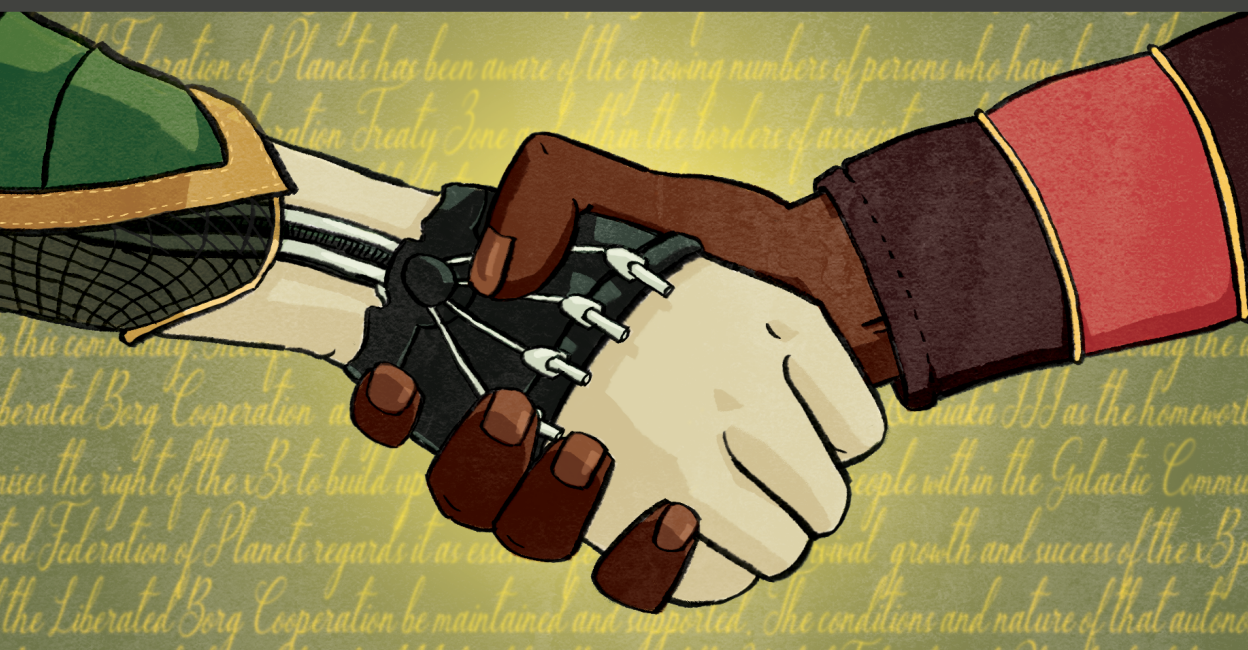


MERCY OF THE COLOSSUS

THE EARLY POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE
LIBERATED BORG COOPERATION, 2378-79



SELECTED EXCERPTS FROM *THE NEW BERLIN TIMES* BESTSELLER
POST-WAR: THE UFP AND THE KHITOMER ALLIANCE, 2374-2385

ORIGINAL *POST-WAR* TEXT
DR. SOLORA HASEGAWA

EXCERPTED MATERIAL ARRANGEMENT & CITATION
JOHN CONCAGH & HYE MARDIKIAN



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PART II
PAVING GOOD
INTENTIONS

**RECONSTITUTION
AND THE ROAD TO 2379**

Second Edition: Summer 2023

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BENJAMIN VASKOV

USS *ARCHIMEDES*, OHNIAKA III ORBIT

Stardate 55615.37 — 2378

HOLLAND COMMISSION REPORT

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL 7.32.
VOYAGER_INQUIRY-POSTHUGHINTERVIEW_N033

LT. JR. GRD. BENJAMIN “BENNY” VASKOV

ASSIGNED TO SECURITY PERSONNEL AS PART
OF “OPERATION HOUSE CALL” USS *KETER* CREW

I don't know what else I expected to see out here. There was a general, uh— “apprehension of going somewhere like this,” but I mean— you read a dossier saying “you're off to be part of the relief crew for a group of former Borg out near the Neutral Zone,” and you're gonna start imagining some weird shit. What were we gonna find, anyway? Borg zombies? Limbs moving around like they're old puppetry rigs? You see the one guy's face they're talking about plastered all over the FNN, sure, and you think “yeah, looks like he's in a rough spot – but I'm sure it's nothing they can't handle, right?” They're from the Borg: everyone knows how tough they are! You don't think they couldn't figure something out in the meantime?

[Vaskov blinks and shakes his head rapidly]

After we'd broken off with the *Concagh*, the *Keter* arrived in O3 orbit right when it'd be the xBs' early morningtime. Aside from the fact ol' *Keter* barely made the sprint out here, we couldn't get any transmissions or scanner signals through to the surface thanks to the EM interference, so Captain T'Roun ordered

a security team landing escort be assembled. I was getting into a specialty haz-mat EV suit when my five-person squadron was pinged, signaling us that CMO Brianna Vasquez, eight nurses, and three science puddies were heading our way. About 10 minutes before we were all set to depart, Captain T'Roun, Seven of Nine, and the Doctor came in and topped off the landing party.

Seven of Nine and this Doctor hologram... ever since those two boarded, they were hard to separate. That one xB kid they'd brought along with them was content to wander the ship that whole week of traveling, but not those two. Even now, as they walked into the cargo bay with a whole bunch of gear slung over their shoulders, it was clear they didn't wanna split up. The Doctor was hovering over Seven's shoulder and firing off a million hypotheses as she donned her EV suit, and Seven was just... bristling, I guess you could call it. Which hey, fine: this is kind of an awkward situation for everyone, and she doesn't have to talk to anyone if she doesn't want to. Whatever. But if I'm gonna be assigned to a *security* position for this crew, I'd at least wanna know who I'm backing up, right? Or— I dunno, what these Borg are gonna be like? *Might* be like? Ugh; I guess my point is that I was surprised she didn't really, uh... jump the gun or give us any heads up's or anything. Maybe I was expecting some sorta explanation from her of what to expect, since she was *also* Borg. Maybe any tips she might have? Any *warnings*? If things actually got *violent*, of course. From either the Romulans, or... y'know. Whatever. But no; she was dead silent the whole time.

[He looks down, as if perturbed by something he said.]

I was surprised Captain T'Roun came down with the landing party. I'd had a few assignments under her command before, working at that starbase; she's normally pretty pragmatic, and knows when a good XO can get something done in her stead. Besides: if the *Keter's* scuttlebutt was anything to go off of, apparently the Romulans and the *Concagh* were getting up to a pretty high stakes game of *Chicken*, out past the system's Oort cloud, so I figured T'Roun would want to stay on the bridge in case we needed to mix up any plans. But... no. She came down with us, left Commander Toolizgh with the conn, and suited up just like everyone else.

I think getting visuals of the shitty little satellite that sent the xBs' hail out in the first place shook the Captain more than she thought it would. Going off the images we got sent down-deck, the poor thing seemed like it was, at *one* time, a fine-enough piece of cobbled-together Borg tech launched into space. *Somehow*, they got it into space. I remember Chief Engineer Jay very much wanting to know how they were able to do that. But *now*? Pffft – looked as if something had eaten it from the inside out. I was mentally getting into “mission mode,” but I remember thinking something along the lines of, “if *this* was the transmitter of their message to the Federation, then how were the *people* faring down *there*?” Because it apparently transmitted the *disease* too, right? I don't know how that works for Borg. Well, anyway, you try and reason: it's out in space, right? It's just a satellite! Maybe the vacuum helped it degrade faster, and besides; not like it's top priority to try and tend to something out in space while you're wrangling a pandemic.

As everyone finished suiting up and filed into the runabout, Captain T'Roun started going over the final debrief with us. After the bridge's power redistribution resulted in us finally getting some scans, we saw that *massive* cube crater for the first time, and from there we plotted our entrance game plan based on what we might encounter down there. Since we were flying into this situation a *little* blind, our *original* plan was to pilot two medical EVAC runabout sdown to the surface one kilometer from the cube's outskirts: Captain T'Roun's team leading with the *Aralez*, and then call in the *Hresh* with backup. We wanted to give the xBs the opportunity to see us coming – or, uh... just in case there was any *trouble*, it wouldn't be too far for us to *retreat*.

T'Roun was covering the last few closing notes when the bridge calls us to say that, *somehow*, that little shit-rocked satellite was sending out a hailing frequency. Apparently, it was a *pitifully*-weak signal– but it was nonetheless making some noise, and if we could *connect* to that signal, it meant we could at least give them a warning to say that we were coming down. Comms said the channel's connection wasn't gonna last long, so T'Roun told them to patch it through to the runabout's display instead of her having to run back up to the bridge.

[Benny stops, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath.]

I think what got me the most was just how... can I swear in this? **[I nod]** Okay cool, gotcha– I think what got me the most was just how fucking *tired*

Hugh and Troval looked. Hugh clearly hadn't shaved in a while, his and Troval's hair was slick and oily, *both* their organic eyes were just *dark*... oh, man; once they realized the connection was established? The way those two looked at the screen was like... watching someone turn on a faucet who hadn't drunk water in days. There was a relief and elation there, yeah, but also a *shock*. Like, "Oh my God, you found us. You're here. This is *real*." I've seen that look before, back when I was first enlisted and sent to guard SMASH units near the Bajoran sector. It's... well. That's a level of desperation you don't see every day. **[he pauses]** That's *also* when I learned xBs' eyes reflect light like a cat's do. Yeah yeah, their camera; it— almost made their eyes seem like they were glowing. I, uh... I dunno. It was neat. ...sorry; it's a little hard to think about all this again.

◆ **It's alright.**

[Vaskov grins before his expression grows solemn again] Anyway, Hugh's jaw: it was shaking, and Troval looked just as stunned. T'Roun took the conversational lead so they wouldn't be standing there gaping at each other. "This is Starfleet's USS *Keter* responding to your emergency hail sent and received on stardate 55546.82," she said real matter-of-factly. "We are here to provide your requested emergency medical assistance and a vaccine, once we've acclimated it to this planet's macromolecules: as well as first-response relief supplies."

They were both dumbstruck. I mean— if I were them and I'd just heard all that after dealing with a fucking plague for almost a month, I might be a little stunned, too. With Hugh in particular... now, I'm no ship's counsellor, but it was like something...**[he balls his fists and tenses]** *snapped* in him. I just remember this— **[Vaskov makes a hand motion down from his eye to the bottom of his cheek]** *huge* tearstreak running down his face, without *any* sort of other change in his expression. It's like if Hugh was a sopping wet towel, and what T'Roun had just said wrung a million gallons of stress out of him.

Before the Captain could follow up with something else, Hugh held his hand out. "P-please, Captain T'Roun, we... thank you—" he goes. He's choked— I could tell he was keeping back *some* sort of breakdown. "We will... we will send you coordinates to the current block of our most critical patients, before this signal loses its strength. I, we... thank you. Th-thank— thank you, *thank you*—"

Troval also babbles out a "thank you" as they turn towards each other and share this... hell, I don't know— "primal relief?" Right before the signal cuts out,

they sorta start pawing for the other and giving these fully-racked sobs. Troval also kinda spasms as they do this though, and uh... suddenly you remember they're working through their *own* ailments. They're *also* sick.

Nobody said a fucking thing other than Jovovich and Ma'arshak talking with *Keter's* ops for takeoff and departure. I *do* remember meeting eyes with Seven, at one point, and I'll be damned if I could tell you what kind of emotions were going on in that head of hers.

I know he apparently wanted to come, but I was real glad she and the hologram left that bright-eyed kid of theirs behind on the *Keter*.

We all just kinda fiddled with our respective gear, during the descent. What the hell else was there to say, y'know? Plus, all of us were watching that cube's shadow get bigger and bigger the closer we got to touchdown. It looked like a pyramid that crashed into the earth, surrounded by a great pit with a winding path around it... and then there were the little farmland plots, coming off and away from the impact crater's rim. It actually reminded me of, uh... so my sister and I went hiking a lot when we were younger, right? She had this obsidian pyramid she'd always set with whatever flowers she'd picked on a trail. Seeing that crashlanded cube there, so stark against the early morning sun coming from the coastline, it... thought of that. Inspired me to give her a call again, later that week.

After Hugh and Troval's transmission cut out, T'Roun told the *Aralez* pilots to follow the xBs' coordinates and touch down only 50 meters away instead of a full 1,000 like before. We still wanted to give our first runabout landing plenty of space to boost signals and establish point-of-contact, but we didn't want to, uh... delay anything anymore. The closer we got to the surface, the more we could see about a dozen figures walking in a line out to where we were approaching. I could tell Seven of Nine was watching them very, very intently, which... sure, I can imagine why. I think she noticed me looking at her, and when she turned back I tried to play it off; asked her something like "Hey, you gonna be alright going out there while that pathogen's still airborne?" She kinda glared at me, but just said real plainly that the Doctor based the vaccine off her own nanoprobe samples combined with *Voyager's* initial viral blueprint. "I would not be 'going out there' had I not taken appropriate precautions." Which, uh... yeah! Alright! Fair! The Doctor kinda gave me a cocked eyebrow and awkward nod, and we left it at that. There were gonna be bigger fish to fry here soon.

When we had about 70 more meters left to the surface, we saw one of them fall over, and that entire line heading out to our landing area crumpled. The ones ahead of them stopped, some turned back, some knelt and hollered for others closer to the structures they'd built... it was, uh. That guy, Crisis; he's a big one too, not someone you'd think would just...

[He motions his hand in a downward flop and shakes his head.]

Captain T'Roun looked at us five and told us to holster our phaser rifles onto our back attachments.

I figured that was fair.

[clears throat] As soon as we touched down, everyone filed out, and my team of five started setting up the pattern buffer enhancers around the runabout's perimeter. Seven of Nine and the Doctor were at the end of the line— just in case something came up with Seven and they might have to hightail it back to the runabout. As I planted my second buffer enhancer standee in the dirt, I heard the xBs coming, so I turned to watch the two parties meeting...

[He takes a deep sigh.]

You've... met former Borg before, right? xBs, they're calling 'em now? Yeah, right; thought so, considering your line of work... anyway, I've— had friends that've had cybernetics work done before: unrelated to xB stuff. One had their arm replaced after getting it blown off by a Jem'Hadar claymore, the other has something on her temple that went behind her ear to help motor controls... this, uh— seeing the xBs reminded me a lot of that. Of *them*. I remember slapping stupid magnets on Lev'koski's arm at 0300 hours with my platoon while they were sleeping, I help Amanda buzz extra hair on the back of her neck where she can't reach...

[He pauses.]

These people... this is how they lived, too. And then here comes this plague, y'know? A stupid fucking piece of collateral from a pissed-off Admiral from the future: not thinking about consequences, and threatening to destroy everything we'd just flown over. Threatening a society that didn't even know what'd been happening out in the galaxy for the last 10 years, we'd find out. These were people just trying to live their lives. And so were my friends too.

xBs just happened to get their metal parts from somewhere else. Some of them still had exo-plating, some didn't; some of them had hair, some didn't... I mean we flew over these—prefab buildings—scrapped together with Borg cube support beams! A solar panel field! *Crops*, for fuck's sake! Trying to live their lives as best they could with the tools they were able to use. I realized these people might be different, sure. Some people back in Sector 001 might not understand them. Be *terrified* of them, as stupid as that sounds now.

But right now, they needed help. They needed compassion and support against that stupid collateral. Just like my friends need help sometimes, too.

[He takes in a hard sniff and runs his hand over his nose.]

They met in the middle. T'Roun waved Seven of Nine and the Doctor to the front of the line. Troval hadn't come with the xBs' group, but Hugh helmed it with another couple of guys flanking him. They *all* looked a little worse for wear; some had masks on, some had these patchy-ass looking scrubs, gloves, robes... As the *Aralez's* engines died down and I turned on my environmental mic, I could hear Hugh and a few other xBs were yelling between each other and T'Roun's advancing party. He's shouting like "you have to help him, please, he's collapsed!". T'Roun's was trying to get Hugh to calm down, and Vasquez and the Doctor immediately dash ahead to start tricorder scans on Croxis.

When Hugh turned back from watching these Starfleet officers run towards his friend, that's when I think he really *noticed* Seven under her EV suit helmet, if you know what I mean. He just kinda... **[he leans his head forward and imitates reaching out a hand towards me with a mimicked, haunted expression]** *this*, at her helmet, and goes "you... I *know* you, you've *known* us... wh-why are you *here*, you'll be-!"

Seven interrupts him and just goes: "Starfleet has a vaccine, and my resilience is proof it works. My systems report themselves as adapting, and are able to immunize myself from the pathogen."

Even from where I was, I could see Hugh was overwhelmed. I think he was still coming to terms with the fact that this was all *real*. The two helping hold him up gripped his shoulder and balled their fists in relief.

"Mr. Hugh," T'Roun said as evenly as possible, "we are still replicating the antigen en masse, but we'll require multiple sample types from this planet and its population in order for it to synthesise properly with an atmospheric

disbursal.” Then her voice gets real gentle; probably the most kind I’ve ever heard a Vulcan manage. “First and foremost,” she said... well, no— almost asks him: “what supplies do you need.”

They’re all at a loss for words before Seven piped up. “They are here to help. We *all* are.”

You’d think they’d seen an angel with all the flames of heaven and hell behind it, the way those three xBs looked at them.

“D-dermal regenerators,” Hugh finally managed. “W—we’ll— offer as many — *whatever* samples you need, for vaccine and antidote acclimation. But t—the dermal tissue, then muscular... i-t’s— what the plague eats at most, before progressing to neurological functions; b-bring as many... as you can, and—!”

That’s when he loses it. They all do. I heard a rise of commotion and I see more and more folks out where the settlement is start to gather and peek towards us. Even CMO Vasquez looked up a little wide-eyed as she’s running tricorder scans over Croxis, and some xBs run their asses off back to the main plaza as more and more lights flick on. Hugh, meanwhile; he’s crying, relieved, he’s shaking the EMH and *T’Roun’s* hands...

My audio futzed out for a bit from the pattern buffer enhancers coming online, and I saw *T’Roun* and a few nurses up finally head towards Croxis. But Hugh and the two xBs with him, though — they lingered a little while to talk with Seven. When my environmental mic popped back on, I caught Hugh saying he was “very glad to meet her.” From the look of it, I don’t think she expected to be *told* something like that, but... hey. What do I know.

[Vaskov pauses, a reflective smile skirting over his face.]

◇ And what happened after that?

[He looks at me with a full smile, shakes his head, and shrugs his shoulders.]

Well, whaddya think? We got to work.

PAVING GOOD INTENTIONS



**RECONSTITUTION
AND THE ROAD TO 2379**



TASK FORCE *KETER*'S FLIGHT

Task Force *Keter* — as much as it *could* be called a task force — made good speed for Ohinaka III. With good *reason*, too: Starfleet Command was well aware of what the Romulan reaction to this mission would be, and that, given the paranoid state of Romulan decision-making at that time, any move in the Neutral Zone's vague direction would be interpreted as a threat. It was, thusly, no real surprise to Jellico *or* the commander of Neutral Zone Tactical Forces Admiral Itoh, that the Romulans reacted very badly.

Within two days of TFK's departure, Starfleet Intelligence confirmed warp reactor blooms and mass signature movements along the entire Neutral Zone. The Rapid Reaction Forces and other tactical elements were quick to react, bringing themselves right up to the edge of the Neutral Zone to shadow the Romulan Star Navy as close as they could. "It's a proper standing and shouting war," Jellico complained to Somak. "They're furious but can't tell us why, and we can't get them to understand why we really don't *care* what they do — so long as they leave us alone."

Despite the best efforts of the RRF and Admiral Itoh, it was inevitable that *Keter* and *Concagh* would pick up a tail; as they closed in on the Ohinaka system, the *Akira*-class *Concagh* would confirm the two signatures on their aft quarter were, in fact, Romulan *D'Deridex* Star Cruisers – holding a steady but malevolent position just outside of weapons range. Captain Iain Bertram McKingsley – known as “IBM” throughout the fleet – was not about to let them follow him nor the *Keter* into the system, no matter what the Romulan’s intentions were. Intelligence debriefs from the Romulus Office – and dispatches from the diplomatic corps – heavily implied that the Romulans viewed the xBs as a “parasitic threat to their empire,” and as such, would consider Ohinaka III a “further infection from the *Llaetus’le*¹ to be stamped out.” “If the Romulans get to them first, they’ll make the Norkan Massacres look like a game of Kadis-Khot,” McKingsley would tell his staff in a briefing. “We’re not about to let that happen, are we?”

As far as Starfleet knew, the Romulans thankfully did not actually know *where*, exactly, Ohinaka III was. Romulan sensor equipment, as good as theirs was at detecting *military* equipment, was sub-par when it came to long-range detection of lifesigns and other organic presences. McKingsley was willing to gamble on this lack of knowledge: at least, that the Romulans would probably follow *Concagh* over the slow, aging *Keter* — especially if the *Concagh* suddenly jumped up three warp factors to try and “escape” her tail. McKingsley had been a Saber Squadron commander during the Dominion War – leading a trio of the fast escort vessels during the Badlands campaign and Operation Intercede. He was very used to being outnumbered and outgunned: in fact, he enjoyed it.

As the two ships approached the Oort Cloud, McKingsley put the plan into action – turning sharply to starboard before taking the *Concagh* to Warp 9.5 in an instant. The Romulans turned to give chase immediately, ignoring the *Keter* in order to keep up with the Starfleet cruiser that just made a high warp break towards the Romulan border. Signals decrypts from the Romulan Star Navy vessels suggest that they believed McKingsley was about to make an attack run on a series of spy satellites in the Wliu System. This was a

1 Colloquial Romulan name in reference to the Borg – the term sometimes used as derogative reference towards the Borg *and* xBs. In Standard Empirical Romulan, “*Llaetus’le*” literally translates to “disease.”

bold assertion, considering that Starfleet was unaware the Romulans had surveillance equipment in the region.

Captain McKingsley would let the Romulan warbirds follow him for eight hours – allowing them to close to within weapons range before springing the second part of the plan. The *Concagh* would cut power suddenly, letting the Romulans overshoot. *Concagh* then shut *all* her power down, taking advantage of the advanced ECM Kit aboard to mask their electronic signature. With the vessel on Silent Running, they watched as the Warbirds scoured the area for them, waiting for one to break off for Ohinaka III. Neither did. It is unclear as to whether they had orders to find and destroy the *Concagh*, or simply feared the consequences if the Starfleet ship made it to Wliu. The latter, unfortunately, would fit the culture of paranoia that characterized the latter Romulan state.

The *Concagh* would make several attempts to slip away from the warbirds, but their tight search pattern and intermittent recloaking would keep her pinned in the space between Wliu and Ohniaka well past McKingsley and T'Roun's estimated rendezvous. In the meantime, the *Keter* pressed on. Stripped of an armed escort, Captain T'Roun would push her ship to the limit. The *Hiawatha*-class ship's retrofitting had kept her going throughout the Dominion War, but she'd never been expected to maintain a cruising speed of higher than Warp Four. Now, T'Roun pushed her as high as Warp Factor *Seven* – trying to put as much open space as she could behind them before Ohinaka system's electromagnetic interference could protect them. When the *Keter's* recently-assigned Chief Engineer Marcus would try and warn that the ship "wasn't made for this" as they evacuated staff due to spiking radiation, Captain T'Roun factually replied that "the *Keter* was made for usage during the Dominion War. The Dominion War has been over for three years."

The Romulans only noticed the *Keter's* speed jump twenty hours after McKingsley had made his border break. Scrambling to intercept, the Star Navy had barely jumped to warp before the *Keter* disappeared off their scopes. Watching with satisfaction from the *Concagh's* bridge, McKingsley remarked: "I'm not sure they're very good at this, are they." *Concagh* would break contact with the warbirds 40 minutes later, holding a low warp speed as they arced around to join *Keter* in the Ohinaka system.

The *Keter* – overworked with wailing engines and deck plates rattling like broken windchimes – arrived in the system on the 29th of July. A quick scan of the planet confirmed the worst fears of many of her biologists: the entire ecosystem of the planet had been contaminated by Borg technology. Nanoprobes had entered the water cycle and plant life, mutated animals, and even changed the composition of the atmosphere. These initial scans hypothesized that landfall without any protective equipment might result in accidental assimilation, or at the bare minimum, severe illness to most humanoids. As such, T'Roun ordered the initial landing groups to gear up in full hazmat gear – with phaser Type 2s on standby. On the insistence of The Doctor and Commander La Forge², Seven of Nine was allowed to join the initial teams. The closest thing to an expert available, Seven – with her status as a “specialist” still in jeopardy thanks to the ongoing Voyager Inquiry – would be vital in the next 48 hours.

With transporters still inhibited by the system's electromagnetic currents, two medical runabouts would deliver the away teams to the surface: the *Aralez* and *Hresh*. Contact – made with Hugh just before the runabouts' departures through a deteriorating orbital satellite – confirmed both the location of the primary xB settlement and their immediate needs. Lieutenant Jr. Grade Benjamin “Benny” Vaskov had seen close combat in the Dominion War: first as part of the 10th Fleet's long support tail, and then at the coal face during the Cornus Sieges and the Invasion of Chin'toka. Like most of the *Keter's* crew, he'd been grabbed from a secondary assignment on Earth or Mars to fill up the berths before the mission began.

“After Hugh and Troval's transmission, T'Roun told the *Aralez* [runabout] pilots to follow their coordinates and touch down only 50 meters away instead of a full 1,000 like before. We still wanted to give our first runabout landing plenty of space to boost signals and establish point-of-contact, but we didn't want to, uh... delay anything anymore. The closer we got to the surface, the more we could see about a dozen figures walking in a line out to where we were approaching. [...]

² Commander La Forge — in company of Commander Data with their temporary transference from the *Enterprise-E* — would not arrive to Ohniaka III until August 10th, though remained in contact with the *Keter* and *Concagh* before having to cut communications to avoid possible eavesdropping from the Star Navy.

When we had about 70 more meters left to the surface, we saw one of them fall over, and that entire line heading out to our landing area crumpled. The ones ahead of them stopped, some turned back, some knelt and hollered for others closer to the structures they'd built... it was, uh. That guy, Crosis; he's a big one too, not someone you'd think would just...

Captain T'Roun looked at us five and told us to holster our phaser rifles onto our back attachments.

I figured that was fair. "

RECONSTITUTION

Crosis — one of the key leaders of this settlement — would be one of the first patients treated by T'Roun's team after they left the runabouts. Any thoughts of clearing the compound for hostiles or establishing a perimeter were thrown out the window: immediate triage was the only thing on anyone's mind. Within about 18 hours, over 250 of the *Keter's* personnel were deployed to the planet, performing everything from pre-op work, non-critical surgeries, and establishing emergency vaccine inoculation sites. After realizing they could get planetside without having to don EV suits, orderlies and engineers worked 'round the clock to set up support facilities and take replicator scans of the xB shantytown's overtaxed infrastructure. In orbit, the remaining 340 crew and 85 supplemental medical staff from Starfleet Medical were swamped with patients filling ICU biobeds, temporary intubations, and most unfortunately, casualties.

Dr. Brianna Vasquez, Chief Medical Officer of the *Keter*, oversaw the surgeries from the overflow wards of the main sickbay. "We had expected to perform around 45 surgeries in the first 20 hours. We ended up doing nearly 130: sometimes on the same patients as repeat cases that returned to the wards. It was a mess. We had all the material the Federation could find on xB medicine — we even had the Doc who'd fixed up Seven of Nine on hand — but we were still scrambling to figure out what, exactly, what was going on with

these people and why. The vaccine would *work*, and then it *wouldn't*, or it would interfere with organ function or cause remaining implants to break down or short out. Every new patient, every new *species* had to be treated individually – not to mention we all had to stop and stare at each other when an xB first asked us ‘how many doses of a children’s vaccine’ we had on-hand. It definitely hadn’t been on the ‘to-do’ list.”

The urgent needs of the xBs, combined with their own anxieties and fears, pushed tensions to their limits planet-side. Starfleet orderlies were confronted as they tried to catalogue and count the population, and engineers attempting to shore up buildings or repair power conduits on their makeshift medical tools were interfered with by xB civilians. Two security officers trying to mark out a perimeter for a planet-side triage centre were attacked and abducted for panicked questioning. It was understandable; the xBs were terrified that Starfleet had come to wipe them out. Even with their limited knowledge of the outside world, they understood well enough what the rest of galaxy thought about the Borg: much less *them*.

Yes, the leaders of this former Borg clade were under Starfleet care – publicly taking the vaccine Starfleet *themselves* made, and undergoing reconstructive physical therapy in Starfleet-replicated dermal biosuits. But once it was learned where this devastating plague had *originated* from, many amongst the xB population were bitter about the flippancy of Janeway’s actions, even if they *had* destroyed the Borg’s freedom of manoeuvre. Even Hugh – instantly charmed by this Seven of Nine and Icheb that had come all the way from the Delta Quadrant – was remarkably apprehensive about the scale of the *Keter’s* operations, despite his new friends’ assurances – and even *more* alarmed at the prospect of a starship like the *Concagh* arriving after he woke up from anaesthetic.

The *Concagh* would arrive in Ohniakan orbit 45 hours after T’Roun made landfall. McKingsley would beam down to the *Keter’s* aid post. After only 20 minutes of inspection, he returned to the *Concagh* and made a call to Starbase 157, requesting the immediate deployment of a Starfleet Mobile Auxiliary Support Hospital (SMASH) unit to Ohinaka III. Initially, Jellico was hesitant – until McKingsley sent through images. 8063rd SMASH would be ordered out of SB 153 that afternoon to provide supporting doctors and medical corps personnel.

The USS *Archimedes* would carry the mobile hospital along the border, trailing the temporarily-transferred Commanders Data and Geordi La Forge's shuttle. The *Archimedes'* captain, Sonya Gomez, had been part of the crew complement that made first contact with the Borg near J-25 aboard the USS *Enterprise-D* 14 years earlier. Now, on her maiden voyage as captain of a starship, she would see them again; not as an enemy, but as powerless patients filling the wards of the *Keter*.

Even with the press imagery arriving out of Ohinaka III, the political situation remained fraught. The scale of the sentientarian disaster was immense and undeniable, certainly; but considering the fresh wounds of the Betazoid Occupation, the Bombardment of Aito, and the attempted genocide of the Cardassian people, there were some in the reactionary elements of the council who were hesitant to offer anything more than cursory support. Starfleet struggled to find a truly unified line: many of those who supported the "Ohinakan Cause" were also backers of soon-to-be Admiral Janeway, and the fact that Janeway had inadvertently caused such a disaster was not lost on their critics. Admiral Paris would visibly squirm as Ambassadors Pagro and Yunsa picked apart his defense of Janeway during a Starfleet Oversight hearing in mid-August.

Back in Paris, Min Zife — who'd begun this whole saga with nothing more than cursory irritation — grew increasingly interested in the events on Ohniaka III. His archetypal micromanaging and hyperfixation, a longstanding headache for the admiralty during the Dominion War, was now turned upon the xBs. There was an element of his fascination that was intended as a counter to Pagro's continued attacks on the "Borg Refugee Bonanza," but it *did* seem as if the xBs' treatment was becoming a larger symbol for the "belligerent sentientarianism" that Zife saw as the way forward in the post-war world. "Those Borg survivors are the sort of people we're here to help," he would tell Admiral Akaar in a staff meeting on the 12th of August. "They've been through hell and back, they're ready to stand on their own feet, and it's our job to make sure they can: no matter what." Zife's eagerness to engage with the xBs went so far as to draw up several proposals for a presidential visit to Ohinaka III. While these plans would progress as far as transfer orders for the USS *Hood*, a disappointed Zife would eventually be talked down by his staff.

As much as Zife's increasingly pro-xB positions upset the Federalists, it was small fry compared to the outrage that came from domestic areas. The rapid move of the *Keter's* personnel and then the 8063rd SMASH upset much of FEDAC's Ross Plan scheduling in the region. The ripple effect knocked the reconstruction efforts on Benzar and Bolarus back by over 8 months, straight into Bolarus's rainy season, and well beyond the targets promised in 2375. The Bolian ambassador, infuriated by the interference of "their own president" in national reconstruction, would withdraw their support for the government – reducing Zife's majority even further.

The Romulans were even *less* happy, however. The mission to Ohinaka III and the continued presence of the *Concagh* — backed up by the *Obena* and a trio of *Steamrunner*-class escorts on anti-piracy ops in early September 2378 — infuriated Romulus. It seemingly confirmed to them that Starfleet was renegeing on wartime promises not to interfere within the Star Empire's sphere of influence, and they were correct in some senses: though that depended on how one understood — or prioritized factors within — this Romulan "sphere of influence." Ohinaka III's position within a group of dense, sensor-masking systems was a clear threat to Romulan interests in the Typhon sector: so long as one assumed that Starfleet was going to build a starbase in the system and turn the xB population into some form of shock troopers. Which is, of course, what the Romulans would have done, and exactly what *they* accused Min Zife of secretly orchestrating.

Zife — never one to tolerate the sycophancy of Romulan Diplomacy — had little time for the diplomatic protests, nor the twisting of Federation magnanimity. Having summoned the Romulan Ambassador to his cigar-smelling office, Zife would warn him that "any attempt to further interfere with sentientarian activity in recognized neutral territory would not be tolerated by the Federation." Despite this, the *Concagh's* task force would face off with Romulan warbirds at least four more times during August as they attempted to reconnoitre the system.

Nevertheless, recovery efforts persisted. The 8063rd, brought in as a overflow hospital for emergency surgery, was quickly shifted from triage to support care. These medical personnel found themselves acting more as support staff for the xBs; considering these former Borg were left alone to

become experts in their own physiology and medical needs, the SMASH staff soon learned that their jobs were to document, aid, and learn from the xBs as they refined their own techniques with the fresh supply of equipment. All in all, from of a pre-pandemic population of 1,202, 165 xBs died from the Cortical Plague in the span of mere weeks – with nearly 85% enduring some form of long-term side effect or disabling.

The *Keter* — still serving as a critical ward for the worst patients — would retire its disaster protocols on August 25th, ending nearly 4 weeks of sleepless nights and double shifts for her personnel. Granted leave for the first time in a month, many of her personnel would join xBs on tours and excursions over the planet’s countryside – as well as finally hike down towards the sandy, rose-colored beaches 7 kilometers out from the 8063rds base of operations. These expeditions – collated and documented in the “McKillingsley-Crosis Report” – represented the first full survey of the planet’s environment by Starfleet personnel, and began the process of archiving the Ohniakan xBs’ decade-long cataloguing of their planet’s flora and fauna into Federation data and seed banks.

The residents of Ohniaka III had known their vessel’s crashlanding had irreparably changed their ecosystem — a phenomenon they called “Cubesfall Inoculation” — but were nevertheless shocked at just how much it had truly spread throughout the planet’s various climates. According to scans performed by the *Archimedes*’ powerful mapping sensors, the great hulk that was once “Cube 5219” had shed an estimated 15 million tons of debris in its slow and fiery descent 10 years ago, explaining how the now-disconnected Borg nanotechnology had already expanded out so much from Settlement 01³. Starfleet personnel had to use caution when drinking unfiltered water or eating fused⁴ foods, were prescribed slow-release nanoprobe nullifier

3 “Settlement 01” was the name of the township that hosted 90% of Ohniaka III’s population where the *Aralez* made landfall, later renamed to “Cooperation Capitol City.” Two tiny villages were also to the coastal north and south of Settlement 01 (named “Settlements 02 and 03”) : established in 2372 and ‘75 as part of the respective years’ expeditions.

4 Developed during the Ohniakan xBs’ Age of Isolation, the “Fused vs. Blank” scale was used to measure how much Ohniakan produce and/or animal-based foods had been “fused” with nanoprobes, or was left “blank” and had yet to be touched by remnant Borg technology. This inoculation has often been compared to the proliferation of yeast in Earthen food; if eaten in large quantities by a non-xB or continuously consumed overtime, it could cause a slow technological inoculation similar to that of Humans’ “Auto-brewery Syndrome.”

medications for all planetary practitioners, and often ran electric currents through clothes not freshly replicated in order to rid them of inoculation particle buildup – one officer going so far as to compare it to “electric aphids.”

Other activities also solidified the return to some normalcy. Civil buildings for administrative affairs were constructed, recreation areas were marked off, and xBs that had regained their strength offered to show SMASH staffers how they would normally tend to their currently-neglected farmlands, community gardens, and aquaponic cultivations. Some of the *Concagh’s* crew from Anglophone countries and colonies would set up a cricket pitch, before losing by 25 runs to an xB team a week later. In a wry note to Admiral Jellico, McKingsley noted that “the success of social recovery can be judged by the fact I have just finished remonstrating five officers for ‘overeager fraternisation’ before putting them on medical leave. I think that’s a sign that we’ve done a good job, Ed.”

Starfleet had good reason to pat themselves on the back. The sentientarian operation might have exacerbated Zife’s declining political power just before the 2378 regional election cycle, but it was a perfect vindication of the Stellar Service’s ongoing mission. It also confirmed that, even with the continuation of heightened military readiness, Starfleet was pressing on with the transition to peacetime activity.

IN PLACE OF STRIFE

On the 22nd September 2378, McKingsley would take receipt of two messages that would change the direction of Ohinaka III forever.

The first was a diplomatic note from the Federation Council to “the legal authority of Ohinaka III:” offering to hand over 748 cryogenically frozen xBs for “care and support.” The “iced borg” were a political hot potato for Starfleet Command, and a nightmare for both medical and engineering that were unwilling to deal with them. All the way from Wolf 359, nearly 70 borg drones were discovered in the cube over earth and scattered across the battlefield

and were cryogenically frozen in the aftermath, Starfleet scientists struggling to find a way to return many of these drones to individuality without causing major physical or mental damage. Others — reclaimed from abandoned Borg vessels, failed assimilations, and the “Polymax Exchange” with the Romulan Empire in 2375 — had brought the number of cryogenically frozen Borg within Starfleet’s purview to nearly 750. Stored at Cold Station 10, the group — sardonically known as “nanoprobe popsicles” by unsavory types in Starfleet Operations — had been left to gather dust in lieu of adequate medical experience.

Only with the return of *Voyager* and the dual work of both The Doctor and Seven of Nine did Starfleet Medical finally find the confidence to return to these cold storage Borg. The better medical knowledge, however, only confirmed certain fears in the interlude: the cryogenic freezing process had not been without complications. Time was rapidly running out to thaw and then “reclaim” the drones before their cybernetics deteriorated before repair. Many in Starfleet — including Admiral Ross, Paris, and Kunuk — were keen on moving them to Ohinaka III, which now represented the largest and most experienced “Borg reclamation facility” in the entire quadrant.

Jellico was bitterly opposed to the idea, remaining apprehensive about the possibility of a “cyborg enclave” on his left flank along the Romulan frontier. Alongside others in Starfleet Tactical, he would argue in favor of resettling the xBs within the UFP entirely on logistical grounds. It would have been a rash move, and almost certainly would have wrecked UFP-xB relations completely at this sensitive stage. Considering the decisions taken during the Dominion War, however, it would not have been unprecedented. Thankfully, cooler heads prevailed, and Admiral Shanthi ordeed the settlement issue to be shelved until after the 2378 electoral cycle ended.

The proposition of moving cold storage drones to Ohinkaka III had first been considered by Commander Geordi La Forge in August 2378. Due to his familiarity with cybernetics and his initial repairs made on Hugh’s biochips in 2368, La Forge had been involved in early false starts to reclaim the 700 frozen Borg, and was thus best informed to broach the subject with the xBs. La Forge did his best to mitigate any pressure from above — well aware that asking a colony of barely a thousand to nearly double their population without much in the way of preparation time was *far* more than a tall order.

As far as pressure was concerned over original “ownership,” Starfleet didn’t want much to do with them; even Jellico’s resettlement plan ended in the cold storage drones being transferred.

After deliniation with their comrades, Hugh and Crois seemed eager to do their part – as did the medical staff aboard *Keter* and the 8063rd SMASH. The 8063rd’s CO would request permission to extend their posting on Ohinaka III for another 18 months after hearing of the request, knowing that, without her aid post’s support, Hugh simply lacked the facilities to accept the offer. A JAG officer dispatch would leave Ohinaka III with a written acceptance of the offer from Hugh — though a senior staffer made it clear that the authorization would have to come from the still-split Federation Council, as opposed to the generally-united admiralty.

What those officers *didn’t* count on was the antipathy of the Centralists towards keeping these xBs within the Federation’s purview. Proposed by Anneik Okeg, the resolution would pass in a surprising nod-through, with the Centralists stifling any opposition from their own side. It would later be apparent that the vote was a watershed moment for Councillor Pagro’s seizure of power within the opposition, but Zife – never one to pay much attention to his opponents when they weren’t causing him problems – was more than happy to take the win, photographed with his signature toothy smile in the Trojan’s direction as the vote was called and passed.

The second message was from the Federal Department of Aid Control (FEDAC). FEDAC, which controlled and managed the movement, resettlement, and support of refugees and asylum seekers within the UFP, had received a petition from 14 individual xBs requesting resettlement on Ohinaka III under the “cultural resettlement and re-incorporation” clause of the McClaren Act. The petitioners were a diverse bunch: 3 were rehabilitated survivors of Wolf 359, 5 Romulan xBs recovered by Starfleet near the Typhon Expanse in 2372, an El-Aurian, 1 Cardassian, 2 Vuclans, and 3 Project Corvidae⁵ scientists who the Romulan Senate had exchanged during treaty negotiations in 2374. All had attempted to return to life as normal citizens, but had found themselves

5 Project Corvidae (2350-2363) was a level five classified Starfleet Intelligence operation, aimed at providing over-the-horizon information, analysis, and crucially warning on the movements and intentions of “Unknown Hostile C” – later identified as the Borg.

alienated by Federation society's unadulterated fear of ex-Borg individuals. Ohinaka III offered an opportunity to live outside of that culture of suspicion.

Initially, T'Roun and McKingsley were hesitant. For starters, Ohinaka III had barely stabilized itself; infrastructure was finally starting to bounce back after the pandemic's devastation, power converter cables were still strung from pylons above streets paved with prefab durasteel mats, and the 8063rd's mess kitchen was only now replacing its tents with properly sealed buildings. Social stability was also fragile; even if outright violence was out of the question, T'Roun carefully considered whether or not the influx of Federation citizens and others might aggravate lingering bitterness over the Cortical Plague.

Alternatively, it was an easy decision for Hugh and Crosis to make. Their social duty for care extended to *all* potential xBs and, combined with the 8063rd SMASH's activity, they were now the best (and possibly *only*) people in the galaxy equipped to reclaim former Borg drones safely. Together, the Progenitors⁶ on the planet found consensus; the ever-efficient descendents of the Borg immediately set themselves to work dedicating "living block" quarters space to expand living accommodations and offer these people a new lease on life – alongside homes for the soon-to-be-awakened 700 cold storage drones. The Ohniakan xBs would eventually persuade the two Starfleet captains to authorize the transfer: at least on a probationary basis.

The decision to allow "limited entry of those whose medical status and expertise are of net benefit to the situation on Ohniaka III" changed the course of the ex-Borg society forever. The tacit and limited, but still-open endorsement of xB migration to Ohniaka III would guarantee Jellico's resettlement suggestion would remain stillborn: even if McKingsley and T'Roun were unaware of that proposal entirely. The 14 petitioners — carried aboard the S.S. *Janus VI* from Regulus — would meet the transport USS *Sinai* at SB 157. They would arrive on Ohinaka III on October 14th, and they would be the first of many.

6 The term "Progenitor" would first be used in reference to the original Ohniakan xB clade by one of the 14 petitioners: a Romulan xB that marveled over the farmlands they saw on their descent to Ohniaka III's surface, and wanted to meet these "Progenitor caretakers." The term was adopted as a shorthand when referring to the differing generations, and indicate some form of respect towards the founding members of this xB society.

Managing the new xBs — alongside the now immense project of thawing over 700 drones and starting their reclamations from the beginning — was a massive ordeal, and one that could not be handled by Starfleet alone. “We could do it,” T’Roun would point out to McKlingsley, “but then what will they do when we leave?” She had a point: as good as the *Keter* and the 8063rd were getting at with regards to xB medical care, their tour of duty had an end point. Even with the extended mission on Ohinaka III, everyone knew that it was only a matter of time before they would all be moved on to a new mission. Already, the medical staff were doing their best to involve and teach the more technical aspects of their operations to the xBs, who deftly combined their greater knowledge of patient care with the medical expertise of the SMASH unit.

The “Reclamation Project” emerged less fully-formed from this process, and more as a solution to a bureaucratic anomaly. As the migration of xBs picked up across late 2378, the amount of supplies being brought in from Starfleet expanded. With large numbers of xBs now serving as active supernumeraries to the engineers and medical staff — as well as beginning independent projects such as the reconstruction of Cubesfall’s town centre — the question of who *exactly* could sign off on these supply deliveries became more fraught. There simply weren’t enough senior officers around to sign for everything. The support services were growing irritated with stocks of biomimetic gel and industrial replicators being signed off on by ensigns carrying commissions younger than the products they were receiving.

Hugh was already beginning to see the need to establish home-grown medical care facilities. To his admittance, the need for a bureaucratic body around it had been ignored for a while. Starfleet Operations would force the issue when T’Roun requested a collection of mothballed computer banks for their usage; when Operations demanded to know which “neutral civil action unit” would be receiving them, Hugh would offer the “reclamation project” as an answer.

What that “project” meant would take months to be formally codified. But even in late 2378, it was clear that, even if the force would act as a security agency in some form, its primary purpose would *always* primarily be recovery and reclamation care for any and all former Borg. Those who

volunteered for the work – under the leadership of “Director” Hugh – were doing so out of civic duty of care rather than protection. Progenitors Troval and Archon, while yet to become the prominent cyberneticists they would be known as, emerge for the first time in Starfleet records after the “xB Meatball Surgery” of August 2378: applying their curiosity and knowledge of the process, quickly outpacing the experience of the 8063rd’s personnel. As much as McKingsley tried to convince the xBs to conduct phaser practices, they scorned his scheduled drills for further psychological studies and medical seminars.

The Reclamation Project also turned out to serve a crucial *social* function for the denizens of Ohniaka III as well – whether they arrived by Starfleet transport, or by cryotube offloading. The former group were the most stand-off-ish, and with good reason – they were used to a universe that viewed them with fear, hatred, and in even grimmer cases: greed.⁷ They came first in pairs, then in groups, and then by the dozens: quietly burrowing within the existing population without much wanted fanfare or celebration. Progenitors confided in 8063rd personnel that the new arrivals seemed largely pessimistic about the long-term viability of the Ohinaka colony, and were surprised at both the Progenitor community’s eagerness and lackadaisical bliss to welcome them in.

Thankfully sooner rather than later, Hugh and the Progenitors came to pinpoint the specific disconnect they seemed to have with these new arrivals, despite their commonality as “those forever bound through the Borg.” The Progenitors’ decade-long seclusion had lent them a privileged, almost naïve celebration of themselves in contrast to the marginalization xBs faced elsewhere – especially when compared to the hardships their newly-arrived kin bore during those same years of pastoral bliss for the Progenitors. “A few months ago, I would be rotating farming duties today,” Hugh would wistfully tell Captain T’Roun. “My most pressing responsibility was to water the newly-seeded Rustleaf patch. My greatest anxieties were whether or not I remembered to turn off a stovetop. I did not have to fear for my life against hateful neighbors who thought I would assimilate them in the night.”

7 During the late 2370s, contraband Borg technology held extremely high trade value in black markets – even if it was extremely dangerous to transport and keep controlled. One seizure of an underground operation in 2377 found invoices showing the price of a single, assimilation-capable nanoprobe frozen in stasis was valued at 6 bars of latinum.

Eventually, the commonalities of experience and “xB directness” began to break the ice. Progenitor councilors helped provide differing perspectives to the sometimes self-loathing transplants, and newly-arrived immigrants began to earnestly confide in these people who lovingly polished their implants and so openly Tethered⁸ with each other. They were all re-forming their ideas of personhood and identity — whether individual or societal — and the ability to do that around others in the same process was vital.

“We’re creating a new kind of society on the fly here,” Troval would tell McKingsley at a meeting in late October. “That’s certainly true,” McKingsley replied. “But you also need to create a new kind of state, too — and everything that comes with that.”

THE PRINCIPLE OF THE ONE

Admiral William Ross would visit Ohinaka III in early February 2379, as a detour from his well-wishing tour of the Romulan Border. It was not intended to be a long visit, nor a particularly formal one; many of the 8063rds doctors had no idea that Ross was even on site before he walked into the OR, nor when he was suddenly there and asked them questions in post-op. He certainly had no expertise in cybernetics or xenobiology to qualify him for the visit: that purview still came under Admiral Kunuk. Instead, Ross’s interest came from war-time experience; Admiral Ross was the one who authorised the “Codetalker” program, where xBs within Starfleet and the FGF had served as signallers, sensitive data couriers, and “living decryptors” in the final stages of the Dominion War.

Arriving on the 11th, Ross was shocked by the state of the xBs: even well after the end of their moment of crisis. Recovery from the Cortical Plague was steadily continuing, but the psychological and physical after-effects

⁸ Coined during the Age of Isolation, Tethering is the name given to the practice of xBs physically connecting to each other with the tubules formerly used for assimilation. Tethering is also used to uplink with various technologies, issue medical aid with reparative nanoprobes, and can be employed in different species’ practices and customs (i.e., Vulcan xBs utilize these tubules when initiating mindmelds for implant diagnostics and cerebral communications).

from its devastation were still apparent. He would go to see the makeshift memorial built to honor the pandemic's dead, talked to several individuals about what they needed, and tried to find out *what*, exactly, the xBs' next steps were – as both individuals, and their “new kind of society” that was needing to be addressed.

Ross would also specifically meet with Hugh to discuss the next steps: still weakened, but recovering rapidly, and already assisting the 8063rd's medic with more complicated cases. Supposedly, this meeting (which lasted only 35 minutes) was the first time that ex-Borg *statehood* was proposed. If Ross is to be believed, it was *Hugh* who suggested the matter – as part of contingencies for any Romulan intervention. More would be discussed at the end of Ross' visit; but for now, Ross could offer an informal (and completely unauthorized) apology for the actions of soon-to-be Admiral Janeway.

Hugh, mollified but still unconvinced, would merely comment that “he understood where she had come from.”

Ross's third and final day on Ohinaka III was spent in the existing communal spaces: inhabited by xBs who had been discharged from the *Keter* and the SMASH unit. The mood was optimistic, and several of the press photos show Ross and his staff amongst smiling xBs and off-duty Starfleet personnel as they dined together in a mess tent. “[Ross] was in his element,” Dr. Zimanski remembered. “It was just like the war; touring the front and seeing troops, except this time no one was dying. Everyone got to live — some even got to live *again* — and that seemed to bring a little life back to the old man.” Towards the end of the meal, Ross was taken by Zimanski to meet some of the “Nameless”⁹ – former Borg whose assimilations (or severances) had been so severe, that knowledge of their previous life had been completely eradicated. With their developing therapy methodologies, there were those that hoped these xBs' identities could be recovered – but for now, they were being treated as new people: “starting from their own beginning,” as Hugh and the Progenitors would put it.

9 It is important to note that every member of the original Progenitor clade was “Nameless,” due to the severity of Hugh's severance from the Collective in 2368. No xB from Cube 5219 retained or has ever recalled memories of any possible, previous life: save for the experiences Hugh had aboard the *Enterprise-D*.

“Halfway down the line, Ross stopped – hand frozen in front of an xB taken out of stasis three weeks ago called Fourth of Eight: who took the unmoving hand and shook it energetically. The xB’s wide smile, punctuated by implant scars and reconstructive surgery, was a stark contrast to the white-faced, gaunt look of horror the admiral had. After a second, Ross quietly asked him for his name. ‘Fourth of Eight, Admiral,’ was the reply. Ross stared back, shaking his head in short, sharp bursts. ‘No, that’s not right. That’s not right. Where’s your beard gone, Jiji?’ Fourth frowned at him, asked if he was alright, and then Ross just...turned and walked away. He might as well have *ran*, for the speed he went at. When I found him behind the supply shelter, the poor admiral was halfway through a panic attack.”

After some coaxing — and a slight dose of Lagavulin — Zimanski would discover that Fourth of Eight was actually Jivan Amirian: half-Human and half-Betazoid academy friend, colleague, and former romantic partner to Ross. Amirian was once the captain of the USS *Constance* at the Battle of Wolf 359, and had been marked as missing: presumed dead for over a decade. “Ross was as white as a sheet for the rest of the day. We ended up scratching the final meetings, simply because he acted like he wanted to be sick. One of his aides said that he hadn’t looked this bad since after the Second Battle of Chin’Toka.”

“Ross thankfully stayed an extra day so we could get what we needed to sorted, and the gossip that morning was that Forth had asked his consultant to take him to Ross’ cabin last night so they could ‘talk some things out.’ What those ‘things’ were, who the hell knows, but in the mess I heard Fourth ask some xBs he was recovering with to try calling him ‘Jivan.’ He’d started to *remember* things, which was *very* rare for all the Nameless we’d treated so far. It gave *us* a scare, and made the *Progenitors* cross-reference their own psyche approaches towards Nameless to make sure they weren’t flubbing anyone’s treatments. But, after some checking, we all figured this was just a special case – and apparently a lot of what Jivan had been searching for during his therapy sessions was found in those memories. The admiral, meanwhile – he walked past me and into his first meeting just before noon looking a hell of a lot better. His eyes were still awful puffy, but considering his mood the day before? I was impressed he actually gave me a smile when he said “good morning.”

Ross's visit was serendipitous in other ways. He was present for a grand meeting of the support council: consisting of Hugh, Crosis, Troval, T'Roun, McKinglsey, and a Progenitor Romulan xB named T'leetan that had designed a majority of Settlement 01's first power generators. They had met again to deal with the contentious delivery of new power plants by Boeing-Shikahr. Despite being a Federation government contract, Shikahr refused to deliver the new reactors without a signature from a "representative of the planetary government," and found the authority of the council to be lacking. When T'leetan had refused, Hugh eventually signed it off as "Director of the Reclamation project" (a title he remained apprehensive of), but the issues were only getting bigger.

"You're going to have to make this leap at some point," Ross would tell them after the argument reached its regular impasse. "It *is* your government, though, at the end of that."

"We don't want it to be *your* government," Crosis would reply. "We don't want to have to do it *that way*. *Your way*."

Government formation on Ohniaka III had been an open debate since the *Keter* first arrived. The mass of engineering projects, supply transfers, civilian and military visits, and deployments that followed only piled the pressure on, even as the xBs pointedly avoided giving a direct answer. Why exactly a society of 1,037 people able to function on a cybernetically-connected collectivist, almost anarchist basis would even *need* a civil government evaded them, and that entirely-rational conversation evasion stymied and annoyed Starfleet to no end. The USS *Cerritos* – which had helped construct minor orbital facilities and a repair yard above Settlement 01 – had written "xB Government TBD" on all its paperwork, much to the irritation of Starfleet Command. Early xB visitors to the UFP – including the first official representatives of Ohniakan xBs who returned to the Federation with the USS *Archimedes* – were issued 85 documents in lieu of any official passports. "If we are to continue defending these people from the Romulans – *and others*," Ross would tell Shanthi, "they need to get through their heads that they need to express their sovereignty with *more* than kind words."

The sovereignty question, on paper, was very simple. In the Federation's 218 years, Starfleet, the federal government, and their constituent

organizations had been involved in over 100 different state formations, re-organizations, and formalizations: from Terra Nova in the early 2160s, all the way to the Bak'u Declaration of 2375. The Federation Department of Aid Control (FEDAC) had an entire division devoted to state building, as did the diplomatic corps – and Starfleet Command itself. “We can build a new state in 18 months if we need to. 12, if you let us use pre-fab constitutions,” joked Commissioner Livos in 2360. Even with FEDAC stretched thin by the Ross Plan and the diplomatic corps tied up in the negotiations over Cardassian sovereignty, turning the xBs of Ohniaka III into a civil society – with state functions, citizenship, and legal protections – would be incredibly easy.

The Admiralty and President's office both quietly believed that the best course of action – both for the future development of “xB society (as much as it could be called that in 2378)” and their security in the near future – would have Ohinaka III become a Federation protectorate world: bringing it under the Owolade Act and all the Starfleet protections it provided. Estimates drawn up by the Interstellar Affairs Office suggested associate membership by the 2380s, and with full membership by 2400 by the earliest. It was a sensible idea: protection for a vulnerable society, a counter to Romulan expansion in the region, *and* another sign that the UFP was putting the tumult of the 2360s and 70s behind them.

Like all sensible ideas, however, it could not survive contact with reality. Sentiment within the Federation – as utopian as it was – remained ambivalent at best on ex-Borg citizenship, and hostile at worse. The experience of the scant few xBs within the UFP and Starfleet in the years after Wolf 359 had been bad: marginalized by society, if not by the state, unable to maintain pre-existing relationships, and “left out” of paradise thanks to crimes they had no part in whatsoever. The complications of the Hudson Act – which withdrew citizenship from “any person who aids and abets the military actions of a hostile power” – meant that many xBs that were once born within the UFP discovered their rights had been revoked, and had to fight to re-naturalize themselves into a society that had tried to erase them from it.

The Dominion War had seen some progress, but even then, Starfleet's fear had clouded their own magnanimity. In shades that matched 23rd century hostility to Illyrians and other augmented species, Starfleet would withhold promotion from and limit the command ranks of any xB personnel within

the service for “security reasons.” Many of the xB “Codetalkers” who played vital security roles during the war’s ground campaigns would not receive formal recognition until the 2380s: with some not until after their deaths. The Federation Council — still knee-deep in post-war recovery and the declining popularity of the Ross Plan — was unwilling to begin a war on yet *another* social front. This is not to say that they were entirely complacent in leaving the xBs out to dry; the continued 8063rd authorizations and McKingsley’s task force spoke to a genuine commitment to ensuring the survival of xB society. “If they want a state, we’ll give them one,” Secretary of the Exterior Orren Sh’Ten would tell Ross. “But they *do* have to want one.”

“Wanting a state” would turn out to be the more pressing issue. The xBs were fiercely autonomous: fearful of the strength of a centralized state that could mimic the Borg collective’s oppressive control. They had resisted attempts to form anything more cohesive than a small decision-making body (sometimes additionally verified by Tethering), and even *that* resorted to more of a consensus-based citizen vote than any recognizable form of indirect democracy. Cooperative deliberation had emerged naturally long before the arrival of Starfleet, and the idea that could change in the future was anathema. What concerned many of the xBs was the general insistence from the Federation that their society should — or perhaps would *need* to — resemble the Federation’s political system.

Advice came from refreshingly-surprising grounds. At the behest of T’Roun, FEDAC would send a committee of political advisors to discuss the possibility of state-building. Though the Progenitors were puzzled by T’Roun and McKingsley’s insistence at keeping the “guest list” confidential until they arrived, the advisors were not people that Hugh, Crois, nor anyone part of the dozen-strong greeting party expected. Instead of the typical Humans or Vulcans, the committee was led by a Horta (Runq), a Medusan (Iboa), a Betelgusian (Wii’yyuv’zwi), and a trio of Bynar (001, 011, and 111). Each represented the culmination of different political systems and traditions: based less on the institutional hierarchies of Terran Democracy, and more on a collaborative, mass consensus approach to societal organization. Working with these groups — who all rejected the general norms of galactic governance in favour of what others might deem to be “anarcho-collectivist” based systems — encouraged the xBs to follow their own path.

The importance of the “Principle of the One” — the ability of individual autonomy to remain paramount within a mutual aid system — which had dissuaded them from Federation association, was *encouraged* by the FEDAC team: against the wishes of their political masters. “They might be getting the runaround they want,” Zife would comment, “but we’re not getting crap out of this, as per usual.” It was not an unfair assessment. Starfleet and the Federation were increasingly investing a great deal of time and resources into the humanitarian mission without it being particularly clear who it was for. Admiral Paris could provide the realpolitik justification by simply pointing to the continued and less-coherent Romulan outrage at having their Typhon flank turned by a post-cybernetic society, but that was difficult to explain to FNN and the voters without sounding somewhat like a Cardassian Gul.

Even as the 8063rd began to wind up its activities and hand over medical facilities to the Reclamation Project, *who*, exactly, the Reclamation Project reported to remained nebulous. Was it the provisional leadership under Hugh? Not if *he* was to be believed. The idea that they reported to “all xBs” was, while rhetorically appropriate, *not* the answer bureaucrats wanted to hear. “This operation’s buck’s got to stop *somewhere*, Hugh,” Lewis Melbourne, Undersecretary to the FEDAC Commissioner would tell the xB leader. “If it’s not gonna be *you*, it’s got to be a *government*.”

The xBs remained hesitant, however. Even with the best of FEDAC offering their advice and models, the idea that anyone — even a group of people — could have authority over their community was still a dangerous concept. xBs had once been bound by the Borg and its further-commandering queen units, and they would have no part in creating another host of demiurges within their own body. The issue would be forced, however: not by Federation meddling, and not even by the increasing burden of the growing population.

Much like the UFP itself, the Liberated Borg Cooperation would finally come into being thanks to dangers that lurked beneath the Raptor’s Wing: the Romulan Star Empire.

COMING SOON

PART III
THE ROMULAN
SPARTACUS

THE TYPHON CONUNDRUM
AND THE SPRING OF 2379

