Ethical Considerations

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/19252909.

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death
Category: F/M
Fandom: Star Trek: Voyager
Relationship: Chakotay/Kathryn Janeway, Tom Paris/B'Elanna Torres, Naomi Wildman & Icheb
Character: Harry Kim, Kathryn Janeway, Chakotay (Star Trek), Icheb (Star Trek),
Naomi Wildman, Samantha, The Doctor (Star Trek), Neelix (Star Trek),
Tal Celes, Noah Lessing, Tom Paris, B'Elanna Torres, Original Alien Character(s), James Morrow, Angelo Tessonni, Brian Sofin, Marla Gilmore
Additional Tags: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Aftermath of Violence, Rescue,
Action/Adventure
Series: Part 8 of Voyager Virtual Season 7.5
Stats: Published: 2019-06-17 Chapters: 12/12 Words: 31001

Ethical Considerations

by jamelia116, Voyager_Virtual Season_7-5_Staff_Writers (jamelia116)

Summary

In the aftermath of the Borg attack, a member of Voyager's crew takes on a mission that will change his life. Meanwhile Harry Kim's "salvage mission" to a derelict spacecraft turns out to be full of surprises, good and bad, for his away team.

Notes

When we planned our virtual season, one of the issues that came up early on was how fast Naomi would mature, given the rate of her development on the show. For story purposes, we decided to move up the date of her birth by a year. It makes a lot more sense for Naomi to have been born during Voyager's first year in the Delta Quadrant, not the second. (A two year pregnancy was a bit much, we all thought.) So she's almost seven at this stage of development, and looks twice that old. It's significant that Scarlett Pomers, who played Naomi, was 12 when she filmed "Homestead," her last episode of Voyager.

So, while you're reading, visualize Naomi more like the way Scarlett looked and acted when she played the daughter on Reba, rather than the way we last saw her on Voyager, or better yet, more like "adult Naomi" in "Shattered."
Our Naomi is 6 going on 7 and has convinced herself she's almost an adult, but of course, she isn't. (And trust us, Icheb is far more aware of reality and of what is appropriate and non-appropriate behavior than Naomi yet knows, whatever his feelings towards her may be.)

See the end of the work for more notes.
Ethical Considerations I: Prologue

Prologue/Teaser

If the computer had been working the way it should have been, Naomi Wildman would have known her quarry was on Deck 5. She would not have needed to stop at Astrometrics on Deck 8, where Megan Delaney told her that Seven and Icheb had gone to Engineering to help with the repairs. Or Deck 11, where a harried Lieutenant Torres told her to try Sickbay, because the Doctor had asked for Icheb's help again.

As it was, Naomi had to climb through the Jefferies tubes between Decks 11 and 8 twice, bypassing the section of turbolift damaged during the Borg attack which the engineering staff didn't expect to have the chance to fix until tomorrow. They were spending the bulk of their time on the computer core and Main Engineering itself, where Borg modifications and stray bullets had played havoc with the ship's systems. They also had quite a time undoing their own "lock down" procedure, which made such unpleasant and unanticipated changes to the systems that a pregnant half-Klingon Chief Engineer was forced to work more overtime than she usually did. Little wonder, therefore, that by the time Naomi reached Deck 5, she stomped down the corridor.

All that changed when she reached the doorway to Sickbay. Remembering who was inside, Naomi's feelings of irritation washed away, into the category of "insignificant," as they deserved. There were heroes lying in there, and no one could say for sure if some of them would ever get down off their beds and walk away again. Not even the Doctor.

This door, at least, was still working right. Naomi stepped inside and stood by the door, watching the bustling medical staff for a few moments to see if she could sense when she might be able to approach without interrupting something they were doing. After a few minutes, she felt bold enough to say, "Hello, Doctor. How is she?" not bothering to define who "she" was. They would know.

"Much the same," the Doctor said quietly, checking the readouts on his medical tricorder.

In a way, she really had not needed to ask her question. The biobed, with its halo up and blinking lights signaling that breathing support was being administered to the waxy form on its surface, provided enough of an answer. The fact that the EMH and Lieutenant Paris were both standing next to Marla Gilmore where she lay in her unnatural sleep, concerned looks upon their faces, confirmed her assumption.

"She's not breathing on her own yet?" Naomi asked in a soft tone. It was hard to come in here, the way things were, and speak in a normal voice.
"Not yet, but we've been able to cut back on the percentage of oxygen without any ill effects. That's a good sign."

She was about to say more, but just as Lieutenant Paris turned around to check on Crewman Pierce, whose biobed was next to Marla's, an alarm went off. Lieutenant Paris frantically waved, and the Doctor whisked himself to the other side of Pierce's biobed. The young crewman's body was jerking in convulsions.

Naomi waited patiently while the Doctor and the lieutenant worked on their patient. She wished she could help in some way, but she was acutely aware of her own limitations when it came to helping with medical procedures. She thought about slipping off to look for Icheb elsewhere, but she was tired of wandering fruitlessly all over the ship. She could see he wasn't in Sickbay.

For a few feverish moments, it looked like Pierce had lost his battle to live, but finally, with the EMH and the senior medic both working on him, the crewman's condition stabilized—for the moment. As she observed both the Doctor and Lieutenant Paris relax, she asked, tentatively, "Do you know where . . . ?"

"He's in the medical lab," Tom Paris responded with a smile.

"How do you know who I'm asking you about?"

"You were looking for Icheb, weren't you? B'Elanna commed me and said you were looking for him."

"She commed you? Is the system back up again?"

"Not totally, but B'Elanna managed to get it fixed first between Engineering and here. Funny, huh? Anyway, since she contacted me just before you came in, I figured that was why you were here."

"Yeah, it was," Naomi admitted sheepishly. "I didn't realize everyone was tracking me, that's all!"

As he moved from Ensign Golwat's bed, where he had been working, to the next in line, to check the vital signs of Ensign Bronowski, Tom said, kindly, "We're not tracking you. B'Elanna was
bugging me about when I was going to be free for dinner. She mentioned you were going to nag Icheb about eating, too."

"Of course I am! He never eats a meal unless I make him eat." She said indignantly, then hesitated. "But if he's doing something really important, I guess I could come back and bother him about it later."

"You're not bothering him at all, Naomi. Eating is something he hasn't been doing of his own volition lately," sniffed the EMH. "In fact, I told him he should go to the Mess Hall over an hour ago, but he didn't want to go until he finished with an experiment."

"Then you can spare him for an hour or so?"

"Two hours, at least. Demand that he regenerate for an hour afterwards as well. It should refresh him. It's been almost a week. And then he can come back to the lab to work at his project."

"Two hours off, huh? You're all heart, Doc," Lieutenant Paris drawled, but his wink at Naomi reassured her that he was kidding. As she turned to go, she could hear the two of them bickering about duty rosters. Joking--and bickering--were par for the course when the two were together in Sickbay. And after all they'd been through together during the past few days, probably necessary.

=\=

As she entered Med Lab 1 and caught her first sight of her friend, Naomi felt her heart skip in that peculiar way it had developed lately whenever she was around him. A little flustered, Naomi slipped into what she and her mother both called her "busybody mode."

"You look exhausted, Icheb, and hungry, too. Time for dinner!" she scolded cheerfully.

He raised his head slightly. A second later he put it down again, as if he were too fatigued to hold it upright for any longer, and said quietly, "I have two more samples to examine before I leave, or I will have to redo the experiment."

"Is there anything I can do? If both of us are working, maybe you'll be done faster."
"The equipment is doing the work now. Thank you for the offer." Naomi, encouraged by the wisp of a smile he sent her way, sat down at the work station next to his to wait for him.

"The Doctor told me he let you go to dinner an hour ago."

"I believe that would have been the last place you would have looked for me."

"You've got that right," she laughed. "The Doctor also gave me strict orders to tuck you into your regeneration cubicle after you've had a chance to eat. He wants you rested up so that you can work even harder after you get out of it. He's such a slave driver," she confided.

"That seems to be a popular condition on board this ship," he replied, with a sideways glance that made her laugh again. She enjoyed those few seconds of attention, even though that was all she got from him. A beeping sound from one of the control panels in front of him snatched it away from her again. As his fingers nimbly performed a series of procedures, followed by a second beeping, lower pitched than the first, Naomi watched, stifling a little sigh. From the intense way he was working, and with all of the people still needing treatment for injuries because of the attack, she knew it had to be a very important experiment.

She waited patiently until he raised his head again and stared in front of him, oblivious to her presence. His stare unnerved her a little. Finally, she broke the spell by asking, "Are both of your samples analyzed yet?"

He blinked and moved his head slightly, as if awakening from a deep sleep. "Not completely. However, I can recalibrate the instruments to finish by themselves now. Then we can leave."

"Well, then, recalibrate them, and let's get out of here! I'm hungry!"

"I will need only seconds to do what I need to do."

"OK," she said, mollified, and stood up to wait by the door while Icheb instructed the instruments to continue doing whatever it was he was having them do. Naomi decided she really needed to find out more about medical procedures. Both her mother and Lieutenant Paris were considered vital to Sickbay operations. She would have to add Medic courses to her "classes I need to take" list. It would be one way of spending a little more time with her friend Icheb. The thought cheered her up even more.
Naomi was unable to see Icheb's face as he worked. If she had, her upbeat mood may have vanished once again. The set of his mouth was grim; and just before he turned towards her, the faraway look returned to his eyes. At that moment, Naomi had no idea that Icheb was not merely helping out the medical staff and caring for those still needing medical treatment after the Borg Elite Force attack. He was a Young Man with a Mission. And that mission would be successfully completed somehow, even if Icheb had to sacrifice more than he wished to accomplish it. It was his destiny.
"I'll only be bothering you for a few more minutes, Captain."

"Take all the time you need, Crewman Tessoni. I'm not fond of holes in my Ready Room wall," Captain Janeway said, glancing up from her PADD and smiling at him.

Returning her smile, he went back to sealing the patch of carpet over the repaired hull plate near the Ready Room viewport. Kathryn returned to her lists of repairs--the "so critical they've already been made," the "priority repairs that can't be finished until the computer and replicators stop acting twitchy," and the "can wait until the criticals and priorities have been completed." She would have considered her Ready Room wall one of the latter, but Commander Chakotay had other ideas. Of course, hull integrity might fail without constant shield reinforcement in that spot. Since dependence upon shields for a long period of time this close to the bridge wasn't standard operating procedure, she would forgive his sending Mr. Tessoni in to work in her sanctuary while she was in residence--for the moment. She would have to say something to Mr. Paris, however, about venting plasma in nebulas to create fireworks as a diversion for an escape. If he did it again, she might not have a ready room to return to!

Perhaps it was her traditionalist heritage, but after a quick perusal of her lists, Kathryn found herself watching the young crewman in fascination as he worked. The wall now looked as pristine as when she first laid eyes upon it at Utopia Planitia, on the very first day she visited her new ship. Mr. Tessoni proceeded to kneel on the floor, cutting away and then replacing a section of carpeting which had been damaged by the breech. She was impressed by the care which he took to fit the replacement so neatly and smoothly that, like the wall, she was sure she would never notice the boundary between old and new unless she stared at it from mere centimeters from its surface.

She was so engrossed that she didn't realize he'd said something until several seconds afterwards, and then she had to excuse herself and ask him to repeat what he'd said.

"Sorry to bother you, Captain. I was just wondering if you liked to repair things."

"Warp cores. Impulse drives. Bioneural networks. Crashed computer linkages. That sort of thing. Not walls or floors. You're very good at that, Mr. Tessoni. I can't even see the difference from here. May I see it close up?"
"It's your carpet, Captain," he replied, but with a grin of pleasure on his face broader than any she could ever recall seeing on him before. Not that he'd had much occasion to grin with pleasure since she'd known him, of course. Considering all the sorrows of the past few days, it was especially good to see it now.

"Remarkable work . . . Angelo, isn't it?"

"That's my name." The grin grew even wider.

"Where did you learn to do such fine work? And so quickly, too!"

The grin vanished. His eyes slipped away as he answered, "We learned to do just about everything in a hurry on the *Equinox*, ma'am."

She could have kicked herself. Why did that have to come up now? It was just as much a sore subject for her, considering her own regrettable actions during that time, as it obviously was for him. Now she had some repair work of her own to do with Crewman Tessoni. "I'm sure you did. I'm glad you never gave up on doing quality work, despite the need for haste."

He nodded, but the easy interaction between them, so welcome after the intense period of activity, stress, and grief the crew had been going through since their latest encounter with the Borg, had dissipated as completely as concrete evidence of damage to her Ready Room.

As he turned to gather up his tools, she breathed deeply to disguise her desire to sigh aloud and sat down again behind her desk, returning to her lists.

A minute later, she became aware that the young man was standing in front of her desk. "Yes, Crewman?"

"Captain Janeway, I . . . well, actually, all five of us have been wondering if any of your messages--the data stream messages, I mean--have ever mentioned the *Equinox*, or Captain Ransom? I've heard there's been some conversations about the Maquis, but what about us? Has anything been decided about what's going to happen when we get home?"

"There have been a few references to your situation," she said carefully. "We've been exchanging logs ever since the Pathfinder project first contacted us, but as far as I know, there's been no serious
talk about what would happen to the five of you." Not that I know of, but I'll just bet there's plenty they haven't told me, she thought grimly.

"I see." He looked down at the floor in front of him, as if preparing himself for hazardous duty, before meeting her eyes again. "What have they been saying?"

"They haven't said much up to now. I've been the one doing most of the talking. They've asked for progress reports, which, I assure you, have been favorable. I've reported to the admiralty that you are doing all we've asked of you. I'm certainly pleased at how you've have pitched in with repairing Voyager."

A small smile, minuscule compared to the previous one, but still welcome, appeared on his face. "It's our ship too, ma'am," he said.

The Ready Room door chime interrupted them. As Kathryn called, "Enter," and exchanged greetings with her first officer, the crewman bent down and picked up his tool box. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see the young man hesitate. "Is there something else, Mr. Tessoni?"

"Yes, Captain. I was wondering if I could tell the others what you just told me? I mean, the others who are able to understand . . ." As his voice trailed off to a whisper, Kathryn knew that his thoughts, as had hers, had strayed to the young woman who might never hear what others had been telling her again, even though several members of the crew spent some of their rare and precious off-duty time talking and reading to Marla Gilmore, hoping to bring her back to consciousness with that old but still valid method.

"Of course you may. Thank you for your fine work."

"Just doing my duty, ma'am," he said, nodding respectfully to Commander Chakotay as he passed him near the door.

"What was that all about?" Chakotay asked.

"He asked me about what's been said about the Equinox crew in the data stream transmissions."

"And what did you tell him?"
Janeway sighed. "That they've been favorable--which is true--but I have to admit they've been more 'lukewarm' than whole-hearted, as I once had hoped."

After his non-committal murmur, she continued, "I couldn't bring myself to tell him that while Starfleet has agreed to consider the 'Equinox 5's' time on Voyager as 'time served,' their Starfleet careers are over as soon as the ship returns to the Alpha Quadrant. Whether they will be paroled or serve longer sentences will be at the discretion of Starfleet, or whichever court ends up with jurisdiction. My final report will be a major factor in the decision, but what can I say? None of them ever volunteer for missions. They're not a part of the crew's social life. They do their duty, and nothing more."

"It's hard to do more when the opportunity isn't there."

"What do you mean?" she asked sharply.

"That Starfleet has already taken a position on their fate, and unless we--or you, more likely--step up to defend them, they might have been better off finding a planet in the Delta Quadrant and settling down there--or even stayed with Captain Ransom to the bitter end."

"I can't believe I'm hearing you say that!"

"Why not? Unless we find a way to make some more huge jumps forward in our journey, we'll be traveling for another two decades, at the very least. How can anyone say that the 'Equinox Five' will never do something heroic enough to redeem themselves before then? They've never been ASKED to do anything for the ship--in fact, they've been actively discouraged from doing so by their circumstances."

Janeway became even icier. "That's absurd. Look at what Marla Gilmore did in Engineering!"

"The exception that proves the rule. B'Elanna has been assigning engineering tasks by ability. She never worries about who is Starfleet, who's Maquis, or who came from the Equinox. Marla was in Engineering when we needed her, and she defended the ship without regard to her personal safety--and may have sacrificed her life because of it. Will your report to the admiralty be 'lukewarm' about what she did?"

"You already know the answer to that, Commander," she said in the dangerous tone that indicated
the topic was to be changed immediately, if not sooner.

He did not or would not pick up on her warning. "Kathryn, you've ordered me to give them the 'leftover' duty assignments. They work more split shifts than anyone else on board. They're always exhausted. It's hard to be a part of the social life of the ship when you always seem to be on duty during ship-wide get-togethers. Yet in a crisis, especially this last one with the Borg, they all behave admirably. Maybe giving them working patterns and responsibility like the rest of the crew will make them more a part of the ship's life. It isn't ethical to complain about their lack of shouldering of responsibility otherwise."

She almost snapped back "Enough!" but what he'd said hit too close to home. There was a lot of truth in what he'd said--too much for her to be comfortable about it, especially now, when five crew deaths in one attack had already frayed her nerves.

In a deceptively calm voice, in a deliberate attempt to quell her own uneasy conscience, Kathryn allowed, "I admit, the surviving fragment of the *Equinox* crew has served competently since they've arrived. That they've done it without complaint, as you claim, speaks in their favor. Still, rehabilitating their reputations with Starfleet may be an insurmountable task. You know the excuse, 'I was under orders,' historically hasn't carried any weight as a defense when it comes to atrocities like those perpetuated on the *Equinox."

"I can't deny that, but from what Captain Ransom said about them when he sent them over--that they were "the best of them"--and from what they've let slip in dribs and drabs to us, it's also clear they were very unwilling participants. We know at first-hand what those alien attacks were like. How much was 'atrocity,' and how much was self-defense for these five?"

"Stealing equipment from our ship . . ."

"Lessing and Gilmore have expressed their remorse for participating in actions against *Voyager*. They were manipulated by their superior officers to steal that equipment, Kathryn. You know that. How do the brass in Starfleet feel about some of the actions we've taken? Our crew follows your orders even when they don't like them . . ."

"I can think of one who questions them vigorously at times."

His intense expression broke into a quick, but genuine grin at that. "Not that certain people listen to me most of the time. And I *do* follow your orders anyway. Most of the time."
She nodded her head affirmatively, her lips pursed. Almost all the time was more accurate, but she let it pass. She could see him getting wound up to say more.

"Kathryn, we both know the lengths you've gone to in the data stream transmissions, insisting that Starfleet pardon the Maquis based upon their records and the fact that they are just as much 'your' crew as the regular Starfleet members have been. Now, I'm asking you to do the same thing with our Equinox people. After the way they've been performing for the past year and a half, and after Marla's heroism, let's assign them tasks so they can show whether or not they are worthy of pardons from Starfleet."

As peeved as she was by his frankness ('What else is new?' she though cynically), she may have been even more peeved at herself for forgetting to rescind that punitive order regarding the schedules of the Equinox crew. She'd never meant for it to go on so long. She just never thought about lifting the order before--probably because she did her best to avoided thinking about the Equinox crew at all. Thinking about them meant thinking about her own behavior towards Noah Lessing. Not her finest hour, not by a long shot.

After several very long seconds of heavy silence, Kathryn finally said, in an astringent tone, "I will concede your point they will be tested better with a schedule more in line with the rest of the crew's. From now on, give them assignments with some risk, so we can see how far they've come. It will be up to them to show what they can do with this opportunity. Now, can we talk about whatever it was you wanted to tell me when you came in?"

"Harry found out why the computer doesn't seem to know where anyone is. It's not a computer problem, actually--it's a sensor problem. The Borg's invasion of the computer core crashed the connection between the monitoring function of the internal sensors and the location programs of . . ."

"I don't need a long explanation, I just need it fixed! It's a priority!"

"Harry reprogrammed the computer, and he has a crew working on fixing the sensors. He estimates the system should be working properly again in less than an hour."

"Wonderful! Now, for the next item on the list . . ."

"Dinner?"

"That's not next, Commander."
"It ought to be."

She arched her brow, wanting to say something about who was taking orders now, but then sighed. She needed some down time to relax—and she was hungry. "You win, Commander. But we'll stop by Sickbay first, if you don't mind."

All trace of light banter left his voice and expression. "I don't mind at all. I was thinking about suggesting it myself."

Smoothing her hand over the front of her uniform, she wearily took to her feet. She really was famished, but first things must come first.

="/==

Although she was able to get Icheb to talk to her during dinner, Naomi couldn't help being worried about her friend, and she couldn't think of a way to help him. When Seven had first come aboard Voyager, Naomi had been petrified of her. After a time, her fear turned into a hero-worship second only to that which Naomi felt about her captain. When the children of the Borg came on board, she became a friend to them all, but especially, to Mezoti. Once the others left the ship, leaving Icheb behind, Naomi became his close friend. She thought she'd learned how to cheer him up when he was upset or worried about something.

The Borg attack, and especially, the Queen's casual dismissal of him, had affected Icheb deeply. He'd seemed more upbeat when they'd left the medical lab, but all the way to the mess hall, his mind kept wandering away from their conversation. In the turbolift, she'd even asked Icheb, "Are you hearing the Borg Queen again?"

"No," he replied, giving her that quicksilver grin of his that she loved, but by the time they arrived at the mess hall and got in line, he'd become distracted again. Icheb was silent when Neelix asked him what he wanted to eat until Naomi poked him with her elbow, prompting him to say, "Your special." Since Icheb hated Gurullian Chowder and steamed Chadre-Kab, Naomi asked him if he were sure before ordering her own chowder. And now, unsurprisingly, his chowder was getting cold while he picked over his Chadre-Kab.

She sighed, then cheered up when she saw her mother get into the line. Naomi waved. Maybe Mom would be able to think of a conversational subject to stop Icheb's attention from wandering to who knows where.
"Oh, no, not again!" Sam Wildman groaned, pasting on a weary smile as she returned her daughter's wave. After working in Sickbay all morning and then drawing an extra half shift helping out in Engineering, the last thing she wanted to do was to choke down dinner--again--while Icheb gazed soulfully at her oblivious daughter. Enough, already! Was having a quiet meal with her daughter, and only her daughter--so much to ask?

"Samantha! How are you doing today?" Neelix said cheerily, although with a bit less enthusiasm as usual.

"Exhausted. And you?"

The Talaxian chuckled. "That about sums it up. I think everybody feels that way. Repairs, repairs, repairs. And of course, we're pretty short-handed everywhere, covering for the people in Sickbay. And everyone is hurting pretty badly over those who never even made it to Sickbay. A lot for a morale officer to do."

"All that, and cooking for us, too," Sam said, glancing back towards the table where her daughter sat, feeling a little ashamed she'd been thinking such mean-spirited thoughts about Icheb. Even from this far away, she could see the haunted look on his face. Tonight, she had a hunch, calf-eyed looks at Naomi wouldn't be that much of a problem.

"Speaking of my cooking, you still need to make a dinner selection," Neelix said. "And if you don't see anything you like, there's always the replicator."

"No, your chowder and Chadre-Kab will be fine. Maybe a little salad would be good, too."

"Chowder and Chadre-Kab it is. Why don't you come around into the kitchen and put your salad together yourself--I've run out of the greens I mixed earlier. And if you don't mind my company, I think I'll have some myself. Chell just finished his meal, and he's my relief."

"Of course, I'd be delighted to have you eat with us tonight."
"Good. If I don't miss my guess, my morale officer skills may be needed at your table, too."

"Oh, my, Neelix. Am I letting it show that much?"

Sam wasn't sure that he'd heard her. Chell bustled into the kitchen at that moment, and Neelix didn't answer her right away. When Neelix had finished updating Chell on the main and readily available dinner choices, however, he stood next to her, ostensibly helping her build her salad, saying in a sotto voce tone, "I was referring to Icheb, but is something wrong with you, Samantha?"

"It's Icheb. He's a very nice boy, but Neelix, he's always there! When he isn't eating in here with us, he's eating with us in our quarters. Or he and Naomi are studying together . . . and when he isn't there physically, Naomi is saying, 'Icheb did so-and-so today,' or 'Icheb says I should do that.' Or, 'What do you think Icheb will say about this?' It's driving me crazy. And the way he looks at her all the time . . . she's growing up fast enough, Neelix. I don't want her rushing into anything she can't handle." As she finished, Sam looked over at Chell, afraid she'd spoken loudly enough to hear. He was the ship's biggest gossip. The Bolian was busy talking to Tal Celes and Billy Telfer, however, and seemed unaware of the conversation going on in back of him.

Neelix murmured sympathetically, "I can imagine that's very trying. Adolescents are like that everywhere, you know."

"Adolescent? Naomi isn't even seven yet."

"Biologically she's close to seven, but she's sprouted up and looks more like a fourteen-year old human, hasn't she? Not that I've known any fourteen-year-old humans, of course."

"I'd like to say that makes me feel better, but it doesn't. What should I do, Neelix? I feel I need to cool things down a little, but do you think I should just let things follow their natural course?"

"Icheb is a fine young man. I really don't think he's going to create any problems for you. To tell you the truth, I was more than a little worried Naomi might get involved with someone who was much too old for her until Icheb came on board. Everyone else on the ship is at least twenty years older than she is."

"Oh, my, I never even thought of that! And she's almost always been around adults, so that could happen so easily!"
"Icheb isn't your usual adolescent, either. He's very serious--a little too task-oriented for someone his age, if you ask me. Naomi is very good for him, too, you know."

"I know," Sam replied, picking up her tray and heading past the chattering Chell towards the table where, she could now see, her daughter was keeping up her end of a very one-sided conversation.

"Besides, I'd be happy to serve as my goddaughter's chaperone."

Sam laughed ruefully. "I accept!" She didn't know whether to be happy or sad about the offer; but she had to admit, she felt better now that he'd made it.

As they sat down at the table with the young people, Neelix called out, "Well, well, how are the two of you doing with your studies? It can't be easy, what with all this confusion. Naomi, when are you taking your entrance exams with Mr. Tuvok? Have you been helping her, Icheb? No fair giving her the answers, now . . . that would be cheating!"

As the Talaxian chattered away, immediately engaging Icheb in small talk and not permitting him the luxury of dwelling upon whatever had been bothering him, Sam acknowledged to herself just how good Neelix was at his job--or jobs. They were lucky to have him.
Ethical Considerations I: Act 2

Act 2

"... afterwards there came a King's son into that country, and heard an old man tell how there
should be a castle standing behind the hedge of thorns, and that there a beautiful enchanted Princess
named Rosamund had slept for a hundred years, and with her the King and Queen, and the whole
court...."

As he made his final rounds and waited for B'Elanna to send word she would be leaving
Engineering at last, the soft voice of Harry Kim followed Tom around the room. Ever since he'd
come in with Captain Janeway and Commander Chakotay, who had congratulated Harry on his
successful reprogramming of the computer core to cooperate with the sensors, the ensign had been
reading to the silent Marla Gilmore. The old fairy tale was all too fitting a subject for a comatose
patient. Tom just hoped this sleeping beauty would wake up. It wasn't looking so good for her at the
moment.

Despite her sternly-voiced qualms about their ineffectiveness when it came to repairing neural
pathways, Seven had agreed to allow her nanoprobe to be used on Marla today. Why not? Nothing
else had worked. But Seven's reservations seemed to be well-founded. The neural monitor fixed to
Marla's forehead had detected no change in her brain wave pattern. They had to hope to meet a
species that had a cure for such serious head trauma which was, as yet, unknown to Federation
medicine. The only alternative treatment the EMH had been able to identify was to place Marla in
stasis for the rest of the trip home. That might not take a hundred years, as in the fairy tale, but Marla
would be a sleeping beauty just the same. And it might be better to put Darren Pierce in stasis, too,
before his increasingly intractable seizures shorted out his brain completely.

No wonder Tom preferred sitting at the helm to medic duty. Even breaking the news to the captain
that his nifty maneuver had ripped a hole in her ready room wall hadn't been as tough as
contemplating the netherworld of life in which Gilmore and Pierce were hovering.

"... at last he came to the tower, and went up the winding stair, and opened the door of the little
room where Rosamund lay. And when he saw her looking so lovely in her sleep, he could not turn
away his eyes; and presently, he stooped and kissed her. She awaked and opened her eyes, and
looked very kindly on him. And she rose, and they went forth together. The King and the Queen and
the whole court awoke and gazed on each other with great eyes of wonderment . . ."

"Torres to Paris"
"Paris here. I hope you're ringing me to let me know you're delegating jobs to your staff for the rest of the night."

"As a matter of fact, I am. Five minutes--ten minutes, tops, and I'll be there."

Tom knew that meant twenty minutes, minimum, but he kept his voice even in reply, "I'll meet you half-way. Paris out."

"... lived very happily together until their lives' end." Harry's voice ended with a flourish.

Tom was about to say, "Bravo," but the word died on his lips at the expression he saw on his friend's face. Oh, no, not again! Not many women were as unattainable as those in a sleep as unnatural as Marla Gilmore's!

"How do you think she looks, Tom? Don't you think there's a little more color in her cheeks today than yesterday?"

"Possibly," Tom replied, noncommittally.

Harry glanced up, his face flushing. "Now, it's not like that, Tom. I'm not doing it again. I'm not falling for her."

"Did I say you were?" Tom couldn't keep the light touch out of his voice, however, and tried to mitigate it by saying, "I actually think this time, you might be onto something. She's not a hologram, or a... well, I don't have to do the whole litany again, do I? Marla's a very nice girl. I think she'd be good for you."

"If she ever wakes up."

Tom couldn't deny that. Unfortunately, it went without saying. "Have a little faith in the Doc and me, Harry. We'll find the answer. She's alive, so there's still hope."

Harry shrugged in agreement, but as he opened his mouth to say something more, the doors to Sickbay swished open. Noah Lessing and Angelo Tesson entered. "How is she today, Lieutenant?"
Noah asked Tom.

As he responded to the question, Tom saw Harry stand up and fetch a second stool, which he placed on the other side of the biobed from where he had been sitting. When Tom finished his discourse on Marla's unchanged condition, Harry handed the book to the *Equinox* crewmen. "Noah, why don't you and Angelo take over. I'm going to get back down to Engineering. Maybe I can convince B'Elanna to call it a night, Tom."

"I should be going, too. Doc? You there? I'm leaving. My shift was over long ago." Tom called out.

The air shimmered in the doorway of the Sickbay office as the EMH appeared. "Yes, yes, Mr. Paris. You may go, as long as you drag your wife back home to get some rest. She's sleeping for two, now, and she hasn't been doing the best job of it for the last few days."

"Nobody has, Doc," Tom said resignedly.

"True. Go on, then, and get some. Both of you," the Doctor scolded.

After making a quick report to the EMH, Tom followed Harry out of Sickbay, catching up with him at the turbolift. "Harry? Can I ask you something? Why do you always disappear whenever Noah or the other *Equinox* crew come by to see Marla? They won't bite!"

The ensign shrugged again as he called out the decks to which Tom and he needed to go. "They need some time to be alone with their friend. I can understand that. So I let them."

Tom did not miss the plaintiveness in his friend's voice. "Harry, would you want to stop by for something to eat in our quarters? I'm sure B'Elanna would . . ."

". . . bite off my head for inserting myself into your personal time," Harry laughed. "Go on home, Tom. I'll get her home to you soon."

Tom smiled gratefully as the turbolift doors opened at his deck. "I owe you one, Har."

"You owe me a whole bunch! But don't worry. I don't plan to collect tonight."
As the door closed behind Tom, Harry sighed. He almost wished Tom had gotten on his back for his "unattainable" women tonight. It would irritate him, which might take his mind off his loneliness. Harry would give anything to have someone to go home to every night, the way Tom did.

Harry walked into the controlled chaos that was Engineering in full repair mode, nodding a silent greeting to Seven as she passed by him. Even she looked tired, but then, everyone was. His department was actually catching up, now that the computers were working right again. He could hear B'Elanna's voice, almost too mellow, considering the circumstances. After catching Seven's eye and consulting with her, they approached B'Elanna together.

"Lieutenant Torres, it is time that you left. Twenty hour days cannot be good for either you or your fetus," Seven admonished.

"Don't say it! Tom put you up to this, didn't he?"

"He knows better than that," Harry said. "But you know, maybe Seven and I can put together a maturation chamber for the baby, B'Elanna. Then you wouldn't have to rest at all . . . "

"All right, all right! I'm going! Just make sure you get every one of those injectors back into alignment by 0700 tomorrow!" B'Elanna ordered.

"We will comply," Seven replied, exchanging an amused grin with Harry.

"One minute, thirty-eight seconds," Vorik pronounced as the door closed behind B'Elanna.

"Excuse me?" Harry asked, turning towards the Vulcan engineer, who was unfolding himself from underneath the console he was repairing.

"That was most efficiently done. We have been trying to send Lieutenant Torres to her husband for the past two hours. You managed to complete the task less than two minutes, and after only two comments. Congratulations, I believe, are in order."
"Thanks, Vorik. I think."

After consulting with Seven about which repair task to assume, Harry watched her as she strolled away from him towards her own set of duties. He couldn't help enjoying the view--and sighing. A lost opportunity there, too. Maybe Tom was right. Could Harry be setting himself up for the "loneliness of command" in the future, the way starship captains often felt themselves compelled to be? 'Except,' Harry had to admit to himself ruefully, 'I can't even get myself at a rank higher than ensign!'

="/\=

"How old do you think she looks tonight, Commander?" Janeway commented.

Chakotay glanced up from his food and watched Naomi as she passed by their table with her mother and Icheb. "I'm not really sure. Not like a seven year old, though."

"The way she's growing, she'll have gone from pre-teen to adult in less than a year. She looks thirteen or fourteen now, and a month ago, she didn't look a day over twelve!"

"If you say so. I'm not an expert in the growth rates of young girls. Particularly half-Ktarian ones."

"I don't think anyone is an expert in half-Ktarian growth rates."

"I think you're right," he grinned in reply. "Although I'd say that Icheb is willing to learn."

"Poor Samantha. She's been . . . "

The captain's remark was interrupted by her commbadge.

"Captain Janeway, I apologize for interrupting your meal" Tuvok said from his post on the bridge.
"We were just finishing, Commander. What is it?"

"We have detected a derelict ship floating in space approximately three light years from here. We can detect no life signs from this distance."

"Any sign of what type of ship it is?" she asked cautiously.

"It does not have the configuration of a Borg vessel, Captain."

"Call the rest of the senior officers to the bridge. We're on our way," she said with a crooked smile as she broke the connection and gathered up her dinner tray. "Commander, I've got a hunch our luck is about to take a turn for the better."

"And I hope you're right."
Ethical Considerations: Act 3

Act 3

"The ship is not totally derelict. Some systems are running at a bare minimum level. They appear to be on standby," Seven reported crisply from her favorite post, next to the viewscreen in the conference room.

"And you're sure that no one is on board?" Janeway asked. "Some forms of life are so different from ourselves they don't always register, especially from this far away."

"We'll continuously make contact with the vessel as we approach, Captain. That shouldn't be a problem," Harry said.

Stifling a yawn, B'Elanna said, "We're not approaching anything until the ship repairs are finished. That won't be for a couple of days, unless I skip . . ." This time her yawn was unstifled, "skip . . . certain diagnostics that we can't afford to skip."

Tom, not even bothering to try to stifle his grin, added, "The Delta Flyer is ready to go. We could take a team over there to check it out, Captain, to see what might be salvageable for Voyager's use."

From the conference room viewscreen, the way he used to participate in briefings in the days before his mobile emitter, when he had no personal access to areas outside of Sickbay or the holodecks, the EMH said, "Mr. Paris, if I can't even spare the time to leave Sickbay for this meeting, I can't spare you. With six patients still requiring treatment here, two of them comatose, and another dozen resting in their quarters needing periodic monitoring, I require a full medical staff--not that I have one. As my primary field medic, your services in particular will be needed for the foreseeable future."

A subdued Tom replied, "Of course, Doc. That 'we' was figurative. He's right, Captain. I really can't be the one to go on this mission."

Harry cleared his throat. "Ops is in very good hands. Lang and Peterson worked with me on the computer repairs. They're extremely competent. We can trust them to finish up anything that still needs to be done. I'd like to volunteer to be in command of this mission," Harry offered, then suddenly remembered himself. "Unless Commander Chakotay would like to be in command and can be spared, of course."
Janeway exchanged a quick glance with her first officer. After almost seven years in the Delta Quadrant, his minuscule nod of agreement and the glint of amusement in his eye was all she needed to know his stance. Turning to her security officer, she took Tuvok’s steady gaze and absence of comment for his assent, as well. "I don't believe I can spare having either Chakotay or Tuvok off \textit{Voyager} at the moment, Harry. The mission is yours. Assemble a team and prepare to depart as soon as you're ready.

"Aye, aye, Captain," Harry replied enthusiastically.

"We'll announce that we're looking for volunteers, Harry, but you might want to consider taking Noah Lessing," Chakotay casually commented. "I believe he can be spared. There probably won't be a lot who can go who have his wide range of experience."

"I'll do that, Commander," Harry agreed.

Janeway refrained from adding anything to Chakotay's suggestion, although her first impulse had been to nominate someone else. Truthfully, he probably was one of the few whose duties would permit him to go on a mission like this. Janeway thought about offering Harry a few other possibilities but was interrupted by an odd noise from the side of the table, where Lieutenants Paris and Torres were seated. Everyone's attention was drawn in that direction, just in time to catch a glimpse of a dozing engineer's head being caught, thanks to the quick pilot's reflexes of her husband, just before her forehead banged onto the conference room table.

"May the chief field medic have permission to accompany the chief engineer to her quarters, Captain?" Tom asked as muffled guffaws erupted from Harry. "I've just prescribed several hours of sleep, and she seems more than ready to begin her therapy."

The captain grinned broadly at her helmsman. "I think that's my cue for ending this meeting. Harry, if you need anything, just let the commander or me know. Dismissed."

"What?" B'Elanna said blearily, as Tom helped her up from her chair and out the door.

After a few whispered words with Tuvok and Chakotay before he left the conference room, Harry stopped by his quarters to fetch his flight bag and hustled to the shuttle bay. It was still rare, although no longer unheard of, for him to command a mission. Other officers of higher rank who were not on the senior staff might have been assigned by the captain instead. If he let his true feelings show, he'd be dancing to the \textit{Delta Flyer}. 
When Harry arrived at the shuttle bay, he had a surprise waiting for him. His volunteers were there: Noah Lessing, Angelo Tessoni, Brian Sofin, and James Morrow, all the *Equinox* crewmen, minus Marla Gilmore, of course; Tal Celes; and William Telfer. After Chakotay's comment, he more or less expected Lessing and was pleased about that, since he had experience as an officer even though he was only a crewman now. He hadn't expected the others, and he had at least two more volunteers than he could reasonably take on the mission. At least there was one he could weed out without hurting any feelings.

"Brian, aren't you still on injury report from that shattered ankle?"

"Don't worry, Ensign Kim. Even injured, I'm all the 'muscle' you would want."

Everyone laughed.

"Seriously, I want to go along. This is the first away mission that I've had a chance to go on for a long time. I'd like to do what I can for the ship . . . and for Marla. She'd want to go along, too, if she were able."

"That's sort of why we want to come, too, Ensign Kim. We want to do whatever we can--after Mortimer--" Tal seemed on the verge of tears, gulping audibly, and unable to finish out her thought.

Harry pondered the situation for a moment. He understood their motivations, but he couldn't take all of them. He didn't have much trouble making the decision on whom to take, however. Even though Telfer had participated in several away missions successfully in recent months, he almost never volunteered for any. The fact that he was asking for this mission was a definite plus, even if it was prompted by the loss of Mortimer Harren. Since he'd just been cleared for duty by the Doctor because of his own injuries from the attack, now might not be the best time for him to be off the ship. And he couldn't take the chance on Sofin right now.

"Lessing, Morrow, Tessoni, Tal, you're with me. I'm sorry, Brian. Our readings about this vessel aren't complete enough for me to be sure about the degree of danger to the mission. Until your ankle heals, you might be a liability. I'd rather you stay here and work on ship repairs--and to keep Marla company. With Noah and me gone, who's going to read to her?"

Although obviously disappointed, Brian smiled weakly. "Okay, Ensign. I'll take that as an order."
"You do that, Brian. Mr. Telfer--your talents would be better suited to staying here and working with Lang and Peterson on the computers--and anything else Lieutenant Torres has for you. She's got plenty to do."

"Yes, sir. Umm, is it true she fell asleep in the middle of your staff meeting?"

"You heard about that? Already? Boy, news sure gets around fast on this ship. Who told you?"

"Seven." Telfer replied.

"SEVEN! Now I've heard everything," Harry exclaimed, as the rest laughed.

Tal Celes remarked casually, as the laughter was winding down, "There hasn't been enough 'funny' to gossip about lately, you know? I think we all needed it."

The chuckling became more subdued, but there was no denying that the spirits of everyone seemed much brighter than they had been for the past few days. Having something positive to do did that for a crew, Harry decided, as he dismissed Telfer and Sofin and briefed the rest of his team on their duties for this mission. Going out into space and exploring the unknown—that's what this crew did best. He felt confident from seeing the enthusiasm that his team was displaying, especially the Equinox people. They'd be ready for anything.

```
So far, the trip had been routine. Harry was alert but relaxed, listening to his team joking with one another in between reports about the status of the Delta Flyer and the vessel towards which they were headed. They seemed more comfortable with each other than Harry had suspected—certainly more comfortable with each other than Harry was with any of them—but then, that made sense. The "Lower Decks" people spent more time with each other than they did with anyone on the senior staff. Harry felt the distance of being the one in command rather than being "just another one of the team," as he usually was. It wasn't a wholly pleasurable feeling.

From tactical, Noah asked, "May I ask you something, Tal?"

"Sure. Don't promise I'll answer, though," she said teasingly.
```
"Why does Captain Janeway call you Crewman Celes all the time? I thought Bajoran family names come first."

"They do."

"So . . . " Noah continued.

She sighed. "Somebody at Starfleet goofed when I came on board Voyager. The crew manifest listed me as 'Celes Tal.' Everybody called me 'Crewman Celes' for the longest time."

"Didn't you ask them to correct the mistake?" asked Angelo Tessoni, from his seat at the engineering station.

"I just let it go. I didn't want to cause a problem."

Angelo said, "But they got your name wrong! Didn't it bug you?"

"Well, yeah, of course. But eventually, Tabor told Lieutenant Torres my name was reversed, so she had the manifest corrected."

"So why do you let the captain still call you 'Celes'?" Noah asked.

"Hey, the captain can call me anything she wants. I'll bet she calls you 'Noah,' doesn't she?"

"Not that I know of. Not to my face, anyway," Noah replied pensively. "But you're right. If she wanted to call me by my first name, I wouldn't object."

Celes, oblivious to the change in Noah's mood, turned to Harry. "What about you, Ensign Kim? Does she call you Harry?"

"Occasionally."
"There you go," Celes said. "She can call me what she wants, but the rest of you better call me 'Tal' unless we get really friendly."


"Don't start, Angelo!" Noah groaned. "If you let him get to flirting with you, Tal, next thing you know, he'll be giving you flowers and candy and sending sickening love notes to you on your computer . . ."

"And this is supposed to be a problem?" Tal giggled, glancing towards the engineering station, where Angelo was leering, but with a big grin on his face. "But not now! We're on a mission!"

"It's about time somebody noticed, people!" Harry said, but with a chuckle, to let everyone know he wasn't really bothered by their banter. "Any more ideas about the energy readings from our target, TAL?" He exaggerated her name to let her know that, despite the humorous exchange, he knew she was deadly serious about how she wanted to be called by the crew.

Crisply, she answered, "They're still fluctuating, sir. It could be from back-up generator power that's starting to run down. Whatever it is, I can't identify the type of energy source. It's either something very different from what we're used to, or it's being masked in some way. It almost looks like there's some sort of dampening field operating, now that we're getting close, but I can't tell for sure."

Noah added, "The ship is very badly damaged. If its original configuration is like most we've seen, what I think used to be the bridge seems to have been ripped right off. There's definitely some sort of shielding and energy-force activated hull integrity protection in that part of the ship. And I agree with Tal--I can't tell what kind of energy source they're using, either. And this thing is even bigger that we thought. You could fit three, maybe even four Voyagers inside it, even without the bridge area."

"Can you tell what caused the damage?"

Noah was silent for a few seconds, and when it came, his reply was subdued. "I'm getting Borg weapons signatures, sir."

The mood in the cabin changed palpably to one of heightened alertness. Tal was the first to speak. "I'm not getting any sign of Borg life signs or vessels in the vicinity, but shouldn't we warn
"The weapons fire doesn't seem to have been recent," Noah observed. "From the rate of residual energy decay, I'd say it's been a few weeks since the damage occurred. At least thirty days, probably more."

Harry nodded, relieved, but he felt compelled to signal down to the lower compartment, "Morrow, we've detected signs of Borg involvement as the cause of this vessel's damage. It's not recent, so we hope there won't be any surprises, but we'll approach with due caution."

"Understood, sir" Morrow replied.

"Tal, send a message advising Voyager of our findings--but make sure to include there's no sign of Borg activity in the area now. We're about due to check in with the captain anyway."

"Aye, sir."

Quelling an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach as he switched to external communications, Harry followed mission protocols and called, "Alien vessel--this is Ensign Harry Kim of the Federation vessel Delta Flyer. We are willing and able to render any assistance you may require. Alien vessel--this is the Delta Flyer . . ."

If any of the away team had been inclined to perceive humor in the way Harry referred to the Delta Flyer as a Federation vessel rather than a shuttle, no trace could be seen on their faces. The magic word "Borg" had ruthlessly destroyed the pleasant mood of camaraderie, transforming them back into a team of professionals, at work in a dangerous galaxy.
The instrument reading on the console screen shifted rapidly as Icheb entered his data. Coiled strands of DNA depicted on the display flew by as he analyzed and re-analyzed critical sections of the sample tagged as "Brunali--male." With a quick nod and a humorless smile flickering on his lips, Icheb highlighted the section he'd been looking for and made a tiny, but potentially momentous modification to the order of base pairs making up the strand's "ladder." Satisfied, he turned to a second bank of instruments to analyze another microscopic sample. "Borg Nanoprobe--modification type beta 5--modified Stardate 51476.3."

Carefully coordinating the two instruments, Icheb planted the modified DNA into the nanoprobe, one of several generations which the Doctor and Seven had altered for medical purposes after removing the factors which the unmodified miniature machines could present. These were "safe" nanoprobe which would not cause Borg implants to form. Icheb hoped this particular modification to the nanoprobe would serve the opposite purpose--to a Borg. None of the power of these nanoprobe was wasted on creating Borg implants. All of it was dedicated to the transference of a virus into the body of a Borg drone, a virus even more lethal to cybernetic implants of the Borg kind than those he carried within his own body, courtesy of his loving parents--if he had planned things correctly.

After confirming that the nanoprobe had, in fact, become infused with the chosen genetic material and had been transformed into becoming an infectious agent which would not need to rely on an assimilated humanoid body to serve that purpose, Icheb leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Rather than feeling triumphant, as one might expect, a wave of sadness overwhelmed him.

The Brunali had developed gene manipulation techniques to a degree unknown to Federation scientists, even though their understanding of nanoprobe technology was quite inferior to that of the Federation--and downright primitive compared to the knowledge of the Borg on the subject. The Borg, after all, depended upon nanoprobe for reproduction, using them to steal the beings of other races by transmogrifying them into drones. *Voyager's* personnel had become intimately acquainted with nanotechnology after they were drawn into the Delta Quadrant. The survival of everyone on board *Voyager* depended upon the acquisition of this knowledge from the Borg, and they'd learned their lessons well. Realistically, the Brunali could never have done what Icheb was attempting to do with his modifications. They'd needed another method of deployment: the sacrifice of one of their young: Icheb.

When he really considered the problem, Icheb could rationalize why his parents did what they did. What choice did they have? Yet on another level, he simply could not comprehend how they could have coldly created their only child to be a weapon of destruction, even as he was destroyed by the accomplishment of that goal. They'd bred him as some races bred animals for ingestion as food. He
was to live only a short life, with no opportunity to function as a grown, independent being, capable of making choices of career and family—in essence, capable of having a future of his own. Desperate beings fearing for their extinction as a separate people might well conceive of such a desolate plan; he understood that. But why did his parents choose to be the ones to sacrifice their own son for this purpose? Were they chosen by lot to contribute the body to be impregnated with the virus? Had they never really wanted a child of their own at all and were therefore willing to provide one for the community, for the greater good? Had he always simply been an object to be used, rather than a person to be loved for his own sake? And if so, how different was that than the way the Borg utilized their drones?

Seeing the way things were on Voyager had opened Icheb's eyes to how precious the bond between parent and child could be. Ensign Wildman cherished Naomi. He recognized that Lieutenants Paris and Torres had fought over their daughter's genetic inheritance for her future good, as disparate as their preferences for how she would look and act in that future life might have been. Seven had taken on the responsibility for Icheb, Mezoti, Rebi, Azan, and for a very short time, and though initially reluctant, the baby from the maturation chamber. Seven continued to provide Icheb with a sense of being nurtured as an individual worthy of respect now that he was the only one of the "Children's Collective" remaining on board Voyager. Her affection was of the sisterly type, he presumed, yet it was genuine. He never thought she said or did anything concerning him when she did not have his welfare in mind. Even Captain Janeway had shown, many times, she was as much a mother to her crew as she was their superior officer. She might not always be perfect in the way she behaved (or so the crew said to each other in private), but she'd sacrificed herself to the Borg to save her crew, as well as drones she'd never met, in the matter of Unimatrix Zero.

His own parents had chosen to send Icheb to be assimilated. Twice.

Despite the bitterness he increasingly felt about his parents' treatment—or at least his mother's, since he perceived his father had been coerced into agreeing to the second sacrifice—whenever he recalled that cold, cruel voice in his head, discounting him as an irrelevancy, as unworthy of consideration as a wayward thought, Icheb knew he must use his terrible legacy to save those he cared about so very much on Voyager. If it were his destiny to be the weapon by which the Borg should lose their own futures, in payment for robbing so many beings of their birthright, than it must be so. The Borg must be utterly destroyed if the peoples of the galaxy were ever to have the chance to live in peace.

His parents may have provided the means, but if he had to sacrifice his own body and life to do it, at least this time, it would be by his own choice, not someone else's. Icheb would be the one to prevent those who would be the Borg's next victims from being assimilated. He would protect the people of Voyager, who had accepted him as one of them even though he was an alien to the peoples of their own quadrant. And he would save the most precious person he knew from becoming one of the living lost: Naomi Wildman.

Whenever he thought of Naomi becoming one of the assimilated, he felt like an ancient being who had watched terrible things happen that he had been helpless to stop. It was as if he suddenly experienced a growth spurt as rapid and extensive as the one which had transformed Naomi from a
child to a girl on the verge of becoming a woman in only a few short months. In his case, the transformation had been from youth to old age.

Yet he also felt something more, an all-encompassing feeling of tenderness and warmth, a longing to share life with another person. Though he had observed others who shared this before, he had never felt it for himself—until now.

For some time Icheb had recognized he had "feelings" for Naomi, but now he had a name for those feelings. He was in love with her. Hearing her name was a song that thrilled his soul. He was certain he loved her every bit as much as Lieutenant Paris and Lieutenant Torres loved each other. He would gladly sacrifice his life to save Naomi, if he had to. It would be much better, of course, if he didn't have to.

If these nanoprobes worked the way he hoped, he wouldn't need to lose his own life to protect hers. These nanoprobes would act as the carriers of contagion. They would become the unsuspected nemesis of the Borg—recognized by the Borg as their own invention, totally innocuous, a normal part of their bodies. They would not be seen as dangerous. Nothing about them would cause the Borg protective response of adaptation. Yet the virus they contained would separate each drone from the rest of the Collective by destroying their implants and cutting them off from communicating with the Hive. And without that communication, the Borg Queen could not order the destruction of any infected vessels. After the drones occupying the cubes, spheres, and scouts were dead, the nanoprobes would remain, lurking within vessels devoid of their malevolent life forms, but ready and waiting to be retrieved and reused by the Borg. They would spread to other ships, cutting more drones off from the Hive, until, if all went well, even to the Queen's Unicomplex itself.

Icheb had tried to find a way for the severance to be transmitted through the communication lines of the Borg. He had not yet succeeded in this goal, but he felt he was getting close to discovering the secret. The Queen could do it, so there must be a way. And when he found that way, either by destroying the drones or the network that linked them together, the threat to the galaxy would end.

Then there would be time for a peaceful journey to the Alpha Quadrant with his friends on Voyager. There would be warlike races along the way, of course, like the Hirogen or the Vardwaar or others he had learned about from Voyager's logs. Icheb was confident, however, that Voyager could survive. As they traveled, Naomi would finish growing up and become the beautiful woman he knew she would be. There would be time for him to win over Ensign Wildman, who sometimes looked at him with a sour expression when he was with Naomi, as if she didn't really want him around, and . . .

"Seven of Nine to Icheb. Icheb, are you there?"

"Icheb here."
"Is your comm unit malfunctioning? I have been trying to reach you for one minute, twenty-seven seconds."

"I apologize, Seven. I did not hear your communication."

"You should go to the Doctor for an examination . . . unless . . . you are not hearing the Borg Queen through your transceivers again, are you?"

"No. I was concentrating on my experiments in the medical laboratory."

"I require your assistance in Astrometrics. The captain has asked us to maximize the efficiency of our sensors. Ensign Kim has reported suspected Borg activity in the area of the Delta Flyer. Their sensors are not as sensitive as the ones on this vessel."

"I will come as soon as the instruments have finished recording the data from my last experiment . . . ."

"Come now. Set your instruments to save your data as it is collected by your instruments. You can retrieve your results later."

After a moment's hesitation, Icheb answered, "I will comply. Icheb out." While he could not completely shut down the computer terminal where he was working without ruining the nanoprobe modifications, he could clear the "telltale" display screens from showing the data they were collecting, replacing them with the "Instrument in data collection mode--do not disengage" message. Seven had correctly assessed the situation. If the Borg were still in this region of space, Astrometrics was the priority.

After checking the screens one last time, satisfied that his experiment was proving to be a success, Icheb cleared the screens and left the medical lab to join Seven in Astrometrics.

=\=

Ten minutes later, Ensign Wildman entered the medical lab, grumbling a bit under her breath about imperious medical holograms who ordered field medics around without giving them a chance to
breathe while on duty, let alone perform assigned tasks efficiently. And, of course, now Icheb had
been pulled into Astrometrics when they really needed his help in Sickbay. Where were those
nanoprobe samples he'd been working on, anyway? What progress had he made developing that
new therapy he claimed showed such promise in curing poor Gilmore and Pierce?

"Always underfoot when I don't want him around, and never nearby when I do--a typical male!" she
muttered as she checked out each bank of instruments in the lab.

Several of them had results glowing on their displays, but Sam couldn't find any that involved
nanoprobe samples delivering medicines or gene splices to brain tissue to make nerves regenerate. Two sets
in the corner read, "Data collection complete--auto save activated." Sam turned the displays back on
to see what data these instruments had recorded.

"Ah, hah! Nanoprobes! These must be the ones," Sam said to herself, then groaned in dismay.
Although the nanoprobes had been infused with genetic material, she could see from the patterns of
the DNA strands on the display that the genes spliced into them were viral in nature. She'd heard of
using viruses to introduce gene splices into the nuclei of cells. The old technique was first perfected
in the early twenty-first century, although introduced well before the turn of the millennium. This
virus didn't seem to be a carrier, though, but rather an infectious agent in and of itself. At least it
wasn't based on human genetics. It shouldn't cause any harm to Pierce or Gilmore, but Sam couldn't
see how it would help them, either. The gene source was Brunali, although it had been modified, so
it might turn out to be . . .

Sam sat down suddenly onto the stool in front of the console as her legs threatened to collapse
beneath her. Sam Wildman, whose primary function on board Voyager was as an exobiologist, not a
field medic, suddenly realized what this Brunali gene sample might represent. No harm to Pierce and
Gilmore, it was true, nor help, unfortunately; but to another species, this could mean death.

As much as she feared that other species, Sam could not condone what she suspected was being
done. The young man was supposed to be researching a cure for his crewmates, not following an
agenda his parents had established for him before he was born.

She should go to the captain about this, but there was danger for her if this should be a legitimate
attempt on Icheb's part to search for a cure. If she were wrong, Sam's own credibility and objectivity
might be called into question. She'd commented to several people, not just Neelix, that she was
wearying of Icheb's ubiquitous presence in her family life. She needed to do some research of her
own before making any accusations about him.

After signaling the EMH to confirm Icheb's absence and let the Doctor know she would remain in
the lab for a while, Sam set to work on analyzing the data Icheb had left behind. She had to be sure.
"Are you sure about those readings, Tal?" Harry asked.

"As sure as I can be with the way the energy fluctuations are interfering. Oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere, with traces of other gases--whoever built this ship was from an M-class planet originally, but it looks like the corridors aren't even two meters high. The headroom is even less in spots. Noah will have to crouch down and scuttle through."

The lanky ex-officer shook his head emphatically. "I'll be fine. I'll crawl if I have to, but I'm going."

Harry shook his head as he fastened the transporter remote to his upper arm. "No, you're not going. It would be better for you to stay behind and monitor us, Noah. Between you staying here and these remotes, we'll be able to get out of trouble if necessary. Once we're assured there's no danger, we'll call you over to crawl around, OK?"

Lessing shrugged his shoulders resignedly. "Aye, sir."

"Still no life signs, right, Tal?"

"No, sir. None."

The rest of his team was waiting calmly, expectantly, exactly what Harry expected to see. The point and rear guards carried the large phasers everyone called "big Betsy" when they weren't calling them "Janeway specials" (but only when the captain was nowhere around). Each member of the team could transport back to the Delta Flyer in a second with the remotes on their arms. Harry felt a surge of pride. It was a privilege to be their commanding officer.

"OK, people. Listen up. We don't know what we're getting into over there, but my gut's telling me to be cautious. Tessoni, you take point. Tal, and I will follow you. Morrow, you take the rear. Everyone, look sharp and be careful."
The team went into a crouch, to compensate for the tight quarters into which they were beaming. Harry gave the signal, and the tingling of the transporter heralded the illusion that it was the Delta Flyer disappearing, rather than the away team finding themselves in dim alien corridors that had appeared out of thin air.

"Who the heck built this thing, anyway? Hobbits?" Angelo muttered from his position in front of Harry, as alien deck solidified beneath their feet. Harry felt a little buoyant. The gravity was approximately 85% of Earth normal. That wouldn't be much help, though. Bouncing lightly around in such low corridors wasn't a pleasant prospect.

"I was thinking Snow White and the Seven Dwarves myself," Harry admitted before turning towards Tal. "How are the readings now?"

"Clearer. Whoever built this was pretty small. Look at the size of the manual hatch controls!"

In the shadows cast by greenish emergency lighting--unfortunately recalling Borg ship lighting, although without the steamy atmosphere associated with cubes and spheres--Harry noted that the controls were half the size of standard ones. The place looked like something out of a Trevis and Flotter program, or perhaps a nursery school playhouse. Harry's tricorder, like Tal's, revealed no hidden dangers, however. After a few more seconds, Harry signaled to Angelo to start forward through the passageway.

"Either this ship is a lot older and out of repair than it seems or the beings who owned this ship had strong little hands," Angelo reported, after grunting his way through opening the first door handle. Their progress was slow. All the hatch handles turned out to be stiff and difficult to turn, although eventually, Angelo got the knack of twisting them just right, stopping and listening for a few seconds after pushing the door open, and then stepping over the high threshold into the next section of corridor.

Harry thought it would have been a fairly benign trip, despite the need to keep his knees flexed slightly so that he wouldn't bang his bead, if the ceiling, walls and floors didn't have some sort of burn or blaster marks on them. While they found no sign of any bodies, the reason every section had a door which was locked down tight was obvious. There had been a fire fight here--and the absence of bodies suggested that there still might be some sort of beings living in this vessel, even though life signs were still absent.

"Do you think the Borg assimilated them all?" Tal asked, when they paused inside a junction in which three doors confronted them as they exited a fourth. She looked concerned, although her voice did not waver.
"Maybe it was an unmanned ship," Morrow said from his rearguard position as he stepped through the hatch. "Although that doesn't fit with all these locked doors, or the blaster marks, or the atmosphere in here, you know what I mean?"

As soon as Morrow mentioned it, Harry realized that was what had been bothering him. Life support was working perfectly. While that could happen on a "ghost ship," life support systems often started breaking down in a matter of days if not properly maintained. Despite the blaster marks, which looked pretty fresh, there was no trace of a burnt smell from the scorch marks as they passed through the corridors. Even scorched metal left a characteristic scent from the melted areas on its surface. Here, there was none. Harry could swear that somebody had cleaned up a mess on board this vessel.

Angelo finally managed to open a wide door, considerably larger than any others they'd encountered. One by one, the team stepped into a more open area, where the ceiling was almost two and a half meters from the floor. Even Noah Lessing could have straightened his back here. The floor space that stretched out before them was huge, dotted with many pillars in neat rows, supporting the ceiling above them. The lighting was much brighter here; it had a yellow-green tinge to it, although for all practical purposes the light was white to Harry's eyes. He detected an earthy sort of scent in the air in this area, mingled with the odor of machine oils and metal; the atmosphere was humid, almost damp. Between the pillars, Harry discerned many low consoles, coming up to about knee level on him. Most were covered with foliage in various hues of green.

"It's a farm!" Tessoni said, standing up straighter.

Harry held his crouch. The plants looked well cared for. Too well cared for to have been abandoned over a month ago. Even more ominously, he noticed that the indicator light on his remote had stopped blinking green, indicating the transporter lock had been broken. Hitting his comm badge, Harry called out, "Kim to Lessing. Noah, is everything OK out there?" There was no answer from the Delta Flyer.

Tal was the one who answered him. "Uh, oh! Ensign Kim? About those life sign readings? I'm starting to get them now. A lot of them."

Harry shouted, "Take cover!" and dove behind one of the consoles, which provided a little shelter. He heard energy weapons whining and the shriek of overstressed metal giving way as light fixtures tumbled to the floor around them—and over it all, incongruously, the babble of children's voices, screeching in an incomprehensible tongue.

 QUEUE
The first sight to greet Sam as she dragged herself into her quarters that night was that of her daughter's willowy form, stretched out upon their couch, one arm curved over her eyes as if to block the light—not that there was much to block. The lighting was barely at the twenty percent level. Sam felt a little guilty she was pleased to see that Naomi was napping. The last thing she wanted to do tonight was talk with her about a certain young man who would be a major topic of conversation if Naomi were awake. He always was—when he wasn't with them in the flesh. Today, the subject was even less palatable to her than usual. Sam crept as lightly as she could to her bedroom to remove her uniform and, possibly, stretch out for a nap herself.

"How's Marla, Mom?"

Sighing, Sam turned around to see Naomi struggling to sit up.

"No change."

Naomi shrugged, frowning. "I was afraid of that. If Icheb can't figure out how to adjust those nanoprobes to help her, she's never going to wake up, is she?"

Biting her lower lip to hold back a reply she might regret, Sam matched Naomi's shrug with one of her own and sat down at the table before answering. "I don't know, Honey. The Doctor is working pretty hard to find an answer. Lieutenant Paris and I have been spending extra time in the lab doing research, too. I never thought I'd ever do that, let alone see Tom working in the lab! None of us are ready to give up on her, or Darren, either."

"I know you won't, Mom," Naomi said, walking to her mother and giving her a big hug. Not for the first time, Sam thought about how brutal her exile in the Delta Quadrant would have been without having Naomi with her. She felt so sorry for her husband Greskrendtregk, who had been left behind on Deep Space Nine. He hadn't even known he had a daughter for the first two and a half years of Naomi's life, and he still only had contact with her through data stream letters. Sam felt the familiar ache, the longing to be together as a whole family, something they had never had the chance to be.

The warm family moment was shattered an instant later. "Mom, can we invite Icheb to dinner? I'm sure he could use a break, too. And you know he never eats unless I nag him."
"Not tonight, Naomi. I'd like to have a quiet family dinner, just the two of us. We've both been working so hard, and we've had so little time to speak with each other alone together lately. I'd like to talk about your day, not Icheb's. What did you do today? Did you work on the circuitry with Vorik again?"

"Yes, I worked with Vorik. We checked out the bioneural gel packs today. That's all I did. Not much to talk about, really. Now that we've talked about my day, can't we have Icheb over? I wanted him to help me study for my Academy entrance exams." Naomi's wheedling became a little sharper after her abrupt change of subject.

Sam's voice level went up a notch. "Naomi, be sensible. I'm sure Icheb doesn't want you tagging along with him so much of the time. He needs to have some time for himself, too."

"Tagging along'? What do you mean by that? Do you think I'm hanging onto him like some little kid?" Naomi's decibel level ratcheted higher.

"Oh, please! If I want to find you, all I have to do is find out where Icheb is, and there you are!"

"And is that so terrible? He's very intelligent! He helps me with my school work, and he keeps me company! And it keeps me from 'tagging along' with everyone else on this ship! I must really be bothering the adults on board if I'm bothering him!"

"Don't start, Naomi. I just want some peace and quiet tonight. I've got a lot on my mind. I'm tired, and I don't want Icheb here tonight. That's all there is to it!" Sam stood up and walked to her doorway, seething as she pulled her tunic over her head to change into casual clothing. The last thing she needed tonight was Icheb simpering in her quarters, knowing what she did about what he was up to and not having screwed up the courage to go to the captain about it yet. In fact, what she should do tonight was go to the captain. Problem was, Sam couldn't be sure if Captain Janeway would come down hard on Icheb for using the med labs for his own experiments when he was supposed to be working on medical treatments for Gilmore and Pierce—or applaud him for finding a way to kill more Borg. And the not knowing which it would be upset Sam all the more.

"If you're that tired, maybe I should just leave you alone and spend the evening with Icheb! I'll bet he wouldn't be bothered by my 'tagging along.' "

Sam groaned, 'I'm sorry I said anything at all about 'tagging along,' Naomi. Please, let's have a quiet evening here, all right?"
"It'll be much quieter for you without me, Mom. Maybe I can help Icheb with his experiments in the med lab."

"I don't want you anywhere near the med lab, Naomi." Sam shuddered involuntarily at the very thought.

"Why not? I'm sure Icheb won't mind having me around!" Naomi's forehead and vestigial tusks burned brightly in her fury.

"I won't have you part of what he's doing!"

"I want to help him! He's trying to heal people."

"Heal? Kill is more like it."

"What are you saying? Icheb is working on a cure for Marla and Darren."

All the discretion Sam had promised herself to maintain vanished as her anger blazed. "That's what he's supposed to be doing! Instead, he's hogging the lab, looking for a way to kill Borg drones without endangering his own precious hide."

"Don't be so hateful! Icheb is brave! And he's not a murderer!"

"I've seen his research! I know what he's doing!"

The crimson drained from Naomi's face, leaving her pale and shaken. "I've got to go to him," Naomi said, running towards the door.

"Please, Naomi! Don't..." Sam called out after her daughter as Naomi ran out into the corridor.

At the doorway she stopped, appalled at the way she'd lost her temper and desperate to comfort her
child in her moment of disillusionment. The words to call her daughter back died in her throat. She
didn't want to see the proof--that Naomi would ignore her mother and run to that boy instead.

Closing her eyes, Sam leaned her head against the doorjamb. She needed to go to Sickbay, which
was surely where Naomi was also headed, to get an analgesic for her pounding headache. But first,
she had a duty to perform. The door closed behind her as she walked back into her quarters. Fetching
her tunic, she pulled it back over her head and smoothed it over her hips. Once she was dressed, Sam
took a few deep breaths and gathered herself together before saying, "Ensign Wildman to Captain
Janeway."

A moment later, a disembodied voice responded "Janeway here."

"I need to see you right away, Captain."

"You sound upset. Is there something wrong, Samantha?"

"Yes, Captain."

"I'm in my ready room. Come as soon as you can."
Act 1

Harry had no idea how many aliens he was fighting, but from the number of shots streaming by them, it was fairly safe to say his little away team was outnumbered at least five-to-one. Actually, only three were firing from their side. Early on, Tal had screamed when one of the lighting fixtures had crashed in front of her, collapsing the console behind which Angelo Tessoni was crouching. Ever since, no shots had come from Tessoni's position.

That may have been a lucky shot on the part of the aliens, as unlucky as it was from Tessoni's point of view. Most of the time, the aliens fire was so scattered and off target, the real danger was from the sheer density of weapons emissions, not accurate shooting. Harry was tempted to think his perception that children were handling the weapons was accurate. It didn't really matter, though. Three more "lucky shots" were all that would be needed to decimate the away team.

After hearing another yelp from Tal's position, Harry could no longer remain silent, even if saying something would reveal his position. With the comm badges deadened by the dampening field, the only way to check on his people was to call out to them. "Report your status! Tal? You okay?"

"Flesh wound on the arm, sir. It's not bad."

"Morrow?"

From far left of Harry, Morrow said, "Ready for anything, sir."

Harry wanted to grin but couldn't, not with energy discharges crackling around him and knowing which team member he had to call out to next. "Tessoni?"

High-pitched voices could be heard, but not Tessoni's warm baritone.

So many lights in their immediate area had been broken, it was difficult to see anything in the dimness. Harry saw only a shadowy pile of metal where Tessoni had taken refuge. He called out "Tessoni?" again, but once again, the room would have been silent if not for the aliens' voices. At
least the shooting stopped when Harry started calling out to his team. As Harry waited grimly for the response from Tessoni that never came, he realized the aliens' speech was beginning to coalesce into words he could recognize, such as "Over here," and what sounded like "Give up, Animal-Mechanical."

When Harry realized the way the universal translator had transformed the last term, he had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. If the Voyager crew had been mistaken for the beings he thought they were being taken for, no wonder everyone had shot madly, leaving the questions for later. When he heard another voice, with more of an alto than the soprano timbre he'd been hearing, he decided he had to try to do something to break the deadlock, to save his people. Softly, he called out to his team, "Tal, Morrow . . . and Tessoni . . . hold your positions. Now that I'm starting to get translations that make some sense, I'm going to give myself up and see if I can talk to these people. If it seems like it's going badly, try to back out the way we came. See if you can get in the clear and transport back to the Flyer."

Tal and Morrow both replied, "Aye, sir." From Tessoni, nothing.

Taking a deep gulp of air, Harry whispered to himself, "Here goes something--I hope." Laying down his phaser on the floor, he called out loudly, "Hello! Out there! Hold your fire! I'm surrendering!"

Carefully, Harry rose to his feet, hands held high in the air. One more shot rang out, followed by a terse "Hold!" in one of the alto voices.

When nothing else happened, Harry slowly moved forward and to his right, standing near enough to one of the remaining lights to show himself to the aliens. When he heard murmurs from all around him, he realized he'd acted just in time; they were on the verge of being surrounded. While most of what was being said around him was unintelligible, Harry suspected it was due to the soft volume of the speech, making it impossible for the universal translator to pick up what was being said, rather than an inability to translate the words. He now could comprehend several phrases and sentences. One made him even more sure of the root of the attack. From the throat of a soprano positioned a good distance in front of him, Harry clearly heard, "You're right, Ralza! He's not a BioMech. He's just a giant!"

Hands still held high above his head, Harry said, "I think we know your BioMech. We call them Borg. They are half men and half machine, right? And they say they are going to assimilate you, and add your technology to their own? And they steal your people when they take your technology?"

The murmurs changed to something more suggestive of the buzz of people chatting before a theatrical performance than the angry, fearful comments he'd caught previously. Far in front of Harry, two figures came into view. Where they stood the light was better than it was over the area in which Voyager's crewmen had taken cover--but not much better. Harry's team had been shooting at
the lights, trying to extinguish all they could, to camouflage an escape attempt through the hatch through which they had come. As the aliens slowly approached, an alto voice called out, "Strangers, we are sorry we mistook you for the BioMech. Or as you call them, the Borg. Please, forgive us."

Harry called out to his team to stand up without their weapons. After a second's hesitation, Morrow and Tal both stood up. Morrow held his hands raised in imitation of Harry; Tal could only lift her left hand to about shoulder height. Her right hand was pressed against a wound in her upper left arm. There was no sign of movement from Tessoni. Tal called out to Harry, "May I check on Angelo, sir?"

Harry addressed the aliens. "Is it all right if my people assist one of my crew? He's been down for quite a while."

The tallest of them, who by now were moving as a large group of twenty or so towards them, waved a hand. Harry took this as assent and nodded to Tal, giving her permission to move towards her crewmate. Gingerly, she walked towards Angelo, circling the pile of metallic wreckage to the front of the console, and gasped, "Oh, no! Ensign Kim, there's so much blood!"

This time, Harry didn't ask the aliens for permission to move. Quickly, he tripped through the detritus of battle and knelt next to Tessoni. From the scarlet pool surrounding the crewman and the extensive head injury visible as soon as Harry got close, there wasn't much need to check for a pulse, although Harry did it anyway. Shaking his head sadly, Harry confirmed his diagnosis. Angelo Tessoni would never send flowers or love notes to anyone ever again.

From over Harry's shoulder Morrow asked, "He's dead, isn't he, sir?" It was more a statement than a question.

"Yes."

Standing up, Harry saw the crowd of aliens encircling their position--close to thirty, he could now see. The top of the head of the tallest barely reached to the level of Harry's bottom rib. Most were waist high or smaller, and the overwhelming majority were very young, if these beings aged in the way of most (but not all) species did. The tallest pair looked female, with wrinkled blue faces and frazzled steel-gray wiry hair on their heads. The rest of the aliens had smooth-textured powder blue skin surrounded by clouds of glossy hair, in shades varying from white to dark blue to purple. The Vulcan-like ears had tufts of hair on their pointed ends. From the way the eyebrows slanted up at a sharp angle and then down again, two sides of an equilateral triangle were formed, which gave the aliens a perpetually startled look. In all respects, the alien beings were perfectly proportioned humanoids, despite their small stature. As unthreatening a race that Harry had ever encountered had caused the death of Angelo Tessoni--and all because the away team had been mistaken for Borg.
Profoundly disturbed, Harry stared at his former adversaries, unable to bring forth any suitable First Contact greeting. Harry was sure some admiral had come up with a comment appropriate to this sort of occasion in the past; but for the life of him, Harry couldn't recall what it might be. The Borg had a way of destroying First Contact protocols.

One of the two women was comforting a tiny alien whose face was half-hidden beneath the taller one's arm. The youngster, as Harry assumed, began to sob. "We didn't mean it, Gratcha! We thought they were BioMech coming to kill us!"

"I know, Gratchilli," the one who was called Gratcha murmured soothingly, gently stroking the youngster on its back, "but a life has been destroyed. We must make amends."

One of the others, almost as tall as the two elders but with a face so young that Harry believed he was barely an adolescent, stepped forward. "I will accept the responsibility, Gratcha. I am the eldest. I was the leader. I detected the approach of the strangers and ordered the defense. I am the one who must offer his life."

"No, Gratchil," Gratcha said. "It cannot be you. I will offer myself to this man . . . Sir? Is that your name?"

"No. My name is Ensign Kim, of the Federation starship Voyager, Gratcha. 'Sir' is a term the members of my crew use for a superior officer. I am here with a small group of Voyager's crew. We thought your vessel was a derelict. We came to salvage parts."

The group in front of him tittered as he spoke. Harry wondered if that was an expression of humor for this race, and if so, what it was they found so funny. With Angelo's body sprawled out in back of him, Harry certainly didn't feel much like laughing.

"Not Gratcha to you, Ensign Kim of the Federation starship Voyager. I am called Caryonna Varinyi Varost, one of the people known in this sector of space as the Pojzan. It is only to the young ones here in this farming bay I am Gratcha. They are all my 'gratchilli', the children of my brother and sister Pojzan. Many of the Pojzan have left life behind, as your Angelo has, to return to the soil. Ralza and I care for their children now."

"They were killed by the BioMech?" Harry asked.
"Yes," she replied succinctly.

Harry shook his head sadly. "So this ship is full of orphans, looking for refuge?"

"Yes, Ensign Kim. Our home planet was ravaged many years ago by the BioM . . . by the Borg. Afterwards, my people found a safe place, well hidden from the rest of the galaxy, and have been colonizing it for the several years. In the past year there have been more attacks on Pojza, and a decision was made to evacuate the last of our population there. On the way, our ship was attacked. Almost three-thousand of us are still alive, but most of the survivors are children. Many are even younger than these--mere babies. The older ones, such as our gratchillian here, work to keep our farm bays productive, so we have food, and air to breathe."

This mission kept getting worse. Harry hadn't anticipated he could feel even more depressed than when he'd first confirmed Angelo's death. He was wrong.

The Pojzan woman bent down, rubbing her chin on the top of the head of the "gratchilli" who was clutching Caryonna's waist tightly and weeping inconsolably. Passing her on to the other adult, who was apparently Ralza, Caryonna did the same to another child, and then another. One by one, the "gratchillian" walked past her in single file, each to be rubbed in the same fashion. Ralza received each child in turn afterwards, giving him or her a quick hug. Those who had completed this strange ritual clung to each other in little groups, many crying openly.

Harry, puzzled by this display, pondered what he could remember of the conversation which preceded it. When he finally realized what must be going on, he was appalled.

"Wait a minute. This 'offering a life'? Do you think I'm supposed to kill you for killing Angelo?"

Harry asked.

"It is our way, to offer a life for a stolen life," Ralza said sadly.

"It isn't our way when it happens like this. Your children thought we would be a danger to your people and acted to protect themselves. And it's our fault as much as yours for blundering in here and frightening your children. Unfortunately, we never got an answer to our hails and offers of assistance when we tried to contact you. We couldn't detect your life signs, so we thought no one was here. This was a tragic accident. You owe us nothing."

The two adults looked at each other. Although Harry had never met this species before today, he
recognized relief when he saw it. Caryonna finally said sadly, "Oh, Ensign Kim, this has been a
terrible day of mistakes indeed! It is clear you are civilized people if you understand to give back the
life offered you! We could not answer your messages. We never heard them, nor could we reply to
them if we did. Our outside communication systems no longer work. If they did, your Angelo would
not have returned to the soil!"

Weakly, Harry shrugged. "We know what you thought you were facing. The Borg attacked our ship
only a few days ago."

"And we have been drifting in space for many days now since the last attack on our ship, making
those repairs we can. Almost everyone with technical knowledge concerning our systems was lost.
We had almost given up h . . ." She caught herself. Glancing around at the uplifted faces of the
children surrounding them, she went on more discreetly, "We need to speak with you in detail about
the situation here, but privately. Perhaps you can still assist us. That is, if you are still willing, since
we killed your friend."

Harry glanced back at Angelo's body. A sudden memory stabbed him of Seven when they were
together on the Nightingale, advising him to be careful about blindly accepting what the Kraylor told
him. Harry quickly shook it off. This was a totally different situation, he could feel it in his gut. He
only had to look at the small faces surrounding him to know that these people were telling him the
truth. They were a small remnant of the galaxy's population, trying to escape to a place where they
could live in peace.

"Of course we'll still help you, but first, will you drop the energy shield operating here so that we
may transport Angelo's body back to the ship we came in? Tal--you go, too. Have that arm looked
at, and help Noah put Angelo's body in the stasis chamber."

"If you wish, we will return Angelo's body to the soil, in the way of our people. It will be done with
due ceremony," Ralza said.

"Thanks for the offer, but no. It is our custom to return a body of a lost crew member to Voyager
whenever we can. Our captain will lead a ceremony for him there."

Caryonna and Ralza bowed their heads. Some customs seemed to be almost universal, and bowing
the head in respect seemed to be one of them. The bent position of the head, however, brought
something else to Harry's mind.

"We have another member of our team," Harry explained. "He stayed behind because he's even
more of a giant than we are. He couldn't fit through your corridors very well. I told him we would
send for him when we knew there was no danger. Is it all right if he came over? I'd like Noah to look at your systems with us; to see if we can do anything to help you."

"Of course, Ensign Kim. We assure you; there is no more danger for your people here. Let me bring you to Lyria Tason Ladreil. She is our 'senior officer,' as you put it. We have much to discuss."

Harry turned to Tal and whispered, "After you put Angelo into the stasis tube in the lower compartment, stay on the Flyer. Call the captain right away and let her know in brief what happened. Tell her I'll make a complete report later. But if we don't check in with you in half an hour, get out of this area immediately. Then contact Voyager and report everything."

She nodded, biting her lip, tears welling into her eyes.

"Are you okay, Tal?" Harry asked quietly.

"I'll be fine, sir. I was just thinking . . . I was wondering what one of those sickening-sweet love notes would have been like. I wouldn't have minded getting one. It's been a while, you know?" Daubing beneath her eyes, she apologized huskily, "Some professional I am. Look at the way I'm blubbering."

Harry brushed her unhurt arm sympathetically, the way he was sure Captain Janeway would have, if she'd been there. "No problem, Tal. You're doing fine. I wish you'd had the chance to find out, too."
Ethical Considerations II: Act 2

Act 2

All the way to the medical labs, Naomi tried to convince herself her mother had been mistaken. She was tired and cranky--that was it. Her mother couldn't be right about Icheb. Finding a way to kill the Borg was something everyone wanted, right? Even though, deep in her heart, Naomi couldn't believe the answer to the Borg menace was just to kill them all. The Queen, that was one thing, She was terribly mean. But all of them? That didn't seem right.

Most of the time when she thought about Borg drones, Naomi didn't visualize the awful ones like those who'd torn apart five of their crew only days before. Instead, she saw the faces of Seven and Icheb; Mezoti, Azan and Rebi; and Marika Wilkarah, P'Chan, and Lansor, who had once been members of Seven's first Unimatrix.

Naomi had been pretty little then, but she remembered Marika, the former Bajoran Starfleet officer assimilated at Wolf 359 from the USS Excaliber, who had spent the last few weeks of her life on Voyager. After P'Chan, Lansor, and Marika had been severed from the Collective, they continued to share each other's thoughts until the EMH removed microcortical implants from their brains. The price they paid for living as individuals without hearing each other was to die as individuals only a few weeks later.

Naomi hadn't thought much about it when she was a child, but now she realized Marika had been around so much because her mother must have been assigned to care for Marika during her last illness. Once she found out she was dying, Marika asked to end her days on a Federation starship. She spent her waking hours during those final few weeks of her life recording a log of her adventures, both as herself and as Three of Nine.

Marika had visited with the Wildmans often, sharing stories about her life before assimilation, her husband, and their lives as Starfleet officers. Although terminally ill the entire time Naomi knew her, the Bajoran woman had never expressed bitterness about her fate. Just before she died, Marika forgave Seven for forcing her to remain part of the Collective. Although her time had been short, Marika returned to the life in Starfleet she loved, free to keep her thoughts to herself or share them with others as she chose. She knew her husband had been killed at Wolf 359. She was sure they would be reunited in the presence of the Prophets after her death.

Naomi remembered feeling happy as well as sad at Marika's funeral. It was the first time she became aware that funerals were about celebrating a life, not just mourning a death. That was also the day Naomi knew her desire to be the "captain's assistant" wasn't only a child's game, but stemmed from a true desire to make her own career in Starfleet. That funeral was one of the pivotal events of her
childhood.

So, to just kill all the Borg indiscriminately? No! Naomi didn't want that. What the captain, Commander Tuvok, Lieutenant Torres, and Seven had done, along with Axum, Korok and the others in Unimatrix Zero—that's what she wanted to see. What Marika, P'Chan and the other "Nine" had found, even though they didn't have long to enjoy it, was better than complete destruction. It wasn't death she wanted for all Borg drones; she wanted them to become free of the Collective, to stop doing evil things to other beings. Borg drones needed the freedom to be themselves. Surely Icheb, as a freed drone himself, felt the same way.

The door to the medical lab was open when Naomi arrived. It usually was, since the EMH and the medical staff had to walk in and out all day and preferred leaving it ajar to save energy—an old habit on Voyager now, but still as essential as ever.

Naomi stopped just outside the threshold, standing where she could see Icheb's profile as he worked at his station. Whenever he turned his face in her direction, his expression was so strange . . . so intense . . . so . . . determined. And it was a grim sort of determined, not like the look on the faces of the EMH or Lieutenant Paris at work. Naomi had seen them there often enough when her mother was assigned as a field medic. A chill came over Naomi as she watched her friend, the realization growing that her mother might very well be right. He looked more like a person working on something lethal, rather than someone searching for a cure for those threatened with sleeping their lives away.

Naomi was barely conscious of her automatic response to Crewman Sofin's greeting when he limped by Naomi, on his way into Sickbay to see Marla, but the sound drew Icheb's attention toward the doorway. He saw her. He did not look pleased, the way he usually did when she came to see him.

"Naomi," he said. "I have already ingested a nutritional supplement. I do not plan to go to dinner in the mess hall tonight."

She nodded, still on autopilot as she walked into the lab. "That's okay. I'm not very hungry myself." She tried to be casual as she strolled over to his station, perching herself on the stool next to his.

"What are you working on?" Her throat was so dry, the words seemed to croak out of her mouth. Icheb seemed not to notice.

"I'm testing these nanoprobes to make sure the genetic material with which they have been encoded are functioning efficiently."

"I see. Are these the healing nanoprobes you've been working on to cure Marla and Darren? Or are
these the ones for killing all Borg drones . . . efficiently?"

She could barely believe it had slipped out so easily like that, raspy throat and all. His eyes widened slightly; and his frown deepened; but he didn't say what she wanted him to say--that of course, these are for healing our crewmates. Instead, he said seriously, "For the good of the galaxy, the Borg must be stopped. If that means all Borg drones must die, then we must find a way to do it."

"No, Icheb, that's not the answer! The drones are like Seven and Mezoti . . . and you! They're victims of the Borg, as much as anyone is! They can't break free of the Collective by themselves. Most of them couldn't even escape to Unimatrix Zero, the way Seven and her friend Axum did! Even the Borg Queen must have been assimilated against her will. When drones attack us, we have to fight back and kill them to save ourselves--but that's self-defense. It's not the same thing as just murdering them all!"

Icheb's head was down, his gaze fastened at the surface of the lab bench. He was struggling with what she was saying--she hoped. Surely he would agree with her!

Her hopes were dashed when he said, "In a way, you are right, but yours is an idealistic view."

"What's wrong with being idealistic?"

His eyes met hers. "Naomi, the Borg can adapt to any weapons we have discovered. The only thing that can stop them is a weapon which causes them to die before they can adapt to it. I have a theory on a way to do that. I have yet to perfect it. I must continue my research."

"If this weapon is dangerous to the Borg, won't it be dangerous to everyone on Voyager, too?"

"No. It is a virus that destroys the drone's link to the Collective, and then destroys the implants themselves. It cannot harm anyone on Voyager."

"Unless they have implants--like you and Seven. Can it be dangerous to the two of you?"

Icheb looked away, withdrawing from her. Naomi became more and more upset as she waited for his answer and none came. It was dangerous to Seven and Icheb, then, and he didn't want to admit it. Jumping off the stool, she pushed against Icheb's shoulders, rolling his seat away from the bench, forcing him to stop because he couldn't reach his work. "Stop! Think about what you're doing! I
can't let you endanger yourself like this! I couldn't stand it if I lost you!"

She heaved him back even further. He slid off the stool but held his ground. Naomi was pressed so close to Icheb, with his every breath she could feel his chest move. Finally, Icheb grabbed her by the upper arms and moved her to one side, away from the bench; but when she was far enough back for him to turn around to his work, he stopped. As if spellbound, he held her, gazing down at her, as if searching for something he had spent a lifetime seeking but had never found before.

Staring up into his face, Naomi experienced one of the defining moments of her life, one she would remember to the end of her days. Her feelings for Icheb were greater than she'd felt for her friends Mezoti, Azan and Rebi; stronger than her admiration for Seven or the captain; greater, even, than her love for Neelix. This was love, too, but not of a sort she'd ever known before—not the kind she felt for her mother, although it was as powerful as that. This was Love. At that moment, she finally understood what those looks she had seen on Icheb's face when he was with her meant, because one very similar must be on her face right then. That silly flip her stomach made whenever she saw Icheb was perfectly understandable. Naomi Wildman had found the love of her life.

And what was perhaps even more important, she was certain that Icheb felt the same way about her. She was sure of it. She could see it in his eyes.

But, oh! What a terrible time to find this out, when he was trying to do something so terrible! Or was it not terrible, but necessary? Naomi's thoughts jumbled around in her head. She didn't know what to say or do, until, without thinking, she felt her body sink against his, her face buried into his shoulder.

"Please, Icheb. Promise you'll find another way. I couldn't stand it if you . . . if you were a murderer," she mumbled, as sobs ripped out of her. Then she backed away, averting her burning eyes as tears poured down her cheeks. She couldn't meet his shocked eyes as she ran out of the lab, leaving him to stare after her, his face contorted in pain.

"They were attacked by the Borg, Captain. The Pojzan call them the "BioMech." More than a quarter of their vessel's people were lost. About eighty percent of the people here are children or adolescents, almost all of them orphaned. Half of the remaining adults are caring for the toddlers and very young kids. In fact, this ship has so many children on board right now, the boy in charge of the ones who mistook us for Borg was younger than Icheb. The ship's officers died when the bridge was stolen. The people on this vessel come from the farming and handicraft region of Pojza, and the only ones with any technical knowledge at all are a few older people who'd retired there. Thanks to the hydroponics farms, they have food and oxygen. What they don't have is a dependable power source unless they can get what they call their zeta drive going again."
"Captain, their 'expert' on the zeta drive is Lyria. She's a ninety-eight year old woman who last served on one of their vessels thirty-two years ago! Her knowledge is so out of date, it isn't funny. They aren't going to survive without our help. And this isn't another situation like the Kraylor, Captain. There's no hidden agenda. They just want to reach their colony, New Pojza, so they can keep themselves and their children safe."

"Voyager can rendezvous with you tomorrow, Harry. B'Elanna is almost finished with her diagnostics."

"Captain, they don't want that. Their colony is hidden away inside a nebula, about twenty light years from their current position."

Reflexively, she glanced out her viewport, over the head of Samantha Wildman, with whom she had been speaking when Harry's message had come through. A smudge of nebula was visible in the right corner. That had to be the one. "They don't want our help reaching the nebula?"

"They'd prefer to keep the secret of the way inside to as few outsiders as possible. I think we can help them get there, Captain. Noah and I have gone over their ship. The Borg didn't steal their propulsion or computer systems. I guess they weren't considered 'superior' enough for the Borg to bother with, but without the bridge, the Pojzan can't go anywhere. They'll just float in space until the energy to power their shields and life support system gives out, and that'll be all she wrote. Noah and I think we've got their propulsion system figured out. We have the specs we need from Lyria to program the replicators. There should be enough energy to make up the parts they need to get the auxiliary navigation system in their engine room working. But if we make their parts, we won't be bringing much back with us. In fact, we're going to be using up a lot of our reserve energy resources."

"That's the way things go sometimes. You're on a mission of mercy now, Harry. I trust your judgment."

"Thanks, Captain. You know, there's another thing I think I should report. It's odd, but the Borg that attacked this ship didn't try to assimilate anyone."

Janeway exchanges glances with Sam Wildman. "Sounds like more of the ones who attacked us the other day, Harry," the captain said.

"I don't think so. The way the Pojza described them, these Borg weren't very efficient. They didn't
work systematically, as one. The Pojzan say they shouted to each other to communicate. Their gear and outfits sound pretty ratty, and the Pojzans said they had to clean up their ship after they finally left, because the stink was so bad."

"To some races, humans--or even a rose--smell bad."

"We seem to agree on what does and doesn't smell good, though, Captain. They said it reminded them of the odor of rotting flesh. Pretty gross."

Rubbing her forehead to avert the migraine she could feel forming, Janeway sighed. Bad smelling Borg. As if they weren't already a nightmare come to life!

"I'm not eager to run into them again, Harry. I don't think it matters much if they shout at each other or smell bad. Not to change the subject, but when do you expect to get back? It sounds like you're going to be gone for several more days."

"Yes, Captain, with your permission, I'd like to accompany the Pojzan to their sanctuary, to make sure they get there all right. If there are problems with their nav system, I think we can 'lighten' their ship enough using their own technology to use the Flyer's tractor beam and drag them where they need to go."

"Permission granted, Ensign Kim," Janeway said, formally, for the benefit of the ship's auto logging system. "And Harry--about the supplies, don't worry about it. We'll take care of our supply situation another day."

"Thanks, Captain. One last thing. The Pojzan offered to take Angelo's body to New Pojza to 'make him one with the soil.' I told them we're bringing him back with us, in stasis. You agree, don't you?"

"Do Mr. Lessing or Morrow think he'd prefer to have his body stay with the Pojzan?"

"Actually, no. Noah says Angelo was from an old Starfleet family. He'd want the photon tube casket shot into space, with the Federation flag on top, and all that. You know--the traditional Starfleet funeral ceremony. It was something they talked about a lot on the Equinox, Noah says. So we planned on bringing his body back to Voyager. There'll be a delay before the service can be held, though, until we get back."
"It sounds like Mr. Tessoni wouldn't mind the delay, Harry. Finish your mission. Then we'll worry about ceremonies."

"That's about it, Captain. I'll check in again at the next scheduled time."

"Do that, Ensign. Janeway out."

As Harry's disembodied voice signing off faded, Ensign Wildman unfolded herself from the ready room couch, where she'd seated herself when Harry's call interrupted her conversation with the captain. "After what Harry and the away team have been through, I'm afraid my complaints about Icheb seem pretty silly."

"Not at all. You must realize that if Icheb has invented a weapon with the potential to remove the Borg threat forever, I have to allow him to develop it, for our own safety, as well as for people like Harry's Pojzan. If he's working on it under false pretenses when he's assigned to find a treatment for Gilmore's and Pierce's comas, however, that's a separate issue. I can't condone dereliction of duty, no matter how valuable his other research might prove to be. I'll call him in and talk with him about it. You were right to come to me."

"Thank you for listening, Captain."

"About that fight with Naomi, though? I'm not sure I can do anything about that. In fact, it sounds an awful lot like an argument or two I had with my own mother when I was growing up in Indiana, too many years ago for me to even want to count them."

Ensign Wildman sighed, smiling. "Me, too, I'm afraid. It's just so difficult out here. It isn't like any of us can get away from each other when we're traveling on a small ship. We have to work it out somehow. I just wish my husband were here at times like this to share the burden--and the joys, too."

"Of course. You'll find a way to solve your problem, Samantha. I'm sure of it. I can't promise you won't ever argue with your daughter again."

"You'd do better to promise me it will happen again, because I'm sure it will! I'm just not used to thinking of her as an adolescent! But Neelix says I need to."

"And Neelix is usually right about these things!"
After dismissing Ensign Wildman, Janeway stood up to stretch her legs, cramped from spending so much time at her desk while she read reports. Her mind wasn't on reports tonight, however. It was too filled with visions of the dead and living crew of the *Equinox*, that truly star-crossed ship--far more unlucky than *Voyager* had been, in truth, although Janeway seldom admitted that to anyone, even herself. Images also appeared of small, blue-skinned humanoids in such desperate straits that only her youngest senior staff officer and his team were in a position to assist, even though his team was now short a member.

Janeway squatted down in the area of her ready room that had sported a hull breach only a couple of days before. She brushed her hand over the carpet, feeling for a seam or fibers out of place, but she could not detect exactly where the intact section ended and the patch began. Somehow, it didn't seem right. No trace remained to remind her where Angelo Tessoni had mended it, because his work had been so well done. There was a conundrum for you.

Janeway sighed deeply. From an old Starfleet family. Of course. She knew Giovanna Tessoni. His older sister, perhaps? Maybe his cousin or aunt, but definitely not his mother. Commander Tessoni wasn't old enough to be his mother. She could look it up--too bad she'd never bothered before. What else hadn't she known about him? About any of them?

Janeway hated thinking of "The Odyssey" at times like this, even though she *always* thought of it whenever a member of her crew was lost. There was a great deal of similarity between that classic tale and *Voyager's*. It had a satisfactory ending--for Odysseus. In Homer's epic, he was the only one who made it back home. That part she didn't like. She despised the ending, in fact, preferring never to think of it, since it tormented her with her deepest fear: to get all the way home, but without her crew. That would be a Pyrrhic victory indeed.

Her headache kicked up a notch. She'd have to replicate herself a suitable remedy or take the time to go to the EMH for an analgesic. Too bad it wouldn't work on the pain in her heart--or her conscience. For that, she'd never found a cure.

\[=/\=\]

As soon as Icheb slumped into Sickbay, Tom knew the young man wasn't in need of a field medic. It was going to be "advice to the lovelorn" time again in Sickbay. Limp posture, dull eyes, a small sigh or even a moan or two from someone who was trying to be brave when his heart had been shattered into tiny little pieces--Tom knew the signs all too well. Harry Kim had been the most frequent recipient of Tom's benevolent counsel, but many others, including *Voyager's* own Emergency Medical Hologram, had come to value Mr. Paris' expertise.
That Icheb was next in a long line of seekers of knowledge regarding the repair of broken hearts was no surprise to Tom. He'd been half-expecting it. The identity of the one who had inflicted this melancholy state upon Icheb was hardly a surprise, either. Tom would have had to be an unperceptive dolt not to know Naomi Wildman must be at the bottom of this. And, his reputation to the contrary, Tom Paris was not an unperceptive dolt, especially when it came to romance.

Tom Paris had spent many years cultivating a rakish, devil-may-care attitude to disguise the fact that he was, in fact, a genuine, old-fashioned sap when it came to love. In his flippant disguise he was able to avoid revealing how supremely easily he could be hurt by the rejection of a potential lover.

One of the most precious aspects of the love he shared with his wife, since both utilized similar mechanisms for protecting themselves from such pain, was that their mutual love made it possible for them to drop the facade of not caring about each other. They could express their tenderly romantic emotions brazenly, in ways their shipmates often laughed at as idiotic, sophomoric, and silly--due, primarily, to these self-same shipmates disguising their own overwhelming jealousy over the fact that they had no one to act as idiotically, sophomorically, and ridiculously romantic towards them.

Fortunately for his friends aboard Voyager, finding love had not caused Tom Paris to turn his back upon those who had failed to find such happiness. Moreover, he had both a long memory and the willingness to share his experiences to assist those in need of his guidance.

Thus, when Icheb wandered into Sickbay that evening, Tom remained silent only so long as it took him to once again check the vital signs and neural readings of the unnaturally slumbering Marla Gilmore before saying, "You've got signs of heart trouble, my friend. Care to describe your symptoms to me?"

"Naomi hates me."

Tom's first impulse to laugh was ruthlessly stifled. He knew that would make the poor kid totally clam up. Pulling himself together while checking the readings from Darren Pierce's neural monitor, he substituted, "What makes you think that?"

"She ran out of the medical lab when she found out . . ." Icheb's morose recitation trailed off before he could finish his thought.

"Found out what?"
Icheb glanced over at Brian Sofin, who was perched on a stool between the biobeds of Marla and Darren, reading a technical journal article to his uncomplaining audience. Leaning close to Tom, he whispered, "She found out I was working on a way to kill all Borg drones instead of a cure for the coma victims."

That totally unexpected sentence shook Tom. Involuntarily, his gaze slipped over to Marla and Darren Pierce; then to Sofin, who continued reading without any hesitation, apparently not having heard what Icheb had said; before it alighted upon the young man's face again. Icheb looked miserable, mitigating Tom's initial reaction of extreme disappointment that the cure everyone had been so hopeful Icheb would discover was not even close to becoming a reality.

Motioning Icheb to follow him, Tom stepped into the Doctor's private office and took a seat at the EMH's desk, a solemn expression upon his face. Icheb followed Tom into the office and took the opposite seat. Once Icheb had settled into the chair, Tom asked him, "So, your reports to the Doctor that you were getting closer to making a breakthrough were false?"

Icheb responded silently, with a nod and an even more downcast expression than the one he'd displayed when he first entered Sickbay. This sort of heartsickness was not the kind Tom felt as confident in handling as the more familiar, love-induced variety. A quick check of the chronometer on the Doctor's desk informed Tom that assistance dealing with this problem would not be arriving expeditiously, however. Dealing with this would be up to him.

"B'Elanna is running a diagnostic on the EMH in the holographic lab, Icheb. It should take another hour or so. Maybe you should wait to make a complete report to him. After all, if the cure you were hoping to find isn't possible, and you decided to work on this other... project, we'd all understand."

"I don't know if a cure is possible or not. I find it difficult to concentrate even since the Queen began to speak to me. Even though she isn't any more, I find myself going off on tangents I should not follow."

"I see. Well, I'm the senior 'doc' on duty as long as the EMH is off-line. Maybe if you tell me about it, we can find a way to get you back on track."

As Icheb described the paths his research had taken and his disagreement with Naomi over his plans for the killer nanoprobe, Tom's ambivalence grew. Observing Icheb himself or thinking about Seven made Tom sympathetic towards Naomi's position, but while Tom applauded her compassion, he could readily comprehend why Icheb could find research in ways that could end the Borg threat forever to be compelling.
"So far, you've been able to find a way for the modified nanoprobes to destroy the connection between drones so they can function independently, like you and Seven do now?"

"Yes, Lieutenant Paris. The transceivers and cortical node cannot be activated, so the affected drones cannot act upon the Queen's commands. However, when the transceiver and cortical nodes are disrupted in this way, they also emit an unknown amount of energy, damaging the neural pathways as the connections fail. Another problem is that I cannot seem to find a way for this virus to be transmitted over distances, even though the Queen has been able to control drones in this manner. It does not matter anyway. Naomi does not want me to try this technique. She wants the drones to all become individuals. She believes they will no longer hurt anyone if this happens."

"I'm not sure that one would follow the other automatically. I remember Seven clunking Harry on the head and trying to contact the Collective when she first made the transition from Borg to individual."

"I do not recall Seven ever telling me that story," Icheb said, brightening a little for the first time. "I will have to ask her about it."

"Just so you don't ask Harry. He's a little sensitive about the episode. But that's not going to help you with your current problem, Icheb. You need to find a way to stop the damage from happening—or heal it if it does. I remember the Doc calling nanoprobes 'efficient little healers' many times. Can you use them to heal the damage done to the neural passages when the connections are severed? Maybe even find a way to heal that obsession about hogging all the technology in the quadrant at the same time?"

Icheb, fortunately, ignored the facetious part of Tom's question and responded to the vital issue. "If I could do that, I should be able to find a way to heal the brains of Crewmen Gilmore and Pierce. But I can't seem to do that."

"You keep getting distracted by the Holy Grail of finding a way to make the nanoprobes more efficient killers, you mean?"

"By inserting the virus from my DNA into nanoprobes. Yes, Lieutenant."

"Too bad you couldn't insert something from the immune system instead. Make those 'efficient little healers' even more efficient. The Borg love efficiency, right? I'd love to see them hoist by their own petard . . . Icheb, are you listening to me?"
"Immune system. Of course. The nanoprobes are already excellent at healing tissue, but if I insert specific base pairs from the DNA of organisms which have superlative immune systems into the nanoprobes . . . Lieutenant Paris, that may be the solution! And I cannot believe I missed it before! It is so obvious . . ."

"I think you've had a lot on your mind, Icheb, that's all. Like a certain strawberry blond with a very cute forehead, maybe?"

That brought a quick, genuine smile to Icheb's face, along with a rosy flush to his skin.

"So," Tom said, "if you get those lean and mean nanoprobes to heal the damage from the severed connections, maybe that Borg weapon of yours could have a shot at keeping drones from becoming just as pigheaded as individuals as they are as a Collective."

"Lieutenant Paris, my idea about improving the healing power of the nanoprobes doesn't have anything to do with a weapon against the Borg. Not directly, at least. If I can improve their healing power and get them working more efficiently on the neuralological system, my research may yet turn out to be beneficial to Crewmen Gilmore and Pierce."

Tom stared at Icheb for a second, then jumped up and pulled Icheb to his feet. "Well, then, Icheb, what are you waiting for? Get into that medical lab and start inserting DNA into those nanoprobes, young man!"

Before Icheb had taken two steps, the comm system activated. "Icheb, come to my ready room. Immediately."

"Yes, Captain Janeway," Icheb responded. Turning towards Tom, he added, despairingly, "Naomi must have reported what I did to the captain. Lieutenant Paris, she must really hate me. And the captain must hate me, too."

Tom sincerely doubted that the captain would be as upset about Borg-murdering nanoprobes as Naomi had been, but there was no mistaking Janeway's tone. Even through the comm system, the ice in her voice had been unmistakable. Motioning Icheb to precede him out of the Doctor's office and clasping him comfortingly on the shoulder, Tom advised, "There's one thing I've learned about being called on the carpet, Icheb. You just square your shoulders, stand up straight, and take your punishment like a man. If you're going to be disciplined anyway, obsessing about who reported you or who hates you isn't going to make it any easier. Just go and get it over with. I should know. I've been on that carpet lots of times."
Dejected but resolute, Icheb replied, "I will remember, Lieutenant. And thank you for your advice."

"If you find a way to make those nanoprobes heal Marla and Darren, I'll thank you, Icheb. So will the captain--and so will Naomi. You'll see."

Straightening his shoulders and standing tall, Icheb marched out of Sickbay without a backward glance.

Tom looked back, however, at the only two bodies occupying biobeds at the moment, silently enduring Brian Sofin's rendition of "Twenty Ways to Improve Warp Core Efficiency" by Commander Geordi LaForge. Tom winced. That was reading material calculated to keep the two patients asleep, not wake them up. Tom fantasized that one day he would be able to commiserate with Darren and Marla, who both would be loudly complaining about Mr. Sofin's choice of reading material on this particular evening.

For Tom, that day couldn't come too soon.

=\=

When Icheb entered the captain's ready room, he feared he would see an accusatory Naomi standing next to her. It turned out to be worse. Seven was the one standing there, with a glare equal to the captain's, and the first to interrogate him. "Icheb, you received an assignment from the Doctor. You were told to find a treatment for the members of this crew who had sustained serious brain trauma during the recent Borg attacks. You were to report to him. How often did you do so? What did you report concerning your findings? And last, but not least, supply a complete explanation of how you budgeted your time in the medical labs."

Remembering Lieutenant Paris' advice, Icheb told the simple, hard, disgraceful truth, adding at the end, "I am sorry, Captain. I should have tried harder to resist being distracted by other research when I promised to search for a cure for Crewmen Gilmore and Pierce. I became obsessed with finding a way to kill the Borg efficiently."

The captain and Seven exchanged telling glances as Captain Janeway stood up and began to pace back and forth in front of her desk as she lectured Icheb. "I am not unfamiliar with people with obsessions, Icheb, nor can I say I'm as disturbed as some on this ship about the nature of your other research. Desperate times call for desperate measures. If you have found a way to exterminate the Borg if they try to destroy us again, I cannot promise I will not use your findings to protect us all."
However, I cannot and will not condone your pursuit of this course of inquiry when you were assigned another task which is vital to the welfare of this ship and two of its crew, who acted heroically to defend this ship from invaders. To protect you, Icheb, and every other soul on Voyager, they did their duty at great personal harm to themselves." She paused and faced him, sending him a withering glare that caused the young man's shoulders to droop visibly. "There is a time for everything, Icheb, but I do not know how much time either of them have to wait for a treatment before their neurological deterioration is such that no cure will be feasible. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Chastened, Icheb lowered his head. "Yes, Captain."

"Since you are not making any progress on a cure, I order you to turn over your results to Seven. Report to Engineering tomorrow at . . . "

"Captain, may I speak?" Icheb interrupted.

Seven sternly raised a disapproving eyebrow, but the captain nodded permission.

"I was in Sickbay, discussing the problem with Lieutenant Paris, just before you called me here. Something he said made me think of another possibility I had not considered. I believe his comment could lead to a breakthrough. I would like to return to the medical lab to investigate this avenue of research."

"How would the captain know you are working on this 'avenue,' rather than your pet project?" Seven asked.

"If I report to the Doctor at least twice during every shift, I believe I will be able to work on the problem with greater focus. An assistant working along with me could serve a similar purpose. Captain, I am ashamed that my behavior could endanger Crewman Gilmore and Crewman Pierce, and that my only solution to the problem of the Borg was to try to find a way to kill them all. I believe Naomi is right; there must be another way to wreck the Collective without killing all drones. I would still like to find it--but I promise not to continue my search until I have either found a cure for the comatose crew or I am satisfied I will be unable to find one. Is that acceptable, Captain?"

The captain considered the problem for a short time and said, "That's acceptable. I will ask Commander Tuvok to take possession of all your data pertaining to the nanoprobes modified as weapons against the Borg. You may continue your medical investigations."
"Thank you, Captain."

"One other thing. If you're under Tuvok's supervision as well as the Doctor's, you may be able to earn Academy credits as a 'distant learner' student for your work. If her mother permits, I may wish to assign Naomi to work with you on the this. Naomi will have to pass her Academy entrance exam first, of course."

Icheb said hesitantly, "To work with Naomi on the real cure would be perfect, Captain, but I don't know if her mother would let her. Ensign Wildman doesn't seem to like me much. But how soon will Naomi take her examination?"

"She's asked Commander Tuvok to administer the entrance examination the day after tomorrow."

"Captain, I promise I will do my best, whether Naomi can work with me or not. And I also promise to keep the Doctor and Commander Tuvok informed--accurately informed--of my research."

"If you are technically an Academy student, you should wear a cadet uniform while on duty. Are you willing to do that?"

"I will comply," Icheb replied, with hope beginning to return. If the captain was willing to forgive him, perhaps Naomi would, too.

As Icheb followed Seven out the ready room door, he felt like running towards the nearest replicator to make a cadet uniform for himself. He would do anything he could to justify the captain's faith in him--and win back Naomi.

=\=

After Seven and Icheb were gone, Janeway sat at her desk for a long time, reflecting upon the subject of obsession. She certainly knew a thing or two about it. According to Chakotay, if she ever wanted to find an example of an obsessive personality, all she needed to do was look into a mirror.

One of her obsessions in recent years had been getting home to the Alpha Quadrant, for obvious--and very sound--reasons. Destroying the power of the Borg was another, and if she needed to kill them all to do it, then so be it. But she had to admit, another of her obsessions seemed to be to rescue and return Borg drones to individuality. Killing drones or freeing them--which was the best way,
which offered the best chance for satisfying that first obsession and saving the rest of her crew? Janeway pondered the question for a long time, unable to come to a definitive conclusion. Perhaps it was out of her hands. The only one who could supply the answer--by supplying the means--might be a young man of Brunali extraction: Icheb.
The wind came up as it always did in the late afternoon, according to those who had been on New Pojzan the longest, usually an hour or so before night fell. Not that "night" really ever fell here. Surrounded by the glorious shell of gleaming gases which made up the enclosing nebula, New Pojza's night was a dimmer sort of day, more like the sky on Terra when a huge thunderhead rolled over, rather than true night. And when the aurora borealis flowed in massive, folding draperies of electrically-charged light over the rolling hills of lush vegetation which upholstered the landscape, Harry couldn't imagine a more beautiful refuge. He was glad he'd had the opportunity to do some sightseeing in this part of the Delta Quadrant.

"We will miss you, Ensign Harry Kim. I wish you could stay longer with us and tell us more tales from your home world," lamented Lyria, the ancient, yet still sharp navigator, who had shown Harry the twisting corridor which provided safe passage between the hidden pocket of space within the nebula and the outside galaxy.

"We have a very long journey to make before we get back home. I've got to rendezvous with Voyager within the next three of our days or they'll have to hold their position and wait for us. I'd hate to do that."

"Of course. We understand. Outside of the nebula, it is not safe to remain at a standstill for long," Caryonna said. "You and your Away Team have been very good to us, despite our very sad first meeting . . ." She sighed then, and Harry knew what she would say next. "We would be honored if your lost friend Angelo were to remain with us always, to become part of our soil, as our own people do when their time of ending comes."

Harry nodded. "Thank you for your kind offer. But, as I said before, my captain asked me to return his body to our ship, and I must do as she commands."

"Of course you must. But we wish you to know our offer is sincere."

"Believe me, I know it is."

As the two mature Pojzan females and Harry rounded the hill, a crowd of children ran out of the hollow and surrounded them, laughing and calling, "Gratchi, tell us a story! Tell us another one
about the hobbits!"

Harry chuckled, but shook his head. "I'm sorry, all my 'gratchillian.' I don't have time to tell you any more hobbit stories. We have to go back home to our ship in our Delta Flyer. But if you're all very patient, maybe you'll still get a chance to hear the ones I couldn't tell you." Harry waved his hand in a circular motion and, obediently, the children formed a ring and sat down upon the grassy slope.

When they had all settled down, sitting as patiently as children anywhere do when waiting to be told a story they are particularly eager to hear (which is to say, not very patiently at all), Harry tapped his comm badge and spoke in a low voice. Seconds later, the air sparkled behind him to reveal Noah Lessing and Tal Celes. Both held a couple of PADDs balanced upon their fingertips. After bowing with due reverence for their contents as they presented them to Harry, Noah and Tal flanked their commanding officer, standing at ease while he addressed the children and the adults supervising them.

"You know how much I've enjoyed telling you the adventures of the hobbits every evening as we journeyed here. Can you guess why?" Harry asked.

He called on a smaller child who was waving her hand so energetically above her head, Harry was afraid she'd sprain her arm if he didn't call on her. "Because we're little like hobbits, but very brave, too!" she said, almost squeaking from the excitement of being called upon.

The other children laughed, but Harry only smiled and said, "That's one of the reasons, all right. Can anyone else guess another?"

This time Harry pointed to an older youth. "Because we choose to make our homes under the rock to protect ourselves from the nebula's radiation while we sleep," he responded solemnly, "just like the hobbits live underground."

"That's true. You do both live underground. And that's a sound, scientific explanation for why you do it. I'm not sure that's why the hobbits did it."

The little one who had been called upon first said, matter-of-factly, "They did it because it's cozy underground." Everyone laughed again.

Harry nodded to another child, who fairly yelled out before Harry could ask him anything, "Because they're good stories, with fights and magic and stuff!"
The children shouted at that answer, and the *Voyager* team all laughed, too. The answer perfectly fit the personality of this child, one with a very good heart who had endured a lot of pain because of the loss of his entire family--but a scamp if Harry ever saw one. "You're right again. They are very good stories. In fact, the people from my planet have lots of good stories to tell their children. From the *Arabian Nights*, and the Brothers Grimm, and a man called Hans Christian Andersen. And from J.R.R. Tolkien, the man who wrote the ones about the hobbits." Harry lifted up the PADDs to let the children see them better. "These devices have all his works stored in them, along with the others I mentioned. There's a lot of other folklore stories, too. I wish we could stay here and read them to you, but we can't. So, we're leaving these stories here. We want to share them with you. Enjoy them in peace and happiness. Consider them a gift from Noah, James, Tal, and me. Who knows? Maybe someday you'll decide to call your planet or your nebula 'The Shire,' the name the hobbits gave their home."

The adults motioned the children to stand, saying it was time to say good-bye to the *Voyager* people. The young ones crowded around Harry, who leaned down and touched as many of them on the top of the head with his chin as he could, in the Pojzan gesture of farewell. Noah and Tal were kept busy the same way until every child had received a head touch from one of the crew from the *Delta Flyer*. As the children walked away towards the doorways in the hillside that led down to their beds, they waved goodbye to Harry and his team, who had shown that Terran farewell gesture to the Pojzan children. Harry wondered if they would forget it quickly, or if it might become one of the customs of their people. He hoped they would keep doing it. It would be nice to be remembered that way.

When the children were all gone, it was almost too quiet. The two Pojzan leaders and the three from the *Delta Flyer* stood in the open, while the nightly dazzle of auroras began their dance overhead. Harry handed the PADDs to Lyria and Caryonna. "I know you recorded me telling the story of 'There and Back Again' to the older children. That's also called 'The Hobbit.' It's in here. So are the other Tolkien stories, especially 'The Lord of the Rings.' The other stories are much more serious, for the most part, but I think that after all that has happened to you, your people will appreciate them--although there's lots of violence and war in them, I have to admit."

"We hope you like the other stories, too," Noah said. "We found more than we expected to find in the *Delta Flyer's* database. Not all our folklore, but a lot of the good ones. And we found some stories from Tal's people, the Bajorans, too."

"This is a marvelous gift. Thank you," Caryonna said, clutching a pair of the PADDs in her arms.

Lyria cradled the PADDs given to her and nodded in agreement. "We will always treasure your gift because it will remind us of Harry Kim and the crew of *Voyager*, who were so kind to us and to our children. But they are also a treasure because we can't even imagine how many of our own stories were lost forever when the Borg destroyed our libraries. These stories will help us replace a little of that lost knowledge--even the ones with fighting and wars in them. Perhaps someday all beings will live in peace together, but until that time comes, we must be prepared to protect what we have. That's
something stories do. They teach children to prepare for the future by imagining what else can be, as fantastic as it may seem."

"That's true. Still, we hope you won't have to worry about wars any more. We hope you've found a safe haven here," Noah said.

"We hope so, too," Lyria responded. "And we have a gift for you, also. A safe haven."

"Thanks again, Lyria, but we're heading towards our own home," Harry said.

"Of course you are, but we can still offer a safe haven--to others. We discussed this with our leaders earlier today, and they agree. This system of four planets is very well hidden from the rest of the galaxy. It can easily hold many millions, but only two hundred thousand of our people have reached here so far. Even if all of the remaining Pojzan transport ships we know about arrive here safely, less than a half million Pojzan will be on this planet. I fear we will be lucky if any others manage to find their way here at all. Although none of the other planets in this system have as pleasant an environment as this one, the nebula offers an abundant source of power. We could transform all of them into good places for beings to live upon. So, there is plenty of room for those who are willing to share these planets and a peaceful co-existence with us. In your travels, you may find others seeking refuge. As long as you are sure they will never divulge the location to anyone who would be a danger to us, like the Borg, you may send them here."

"That's an incredibly generous offer," Harry said.

"No more generous than you, who were attacked when you explored our ship. You forgave your attackers and helped us, and our children, to find safety."

Noah and Tal looked as astonished as Harry felt himself, but he managed to find his voice. "You can be sure I will personally send a recorded message along with anyone we send, so you'll know we trust them with your secret."

It was time to say good-bye. Harry, Noah and Tal found it much easier to touch their chins upon Lyria's and Caryonna's heads than receiving that gesture from the Pojzans, but they managed. As Harry felt the familiar transporter buzz surround the Voyager crew, returning them to the Delta Flyer, Lyria called out as she waved her hand in farewell, "Remember your friends in The Shire, Harry Kim." Harry was sure he always would.
When he entered the EMH's domain, Icheb carefully avoided looking in the direction of Ensign Wildman, who was treating Brian Sofin's bad ankle at the other end of Sickbay. He hoped she would be unable to hear him if he kept his voice low. He was uncomfortable having to make his report with her standing there. He had not spoken with Naomi in a week, since she had stormed out of the medical labs. He had heard that although she passed her Academy entrance examination, her mother had not allowed her to work with Icheb. Even though he had predicted that would happened, Icheb had been crushed when learned of it. He did not wish to confront Ensign Wildman about this, however, as matters could become even worse between them than they already were.

He certainly did not need to ask if Ensign Wildman was still upset with him about Naomi. She usually turned her back to him whenever he came into the same room. She was doing it again now.

Still, reporting to the EMH was very welcome, since it stopped him from thinking about how much it hurt to be given the "frigid shoulder," or something like that, as Lieutenant Paris had put it yesterday.

"Doctor?"

"Yes, Icheb. What is it? Is this a routine report, or have you made a discovery?"

"I wish to report my completion of the modification of the Borg nanoprobes. I believe I have found a way to treat Crewmen Gilmore and Pierce, although I cannot be sure it will be successful. I hope it will. My research suggests this technique may provide even greater protection against assimilation than the one you developed for the captain, Commander Tuvok, and Lieutenant Torres several months ago. I am not sure if it will also break the connections between Borg permanently without killing them, however."

"You would need to test it, undoubtedly."

"Yes, Doctor," Icheb agreed, feeling suddenly nervous about his results. "But that is a problem. I do not know how to go about the next phase of testing without using a humanoid subject. Computer simulations are usually accurate, but not always. I would gladly test it upon myself, but I am not a suitable subject since I am already disconnected from the Collective. If we test it directly upon Crewmen Gilmore and Pierce, it could kill them instead of helping them wake up. We cannot obtain their consent to be subjects for such testing. And after their long comas, it would not be ethical to test the anti-assimilation properties of the nanoprobes by injecting them with the unmodified type. If it fails to protect them, Na... everyone would be upset with me, Doctor."
"Icheb, that's a lot to worry about all at once. We shall take it one step at a time. Does that PADD you're holding contain your test results?" After Icheb's affirmative response, the Doctor said, "Hand it over and I'll check your work."

Icheb gave him the device containing the fruits of his research and waited patiently inside the office while the EMH, humming an aria from "The Marriage of Figaro," perused its contents.

"Everything looks in order, Icheb. I agree with you. The next step is to try it on a test subject. I'll ask the captain about requesting volunteers from . . ."

"You don't need to, Doctor. I'll be your guinea pig."

Both Icheb and the Doctor looked a bit startled as they turned to the doorway of the office, where Brian Sofin was lounging against the frame. Confused, Icheb responded, "You are not a guinea pig. You are a human being."

"Mr. Sofin is referring to the archaic medical research practice of using animals as test subjects to see if a treatment is harmful or efficacious, Icheb. The guinea pig was frequently used for such trials. Of course, guinea pigs never had the opportunity to volunteer personally, as you do, Mr. Sofin. We would welcome your assistance—if you really wish to do this."

"You're looking for a cure for Marla and Darren, aren't you? That's what I want, too. And if this treatment can heal these nerves in my ankle, I'd get something out of it, too." The young crewman shifted his weight from one foot to another, wincing a little from the pain he felt constantly.

The Doctor nodded. "That would be beneficial, of course. However, this experiment would also require the injection of unadulterated Borg nanoprobes to test whether assimilation by the Borg can take place after this treatment is completed. We hope it will not."

"Really? Then I definitely want to volunteer."

Icheb felt compelled to interject, "But Crewman Sofin, if the treatment does not work, injecting you with this type of nanoprobe could turn you into a Borg."
"You're a pretty smart kid, Icheb. I'm willing to bet it will work. But even if it doesn't, the Doctor will fix me right up, won't you?"

"I've certainly had plenty of practice!" The Doctor said archly, with the self-satisfied air Lieutenant Paris had told Icheb was called "preening."

"You're sure, then?" Icheb asked.

"Yes, I'm sure. It's for Marla."

"I'll contact the captain," the EMH said. "As long as she approves, we'll begin immediately."

Icheb, acutely aware of Ensign Wildman staring at him through the glass walls of the Doctor's office, became even more nervous while waiting for the captain's response. When it came, the tension was not relieved immediately; the captain asked for the trial to be delayed until she could come to Sickbay to observe the procedure.

While they waited, Icheb considered all that he had accomplished, or at least, hoped he had accomplished. He knew he had done the very best he could, managing to stay on task and leaving his research on the other nanoprobes alone while he worked on these benign, hopefully benevolent ones. It was easier than he thought it would be--the others were already so lethal, he had little doubt that even without further tampering on his part, they would serve to be a powerful weapon against any future Borg invasions into Voyager.

Yet his success in that project was bittersweet. He had lost Naomi's companionship as a result of his obsession. And, as Lieutenant Paris had said when helping him to clear up his work area and remove the superfluous data from his computers, "That genie is really out of the bottle now." Icheb had looked up the reference in the database and found it was an apt comment--as were most of Lieutenant Paris' flippant remarks, when one really looked into them. Now that these killer nanoprobes were available, it would be very tempting to use them against the Borg. It might be impossible for other drones to have the benefit of being rescued from the Collective, as he and Seven had been. It would be far easier to deal with the threat by simply killing them, a temptation that might be hard to resist.

When the captain finally arrived, she was accompanied by her first officer. When she ordered the trial to begin, Icheb sensed time slowing to a crawl, as if a temporal anomaly had suddenly afflicted Sickbay. Lieutenant Paris entered Sickbay as well, relieving Ensign Wildman from duty. It was strange, but even though Ensign Wildman's presence had disquieted Icheb, he was saddened when she left. He had learned she was the one who had discovered the secret of his work developing the
lethal nanoprobes. It would be good if she was also here when the healing ones did their work--assuming they did as expected.

Then Icheb found himself explaining one more time to those assembled exactly what would happen to Brian Sofin if all went according to plan.

As the EMH injected the former *Equinox* crewman with the healing nanoprobes, Icheb did not know if he could bear the pressure of waiting to see if his project would end in success or failure. Maybe it was a good thing Ensign Wildman had left.

="A=

"Oh, wow! That tingles!" Brian exclaimed, several minutes later. "But the pain in my foot is fading away. Doctor, am I imagining it, or is it really healing that fast?"

"Your perceptions are very real, Mr. Sofin," the EMH, said, as he waved his medical scanner over the young man's leg. "Your nerves are regenerating at an incredible rate. If they act on brain tissue the way they do on peripheral nerves, I am very optimistic they will work on our sleeping shipmates."

"Doctor, can you check my head..." At the sudden burst of laughter, Crewman Sofin blushed. "I mean, do a scan of my brain. I had to have surgery once when I was on the *Equinox*. You found evidence of it in your scans when I came on board, remember? Can you see if there's any healing going on there?"

"I'd forgotten all about that injury, Mr. Sofin. Any healing there would certainly be comparable to... my word!"

"Doctor, don't keep us in suspense!" the captain said in an exasperated tone, when the EMH failed to follow up his interjection with an explanation.

"I'm sorry, Captain, but it's simply remarkable! The old scar tissue in his brain is simply--disappearing!" The EMH switched on the large scanner, bringing up two views of a brain. "This view is of Crewman Sofin during his last physical, when my innovative internal imaging scanning techniques were..." At the sound of the captain's irritated cough, the Doctor stuttered, "Well, my camera techniques aren't that important. But compare the older scan of the brain with the current one. Can you see how this area is no longer cloudy? Even old scar tissue is being converted to healthy brain matter. Captain, I request permission to treat Marla Gilmore and Darren Pierce immediately!"
"The test isn't complete," Brian reminded the Doctor.

"What? Oh, the anti-assimilation test. We can do that some other time, Crewman."

"Hey, I'm here now. I'd like to get it over with."

Lieutenant Paris bobbed his head in agreement, "Doc, if I ran off and used a new treatment a few minutes after I'd first tested it, you'd be all over me for being too 'impulsive.' Finish the test. I don't think Marla and Darren are going to get mad at you if they have to wait a few more minutes for their cure."

"They're right, Doctor," agreed the captain. "Finish the whole test before proceeding to the next step."

Icheb infused a hypospray with a sample of "unsafe" Borg nanoprobes. He hesitated when he approached Brian Sofin, who was wriggling nervously in his seat as he waited to receive the shot of nanoprobes. Lieutenant Paris seemed to understand the problem. Holding out his hand to Icheb, he said, "I'm the field medic, Icheb. It's my job."

Quite possibly it was only an illusion that they all held their breath when Lieutenant Paris injected Brian Sofin at the base of the neck with the hypospray. Sickbay was eerily silent while they waited for mottled gray flesh and metallic devices to explode from out of Brian Sofin's skin. Thirty seconds. One minute. Five minutes. Ten.

"There is no evidence that any implants or a cortical node are being created by these Borg nanoprobes. I'd say this experiment is a complete success, Captain. Now may I proceed with treating my patients?"

"By all means, Doctor. Treat your patients!" Captain Janeway exclaimed, sharing a grin with Commander Chakotay. A second later, she flashed a proud smile at Icheb. He smiled back, a little warily. After all the tension, Icheb decided the only thing he wanted to do was to spend the next several hours regenerating. But he couldn't—not yet. There were two more patients who needed to be treated by this revolutionary technique. Icheb moved to the instruments aligned on a tray and methodically began to fill them, carefully, with nanoprobes that healed.

As he turned to hand the hyposprays to the Doctor and Lieutenant Paris, Icheb noticed that two more
people had entered Sickbay. Samantha and Naomi Wildman stood just inside the door, out of everyone's way. Icheb caught Naomi's eye and noted the slight smile which slowly spread across her face. "Well, Icheb? Where are those hyposprays?" the Doctor demanded sharply.

"Sorry," Icheb quickly responded, as he handed them to the Doctor and field medic. Lieutenant Paris' smile was neither slight nor slow to develop as he accepted the one he was to use on Darren Pierce.

At the faint hiss of the hyposprays, Icheb stepped back towards the door of Sickbay. His work was done. Now, they only had to wait to see if the comatose patients reacted as well to the treatment as Brian Sofin had.

=\=

It took almost an hour before Marla began to stir slightly. Several more minutes passed before her eyes slowly blinked open. "Hey, there, sleepyhead," Brian Sofin said to her as he grabbed her hand. "How long are you going to stay on vacation in here? Lieutenant Torres has been tapping her feet, waiting for you to come back to work."

Weakly, but visibly to all the watchers, Marla squeezed his hand back. Her voice was only a whisper when she answered, "Tell her I'll be back in a minute."

Naomi wanted to cheer, but in deference to the fact that Darren Pierce was also stirring in his biobed, the reaction of everyone was subdued. The happiness, however, was genuine.

When she heard first the EMH, and then Commander Chakotay and Captain Janeway, congratulate Icheb upon a job well done, Naomi felt so happy for him. He deserved the captain's praise. Naomi wanted to go to him herself, but in the jostling of those around the biobeds coming to greet Marla and Darren, she lost sight of him. When she moved in the clear, she realized Icheb was no longer standing where he had been. The hissing glide of the doors of Sickbay caught her attention just in time for her to turn and see him stride out of Sickbay.

Naomi managed to get to the doors just before they closed completely, quickly enough to catch a glimpse of Icheb's back as he slipped into the medical lab. "Icheb! Wait for me!"

He turned to look at her over his shoulder. She wasn't sure how to interpret the expression on his face. When she caught up with him, she found she didn't know quite what to say. Finally, she
whispered, "I'm so proud of you, Icheb," and gave him a soft, chaste peck on the cheek.

"You no longer hate me, Naomi?" he asked, stumbling over the words a little.

"Oh, Icheb, I never hated you. I got angry at you, but that didn't mean I . . . I didn't love you anymore."

He immediately began to blush deep red. From the sudden warmth coming to her face, she knew hers must be as bright as his. Sublimely happy, Naomi leaned her head against Icheb's chest. She felt him put his arms around her very gently and give her the sweetest hug she could ever remember.

From out of the corner of her eye, Naomi saw Lieutenant Paris glance into the lab as he left Sickbay. She should pull out of Icheb's arms. After all, whatever could she say if her mother came out and saw them, too? But Lieutenant Paris didn't say anything. He just winked at Naomi. A second later the med lab's doors swished to a close, leaving Naomi and her Icheb in blissful privacy.
"Hello, Commander," Harry said to Chakotay as his team filed out of the *Delta Flyer*.

"How are you doing, Ensign?"

"As well as can be expected, considering I lost a member of my crew," Harry answered. "But the Pojzan are safe within their nebula. I've brought back messages for the captain, assuring her of the Pojzan's gratitude and good will, some information about their zeta drive they were willing to share with us--and gases from the nebula to compensate in a small way for the supplies I didn't get from the 'derelict ship.' And," he sighed, "I'm bringing back the body of Angelo Tessoni, which has been in stasis all this time. It was an expensive trip, sir."

Chakotay clapped him on the shoulder. "It's always hard when you lose someone. But there's good news from Sickbay. Marla Gilmore and Darren Pierce are finally awake and making good progress."

"That's wonderful, Commander," Noah Lessing said, his serious expression brightening at the news.

Morrow asked, "As soon as we get the *Flyer* cleared out, would it be okay if we went to see them?"

"Of course. In fact, you can go right away. I'll call in a team to clear out the *Flyer*.

Harry began to demur, "It's my responsibility to take care of my crew, sir. And then there's the gases in the Bussard collectors . . ."

"Harry, just come. We have to tell her about Angelo, and we really need you there when we do. Tal, you're coming, too, right?" Noah said.

"I will if you will, sir," Tal said to Harry.
Harry still seemed somewhat reluctant until Chakotay said, "It will be fine, Harry. In fact, it's an order."

"All right, Commander," Harry said, unwilling to disobey his commanding officer.

As Harry and his team left the shuttle bay, they failed to notice Icheb and Seven slipping inside the Delta Flyer. Chakotay followed the ex-Borg at a more leisurely pace, stepping down into the lower compartment where the biobed and stasis chamber were located. As he reached the bottom of the steps, he was just in time to see the body of Angelo Tesson shimmering away.

"To Sickbay?" Chakotay asked.

"Yes, Commander," replied Icheb. "His prognosis is uncertain because he suffered anoxia from major blood loss and sustained a serious head injury."

"Very serious," Seven agreed. "The Doctor will need to perform a surgical procedure to reshape his skull before we try the other therapies, but it is worth the attempt, Commander."

"Good. I have to report to the captain. You'd better get to Sickbay yourselves to assist the Doctor."

=\=

Despite his gloom from coming back from his mission shy one team member, the atmosphere in Sickbay was remarkably different from the last time he'd been there. Only two biobeds were in use, and their occupants were chatting with Sam Wildman as Harry's team entered Sickbay.

Marla smiled as soon as she caught sight of Noah and James. "It's so good to have you back, safe and sound!" she said.

"Well, not all of us are safe, Marla," Noah said with a sigh. "We lost Angelo on the mission."

"I know. The Doctor told me." Harry was glad so see how calm she was. It was a good thing she'd
already heard the sad news. It made this visit easier. "He also told me something else. He said that several people spent a lot of their free time visiting me while I was 'asleep.' " Marla held her hand out to Harry. "I seem to remember hearing voices. Tom told me you were one of the people who read to me. I want to thank you for that."

Harry gave her proffered hand a squeeze. "I'll keep on reading to you, if you want me to."

"I wouldn't mind a clarinet concert every now and then, either."

"Done," Harry said, his heart a little less heavy. "But I think we should leave. You need to get your rest."

"I think we've been getting too much rest lately, right, Darren?" Marla asked her neighbor.

"Way too much," Darren agreed. "Why don't you get your clarinet and play for us?"

"I will if you want me to," Harry agreed, glancing at Tal Celes, who had been whispering with Darren while he'd been talking to Marla. "I'll be back in a few."

"Okay, Harry." Marla gave him a quick hug and he left, never noticing the activity that had suddenly commenced behind the opaque shielding of the surgical bay.

After Harry was gone, Tal Celes asked, "What's this about a new treatment?"

"You were around when Neelix was killed on an away mission and Seven was able to resurrect him, weren't you?" Marla asked.

"Sure."

"Icheb came up with a variation on that treatment. That's what brought Marla and me out of our comas," Darren elaborated. "If you three stick around, we'll see if they can pull it off one more time."
"You mean Angelo . . ."

"We hope so, Mr. Lessing," the EMH said as he emerged briefly from behind the shield. "We very much hope so."

=-=-=-=-=

"Seven and Icheb are optimistic about Angelo Tessoni, Kathryn. No guarantees, but he has a chance. They've initiated the procedure."

"That's the best we can hope for, Chakotay. And go right ahead. You can say it."

"Say what?" From his expression, it appeared he had no idea what she meant.

"You can say, 'I told you so' about the Equinox people. You were absolutely right. All they needed was the opportunity to show their bravery and loyalty to this ship and her crew."

His smile glowed. "Ah, I agree. They've all done well, but the way Brian volunteered to be the guinea pig for Icheb's vaccine really impressed me. Anyone who allows himself to be injected with live Borg nanoprobes, risking assimilation--that's bravery 'above and beyond the call,' although there seems to have been a lot of that sort of bravery around here lately."

She smiled at him crookedly, not missing his double meaning. "Yes, there has, Commander, and the next thing I'd like to do is work with you on something I wish to send to Starfleet Command through the next data stream transmission. I want to file a report about how the Equinox crew have proven that they, too, deserve to be treated the same as any of Voyager's crew. A glowing, praise-filled report. Nothing lukewarm about it."

Chakotay's grin became wider. "I'll be happy to, Kathryn."

"And there's one other thing. I've got a list here I'd like you to look over . . . see if you approve." She handed him a PADD, which he studied for quite a while.
He was still smiling, but with a shade of uncertainty, as he finished it. "I have absolutely no problem with these promotions, Kathryn, but do you really think Starfleet will approve them? Any of them, in fact?"

"One shouldn't be a problem. And Gilmore's case will be a good test of what the Admiralty intends to do, don't you think?"

"And Seven? Do you think she'll go along with a field commission?"

"The only way to find out is to ask her, Chakotay."

"And if Starfleet won't go along with our recommendations? What then?"

Janeway stared at the list he was holding for quite a while, considering all the factors. Finally she said, "I don't really care whether they go along with them or not. As you've been saying for quite a while, as long as we're out here in the Delta Quadrant, how much will it really matter? If we get back in five years, or ten years, what then? Only our own crew's morale will be affected. We have to be concerned about our own. Starfleet can worry about how 'appropriate' it would be to have additional officers on a ship the size of Voyager."

"Then maybe we should just go ahead and do it first, and ask for their approval afterwards. Let the Admiralty deal with it as a fait accompli."

The captain laughed huskily. "That's the spirit, Commander."
Neelix had outdone himself with the decorations. Starfleet and Federation flags were everywhere. An elaborate array of drinks, finger foods and snacks crowded the mess hall counter. Everyone was in uniform. Neelix's, admittedly, was formal wear well-suited to his role of ambassador, but everyone else wore a Starfleet uniform of one type or another.

Icheb and Naomi were resplendent in their brand-new cadet uniforms. A stream of people were passing by, making the sort of fuss that, privately, Janeway believed both richly deserved. Icheb was praised for his medical discovery, while Naomi was being congratulated for passing her entrance exams. Icheb's achievement was plain to see, since the beneficiaries of his research were among those enjoying the evening's festivities. And for anyone to pass those examinations when she still hadn't reached her seventh birthday was a remarkable feat, no matter how quickly the applicant matured. Kathryn Janeway was proud of Naomi and Icheb, as she was of her entire crew. Had any captain ever had a better one? She doubted it.

A small knot of people constantly milled around one person's chair, greeting him and generally simply wishing him well. The captain decided to become one of them. She had a question she wanted to ask anyway.

"Good evening, Mr. Tessoni," Janeway said as she approached him. "I'm glad the Doctor released you for the ceremony. How are you feeling today?"

He was wan and thin, but his smile was the one she remembered from that day in her ready room. "Much better, thank you, Captain. The Doctor didn't have much choice about releasing me. I threatened to hide his mobile emitter so he couldn't go unless he let me come, too."

"Don't expect to make a late night of it, Mr. Tessoni," the EMH sniffed from his position immediately behind the young man's chair. "Remember, I'm monitoring you every second. At the slightest irregularity, you may expect to be whisked back to Sickbay."

"I'll make sure he behaves himself, Doctor. I'm still waiting for him to make good on that love note he owes me," Tal chided from her seat next to Angelo.

"You're going to have to wait until I'm not so dizzy from all these nanoprobes running around inside
"my head . . ." he joked, leaning in towards Tal and whispered something into her ear which sounded a bit like "celestial" to Janeway's ears. The pretty Bajoran blushed, but Janeway noted, she didn't move away from her seat next to Angelo. She had to admit the man was doing pretty well for someone who had been pronounced dead and placed in stasis only a couple of weeks before.

After Janeway moved away from the convalescent's area to that of her chief engineer and helmsman, she recalled she'd meant to ask Angelo if Giovanna was related to him, and if so, how. After the ceremony, she really must remember to do that.

Next to B'Elanna, a graceful figure in teal and black stood. Janeway leaned in to her and asked, "If you've changed your mind I've got a couple of extra pips, Seven."

"Thank you, but no, Captain. I'm still mulling over your offer."

"You look very good in that uniform," Janeway said, still hopeful.

"I've decided to wear the uniform from now on with or without formally enlisting in Starfleet, Captain. All the Maquis wear it. Now that Icheb and Naomi are both wearing cadet uniforms, too, thanks to being granted 'distant learner' status at Starfleet Academy, it seemed pointless to refuse any longer."

Janeway resisted the impulse to make any reference to "resistance is futile." She suspected the joke would not go over well.

When Chakotay signaled her from across the mess hall, Janeway raised her glass to acknowledge his summons. Walking to the front center of the room, she placed her glass upon the lectern Neelix had fabricated and took her place next to her first officer. The buzzing of conversations died down rapidly. Everyone knew the reason for this gathering. She guessed they wanted to get past the ceremonial aspects and back to the party. That suited her, as well.

"As you know, I've held the line on promotions for more than six years, giving them out to only a very few. Now that we're in contact with Starfleet, I've decided I may have been too cautious. And after the bravery and devotion to duty I've seen in the past weeks from all of you, as you fought off our attackers and returned Voyager to specifications despite the degree of damage we sustained, the time has come to reward those whose contributions to this ship should no longer be ignored."

At Janeway's nod, four members of the crew took their places in a row in front of their two most
"Lieutenant B'Elanna Torres, for your courage under fire and brilliance in Engineering, I raise your field commission to the status of full lieutenant. Congratulations, B'Elanna."

As soon as the new Maquis full lieutenant's rank insignia was attached to her collar, Neelix called out, to general laughter from the assembly, "You'd better be careful now, Tom. She outranks you again." When the chuckling had died down, Janeway picked up another Maquis insignia, exactly like the one she had just bestowed upon her chief engineer.

"Lieutenant Michael Ayala, for your services as Commander Tuvok's right hand man in Security, particularly for instituting the improved security measures that recently were tested to the utmost, from lieutenant j.g. to full lieutenant." The tall, generally quiet man bent down and received his new rank insignia from his captain, a huge grin upon his face.

"To Ensign Harry Kim, whose loyal service to the crew of this ship has long been sufficient to justify my granting him a lieutenant's pip, but whose diplomatic and humanitarian efforts with the Pojzans deserve special mention: here it is, Harry, at long last." Harry was positively beaming as she positioned the gleaming black pip upon his collar and whispered, "Congratulations."

Her mind churned over how she should word the last citation. It would be controversial back at Starfleet, but it was something she simply had to do. Let the Admiralty decide to take it away, if they dared. When Janeway recalled how far Marla Gilmore had come, from the young *Equinox* officer whose nerves had been frayed so badly she couldn't even bring herself to travel by turbolift on *Voyager*, to the crewman who had remained at her post while the Borg were literally tearing people apart all around her, she was finally able to formulate what she would say.

"And last, but certainly not least . . . Marla Gilmore . . . when you first became a member of this crew, I stripped away this pip from your collar and said you would have to earn my trust and that of your shipmates to get it back. It is abundantly clear you have done just that. You acted to save this ship and its crew from its enemies at the very grave risk of your own life. For this action in particular, I am recommending you for the Star Cross, for gallantry. And I am reinstating you to the rank of ensign. Congratulations, Ensign Gilmore."

As loud as the cheers had been for Harry Kim, those for the newly minted ensign were even louder. As Janeway placed the ensign's pip to Marla's collar, the emotions of the young woman were easy to read, spilling over into tears of joy. Janeway felt her own eyes grow a bit misty. Those who had survived the hell of serving on the *Equinox* faced an uncertain future in the Alpha Quadrant, but so long as they served on *Voyager*, they would be treated with respect. And this crew member--or rather, this ensign--would hold the rank she so richly deserved.
When the cheers died down, there was one more tradition to be followed. Tom gave B'Elanna a buss on the lips to congratulate her on her promotion, just the way she had kissed him on the bridge on the day the captain reinstated him to lieutenant. He didn't see who had given Ayala his kiss, but Tom thought Seven might oblige Harry. She was still standing at the edge of the room, however, next to Icheb, Naomi, and Sam Wildman. Instead, Harry was kissing Marla, while she returned the favor to Harry. Tom heard, rather than saw, that B'Elanna had seen it, too, thanks to her audible groan; but before his wife had a chance to comment, Harry and Marla were walking towards them, smiling broadly.

"Well, now, old buddy. You're going to have to get used to being the same rank as me all over again," Harry teased.

"Maybe so, Harry," B'Elanna said with a smirk. "but I outrank you both. And don't you forget it!"

"I would never dream of forgetting it, B'Elanna! I mean, Lieutenant Torres!" he laughed.

While B'Elanna and Marla were exchanging congratulations, Tom stood near Harry, listening to the females chatter for a few moments before it slipped out. "Nice kiss, Harry."

"Tom, don't even think it. It's not like that at all. We're just good friends. There's nothing happening between us. Nothing at all."

"I'll bet you wouldn't mind if something did, though," Tom mused.

"That's it! I'm going! Marla, do you want to get a bite of something to eat? I hear Neelix has been cooking all day . . ."

As the new lieutenant and restored ensign moved towards the buffet tables, Tom and B'Elanna closed ranks, shaking their heads. It was on the tip of Tom's tongue, but B'Elanna said it first. "Harry really is falling hard for her."

"Yup," Tom agreed. "Buster Kincaid is at it again."
When we planned and began to post our Virtual Season, we decided to put up one episode a week in order to imitate a television network's season. This story, and "Escalation," the one which preceded it, were in the process of being written in September, 2001. The events that occurred during this period of time made visiting the emotions some of the characters go through particularly excruciating to write down.

"Ethical Considerations" was first outlined when our writers were gearing up for this project. Who knew then that writing about violent attacks and rescuers would have such resonance? Yet this story is a necessary part of our season, so as the designated "scriptwriter," I had to complete it. I'm not saying a few things weren't altered as a result of September 11, 2001, but then, what wasn't? We dedicate this story to all those who lost their lives, to the rescuers, and to all those whose own lives were changed irrevocably as of that date.

I wish to acknowledge my debt to my fellow writers of Season 7.5 for not giving up on me and for helping me through some very rough spots with this story, particularly Christina, Rocky, and Julie. Thanks, so much! I appreciate your help more than words can say.

Next Up: When Captain Janeway helped free the drones of Unimatrix Zero, she never dreamed what the consequences might be.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!