to come look again at the ruined Borg sphere hanging above the moon’s rounded horizon, and the *friend* in him said to wait and watch for Hugh’s ships to arrive. After all, Geordi reasoned— he hadn’t seen a Cooperation Command Juggernaut in person yet! A Commander of a Starfleet research station had to observe another faction’s flagship at least *once* from the ground before anything.

There. Perfect excuse.

Having poured over the sphere’s holographic renditions for two weeks straight, Geordi was almost *used* to the sight of it, by this point. While the hastily-completed station had disbursed scout drones around and *inside* the sphere thanks to its exterior hull damage, no living crew had entered the ship yet— the Cooperation’s first seniority-enforced rule instructing Starfleet to avoid entrance at all costs until the Reclamation Project arrived. As Hugh’s report indicated and Starfleet’s scans proved true, although the structure was by all means dormant, three factors inside would’ve made the sphere exponentially dangerous without xB supervision: the primary Queencell, the sphere’s Central Plexus Hub,

and finding *where*, exactly, said queen unit was. Based off preliminary scans from Staffleet and what the Reclamation Project theorized, she was most likely in protective stasis within the Queencell; severed from the Collective and the sphere's central plexus, choosing unit deterioration rather than face a life of singularity.

Commander La Forge allowed himself to admit that tomorrow's mission of venturing inside the sphere to "address" these issues was going to be a high-risk, if not *scary* mission. He could see himself gripping a Type 3 phaser with tendon-white knuckles, creeping through a Borg sphere in an EV suit to plug life support back in, extracting a queen's head to bring into *Solstice's* quarantine chamber... but Geordi was with a good team. Worry couldn't gnaw at the Commander *too* much, considering the factors that provided him a mental safety net. He trusted Hugh, the xB's selected company, the Reclamation Project, his own team he'd hand-picked (save for a few pre-selected officers at Starfleet's request)...

And there, suddenly, three starships dropped out of warp: two Cooperation Tactical Cubes, and a Command Juggernaut towering over them both.

While similar enough to their Borg Collective counterparts, Cooperation starships had a few giveaways that made them uniquely recognizable. Each vessel had a unique placement of the Reclamation Project's cube-like emblem, alongside the Cooperation seal and ship's serial number written in Borg script. Their shimmering black and greebled hulls were complimented by glows of brilliant white-gold and green light, and modifications to their exterior hulls showed evidence of quality-of-life improvements for the xB crew inside. While Geordi was enamored with seeing two Cooperation Tactical Cubes in person (thankfully far smaller than their titanic Borg relatives), the Command Juggernaut was by far the most striking vessel to observe—reminding Geordi of a strange, polygonal palace rather than a starship. Almost wobbly in proportions with its bridge extending outwards and an "arm" emerging from starboard, it looked as if the Juggernaut was designed with decentralization at its core theme, Geordi expecting something

much more... symmetrical? Rectangular? He wouldn't get very far by trying to match it to a shape, so Geordi decided to watch their warp drives dim and switch to impulse, a smile spreading across his face as an emotion surged into an overwhelming sense of humility...

Look at you now, Hugh. Look at what the Cooperation's been able to champion, helm, and *become* in just two mere decades: it was practically unfathomable, who would've ever expected that one drone-- *one drone* started all of this! And look at that drone now: once a hungry crash survivor quarantined in the *Enterprise's* cellar, here he was leading three ships across the quadrant for sentientarian aid. The Commander imagined Hugh standing over a bridge crew with that warm, kind smile of his; hands behind his back, overseeing arrival to an operation they would foster together...

Geordi's hand went to rub at his beard.

Whaddya think, Data?

As the ships disbursed to begin their orbital anchoring procedures, Geordi realized he should probably get going, smiling to no one in particular as he trotted out his Ready Room door.

One hall down and a corner turn later, Commander La Forge spied another formal Starfleet uniform heading into a turbolift-- the bowl cut of Geordi's Vulcan First Officer just as unmistakable as his Operations yellow and consistently-resting frown.

"Vorik," the Commander greeted, "fancy meeting you here."

"Indeed. Apologies, Commander," the Vulcan greeted with, "I had intended to be earlier so I may greet you there, but I found myself entrenched in preparatory readings before departing my quarters. 'Transporter deck,'" Vorik told the lift, and the turbolift cabin began its ferry there.

"No problem, Commander," Geordi assured, "if anything, I encourage it. May I ask what you were reading?"

"Of course. I was familiarizing myself with the most recently-published Federation xenanthropology observations regarding the new Sontubus II micro-community."

"Ahhh, the Reclamation Project's most recent venture!" Geordi remembered. "Anything in particular catch your eye?"

“For something in ‘particular to catch my eye,’ that would imply there were parts that I was *uninterested* in, or preferred more over the other. Quite the contrary,” Vorik elaborated, “if anything, I was struck by an odd sense of... ‘nostalgia,’ for each social observation I read about, if my service record with Starfleet provides context. Although, upon reflection, I believe the proper term is ‘*déjà vu*.’”

Geordi paused, eyeing his XO up and down. “They pulled a few folks from old *Voyager* for a reason, Commander. And it wasn’t an assignment you were required to take.”

Vorik nodded in polite agreement. “Indeed,” he spoke, “it was a position and recommendation I would expect nothing less of from my former Captain. To this day, Admiral Janeway remains resourceful, and knows how to utilize her available Starfleet amenities well. If Vulcans were a *betting* people, I would say that she was hoping this experience could provide *Voyager’s* crew with some sort of... ‘closure,’ if you will.”

The turbolift stopped and opened, allowing the Commanders to proceed down the hall where Geordi spied the other Lieutenants pouring into the transporter room ahead of them.

“Not *nervous*, are you?”

“I’ve had a particularly thorough history with former Borg drones, Commander,” Vorik told him plainly, the two entering as Geordi nodded to the presiding Lieutenants. “As a Vulcan, I am inclined to say that I am neither ‘thrilled’ nor ‘dreading’ the experience of working with the Liberated Borg Cooperation, until further personal interactions lend my anticipation otherwise.”

“Would you say, then,” Geordi mused as he took up space beside him to speak to the group, “that you’re willing to... ‘cooperate’ with them?”

Vorik gave him a flat look.

“Creative, sir.”

“I had to.”

Vorik turned to face the station’s head officers of their respective department, Geordi’s ice-colored eyes darting over his personnel as he rounded his shoulders.

“Everyone,” he began, “thank you for attending this meeting, and

welcoming the Cooperation's entourage to the Solstice station. Our mission for the next six months may be rooted in the pursuit of scientific discovery, but it will *also* be a mission of critical importance between Federation and Cooperation ties. This is a civilization that has erupted within our lifetimes out of a very suppressive species; as personnel working upon Starfleet's first joint-operation with the Reclamation Project, it is *imperative* we foster both pleasant relations and a welcoming atmosphere with these xBs. As you are well aware from your debriefings, while *we* will be working on the technical affairs, 300 Reclamation Project staffers will be assisting us with technological research, as well as medical procedures and rehabilitation of former Borg drones— helping them acclimate and reintegrate into all mental, emotional, and physical planes of individuality."

Geordi paused to think.

"These people you're about to meet... know that every xB has a personality they've fought to create, reclaim, and share with others after emerging from the Borg Collective. Treat this, as you would, a first contact mission: with grace, hospitality, a willingness to learn, and an open mind to a culture that, just as *we* are learning from *them*, *they* are learning from *us*. As such: any observed or recorded instances of bigotry, harassment, or judgment based upon their nature as former Borg go against the very ideals of the Federation, and will not be tolerated by my supervision. Your actions will warrant possible immediate termination and dismissal from this project, should said behavior not be corrected if addressed. Do I make myself clear?"

Everyone nodded: some with thinned lips, some with wider eyes, and some glancing back and forth between the Commander and the transporter pad behind him.

"Yes, Sir."

Geordi nodded. "Good."

"Commander La Forge," the transporter chief spoke, "we're receiving requests to beam over."

Geordi turned to face the transporter pad.

He grinned.

"Energize."

And into Transporter Room 01 shimmered the Reclamation

Project's Executive Director with four other xBs flanking him.

For an evening of diplomacy, it seemed as if Hugh and his company had gone for the more dramatic, stylistic voyeurism of current Cooperation fashion. The designs looked even more elegant in person; every xB's outfit focused on geometric patterns and black matte and glossy contrasts, save for the streaks of gold and white that criss-crossed their outfits and complimented the emblems on their chests. For Hugh, this was certainly a change than what Geordi had seen him in before; a high collar with a silver and gold zipper? Black gloves that covered his arms down to his fingertips? Knee high boots and jacket tails to match?! Perhaps it was the shimmer of the remnant transporter energy, or perhaps the bravado by which the company carried themselves that lended to their flair, but Geordi also noted that the remnants of their facial Borg implants seemed to shine a little brighter than usual. In any case, it was clear the Cooperation was already offering its own radiance to the *Solstice* station, and Geordi La Forge was all the more pleased to welcome such a resilient (and surprisingly fashionable) people.

"Volunteers to the Reclamation Project of the Liberated Borg Cooperation," Geordi announced, "welcome to Starbase SP-4852 *Solstice*. It is an honor, and *privilege*, to host you."

The group followed behind Hugh immediately as he approached: an uncommon action for most ambassadorial entourages to do. Usually, the chosen leader would emerge first to greet the host, leaving the rest of their company behind until summoned for escort; here, however, the Cooperation moved with their leader, their Director, as if Hugh were merely a community guide and shepherd. Even in group settings, xBs boasted their own autonomy, and that autonomy was something to be treasured at all costs.

"Commander Geordi La Forge," Hugh greeted back, "as the Reclamation Project's Executive Director, it is a similar honor to be hosted for such wonderful opportunities. The Cooperation's Reclamation Project thanks you, Starfleet, and the United Federation of Planets for your hospitality, and your willingness to... *cooperate*, with the Cooperation."

Geordi dearly wished he could've seen Vorik's face.

Mr. Hugh wore his pride well.

"We're just excited to see where that 'cooperation' leads, Director. This is Lieutenant Commander Vorik, my second in command onboard this station. Lieutenant Commander Bartholomew, Chief Medical Officer— Lieutenants Ha'arshov, Tal'Wen, and Hagirian: Cybernetics, Programming, and Engineering Research Department Leads, respectively," he elaborated by gesture. "You'll meet everyone else eventually as we post weekly schedules."

"I cannot speak for my fellow company," Hugh began, "but I, at least, am thrilled with what staffing we are already graced with here. Thank you, *all* of you— for attending our arrival, and we wish nothing but enlightening discoveries, constructive collaboration, and smooth progress on all fronts during our time working together."

Hugh then motioned to the furthest xB in the group from his right. "I will let my company speak for themselves."

Another nod to the value of individual autonomy, Geordi pondered: should he have let his officers introduce themselves?

An xB Geordi remembered from Hugh's brief visits at Starfleet HQ smiled pleasantly at the Commander. The mustachioed man was *huge*, Geordi thought; how could he forget his name!? What was it again, something Greek-sounding or--

"Reclamation Project Director Second, Crosis."

Close.

When Crosis unfolded his hands, the xB beside him bowed. They were formerly Vulcan, by the look of it; wearing a stylized coat that blended both Vulcan and Borg scripts, their jaw was lined with an augmentation that ran the length of the bone, saluting with a hand completely made of xB Reclamation tech.

"Cyberneticist Junction, V'evik."

"Engineering Junction, Five of Ten," spoke the Human beside V'evik. Black and half a head taller than Geordi, both of her eyes were lined underneath by scarring and implants, remnants of exo-plating dotting long-removed head augmentations and rivaled by a beautiful black and gold headwrap bundling her hair. "You may call me Five."

Next to her, an older Betazoid stood with an eye augmentation that

also served as a scanner, their dark hair trimmed shaggy and short to their head with a playful expression to rival their round features. They wore gloves similar to that of Hugh's, extending their empathetic sensory to the entire room. "Reclamation Medical Resource Junction, Troval."

Occasionally, Geordi glanced over his own personnel as the Cooperation introduced themselves.

Vorik seemed to be particularly interested in V'evik.

Predictable.

"A privilege to meet you all, and thank you for joining us this evening. *Solstice* has prepared you individual quarters, an entire research wing, and common area to utilize at your discretion that we will be touring. After the tour this evening," Geordi continued as a grin ebbed onto his face, "we've prepared a station-wide celebration to begin in 200 hours: in honor of both *Solstice's* completion, *and* your safe arrival— should you so wish to attend. Any Reclamation Project staffers still onboard their respective vessels are also welcome to attend. If you would like to retire to your private quarters on either *Solstice* or your vessels after the tour is complete, however, you're wholly free to do so."

The xBs seemed pleasantly surprised by this revelation: some exchanging glances, and others a few hushed whispers to those they were nearby. As if waiting to sense the mood between his group, Hugh merely listened, silent as his eyes scanned each Starfleet officer in the room with him as his Cooperation collaborated.

"As Director, I must thank you for your *already* generous hospitality, Commander. For now," Hugh alluded, "I will say for my complement that we are very intrigued to see what *Solstice* has to offer. We shall complete our pre-established tour first and foremost, before any further decisions are made regarding our individual attendance."

Ah, fair. Like Geordi had said: they'd journeyed a long ways from Ohniaka III, traveling by standard warp instead of utilizing their Juggernaut's transwarp conduit. Those salvaged engineering nightmares from the Borg had to be used sparingly, in the xBs' line of galactic reputation: lest the irreplaceable technology lifespan be whittled down quicker than it ought to be, or their conduit signatures attracted those who might want the engine for themselves.

It was then Hugh began to grin.

"But I, at least," the Director teased, "am planning to attend the ceremonies, Commander La Forge."

"Of course you are," Croxis murmured, surprising Geordi and earning an eyeroll from Hugh. "I would be surprised if you did *not*."

The Medical Junction named Troval was smirking, and the more Geordi peered at their group, the more he realized these three xBs in particular looked very similar in age.

Hugh had a knack for making friends, Geordi supposed.

Refluffing his pride, Hugh adjusted his gloves with a humored cadence. "Well: thank you for the vote of *confidence*, Director Second Croxis."

"Of course, Director Hugh."

Geordi nodded. "Follow me, everyone. Vorik?"

"Ready, Commander."

At the risk of sounding too much like Vorik, Geordi would have called the near hour-long tour of the *Solstice* station "fascinating," if not for the amusement that Hugh brought as both Reclamation Project Director and friend. Clever and polite banter littered their conversations as Geordi and his team described *Solstice's* technical outfittings, the Commander even making small talk with Croxis once he'd remembered more about him from their last meeting in San Francisco. The xB's regarded the station's layout, their provided common area, and the quarters allotted to them well enough. Even the Reclamation Project's... "Chief Medical Officer," Geordi guessed he could call them, was thrilled by how large the quarters were, and Five was impressed at how well the Starfleet architects followed Cooperation-given instructions to prepare for regeneration alcove installation.

The Junctions, by far, were some of the more memorable foreign delegates Geordi had encountered in his service with Starfleet. For Reclamation Project divisions, the title "Junction" was chosen intentionally, Hugh explained; it was less of a declaration of authority,

the title was meant to encourage circulation of thought and theory by all members of the aligned department. xBs relied on community, Croxis told Geordi, and this system worked its way up “balanced Relays” by which Junctions not only offered their skill, but expertise from their individual experiences.

Though there were 295 other xBs (alongside a Starfleet staff of 400) that would remain stationed on the sphere or Cooperation starships, Geordi was already captivated by these four at hand, excitement bubbling at the prospect of working with them and what they might discover together onboard the sphere. After confirming that yes, Troval *was* an old friend from Hugh and Croxis' original clade called "Progenitors," the Human Engineering Junction Five of Ten had originally been from Earth: taken by the Borg at Wolf 359, and salvaged by a Reclamation Project scout ship combing through old Borg confrontation sites at Starfleet's request. Geordi even noticed Vorik was made curious by the Cyberneticist V'evik's inquisitiveness, learning their original name very similar to Vorik's own. After assimilation and only knowing the unit designation "Seven" for so many years, the Vulcan decided to blend both their old name and deadname into something entirely new upon their Reclamation.

Once *Solstice's* tour was complete, the xB's dismissed themselves to prepare for a night of growing more acquainted with the station. As the company departed and Geordi's own crew were dismissed, Geordi grew excited when Hugh asked if he could “speak to him personally,” Geordi confirming with a wink and beckoning nod to follow him towards his Ready Room.

“Well: thank you for the tour of *Solstice*, Commander La Forge,” Hugh chimed as the doors shut behind them. “I feel Starfleet's provisions will be *superb* in aiding the Reclamation Project's presence here.”

“No problem at all, Director Hugh,” Geordi crooned back. “Happy to play the guide for such esteemed guests Starfleet and I are able to host.”

“Good; I'm very glad.”

“Right, right...”

“Yes yes, of course.”

The two stood in silence with pursed lips, avoiding eye contact with hands behind their backs... until snorts of laughter suddenly filled the room as their composure crumbled, Geordi breaking professionalism and turning to Hugh with (thankfully returned) open arms and a quick "Ooh, come here, you--"

The two laughed as they shared a good, strong hug: chuckling with loving pats to the back, and smiles as wide as could be.

"You look *amazing*, by the way," the Commander scoffed in jest, parting to hold Hugh by the shoulders, "look at you! The gloves, the jacket-- wear that on another starbase and you'll be the talk of its entire promenade, Mr. Hugh!"

The xB was positively beaming, Geordi's laughter swelling as the xB put a hand to his chin and smirked in a rather gratuitous pose. "Oh, I *long* for the day where I can enter a starbase and be talked about solely for my fashion choices... *you*, though, you're one to talk," Hugh exclaimed, "you look fantastic in the new uniforms! I don't believe I've ever seen you in Red!"

"Oh it's not just you, it's been a long time since I've worn a command uniform," Geordi sighed, "back when red was still for *Engineering* staff, I think. I'm still getting used to not seeing *yellow* when I look at myself in the mirror."

"Well: it is a good look on you, my friend," Hugh crooned, "and I am glad to see you as you are now. Time inevitably changes us all, and you are adapting to that change rather handsomely."

It took Geordi a moment to recover from a mental stumble of flattery.

As if Hugh *himself* realized what he'd said, he swallowed with a timid grin, looking around Geordi's Ready Room and eyeing the still-bare shelves behind his main work desk. "If I may ask; did you travel light for this mission?"

"No no, I just got here yesterday morning," Geordi sighed, looking around the admittedly-barren room. "Haven't had a chance to decorate. I made some replicator scans of my memorabilia back on Earth before I left--"

"And those chair cushions?"

Geordi chuckled a yes. "I might use the evening to send some other furniture patterns I have on file to the industrial replicator... We're all

gonna be here for six months— might as well make it comfortable.”

“I’m trying to decide how best to split my presence between my quarters aboard the Juggernaut and *Solstice’s* accommodations,” Hugh thought aloud. “Perhaps keep business affairs in the provided study here, recreation aboard our other vessel— but you *did* provide places for regeneration alcove installation...”

“Never hurts to have access to a quick nap on hand,” Geordi offered. “Hell, I *wish* I could have a bed in my Ready Room and just-- lock the door, turn the lights off— hang a little ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign outside...”

“Oh, as if having to put one on your face standing up in your own alcove is much better, lest people think they cannot hear you and yell far too loud when they enter your open office during one of those ‘naps’--”

“Has that happened before?!”

“Only twice,” Hugh assured, “They were both so apologetic and fearful I’d put something on their record, you’d think I were a Starfleet Academy teacher...”

“You didn’t, did you?”

“No,” Hugh assured, “I merely put a note in my reports that they were both ‘ensuring attentive studiousness amongst their peers.’”

Smug little shit.

“You have a lovely view of the sphere, may I add,” Hugh noted, looking out of Geordi’s window-walled Ready Room. “Very lovely. We all thought it was quite... *stirring*, when we first arrived; some of us had not seen an unreclaimed sphere in person for many, many years. Myself *included*, admittedly.”

“The xB Wing’s quarters have a pretty good view of it, too,” Geordi offered. “I may or may not have requested construction include a view that saw over the crater’s rim for you.”

“I appreciate the accommodations, Commander.”

“No problem.”

The men paused.

“Are you nervous for tomorrow?” Geordi finally asked.

Hugh’s lips thinned. “It is... not something I would label ‘nervous,’” Hugh started, “but perhaps rather... intimidation? Immensity? *Weight* combined with *importance*. We all know what to do; we’ve been over the plan to secure the Queencell control core and central plexus dozens of

times. I am not... *afraid* of this queen unit," Hugh told him, "but I am certainly aware of the *power* she has. ... 'Had,' rather; she no longer has power over these drones, much to her dismay. Power that was the Borgs' original sapience; a purely-*instinctual* sapience, mind you, that took neither joy, pleasure, nor sadness from others' assimilation. But now, it is a power that queen units have manipulated the rest of the Collective into: subjugation and subservience. A piece of us will always be held by the queens... and each one of us, in turn, bears a piece of the queen units. And that... that alone, that capability of what we were *left with* or what we *could* become-- that frightens me, Geordi."

Memories of Geordi's recent readings wafted back as he pondered on how to comfort Hugh.

"Forgive me, I-- rambled a bit there."

Do we give part of ourselves to the perception of nothingness, leaving an eternal or beheld presence upon the void's emptiness? What do we take from nothingness, and what does nothingness take from us?

"If it's fair to say, Hugh," Geordi tried, "I think that power strikes fear in *all* of us. Queens, the idea of becoming a drone against your will... it's not a fear someone easily forgets. Experiences, our existences against conflict-- it all adds up. Adds *wisdom*. But remembering why we're all here... that manages to negate that fear a little, right? Learning more about Borg technology, rehabilitating and reclaiming drones, offering them better lives rather than just wasting away in an old abandoned sphere... that's why we're here," Geordi repeated, "that's why we're gonna get it done. And you have my support in doing that with every resource I'm able to offer you."

Hugh nodded with a timid smile.

His eyes were just as doeful as they were 23 years ago.

"Are *you* nervous for tomorrow, Geordi?"

God yes.

"A little bit," Geordi admitted, "but I'm coping, knowing you'll be leading the operation. Call me in good hands."

Hugh's face morphed into a humbled flattery.

"Thank you, Geordi. That comforts me to hear."

Before Geordi could continue thinking about how big and pretty Hugh's eyes were, the xB's gaze swiveled towards Geordi's desk, eyeing the digital cover of a PADD's periodical. "I, ah--" Hugh cleared his throat, "see you've been doing some reading?"

Geordi stood up straighter and glanced to the PADD he'd left open on his desk. "Yeah, I-- wanted to brush up on some xB literature over the past couple of weeks. Great stuff, so far-- very... introspective?" He tried to explain. "Immense, really. This author, Twenty of--"

"Twenty of Sixty, may I guess?"

"Yeah! She's got a great talent for discussing about the value of balancing independent and communal thought."

"It's striking, if anything," Hugh agreed. "Her pieces are quickly becoming some of the most popular in periodical philosophy throughout Cooperation thinker enclaves. Aaand you didn't hear this from *me*, but from what *I've* heard, she's publishing a new collection of writings within the coming weeks."

"I'll be sure to subscribe, then."

Geordi felt words hanging on his tongue as he pondered whether or not they would be too much, feeling the former Borg watching him with curious intrigue.

It was true, then—just as much as it was gossiped about now— it was still just as true as it had been all those years ago when he first met Hugh.

xBs truly had the most intense, captivating stares.

"Geordi?"

Even the way Hugh says his name hadn't changed a day.

"It's amazing, you know," Geordi finally began as he shook his head and rubbed his beard, "I admire it, actually. How much you, the Cooperation, the Reclamation Project... how much work you've done since I first met you, Hugh. I mean-- 23 years after making you a power cell converter in the brig after your scout's accident, and you're out here organizing an entire *rehabilitation program* for other drones cut off from the Collective? I, that's... not many people get to say they witness the birth of a new culture, Hugh," Geordi gushed, "much less know the guy who helped *start* it. And hell, I'm-- sorry people are awful towards you all. Horrible, judgmental, close-minded at what you folks have been

through... and you just-- resis-- uh, *power* through them. You keep being you, despite it. And because of that, I get to talk to a friend I made 23 years ago who looks like a million bars of latinum."

Geordi turned his gaze back to Hugh, and the sense of déjà vu nearly overwhelmed the Commander. Contemplation shot through Hugh's darting eyes and his head tilted in thought, as if the xB was trying to process emotions according to his programming's capabilities. It welled an old ache in Geordi's heart, and he felt the weight of not only time's burden of absence, but also the sensation of realizing, of *remembering*, how much he loved watching that phenomenon in real time.

Just like Data used to.

Maybe he should've made scans of their weddings rings, after all.

Suddenly, with a reaction Geordi could only call "sheepish," Hugh's face shifted into something sweet.

"It's alright, you know."

A small smirk began to grow out of that formerly-sheepish face.

"You can say we 'resist.'"

And Geordi laughed, shaking his head at the other chuckling man.

"Don't-- I was being serious, you, come on--"

"Forgive me, I couldn't help myself--"

"Forgiveness denied," Geordi scoffed, rolling his eyes as he stepped towards the Ready Room replicator. "You want anything to drink in particular? Your choice."

"Ah-- a synthehol champagne, perhaps?" Hugh asked "I can only handle liquors that are so strong."

"No problem at all: better for *both* of us, come tomorrow morning."

Geordi requested two bubbling flutes from the replicator's interface, the Commander bringing both to join Hugh near the observation window. Hugh, with that same sheepish face, took the glass from Geordi's hand, admiring the sight of both the prosecco and his dear friend.

"It is called a 'toast' on Earth, correct?"

Geordi smirked. "You tried this last time I saw you; don't think I forgot already."

"I know," Hugh quipped back. "Just wanted to see if you remembered."

“Fine. A toast, then,” he humored before raising his glass to Hugh.
“To enlightenment, realization, and ...reclamation?”

Hugh smiled.

“I like that. A toast, indeed.”

Under the sphere's mighty shadow, Geordi and Hugh clinked their flutes together.

