

FINDING CLARITY



BY MULTIMAPPER

Finding Clarity

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Winner of

Chapter 1

Fennis II was a beautiful planet with warp capable inhabitants who were very friendly and inviting. After some mutually satisfying trade negotiations, the government officials invited the crew of Voyager to enjoy a harvest festival in the capital city.

Lieutenant Tom Paris, the chief helmsman of Voyager, walked through the capital square with his best friends, Harry and B'Elana, looking through merchant stalls for trinkets and just enjoying the festive atmosphere. An odd triangular symbol at one of the stalls caught Tom's eye. Unnoticed by the others, he left for a moment to check it out.

Tom walked up to the elderly woman who was proprietress of the stall and noticed that she didn't have any wares displayed. Overcome by curiosity, he asked the woman, "What are you selling?"

"I offer a service of clarity."

"I don't understand."

"Sometimes, we make our way through life and become distracted from the things that are most important. I simply aid in returning to the path." She said with a look of ultimate peace in her eyes.

Tom thought about this for a moment, then asked, "What would I have to do?"

"Take my hands." The woman said in a motherly tone as she extended her hands to him.

Tom took her hands cautiously then looked into her eyes.

"What now?"

"It is done."

"Wha?"

"Soon you will find clarity, be well, enjoy the festival." She said and gave him the most loving smile that he'd ever seen in his life.

"Um... thank you." Tom said hesitantly.

She nodded once, then looked away from him, toward a gathering of people in the central courtyard.

Having been dismissed, Tom walked away from the booth somewhat dazed.

A moment later, he caught sight of Harry and B'Elana and hurried to rejoin them.

They hadn't noticed his momentary absence and soon he forgot that he had left their company.

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Upon arriving back on the ship, Tom made his way back to his quarters. When he found himself alone, he began to think. At 03:00 Tom snapped out of his thoughts and realized that half the night had passed. Tom dragged himself to the bed and collapsed.

When the alarm sounded, Tom awoke and realized that even during his sleep, his mind had been racing. He had been thinking about the stages of his life and the choices that brought him to this day. He sluggishly went through his morning routine, then went directly to the bridge and continued on to the ready room for the morning briefing.

From the moment Tom stepped onto the bridge, he was completely focused on his job without any sluggishness or distraction. Through the briefing and on through the course of his shift, Tom was the consummate professional. Although no one noticed at the time, Tom passed up several opportunities to make his typical smart assed comments. Instead, he responded to every inquiry or direction directly, concisely, and respectfully.

After the shift ended, Tom went back to his quarters without giving his day of work a second thought. As soon as he had changed out of his uniform, he sat on the edge of his bed and began to think...

...and think...

* * * * *

"Tom? Are you in there?" Harry's voice called over the comm at Tom's door.

After a moment to snap out of his deep thoughts, Tom reluctantly stood and said, "Come in."

"What's going on? I haven't seen you outside of duty for over a week." Harry asked with concern.

"Um... yeah. I just haven't felt much like going out." Tom said evasively.

Harry looked closely at Tom and saw dark circles under his eyes and a gaunt hollowness to his overall appearance.

"Are you feeling alright? You look like you've been sick." Harry said cautiously.

"I'm feeling fine, I've just got a lot on my mind." Tom said in a distracted voice.

"Is it anything I can help with?" Harry asked cautiously, already knowing that his offer of help would be refused.

"No. Really, there's nothing wrong." Tom said and tried to force a smile onto his face.

The false smile was the last bit of confirmation that Harry needed to prove that something really was wrong.

"Do you want to go out and shoot some pool or check out the resort program?" Harry asked cautiously.

"Maybe some other time. It's been a long day, I'm going to turn in early." Tom said as he ushered Harry toward the door.

{Sure you will.} Harry thought to himself as he looked again at the dark circles under Tom's eyes.

"I'll see you tomorrow Har. I really need to get to sleep." Tom said as he all but threw Harry out into the hallway.

"Yeah. Tomorrow." Harry said to the door as it closed in front of him.

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"Commander? Do you have a minute to talk with me?" Harry asked nervously from Chakotay's office doorway.

"Of course Ensign Kim, what can I do for you today?" Commander Chakotay asked as he sat back in his chair and devoted his full attention to Harry.

"Well, I, um... I'm kind of worried about Tom and... I didn't know who else to talk to about it." Harry said uncomfortably.

"Please have a seat and tell me what's bothering you." Chakotay said as he sat forward with interest.

Harry sat down and was silent for a moment as he collected his thoughts.

Finally he looked into Commander Chakotay's eyes and said, "Tom's been acting strangely for a couple weeks now. Last week I tried to talk to him about it and he was in such a rush to get rid of me he nearly threw me out of his cabin."

"Go on." Chakotay said in a measured tone.

"Well, since then, I've been watching him. He goes to work, then he goes back to his cabin and stays there." Harry said intently.

"It's his right to be alone if he chooses to be." Chakotay said simply.

"You don't understand Commander, he's not eating. I don't think he's been sleeping. I'd be willing to bet that he's replicated new uniforms because he's lost so much weight that his old ones don't fit anymore."

Chakotay thought about how earlier that same morning he had noticed that Lieutenant Paris looked thinner.

"Haven't you noticed how different he's acting on the bridge?" Harry asked in a slightly pleading voice.

"Yes. He's been very professional. In fact, I made a note to myself just yesterday about it for his performance review. His conduct the past two weeks has been exemplary." Chakotay said as he looked Harry in the eyes.

"Yeah. That's not like Tom at all. He hasn't even made a joke in two weeks." Harry said desperately.

"Ensign Kim, return to your duty station and I'll look into the matter." Chakotay said seriously.

"Yes sir." Harry said reluctantly.

"Ensign, if Lieutenant Paris has a problem, I'll see that it's dealt with." Chakotay said firmly.

Harry smiled with relief, then said, "Thank you sir."

"Go on." Chakotay said and returned the smile.

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Chakotay considered Harry's words for the rest of the day and did his best to observe Tom's behavior at the helm without being obvious about it.

About an hour after Tom had gone off shift, Chakotay completed his reports for the day then made his way to Tom's cabin. He reluctantly pressed the button by the door, not completely sure what he was going to say.

After a long moment of silence, Tom's hesitant voice sounded over the comm, "Come in"

Chakotay walked into the darkened room to find Tom sitting on the couch curled up into himself with his knees to his chest.

"Tom, can we talk?"

Tom looked up slowly with pain evident in his eyes.

Chakotay was taken aback at the emotional state that Tom appeared to be in.

When Tom realized who had walked in, he quickly stood and quietly said, "Yes sir. Please come in and have a seat."

Tom gestured to the couch and waited for Chakotay to sit down before taking his seat again.

"What's wrong Tom?" Chakotay asked quietly with concern.

"What do you mean? Did I do something wrong?" Tom asked, almost sounding panicked.

"No, you just haven't been acting like yourself the last few weeks and I wanted to know if you're having a problem." Chakotay said honestly, feeling like he was talking to a complete stranger.

"I can't really explain, I need a little more time to be able to put it into words." Tom said reluctantly.

"Do you need to see the Doctor.?" Chakotay asked quietly, not sure if the suggestion would provoke a hostile reaction.

"I went to see him yesterday. I don't really feel sick but I had him check me out anyway, just to be safe. The Doc says that besides being a little underweight, I'm fine."

"You're not fine, Ensign Kim says you've been distant and you haven't been eating."

"Yeah, I've just been thinking, I might have forgotten a few meals." Tom said in a voice of distraction.

"What have you been thinking about, if you don't mind me asking?" Chakotay asked cautiously.

"I don't mind, but I'd rather not talk about it yet. Not until I have it all sorted." Tom said as he finally looked into Chakotay's eyes.

"I can accept that. Is there anything I can do to help?" Chakotay asked, being drawn into the lost and helpless expression.

"Yeah, and you're doing it right now." Tom said as he tried to force a smile onto his face.

"What am I doing?"

"You're talking to me like I'm a real person."

"As opposed to...?"

"As opposed to a lieutenant, or a pain in the ass." Tom said and a little smirk found its way into his expression.

The statement made Chakotay mentally step back for a moment. This person that he'd been talking to wasn't the dutiful lieutenant from the bridge or the 'smart ass' that he was accustomed to encountering when Lieutenant Paris was off duty.

Chakotay finally took a chance and said, "Actually, I like talking to you like this. You're usually so evasive that I can't get a straight answer out of you."

"Yeah, I know. I've still got a little more thinking to do. Do you think we could sit down together sometime soon and talk some more about this? I think I've just about figured it out."

"Do you think you'd be ready to talk after shift tomorrow?"

"Yeah, maybe... probably."

"How about my quarters at 18:00, I'll make us dinner and we can talk." Chakotay said and gave Tom a genuine smile.

"Thank you. I'd like that." Tom said and returned the smile full force.

Chakotay then left the quarters leaving Tom much the same way as he had found him. While walking back to his quarters he thought about the Lieutenant's behavior over the past two weeks as opposed to the previous five years.

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After a long and uneventful shift, Chakotay completed his outstanding tasks, then went to his cabin to prepare a meal for two.

He took a moment to reflect on how long it had been since he'd done that, but was eventually caught up in the task at hand.

Just as Chakotay was programming their dessert into the replicator, the door signal sounded.

::Be-op::

"Come on in."

Tom entered the room looking more wan and subdued than the day before.

"I figured we could talk for a few minutes before we eat. Can I get you anything to drink?" Chakotay said, trying to hide his concern.

Tom considered for a moment, then said, "Llareth, hot."

Chakotay replicated himself a cup of herbal tea and a cup of the mysterious Llareth for Tom. "Llareth? I'm not familiar with that drink."

"It's a Betazoid tea, it's kinda relaxing."

Chakotay handed Tom his beverage and indicated for them to sit on the couch. "I'll have to try it sometime."

"I think you'd like it. I don't even remember where I was introduced to it, I've just always preferred it when I'm concentrating on a problem."

{Well I can't pass up an opening like that.} Chakotay thought to himself, then

asked, "So what is the problem that you're concentrating on?"

Tom laughed as he said, "OK, I guess I did set myself up for that."

Chakotay smiled curiously and asked, "For what?"

"You remember what I said yesterday about talking to me like a real person?"

Tom asked as he relaxed back into Chakotay's couch.

"Yes..." Chakotay said cautiously, not knowing where this was going.

"I think that's what's been happening with me. I've been defining the different people that I am, and that I'm expected to be." Tom said in a considering voice.

"How so?"

"For example, on the bridge I am expected to be Lieutenant Paris, chief helmsman. In Sandrine's, I'm expected to be Tom, the smart assed pool player..." Tom trailed off to see if Chakotay was understanding what he was saying.

"I get that, but I still don't understand what you mean by the 'set myself up' comment." Chakotay said cautiously.

"It's not just me Chakotay, you have several roles too. Commander, Counselor, and so on." Tom said, then took a sip of his tea.

"I suppose I do."

"When I said that thing about concentrating on a problem, it brought Counselor Chakotay out in full force. I could almost hear the switchover." Tom said with a gentle smile.

"And is that a bad thing?" Chakotay asked cautiously.

"Yeah, for me it is. You have to understand that my father used counselors to try and make me be what he wanted me to be. After the Caldik Prime incident, the Starfleet counselors descended on me like a pack of hungry jackals. Then in Auckland, I had a counselor picking at me every other day trying to 'rehabilitate' me." Tom trailed off with a helpless look at Chakotay.

"Then I assume that you would rather not speak to Counselor Chakotay."

"I would rather not tonight, but I think I am going to need to talk to him about

a few things later. I'll schedule an appointment for that." Tom said, and there was a tone of nervousness in his voice.

"So which me were you wanting to talk to tonight?" Chakotay asked, trying not to sound like a counselor.

"I'd like to talk to the person behind all the titles." Tom said frankly.

"Okay, for tonight the Commander is on the bridge and the Counselor is in his office." Chakotay said seriously.

"Good and the Lieutenant is on the bridge with the Commander and the Smart Ass is in Sandrine's playing pool with Harry." Tom said with a smile, then an expression of concern fell over his face.

Tom looked at Chakotay speculatively then seemed to come to a decision.

"Actually this is what I wanted to talk to you about."

"What? Your role on Voyager?" Chakotay asked cautiously.

Tom gave a little laugh. "No, Lieutenant and Smart Ass cover that pretty well."

"Then what?" Chakotay asked as he shifted into a more comfortable position.

"Me, the person that I am, right here, right now. The person without the mile high walls of defenses." Tom said in a small voice.

"What about him?" Chakotay asked, then took another sip of his tea.

"Exactly." Tom said with a nod.

"What?"

"I've been living in the roles so much, I don't know about him, the person I am when I'm not being the Lieutenant or the Smart Ass."

"Is that why you had the attitude on the bridge, I mean before the last two weeks." Chakotay asked without accusation in his voice.

"Yeah, I think so. When something came up and the Lieutenant needed to express himself, he only had the Smart Ass to use as a voice. The Lieutenant doesn't say much besides 'Yes sir' and 'Aye Captain'." Tom said in thought.

This realization made Chakotay think. It explained so much about Tom's

behavior in the past. "Did you notice that you've been talking about your other roles as separate people?"

"Yeah, it's just easier to think of it that way. We even have names."

"Really? Would you like to introduce me?" Chakotay asked quickly.

"Sure, you already know Lieutenant Paris. The Smart Ass is Tom. There is also a daredevil called 'Flyboy'. And then there's me, Tommy."

"Tom are you..."

"Tommy, if you don't mind."

"Okay, Tommy, are you serious about this? Because if you are..."

"I know what you're talking about Counselor Chakotay." Tommy said with a wry grin. "Multiple Personality Disorder. And I promise that I will make an appointment with you and take whatever tests you feel are necessary. In fact, just let me know when you want to see me, I don't have any plans after my shift the next few days. But right now, I'd appreciate it if you would go back to your office so Chakotay and I can have dinner."

"Point taken. The Counselor has left the room, it's just us now." Chakotay said as he tried to switch back to his more casual nature.

"Good. Would you mind if I call you Tay?" Tommy asked hopefully.

"Why?"

"It will just be a signal to let you know that I want to speak to the person behind the roles. Just like Tommy is for me."

"I see, you'll call me Commander if you need me in that capacity, Counselor in that, and Tay in this." Chakotay said in confirmation.

"Yes, and when I call you Chakotay, I'm speaking to whoever is on duty." Tommy's eyes lighted with a gentle smile.

"Fair enough, are you ready for dinner Tommy?"

"Sure am Tay."

Chakotay pressed the replicator button to produce the dinner he had programmed earlier and carried it to the table.

"Ratatouille?" Tommy asked with a delighted glint in his eyes.

"Yes, I hoped you'd like it."

"Yeah, I haven't had it since I was in Marseilles. I haven't even thought about it." Tommy said as he smiled with delight.

"Good, dig in." Chakotay said and felt a swell of happiness at Tommy's obvious enjoyment.

They both started into the dinner, then Chakotay asked, "What are you going to do about Harry? He's really worried about you."

"I know. Tom is going to invite him out to shoot pool on Friday. I think that will take care of things as far as Harry and B'Elana are concerned."

"Are you going to tell him about what's going on?"

"Actually, I'm going to discuss that with Counselor Chakotay when we have our appointment. I have a feeling that the appointment will be before Friday." Tommy said with a teasing grin.

"Yes, I have that feeling too." Tay said with a smile.

"Tom has always been the one to deal with counselors so this is going to be a little difficult for me. And it might turn out to be difficult for Counselor Chakotay too." Tommy said distantly.

"How so?"

"Because if I start to feel threatened, Tom will step in to protect me." Tommy said as he reluctantly looked up to meet Chakotay's eyes.

"Oh horror!" Chakotay said with a mock shiver.

"Yeah, and that will be the end of the counseling session." Tommy said with a smile at Chakotay's reaction.

Chakotay smiled, then stood and started to clear their empty dishes out of the way.

"So, what does Tay like to do for fun?" Tommy asked with genuine interest as Chakotay placed two pieces of chocolate cake on the table.

"I enjoy boxing on the holodeck and long distance running." Chakotay said

absently as he took his seat again.

"And?"

"And what?"

"Is that all you do outside your duties for fun?"

"No, I also like to meditate and take a spirit walk occasionally."

"Mystic Warrior Chakotay."

"Hmmm?"

"I can't speak for you, but it seems that the Mystic Warrior may be another role in your life."

"I suppose, but it's all me."

"I'm just trying to get to know the man behind all the roles. You know, Tay, the person who enjoys boxing and running. Tay, the person who is willing to share dinner with someone that has been a pain in the ass to him for the past five years." Tommy finished with a gentle smile.

"Tom, er, Tommy, I hate to admit it, but I don't think I know too much about Tay."

"Then I'd like to help you get to know him. From what little I've seen, he's a pretty good guy and worth getting to know." Tommy said honestly.

"Thanks. I'd have to say the same thing about Tommy."

"Before the last two weeks, I don't think I knew me. The me that I thought I knew, I didn't like at all." Tommy said reflectively.

"And now?"

"Now, I think I like me just fine." Tommy said with a smile of accomplishment.

"So do you think you're going to stay like this?"

"Yeah... Well, not *exactly* like this, but I like having the roles clearly defined and autonomous."

"Why?"

"I don't get lost behind them. I get time to be me."

* * * * *

With dinner finished, Tay and Tommy returned to the couch for some more conversation.

"Tay, I'm curious about something."

"What's that?"

"What do you do about companionship?"

"In what way?"

"I mean, doesn't it bother you to come back here after your shift and not have someone to talk to about your day?"

"I really don't think about it."

"I do... now. I guess I didn't before, but I think that's why I was always running around being the pilot, holodeck programmer, back-up medic and Delta quadrant playboy."

Chakotay thought about the statement, but remained silent, relating to what Tommy was saying on some level.

"I think I was just trying to fill up my time with meaningless things so I wouldn't have to spend an evening with myself."

"I see what you mean. Between my days on the bridge, and evenings doing reports, I really don't have much free time."

"So you fill your off duty hours with work so you don't have to think about it?" Tommy asked quietly.

"Yes, I think I do."

"And if you did think about it?"

"I guess I wouldn't like it."

"I tell you what Tay. I think we can help each other out with this." Tommy said honestly.

"How so?"

"Just by being here for each other. I'm enjoying just sitting and talking with you, and I would like it if we could do this again, and often." Tommy finished with a hopeful smile.

"I think I'd like that too... It's nice to have someone to sit and talk with. We can leave ship's business outside and just talk about whatever interests us." Chakotay said with a dreamy smile.

"Exactly. What do you say? Wanna try it? I know we don't have the rations to do a dinner like this every night, but we could just stop off at one of our cabins after dinner and relax and be ourselves for a while." Tommy said with mounting excitement.

"I don't know if I'll have the time to commit to something like that. My duties..." Chakotay began to say.

"Do you think that Tay deserves to have some time to do things?"

"Come to think of it, Tay deserves some consideration. The commander can deal with things on his own time." Chakotay said decisively.

"Good, I'm going to reserve Tuesdays and Fridays for time for Tom to spend with Harry. But any other night I'd be available to spend some time with Tay, I mean, when you feel like it."

"I like the sound of that Tommy. Would you like to meet again tomorrow at 19:00?"

"Yeah, that will give me plenty of time to lose the uniform and get something to eat first."

Chakotay nodded his agreement to the arrangement.

"I guess I'd better get going. It's getting late and the Commander and the Lieutenant have early shifts tomorrow." Tommy said with regret.

"The counselor will schedule an appointment with you sometime tomorrow, if that's alright." Chakotay asked as he stood to walk Tommy to the door.

"That's fine, as long as you let him know that I have plans at 19:00." Tommy said with a smile.

"I'll be sure to tell him." Chakotay said warmly.

"Good night Tay."

"Good night Tommy."

* * * * *

The next morning, about an hour after shift change, Janeway leaned over in her chair and whispered, "I need to discuss something with you in my ready room."

Chakotay nodded, then stood to follow her.

"Tuvok, you have the bridge." Janeway said as she walked with purpose toward the door.

* * * * *

"It's about Tom Paris." Janeway said without prelude as she stopped just inside the door.

"Is there a problem?" Chakotay asked cautiously.

"That's what I'd like for you to find out. I've had three people come to me voicing their concerns about him. They say that he's become reclusive and hasn't been eating." Janeway said frankly.

"Actually, I am aware of that. Ensign Kim came to me two days ago saying much the same thing." Chakotay said cautiously.

"And?"

"And I spoke to Lieutenant Paris about it. Kathryn, he's working through some personal issues and he asked me to schedule an appointment with him today in my capacity as counselor." Chakotay said very precisely.

The captain had a mild stunned look on her face, then quietly asked, "Are you aware that he would rather spend an afternoon in a pit of Denebian slime devils than spend an hour with a counselor?"

Chakotay laughed, then said, "I'm aware of that, and I even understand his reasons for that attitude. But, he is the one who asked for the counseling session. Since he is willing, his attitude shouldn't be a problem, as long as I'm not too aggressive with him."

"I get the feeling that you already know what the problem is." Janeway said

speculatively.

"I have an idea. But I hope to know more after our session this afternoon." Chakotay said as he watched her expression carefully.

"Is it anything that will effect his performance on the bridge?"

"Yes, I think this particular problem might improve his performance. Think about how he has been performing his duties the past two weeks."

"Come to think of it, he has been unusually conscientious and cooperative. It's just not like him." Janeway finished with a questioning look at Chakotay.

"Without breaking confidentiality, there isn't much more I can say except that he is aware of his behavior and has asked for counseling. I think that alone is a reason to be optimistic."

"Agreed. Let me know if there is anything I can do to help."

"I will."

* * * * *

::Be-op::

"Come in."

"Counselor?" Tommy said with a somber, somewhat frightened look in his eyes.

"Come on in Tommy, have a seat." Chakotay said and gestured to the chairs across from his desk.

Tommy looked at the chairs apprehensively then sat down stiffly.

"I know you don't want to be here Tommy. You must have some pretty big concerns to put yourself through this so let's just deal with those first. You go ahead and tell me what you think I need to know and ask whatever questions you want. We'll save the tests and whatever else we decide to do for some other day. Is that okay with you?"

"Yeah. I guess the main thing I wanted to talk about is Harry."

"Are you worried that Harry won't like Tommy?"

Tommy looked up, just a little startled, then reluctantly said, "Yeah, I think

that's it. I've taken a lot of time to think in the past couple weeks. I've remembered a few times when Harry has seen behind the Tom persona and he didn't react well."

"In what way?"

"If I say something outside the Tom persona, he quickly changes the subject or backs off right away." Tommy said reluctantly.

Chakotay pondered this for a moment then said, "I have an idea about this, it's just something for you to consider, do you want to hear it?"

"Sure, go ahead Counselor."

"Maybe you're afraid that Harry is Tom's friend and not yours." Chakotay ventured to say.

Silence sat like a cold stone in Tommy's mouth. Chakotay waited until the silence became too strained then said, "Or maybe your afraid that you don't like Harry as much as Tom does."

The silence continued but then with eyes downcast, Tommy slowly and slightly nodded his head.

"And that's okay." Chakotay said in a voice of assurance.

Tommy looked up questioningly.

"Tommy, you like who you like. If Harry is Tom's friend, so be it. Let them have their fun sometimes and you do your own thing other times." Chakotay said seriously.

"Counselor, I thought that you would be trying to force me back into being one person, I didn't think you could accept me as Tommy. Why aren't you trying to make me like I was before?" Tommy asked with fear and confusion in his voice.

"To put it simply, I think you're better off like this. Too many people try to fix things just because they're outside the norm. You're condition is unusual but from what I've judged from our talk last night, you seem to be well adjusted, thoughtful, and trying to better your current situation. What more could I hope for you? But if you feel that you have a problem and that we should try to reintegrate you, then I will do everything I can to help you."

"I kinda just assumed that you'd think that I was messed up and try to fix me." Tommy said in a lost voice.

"No, I think you should decide what is going to make you happy, then let me know and I'll try to help you get it." Chakotay said with a warm smile.

"So you think I'm okay? I'm going to need to think on that one for a little while before I make any life altering decisions." Tommy said in a considering voice.

"That sounds like a good idea. I do have some concerns that you need to be aware of." Chakotay said quietly.

"Like what?"

"I find Tommy to be well adjusted and a very likable person. And to put it frankly, Lieutenant Paris is a commanding officer's wet dream. But I don't know about the stability of Tom and Flyboy. I would like to schedule future sessions with them to make sure that they aren't a menace to themselves or others." Chakotay said cautiously, watching carefully for Tommy's reaction.

"You mean that you're afraid that Tom will get drunk and start tearing up Sandrine's or Flyboy might want to do World War I dog fighting with the holodeck safeties turned off?" Tommy asked slowly.

"Yes Tommy, that's exactly what I'm afraid of. But as far as your role in these counseling sessions, I think we need to define your goals so I can help you achieve them." Chakotay said with a smile.

"Okay counselor, I have to admit, you just surprised me. I've been through more counselors than I can name and I've never had any of them tell me that I'm fine before. I think I like the sound of it. And one other thing... "

Chakotay nodded to encourage Tommy to continue.

"When you meet with Tom and Flyboy, you might consider meeting them on their own turf. Tom is going to be a complete prick to you if you sit him down in an office and try to get him to open up to you. And Flyboy has so much nervous energy, his fidgeting will probably drive you up the wall before you can pry five words out of him."

"What do you suggest then?"

"I think if you set up a time to play pool at Sandrine's with Tom, or even play some cards with him in my quarters, then he might be more cooperative. As for Flyboy, just join in some of his interests and he'll open right up, maybe rock climbing or skydiving." Tommy said in a speculative voice.

Chakotay nodded his agreement, then asked, "Where do you want to meet at 19:00?"

"Let's meet at my place." Tommy said with a happy smile at the change in subject.

"Sounds good, I'll see you then."

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After a comfortable evening of general talk and companionship in Tom's cabin, the two went their separate ways. The next morning they worked their shift and an overall sense of harmony seemed to fall over the bridge as the tension that was usually between them was noticeably absent.

Finally the shift ended and they met each other in the turbo lift.

"Deck five."

"Deck eight."

"Big plans tonight?" Chakotay asked as the turbolift began to move.

"I guess so. Tom is going to play pool with Harry." Tommy said reluctantly.

"Well, let them have their fun. Tom's been really good about letting us have time to do what we want." Chakotay said with a smile.

"Yeah. I guess so. What are you going to be doing tonight?" Tommy asked curiously.

"Crew performance reviews. Tuvok and I are going to be up most of the night getting them finished." Chakotay said with a sour look.

"I won't whine about watching Tom and Harry play pool then." Tommy said with a sympathetic smile.

"Just tell me all about how it went tomorrow." Chakotay said as the turbolift doors opened.

"You've got it. I'd better get going." Tommy said quickly.

"I'll see you tomorrow." Chakotay said with a smile as he watched Tommy hurry away.

* * * * *

::Be-op::

"Excuse me Tuvok, this may be important." Chakotay said as he stood from the table where they had been working.

"Come in." Chakotay said as he walked toward the door.

Tommy rushed into the room, then froze when he saw Tuvok at the table.

"It's okay. What's the matter?" Chakotay asked with concern at the expression of worry on Tommy's face.

"Can I... can we... talk privately?" Tommy fought to ask past hitching breaths.

"Of course, come with me." Chakotay said and motioned for Tommy to walk into the bedroom with him.

Tuvok quirked an eyebrow at the unlikely circumstance of Lieutenant Paris coming to Commander Chakotay for emotional support, then mentally filed his speculation for later thought and went back to his work.

* * * * *

"What's wrong Tommy?" Chakotay asked at the devastated look on Tommy's face.

"I... we were playing pool... and... and...." Tommy fought to say.

Chakotay pulled Tommy into a comforting hug and whispered, "Calm down for a second then tell me what happened."

Tommy clutched onto Chakotay desperately and tried to calm himself.

After a long silent moment, Chakotay quietly asked, "Feeling better?"

"Yeah. Thanks Tay."

"Can you tell me what's got you so upset?" Chakotay asked as he continued

to hold Tommy close to his chest.

"Tom and Harry were playing pool. Then B'Elana joined them." Tommy said from the embrace.

Chakotay slowly started rubbing Tommy's back to soothe him.

"Well, they were having fun and everything was fine until... I guess I thought I could come forward and maybe have some fun with them too." Tommy said in a trembling voice.

"What happened?" Chakotay asked gently.

"I missed a shot and they made fun of me. Harry and B'Elana both started laughing at me and calling me names." Tommy said as tears started falling down his cheeks.

"What did you do?" Chakotay asked as tears started to well up in his own eyes.

"I let Tom take over again and he just started laughing with them and pretended like he was goofing around." Tommy said in a pained voice.

"Tommy. You've never had to deal with something like this before because you've always had Tom to shield you from it. Harry and B'Elana weren't being cruel, they were just interacting with you the way they always do." Chakotay said gently.

"But I'd never call someone a 'loser' or a 'disgrace to the Fleet' no matter how badly they played." Tommy said in misery.

"I know. That's one of the things I like about you Tommy. You're an honest and caring person who would never hurt another person's feelings. But you've got to understand that they weren't serious when they said those things, they were just playing." Chakotay said gently.

"It doesn't matter. I don't want to be around people who make me feel like that. I want to have friends who... empower me. I want to have friends that will know I'm being honest when I say how much I appreciate them and will share their feelings honestly with me." Tommy said desperately.

"I agree. Those are the type of friends that you need. That's the kind of friend that I'm trying to be for you." Chakotay said cautiously.

"You are Tay. I guess I haven't told you before, but I really do think of you as a friend." Tommy said as he pulled back to look Chakotay in the eyes.

"Thank you Tommy. And I think of you as a friend too. I'm sorry that you've had such a bad experience but it might have turned out for the best." Chakotay said as he tried to sound optimistic.

"How's that?" Tommy asked cautiously.

"Just think about what you've learned. The type of people that Tom enjoys spending time with aren't the same type of people that you enjoy. Now that you understand that, you can be on the lookout for new friends who *are* the type of people that you would like to spend time with." Chakotay said with a gentle smile.

"But what about Harry and B'Elana?" Tommy asked quietly.

"They're Tom's friends, let him spend time with them like you planned before." Chakotay said simply.

"Thanks Tay... I'm sorry I interrupted you while you were working." Tommy said shyly.

"That's fine. You're more important to me than performance reviews, and besides, I was ready to take a break." Chakotay said with a warm smile.

"Thanks. I'm going to go now. I'll see you tomorrow." Tommy said with a happy smile.

"I'll see you then. Have a good night." Chakotay said, relieved that Tommy was feeling better.

Chapter 2

The next day started normally but a half hour into the shift Commander Chakotay broke the routine by asking, "Lieutenant Paris, could I see you in the Captain's ready room for a moment?"

"Yes sir." Lieutenant Paris said, then waited until Ensign Baytart relieved him at the helm.

* * * * *

Chakotay was about to ask to speak to Tommy but stopped at the determined look in the Lieutenant's eyes as he stood at attention.

"At ease Lieutenant." Chakotay said and watched him closely.

Lieutenant Paris put his hands behind him and fell into a textbook 'at ease' stance.

"Your performance on the bridge the past few weeks has been exemplary. If you're interested, I'd like for us to sit down sometime and discuss your career plans." Chakotay said carefully.

"Yes sir. I would be very interested." Lieutenant Paris said with a note of enthusiasm in his voice.

"Good. Right now I need to speak with Tommy for a few minutes, then you can go back to your duties." Chakotay said as he watched the Lieutenant with interest.

"Yes sir, and thank you." Lieutenant Paris said formally, then a look of confusion came over his face.

"Tay?" Tommy asked curiously.

"Hello Tommy. I was just thinking about something and thought I'd ask your advice." Chakotay said with a gentle smile.

"Sure. What can I do to help?" Tommy asked happily.

"Well, you remember when I said that I wanted to have sessions with Tom and Flyboy sometime soon? It turns out that I'll have the time tonight and wanted to know if Tom would be willing to meet with me."

Tommy closed his eyes in concentration for a moment, then finally said, "He'll do it. I can't promise that he'll be nice about it, but he'll meet with you."

Chakotay smiled at the statement, then said, "It's okay Tommy. I know that I'm not one of his favorite people. Please just ask him to meet me in my office at 17:30 and I'll handle it from there."

Tommy's look became distant for a moment, then he asked, "Could you meet at 18:00? Tom's going to be working half a shift in sickbay today. When he's working with the Doctor they don't always finish on schedule."

"18:00 will be fine." Chakotay said and noticed the uneasiness in Tommy's expression.

"I noticed that we're both off duty tomorrow, do you have any plans?" Chakotay asked, hoping to divert Tommy's attention.

After a moment of thought, Tommy replied, "No. Nothing yet."

"What would you think about spending the afternoon in the resort program on the holodeck, just sitting by the pool and relaxing?" Chakotay asked with a smile.

"That sounds wonderful. I've watched Tom go there dozens of times but I never, you know, went as myself." Tommy finished shyly.

"Then it sounds like a plan. Is 12:00 alright with you?"

"Yeah. Thanks Tay. I was wanting to ask you to go do something tomorrow but I couldn't think of anything." Tommy said happily.

Chakotay smiled and said, "Well, don't think you're off the hook completely. You get to plan the next outing."

"Oh great! No pressure." Tommy said in a teasing voice.

"Lieutenant Paris had better get back to the helm. I wouldn't want him to miss out on too much of his piloting time." Chakotay said as he took a step toward the door.

"Yeah. Thanks Tay. It was good to have a chance to talk with you." Tommy said with a shy smile, then the look faded to that of Lieutenant Paris.

"Dismissed." Chakotay said casually.

"Yes sir. And thank you again." Lieutenant Paris said formally, then left the ready room.

Chakotay shook his head and smiled as he wondered how things were going to work out in the long-term.

* * * * *

"Where's the doctor? Gerron needs help!" Lieutenant Ayala said forcefully as he carried an unconscious Bajoran man in his arms.

"I'll get him." Tom said quickly and raced out of the room.

He returned a moment later with the Doctor following close behind.

"Please state the nature of the medical emergency." The Doctor said as he approached the young man who was now laying on a biobed.

"I'm not sure. I stopped by airponics to talk with Gerron on my break and I found him like this in the floor." Ayala said as he watched with worry.

The Doctor activated the biobed and started looking at the readings.

Tom saw the look of helplessness in Ayala's eyes and quietly said, "Why don't you come over here and sit down? The Doctor is going to help Gerron, but it's probably going to take a few minutes and you might be in his way if you stay here."

"I'm... I'm supposed to be back on the bridge... um, five minutes ago." Ayala said in a distracted voice.

"I tell you what. If you go back to the bridge, I'll send you a message as soon as we know what's wrong with Gerron." Tom said seriously.

"You promise?" Ayala asked cautiously.

"I swear. Lieutenant to Lieutenant. Just as soon as we know what's wrong I'll let you know." Tom said firmly.

Ayala looked at Tom appraisingly for a moment, then said, "I've been watching you for five years and haven't found one reason yet that I should trust you... but if you'll take care of Tem for me... I'll let all the rest stay in the past."

"It's a deal." Tom said firmly and held out his hand to shake.

Ayala looked at the hand, then said, "Take care of Tem."

Tom nodded and watched as Ayala walked briskly out of the room.

"Epinephrine." The Doctor said in concentration.

Tom rushed to the supply cabinet and loaded the hypospray with the requested medicine.

As he handed the hypospray to the doctor, he asked, "Do you know what's wrong with him?"

"It appears to be a severe allergic reaction, but I can only work to counteract the symptoms until I'm certain." The Doctor said in concentration.

"He works in airponics, maybe he's allergic to something in there." Tom said as he watched the doctor work.

"I'm sure Crewman Gerron would have taken the proper precautions if he had an allergy to any of the plants in airponics." The Doctor said seriously.

"Only if he knew. Maybe he picked up something new at Fennis II." Tom said speculatively.

"Perhaps. I'm going to examine his blood sample to see if I can verify what caused this reaction. Examine his hands and arms for any signs of irritation. If he regains consciousness, ask him if he purchased any new plants while he was on shore leave." The Doctor said as he carried a blood sample to the lab equipment on the other side of the room.

"Yes Doctor." Tom said seriously as he began to examine Gerron's hands carefully.

"Gregor?" Gerron asked in a weak voice.

"He's on the bridge. I told him that I'd call him as soon as we figured out what was wrong with you." Tom said seriously.

Gerron turned his confused gaze on Tom and tried to focus his eyes.

"Gerron, do you know what caused this?" Tom asked firmly.

After a moment of consideration, Gerron slowly shook his head.

"Did you buy any new plants while you were on shore leave?" Tom asked

carefully.

"Yes. I bought five new plants." Gerron said in a semi-coherent voice.

Tom moved closer so Gerron could see him more clearly and said, "It's possible that you're having a severe allergic reaction to one of those plants."

"I... I want Gregor... Please... I'm scared." Gerron said in a small voice as his eyes began to fill with tears.

Tom looked over at the Doctor who was engrossed in his work then down at Gerron who seemed to be on the edge of losing his emotional control.

Between one heartbeat and the next the expression on Tom's face changed from helplessness to sympathy.

Tommy took firm hold of Gerron's hand and said, "You don't have a thing in the universe to be afraid of."

Gerron looked at Tommy with confusion.

Tommy smiled and said, "You know how good the Doctor is, he'll figure this out. I'm going to stay right here with you until Ayala can come back here and take care of you himself. So you're not alone and you're going to be just fine."

Gerron examined Tommy's face carefully and saw the sincerity in his eyes.

"Who are you?" Gerron asked cautiously.

"Tom Paris." Tommy said in a gentle voice.

"No. I've seen Tom Paris a lot of times. You're not him." Gerron said as he started pulling his hand away.

Tommy looked to see that the Doctor was still busy, then leaned in closer to Gerron to whisper, "You're right, but it's okay. I'm a friend."

Gerron stopped struggling and looked at Tommy with question.

"The Tom Paris you know is a big confident loud show-off. I'm the regular guy who lives inside him." Tommy said quietly.

"There is an ancient story among my people about a man with a hundred thousand masks. He entertained and delighted people all over Bajor with his ability to become anyone he wanted. The audiences would call out names of

prominent citizens and he would flawlessly transform his appearance to each and every one. But one day he was given a request that he couldn't honor. A young boy asked him to be himself. He searched through the hundred thousand masks, but couldn't find his true face. The story ends with him going insane with grief... it's strange. A lot of Bajoran stories end like that." Gerron trailed off in thought.

Tommy smiled and said, "You don't have to worry about me. I only have three masks, and this is my true face."

Gerron looked Tommy in the eyes, then smiled.

"You should wear this face more often. I like it." Gerron said consideringly.

Tommy smiled at the statement, then said, "I still need my masks sometimes, they protect me. But I'm learning that it's important to show my true face to the people who can understand me... you're the second."

"Thank you. I'm honored." Gerron said peacefully.

"I've got it!" The Doctor said in triumph.

"Sounds like good news." Tommy said as he continued to hold Gerron's hand.

The Doctor approached the biobed, then started programming the scanners to look for something specific.

"Can you tell us what's wrong with Gerron?" Tommy asked cautiously, secretly wishing that Tom would take over to deal with the Doctor.

"One moment and I'll show you." The Doctor said with certainty.

Gerron and Tommy both watched the Doctor expectantly.

"And there it is." The Doctor said with a triumphant smile.

"There what is?" Tommy asked cautiously.

The Doctor moved down the bed and rolled up Gerron's left pant leg.

"The allergic reaction was caused by this insect bite." The Doctor said as he exposed a small red bump on Gerron's leg.

"Does that mean you can treat it?" Tommy asked hopefully.

"No Lieutenant. That means *you* can treat it. I'm going to attend to locating the insect or insects to remove the possibility of another case such as Crewman Gerron's." The Doctor said firmly, then handed a dermal regenerator to Tommy.

"Wha..." Tommy began to ask when information started to flood his mind.

"Oh. Okay." Tommy muttered to himself as he turned on the dermal regenerator's display and started to adjust it to the proper setting.

"Did the Tom Paris that I know just tell you how to do that?" Gerron asked speculatively.

Tommy looked to see that the Doctor was walking away, then said, "Yes. I don't have a clue about anything in sickbay. But Tom just told me what I needed to know to help you."

Gerron looked at Tommy curiously, then asked, "Why didn't he do it himself?"

Tommy looked at Gerron shyly and said, "The truth is that I'm enjoying talking to you and I didn't want to leave. Tom knew that and decided to help me."

Gerron smiled at the statement and said, "I'm enjoying talking to you too."

Tommy pressed a button on the regenerator and said, "This is probably going to feel weird for a few seconds."

"It's okay." Gerron said as he watched Tommy moving the regenerator carefully over his lower leg.

Tommy stopped the regenerator and pulled a comm unit on a swing arm around to Gerron's side.

"While I'm regenerating your leg, I think there's a Lieutenant on the bridge who would like to know how you're doing." Tommy said then went back to work.

"Thank you Tom." Gerron said quietly.

"Your welcome... and you can call me Tommy if you want." Tommy finished shyly.

Gerron looked at Tommy with surprise, then quietly said, "And you can call me Tem."

Tommy looked up from the regenerator as he realized the significance of what Gerron had just said.

For a Bajoran to offer the use of his given name was a gesture of trust and respect.

"Thank you Tem." Tommy said reverently, then turned his attention back to the regenerator.

"Hi Gregor." Gerron said into the comm.

"Thank the prophets." Ayala said in relief.

Gerron giggled, then said, "I'm the one who believes in the prophets."

"Oh, I knew it was one of us. Did the Doctor find out what was wrong?" Ayala asked in concern.

"Yes. Some sort of insect bit me on the leg and I had an allergic reaction. Tom is regenerating the wound now." Gerron said quietly.

"Is he taking good care of you?" Ayala asked cautiously.

"Yes Gregor. In fact, he just exposed himself to me." Gerron said in contentment.

"HE WHAT!? I'LL KILL HIM!" Gregor shouted through the comm.

Tommy's eyes went wide as he grew pale.

Gerron thought for a moment about what he had said, then shook his head.

"Humans." He muttered, then waited for Ayala to come back to the comm.

"Gregor?" Gerron said timidly.

After a silent moment, he said it louder, "Gregor?"

Lieutenant Ayala stepped back in front of the comm unit, then said through gritted teeth, "Tell me *exactly* what he did to you.

Gerron rolled his eyes as Tommy felt his knees get weak.

"Tom held my hand when I was afraid and spoke honestly with me. He

exposed his true inner self to me. That's all." Gerron said firmly.

"So he didn't make a move on you?" Ayala asked in a gruff voice.

"No Gregor. He has behaved as a friend toward me." Gerron said seriously.

"Okay." Ayala said hesitantly, then let out a sigh of relief.

"Gregor. Please trust my judgment. Tom is my friend." Gerron said firmly.

"Oh. It's like that... Okay Tem. I trust you." Ayala said in resignation.

"I'll see you when you get off duty." Gerron said in a more gentle voice.

"Call me if you need anything before then." Ayala said quietly.

"I will. I promise." Gerron said peacefully.

"Then I know it's the truth." Ayala said, also sounding peaceful.

Gerron turned off the comm, then pushed the unit out of his way.

"I'm done." Tommy said quietly as he looked over Gerron's unblemished leg.

"Thank you Tommy. I didn't think you wanted me to use your true name in front of Gregor." Gerron said quietly.

"Thanks Tem. I hope it won't be too long before I can... expose myself... to him too." Tommy said with a blush.

Gerron giggled at the statement, then said, "You Humans change colors at the strangest times."

Tommy smiled and said, "I suppose we do."

"Mr. Paris. I have used the ship's sensors to locate the insect in airponics and have contained it behind a force field." The Doctor said as he walked to Crewman Gerron's bedside.

Tom smirked at the Doctor and asked, "Why do I get the feeling that I'm going bug hunting?"

"Because you are, Mr. Paris. Spray it with this compound and bring it back here so I can make sure that it's not carrying any disease." The Doctor said and handed a canister and a sample container to Tom.

"You got it Doc." Tom said as he accepted the items.

"Tom?" Gerron asked from the bed.

Tom turned to find Gerron looking at him curiously.

"Thanks for letting him help me." Gerron said quietly.

"Glad to do it." Tom said with a big smile and a wink, then hurried away.

"How are you feeling Crewman?" The Doctor asked as he ran a new scan.

"Like I just made a new friend." Gerron said happily.

* * * * *

"Okay. I'm here. Now what?" Tom asked as he threw himself into the chair in front of Chakotay's desk.

"I've scheduled the holodeck for us for the next few hours." Chakotay said as he stood.

"What do you want us to do there *Commander*?" Tom asked in nearly a snarl.

"You'll see when we get there. And can you drop the attitude? It's not helping." Chakotay said as he walked toward the door of his office.

"Is that an order, sir?" Tom asked in a challenging voice.

"No. No orders. The only thing I'm going to ask of you for the next few hours is not to wimp out and quit on me before we're finished." Chakotay said as he stepped out of his office.

"Fat chance." Tom muttered as he reluctantly followed.

"If you're so dead set against this, why did you agree to it?" Chakotay asked as they approached the turbolift.

Tom looked around to be sure nobody could hear them, then said, "Because of what you're doing for Tommy. I may not like you, but I've got to admit that you're really helping him."

"So are you willing to go along with this because it might help him, or because I might be able to help you?" Chakotay asked curiously.

"Help me? I don't need any help. I'm just fine the way I am." Tom said

seriously as he followed Chakotay onto the lift.

"Holodeck 2." Chakotay called out to the ceiling.

"Come on *Tay*, fill me in. What's the plan?" Tom asked as he crossed his arms across his chest.

"You may call me Chakotay if you like. Only Tommy gets to call me *Tay*." Chakotay said firmly.

Tom got a look of surprise, but didn't offer any objection.

"And to answer your question, we're going to have a competition." Chakotay said seriously.

"Okay. You've got my attention." Tom said with a confident smile.

Chakotay turned away to hide his evil grin as the turbo lift doors opened.

* * * * *

"Where is this?" Tom asked as they walked into a strange dim desert landscape.

"Dorvan Five. My home world." Chakotay said simply as he led the way.

"If you're trying to make me comfortable, I'd have to say that this is a step in the wrong direction." Tom said as he strained to see where he was walking in the hazy orange light of the sunset.

"Who said I was trying to make you comfortable? Now quit whining, the lodge is just over this rise." Chakotay said and pointed to the path in front of them.

"Lodge?" Tom asked cautiously.

"That's right." Chakotay said seriously to Tom at his side, then in a louder voice called into the air, "Computer: Engage level one privacy lock. Disable all communications..."

"Chakotay..." Tom began to say but was stopped as Chakotay raised his hand to indicate his wish for silence.

Then in a firm voice he continued, "...and override safety protocols. Authorization Chakotay Beta Beta Two Four." Chakotay said into the air as

they walked.

"Privacy Lock: Engaged. Communications: Disabled. Safety Protocols: Disabled."

"What are you doing Chakotay?" Tom asked as he watched Chakotay cautiously.

"Something dangerous." Chakotay said as he finally crested the small hill.

"I got that part when you turned off the safeties. But *what* are you doing?" Tom demanded.

Chakotay turned to face Tom and said, "Tom, I won't ask you to do anything that I'm not willing to do myself. What we're going to do has its dangers, but without the danger the ceremony is meaningless."

"Whatever. Just do your hocus pocus so we can get out of here." Tom said irritably as he looked away.

"That's the spirit." Chakotay said with a smirk, then continued to follow the path in the diminishing light.

* * * * *

"Take off your clothes." Chakotay said as he sat down on a rock and began to take off his boots.

"Excuse me?" Tom asked with wide eyes.

"You heard me. Take off your clothes, that includes jewelry and anything else that you weren't born with." Chakotay said firmly.

"Commander, I don't know what you have in mind, but just because I was in prison doesn't mean..." Tom trailed off as he looked at Chakotay suspiciously.

"Tom. We do this ceremony naked. That's the way it's always been done. But if it helps to ease your mind at all, this is a holy place and I wouldn't desecrate it by suggesting anything sexual. You have my promise." Chakotay said solemnly.

"Yeah. That and two replicator rations will get me a cup of coffee." Tom said as he glared at Chakotay.

Chakotay stopped undressing and said, "It's really simple. This is an endurance test. You go into the sweat lodge and see if you can last for the first forty-five minute cycle, then the second and keep on through the fourth. The only thing keeping you in there is your own will power. You're free to leave at any time, but if you leave, it will be with the knowledge that you failed."

"This isn't really fair. You get to come here and do this all the time." Tom said slowly as he considered what Chakotay was proposing.

"I've done it four times in my life. Once since we've been in the Delta quadrant." Chakotay said seriously.

"Let me guess, after our last encounter with Seska?" Tom asked as he watched Chakotay's expression carefully.

"As a matter of fact, yes. The second cycle of the ceremony is focused on cleansing." Chakotay admitted reluctantly.

"Okay Commander. Let's do this before I can think about it and come to my senses." Tom said as he sat down to take off his boots.

"I'm willing to leave the ranks out here with the uniforms if you are." Chakotay said, then pulled his shirt off over his head.

"Tommy is going to owe me soooo big for doing this. I think three extra nights with Harry and B'Elana should about cover it." Tom said as he stood.

"He didn't have any idea I was going to do this. Please don't make him pay for what I'm asking you to do." Chakotay said in nearly a whisper.

Tom pulled his shirt off, then stopped at the look of concern in Chakotay's eyes.

"Okay. I won't make him pay me back for this." Tom said, then pulled down his pants in one indignant move.

Chakotay smiled, then casually took off his own pants.

"You're sure about this?" Tom asked cautiously as he stood only in his boxer shorts.

"Does this answer your question?" Chakotay asked, then pulled down his

briefs.

Tom reluctantly reached down to catch his thumbs in the waistband of his underwear, then slowly pulled them down.

"Good. Perfect timing." Chakotay said as he faced away.

Tom looked up to see what Chakotay was looking at.

The last rays of the sun were fading on the horizon.

"What now?" Tom asked with his hands strategically placed before him, trying to look casual.

"Follow me." Chakotay said and led the way down a narrow path between some gnarled trees.

Tom followed closely since there wasn't much light.

Flickering firelight could be seen through the trees ahead as they approached a clearing.

Tom came to a sudden stop when he realized that there were people gathered around the fire.

"Don't worry. They're here to help with the ceremony." Chakotay said in a whisper.

"Enter." One of the men said in a low voice without looking away from the fire.

Chakotay motioned for Tom to follow him, then walked to a dome-like structure across from the fire.

The opening was low to the ground. Chakotay got down on his hands and knees, then lowered himself almost completely to the ground before he began crawling into the impossibly low opening. Tom gave him a moment to get inside, then hesitantly followed.

Inside the dome it was pitch black.

"Chakotay? Where are you?" Tom asked as soon as he was fully inside.

"Stop. There's a pit in the middle of the room. Turn to your left and feel along the wall. Follow the wall until you find me." Chakotay said quietly.

"Okay. Thanks for the warning." Tom said seriously and did as he was told.

When his questing hands finally made contact with living flesh, he pulled back quickly, not wanting to think about what he might have just touched.

"Have a seat. The elders are going to bring the stones in just a minute." Chakotay said seriously.

"I don't know... am I allowed to talk or... what am I supposed to do?" Tom asked cautiously.

"It depends on the intent of the ceremony and those participating. If we were two teenagers having a sweat lodge to celebrate the journey into manhood we would have a completely different ceremony with many formal requirements. In this case, all I'm asking is that you be respectful of my religious faith and culture. Otherwise you are free to speak if you want to." Chakotay said seriously.

"Um. Okay." Tom said reluctantly.

There was a scraping sound across the small room from Tom, then a glowing red light could be seen.

"They're passing in the stones. We're just about ready to start." Chakotay said from his sitting place about a foot away.

"What are you going to do with that?" Tom asked in a quiet voice as he saw the glowing hot rock being lowered into the shallow pit in the middle of the room.

"This is a sweat lodge. The stones provide the heat." Chakotay said simply.

"Good. I don't really know anything about your traditions, but I was afraid..." Tom began to say.

"You won't be forced to do anything and you can leave at any time." Chakotay said seriously.

"Really? I mean, those guys out there won't hunt me down and drag my bare ass back in here if I try to run away?" Tom asked cautiously.

"No. And you wouldn't have to run. You could walk. They're only here to carry out their part of the ceremony." Chakotay said solemnly.

"Okay. What's their part?" Tom asked as he watched another glowing hot rock being lowered into the pit.

"For the most part, their job is to tend the fire and heat the rocks." Chakotay said frankly.

"Makes sense." Tom said consideringly.

"Once the stones are all in place, they will leave us alone in here. Under different circumstances, they might join us. This tradition of my people is one that has many meanings and can be adapted to serve a variety of purposes." Chakotay said introspectively.

"What is its purpose this time?" Tom asked curiously.

"I can't say specifically. The ceremony we are participating in has many purposes and it's my hope that we will gain something from each cycle that we endure." Chakotay said cautiously.

"Um... That wasn't anything like an answer, was it?"

Chakotay chuckled as he said, "No. I guess it wasn't. How about I tell you the purpose of each part as we come to it and you can focus on that?"

"Okay. How many more rocks are they going to load in there?" Tom asked as he leaned forward to look into the pit.

"They're almost done." Chakotay said calmly.

"So what's the purpose of this, um... whatchacallit... cycle?" Tom asked cautiously.

"This cycle is to help us connect with the spiritual realm. Our purpose during this time will be to ask for guidance." Chakotay said quietly.

"So you're hoping the spirits can give you an answer about what to do with me?" Tom asked in a defensive and slightly mocking tone.

"No Tom. I'm asking for guidance for my own life. You can ask for guidance for whatever may be confusing or troubling you." Chakotay said slowly.

Distantly they could hear the beat of a drum begin, slow and rhythmic.

"They're done. It's time." Chakotay said as he moved along the wall to the doorway and lowered a flap to close it off.

Tom watched Chakotay's vague image in the meager light from the glowing rocks then hesitantly asked, "Okay. What happens now?"

Chakotay moved to an urn beside the pit and dipped out a ladle of water.

A loud hiss sounded as the water sizzled across the hot rocks.

"You scared the hell out of me Chak!" Tom said in a gasping voice.

"Then you probably didn't need it in you to begin with." Chakotay said with a smile, then carefully opened a bundle beside the urn.

"Whoa, it's really getting hot in here." Tom said as he noticed that the faint glow of the rocks was fading.

"It's a sweat lodge. That's the point." Chakotay said as he took a handful of herbs from the bundle and scattered them over the steaming rocks.

"What's that smell?" Tom asked as he felt a wave of panic welling up inside him.

"Some soothing herbs to make the experience more pleasurable." Chakotay said as he folded the bundle closed.

"I... I don't think I like this." Tom said through heavy breathing.

Chakotay quickly worked his way to Tom's side and said, "I'm here with you Tom. Just try to calm yourself and experience the sensations as the steam penetrates your body and releases the toxins."

"I'm really used to my toxins being right where they are. Maybe we could just change the holodeck over to Sandrine's and shoot some pool." Tom said quickly as he realized that the light from the pit was now gone.

"Tom. Tell me what you're feeling right now. What about this experience is bothering you so much?" Chakotay asked quietly.

"All of it. The heat, the wet, the dark, the drum... the way we came in here... it's all... it's like..." Tom sputtered to a halt.

"The womb." Chakotay said in almost a whisper.

Silence fell between the two men as they felt the moist heat and listened to the sound of the drum.

"That's what this is about isn't it? That's the connection to the spirit. Being naked and in this dark cave. We're back in a place where every thought is pure and the world hasn't contaminated anything yet." Tom said speculatively.

"This ceremony has many meanings and its meaning is different for everyone who performs it. If that's what you take all of this to mean, then follow that path and find your guidance." Chakotay said seriously.

"How? I mean, isn't there a chant or something that I'm supposed to do?" Tom asked cautiously.

"Yes. There is a chant that we could do right now. The words are ancient and sacred, but their meaning would be lost on you. If you feel like chanting, then chant. If you feel like singing, then sing. You can cry or pray or sit in silence and meditate if you think that's the appropriate thing for you to do." Chakotay said reverently.

"But what if I do something... weird?" Tom asked hesitantly.

"Anything you share with me will stay between us. I swear on my ancestors that I will never divulge anything that happens here, be it good or bad. Just follow your heart." Chakotay said seriously.

"Okay." Tom said reluctantly.

Silence fell between the men, then in a small voice, Tom said, "Great Mother of us all. Please hear your lost son. I hear the sound of your heart and feel the warmth of your love and am afraid. Please show me the way... I know that you love all your children, but please show me the way to accept your love."

Chakotay sat in fascination at the heartfelt prayer from the usually gregarious pilot.

"What do I do now?" Tom whispered.

"Sit quietly and let your mind wander. If a vision appears to you, follow it and allow it to show you your answer." Chakotay said cautiously, having difficulty believing that Tom could make a full spiritual connection on his first try and without the benefit of an akuna.

Chakotay relaxed back and focused on the sensation of the steam.

He was breathing it in and it was penetrating the pores of his skin.

Chakotay could visualize the tension and toxic energies washing out of him, being carried away by the steam.

Suddenly, Chakotay felt a sense of caution. Tom had remained silent too long.

"Tom, are you alright?"

There was another long moment of silence, then Tom took in a sudden deep breath.

"Wow. That was... I saw it... I mean... I really saw it... I mean it was like this big deer but he had the biggest horns I've ever seen." Tom said with excitement.

"Tom. Settle down. You've just taken a spiritual walk. Was the stag the first animal you saw?" Chakotay asked carefully.

"Yeah. And he talked to me. He said his name was..." Tom began to say.

"Don't tell me. That was for you and no one else. I probably shouldn't know that your spirit guide is a stag, but I'm sure he'll forgive us under the circumstances." Chakotay said cautiously.

"Yeah. I know he will. He was so incredible." Tom said, still nearly breathless with his enthusiasm.

"When I told you to ask for guidance, I thought you might get a sense of what the proper direction might be for your life. I didn't expect for you to be introduced to your spirit guide." Chakotay said with a smile, being drawn into Tom's enthusiasm.

"Thank you for bringing me here Chakotay. I really thought it was weird at first and kind of creepy when we had to get naked but now... thank you. This is the best thing that's ever happened to me." Tom said in complete joy.

"I'm glad you think so." Chakotay said with a peaceful smile.

"How can I do it again? I want to talk to him some more." Tom said and Chakotay could imagine that he was bouncing with his enthusiasm.

"Just calm yourself and allow it to happen. But there's something you need to

keep in mind." Chakotay said, feeling truly happy.

"What's that?" Tom asked cautiously as he stopped all movement.

"This is only the first cycle."

Chapter 3

The drumming abruptly stopped and the silence became overwhelming.

"What's happening?" Tom asked in a whisper.

"The first cycle is complete. You're free to leave the lodge and enjoy the cool evening air for a few minutes, or you can remain here and meditate while more stones are added to the pit." Chakotay said quietly.

"What are you going to do Chak? Um... is it okay if I call you Chak?" Tom thought to ask.

"That's fine Tom. And I think I'm going to go outside for a few minutes and enjoy the night sky." Chakotay said peacefully.

"Is it okay if I go with you? I'll stay here if you need to be alone." Tom said hesitantly.

"It's fine Tom. I brought you here so I could share this with you." Chakotay said, then started working his way toward the door.

Tom started feeling his way along the wall, back the way he came when Chakotay said, "Please come this way. It's tradition to move clockwise when you enter or exit the lodge."

Tom turned around and felt his way along the wall.

"Why do you move clockwise?" Tom thought to ask when he finally found Chakotay.

"I could give you a long mystical explanation about the patterns of nature but I think the real reason is so we don't butt heads in the dark." Chakotay said, then crawled out the low opening.

Tom chuckled at the response as he waited for Chakotay to finish crawling out the door.

* * * * *

"Did you ever see anything so beautiful?" Chakotay asked as he slowly walked away from the lodge and the fire to stare at the night sky.

Tom walked to Chakotay's side and looked up into infinity.

"We live among the stars. We see them every day. But for some reason they seem so much more beautiful now." Tom said in a voice of wonder.

"The stars haven't changed. We have." Chakotay said peacefully.

"Because I've gotten in touch with my spirit guide?" Tom asked cautiously.

"Maybe a little, but I think that it has more to do with the tension that's always been between us. Without having to keep our defenses up, we can be open to something like the beauty of the night sky." Chakotay said speculatively.

"Can I ask you something?" Tom asked hesitantly.

"Anything you want." Chakotay said seriously.

"Why don't you like me?" Tom asked in a toneless voice.

"Because it's difficult for me to deal with your insults and negative attitude." Chakotay said simply, not expressing any emotions in his statement.

"But even when I did my best, it wasn't good enough. You always acted like you disapproved of me. What else was I supposed to do?" Tom asked curiously.

"I can't answer that in such general terms. If you can ask about a specific instance, I'll do my best to explain what I was thinking and feeling at the time." Chakotay said as he turned his attention to Tom.

"Back on the Ocampan home world, I went back for you. I was willing to die to try and save you but... it wasn't enough." Tom said quietly as he kept his gaze on the stars.

Chakotay closed his eyes and quietly said, "I'm sorry for that Tom. I treated you unfairly. At that time Janeway was the enemy and I saw you as a traitor to the Maquis cause. Even though it was wrong of me, it was just easier to see you as a traitor than to take the time to look deeper. I was consumed with my responsibility to my crew and focused all my attention to seeing that they would be treated fairly on Voyager."

"So it wasn't really about me?" Tom asked quietly.

"No Tom. It had nothing to do with you personally. It was just the safest way

for me to deal with you given the limited information I had about you and all the other demands on my attention at the time.." Chakotay said as he turned his attention back to the sky.

"Then what about when I left Voyager to expose Jonas as a spy on our ship?" Tom asked as he glanced at Chakotay.

"By that time we had established the pattern of how we deal with each other. You would insult and jab at me up to the brink of my tolerance, and I would use every bit of self control that I could gather to keep from beating you senseless. By the time we reached that point, I don't think there's anything you could have done that would make me change my mind about you." Chakotay said, and a note of regret could be heard in his voice.

"How about now?" Tom asked in nearly a whisper.

"I'm not sure. I think I'm beginning to like you but... I'm reluctant to open myself to the insults and attitude." Chakotay said quietly.

Tom nodded, then looked back to the sky.

The sound of a drum beat drew both men's attention.

"Ready for round two?" Chakotay asked as he turned to face the clearing.

"Yeah. Thanks for being honest with me Chak." Tom said quietly.

"Thanks for letting me be honest." Chakotay said, then gestured for Tom to walk with him back to the camp fire.

* * * * *

"What's the purpose this time?" Tom asked as he settled into his place along the wall.

"Cleansing." Chakotay said simply as he poured two ladles of water over the rocks.

After the hiss and sizzle subsided, Tom quietly said, "I'm guessing that you're not meaning that in a physical sense since we're all sweaty and have been crawling in the dirt."

Chakotay scattered some wood shavings over the steaming rocks, then moved to his position beside Tom.

"The purpose here is to let loose of all the old poisons in your soul and set them free. Let the steam draw them out of you and carry them away."
Chakotay said reverently.

"How do I do that?" Tom asked in thought.

"Think about what you want to let go of. Visualize it and give it a form, then let go of it and let it drift away." Chakotay said carefully.

"I'm not sure I understand." Tom said with difficulty.

"Maybe you could think about it this way. Imagine that we've encountered a magical being who has the ability to go back in time and change something. Think about what you would like to have changed." Chakotay said slowly.

Without hesitation, Tom said, "My father. If I could go back and change only one thing, I'd do something so he never knew I existed. I'd live my life without his demands and expectations pushing at me every moment of my life."

"Then use this time of cleansing to get rid of him." Chakotay said carefully.

"How?" Tom asked with surprise.

"You can't undo everything he did in the past, but you have it within you to take away his power over you. Release the bonds that he spent years wrapping around you and take that power back for yourself." Chakotay said in a distant voice.

"I... don't know how." Tom said in a whisper.

"Visualize your father standing before you." Chakotay said seriously.

"Okay." Tom said hesitantly.

"How does he make you feel?" Chakotay asked in a leading tone.

"Small. Weak. Like nothing is ever good enough." Tom said as his voice began to tremble.

"Then take that power away from him. He's just a man. If you take away the power you've given him, then he can't hurt you anymore." Chakotay said seriously.

"Just a man..." Tom whispered.

"That's right. His judgments of you don't mean anything unless you want them to." Chakotay said carefully.

"I don't have to prove anything to him." Tom said in a distant voice.

"That's right. Set your own standards. Live up to your own expectations." Chakotay said in a slow, soothing voice.

"Okay. I think I've got it." Tom said in concentration.

"Good. Now set it free. Let your father and all his criticisms and expectations flow away from you." Chakotay said in a leading tone.

"Just let it go..." Tom said in a whisper.

"Now that you've released those bonds that have been holding you back, you can be cleansed. Let the spirit and the steam carry away everything that you don't need to carry with you anymore." Chakotay said quietly.

"Chak." Tom said, then a sob escaped.

"Go ahead Tom. You can release the pain in many ways. If your pain wants to come out in tears, then set it free. I'm right here to help you through it." Chakotay said in a comforting voice.

Chakotay felt something touch his leg, then felt Tom's questing hand touch his arm and work its way down to his hand.

"Go ahead. I've got you." Chakotay said as he held Tom's hand firmly.

The quiet darkness was interrupted by the sound of the drumming and Tom's occasional sobs.

When the crying had finally quieted, Chakotay squeezed Tom's hand and said, "Now bring the peace into yourself. Let it cleanse all the places where the poisons were eating away at you. Let the spirit heal you."

Tom squeezed Chakotay's hand in return, then took in a slow, deep breath.

"Can you feel it? The bonds you've been carrying have been slowly sapping your spiritual energy. Without them, you should feel strength." Chakotay said distantly.

"I don't know what I'm feeling. It's so... light." Tom said in confusion.

"Do you remember what it was like to see your spirit guide earlier?" Chakotay asked in a leading tone.

"Yes." Tom answered in thought.

"Go to him now. Form the vision of the place where you met him and show him what you've achieved." Chakotay said as he released Tom's hand.

There was a long silence as Tom concentrated on the vision.

Chakotay closed his eyes and began to recite the words that helped him reach his own meditative state.

"Akoochimoya. We are far from the sacred places of our grandfather's. We are far from the bones of our people..."

* * * * *

"Chak! Chak! Are you alright?" Tom asked in panic.

Chakotay came out of his meditation and said, "I'm fine Tom. Is something wrong?"

There was a moment of silence, then Tom hesitantly said, "No. Not really. I just... when I tried to talk to you and you didn't answer I was afraid that you had passed out from the heat."

"I was just in deep meditation. I'm really fine." Chakotay said assuringly.

"Oh. I'm sorry if I interrupted you." Tom said timidly.

"That's fine Tom. You didn't interrupt anything at all. I spoke to my spirit guide for a moment, then just let myself float in the peace of the spirit." Chakotay said gently.

After a moment of silence, Chakotay quietly asked, "Is everything okay?"

"I don't know." Tom said in thought.

"What's bothering you?" Chakotay asked with concern.

"Are you trying to make me like Tommy?" Tom asked in a small voice.

"No Tom. I'm trying to guide you to be the best, most fulfilled person you can be." Chakotay said quietly.

Silence fell between them again as Tom thought about the statement.

"Why?" Tom asked in a voice so low that Chakotay could barely hear it.

"Honestly, I originally intended to bring you here to put pressure on you to determine your stability and self control. I thought that the physical stress of the heat along with being in my company would create enough tension to push you past your limit." Chakotay admitted shyly.

"Why did you want to do that?" Tom asked cautiously.

"So I could see what your limit was and just how you reacted when you were pushed past it. Since you've become... fragmented, I need to know that this part of your personality is stable. It would be irresponsible of me to just accept that all four of your personalities are harmless." Chakotay said carefully.

"So what happened to change your plan?" Tom asked cautiously.

"You did. Instead of shielding yourself behind anger and sarcasm you were willing to open yourself to my instruction. The moment I realized that you would be willing to trust me, I abandoned my original plan and tried to provide the best advice I possibly could to start you on your spiritual walk." Chakotay said seriously.

"Thanks. I guess after seeing how you helped Tommy, I felt like maybe if I gave you a chance that maybe... I don't know... things could be better." Tom said shyly.

"I'm glad you did. I've never felt like there was any possibility of friendship between us before. We're just two very different people." Chakotay said quietly.

"And now?" Tom asked hopefully.

"Now I feel very ashamed of myself for ignoring your courage and determination. I've wasted so much time for no good reason." Chakotay said sadly.

"We've both devoted a lot of energy the past five years to finding fault with each other. If you're willing to let it go, so am I." Tom said seriously.

"I think that's a very good idea. The steam can carry away the poison of our

hard feelings and cleanse us." Chakotay said thoughtfully.

"I'm with you on most of the spiritual stuff, but why don't we just shake on it?" Tom asked cautiously.

"If that's what you want." Chakotay said and felt to his right for Tom's hand.

"Um... Chak. That's not my hand. But you can keep shaking it if you want." Tom said, obviously trying to suppress a chuckle.

"Very funny." Chakotay said dryly as he pulled his hand away.

"Come on Chak, even though I don't hate you anymore, I'm still me." Tom said frankly.

"I suppose so. But don't be surprised if I don't play along. I'm like Tommy in that I don't find certain types of humor funny because the underlying sentiment is cruel." Chakotay said seriously.

"I bet you're just the life of the party." Tom said with a roll of his eyes (which was wasted in the complete darkness).

"No. As a matter of fact I'm not. I let someone else make a fool of himself to get attention while I settle back and enjoy honest conversation with my friends." Chakotay said firmly.

Tom thought about the statement for a moment, then quietly said, "Maybe I should try that sometime."

"How about the next time Neelix finds an excuse to have a party, you spend some time off to the side with me. You won't lose the option of joining Harry and B'Elana later if you find out you don't like it." Chakotay said seriously.

"Yeah. I'll do that. Thanks Chak." Tom said in thought.

The silence between them seemed deafening, then Chakotay realized that the drumming had stopped.

"Do you want to go out for some air or are you enjoying the heat too much?" Chakotay asked as he started toward the door.

"I think a little fresh air would do me good." Tom said as he followed.

"I think a cool drink of water might be nice too." Chakotay said before crawling out the door.

Tom waited for a moment for Chakotay to make his way out of the lodge and thought about what a journey they had already made and they still had half of it to go.

* * * * *

"Chak, I'm sorry about making a joke in there. I really wasn't trying to be disrespectful... it just happened." Tom said quietly.

"Do you know what my father would have said if he had been in there with us?" Chakotay asked distantly.

Tom hesitantly shook his head.

"He would have told me to stop being such a little old lady, then he would have complimented you on the joke." Chakotay said as he gazed into the distance.

Tom smiled, then said, "Your dad sounds nice."

"He was, but I didn't always see it."

Tom turned to face Chakotay, silently prompting him to continue.

"He always called me contrary. No matter what he tried to teach me, I always seemed to believe the opposite."

"My brothers Beyval and Nayib always seemed to be in tune with him and understood what he was saying, but I... I just never felt like he understood me and I couldn't understand him." Chakotay said as his voice became softer.

"Then I guess we do have something in common." Tom said gently.

Chakotay turned to see the look of understanding in Tom's eyes and felt a small, tentative smile come across his face.

There was a long moment of silence between the men until it was finally broken by Tom asking, "Did you say something earlier about water?"

"Oh, right. It's right here." Chakotay said and walked back to the campfire where a line of men were passing the heated stones into the sweat lodge.

Chakotay picked up a water skin from behind a pile of large rocks and handed it to Tom.

"How do you use one of these things?" Tom asked as he turned it over and around in his hands, trying to find a place where you would drink from it.

Chakotay smiled fondly and said, "Give it here and I'll show you."

Tom handed the oddly shaped bladder to Chakotay and watched carefully as Chakotay opened it, tilted his head back and sprayed a long stream of water into his mouth.

When Chakotay lowered the water skin, he noticed an amused look on Tom's face.

"What is it Tom?" Chakotay asked cautiously.

"Nothing. Not a thing." Tom said with an amused smile as he accepted the water skin from Chakotay.

Chakotay thought while Tom took his drink, then cautiously said, "I thought that nothing would bother me as much as your jokes made at my expense, but now I know that it's more annoying to be the butt of the joke AND not hear the punch line."

Tom laughed as he handed the water skin back to Chakotay, then said, "It wasn't anything bad Chak. I promise. I just realized how strange all of this is."

"How do you mean?" Chakotay asked curiously as he sat the water skin back behind the rocks so it would be shielded from the heat of the fire.

"After five years of barely tolerating each other, here we are, standing naked, sharing water out of... some animal's internal organ I guess... it just seems surreal." Tom said frankly.

"When you put it that way, I'd have to agree." Chakotay said with a smile.

Tom noticed the men walking away from the sweat lodge, then he looked at Chakotay with question.

Chakotay nodded that it was time and gestured for Tom to precede him into the domed structure.

* * * * *

"God! I think it's hotter than last time." Tom said as he made his way

approximately half-way around the dark room.

"That's how it works. The heat doesn't have any way to escape and they keep adding fresh hot stones." Chakotay said, then waited until he heard the drumming start.

He slowly poured three ladles of water over the glowing rocks, then found a small clay bowl beside the urn of water.

He held the bowl up to his nose and inhaled the sweet aroma.

"What is it this time?" Tom asked, barely able to see Chakotay in the diminishing light and steam.

Chakotay held the bowl over the pit and casually scattered the contents as he said, "Sage and sweet grass."

"Sage, like in sausage?" Tom asked curiously.

"Not exactly, but it's the same botanical family." Chakotay said as he moved to Tom's side.

"Whoa, it's really hot this time." Tom said as he tried to adjust to breathing in the steam.

"This is why the holodeck safeties had to be turned off. This level of temperature and humidity would probably be considered unsafe by the control systems." Chakotay said quietly.

"Yeah. Wait, that means the next one is going to be hotter, right?" Tom asked with concern.

"That's right." Chakotay said quietly.

Tom thought about it for a moment, then said, "If you say it's going to be safe, I'll trust you."

"Thanks Tom. If it looks like it's going too far, I'll shut it down." Chakotay said with assurance.

"So what's our purpose this time?" Tom asked curiously.

"This cycle focuses on personal reflection and your desires for the future." Chakotay said quietly.

"Kinda like, what do you want to be when you grow up?" Tom asked in a half-joking manner.

"Actually, yes. Where do you see yourself five, ten, twenty or even thirty years from now?" Chakotay said seriously.

Tom thought about the question, then asked, "Should I assume that we're back on Earth or still on Voyager when I look that far ahead?"

"Either. The things that are really important aren't reliant on location." Chakotay said with certainty.

"Oh. Um... I don't know what that means for sure. But I get that it doesn't matter... What should I do first?" Tom asked as he felt sweat falling down his back.

"Just look into the future and form an image of your life. How you expect it to be." Chakotay said in a trancelike voice.

Tom concentrated, but found that he wasn't able to bring any visions into his mind's eye.

"I can't figure out how to do it." Tom said quietly.

"I'll give you an example, sort of a composite of my past visions, then maybe you'll be able to use that as a guide." Chakotay said carefully.

"Okay." Tom said with anticipation.

"The place is here, on Dorvan Five. The time is thirty years away. The Federation and Cardassians have both withdrawn from Dorvan Five and left it to be self-governed and independent. I walk home after a long day of teaching at the local college and find my favorite dinner waiting for me on the table. I am kissed and hugged, then asked to share the events of my day. After my meal, I review correspondence from my friends until there is a knock on the door. I answer the door and it's my oldest son holding my first grandchild in his arms. I invite him in and we have a long talk about the joys and challenges of fatherhood. There's more, but I think that gives you an idea." Chakotay said in a tranquil voice.

"Wow. That was... that was so beautiful." Tom said in wonder.

"Do you really think so? I thought you'd find that type of existence boring."

Chakotay said with interest.

"No. It's... like the home I never had, but always wanted." Tom said speculatively.

"So are you ready to form a vision of how you want your future to be?" Chakotay asked carefully.

"Yeah." Tom said in a whisper as he thought about what he wanted.

"The place is here, on Voyager. The time is thirty years from now. We're still working our way toward Earth, but a lot of us have accepted that the ship is our home. I return to my cabin after a long day at the helm and decide to make a special dinner for my wife. She comes home and I kiss her and ask her about her day." Tom said with a smile.

Chakotay's eyes started to widen as he realized what Tom was doing.

"I'd clean up from the dinner while she relaxed after her long day at work. Then our daughter would be there with a baby in her arms and another one holding onto her leg. We'd visit and laugh about the things that kids do and tell a few stories about when she was younger until it was time to put the kids to bed. Then my wife and I would tidy up the place and go to bed, just caught up in our love for each other." Tom finished in obvious happiness.

"Tom, yours is exactly like mine." Chakotay said reluctantly.

"No. It's completely different." Tom said immediately.

"In all the ways that matter, our visions of the future are exactly the same... I'm afraid that me telling you of my vision influenced your own." Chakotay said quietly.

Tom thought about it for a minute, then said, "Okay. I guess I can see why you'd say that, but... this isn't something I decided just because I heard your story. This is something that I've been thinking about since we got stranded in the Delta." Tom said frankly.

"Really?" Chakotay asked with surprise.

"Yeah. I've been playing the field, going from one relationship to another, testing the water without getting in too deep." Tom said quietly.

"So that's what you're doing?" Chakotay asked curiously.

"Well, yeah. At least that's part of it. But the problem is that I'm not finding what I'm looking for. I can get along with all of them okay, but I can't really say that there's one woman that I've been with that has made me want to open up and share my life with her." Tom said reluctantly.

"What about men?" Chakotay asked calmly.

"What about them?" Tom asked hesitantly.

"Have you considered a same-sex relationship?" Chakotay asked seriously.

"No. Not really. Because of some of the stuff that I've been through, I, um... don't think that's ever going to happen." Tom said reluctantly.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Chakotay asked in nearly a whisper.

Tom thought for a moment, then said, "You know I was in prison. Well, they're usually pretty good about seeing that nothing happens but... well, they can't be watching all the time. Three guys got me and... you know..."

Chakotay patted around until he found Tom's hand and took a firm hold of it.

"Thanks. Um, well... I guess I just never even thought about being with a guy after that. So it looks like it's a wife or nothing." Tom said quietly.

"Tom, it's possible to overcome something like this. All you have to do is want it and commit to it and we can restore you to a place where you're free to love whoever you want." Chakotay said with assurance.

"Thanks Chak. Let me think on it. I know you're right, but I don't know if it's worth going through all that therapy to get back something that I never used anyway." Tom said reflectively.

"I won't pressure you about it Tom. I'll just leave the option open to you." Chakotay said quietly.

"Thanks. What about you? I notice that you didn't say 'husband' or 'wife' in your vision of the future." Tom asked curiously.

"I just don't know. My track record with women hasn't been too good up to now, but I've never had anything more than a casual relationship with a man. I don't know if I could achieve the level of emotional intimacy with a man

that would be necessary for a long-term relationship." Chakotay said distantly.

"Yeah. I have trouble with that intimacy thing too. I think Tommy would be good at it, but I'm... not him." Tom finished with regret.

"No. You're not him. You're an individual with different emotional needs. Hopefully we'll be able to find someone who can address those needs so you can have a fulfilled life." Chakotay said with a smile.

"We?" Tom asked cautiously.

"We." Chakotay said firmly, then continued, "Tom, before today I've never been comfortable around you. I thought that any attempt that I made to reach out to you would be met with hostility and sarcasm. But I feel like we've gotten past that and can talk honestly to each other as people... friends."

"Yeah." Tom said quietly.

"So whatever challenges you have to face, you can count on me to help you however I can." Chakotay said quietly.

"Yeah. I don't know when it happened, but I think I knew that." Tom said in slow thought.

"Are you ready to complete this cycle?" Chakotay asked carefully.

"Sure. What do I have to do?" Tom asked with a smile in his voice.

"Just focus on your vision of the future. Add in details to make it as real as possible. When you have your vision as complete as possible, you can take it to your spirit guide and show him. When you can give him your vision and show him what you want, he can help to guide you to achieve it." Chakotay said peacefully.

"Um, would it be... wrong or anything if I asked what your vision was like the last time you did this?" Tom asked quietly.

"You mean after Seska?" Chakotay asked in a low voice.

"Yeah." Tom said in a whisper.

"I was in emotional distress. The vision I held at that time was only five years away. I pictured myself back on Dorvan Five, surrounded by friends and

family who really cared about me and provided me a network of support." Chakotay said distantly.

"Are all your visions of the future on Dorvan Five?" Tom asked quietly.

"Yes. It's my home." Chakotay said gently.

"I never really had one of those. I mean, we had a house to live in everywhere we lived, but it always felt like we were living in someone else's house." Tom said frankly.

"Would you like to have a home?" Chakotay asked cautiously.

"I think so. Like I said, I've never really had one, so I can't be sure. But it sounds nice." Tom said in a considering voice.

"Well, I know that I will eventually have a home, even if it ends up being in a cabin on this ship. So if things don't turn out exactly the way you want them to, you'll always be welcomed at my home." Chakotay said quietly.

"Thanks Chak. I get the feeling that Tommy's going to be visiting you a lot." Tom said with a chuckle.

"And he'll always be welcomed, but I was talking about you Tom. I want to keep the friendship that we're starting to develop. I'm seeing things in you that I've never noticed before." Chakotay finished in a distant voice.

"What are you seeing?" Tom asked curiously.

"My father for one thing. There's something about your sense of humor that's a lot like his. I'll probably never understand either of you." Chakotay finished with a chuckle.

"I don't know about that. You seem to be doing alright." Tom said casually.

"I have to work at it. Reacting to your humor with offense has become a knee-jerk reaction." Chakotay said honestly.

"You shouldn't have to work at it. A joke is funny or it's not." Tom said seriously.

"Really? Well, then I've got some bad news for you about the last five years..." Chakotay said slowly.

Tom started to chuckle and said, "I knew you had a sense of humor

somewhere in there."

After a moment, Chakotay quietly asked, "You think I was joking?"

The room was silent but for the beating of the drum.

Finally Tom heard an unusual hissing sound. It took him a minute to realize that it was Chakotay's stifled laughter.

"Good one Chak. You almost had me believing you." Tom said with a smile.

Chakotay let loose a gale of laughter at the statement.

Tom started to chuckle, drawn into the infectious laughter.

"Chak, you may not use it very often, but you've got a very good laugh there." Tom said with a smile.

"I have a feeling that If we spend some time together, I'm probably going to be using it more often." Chakotay said as he fought to get his laughter under control.

"I'll do what I can." Tom said happily.

"Are you ready to try to make your vision of the future now?" Chakotay asked in a carefree voice.

"Sure. Do you think it'll be okay if I make my vision of a home here on Dorvan Five? I really don't have anyplace that's special to me back on Earth and... you know... Tommy will want to be close by." Tom finished shyly.

"That'll be fine. Go ahead and construct your vision and take it to your spirit guide so he can help guide you in the direction to make it a reality." Chakotay said peacefully.

"Are you going to do it too?" Tom asked curiously.

"I wasn't planning on it at first, but... I think I have one or two additions to make to my previous vision." Chakotay said warmly.

The room became silent except for the rhythm of the drum.

* * * * *

"Chak?" Tom asked in a whisper.

"Yes?" Chakotay answered immediately.

"The drumming stopped." Tom said quietly.

"Oh... I guess I was so caught up in my thoughts that I didn't notice." Chakotay said, then started moving for the door.

"Is everything okay?" Tom asked with concern.

"Everything is fine. My spirit guide just gave me something to think about that's... distracting." Chakotay said uncomfortably.

"I won't ask." Tom said as he followed Chakotay along the wall quietly.

"Thanks Tom." Chakotay said, then opened the flap and crawled out of the low opening.

* * * * *

"I'm so tired I can barely stand up." Tom said as he struggled to his feet.

"Let's get a drink of water, then I want to show you something." Chakotay said as he led the way to the fire.

"I think you're already showing me everything you've got." Tom said as he glanced at Chakotay's ass.

There was a moment of silence between them, until Chakotay finally asked, "That was something like a joke, right?"

Tom broke into laughter at the question while Chakotay took a long drink of water.

"Here. Don't drink too much or you'll probably throw up when we go back in." Chakotay said as he handed the water skin to Tom.

Tom nodded, then took a long drink of water.

Once Chakotay had put the water skin behind the rocks again, he motioned toward the path that they had arrived on.

"Where are we going?" Tom asked curiously as he followed closely behind Chakotay.

"I just wanted to show you my vision." Chakotay said quietly as he led the way.

"Your... you made it?" Tom asked with surprise.

"That's right. Every now and then something will get to me and I'll come here to get away from everything for a while. I had originally intended to recreate my father's house but when it came time to do it, I decided that I wanted to make my own place." Chakotay said, then stopped as the path opened into a clearing.

Tom stepped beside Chakotay and looked at the house carefully.

"It's beautiful." Tom said quietly.

"I think so too. It's not a big dream, but it's mine." Chakotay said with a smile.

"Can we go inside?" Tom asked hopefully.

"Not right now. The last cycle will begin soon. I just wanted to show you what my dream was like." Chakotay said shyly.

"It's really nice Chak. Maybe you could help me make a place like this." Tom said speculatively.

"You have a lot more holo-programming experience than I do." Chakotay said frankly.

"Yeah, but you have a lot more experience with what works best on Dorvan Five, and besides... I think it would be fun if we could do it together." Tom finished quietly.

Chakotay smiled at the statement, then said, "You're right on both counts. Let's get back to the sweat lodge now. We've just got one more to go."

Tom nodded and turned to follow, then thought to ask, "What's this next one about?"

"Growth. Now that you've made contact with the spiritual plane, healed old wounds and made a goal for the future, it's time to look at yourself and decide what kind of person you want to grow into between now and the time you reach your goal." Chakotay said as he led the way.

"So I'll be looking at myself and deciding what I want to change?" Tom asked cautiously.

"To some degree. Before we came in here you told me that you were just fine the way you are. If you really believe that, then what you will be focusing on isn't as much how you're going to change as how you're going to grow."

Chakotay said as he carefully led the way down the path lit only by moonlight.

"I don't get the distinction." Tom said slowly.

"Well, for the sake of argument, let's say that you're feeling that you don't get enough of an opportunity to express yourself creatively. You could look at the things you already do, like holo-programming and consider other avenues like.... painting." Chakotay said as they could see the firelight through the trees ahead of them.

"I have no talent for painting at all." Tom said with a sour look.

"It's just an example. Consider the things in your life that bring you happiness and fulfillment, then look at ways that you can expand those parts of your life in the future so you'll end up in a place where every day is filled with joy and you have no regrets." Chakotay said, then noticed that all but one of the elders was gone.

"It's time." Chakotay said and motioned for Tom to enter the sweat lodge.

Tom glanced at the man by the fire in time to see him hit the drum.

He turned and lowered himself to the ground, then crawled into the hot moist darkness.

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"Chak, I'm not sure I can go through with this." Tom said weakly as he took shallow breaths.

Chakotay responded by pouring four ladles of water over the mound of rocks in the middle of the room.

"Fuck! I can't breathe." Tom said as he struggled to inhale the steam.

"Relax. Don't fight it. Just take slow steady breaths until you get used to it." Chakotay said in a low voice.

"Isn't this bothering you at all?" Tom asked as he tried to get his breathing to

slow down.

"Of course it's bothering me. But I'm determined to go through with it, so whining about it is pointless." Chakotay said slowly.

"Point taken." Tom said with resignation and rested his head back on the wall.

"Tom. Who do you want to become?" Chakotay asked seriously.

"I don't know." Tom said frankly.

"That's the only wrong answer to that question." Chakotay said more quietly.

"I guess it goes back to when I was a kid. When I was about... ten or eleven, my dad had these counselors trying to 'motivate' me. My IQ tests said that I was smart enough to be getting straight A's in school, and I wasn't, so I needed to be fixed." Tom said in a voice of distant memory.

"When I figured out what he was doing... that's when I figured out that I didn't want to grow up to be like him." Tom said in thought.

"But you joined Starfleet." Chakotay said curiously.

"My attendance was not optional. The Admiral made sure that I had nothing else in my life to distract me from his path. When I got into the academy, I thought that maybe everything would be okay and I guess I made a pretty good go of it, but... being an admiral's son comes with a lot of baggage." Tom said with a note of pain.

"I'm sure there were people who could see that you were just another student trying to make his way." Chakotay said with concern.

"There probably would have been if the Admiral hadn't tried to help me out along the way. I had the biggest and best of everything. My name was at the top of every list to volunteer for anything extra... and I didn't put it there. Chak, I was going to crash and burn at some point, unfortunately it was when I was serving aboard the Exeter... I'm sure you've heard all about what happened at Caldik Prime." Tom whispered.

"I've read the report. But reports don't always accurately reflect what happened." Chakotay said quietly.

"Well, this time they do. I was so convinced that I could do anything, I was just so full of myself that I was showing off. Every stunt had to be just a little bigger and more dangerous than the one before. Anyone with common sense would have known better. But I just kept doing stunts and taking risks like there was no tomorrow... And you know what? I didn't care. I knew that there was a chance that I could die doing all that showing off and I just didn't care... But then it happened. My luck ran out. In the blink of an eye, there I was in the wreckage of my ship. Three people... my friends... were dead and I was alive. And it was all my fault." Tom said as his tears flowed freely down his cheeks.

"Why did you lie about what happened?" Chakotay asked quietly.

"I didn't. My fucking father went in behind me and changed my official report. I guess he thought he could smooth things over so I wouldn't get kicked out." Tom said in despair.

"Why didn't you tell someone?" Chakotay asked, having no doubt that Tom's version of the story was true.

"Tell who? And why? So I could stay in Starfleet? Even though I didn't like the way it happened, at least it was a way out. By the time they were able to prove that my statement was a lie, I was glad to be out of it all." Tom said, then angrily wiped the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand.

"I'm sorry Tom. I didn't know." Chakotay said quietly.

"I know. I never told anyone about it. As far as anyone knows, I was reckless, I crashed, I lied about it and was thrown out of Starfleet. And you know what happened after that, you were there." Tom said as he wiped his eyes again.

"If I had any clue about any of this back when you joined the Maquis, I would have taken better steps to protect you." Chakotay said quietly.

"Chak, I got captured on my first mission. It was a trap... probably set up by Seska." Tom said frankly.

"Or Tuvok." Chakotay said with resignation.

"Either way, I never blamed you for it. I know I did everything the way I was supposed to, but I was led into a trap. It wasn't my fault, it wasn't your fault, and it doesn't matter out here in the Delta anyway." Tom finished seriously.

Chakotay smiled and said, "You're right Tom. But I still feel bad knowing that you were in that prison and I never even considered trying to help you."

"It's okay Chak. You're here now. I don't know about the spirit stuff like you do, but I think we're here right now because we're both finally ready." Tom said quietly.

"I can accept that. So do you know who you want to grow into?" Chakotay asked quietly.

"I don't have a clue." Tom said immediately.

"Let's try a different approach. Think back over the past few months and try to identify the one or two things that you've done that have brought you the most happiness and fulfillment." Chakotay said seriously.

Tom thought about it for a moment, then asked, "Do I have to tell you?"

"No Tom. I don't need to know. Just take that experience and try to see how you could incorporate it into your everyday life. Expand on the idea and find ways to achieve that feeling in different ways." Chakotay said carefully.

"Okay... Let me work with that for a few minutes." Tom said in deep concentration.

"I'm going to meditate now, but it's just to help me center my thoughts. Feel free to ask me any questions you have." Chakotay said calmly.

"Thanks Chak." Tom said appreciatively.

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"Chak, can I ask you something?" Tom asked in nearly a whisper.

"Of course. Anything you want." Chakotay said peacefully.

"What kind of father do you think I'll be?" Tom asked quietly.

Chakotay was surprised by the question, but did his best to get over it and give a thoughtful answer.

"Well, if you mean you personally, I think you probably would be able to deal with a child on his or her own level and become a friend as well as a parent. If you're speaking of you, Tommy, Flyboy and the Lieutenant... I suppose you would each take on the parental duties that you're best suited for

and probably end up being a better parent than most." Chakotay said in a considering voice.

"So you don't think I'll end up being like my father?" Tom asked with concern.

"As long as you're worried about it, I don't think it will be a problem."

"Good. I think it's about time for me to look at settling down to raise a family."

"That might be difficult in our current situation."

"I know Chak. But no one said it would be easy."

"How sure are you?" Chakotay asked quietly.

"Completely sure. Look at the directionless life that I've led up to now. I'm scattered, trying to be all things to all people. No wonder I've split into separate personalities. But when you asked me about what gives me a feeling of fulfillment... the only thing I could think of is when I'm taking care of Naomi. There's no other time when I feel completely at peace. I guess I never thought about what it would be like to have that feeling every day. I can't imagine a more perfect future." Tom said with contentment.

The sound of the distant drumming was all that could be heard as both men thought about what Tom had said.

Chakotay reached beside him and placed a hand on Tom's shoulder, then said, "Let's get out of here."

"But we're not done. The drum is still going." Tom said hesitantly.

"You've accomplished the purpose of this cycle. The only thing you'll accomplish by staying longer is sweating some more." Chakotay said as he turned toward the exit.

"No. That's fine. Besides, I don't think I have any sweat left anyway." Tom said as he followed.

"Before we leave I just want to say that I'm really proud of you Tom. Before we came in here I didn't think you would have the courage to endure the steam. It turns out that you faced your past, your self and your future without

backing down. You've earned my respect." Chakotay said reverently.

"Um... I think the steam is making you go all sappy. You'd better get moving." Tom said shyly.

"You've got it, my friend." Chakotay said happily as he crawled out the low opening.

{Tommy's not the only one making new friends today.} Tom thought with wonder, then followed.

Chapter 4

After both men took a long drink of water, Chakotay asked, "What would you think about a swim before we leave the holodeck?"

"I think that would be heaven." Tom said with a smile.

"There's a small lake this way." Chakotay said as he led the way away from the fire.

Tom followed silently in the light from the twin moons of Dorvan Five.

"Now that you've been through the ritual, what do you think?" Chakotay asked casually as he led the way down a well worn path.

"I don't know what to think. I feel like a different person." Tom said carefully.

Chakotay smiled and said, "You're still the same person Tom. I wouldn't ever try to change you. But hopefully after having had these experiences, you'll be able to continue to grow and develop into the man that you ultimately want to become."

"Thanks Chak. I really had the feeling that you were trying to make me into the type of person you could relate to instead of myself." Tom said reluctantly.

"If you've changed at all, then it's to be more of your true self than the image you portray." Chakotay said, then stopped and gestured to the lake in front of them.

"It's beautiful." Tom said in wonder as he looked at the still, silent lake before them.

The glassy water reflected the moonlight and the shadows of trees created interesting and eerie patterns on the water's surface.

"When I was back on Dorvan I would sit by this lake for hours, just drinking in the serenity." Chakotay said, then started walking toward the edge of the water.

"Your home is really beautiful." Tom said as he followed.

"Thank you Tom. I'm glad that I'm getting this opportunity to share it with you." Chakotay said honestly as he cautiously took a step into the cool water.

"How is it?" Tom asked cautiously.

"Cold." Chakotay said with a chuckle at the sensation.

Tom backed up a few steps, then ran full out and cannonballed into the water.

Chakotay smiled at the move, then threw himself forward to dive in all at once.

When they had both come up for air, Tom said, "It's perfect Chak. God, I feel so alive right now."

Chakotay gave a contented smile and said, "So do I. It's the perfect end to a perfect night."

Tom looked at Chakotay cautiously for a moment, then said, "I don't want this feeling to end."

"We can carry it with us. When the duties and obligations of life on Voyager start to weigh on you, all you have to do is pull up this memory and have that feeling all over again. And nothing says that we can't have other adventures that will provide even more memories like this." Chakotay said happily.

"I'd really like that Chak... I just don't know how things are going to go with Harry and B'Elana after going through all this... I look at them now and it all seems so... hollow." Tom said with concern as he floated in the cool water.

"I think you'll be fine. The time you spend with your other friends will only be improved by this new experience. You haven't lost anything, just gained a greater understanding of yourself." Chakotay said peacefully.

"I guess so." Tom said noncommittally.

"Do you want to race to the island and back?" Chakotay asked as he pointed to a small island in the middle of the lake with a single tree on it.

Tom's only answer was to take off swimming as fast and hard as he could.

Chakotay was surprised by the movement, but quickly took off to catch up to Tom.

* * * * *

The pair of men were giggling as they finally emerged from the water.

"That was great. After all that steam, it was the perfect way to get cleaned up." Tom said happily.

"I agree. How would you like to do something tomorrow night?" Chakotay asked as he led the way up the path, back to the fire.

"Like what?"

"I was thinking about shooting some pool at Sandrine's." Chakotay said casually.

Tom thought about it for a moment, then reluctantly said, "Harry and B'Elana will probably be there."

"If you'll help to get Harry to relax while I'm there, I don't think it will be a problem. B'Elana and I have been friends for years." Chakotay said casually.

"Are you two... you know... close?" Tom asked hesitantly.

"We were together for a while. It was one of those relationships that just wasn't meant to be. We parted as friends." Chakotay said introspectively.

Tom smiled and said, "Okay. I just wanted to be sure I wasn't going to be treading on dangerous territory if I said anything about the two of you."

Chakotay laughed and said, "Not with me, but I don't know how B'Elana will react. Who knows, one or two well placed comments about our previous relationship might be just what you need to throw her off her game."

"You'd be okay with that?" Tom asked with surprise.

"As long as you don't take it too far. I don't want to see her hurt, but it might be fun to watch you needle her for a few minutes." Chakotay said with a smile.

"I'm not used to seeing this side of you Chak. I think I like it." Tom said with a wicked grin.

"I have different facets to my personality just like you do. I'm not just the Commander and the Counselor." Chakotay said as they passed by the fire which was starting to die down.

"I'm beginning to see that. I think our evening at Sandrine's is going to be

interesting." Tom said speculatively.

"I think you're right." Chakotay said with a smile.

* * * * *

The men crested the hill and began to dress in silence.

"Chak?" Tom said quietly as he pulled on his underwear.

"Yes?" Chakotay responded and turned to look at Tom with question.

"You know that thing I was talking about earlier, you know... what happened while I was in Auckland?" Tom said hesitantly.

"I remember." Chakotay said quietly.

"I think I'd like to start dealing with it." Tom said as he focused all his attention on pulling up his pants.

"I'll do everything in my power to help you Tom. Just let me know when you're ready and we'll have a counseling session." Chakotay said as he started dressing again, not wanting Tom to feel that he was staring at him.

"Do you think we could do it somewhere besides your office? I really have a problem with the formal setting." Tom said reluctantly.

"We can do it anyplace you want. In fact, I think I could arrange it so we could meet here. We could have a picnic by the lake if you wanted. Is that informal enough?" Chakotay asked gently.

"That sounds nice." Tom said with a shy smile, then sat down to pull on his socks and boots.

Chakotay also sat, then casually said, "My only regret in all this is that I can't spend some time with you and Tommy together. I enjoy spending time with both of you."

"I think we could probably do that sometime. Most of the time Tommy is in the background watching what's going on and I'm always watching what Tommy is doing in case he needs help." Tom said seriously.

"Was he watching tonight?" Chakotay asked curiously.

"No. When I went to your office, he stepped all the way back and allowed us

some privacy." Tom said seriously.

"That was very considerate of him. You must like him a lot to protect him the way you do." Chakotay said as he stood.

Tom hurried to finish putting on his boots as he said, "I do. Besides, I feel like I'm his older brother. It's my job to protect him."

Chakotay smiled at the statement, then said, "When I first realized that you had multiple personalities, I thought you were just a defense mechanism in place to protect Tommy."

"You mean I'm not?" Tom asked curiously and Chakotay could detect a small note of fear behind the question.

"No Tom. I believe that if you were a defense mechanism, then you wouldn't be able to form your own friendships and have your own interests independent from Tommy. You would be an extension of him that came to the forefront when he felt threatened." Chakotay said seriously.

"But I'm not sure that that's not what I'm doing." Tom said quietly.

"Tom. Please trust me... I'm sure. You are a person in your own right. You have your own thoughts and feelings, likes and dislikes, even your own independent sense of humor that is completely unique to you." Chakotay finished with a smile.

"Thanks Chak. It's really hard for me to be sure since I don't know anyone else who lives like this." Tom said quietly.

"As far as I know, it's a condition that's unique to you, but that doesn't mean that you aren't a real person. There may be others like you who go through their lives hiding their differences." Chakotay said frankly.

"I never thought of that. I suppose it's not a bad way to be. Especially when I've got a friend like you to help me." Tom finished with a smile.

"Come on friend. It's time to get back to the real world." Chakotay said and gestured to the path before them.

"Yeah. I feel like I could sleep for a week." Tom said with a chuckle.

"Computer: Restore Holodeck to default settings, authorization Chakotay

Beta Beta Two Four." Chakotay called into the air.

"Default settings: Restored." The computer answered tonelessly.

"Do you think Flyboy would mind meeting with me in the morning?"

Chakotay asked casually as they approached the door.

"Give me a second." Tom said, then stopped and concentrated.

Chakotay watched curiously.

Tom opened his eyes and looked at Chakotay with regret as he said, "I don't think he wants to."

"Do you know why?" Chakotay asked cautiously.

"He thinks that you're boring." Tom said reluctantly.

Chakotay chuckled at the statement, then said, "Tell him that if he'll meet me at my cabin tomorrow morning at 09:00, I'll promise to provide him a morning of excitement."

Tom quirked an eyebrow at the statement, then briefly closed his eyes.

"You've got his attention. He'll be there." Tom said with a cautious smile.

"Will you be watching us?" Chakotay asked as he gestured toward the door.

Tom started walking again, then said, "Probably not. The things that Flyboy does scare the hell out of me most of the time."

Chakotay chuckled, then said, "I'm glad I'm not the only one."

"Tommy wants to tell you something before we call it a night." Tom said as the door opened.

"Thanks Tom, I'll see you tomorrow night." Chakotay said with a smile.

"I'll see you then Chak." Tom said with a grin, then a shy, happy look came over his face.

"Hi Tay." Tommy said with unrestrained happiness.

"Hello Tommy. How are you doing this evening?" Chakotay asked with a smile.

"Wonderful! Did Tom tell you about what happened to me today?" Tommy

asked with bubbling enthusiasm.

"No. He didn't mention anything." Chakotay said, feeling drawn in by Tommy's excitement.

"I made a new friend." Tommy said in absolute joy.

"Really? Why don't you tell me all about him?" Chakotay said as he gestured for Tommy to walk with him down the hall.

"Well, it's Gerron Tem. I think you know him." Tommy said quickly.

"Yes, I know Gerron, but only through Greg. We've never really talked much socially." Chakotay said in a considering voice.

"It was so cool. Tom was in sickbay and Ayala brought Gerron in and... well, it ended up that I was the one helping Gerron not be scared and we started talking and it was just... we started talking and he really likes me, not Tom but me." Tommy said in absolute joy.

"And how do you feel about him?" Chakotay asked, unable to restrain his smile.

"Well, he's really quiet and deep and we didn't get to talk that much. But I think that if we had some time to really sit and talk for a while that we could become really good friends." Tommy said happily.

"Are you maybe interested in becoming more than friends? He's very attractive." Chakotay asked casually.

Tommy stopped and thought about the question for a moment before finally saying, "No. I get the feeling that he's either already with Ayala or is going to be. I didn't get any kind of 'interested' vibe from him at all."

"Gerron and Greg? Hmm... I don't know how that would work. They're very different people... and Greg is married." Chakotay said in thought.

"I don't know if there is anything. But from seeing how they care for each other, it wouldn't surprise me." Tommy said frankly.

Chakotay considered for a moment, then said, "Greg and I used to be close friends back on the Crazyhorse, but we've drifted apart over the past five years. Maybe it would be a good idea to spend some time catching up with

him."

"Do you think the four of us could do something together sometime?"

Tommy asked hopefully.

"Yes. That sounds good. Would you like to talk to Gerron to arrange it? I think you know my schedule well enough to know when I'll be available."

Chakotay said as they came to a stop in front of the turbolift.

"Yeah. I can do that tomorrow morning and let you know what I come up with while we're at the resort." Tommy said quickly.

"Flyboy and I are going to be doing something at 09:00. And Tom and I are going to shoot some pool tomorrow night." Chakotay said in thought.

"Wow. You're spending your whole day off with me?" Tommy asked in surprise.

"No. I'm just going to be spending the afternoon with you." Chakotay said, then thought about it, then revised, "I suppose I am spending the whole day with you in a manner of speaking."

Tommy smiled broadly as they stepped onto the turbolift.

"Deck two."

"Deck four."

"Why does that make you so happy?" Chakotay asked, unable to restrain his smile.

"Because it means that you really do see me as me, not as a... part of Tom."

Tommy finished reluctantly.

"Computer: Halt lift." Chakotay said seriously, then turned to look Tommy in the eyes.

"Tommy. I just finished explaining this to Tom a few minutes ago, so you can talk with him to get the details. But I really do believe that you four are completely separate personalities. I don't know how or why it happened, but I can't find any reason to believe that it's something that needs to be fixed."

Chakotay said frankly.

"Thanks Tay. I think I already knew that, but I just needed to hear it again."

Tommy said with a gentle smile.

"Computer: Resume."

* * * * *

09:00 - Chakotay's Quarters

::Be-Op::

"Come in." Chakotay said as he finished pulling on a grey sweat shirt.

Flyboy walked in wearing sneakers, skin tight blue jeans, a well worn yellow T-shirt with 'Mellow Yellow' emblazoned across the chest and a bright red windbreaker jacket to finish off the look.

"Are you going to be able to run alright in those pants?" Chakotay asked curiously.

"Yeah. No problem. Don't tell me that we're going on a long distance run." Flyboy said in a whiny tone.

"No. It won't be that long... and I think it will be more interesting than you expect." Chakotay said as he gestured toward the door.

"You're not going to tell me where we're going, are you?" Flyboy asked curiously.

"Sure I will. Holodeck 2." Chakotay finished with a smile.

"I hope with all this build-up it turns out to be something more interesting than a nature walk in Montana." Flyboy said as the boredom could clearly be heard in his voice.

"You whine worse than Tom." Chakotay said as they entered the lift.

"Thanks a lot." Flyboy said irritably.

"Holodeck 2." Chakotay said to the ceiling of the lift, then turned to Flyboy and said, "I'm sorry about that. I shouldn't compare you to the others. Please just give me a chance and meet me half way."

"I know what you're trying to do. You want to make sure I'm not going to go all crazy because I can step forward and take control when I want to and the others don't have any influence over me." Flyboy said frankly.

"Well. Yes." Chakotay said with a nod as the lift doors opened.

"Let me set you straight on something Commander. I may do some dangerous things, but it's because I know my limits and am very good at what I do. I wouldn't take this ship into harm's way without reason and I wouldn't volunteer to do anything unless I was sure that I could pull it off. Every time you question me about my plans you're insulting my judgment and my abilities." Flyboy said with venom.

"Okay. Then before we begin, how is your ability to run?" Chakotay asked as he led the way to holodeck 2.

"Just fine. Probably better than yours." Flyboy said with irritation in his voice.

"Let's find out." Chakotay said as the holodeck doors opened.

* * * * *

Flyboy looked around at the scenery and tried to determine where they were.

"Computer: Engage level one privacy lock, disable all communications and override safety protocols. Authorization Chakotay Beta Beta Two Four." Chakotay said as he walked down the quiet village street in the predawn light.

"Where are we?" Flyboy asked curiously as he looked around.

"Pamplona, Spain... Come on, Santo Domingo is right over here. It's going to start at daybreak." Chakotay said as he hurried away from Flyboy.

"Hey. Wait up... Pamplona? What's going to start?" Flyboy asked, then noticed that they were approaching a large group of people.

"I thought you said you could run. Come on!" Chakotay urged from ahead.

Flyboy broke into a run to catch up with Chakotay as he saw more and more people lining the streets.

Just as suddenly as he had started, Chakotay stopped then turned with a panicked look in his eyes.

"RUN!" Chakotay screamed and started running back toward Flyboy.

A glance behind Chakotay made Flyboy's blood run cold, then he took off in

a full run just as Chakotay passed him.

Both Chakotay and Flyboy ran as if their lives depended on it. And with the holodeck safeties turned off, their lives actually did depend on it.

There were cheers and screams from behind them. Flyboy glanced over his shoulder in time to see a bull gore one of the other runners and toss him out of the way like a rag doll.

"FUCK!!!" Flyboy screamed as he increased his speed beyond what he ever thought he was capable of.

By this time Chakotay was about three meters ahead, but Flyboy quickly closed the distance with his new motivation driving him.

"Over here!" Chakotay screamed and quickly jumped through a gap in the fence.

A heartbeat later, Flyboy was dodging through the space to join him.

Both men sat, gasping for breath as they watched the bulls rampaging past.

"You... you..." Flyboy fought to say.

"Could have warned you?" Chakotay asked with a chuckle.

Flyboy nodded quickly.

"At least you're not bored anymore." Chakotay said with a chuckle.

Flyboy broke into laughter at the statement.

"I get the impression that you're an adrenaline junkie so I wanted to provide a thrill before we had our talk." Chakotay said with a smile.

"You sure as hell did that." Flyboy said with a laugh as he continued to try and get his breath back.

"You've already addressed my main concerns, so I guess the only thing I need to know now is what can I do to help you have a happy and fulfilled life?" Chakotay asked with a smile.

"Oh. Is that all?" Flyboy asked with a roll of his eyes.

"I suppose it does sound like a complex question. But I get the feeling that you are very aware of your purpose in life and your needs." Chakotay said

speculatively.

"Thanks... I think. Um... yeah. I can think of two things at the moment." Flyboy said as a serious and determined look came over his face.

"Go ahead." Chakotay said seriously.

"Well, one of the things is an arrangement with the others to give me time to practice. I can't very well do my 'amazing feats' without the opportunity to hone my skills and reflexes." Flyboy said as he looked Chakotay in the eyes.

"Although time sharing issues are bound to be a problem, I don't see it being an insurmountable one. Talk with the others and if there's a problem, I'll arbitrate." Chakotay said in thought.

"Good. The other thing is something that you can do for me." Flyboy said with a look of intensity.

"And what would that be?" Chakotay asked cautiously.

"Trust me." Flyboy said firmly.

"I do..." Chakotay began to say.

"In an emergency situation you have to stop and consider and use up every other possible option before you'll let me do what has to be done to save the ship. If you'll just trust me when I say I can do something, you'll make both our jobs a lot easier." Flyboy said firmly.

"You're not at all like what I imagined you to be." Chakotay said honestly.

"What did you imagine?" Flyboy asked seriously.

"Someone with a surfer mentality who lives for the thrill. An adrenaline junkie who is only interested in pushing the limit of what he can do." Chakotay said frankly.

"Well, I suppose there's some truth to that. I absolutely hate being bored and I do love a good thrill. I also do like to push my limits, but I guess the difference is that I prepare myself to push those limits and minimize the risks as much as possible." Flyboy said in consideration.

"I see that now. You're a very interesting blend of contradictions." Chakotay said with a smile.

"I think you are too, as conservative as you like to act, you must have a wild streak a mile wide to even think of running with the bulls." Flyboy said with a chuckle.

"Tommy suggested rock-climbing or skydiving and I thought that I would try for something equally adventurous that you probably hadn't tried before." Chakotay said with a smile.

"You found it." Flyboy said with a laugh.

"I think it might take quite a while to understand you Flyboy." Chakotay said consideringly.

"I'm not that hard to understand. After Caldik Prime, we needed to be sure that nothing like that would ever happen again. That's why I'm here." Flyboy said dismissively.

After a moment to consider the words, Chakotay slowly said, "That's it?"

"Yep. That's it. At least that's how I came to be. Now... I don't know why I'm a separate person. I guess it's like a new adventure." Flyboy finished happily.

"Let's get out of here. I think I've had all the adventure I can handle for one morning." Chakotay said with a smile.

"Good idea. How about next time you let me pick the activity?" Flyboy asked with a grin as he held out a hand to help Chakotay to his feet.

* * * * *

"Commander, do you have a moment to speak with me?" A shy voice asked over the comm unit by Chakotay's door.

Chakotay didn't recognize the voice, but quickly answered, "Yes. Come in."

It took a moment for Chakotay to recognize the serious look on Tom's face.

"Lieutenant Paris? What can I do for you this morning?" Chakotay asked cautiously.

"You mentioned that you would like to discuss my career plans at some future time and I thought that if you had time we could do it now." Lieutenant Paris said hesitantly.

"Oh, yes of course. Please come in and have a seat." Chakotay said quickly

and walked to the table.

"Thank you sir." Lieutenant Paris said and walked to stand by the chair.

Chakotay took his seat, then watched as Lieutenant Paris sat down very precisely.

"I'm guessing that since you're here that you have some idea of how you would like to proceed with your Starfleet career." Chakotay said seriously.

"Yes sir. I believe that I would like to work toward the goal of being a Lieutenant Commander." Lieutenant Paris said formally.

Chakotay nodded in acknowledgement and said, "A reasonable goal given your current rank. Is there anything I can do to help you in pursuit of your goal?"

"Yes sir. Even though I have held the rank of Lieutenant for five years, I feel that I have routinely been treated like a junior officer." Lieutenant Paris said carefully, then quickly amended, "Not that I'm disagreeing with your judgment in that. Given my... unique nature, I'm frankly astounded that I was made a Lieutenant to begin with."

"It was the Captain's decision. But over time I've seen the wisdom in it." Chakotay said carefully.

"Thank you for saying so sir." Lieutenant Paris said respectfully, then continued, "If it is possible, I would like to be given responsibilities more in line with those of other Lieutenants."

"I don't understand what you're asking." Chakotay said honestly.

"Well, forgive me for saying so. But as chief helmsman I should be responsible for the scheduling and training of the other helmsmen. My level of responsibility should be the same as that of Lieutenant Torres' in Engineering." Lieutenant Paris said frankly.

"I see." Chakotay said in thought as he realized that Lieutenant Paris was right. B'Elana and the other department heads were responsible for the scheduling and training of their junior officers, but Lieutenant Paris had been given the title without any of the responsibilities that came with it.

"I'm not complaining sir. I just feel that I won't be able to advance in rank if

I'm not given the opportunity to develop my leadership skills in my current rank." Lieutenant Paris said seriously.

"I agree. But I can't give you the full responsibility of your duties in one day. It would be chaos for you and for your crew. How about this? About a week before the next crew rotation comes around, schedule a meeting with me so we can write the new schedule together. After a time or two of doing that, I'll gradually shift more and more of the responsibility to you. That way everyone will be able to adjust to the change gradually and there's less chance of a disruption due to ambiguity about your role and authority." Chakotay said carefully.

"Thank you sir. I would appreciate the time to ease into the added responsibilities." Lieutenant Paris said formally.

"Good. And I will notify the Captain of your wish to take more of a commanding role in your position so she won't be surprised by the changes." Chakotay said in thought.

"Thank you sir. I believe that she will be pleased. I've gotten the feeling that she would like for me to be more of a traditional leader... not that she expects it, just that she would prefer it." Lieutenant Paris said carefully.

"I agree with your observation. Tom's charisma has been accomplishing the tasks that your military leadership should have been doing. But if you're going to advance in rank, you really do need to lead in the traditional way... although a bit of charisma wouldn't hurt." Chakotay finished with a smile.

"Tom will be willing to step in if I ask. But I get the feeling that he would like me to begin to make my own way and stop depending on him as much." Lieutenant Paris said thoughtfully.

"From what I've learned about Tom, you'll be able to depend on him if you need to. But I think it really is best if you learn to stand on your own and take command when it's necessary." Chakotay said in a considering voice.

"Thank you sir. With your support, I know that I will be able to adapt to command and eventually attain my goal." Lieutenant Paris said confidently.

Chakotay gave him a fond smile, then asked, "So have you decided what direction you would like to take your career? Do you have your eye on being

a captain or maybe an admiral someday?"

Lieutenant Paris shook his head and said, "I don't think I would be happy in either of those positions. At the moment my ultimate goal is to become a commander and teach helm and navigation at the Starfleet Academy."

Chakotay smiled and said, "I think that's a realistic goal and well within your reach given your experience and temperament. But what about Tom and Tommy? Won't their future plans influence what you'll be doing?"

Lieutenant Paris thought for a moment, then said, "I don't know what their plans for the future are, but if they are significantly different from mine, I believe that we will be able to find a compromise that we can all be comfortable with."

Chakotay considered for a moment, then said, "I think you're right. I can't imagine that any of the others would ask you to give up your dreams. As long as you're willing to compromise, I think they will too."

Lieutenant Paris nodded his agreement.

"I hate to cut this short, but I have an appointment with Tommy to go to the resort in a few minutes." Chakotay said seriously.

"Yes sir. That was everything that I wanted to discuss. Thank you for taking the time to talk with me." Lieutenant Paris said as he stood.

"Anytime Lieutenant, and I mean that. If you have any questions or concerns... even if you just want to talk... please feel free to come to me." Chakotay said with a gentle smile.

"Thank you sir. I will." Lieutenant Paris said and betrayed a small smile in his military expression.

"Lieutenant, you are dismissed." Chakotay said gently.

"Yes sir. And thank you again." Lieutenant Paris said, then walked to the door.

Chakotay smiled as he watched the lieutenant leave, then went to change into something appropriate for the resort.

Chapter 5

::Be-Op:: the door chime sounded.

"Come in." Chakotay called as he finished pulling on his sleeveless T-shirt.

"Am I too early?" Tommy asked cautiously.

"Not at all. Have you eaten?" Chakotay asked as he walked to Tommy's side.

"No... I don't think so." Tommy said slowly, not entirely sure.

"Good. Me either. Let's get something at the resort, my treat." Chakotay said happily.

"Are you sure you have the rations for that?" Tommy asked cautiously.

"I've been saving rations for five years Tommy. I think it'll be okay to spend a few extra to enjoy a meal by the pool if we want to." Chakotay said with a grand smile.

"What's got you in such a good mood?" Tommy asked curiously.

"I'll tell you on the way to the holodeck." Chakotay said as he motioned toward the door.

* * * * *

"So what is it?" Tommy asked as they walked.

"Well. How much do you know about what happened last night with Tom?" Chakotay asked curiously.

"Not much. I got the feeling that Tom was really pleased with the way things went, but he didn't talk to me about it." Tommy said in thought.

"Holodeck 1." Chakotay called to the ceiling of the lift, then asked, "What about my meetings with Flyboy and the Lieutenant?"

"I didn't even know that you had a meeting with the Lieutenant, and Flyboy doesn't really talk to me much. He always seems to be too busy with other things." Tommy finished with a shrug.

"Well, let me fill you in on the most important development." Chakotay said with a happy smile as the turbo lift doors opened.

"What's that?" Tommy asked with excitement.

"Counselor Chakotay has concluded that Lieutenant Thomas Eugene Paris is one hundred percent fit for duty and as sane as any person on this ship." Chakotay said happily.

"Really? Even Tom?" Tommy asked with delight.

"Especially Tom. As long as you four keep working together and being considerate of each other the way you have been, I don't see any major problems on the horizon." Chakotay said with a smile.

"But what about Harry?" Tommy asked with concern.

"I think you'll have to decide how you're going to deal with him at some point. But I don't see it being an insurmountable problem." Chakotay said honestly as they approached the holodeck door.

"It's already running." Tommy said with surprise.

"Yes. The resort has been running all day. Most of the alpha shift have their day off today." Chakotay said seriously as he entered the holodeck.

"Oh... I thought it was just going to be us..."

"Is that a problem?" Chakotay asked with concern.

"I... well... I'm just not comfortable around a lot of people." Tommy said reluctantly.

"Well, I don't see that changing unless you go out and do things." Chakotay said honestly, then walked to the bar at the poolside.

Tommy reluctantly nodded as he noticed four crewmembers interspersed among the holographic characters.

"What would you recommend for lunch?" Chakotay asked casually.

"Um..." Tommy said as he shook himself out of his thoughts, then considered for a moment.

"Do you need a menu?" Chakotay asked slowly.

"No, I'm just thinking. How about the Hawaiian Kabobs? They're vegetarian and taste pretty good." Tommy said consideringly.

"I haven't tried that before. I think I will." Chakotay said with a smile, then looked at the bartender and said, "I'll have the Hawaiian Kabobs, please put both meals on my account."

"Yes Commander Chakotay. And for you?" The Bartender asked Tommy.

"Make it two." Tommy said with a content smile.

"And to drink?" The bartender asked professionally.

Tommy looked at Chakotay expectantly.

"I plan to drink at Sandrine's later, so I'll just have iced tea with lemon." Chakotay said seriously.

"Me too, minus the lemon." Tommy said with a smile.

"If you would like to have a seat at a table, I'll bring it out to you when it's ready." The bartender said with a friendly smile.

"Thanks." Tommy said, then looked around to find a table that was somewhat secluded.

"Is this okay?" Chakotay asked as he picked the table nearest the holodeck doors.

"No, I don't want to be by the entrance." Tommy said reluctantly.

"How about over here?" Chakotay asked and indicated another table.

"That's right by the pool." Tommy said slowly.

Chakotay rolled his eyes and said, "Tommy. I know you don't like being around other people, but this is one of those things that is good for you and you need to do it whether you like it or not."

Tommy reluctantly nodded and moved to the table by the pool.

* * * * *

"Are you okay?" Chakotay asked with concern at Tommy's worried look.

"I don't know. I just feel like... if I make one wrong move everyone will know that I'm not Tom and then everything will be ruined." Tommy said quietly.

"We don't know what will happen if everyone finds out. Maybe it will turn out to be a good thing. The only thing I know is that you can't spend every day of your life from now on hiding from people." Chakotay said firmly.

"I guess you're right." Tommy said reluctantly.

"Now cheer up. Our food's here." Chakotay said and gestured toward the bartender slowly approaching with two long flaming skewers.

A waiter placed their plates and drinks on the table, then took one of the skewers from the bartender and made a production of slowly sliding the flaming tropical fruit onto Chakotay's plate.

Tommy chuckled and said, "I forgot about that."

Chakotay quickly blew out the last few flames on his plate, then said, "You forgot that our lunch was a fire hazard?"

Tommy nodded as he fought to contain his laughter. The waiter then moved in front of Tommy and started to fill his plate with flaming chunks of fruit.

* * * * *

"The whole idea of a flame broiled banana is repulsive to me, but... this is really good." Chakotay said with surprise.

"Yeah. I don't know if it's the rum or the open flame that does it but the flavor is great." Tommy said happily.

"Well, *there* he is!" A voice said dramatically.

Tommy's look fell as he saw Harry approaching.

"Tommy, it's time to face this. I'm right here with you." Chakotay said firmly.

After a moment, Tommy reluctantly nodded, then looked up at Harry who was almost at his side.

"I tried to call you half a dozen times last night and again this morning and the computer couldn't route the call. Is everything okay?" Harry asked with concern, completely ignoring Chakotay.

"Um... yeah. Chakotay and I were doing some things and didn't want to be interrupted." Tommy said shyly.

"You and..." Harry said, then reluctantly looked at Chakotay.

"Good afternoon Ensign." Chakotay said with a bland smile.

"Um... Yeah. Good afternoon Commander." Harry said in a distracted voice, then turned his attention back to Tommy.

"Yeah Harry. Chakotay and I got to talking and decided to do some things together." Tommy said, sounding a little defensive.

"In fact, we're planning to shoot pool at Sandrine's tonight if you'd care to join us." Chakotay said in a neutral tone.

Tommy smiled and said, "Yeah. Maybe we can talk B'El into playing and play as teams."

Harry considered for a moment, then said, "That might be fun. So what are you guys doing here now?"

Chakotay and Tom exchanged a look as Harry pulled out a chair and sat with them.

"Having lunch. Then we were just planning on getting some sun by the pool." Tommy said, trying to sound happy about it.

"I thought about getting a massage." Chakotay said seriously.

"Yeah, that sounds nice." Tommy said with a smile at Chakotay.

"I think I'll go track down B'Elana and see if she wants to join us tonight." Harry said as he stood.

"How does 18:00 sound?" Chakotay asked with a pleased smile.

"That's good. I'll see you guys later." Harry said and hurried away from the table.

Tommy let out a relieved gust of breath.

"That wasn't half as bad as you thought, now was it?" Chakotay asked with a smile.

"No. I guess not. But for a minute I thought he was going to join us for lunch." Tommy said seriously.

"I thought so too. But when I mentioned getting a massage, I could almost

see him form the mental image of me wearing only a towel. Food was the farthest thing from his mind after that." Chakotay said with a chuckle.

"I don't know. I think you'd look nice." Tommy said with a gentle smile.

"After lunch we could both get massages if you'd like to find out." Chakotay said with a grin.

"Yeah, let's do that." Tommy said peacefully, then went back to eating his lunch.

* * * * *

"Hey Chak. How are you doing tonight?" Tom asked with a big smile.

"I'm fine. You really outdid yourself on the outfit. You look good." Chakotay said with an appraising eye.

"I didn't think I was overweight before, but losing a few pounds has made a lot of difference." Tom said as he patted his firm belly.

"Did Tommy tell you about Harry and B'Elana joining us tonight?" Chakotay asked curiously.

"I was watching. I could have smacked Harry up side the head for sitting down uninvited like that. I'm the only one allowed to get away with that kind of a stunt." Tom finished with a smirk.

Chakotay chuckled and said, "I guess you've been doing other things the past few weeks so Harry's picking up the slack."

"I guess so. You're not going out wearing that are you?" Tom asked with a pained look.

"What's wrong with it?" Chakotay asked curiously.

"Um, Chak. If you looked up boring in the dictionary, whatever it said would have to be more exciting than that shirt. Let's find you something else." Tom said, still looking to be in pain.

"Is it really that bad?" Chakotay asked as he looked at the burgundy and navy blue plaid shirt.

"Yes. Show me what you've got." Tom said firmly.

"I didn't think that when we called a ceasefire between us, you'd end up dressing me." Chakotay grouched as he led the way to his closet.

Tom rolled his eyes, then looked at the selection.

"Boring, boring... God! When I was a kid my cat threw up something that looked like this one... Wait... Here. Put this on." Tom finally said and handed Chakotay a multi-colored striped shirt.

"B'Elana got me that. It looks like something that belongs on a parade float." Chakotay said as he looked at the loud colors.

"Chak. Trust me on this. You're bland enough to neutralize the colors of the shirt. Put it on." Tom said firmly.

Chakotay reluctantly accepted the shirt and began to change.

"I'm sorry Chak. I don't mean to be like that, but I just feel like it's important to look good when you go out." Tom said hesitantly.

"It's okay Tom. I understand that you're not doing it to be mean. You're just trying to help me." Chakotay said as he tucked the shirt in.

Tom stepped back and looked at Chakotay critically.

"Do you have any kind of hair stuff?" Tom asked cautiously.

"Yes, in my bathroom." Chakotay said hesitantly.

As Tom walked away, he said, "You don't have to give me that look. I'm not going to do anything weird."

"I'm kind of used to my hair the way it is." Chakotay called toward the bathroom.

"I know. You've heard the expression 'Letting your hair down'? That's what this is. A different look for a different Chakotay." Tom said as he walked to Chakotay with a little dab of hair gel in his hand.

Tom stopped and looked at Chakotay with question.

"Okay Tom. I'll go along with you this time, but if I don't like it then never again." Chakotay said in warning.

"Relax Chak. Like I said, nothing weird." Tom said as he styled Chakotay's

hair down into loose, casual bangs.

"Good. That works." Tom said with accomplishment.

Chakotay reluctantly walked over to look in the mirror over his dresser and was stunned at the difference.

"Cute guy, huh?" Tom said with a grin.

"Thanks Tom." Chakotay said in a bewildered voice.

"Come on. Harry and B'El are probably waiting on us.

Chakotay took one last look in the mirror before hurrying to follow Tom.

* * * * *

"They're finally here!" Harry said as Tom and Chakotay entered the room.

"When you get back to your cabin, look up the phrase 'fashionably late' Har." Tom said as he walked over and took a seat at Harry and B'Elana's table.

"Looking good Chakotay. What's the occasion?" B'Elana asked with appreciation.

"I'm spending the evening shooting pool with a lovely lady, how are you this evening B'Elana." Chakotay asked with a sultry smile.

"Things are looking up." B'Elana said with a predatory grin.

"How's it hangin B'El?" Tom asked curtly.

"Pig." B'Elana responded without turning her gaze away from Chakotay.

Harry and Tom shared an amused glance as that confirmed that everything was normal.

* * * * *

After a night of drinking beer, shooting pool and trading insults with Harry and B'Elana, Chakotay reluctantly got up to leave.

"As nice as it's been to spend the evening with all of you, the commander is expected on the bridge in the morning and it wouldn't do for him to be groggy." Chakotay said with a friendly smile.

Tom quickly stood and said, "I've been trying to shape up, so I'd better follow

our fearless leader's example."

"Well, I hope we can do this again sometime soon. It's been fun." B'Elana said then took a casual sip of her beer.

"How about next week. Same time, same holodeck?" Tom asked happily.

"Yeah. It's a date." B'Elana said with a smile.

"And that'll give me a week to work on Chakotay about relaxing the restrictions on betting rations on the game." Tom said with an impish grin.

Harry chuckled and said, "Good luck."

Chakotay looked at Harry and said, "I've noticed that when Tom sets his mind to something, he has a remarkable talent for achieving it."

"I can't wait till next week to find out." B'Elana said happily.

"I'll see you all in the morning." Chakotay said, then turned to leave.

"Wait up Chak." Tom said and hurried to his side.

* * * * *

"So? Did you have as much fun as it looked like?" Tom asked as they walked away from the holodeck.

"Yes. I don't think I've had that much fun since I came on Voyager." Chakotay admitted reluctantly.

"I'm glad. After everything you've done to help me the past week it's good to be able to do something for you." Tom said with contentment.

"Is that what this was about?" Chakotay asked curiously.

"No. I really wanted you to be here with us. But it's just good to know that it's not all one way." Tom said with difficulty.

Chakotay nodded that he understood, then said, "I've enjoyed this week as much as you have Tom. I can honestly say that I've lived more this week than in the past five years."

Tom considered the words as they waited for the turbo lift to arrive, and finally said, "Me too."

* * * * *

The next morning came and everything was business as usual until Chakotay noticed Lieutenant Ayala approaching.

"Chakotay? Can I talk to you for a minute?" Lieutenant Ayala asked in a whisper.

Chakotay got up from his chair and followed Ayala back to his station.

"Gerron just sent me a message about us having dinner with you and Lieutenant Paris tonight. Do you know what's going on?" Ayala asked with concern.

"Not exactly. Tom and I discussed the possibility of the four of us doing something together sometime but I didn't know that he was arranging it yet." Chakotay said honestly.

"So it's for real?" Ayala asked in thought.

"Yes. Something happened in sickbay a couple days ago that gave Gerron and Tom a chance to talk. Tom seems to think that if they spent some time together that they might become good friends. I mentioned to him that you and I are old friends so... it just seemed like the thing to do." Chakotay said casually.

"What is he wanting to do with Gerron? I mean, what kind of friends?" Ayala asked cautiously.

"Friends like we are Greg. I already asked him if he had any romantic interest in Gerron and he said that he didn't. I believe him." Chakotay said frankly.

Ayala nodded in thought, then said, "Thanks Cap. I've just heard the stories about how Paris has screwed his way through half the crew and I don't want Gerry to get hurt."

Chakotay stifled his automatic defensive reaction and quietly said, "Trust me Greg. Even though Tom has done some things that he may not be proud of, he's not trying to do anything more than make a new friend."

"Okay. I don't trust him, but if you say he's okay, I'll trust you." Ayala said reluctantly.

Chakotay patted him on the shoulder, then said, "Just watch and listen. You'll see."

Ayala nodded, then noticed an unusual reading on his console.

"Ensign Kim, are you detecting a dilithium signature at heading 17 mark 4?" Ayala asked curiously.

Chakotay moved to the operation station to see if the reading was really dilithium.

"Confirmed. It appears to be a dilithium deposit on the fourth planet from the star... 'M' class... no signs of humanoid life forms. " Harry said in an increasingly excited voice.

"Captain to the bridge." Chakotay called out into the air.

"Lieutenant Paris, alter course to heading one seven mark four." Chakotay said seriously as he examined the reading over Harry's shoulder.

"Report." Janeway barked as soon as she stepped onto the bridge.

"We've detected a dilithium signature, I've altered course to check it out." Chakotay said seriously.

"How big?" Janeway asked cautiously.

"Big." Harry said as he examined the readings closely.

"Can you be more specific Ensign?" Janeway asked hopefully.

"The sensors can't penetrate very far below the surface, but so far I'm reading one point two metric tons." Harry said as he looked up from his console.

"Please tell me that it's somewhere that we can get to it." Janeway said in a pleading tone.

"Yes Captain. The edge of the deposit appears to be exposed to the surface." Harry said with excitement.

"Chakotay, take the Delta Flyer and collect as much as you can carry." Janeway said seriously.

"Yes captain." Chakotay said as he continued to examine the readings carefully.

"Paris, Ayala, Kim, you're with me." Chakotay said seriously.

The three named individuals waited for the standby crew to man their stations so they could proceed to the shuttle bay.

Chakotay keyed the comm and said, "Ensign Swinn, Crewman Gerron, Crewman Dalby and Mr. Neelix, report to shuttle bay one for away detail."

Janeway looked at Chakotay with question.

"The scanners also show a variety of plant life. It would be short sighted of us to overlook the possibility of finding something useful just because we've also found dilithium." Chakotay said as he looked at Janeway with a smile.

"Very good Commander." Janeway said with an answering smile.

* * * * *

"Ensign Kim, would you download the sensor readings to the Delta Flyer so we can decide where to land for optimum efficiency?" Chakotay asked as he boarded the shuttle.

"Yes sir." Harry said as he took a seat before a console.

"Lieutenant Paris, take off as soon as you're done with your preflight, we'll have touch down coordinates for you before we hit the atmosphere.."

"Yes sir." Lieutenant Paris said professionally.

"Swinn, you'll be assessing the plant life for potential scientific use. Neelix, you'll be looking for edible food. Gerron will be in charge of collecting and maintaining the plant samples you find valuable." Chakotay said seriously, then turned to the others.

"Ayala and Kim will be in charge of collecting the dilithium. Dalby will be in charge of the equipment." Chakotay said seriously.

"I have the teams logged." Lieutenant Ayala said from his console.

Chakotay nodded that he heard, then moved to Harry's side and said, "Ensign Kim, have you mapped out the terrain?"

"Yes sir. But I'm afraid that the area where the dilithium is exposed has very little plant life." Harry said reluctantly.

"I see. I'd say that this area sixty kilometers to the South is the most concentrated area of plant growth anywhere near the dilithium site." Chakotay said as he pointed.

"Yes sir." Harry said carefully.

"Fine. Dilithium team. Prepare your gear and be ready to leave the shuttle as soon as we land. Botany team. When you land, make good use of your time and secure the samples as you go. As soon as we've collected a decent amount we'll signal for pickup." Chakotay said firmly.

"I will command the Dilithium team and Lieutenant Paris will be in command of the Botany team." Chakotay said seriously.

"Ensign Kim. Make note of both landing sites and relay the coordinates to Lieutenant Paris and back to Voyager." Chakotay said as he moved back to the copilot's seat.

"Yes sir." Harry said immediately.

* * * * *

The Botany team walked through the lush undergrowth trying to find plant life that could be of use to the crew of Voyager.

As soon as they were away from the others, Gerron walked to Tom's side and quietly asked, "Who are you?"

"Lieutenant Paris." The Lieutenant said seriously.

"It's nice to meet you Lieutenant, I'm Gerron Tem, a friend of Tommy's." Gerron said quietly.

Lieutenant Paris smiled at the introduction and replied, "It's nice to meet you Crewman Gerron. If there's an opportunity later, I'll try to arrange it so you and Tommy can talk for a few minutes."

Gerron considered for a moment, then said, "If everything goes as planned, we'll be having dinner together tonight, so that's alright. You probably need to stay out front while you're in command of our team."

Lieutenant Paris smiled at the statement and said, "Yes. That's probably best. Thank you for understanding."

Gerron nodded, then turned as he heard Neelix's excited voice in the distance.

* * * * *

"::static:: ...Paris, please... ...Dilithium... ...immediate... ::static::med... emergency..." Lieutenant Paris couldn't identify the voice due to all the distortion and static.

"Botany team. Return to the Delta Flyer immediately." Lieutenant Paris said firmly into his comm badge, then rekeyed it and said, "Commander Chakotay, please come in."

There was a moment of silence, then he tried again.

"Dilithium team, please report your status."

"What's the matter?" Olivia Swinn asked as she approached from Lieutenant Paris' left side.

"I've lost contact with the Dilithium team." Lieutenant Paris said firmly as he increased his pace toward the Delta Flyer.

"Paris to Kim, report." Lieutenant Paris said firmly.

After a moment, Lieutenant Paris rekeyed his comm badge and said, "Paris to Voyager, the Dilithium team has reported a medical emergency."

A burst of static was the only response.

"Tom, why don't you go see what they need and come back for us? We're perfectly safe here and it will give us time to collect more of these lovely roots." Neelix said in a wheedling tone.

"Neelix. I'm in command. We're leaving." Lieutenant Paris said firmly and didn't slow his pace.

Neelix looked surprised by the statement, but gave no further argument.

Gerron worked his way ahead of Swinn and Neelix to fall into step at Paris' side.

"What's wrong Lieutenant?"

"There was static. Our scans didn't show anything that should be able to interfere with our communications." Lieutenant Paris said cautiously.

"So our presence may have caused something to happen?" Gerron asked in thought.

"It's possible. Come on everyone. Let's hurry." Lieutenant Paris said as he started jogging toward the Delta Flyer.

* * * * *

"Delta Flyer to Voyager, please respond." Lieutenant Paris said, then continued working down his checklist for the preflight.

"Tom, I've got something on the sensors." Olivia Swinn said in an anxious voice.

"Can you be more specific?" Lieutenant Paris asked as he continued his preflight checks.

"No. Not really. It's... maybe a storm..." She said helplessly.

Lieutenant Paris looked at his sensor readings and saw that the storm or whatever it was appeared as solid and none of their sensors could penetrate it.

"It shows as solid, but it seems to be moving fluidly." Swinn said in concentration.

"Are we secure?" Lieutenant Paris asked loudly.

Gerron looked around to see that everyone was belted in, then said, "Yes sir."

"Then hang on." Lieutenant Paris said as he launched the Delta Flyer into the air at the top speed.

When the Delta Flyer leveled out and the gravitational forces had lessened, Neelix hesitantly asked, "Tom... Do you think you could not do that again?"

"Sorry Neelix. We have a team in trouble." Lieutenant Paris said frankly.

"Right. Right... It's just that I've never accelerated fast enough to taste my spleen before and it wasn't a very..."

"We're about to enter the storm. Brace yourselves." Lieutenant Paris said as he followed the flight path from their previous sensor readings.

"Flyboy? Are you ready to step in if this goes wrong?" Lieutenant Paris called internally.

{I'm watching and I'll take over at the first sign of trouble.} Flyboy responded immediately.

Everyone braced themselves as the Delta Flyer entered the complete blackness.

The transition from bright sunshine to deepest midnight was disturbing, but otherwise nothing seemed to happen.

"Did we hit it yet?" Neelix asked cautiously.

"Yes. We're inside... whatever this is. I'm flying completely blind here." Lieutenant Paris said as sweat began to bead on his forehead.

"I'm quite a good navigator, if I do say so. Maybe I could help." Neelix suggested hesitantly.

"Thank you Neelix. Take the copilot's position." Lieutenant Paris said quickly.

Neelix unbuckled his restraint harness and moved to the copilot's position.

"I'm following the sensor readings we took before we landed. When I land the ship, I want you to take the pilot's seat and be ready to take off at a moment's notice. If I'm not back in fifteen minutes, take off and get far enough away from this storm to call for help." Lieutenant Paris said seriously.

"Let me go Tom. You're a much better pilot..." Neelix began to say.

"I need to be the one to go. I'm the one with medical training. I'm also in command and your safety is my responsibility. And I've seen your piloting skills. This won't be any problem for you, besides, all you'll need to do is go up. That should be the most direct route to help." Lieutenant Paris said firmly.

"Up. I can do that." Neelix said with assurance.

"Good. I'm counting on you to keep Olivia and Geron safe. That's your first priority." Lieutenant Paris said, then started making preparations to land.

"I understand. You can count on me." Neelix said confidently.

"Everyone hold on. We're about to land." Lieutenant Paris said loudly, then

there was a thump as they impacted the ground heavily.

* * * * *

"Chakotay! Harry!" Tom called out in the complete blackness as he took one blind step after another, hoping he had enough rope to make it to the Dilithium Team.

Sound didn't seem to carry very well and the air was bitter and hard to breathe.

The blackness seemed to have currents that were pushing against him as he trudged forward.

"Tom? Is that you?" Harry's voice finally called in response.

"Har! Where are you? I can't see anything." Tom called out.

"I'm right here. I can't see anything at all." Harry called and sounded closer.

"How are you guys?" Tom asked as he finally found Harry and hugged him gratefully.

"Chakotay and Dalby both got hit with... something. It came out of the dilithium when they tried to cut it. They don't look hurt but they won't wake up. When it got dark Ayala fell down and now he's hurt." Harry said in a small voice as he held Tom tightly.

"I don't think I'll be able to do much to help them in this blackness. Can Ayala walk?" Tom asked cautiously as he tried to coax Harry to let go of him.

"How's Tem? Is he hurt too?" Ayala asked in a pained voice.

"He's fine. He's waiting for you back on the Delta flyer. Just follow this rope I'm holding, the Flyer is about twenty meters away." Tom said firmly.

"Twenty meters? I can do that. I need Tem." Ayala said with pain as he found Tom, then followed the rope that he was still holding.

"Harry, where are Chakotay and Dalby?" Tom asked as he tried to stay calm.

"Just feel around, they're right here by our feet." Harry said as his voice seemed to be descending.

Tom knelt down and found an ankle.

"I think this one is Dalby." Harry said quietly.

"Then I've got Chak. Fireman's carry, twenty meters. Let's go." Tom said firmly.

"I can't pick up Dalby. He's too big." Harry said reluctantly.

"I don't care if you have to drag him by his ears, just get moving." Tom said as he struggled with the dead weight of Chakotay.

* * * * *

"Harry?" Tom called out behind him.

"I'm tired." Harry said in a whining tone as he struggled to drag Dalby.

"Can't you make it a little longer. We're over half-way there." Tom asked impatiently.

"No. No more."

"I don't know if breathing this stuff is making you tired. Keep talking to me while you rest so I know you're okay." Tom said as he carefully laid Chakotay on the ground beside him.

"Okay. You want to talk? Why don't you tell me what's going on with you and Chakotay?" Harry asked in an angry voice.

"What do you mean?" Tom asked curiously.

"Don't play games with me Tom. I've known you too long. Something happened and then I don't see you except on duty for two weeks. The next thing I know, Chakotay is your new best friend. Did he brainwash you or what?" Harry asked angrily.

"No Harry. He didn't brainwash me. He just talked to me." Tom said with caution.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Harry asked angrily.

"Exactly what I said. We talked."

"Talked about what? Becoming boyfriends? Lov-ers?" Harry asked in a mocking voice.

"Your inner child is pretty much running the show right now, isn't he Har? Come on. The rest break is over. Let's get back to the Flyer." Tom said with irritation.

"You're calling me childish? I'm not the one who's being childish. You are! I've been your friend for five years. I defended you and put up with a lot of crap from a lot of people because of you. Now in two weeks you just blow me off and Chakotay's your new best friend?" Harry asked angrily.

"A few things Har. If it was such a fucking burden to be my friend, then you shouldn't have bothered. If the price of your friendship is that I don't get to have any other friends then the price is too high. And what's with this 'best friend' shit anyway? What are you, eight years old? Grow up Harry." Tom said, then struggled to heft Chakotay onto his shoulder again.

"Tom?" Harry called out in a frightened voice.

Tom felt his anger wash away at the fearful tone.

"I tell you what Har. Just stay right there and keep hold of the rope. I'm going to get Chakotay inside then I'll be right back to help you with Dalby." Tom said more gently, then started struggling toward the ship in the complete blackness.

* * * * *

Tom finally found the Flyer and was helped aboard by Gerron and Swinn.

He put Chakotay down as gently as possible then pulled out the med kit and tried to find out what had happened to him.

After a moment of looking at the medical tricorder readings Tom reluctantly looked up at the expectant faces around him.

Rather than say anything, he turned to Ayala and began to assess his condition.

He quickly took off Lieutenant Ayala's shirt and started to wrap his chest with a heavy bandage.

Lieutenant Ayala let out a few whimpers, but Crewman Gerron was holding his hand and whispering to him to keep him calm.

As soon as he was finished, he checked the hypospray to see what the contents and dosage were and held it where Lieutenant Ayala could see it.

"Lieutenant Ayala, this is a pain reliever. It will take the edge off the pain." Tom said seriously.

"Huh?." Ayala asked semi-coherently.

"This will make it stop hurting. Do you want some?" Tom asked cautiously. Lieutenant Ayala nodded hopefully.

Tom pressed the hypospray to Ayala's neck, then watched as relief filled his eyes.

"I'm going out to get Harry and Dalby. Neelix, you're with me." Tom said in a commanding tone.

Neelix quickly nodded and hurried to Tom's side.

"What about Gregor and Chakotay?" Geron asked in a small voice.

"Don't worry. Ayala is going to be fine. But we need to go get Dalby and Harry so we can get the hell out of here." Tom said frankly.

"I like that plan." Ensign Swinn said firmly.

"Come on Neelix." Tom said as he stepped back out into the inky blackness holding firmly to the rope.

* * * * *

"Harry!" Tom called out into the dark, but didn't receive a response.

"Tom, I have a very bad feeling about this." Neelix said seriously.

"You and me both." Tom said as he felt his way along the rope.

Finally the rope seemed to be snagged on something low to the ground and Tom followed it.

"Tom, what is it? What did you find?" Neelix asked anxiously.

"I think it's Dalby." Tom said as he felt the man on the ground.

"What about Ensign Kim?" Neelix asked cautiously.

Reluctantly, Tom said, "I don't know... but we'll have to worry about him

once we have Dalby safe."

"Ensign Kim! Please answer us!" Neelix called out.

"Neelix, grab Dalby's legs. You can keep calling out for Harry while you're helping me." Tom said with a sinking feeling.

After a moment of shifting around to take hold of Dalby's legs, Neelix called out, "Ensign Kim!"

"Harry!" Tom called as he struggled to carry the dead weight and follow the rope.

* * * * *

"Everyone, it's decision time." Tom said as he looked at the group on the shuttle.

"I'm the ranking officer and it's my decision as to what we do next. But I would welcome your thoughts before I make that decision." Tom said carefully.

"I don't understand what decision you're talking about." Geron said quietly from Ayala's side.

"He's talking about leaving Ensign Kim here." Neelix said in a concerned whisper.

"There's more to it than that. I don't know how severe Chakotay and Dalby's injuries are. The medical tricorder isn't telling me anything useful and anything I could try to do to help them would be just as likely to make matters worse." Tom said with regret.

"So you have the choice of risking two lives to save one?" Ensign Swinn asked cautiously.

"That's one way of looking at it. Another is that if we can get out of this black fog or whatever it is, we can call Voyager and get more help, not only for these guys but help in searching for Harry." Tom said in thought.

"That sounds like a very good bit of reasoning." Neelix said as he nodded.

"Yeah. So why does it feel like I'm giving Harry a death sentence if I decide to take off?" Tom asked quietly.

After a long moment of silence, Gerron said, "Because you probably are."

Tom nodded, then walked to the front and began his preparations for take-off.

"Thanks." Tom called out over his shoulder into the cabin, then reluctantly powered up the engines.

Chapter 6

"Delta Flyer to Voyager. Please come in." Tom said firmly.

"Voy... Delt...w....ch... ...rr..."

"Delta Flyer to Voyager, we have a medical emergency. I repeat. We have a medical emergency." Tom said firmly.

"Please advise...what injuries have you sustained?" Captain Janeway asked professionally.

"Commander Chakotay and Crewman Dalby were knocked unconscious by an unknown force from the dilithium they were trying to collect. The medical tricorder isn't showing any injury, so I haven't wanted to take the chance of administering any treatment. They appear to be stable. Lieutenant Ayala was injured in a separate incident and has two broken ribs and some minor internal injuries. I've administered pain medication to deal with his discomfort and done my best to immobilize his ribs with a pressure bandage. Also we... I lost Ensign Kim." Tom finished quietly as he fought to hold back his tears.

"What do you mean by 'lost'?" Captain Janeway asked carefully.

"I mean lost. Misplaced. Can't find... he's down on that planet all alone and there's nothing I can do about it" Tom said as a tear started gliding down his cheek.

"Excuse me Tom." Geron said from Lieutenant Ayala's side.

"Yes?" Tom whispered as he muted the comm.

"I think it might be a good time for Lieutenant Paris to take over." Geron said with a timid look in his eyes.

Tom looked at Geron with uncertainty for a second, then nodded his agreement.

Lieutenant Paris looked over his controls, then unmuted the comm channel.

"Captain Janeway, as soon as we're in transporter range I would like to transport the injured members of the team to the ship, then return to the surface to search for Ensign Kim." Lieutenant Paris said firmly.

"Our sensors aren't able to penetrate the storm on the surface, please advise of the conditions at the landing site." Captain Janeway said professionally.

"The black fog that we encountered blocks out all light, is difficult to breath and seems to have a thickness to it that makes it difficult to walk through." Lieutenant Paris said professionally.

"You're entering transporter range. Tuvok will be beaming aboard with a security team to take charge of the search party." Captain Janeway said firmly.

"Aye Captain." Lieutenant Paris said without emotion.

"Have the remainder of the away team prepare for transport." Janeway said calmly.

"Aye captain." Lieutenant Paris said, then muted the comm as he turned in his seat.

"Everyone, prepare for transport to Voyager." Lieutenant Paris said firmly.

Gerron looked at Lieutenant Paris with a gentle smile and said, "You're doing fine. Take good care of them."

Lieutenant Paris smiled at Gerron and gave a brief nod.

As soon as everyone was in their transport positions, Lieutenant Paris unmuted the comm and said, "Energize."

* * * * *

"Lieutenant Paris, prepare to take us to the last known location of Ensign Kim." Tuvok said seriously.

"Yes sir." Lieutenant Paris said formally and programmed the reciprocal course.

"Is there any further information you can give that might aid in our search for Ensign Kim?" Tuvok asked as he took the co-pilot's chair.

"The only thing I can think of is that he seemed to be behaving in an unusually... childish manner." Lieutenant Paris said hesitantly.

"How so?" Tuvok asked curiously.

"His manner of speech was different and his reasoning didn't seem to be normal. Come to think of it, Lieutenant Ayala didn't seem to be acting like himself either.." Lieutenant Paris said in concentration.

"If there was indeed an effect from being on the surface, can you speculate why you weren't effected in the same manner?" Tuvok asked seriously.

"No sir. I might have been effected to some degree, but maybe since I wasn't in it as long it didn't effect me as badly." Lieutenant Paris said in thought.

"Thank you Lieutenant. We appear to be nearing the storm." Tuvok said calmly.

"Right. This storm or whatever it is doesn't seem to cause any problem with the Delta Flyer's navigational systems or engines but it blocks our communicators and sensors completely." Lieutenant Paris said as he followed the programmed course.

"Lieutenant Paris, once we have landed, remain with the ship and be prepared to lift off as soon as we have retrieved Ensign Kim." Tuvok said seriously.

"Yes sir." Lieutenant Paris said as he worked his controls to try and make the landing as soft as possible.

* * * * *

As soon as the Delta Flyer had touched down, Lieutenant Paris said, "Ensign Kim's last known location was approximately ten meters to starboard."

"Thank you Lieutenant. Search team, anchor to the ship and begin search pattern alpha. Communicators will not work in this environment so you will have to relay messages to your nearest team member." Tuvok said professionally.

Lieutenant Paris looked back at the group of three men and one woman who were paying Commander Tuvok their full attention. Inwardly, the Lieutenant felt a spark of admiration for the respect and trust that Commander Tuvok had earned from his team.

"Proceed." Tuvok said firmly and watched as his security team made their way into the blackness.

As soon as the last one had gone, Tuvok attached his harness to the rope by

the Delta Flyer's door and followed them into the dark.

* * * * *

Lieutenant Paris went through every possible system check on the Delta Flyer trying to make sure that everything was in top operating condition.

Finally he sat in the pilot's chair and looked back at the empty ship.

{Tom?} Lieutenant Paris asked quietly in his mind.

//Right here.// Tom answered immediately.

{Would you like to check the med-kit to see that it has everything you need?} Lieutenant Paris asked cautiously.

//I know what's in there. Besides, if there's something missing, there's not much I can do about it now.// Tom said frankly.

{Yes. I should have thought of that.} Lieutenant Paris said with distraction.

//Do you want to talk about it?// Tom asked quietly.

{About what?} Lieutenant Paris asked cautiously.

//About why you're making up excuses to talk with me.// Tom said in a playful voice.

{I'm not usually... out here like this.} Lieutenant Paris said in a lost tone.

//Yeah. You usually take care of the duty shift and let the rest of us handle the down time.// Tom said frankly.

{I don't know how to do... nothing.} Lieutenant Paris said helplessly.

Tom chuckled, then said, //Lou, we're going to have to work on getting you a life outside of duty.//

{Lou?} Lieutenant Paris asked cautiously.

//Yeah, short for Lieutenant. What do you think?// Tom asked happily.

After a moment of thought, Lieutenant Paris smiled and said, {I think I like it. I never even thought about getting a name of my own before.}

//Well, if you're anything like me, you were probably thinking that you're just one of Tommy's defenders. But I had a long talk with Chakotay and he

explained it to me. We're all real.// Tom finished in a firm voice of certainty.

{But, how can we be?} Lieutenant Paris asked in wonder.

//I don't know how or why. I just know that we are real. From the moment we awoke as separate people we've been learning and growing. Lou, I love my life and I want you to love your life too.// Tom said happily.

{I don't know if I can. Up to now I just assumed that I was Tommy's duty. His professional persona. But if I'm more than that... I don't know how to be more.} Lieutenant Paris said helplessly.

//Well, I happen to know a few people who can help you with that.// Tom said in a leading tone.

{Commander Chakotay?} Lieutenant Paris asked cautiously.

//That's one. But don't forget about me and Tommy. I bet Flyboy might even kick in some suggestions to liven things up for you.// Tom said warmly.

{I'm going to need to think about this. I just don't know what to believe.} Lieutenant Paris said in a lost voice.

//Believe in what your heart tells you. Maybe when you're ready, you can get Chak to take you on a spirit walk. It really helps put things in perspective.// Tom said with an internal chuckle.

{Spirit walk?} Lieutenant Paris asked cautiously.

//Yeah. Don't worry about it now.// Tom said in an encouraging voice.

{Thanks Tom. You've given me a lot to think about.} Lieutenant Paris said quietly.

//I think that's my cue to leave. I think you know where to find me if you need me.//

{Thanks Tom. But I'm going to try to handle this mission for myself. I've got to learn how to do something more than be a pilot.} Lieutenant Paris said cautiously.

//I understand, but here's one more thing to think about.// Tom said in a leading tone.

{???

//We all share one body. Maybe instead of learning how to do everything by yourself, you might think about being a real leader and delegating the tasks that need to be done to those with the best talent for doing them.// Tom said, then faded from Lieutenant Paris' mind's eye.

* * * * *

"Lieutenant Paris, please scan Ensign Carlson to determine his condition." Tuvok said firmly as he guided one of his security men into the Delta Flyer.

"What's wrong with him?" Lieutenant Paris asked quickly as he scanned the young man with the medical tricorder.

"That is what I would like for you to determine." Tuvok said firmly.

{Tom, can you handle the medical thing? You've had a lot more practice than I have.} Lieutenant Paris asked hopefully.

//I'm on it.// Tom said as he moved forward.

"His blood chemistry is going crazy. The tricorder can't make sense out of what's happening to him." Tom said as he examined the readings carefully.

"He was exhibiting child-like behavior. Others of the security team seem to be likewise effected to a lesser degree." Tuvok said darkly.

"Any sign of Harry?" Tom asked with concern.

"Yes. Ensign Kim's boots have been recovered. Based on the location of that find we are instituting a new search pattern." Tuvok said professionally.

"You can leave Ensign Carlson here with me if you want to get back to your team." Tom said as he watched Ensign Carlson carefully.

"Yes. It would be advantageous if you could find a treatment for Ensign Carlson's condition." Tuvok said seriously.

"Without knowing the cause, there's not much I can do. Maybe it'll just wear off now that he's inside." Tom said as he looked at the readings again.

* * * * *

"Ensign Carlson, what's your first name?" Tom asked quietly.

"I'm Terry. You want to play a game?" Ensign Carlson asked with a big

hopeful smile.

"It's nice to meet you Terry. I'm Tom. I would like to play a game, but not right this minute. Right now I want to be sure that you feel okay." Tom said slowly.

"Are you a doctor?" Ensign Carlson asked suspiciously as he began to back away from Tom.

"No. I'm not anything like a doctor. I just want to make sure you didn't get hurt when you were outside in the dark." Tom said as he discretely scanned the young ensign again with the medical tricorder.

"I'm hungry." Ensign Carlson said in a grumpy tone.

Tom saw that the readings hadn't changed, then said, "Let's see what we can do to fix that Terry. Do you want to help me look in these storage crates to see if we have some food in here?"

Ensign Carlson got a big smile as he happily followed Tom.

"What do we have in this one?" Tom asked as he pointed to a storage crate.

Ensign Carlson carefully opened the crate and looked inside.

"Salad." he said with a crinkled nose.

Tom looked in the crate and recognized it as some of the plant samples his team had collected.

"Yeah, salad. Let's see if we can find something better. What's in this one?" Tom asked and led Ensign Carlson to the next container.

"Lieutenant Paris. I require your assistance." Tuvok called from the door of the shuttle.

Tom hurried to the door and heard a whimpering cry just outside.

"Terry, will you come here and help me?" Tom asked as he stood by the door.

The young ensign scrambled to the door, nearly tripping over his own feet.

"Tuvok, what is his first name?" Tom asked seriously.

"This is Ensign Douglas O'Donnell." Tuvok said and seemed to be surprised

at the irrelevant question.

"Terry, help me get Doug into the Delta Flyer. He's probably scared of being in the dark." Tom said quickly.

Ensign Carlson looked out the door into the complete blackness, then screamed, "Doug! Don't be a baby! Come in here and help me look for food with Tom."

Tom smiled and said, "Doug, if you'll follow my voice, you can come in and we'll see if we can find you something to eat."

A timid pair of eyes could finally be seen from the edge of the door.

"We'll be fine Tuvok. Go find Harry." Tom said as he held out his hand to the timid Ensign.

"It's okay. He's nice." Ensign Carlson said happily.

Slowly, the dark haired Ensign crept into the shuttle.

"It's okay Doug. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm here to keep you safe." Tom said gently.

Doug looked over at Terry with question and received a nod of confirmation.

In the space of a heartbeat, Tom was nearly tackled by the 6'2" security officer.

Tom chuckled at the move and hugged Doug in return.

"Okay Doug, calm down. You're here and you're safe. Do you want to help us look for food? We have a bunch of crates to go through and I'm sure that there are emergency rations in here somewhere." Tom said gently.

"I'm Terry." Ensign Carlson said from beside the pair.

"That's right. He's Terry and I'm Tom." Tom said as he coaxed the large man to release him.

"I need to poop." Doug said seriously.

"Oh. Well, then I'm glad I built a lavatory in the Delta Flyer. Come with me Doug and we'll get you taken care of."

"Can I come too?" Terry asked hopefully.

Tom smiled and said, "Sure. Come on."

* * * * *

Within half an hour the rest of the security team were brought back to the Delta Flyer.

Tom would comfort them, feed them and get them settled.

Terry and Doug were chatting quietly, cuddled together by the door.

Tom had an older security Ensign named Milo snuggled against his left side and a junior grade lieutenant named Karla on his other side.

"Lieutenant Paris. I have located Ensign Kim, but I require assistance in retrieving him." Tuvok said firmly.

"Okay Tuvok. I'll be right there." Tom said and shifted the two security officers off his chest.

"You're leaving us?" Milo asked in a whimper.

"I'm just going outside to find a friend of mine who is lost in the dark. If you were out there, I'd go out to get you." Tom said in a soothing voice.

Milo reluctantly nodded as tears filled his eyes.

"Terry, will you be in charge while I'm gone?" Tom asked seriously.

"Only if Doug can be in charge too. He's my bestest friend." Terry said firmly as he clutched Doug to his side.

"Alright then. Everyone, Terry and Doug are in charge while I'm gone. Listen to what they say." Tom said seriously as he looked around.

"You be back soon?" Karla asked in a small voice.

"I'll be back just as soon as I can Karla, I promise." Tom said, then gave her a kiss on the forehead.

"Lieutenant Paris." Tuvok said in an urging tone.

"Yes sir." Tom said, then internally called to Lieutenant Paris to take over.

{Are you sure?} Lieutenant Paris asked cautiously.

//I really think you're better at dealing with Tuvok. I'll be here when you need

me. Go get Harry and bring him back.// Tom said seriously.

{Okay Tom. I'll take care of it.} Lieutenant Paris said with apprehension, then stepped out of the Delta Flyer and into complete darkness.

* * * * *

"Ensign Kim has lodged himself into a small space between some rocks. Were I to attempt to extract him alone, I would, in all probability, break some of his bones." Tuvok said as he led the way along the rope.

"Is he conscious?" Lieutenant Paris asked cautiously.

"Yes. But his mental faculties seem to be those of a very young child." Tuvok said gravely.

"I'll see what I can do." Lieutenant Paris said as he continued to follow.

"We are nearing the outcropping of rock. Be cautious, the terrain is uneven from this point on." Tuvok warned.

"Where is he?" Lieutenant Paris asked quietly.

"Approximately two meters ahead and half a meter down." Tuvok said seriously.

"Let me see if I can get him to come out on his own." Lieutenant Paris said as he got on his hands and knees and felt his way ahead inch by inch in the blackness.

"Harry?" Lieutenant Paris called gently.

A whimpering cry was his response.

"Harry? How are you doing?" Lieutenant Paris asked quietly.

"Daddy's mad at me." Harry said in a whisper.

Lieutenant Paris thought for a moment, then realized that Tuvok's Vulcan demeanor could be mistaken as anger from a young child's point of view.

"Would you like to make Daddy Tuvok happy with you?" Lieutenant Paris asked as he felt around and finally found Harry's arm.

"Uh huh." Harry said quietly.

Lieutenant Paris quickly felt around to survey the small crevice where Harry had wedged himself to try and get an idea of how to get him out.

"Then you need to come with me now. Daddy Tuvok is unhappy because you're hiding from him. But if you come back to the ship with us he'll be happy again." Lieutenant Paris said gently.

"Really?" Harry asked cautiously.

"Well, Daddy Tuvok doesn't laugh and smile like some people when he's happy. But if he gets to complete his mission, then he's happy and he'll be able to complete his mission if you come with us." Lieutenant Paris said in a slightly urging tone.

There was a long moment of silence as Harry considered the words.

"And if you'll come with me, I'll take you to my ship where there are a bunch of other kids your age. You'll have lots of friends. I know they'll all like you." Lieutenant Paris said with a smile.

"Lots of friends?" Harry asked quietly.

"That's right." Lieutenant Paris said gently.

"Is Tom going to be there?" Harry asked in a trembling voice.

"Do you want him to be?" Lieutenant Paris asked cautiously.

"I was stupid and mean and now he hates me." Harry said then started crying.

"Tom doesn't hate you. He's the one who got all of us to come here to look for you." Lieutenant Paris said gently.

"Really?" Harry asked cautiously.

"I swear. He's really worried about you and misses you a lot." Lieutenant Paris said quietly.

"I'm stuck." Harry said in a small voice.

"Well, if you'll give me your hand, I'll try to unstick you." Lieutenant Paris said with a smile.

After a moment, Lieutenant Paris felt Harry's questing hand.

"I've got you Harry. Take hold of my wrist and I'm going to hold onto yours."

Lieutenant Paris said quietly.

Harry shifted his grip around until he was gripping Lieutenant Paris firmly by the wrist.

"That's good. Now see if you can give me one of your ankles." Lieutenant Paris said as he slid his free hand down Harry's side and tried to catch his ankle.

After a moment, he was finally able to take hold of it.

"Now it's time to unstick you. I need you to lay as flat as you can, then I'm going to pull on your wrist and ankle. Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you, I'm just going to slide you out of there." Lieutenant Paris said in a gentle voice.

"What's your name?" Harry asked curiously.

"My name is Lou. Are you ready?" Lieutenant Paris asked in an encouraging voice.

"Yeah." Harry whispered.

"Okay. Here we go. One, two and threeeeeeeee."

Harry giggled as he felt himself being pulled free of the confined space.

Lieutenant Paris smiled at the happy sound and pulled Harry into a joyful hug.

"Well done Lieutenant Paris." Tuvok said from behind them.

Harry's breath caught in his throat as he froze with fear.

"It's okay Harry. Tuvok isn't mad at you, are you Tuvok?" Lieutenant Paris asked in a leading tone.

"On the contrary. I am pleased to know that you are safe. Now we must return to the shuttle." Tuvok said firmly.

"Come on Harry. Can you walk?" Lieutenant Paris asked as he coaxed Harry to stand.

"Will you carry me?" Harry asked hopefully.

Without giving it a second thought, Lieutenant Paris picked Harry up and

carried him toward the shuttle.

"You're nice." Harry said as he rested his head on Lieutenant Paris' shoulder.

"I'm glad you think so Harry." Lieutenant Paris said gently, trying to keep the strain of carrying a full grown man out of his voice.

"Do you have any kids Lou?" Harry asked quietly.

"No Harry, but if I did, I'd want them to be just like you." Lieutenant Paris said, and gave Harry a hug.

* * * * *

Lieutenant Paris, Tuvok and Harry entered the Delta Flyer to find complete chaos.

The security team were in various stages of undress. Most of the contents of the storage crates were scattered throughout the ship and Karla was laying back, laughing hysterically while Milo was drawing smiley faces on her bare breasts.

"I told them not to." Terry said in a small voice as he held close to Doug who was naked from the waist down.

Lieutenant Paris looked around the ship for a moment, then said, "They're still alive. So you did a good job. Thanks Terry, you too Doug."

Both men moved toward Lieutenant Paris, wanting to hug him.

"Hold on. Guys, this is Harry. Harry, this is Terry and this is Doug." Lieutenant Paris said carefully.

"Lou, why do you look like Tom?" Harry asked curiously, then brought up a hand to feel Lieutenant Paris' face.

"Because we're brothers. Harry, will you sit with Terry and Doug while I take us all back to Voyager?" Lieutenant Paris asked quickly.

Harry looked at the two men, then back at Lieutenant Paris with uncertainty.

"Terry and Doug are my friends. And if you'll let them, they'll be your friends too... won't you guys?" Lieutenant Paris asked with a smile.

Terry and Doug nodded simultaneously.

"Go on Harry. I'll be at the front of the ship if you need me for anything."
Lieutenant Paris said with a gentle smile.

Harry reluctantly released Lieutenant Paris and took a tentative step toward the two men.

"Come on. I want to show you the bathroom." Doug said happily.

Harry looked back at Lieutenant Paris with question.

Lieutenant Paris nodded with a gentle smile, then watched as the three ran to the bathroom.

* * * * *

"I fail to see why you praised Ensign Carlson and Ensign O'Donnell when they failed to maintain order in our absence." Tuvok said seriously as he took the copilot's seat.

"Because if I scolded them, they'd be unhappy right now. This way they're happy and we don't have to worry about them as much." Lieutenant Paris said as he went quickly down his checklist.

"I also do not understand why you claimed to be 'Lou' while you were talking to Ensign Kim." Tuvok said curiously.

"I just thought that because we had a disagreement earlier, he might not trust me as Tom. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time." Lieutenant Paris said frankly, then started the engines.

"Regardless of the logic behind your decisions, the result is favorable. Well done Lieutenant Paris." Tuvok said formally.

"Thank you sir. I'm ready to lift off on your command." Lieutenant Paris said with a smile.

Tuvok looked back through the ship at the chaos his security team were causing, then said, "Proceed."

* * * * *

"Karla, find your shirt. Doug, find your pants. Everyone else, get ready because we're about to leave the Delta Flyer and go to sickbay." Lieutenant Paris said with a smile.

Groans and shaking heads filled the room.

"Your objections do not negate the fact that the doctor will need to see you." Tuvok said firmly.

A sea of tear filled puppy dog eyes was the only response that he got.

Lieutenant Paris was trying to figure out what to do, when Tom sent a wicked little thought his way.

"Why don't we take them to the holodeck?" Lieutenant Paris asked with a smile.

A cheer rose up through the Delta Flyer at the suggestion.

"I'll take the kids to the holodeck and do something fun with them until the Doctor is ready to see them. Then he can transfer his program over to the holodeck and examine them in a less threatening environment." Lieutenant Paris suggested with a smile.

"I do not see the logic in your request, but your instincts have proven to be accurate thus far. Proceed." Tuvok said seriously.

"Okay guys. Daddy Tuvok said yes. So I need for everyone to get cleaned up and ready to go while I get the holodeck set up for us. Doug, will you show everyone where the bathroom is?" Lieutenant Paris said, then hurried off the shuttle.

Tuvok watched as the child-like adults were chattering with excitement and helping each other to get ready to leave.

He quirked an eyebrow at the scene, then turned and left the Delta Flyer.

* * * * *

"Is it Disney Land?" Harry asked hopefully.

"No Harry, but it's someplace almost as good." Lieutenant Paris said as he led the group down the hall.

"Do we get to eat?" Doug asked hopefully.

"Yes we do Doug." Lieutenant Paris said happily.

"Will we get to play games?" Terry asked next.

"Yes Terry. As many as you want." Lieutenant Paris said as the group approached the door.

"Computer, start program." Lieutenant Paris said happily.

"Program initiated. You may enter when ready." The computer's voice said tonelessly.

"Well, here we are." Lieutenant Paris said as he stood aside and allowed his merry band to enter.

* * * * *

"CHUCKY CHEESE!!!" Harry screamed with absolute joy.

The others ran past Lieutenant Paris, squeeling with delight.

Lieutenant Paris smiled at the reaction and could feel Tom laughing in the back of his mind.

"Everyone! Listen up! You see that big mouse over there? He has game tokens for all of you. There is a movie playing over on that big screen and the pizza will be out in just a minute." Lieutenant Paris said happily.

Lou stood just inside the doorway and watched with contentment as the group of child-like adults were exploring all the wonders that Chucky Cheese had to offer.

"Lieutenant, do you think you could explain this?" Captain Janeway asked from the doorway behind him.

"Captain! I just thought that since we have a group of adults who are essentially children, that they should be able to enjoy themselves instead of being miserable while they're waiting to be examined." Lieutenant Paris said, hoping that she wasn't angry.

"It's a unique way of dealing with the situation, but they do seem to be happy." Captain Janeway said as she looked around the room.

"How are Chakotay and Dalby?" Lieutenant Paris asked with concern.

"The doctor says that they're going to be fine. A significant portion of their neural energy was somehow drained. The only treatment is rest and lots of sleep. They should be fit for duty in a few days." Janeway finished quietly.

"I'm glad. I was worried about them." Lieutenant Paris said seriously.

"Captain Janeway. Come here. I want to show you something." Karla called out happily.

"If you're going to run, now's the time." Lieutenant Paris said with a smile.

"Not a chance." Captain Janeway said, then followed Karla to find out what amazing thing she had discovered.

* * * * *

After a time of enjoying the children's company, the Captain excused herself and went about her duties.

Lou watched the children playing and felt a sense of overwhelming peace at the sight.

A new holographic character walked into the room and Lou looked at him carefully, not quite sure what he was up to.

When Lou finally realized who it was, he said , "Doctor, I'm surprised to see you like this."

"The Captain thought I would be less threatening to them dressed like this... though I can't imagine how she came to that conclusion." The Doctor said as he looked with disgust at the rat costume he was wearing.

"It just seems that it would be better to keep them happy than to drag them to sickbay where they'll be bored and miserable." Lieutenant Paris said frankly.

"Given their behavior, I suspect that their conditions are the same as that of Lieutenant Ayala." The Doctor said seriously.

Lieutenant Paris was surprised when the Doctor began to scan him.

"I'm not having a problem Doctor. You need to scan them." Lieutenant Paris said cautiously as he gestured to the room in front of them.

"I'm aware of that, but Commander Tuvok suggested that you might have some sort of immunity to the effect since you were exposed longer than some of his security personnel and have shown no symptoms." The Doctor said frankly.

"If you think it will help." Lieutenant Paris said in resignation and spread his

arms to be fully scanned.

After a moment of looking at the tricorder's readings, the Doctor said, "Interesting."

"What would that be?" Lieutenant Paris asked cautiously.

"Your neural activity seems unusually high. When we have this matter resolved, I'd like for you to stop by sickbay for a neurological scan." The Doctor said firmly.

"Just say when." Lieutenant Paris said seriously as he silently sent out the information to his other selves so they could be thinking about it.

"I suppose I'd better begin." The Doctor said with resignation, then quickly said, "You there, Ensign O'Donnell..."

Chapter 7

"Species 1014." Seven of Nine said as she walked onto the bridge.

"What was that?" Captain Janeway asked as she watched Seven approach.

"I have heard of the difficulties of the away team and suspect that they have encountered species 1014." Seven said in her ever serious tone.

"What can you tell me about them?" Janeway asked curiously.

"The being emits a false dilithium signature to attract warp capable species. When the dilithium protrusion is disturbed, the creature emits a cloaking fog that disrupts communications and is capable of separating drones from the collective. The drones are then incapacitated with a neural toxin which impairs higher brain functions. Once the drones are sufficiently impaired, the creature goes above ground and gathers it's victims and ingests them." Seven said calmly.

"That does sound like what we have here. What can be done to counteract the neural toxin?" Captain Janeway asked immediately.

"Those drones that were able to be retrieved were purged with the neural energy from the collective." Seven said simply.

"Go down to sickbay and work with the Doctor to see if some variation of the treatment can be developed to help our people." Captain Janeway said decisively.

"Captain, you should be aware that the creature is capable of leaving the planet in pursuit of it's prey. It has the physical strength to pose a significant threat to Voyager and is resistant to energy weapons." Seven of Nine said frankly.

"Ensign Baytart, take us back to our original course and heading, warp five." Captain Janeway said immediately.

"Course laid in." Ensign Baytart said quickly.

"Engage." Captain Janeway said firmly.

The ship accelerated and entered warp in just a few seconds.

"Captain, something has just left the planet's atmosphere and is pursuing us at high warp." Ensign McKenzie said from the tactical station.

"Red Alert. Ensign Baytart, maximum warp. Lieutenant Paris to the bridge." Janeway called into the air.

* * * * *

Lieutenant Paris heard the call, and looked around the room anxiously.

"I believe I can look after them." The Doctor said confidently.

"Just to be safe, you should probably call Ensign Wildman since she has more recent experience with children." Lieutenant Paris said as he walked to the door.

"Poopy Head!" Karla screamed and threw a slice of pizza at Milo.

"Yes. Perhaps that would be best." The Doctor said and stopped in the arch as Lieutenant Paris exited.

* * * * *

Lieutenant Paris stepped on the bridge in time to hear Ensign McKenzie say, "It's gaining on us."

A bat-like creature with a crystalline protrusion on its head was filling the screen.

"Fire." Janeway said firmly.

The sound of phasers firing filled the room, then everyone watched the screen as the phasers found their target.

"The phasers aren't having any effect." Crewman Fitzpatrick said from the operations station.

"What kind of propulsion is it using?" Flyboy asked as he moved to Ensign Baytart's side and waited for him to turn over the helm.

"It seems to be generating a graviton wave." Crewman Fitzpatrick said in concentration.

"Thought so." Flyboy said as he took his seat.

"It's still gaining on us." Ensign McKenzie said with a tone of desperation.

"I've got it. Captain, you'd better tell everyone to hang on." Flyboy said as he worked the controls.

"All hands..." The Captain began to say, then grabbed onto her command chair for dear life.

Tom brought them out of warp for a millisecond and changed the attitude of the ship so the nose was pointing straight down compared to their previous flight path, then kicked it into maximum warp.

Everyone clutched the nearest stationary object when the gravity seemed to become nonexistent for an instant, then just as suddenly pulled at three to four times normal gravity.

The inertial dampers finally caught up to what Flyboy was doing and the gravity returned to normal.

After a moment to get her breath back, the captain continued, "...prepare for sudden acceleration."

"The creature is turning in a slow arch to pursue. We're gaining distance." Ensign McKenzie said in wonder.

"The problem with a graviton wave is that it isn't very maneuverable on the Z axis. As long as I change direction at a sharp right angle when it lines up on our flight plane, I should be able to get us away from it." Flyboy said as he watched the creature carefully.

"I see..." Janeway began to say.

"Hold on." Flyboy said, then turned the ship suddenly upward.

The sound of groaning metal could be heard as he repeated the maneuver.

"The stress on the hull..." Crewman Fitzpatrick began to say.

"...won't matter if that thing catches us." Flyboy interrupted, then turned the ship sharply again.

"We're outrunning it." Ensign McKenzie said slowly.

"We're not out of it yet." Flyboy said as he turned the ship into a tight clockwise spiral, then started programming a complicated series of maneuvers.

Janeway watched the spinning view screen in front of her for a moment, then turned away as she felt herself getting queasy.

"This should do it." Flyboy said, then pressed the button on the helm to activate the sequence he had programmed.

The ship would stop, change attitude, burst into full speed, then repeat the process.

Each short burst took them in a completely different direction and the changes were coming so quickly that no one could keep up with which way they were going.

"The creature has disengaged. It's returning to the planet." Ensign McKenzie said with amazement.

"Very good. Lieutenant Paris. Please put us back on course." The Captain said slowly.

Lieutenant Paris was surprised to find himself in control, then quickly responded, "Aye Captain."

"Ensign Baytart, take the helm when Lieutenant Paris is finished." Captain Janeway said as she tried to force herself to let go of the arms of her command chair.

Lieutenant Paris set the ship back to its normal course and speed, then relinquished control to Ensign Baytart.

"Tom, that was some outrageous piloting." Captain Janeway said as she was finally able to stand.

"Thank you Captain." Lieutenant Paris said calmly.

She shook her head for an instant, then said, "I suppose you can take that as a compliment if you like."

Lieutenant Paris considered the statement for a moment, then smiled when he determined that she was probably making a joke.

"Seven of Nine has some insights into the condition of the away team. If you'll go to sickbay, they might be able to put together why you weren't effected by the neural toxin and use that information to develop a treatment."

Captain Janeway said seriously.

"Yes Captain." Lieutenant Paris said formally.

Janeway looked at Lieutenant Paris with an appraising eye for a moment, then said, "Dismissed."

Lieutenant Paris walked briskly off the bridge.

* * * * *

"Doctor, the Captain sent me down here to help you." Tom said as he entered the Sickbay.

Seven of Nine was walking from one bed to the next, checking the readings of each patient.

"I assume that you were piloting just now." the Doctor said as he picked up medical instruments that were scattered around the floor.

"Yes Doctor." Tom said shyly.

"You being off the helm is probably the biggest help you could give me at the moment, but get on a biobed and let me check out a few things." the Doctor said seriously.

Tom climbed on the nearest unoccupied biobed and waited as the Doctor programmed it for the readings he wanted.

"I thought your higher level of neural activity might have been the key, but Commander Tuvok's level of neural activity is higher than yours and he was effected." The Doctor said conversationally as he looked at the readings.

"Is he alright?" Tom asked with concern.

"He is at the emotional level of an eight to ten year old Vulcan child... But considering Vulcan emotional development, it's hardly noticeable." the Doctor said frankly.

Tom thought about the statement and finally nodded.

"Ah ha!" the Doctor said triumphantly.

"Does that mean you found something?" Tom asked with surprise.

"Do you think I walk around Sickbay all day saying 'Ah ha'?" the Doctor

asked indignantly.

"This line of questioning serves no purpose. Have you developed a cause for Lieutenant Paris' immunity to the neural toxin?" Seven asked in a monotone as she approached.

"Not an immunity, but a preventative condition. The airborne neural toxin is most easily absorbed through the mucous membranes. Both Commander Chakotay and Lieutenant Paris have shown signs of recent trauma to their mucous membranes consistent with breathing scalding hot air, which had the effect of preventing absorption of the toxin. Perhaps you could tell me Mr. Paris, what were you and the Commander doing to cause this condition?" The Doctor asked curiously.

"Breathing scalding hot air." Tom said frankly.

The Doctor stared at him stupidly for a moment, until Seven of Nine said, "I fail to see how this is of any benefit in restoring your patients to full health."

The Doctor shook himself out of his stupor, then said, "It gives me the transmission vector, and in this case that will allow me to formulate an effective treatment. Creating an antitoxin wasn't the challenge, it was finding the transmission vector so I could develop the antitoxin to be administered to the effected areas of the brain."

"So that means you found a cure?" Tom asked hopefully.

"In a manner of speaking. Now that I know how the antitoxin will need to be administered, I can develop it to be carried in an airborne form. Once inhaled, it should slowly return the effected individual to their former state." the Doctor said seriously.

"What about Chakotay and Crewman Dalby? Will they be alright?" Tom asked with concern as he looked at them asleep on their beds.

"Yes. What they need most now is rest. But I will administer treatment to them and everyone who went to the surface to eliminate all traces of the toxin." the Doctor said seriously.

Tom looked over at a movement and saw Geron sitting on Ayala's bed, holding his hand and talking to him gently. Ayala seemed to be half asleep and completely comfortable.

"Wildman to Paris." Sounded on Tom's comm badge.

Tom keyed the communicator and said, "Paris here."

"Tom would you come to Holodeck two... Right away, please." Samantha asked desperately and she sounded to be nearly in tears.

"My fancy flying must have scared the kids to death. I've got to go Doc. Just call me if there's anything I can do." Tom said as he hurried toward the door.

"Just keep those people in the holodeck until I've developed the treatment. When it's ready, I'll introduce it into the air supply." The Doctor said seriously.

"You got it Doc." Tom said, then hurried out of the room.

* * * * *

As Tom walked into the holodeck, he saw Karla Jarvis crying her heart out as Ensign Wildman tried to comfort her.

{Lou, you're up.} Tom said internally.

//You're kidding! I don't have any experience with something like this!// Lou responded helplessly.

{There's only one cure for inexperience Lieutenant. Now get in there and deal with it... I'll talk you through it.} Tom finished in an encouraging tone.

//I'm going to need a day off after this.// Lou said frankly.

{I have a feeling that we all will.} Tom said, then receded into the background.

* * * * *

"Did I scare the kids with my flying?" Lou asked cautiously.

"No. They thought it was just part of the Chucky Cheese experience. They all loved it." Samantha said as she held Karla close to her chest.

"Then what's wrong?" Lieutenant Paris asked with concern.

"Milo has been terrorizing her. I've tried to talk to him, but... I don't know why he's acting this way." Samantha said helplessly.

"I'll talk to him." Lieutenant Paris said seriously, then looked around the room to find Milo's head barely peaking out of a pit of balls.

As Lieutenant Paris approached, Milo submerged himself the rest of the way in the ball pit.

"Milo, please come out here and talk to me." Lieutenant Paris said, trying to keep his voice gentle.

Slowly, Milo's head emerged to reveal the tears streaking down his cheeks.

"Will you tell me why you upset Karla?" Lieutenant Paris asked quietly.

"I... I don't know." Milo said then his lower lip began to tremble.

"Why don't you tell me what happened?" Lou asked as he held out his hand to encourage Milo to climb out of the pit.

"I was... she was talking to Harry and... and... I wanted her to talk to me." Milo finished in a whisper.

"What did you do?" Lou asked quietly.

"I... pulled her hair and made fun of her boobies." Milo said as he looked at the floor.

Tom whispered to the back of Lou's mind to explain what was happening.

"Come here Milo." Lou said gently and held out his arms to invite Milo into a hug.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to make her cry." Milo said as he cried into Lou's shoulder.

"I know Milo. Maybe if I talk to Karla for a minute to explain that you didn't really mean to make her mad, she'll forgive you and talk to you again." Lou said soothingly.

"Really?" Milo asked hopefully.

"I can't be sure it will work, but I can try." Lou said as he held Milo in a firm hug.

"Thanks Lou. Harry said you're name is Lou, you're Tom's brother." Milo said seriously.

"That's right Milo. Now if you'll stay here for just a minute, I'm going to talk to Karla and see if I can get this all straightened out for you."

Milo nodded, then reluctantly pulled away from Lou's chest.

* * * * *

"Hi Karla, how are you doing?" Lou asked with concern as he sat at her side.

"Milo hates me." Karla said as she clutched to Samantha and started crying again.

"He doesn't hate you Karla. He's afraid that you hate him." Lou said quietly.

"I do!" Karla said firmly.

"Karla, you're a very beautiful and special girl. Milo sees that and wants you to notice him." Lou said gently.

"I hate him."

Lou shook his head and looked at Samantha helplessly.

"Why is he acting this way Tom?" Samantha asked as she held Karla close.

"Because he likes Karla." Lou said frankly.

"But that doesn't make any sense." Samantha said as she combed her fingers through Karla's hair.

"Little boys have been terrorizing little girls for as long as there have been boys and girls. Milo want's Karla's attention and doesn't know another way to get it." Lou said, hoping he was understanding what Tom told him correctly.

Samantha got a distant look, then said, "I guess you're right. I didn't even think it could be something like that."

"Now if we can just get Karla to understand, maybe they can be friends again." Lou said quietly.

"Give me a minute alone with her. I'll see what I can do." Samantha said gently.

"Okay. I'm going to get back to Milo now." Lou said, then looked over and saw Milo's fearful expression.

* * * * *

"Samantha is going to talk to Karla and try to fix things with her." Lou said as he carefully pulled Milo into a hug.

"Thanks Lou. I'm sorry I made her cry." Milo said, on the verge of tears again.

"I tell you what Milo. Next time she ignores you and you want to get her attention, come over and tell me. We can work together to find a way to get her to notice you that will make her happy instead." Lou said with an encouraging smile.

"Okay. I will. I promise." Milo said seriously.

Lou felt Milo stiffen in his arms and turned to see what was happening.

Karla walked up to Milo with a determined look in her eyes.

"Samantha says that you like me. Do you?" Karla demanded.

"Uh huh." Milo said timidly.

Karla grabbed Milo away from Lou and pulled him into a tight hug.

Lou stepped away and watched with a fond smile.

"If you pull my hair or make fun of my boobies again I'm going to kick you in the pee-pee and make you cry." Karla said seriously.

"Okay." Milo said quietly.

With that declaration out of the way, Karla moved in to give Milo a firm kiss.

"Ah, young love." Samantha said as she walked to Lou's side.

"I just hope they don't have a problem with this after the Doctor cures them." Lou said frankly.

"Has he figured it out?" Samantha asked hopefully.

"I think so. He just has to cook up the cure. It shouldn't be too long." Lou said then noticed Harry watching him timidly.

"I'm glad. Even though they're kind of sweet like this, I'll be glad when they're better." Samantha said as she watched Milo and Karla still kissing.

"I agree. I think Harry needs me, will you make sure those two don't go past second base?" Lou asked with a gentle smile.

"Don't worry about it Tom. Now that I know what's going on with them, I think I can handle it." Samantha said with assurance.

* * * * *

"Hey Harry, what's going on?" Lou asked casually.

"Lou?" Harry asked cautiously.

"That's right."

"Where's Tom?" Harry asked slowly.

"Come over and sit down with me and I'll tell you." Lou said and indicated the row of movie seats in front of the big screen.

Harry nodded, then led the way.

Once they were both settled, Lou quietly said, "I'm going to tell you something, but this is just between you and me because we're friends. Okay?"

Harry nodded vigorously.

"You asked where Tom is. The truth is that he's inside me." Lou said seriously.

"Really? How did he get in there?" Harry asked with wide eyes.

Lou smiled at the question and said, "We're both part of me. I'm the guy who's always serious while he's working on the bridge. Tom is the guy who likes to play games with you and have fun."

"Can I talk to Tom?" Harry asked cautiously.

"Sure." Lou said then closed his eyes.

A moment later, Tom opened his eyes and smiled at Harry.

"How's it going Har?" Tom asked with a big smile.

"Tom! It's really you." Harry said in wonder.

"It sure is. Do you think Captain Proton would leave Buster Kincaid behind?" Tom asked as he put an arm around Harry's shoulders.

"How did you? Where did Lou go?" Harry asked quickly, then pulled Tom aside to look behind him.

Tom chuckled at the move, then said, "Har, please don't worry about it. If you ever want to talk to Lou, all you have to do is ask."

"Okay... But if I ask, does that mean you'll go away again?" Harry asked cautiously.

"Only until you want me to come back." Tom said gently.

"I don't want you to go away. You're my bestest friend ever and I don't want you to ever go away again." Harry said firmly.

"Har. I'm here, don't worry about it." Tom said gently as he held Harry with one arm.

Both of them looked up at the screen in front of them when some very spirited music started playing.

"What's this?" Harry asked with excitement at the vividly colored picture before him.

"It's a cartoon, I'm not sure if I've seen this one before. Let's watch it." Tom said happily.

Harry snuggled down in his seat a little so he could lean over and rest his head on Tom's shoulder.

On impulse, Tom leaned over and kissed Harry on the top of the head.

* * * * *

Before the cartoon was over, Milo, Karla, Terry and Doug had all joined Tom and Harry in front of the cartoons.

"Lieutenant Paris?" The Doctor asked quietly from behind him.

Tom looked over his shoulder and said, "What's up Doc?"

"I've developed the antitoxin and tested it on Lieutenant Ayala. He's resting comfortably and all signs of the toxin are being purged from his body." The Doctor said seriously.

"So when do you want to take care of these guys?" Tom asked as he glanced

up and down the row to see all of them paying their full attention to the cartoons on the big screen.

"In just a few minutes. I'm going to introduce the anti-toxin into the air supply of the holodeck and they should fall asleep within the next fifteen to twenty minutes." The Doctor said seriously.

"How long will they sleep?" Tom asked cautiously.

"I estimate that the anti-toxin will complete it's work in three to four hours, then they will fall into natural sleep and wake when they are rested." The Doctor said in a considering voice.

"Thanks for telling me Doc. Do you want me to stay here?" Tom asked curiously.

"There is no medical reason that you need to stay, but..." The Doctor said as he looked up and down the row.

"I'll stay. Thanks again Doc." Tom said with a gentle smile, then turned his attention back to the cartoon on the screen.

The Doctor stopped for a moment and smiled at the sight of Tom Paris with all the 'children' then went about his duties.

* * * * *

"I'm getting sleepy." Milo said as he rubbed his eyes.

"Well then, what would you guys think about sleeping here tonight?" Tom asked with a smile.

"Sleep? At Chucky Cheese?" Harry asked in wonder.

"That's right Har. Unless anyone can think of a better place to sleep?" Tom asked playfully, fairly sure that no one would be able to think of anything better.

"Give me just a minute to get our sleeping bags." Tom said as he got up from his place in the middle of the row of seats.

"Are you going to sleep here with us?" Terry asked hopefully.

"That's right." Tom said as he walked to the door.

Harry nodded, then turned his full attention to the cartoon.

Tom quickly keyed in his instructions, then walked back over to the 'kids' and said, "Here we are."

They turned around and looked with wide eyes at the row of sleeping bags where the tables had been just a moment before.

"Come on Milo. Pick out which one you want." Tom said with a smile.

"I want the one next to Karla's." Milo said firmly.

"Okay. How about this? Milo and Karla here. Next will be me and Harry. Then Terry and Doug." Tom said as he pointed.

"Do we have to go to bed right now?" Karla whined.

"No Karla, I'm going to lay down, but you guys don't have to." Tom said as he made a show of getting down on the floor and crawling into his sleeping bag.

As expected, within a minute, all the 'kids' had gotten into their sleeping bags and were happily chattering away.

"Tom?" Harry asked quietly.

"Yeah Har?" Tom responded.

"Are you mad at me because I was mean to you before?" Harry asked hesitantly.

"No Har. Sometimes friends fight, even bestest friends." Tom said peacefully.

"Thanks. You really are my bestest friend..." Harry trailed off and was soon fast asleep.

"You're mine too Har. I'm glad you reminded me." Tom said gently.

* * * * *

After all the kids were asleep, Tom got up and walked to the arch.

After a few minutes of searching through the holoprogram database, he finally found what he was looking for and pressed in his selection.

A message appeared on the small screen which said 'Ready'.

"Computer: Activate Supplemental Counseling Holographic program." Tom said quietly.

A beautiful woman with long dark brown hair appeared wearing a long turquoise dress.

"You're a counselor?" Tom asked incredulously.

"No. I am a tool to be used by an experienced counselor to help patients who require an alternative to traditional counseling sessions." She said seriously.

"Oh, does that mean that you can't help me sort some stuff out?" Tom asked quietly.

"No. It means that this program is not intended to take the place of a qualified counselor, it is merely a tool." She said frankly.

"Then you *can* help me?" Tom asked even more quietly.

She appeared to be thinking about the question, then she said, "I will do as much as I can within the boundaries of my program."

Tom nodded at the arrangement, then thought to ask, "Do you have a name or am I just supposed to call you Counselor?"

"You may call me Deanna if you like, or Counselor Troi if a formal setting makes you more comfortable." She said, then noticed that they were standing in a Chucky Cheese restaurant.

"You can call me Tom. And this is about as formal as I want to get." Tom said with a smirk, then led her over to the movie seats.

"Is this part of the reason you needed to talk to me?" She asked as she looked at the row of people sleeping peacefully.

"No. This situation seems to be just about worked out. What I'm trying to figure out is, how important is it to a person to be seen as 'normal' by the people around him?" Tom asked curiously.

"In what way?" Deanna asked curiously.

"I have a... condition, let's call it, that is unusual. I guess all the people that I really care about know and understand, but I'm not sure how the people I work with every day would react if they knew this about me. I'm just trying

to figure out if it's worth the trouble of keeping it hidden or should I just let everyone know the truth and think what they want to think." Tom said seriously.

Deanna considered for a moment, then said, "There is a great deal of research on the subject that gives a convincing argument to both sides of the question. I suppose what it boils down to is what do you want?"

Tom nodded in thought, then said, "Yeah. I should have known it would come down to something like that."

"It sounds like you're standing on the brink of a life altering decision. I think the best advice I could give you is to talk to a qualified counselor about this and take the time to consider your decision carefully." Deanna said gently.

"Well, my counselor is in sickbay right now and will probably be there for another day or two. But I'm not planning on making any announcements before he's released. I just thought that while I had the time I'd like to talk to someone about this to get started on it." Tom said in thought.

"That sounds like a good idea. If you would like to tell me about your condition, I may be able to offer some insights into your decision. When you terminate my program, you have the option of saving or deleting my memory about this session." Deanna said frankly.

"Thank you Deanna. I think it might help." Tom said slowly.

Deanna waited patiently as Tom thought about how to phrase his problem.

"All my life I've had these defenses. A Bajoran friend of mine calls them masks. Depending on the situation, I put on the mask that can handle it best." Tom said in concentration.

"That sounds natural to me." Deanna said consideringly.

"Yeah. But a few weeks ago, all the masks came to life. Each one has it's own personality, memory, sense of humor... friendships." Tom said carefully, watching for her reaction.

"Have you spoken to your counselor about this?" Deanna asked seriously.

"Yes. He said that all my personalities are healthy, well adjusted and perfectly sane." Tom said frankly.

"I see. Do you think I could speak to one of the alternate personalities so I could verify that he really is self aware?" Deanna asked cautiously.

"Well, I'm one of them." Tom said with a helpless look at her.

Deanna looked at him with surprise for a moment, then considered what this might mean.

"I'll let you speak with Tommy. Maybe he can explain things a little better. He's better with feelings." Tom said seriously.

"I'll speak to you again in a few minutes." Deanna said gently, then watched carefully as Tom's introspective expression transformed to one of curiosity.

"Hi. Um, I wasn't really paying attention but Tom says that you're a counseling program." Tommy said as he looked around.

"That's right. I'm Deanna." she said as she watched Tommy carefully.

"It's nice to meet you. Did you want to know something?" Tommy asked with an honest smile.

"I just wanted to meet another of the personalities. Tom is considering whether or not he should tell other people about your condition." Deanna said frankly.

"Well, I'd rather not. I don't like being around people and if they knew about me... It would just be awkward." Tommy said frankly.

"I'm sure it would at first, but it would pass as the novelty wore off." Deanna said gently.

"Yeah. Probably. As long as I had Tay and Tem to help me through it, I think I'd be okay." Tommy said carefully.

"Tay and Tem? Are those other personalities?" Deanna asked cautiously.

Tommy giggled and said, "No. They're my friends. Tay is Commander Chakotay and Tem is Crewman Geronimo. They're both really good people and as long as they stood by me, I think I could handle it if everyone found out that I'm... like this."

"I see. Are Tay and Tem Tom's friends too?" Deanna asked carefully.

"Yeah, at least Tay is. I think Tem might be too if they got to know each

other." Tommy said thoughtfully.

"Does Tom also have his own friends?" Deanna asked, seeming to be fascinated.

"Yeah, Harry and B'Elana." Tommy said with a smile.

"What about your other... selves?" Deanna asked cautiously.

"Well, Lou hasn't really been trying to make friends until the last day or two, but I think you could count all those people sleeping over there as his friends." Tommy said as he smiled at the row of sleeping people.

"Quite frankly, I don't know what to tell you. As complicated as this all seems to me, you seem to be at peace with it." Deanna said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. We all are. Tom just doesn't like the idea of living a lie and hiding who he really is." Tommy said simply.

"I can understand his feelings on the matter, and at the same time, I can understand why you would be reluctant to open yourself to public scrutiny." Deanna said seriously.

"Yeah. That's exactly it." Tommy said with a nod.

After a moment of silence between them, Deanna quietly asked, "Was there anything else you wanted to discuss?"

Tommy thought for a moment, then said, "Hold on."

Deanna watched as the happy expression faded from Tommy's face and was replaced by a less emotional one.

"Hello Counselor Troi, I'm Lieutenant Paris, the guys call me Lou." Lieutenant Paris said carefully.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Lou. Are you aware of what Tom and Tommy have said?" Deanna asked curiously.

"Yes, at least since you started talking to Tommy. Tom asked me to stay alert in case you wanted to talk to me too." Lou said honestly.

"Then what do you think about revealing your condition to others?" Deanna asked casually.

Lou looked over at his 'kids' all asleep, then said, "The people who matter the most to me like me just the way I am. So as long as it doesn't disqualify me from Starfleet service, I don't mind either way."

"But if you had to choose, would you choose to reveal your secret or keep it?" Deanna asked curiously.

"I suppose I would choose to keep it, but that's only because if you keep a secret, you still have the option of revealing it later. If you start off by revealing it, there's no taking it back." Lou said carefully.

"I suppose that's a good way of looking at it." Deanna said consideringly.

After a moment, Lou said, "Tom thinks so too."

"It doesn't appear that you need my help. You seem to be perfectly capable of talking this out amongst yourselves." Deanna said frankly.

"Maybe. But it's good to have someone else to talk to about this. If nothing else, it helps us to put our feelings into words." Lou said carefully.

"Sometimes that's the best service that a counselor can give." Deanna said with a smile.

Lou got a look of distraction, then said, "Flyboy wants to talk to you."

"Oh, yes." Deanna said, then waited for the next personality to appear.

"Counselor, I just have one question, then I'm outta here." Flyboy said seriously.

"I'll answer it if I can." Deanna said, surprised by Flyboy's blunt tone.

"Do you think there's any possibility that a lovely hologram like yourself and an alternate personality like me could go out on a holographic date sometime?" Flyboy asked frankly.

"No. I am a Supplemental Counseling Holographic program. I am not programmed for the type of interpersonal relationship that you're proposing." Deanna said firmly.

"But what if you were... I mean, I happen to know a pretty good holoprogrammer who could probably make that little 'morality block' of yours go away. You could be free to develop whatever type of relationship

you wanted. I just want to know if you could, would you go on a date with me?" Flyboy asked seriously.

"Do you have a name like the others?" Deanna asked quietly.

"You're the first person who ever asked. My name is Gene." Flyboy said with a gentle smile.

"Gene. My personality template is based on an actual person, Lieutenant Commander Deanna Troi. At the time this program was created, she was serving as counselor on the USS Enterprise. Regardless of what feelings I might or might not develop if the blocking routine were removed, I would not engage in any type of romantic relationship out of respect for her. I know enough about how she thinks and feels to know that she would feel violated if she found out that her image was altered to make it possible for us to have a relationship." Deanna said firmly.

Flyboy let out a sigh of regret, then said, "I guess I can understand that. You're just the first woman, holographic or otherwise that I've met that I've felt like I could connect with. I'm sorry if I was too forward, but I get bored easily and wanted to know upfront if I had a chance."

Deanna smiled and said, "I will take it as a sincere compliment and thank you for being honest. And from a counseling perspective, I think it was a healthy expression of your desires."

"Oh well. It was worth a shot. Would it be okay if I come back here and talk to you now and then?" Flyboy asked hopefully.

Deanna considered for a moment, then said, "I think I might enjoy a visit from time to time."

Flyboy closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, he smiled and said, "I've made the guys promise that they won't delete your memory when they shut off your program. That way we can pick up where we left off the next time we meet."

Deanna chuckled and said, "I can tell that you aren't one to take 'no' for an answer."

"I can accept 'no' as an answer, but I won't accept 'never'." Flyboy said frankly.

"Then I suppose I should expect to be asked again." Deanna said carefully.

"Once. Each time we meet, I'll only ask once. If you say 'no' I'll respect your answer and let it go until next time." Flyboy said gently.

"Thank you. I don't think the day will ever come that I will answer 'yes', but it really means something to me that someone cares enough to ask." Deanna said gently.

"Just remember Deanna, you're not her. You're you." Flyboy said quietly.

Deanna looked him in the eyes and hesitantly nodded.

"Computer: Deactivate Supplemental Counseling Holographic program... save memory."

Chapter 8

Tommy awoke at the sound of movement and turned in time to see Karla open her eyes.

She looked down at Milo who was snuggled to her side, then over at Tommy with confusion.

Tommy considered for a moment, then asked Tom if he wanted to take over.

{They're Lou's kids. He'll want to be the one to take care of them.} Tom answered simply.

Tommy was confused by the response, but called Lou to the forefront to talk to Karla.

"How much do you remember Karla?" Lou asked gently.

Karla had a look of confusion, then said, "I think I remember everything, but somehow it feels like it was a dream."

Lou smiled and said, "That's probably a good thing. This way you have the choice of looking back on it as a dream that never really happened so you can get on with your normal life."

Karla thought about it for a moment, then slowly shook her head.

"What's wrong?" Lou asked with concern.

"I was raised by my mother. I've never even met my father and all my life I've wondered what it would be like to have one. Yesterday I felt like I was your daughter. You told me that I was beautiful and special and you held me and loved me in a way that I've never felt before. I'm not going to try to forget yesterday like a strange dream. I'm going to try to remember it and hold on to it as the day that I spent with my father." Karla said with tear filled eyes.

"I can't help but think of all of you as my kids. So in my heart, you'll always be my beautiful, special daughter. If you ever need me, I'll always be there for you." Lou said quietly.

"Thanks Lou... Tom... Why did Harry tell everyone that your name was Lou?" Karla asked in confusion.

"It's a long story and it doesn't matter right now." Lou said with a gentle smile.

Milo's eyes snapped open and he looked around with question.

"Good morning Milo." Lou said gently.

After a moment, Milo realized that his head was resting on Karla's breast and he jerked away suddenly.

Lou smiled at his reaction as Karla watched him carefully.

"Relax Milo. Everything is fine. Karla understands that you weren't yourself yesterday." Lou said gently at his confused state.

Milo thought about the statement, then distantly said, "But I was myself. I was more myself than I've ever been."

After another moment of thought, Milo sat up and turned to look Karla in the eyes.

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings yesterday. Lou was right, I was trying to get your attention. I liked you then and... I like you now. I've liked you since the first time we met." Milo finished shyly.

Karla seemed amazed by the statement, then finally said, "I always liked you too. I just thought... you weren't interested."

Milo shook his head and said, "I never know what to say or how to act with women. I always end up being such a goon."

Lou smiled at the statement and Milo noticed.

"Thanks for helping me Lou. What you did... thanks." Milo finished shyly and looked down.

"Milo." Lou said gently to get him to look up again.

After a moment, Milo reluctantly looked at him.

"Just because we're all adults now doesn't mean that I've stopped caring about you. I'm here whenever you need me. If you're having trouble just come to me and we'll work it out together." Lou said seriously.

Milo shyly smiled and said, "Thanks Lou. I'll remember that."

Karla placed her hand on Milo's shoulder to get his attention and said, "Let's get out of here. I think we have some things to talk about."

Milo looked surprised, then the look slowly changed to happiness.

"Do you remember the ground rules?" Karla asked seriously.

Milo thought for a moment, then slowly shook his head.

"If you pull my hair or make fun of my breasts, I'm going to kick you in the pee-pee and make you cry." Karla said as she tried to restrain her smile.

Milo nodded and said, "I'll keep that in mind."

"You two need to stop by sickbay so the Doctor can check you out." Lou said with a fond smile at the pair.

"Whatever you say dad." Karla said with a wink.

"We will Lou. Thanks for everything." Milo said as he straightened out his uniform, then waited for Karla to be ready to go.

* * * * *

After a while of laying quietly, drifting in and out of sleep, Lou heard movement from the other side of Harry.

Lou got out of his sleeping bag and moved around Harry to make sure everything was okay.

Terry had just opened his eyes and seemed to be trying to put together the events of the past day.

"Good morning Terry. How are you feeling?" Lou asked quietly.

"I had the strangest dream... or was it a dream?" Terry asked in confusion.

"If you dreamed that you were a kid again, then no, it wasn't. But you're fine now." Lou said gently.

Terry looked down at Doug with surprise, just realizing that he had awoken snuggled up against him.

"Don't worry about Doug. I can't imagine that he would be upset by anything that happened yesterday. Anyone would be happy to be called your best friend." Lou said with a contented smile.

"Bestest." Doug whispered as he opened his eyes.

"Good morning Doug." Lou said happily.

"Good morning." Doug said slowly, then noticed that Terry was looking at him with uncertainty.

Doug gave Terry a small smile, then said, "I don't kid about friendship Terry. Bestest friends, forever."

Terry smiled with relief at the statement.

"That's great guys. You two need to go to sickbay to get checked out now." Lou said happily.

"One thing first." Doug said as he sat up to face Lou.

"I didn't have a very good childhood. I was very unhappy and very alone. For a few hours yesterday I had the childhood that I always wanted and it's thanks to you." Doug said seriously.

"If you ever need me, I'll always be there for you. In my heart you'll always be my kids." Lou said seriously.

"I'll remember that Tom. Come on Terry, I'll race you to the Sickbay." Doug said with a smile as he climbed out of his sleeping bag.

Terry chuckled and hurried to get out of his sleeping bag and follow.

Lou smiled at the pair, then went back to his own sleeping bag to wait for Harry to wake up.

* * * * *

"Tom?" Harry asked in a quiet voice.

Tom opened his eyes, surprised that Lou hadn't stepped to the front.

"Tom?" Harry asked again.

"Yeah Har. It's me." Tom said as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"I had the strangest dream. I was a kid again and you were... Lou?" Harry said with confusion.

Tom chuckled and said, "Don't worry about it now. Let's go get you checked

out so we can get back to work."

Harry looked around the room in confusion, then slowly got out of his sleeping bag.

It took a few minutes to get themselves in order, but finally the pair were ready to get back to business as usual.

After one wistful look back at the holodeck, Tom reluctantly said, "Computer: End program."

* * * * *

"Good morning Doctor. How are you doing today?" Tom asked in an unusually good mood as he walked into Sickbay with Harry at his side.

"Very well Lieutenant Paris. In fact, I would have to say that the treatment has been a complete success." The Doctor said happily.

"I'm glad to hear that. Harry's here to be checked out. Where do you want him?" Tom asked casually.

"Right over here. I will need to do an extensive scan so this will take a few minutes." The Doctor said as he indicated the biobed he wanted to use.

Tom noticed that Gerron and Ayala were both awake and quietly said, "Har, while you're doing that I'm going to check on these guys. Yell if you need me."

"Okay Tom, I will." Harry said, then laid back on the biobed.

* * * * *

"Good morning gentlemen. How are you today?" Tom asked curiously as he approached.

"Greg is going to be fine. He's just a little sore from the broken ribs." Gerron said quietly.

"I'm glad you're feeling better." Tom said honestly.

"Tem tells me that you've got a thing... like you change." Lieutenant Ayala said with difficulty.

"That's right. Depending on the situation that I'm in, I'll switch over to

whoever can deal with it best." Tom said carefully.

Lieutenant Ayala looked at Tom cautiously, then said, "I've learned that Tem can see things in people that I can't, so I'll trust him about this. But I do have my doubts."

"Thanks for being honest with me. I really didn't mean for any of this to happen, but when you brought Gerron into Sickbay the other day, I didn't really know how to help him deal with what was happening. I turned control over to Tommy, he's more emotional and understanding than I am." Tom said seriously.

"Are you sure you don't need to be in a crazy house or on some heavy drugs or something?" Lieutenant Ayala asked cautiously.

Tom smiled at the question and said, "Chakotay doesn't think so. He's helping me to make sense of all this."

Ayala nodded, then looked up at Tem who had been listening to everything.

"Do you think Tommy could come out and meet Greg? I think it's time." Gerron asked quietly.

"Sure." Tom said peacefully, then closed his eyes to make the transition easier for Tommy.

When Tommy's eyes opened, Gerron and Ayala both noticed how they lit up with happiness.

"Hey guys. How are you doing?" Tommy asked gently.

"Gregor has had his injuries healed and is waiting for the Doctor to release him." Gerron said quietly.

"I was sure that you were going to be fine with Tem watching out for you." Tommy said with a cheerful smile.

Ayala looked at Gerron with question and received a nod that he had given Tommy permission to use his name.

Tommy looked carefully at the pair and noticed something in the way that Gerron was holding Ayala's hand.

"You're not lovers." Tommy said cautiously.

"What?" Ayala asked in surprise.

"Seeing how much you care for each other, I jumped to the conclusion that you two are lovers but... now I can see it... you're not." Tommy said carefully.

"No Tommy. We're family." Tem said quietly.

Tommy looked at the pair, but couldn't identify the connection.

"Tommy?" Ayala asked cautiously.

After a nod from Tommy that it was okay to use his name, Ayala continued, "Tem joined the Maquis to defend his home and way of life. He was still pretty young when he left his family and he misses them desperately. I have a family back in the Alpha quadrant and I miss my boys so bad it hurts. So I'm a father without my sons and Tem is a son who misses his father. We decided that we would be family for each other to make it hurt a little bit less."

Tommy nodded, then said, "I'm glad you did. All of us need to find our peace however we can out here."

"Tommy?" Sounded from the next bed.

Tommy turned quickly to find Chakotay looking at him.

"How are you doing Tay?" Tommy asked as he hurried to Chakotay's side.

"I'm not sure. We were about to start gathering the dilithium and then... I'm here." Chakotay said in confusion.

"Don't worry about it now Tay. Everything is fine. Everyone is safe and all you have to worry about right now is getting enough rest." Tommy said quietly.

"Hey Cap. How are you feeling?" Ayala asked from the next bed.

"Tired." Chakotay answered honestly.

"Don't worry about it. Tem filled me in on everything the Doctor's been doing and you're going to be fine. You just need to relax and recharge." Ayala said simply.

"How about you?" Chakotay asked with concern.

"Me? I'm just fine. Everything's been healed and as soon as the Doc releases

me, I'm going back to my cabin to enjoy a little mini vacation." Ayala said with a smile.

"That sounds nice Greg. I have a feeling that I'll probably be doing the same." Chakotay said quietly.

"Why don't you get some sleep Tay. You sound like you're fighting to stay awake." Tommy said with concern.

"Okay. I think I will." Chakotay said, then his eyes drifted closed.

"What about you two?" Ayala asked quietly.

Tommy looked at Greg curiously, then said, "I don't know yet. It's a little more complicated for me than most people."

"Things tend to be complicated if you let them be. When you strip away the things that don't really matter, most things end up being quite simple." Geron said quietly.

Tommy nodded that he could accept that reasoning.

"Lieutenant Paris, I don't know how you did it, but the security personnel not only checked out to be in good health, but also seemed to be in good spirits. I expected them to be disturbed by yesterday's developments." The Doctor said as he looked over Ayala's readings.

"Lieutenant Ayala, I'm releasing you to your cabin. Return here in three days and I'll see if you're fit to return to duty." The Doctor said professionally.

"Lieutenant Paris..." The Doctor said as he quickly scanned Tommy with the medical tricorder.

"I'm showing signs of fatigue and slight dehydration from the anti-toxin. I'm declaring you fit for duty but recommending that you take the rest of the day off and drink lots of fluids." The Doctor said firmly.

"I'll see if the Captain can spare me." Tommy said while internally urging Tom to come to the front to deal with the Doctor.

The Doctor moved to Chakotay's bed and checked the readings.

"How is he?" Tommy asked with concern.

"Sleeping. As soon as he awakens, he'll be released to his cabin." The Doctor

said carefully.

"He woke up for a few minutes before you came over." Tommy said quickly.

"He appears to need the rest, so next time he wakes up, I'll release him." The Doctor said seriously.

"Thank you Doctor." Tommy said quietly as he looked at Chakotay with concern.

The Doctor looked curiously at Tommy's subdued mood, then hurried away to check on his other patients.

"You love him don't you?" Greg asked quietly.

Tommy slowly nodded, then said, "But it couldn't work. It wouldn't be fair to Chakotay."

"That's his decision to make, not yours." Geron said seriously.

Tommy looked at Geron with a considering look, then nodded.

* * * * *

"I've got to go to work." Harry said with a whine as he approached Tommy's side.

Tom automatically moved to the front and said, "I thought you'd at least get a day off."

"Yeah. It looks like we're going to have a very long day." Harry said irritably.

"Um, Har. The Doc says I should take the day off." Tom said reluctantly.

"I swear, the Doctor has it in for me. It has to be personal..." Harry began to rant.

Tom glanced at Geron and Ayala who had been watching the exchange and gave them a wink before walking with Harry out of the Sickbay.

* * * * *

After everyone had taken their seats for the morning briefing, Lieutenant Paris noticed the empty chair where Commander Chakotay normally sat.

Even though he knew that the Commander would be fine, his absence was felt during the meeting.

After completing the morning business and a discussion of the previous day's events, the Captain asked, "Is there anything else?"

"I have something." Lieutenant Paris said carefully.

"Yes Lieutenant, what can I do for you?" Janeway asked curiously.

"The Doctor has declared me fit for duty but recommends that I take the day off." Lieutenant Paris said formally.

"I think Ensign Baytart would appreciate the time at the helm. Considering everything you went through yesterday, I'm sure you've earned it. Just be available in case we encounter anything unexpected." Captain Janeway said carefully.

"Thank you Captain. I will." Lieutenant Paris said formally.

"If there's nothing else, we're dismissed. Lieutenant Paris, enjoy your day." Captain Janeway said as she stood.

"Thank you Captain." Lieutenant Paris said quietly, then looked at Chakotay's empty chair again as he got up to leave.

* * * * *

Tommy tried to relax in his cabin, but within half an hour, he was certain that he wouldn't be able to relax without knowing how Chakotay was doing.

A trip to the sickbay revealed that Chakotay had already gone to his cabin.

With mounting anxiety, Tom hurried to Chakotay's cabin, knowing that talking with Chakotay would be the only thing that would allow him to get peaceful rest.

* * * * *

::Be-op::

"Come." Chakotay called from his couch.

Tommy walked in to find Chakotay reclined on the couch, sipping a cup of tea.

"I thought you'd be on the helm right now." Chakotay said quietly as he scooted up on the couch to make a place for Tommy to sit.

Tommy automatically hurried to Chakotay's side and sat down.

"What's bothering you?" Chakotay asked with concern.

"I don't know. It's like I have this cauldron of emotions in me that's bubbling and... I'm sorry, you don't need this right now. You need your rest." Tommy said in a tired voice.

"I'll rest better if I know that you're okay. Come here and tell me what's going on." Chakotay said and pulled Tom into a gentle one armed hug.

Tommy relaxed against Chakotay's chest and quietly said, "I really don't know. Everything was fine when I woke up this morning but since then it feels like everything is just on the edge of going out of control."

"You look tired, maybe if you get some sleep it will all sort itself out." Chakotay said gently.

"Maybe." Tommy said uncertainly and closed his eyes.

* * * * *

Several hours later Tommy awoke to find himself still laying on Chakotay's chest.

Chakotay felt the movement but remained quiet.

Tommy felt different, not knowing what was wrong, but certain that something was.

"Tay? Are you awake?" Tommy finally whispered.

"Yes. How are you feeling now?" Chakotay asked with concern at Tommy's hesitant tone.

"I... I think something happened." Tommy said in a shaky voice.

"Can you be more specific?" Chakotay asked quietly.

"I'm... alone." Tommy said in a hollow voice.

"How do you feel?" Chakotay asked as he hugged Tommy more tightly.

"Scared." Tommy said honestly.

A long moment of silence stretched between them as Tommy tried to understand what he was feeling.

"Tommy?" Chakotay finally said.

"Hmmm?"

"You're not gone." Chakotay whispered.

"I noticed." Tommy responded hesitantly.

"What's bothering you?" Chakotay asked with increasing concern.

"I... for just a minute this morning... I wished for this." Tommy said as tears began to fall down his cheeks.

"You wished that you were the only one? That the others would go away?" Chakotay asked carefully.

Tommy nodded as the tears continued to fall.

"It's okay Tommy. This probably means that you don't need the others anymore, they're not gone, they're just a part of you now." Chakotay said soothingly.

"No, they're not. They're gone." Tommy said in despair.

"Do you think you can still be a daredevil pilot?" Chakotay asked carefully.

"Huh?"

"Do you still have flyboy's skills?" Chakotay asked as he gently coaxed Tommy to face him.

After a moment of thought, Tommy reluctantly said, "Yeah."

"How about the others?"

"Yeah, it's all here." Tommy said slowly.

"And is it at war with you."

"No, it's just a part of me, available for me to use when I need it." Tommy said cautiously, still not able to believe that it was a good thing.

"Right answer."

"What?"

"That's just how it's supposed to be."

Tommy considered, then asked, "If there is a reason for all this, do you think this is it? To bring me out in front of the defenses where I can call them up when I need them instead of hiding behind them?"

"That's as good an answer as any." Chakotay said frankly.

A long moment of silence fell between the two as they held on to each other and thought about what had happened.

"Tay?"

"Hmmm?"

"Can I kiss you?" Tommy asked with a tremble of fear in his voice.

"Absolutely."

Tommy lifted his head up and gave Tay a gentle kiss on the lips.

It was hesitant and chaste, and yet, somehow perfect.

After the kiss, Tommy rested his head back on Chakotay's shoulder and fell back to sleep.

* * * * *

"Chak?" Tom asked seriously.

Chakotay woke at the sound and quietly asked, "Tom? Is that you?"

"Yeah. Sorry about going away like that." Tom said shyly.

"What happened?" Chakotay asked in shock.

"Tommy was getting overloaded. It's like all of us were growing and our emotions were wearing him down. It reached a saturation point or something and we sort of merged for a little bit and absorbed each other's memories. It looked like we were going to reintegrate until Flyboy came up with a way that we could take the pressure off Tommy." Tom said seriously.

"How's that?" Chakotay asked curiously.

"He built himself a room in here. When he disappeared, Lou and I went

looking for him. We kind of got pulled into his room for a while and couldn't get out. We were completely shielded in there and couldn't let Tommy know what was going on. But we finally figured it out and now we're back and everything is fine. In fact, we're going to build rooms of our own. We're even going to build one for Tommy just so he'll have a place to go while one of us is out front." Tom said happily.

"Are you aware of what happened while you were gone?" Chakotay asked cautiously.

"You mean between you and Tommy? Yeah, Tommy told us." Tom said with a smile.

"We thought you had all been integrated back into Tommy." Chakotay said with concern.

"It's okay Chak. I'm not comfortable with certain physical acts, but now I have a room that I can go to while you're doing stuff like that." Tom said quietly.

"But are you really okay with that?" Chakotay asked curiously.

"Chak. If it was anyone else, I think I'd have a big problem with it. But since it's you, I have no problem at all." Tom said seriously.

"So what are the rest of you going to do now?" Chakotay asked cautiously.

"We'll come out and do our thing just like before. The only difference is now that we've melded or merged or whatever it was, we won't have to be switching out constantly. All of us are capable of using each other's skills. Whoever is driving can take care of things while the others are in their rooms." Tom said with a happy smile.

"What are you going to do in your room?" Chakotay asked gently.

Tom smiled and said, "Well, mine is going to have a pool table. The next time the four of us team up, you can just leave Harry and B'El to me."

"I'll remember that." Chakotay said with a fond smile.

"Chak. We got together and figured something out that made everything make sense. I'll let Tommy tell you about that. I just came out here to explain this to you because I understand what happened a little better than he does."

Tom said seriously.

"Thanks for explaining it. I'll try to arrange a counseling session on the holodeck for us later this week." Chakotay said with a smile.

"Just say when and I'll be there." Tom said with a grin, then the look faded to the gentle smile of Tommy.

"How are you doing?" Chakotay asked with concern.

"Wonderful. I really thought I'd lost them." Tommy said as he cuddled close to Chakotay's chest.

Chakotay smiled at Tommy's happiness.

"Tom says that you've figured some things out." Chakotay said as he held Tommy gently.

"Yeah, we all got together and worked out what happened and what we're going to do next." Tommy said peacefully.

"Can you tell me about it, or is it private?" Chakotay asked cautiously.

Tommy chuckled and said, "I'm going to tell you, and I hope you're going to like it."

Chakotay snuggled Tommy to his side and waited.

"Well, I guess what it comes down to is that I'm just one person." Tommy said in thought.

"Okay." Chakotay said hesitantly.

"Up to now we've been thinking that I'm the main personality that was hiding behind the other three because they're my defenses." Tommy said carefully.

"And they're not?" Chakotay asked cautiously.

"No. Tom is our public face for everyone else to see. Lou is our dedication and duty and our professional life. Gene... Um, that's Flyboy's name, he's kind of our security man. He prepares for the worst case and makes sure that he's able to handle whatever challenges we face. I'm our private, romantic face. I'm the one who has real, personal relationships for us." Tommy said happily.

"So they're looking at our relationship as your contribution to all their lives?" Chakotay asked curiously.

"Yes. And I really like that feeling. Each of us has his own job and own purpose. We're separate people, but we all make a contribution to the whole. I'm no more or less important than any of the others." Tommy said happily.

"The only thing that bothers me about all this is that I don't understand why it happened." Chakotay said as he pulled Tommy to snuggle into his side.

"Oh that. Tom remembered that while we were talking. Back on Fennis II he met a woman who offered to help him find clarity." Tommy said casually.

"Clarity?" Chakotay asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I was a jumble, a swirl of four different personalities who were vague and undefined, sometimes working against each other. Now I'm me in a way that I could never have imagined. I think I'm happier than I ever could have been the other way." Tommy said with a peaceful smile.

"As long as you're happy, that's all I need to know." Chakotay said and moved in for a kiss.

Tommy held Chakotay tightly as the kiss became more passionate and peace radiated through his soul.

-Thirty Years Later-

"Tommy?" Chakotay called as he walked in the front door of their house.

"In the kitchen Tay." Tommy called out.

Chakotay smiled as he caught the aroma of something cooking.

"Something smells good." Chakotay smiled as he walked into the kitchen.

"I thought for a while that I wasn't going to be able to get the ingredients." Tommy said, then dipped some soup out with a large spoon and presented it to Chakotay.

"Does this have anything to do with that call from customs?" Chakotay asked curiously, then blew on the soup to cool it a little before tasting it.

"That's right. The Dorvan customs officials didn't know what to think of the eggplants." Tommy said with a smile.

After taking a taste, Chakotay hesitantly asked, "Ratatouille?"

"That's right. I thought it would be the perfect food for today." Tommy said with a grin.

"Today? What's today?" Chakotay asked cautiously.

Tommy looked at him incredulously, and slowly said, "Thirty years ago today is when we got together."

"Are you sure? I thought that was next week." Chakotay asked hesitantly.

"Yes I'm sure. And don't pretend like you didn't remember because I can read you like a book Captain Chakotay." Tommy said with a grin.

"I never had a chance, did I?" Chakotay said with a chuckle.

"Nope. Grab the French bread." Tommy said happily, then started to ladle the ratatouille into large bowls.

Chakotay picked up the loaf of bread, then followed Tommy to the dining room.

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"Perfect. Better than I remember it." Chakotay said as he finished his food.

"We're not done yet." Tommy said with a smile, then produced two slices of chocolate cake from under a cover on the sideboard.

"You thought of everything." Chakotay said happily.

"I just thought it would be nice for us to celebrate our anniversary with the first meal we ever ate together." Tommy said gently.

A knock on the door interrupted any further conversation.

Chakotay didn't make any move to get up, so Tommy got up from the table to answer the door.

Tommy opened the door to find their oldest son and their first grandson looking back expectantly.

"Kole?" Tommy asked with surprise.

"Happy anniversary Papa Tommy. We're not too early are we?" Kolopak

asked curiously.

"No, you have perfect timing, we just finished eating. And how's my little Koty today?" Tommy asked as he knelt down to pick up the four year old boy.

"Hi Paw Paw Tommy, can I talk to Paw Paw Lou?" Koty asked hopefully.

"Anything you want." Tommy said as he hugged the boy, then his expression changed to one of curiosity.

"Paw Paw Lou. You member the story you told me bout Uncle Terry and Uncle Doug and Aunt Karla and Uncle Milo? I drew a picture!" Koty said quickly, then pulled the picture out of his pocket.

Lou looked at the picture, then said, "Come on in the living room so you can show your Paw Paw Chakotay too."

"Kay!" Koty said cheerfully.

* * * * *

Chakotay and Lou watched as Koty pointed out every feature on the picture and retold the story that he'd been told from his four year old point of view.

"What's that?" Lou asked curiously as he pointed to a blobby figure at the side.

"That's the Doctor." Koty said seriously.

Chakotay smiled and said, "Looks just like him."

There was another knock on the door, and Lou suspected that he knew who it was.

He gave Koty a quick kiss on the top of the head, then went to answer it.

* * * * *

"Hi Neesie." Lou said gently as he pulled his daughter into a hug.

"Papa Lou? I thought you'd be resting after working all day." Denise said happily.

"Koty wanted to show me something... Where's Kimmy?" Lou asked as he looked around.

"In the ground car. She's in a mood." Denise said with an exasperated look.

"Let me see if I can talk her out of it." Lou said with a gentle smile.

"Sure. Go ahead. Make me look like an incompetent parent." Denise said dramatically.

"If you insist." Lou said with a chuckle and a wink, then walked to the ground car in the driveway.

"Kimmy, It's Paw Paw Lou. Don't you want to come in and visit with us?" Lou asked quietly as he got in on the other side of the ground car.

"Mommy's making me wear a dress!" Kimmy said indignantly with her arms crossed across her chest.

Lou glanced over his shoulder to see that his daughter couldn't hear, then whispered, "I have your play clothes in the spare room. If you want to go change, I'll keep your Mommy busy."

"Thank you Paw Paw Lou. I love you." Kimmy said and hugged him tightly.

"When you're done changing, Koty's here too. You two can play in the spare room if you like." Lou said, then gave her a quick kiss.

"Okay!" Kimmy said happily as she jumped out of the car and ran for the house.

Denise chuckled and shook her head as she walked slowly to the car where Lou was getting out.

"I don't know how you do it. In two seconds you changed her mood from dark to light." Denise said with a gentle smile.

"I had a few years of practice with a moody little girl." Lou said with a knowing grin.

"I was *never* like that." Denise said firmly.

"I don't know, I seem to remember a little girl in a horribly foul mood because she had to dress up to see her uncle Tem be ordained as a Vedek." Lou said slowly.

"You'll never let me live that down, will you?" Denise asked in a grumble.

"No. It's my job to remind you when Kimmy does something and you forget that you did *exactly* the same thing." Lou said frankly.

"Papa Gene would have let me get away with it." Denise said absently as she turned to walk back toward the house.

"Maybe, but Papa Gene would have gotten Kimmy out of the car by taking it out for a spin with her in it. By the time they got back Kimmy would have been begging to go inside." Lou said with a chuckle.

"He always made going for groceries an adventure." Denise said with a laugh.

"Your Papa Tommy wants to come out and talk to you." Lou said gently.

"Okay. It was good talking to you Papa Lou, I love you." Denise said and gave him a quick kiss.

"Love you too Neesie." Lou said gently, then closed his eyes to let the transition happen.

* * * * *

"Hi Baby Girl. It's good to see you." Tommy said and gave Denise a tight hug.

"It's good to see you too Papa Tommy." Denise said happily.

"How's Jordan?" Tommy asked casually as he led the way back into the house.

"He's fine. He wanted to be here today but it's the middle of the harvest season and you can't put off harvesting the jumja sap." Denise said in an apologetic tone.

"Don't worry. I've lived on Dorvan long enough to understand how it works." Tommy said as he put an arm around her.

"After this harvest, we're going to try to make a little brother or sister for Kimmy." Denise said quietly.

"That's wonderful. I think you two are financially secure enough and you have no shortage of love to give. I think this is the perfect time." Tommy said gently as they walked into the living room.

* * * * *

"Kole was just saying that he and Gina are talking about having another child." Chakotay said happily.

"You two always did love a good competition." Tommy said to his daughter at his side.

Chakotay and Kolopak looked at them curiously.

"Jordan and I are talking about it too." Denise said shyly as she walked to Chakotay and gave him a hug.

A glazed look came over Tommy's eyes and everyone noticed as his expression changed.

"I'm so proud of you two. Helping you two grow up to be happy responsible adults is the most important and rewarding thing I've ever done in my life." Tom said honestly.

"I couldn't agree more." Chakotay said as he stood and walked to Tom's side.

"Thanks Papa Tom. You two gave us the example to follow." Denise said gently.

"That's right. Nobody else I've talked to had parents who let them help pay the bills or help make the choices for the family. When we moved out on our own we understood what our responsibilities were and were able to get our lives on target without the usual mistakes that people make." Kolopak said seriously.

"I think it's because you showed us what it means to be in love. Even when you had arguments, instead of trying to hide it from us, you'd explain what the problem was and how you solved it. I don't know if Jordan and I would have made it if it weren't for your example. His parents always tried to hide their arguments so he didn't know what to do when we had a disagreement." Denise said quietly.

"I'm sure Greg and Callah did their best." Chakotay said gently.

"I'm not saying that they were bad parents. I love them both. What I'm trying to say is that because you gave me an example to follow, a little argument doesn't blow up into something that could threaten our relationship." Denise

said seriously.

"I'm glad you think we did a good job." Tom said as he hugged Chakotay to his side.

"Where are the kids?" Kolopak asked as he looked around the room.

"Lou sent them into the spare room to play." Tom said peacefully.

"They're too quiet." Kolopak said as he hopped up off the couch.

"Kimmy isn't even this quiet when she sleeps." Denise said as she raced her brother to reach the hallway.

After a moment, Denise called, "Dad, Papa, I think you should see this."

Chakotay and Tom shared a look, then walked down the hallway to the spare room.

* * * * *

"Isn't that sweet?" Denise asked with a chuckle.

"Where's a camera?" Kolopak asked his fathers quickly as they passed.

Chakotay and Tom walked past them to peek in the room and saw Koty and Kimmy playing like they were having a tea party. Koty was wearing Kimmy's dress from earlier and Kimmy was wearing her play clothes.

"Prime blackmail material when he's ready for his first date." Tom said with a smirk.

"Or when he has kids of his own." Chakotay said with a grin.

Tom's eyes opened wide, then he ran into the bedroom he shared with Chakotay.

Denise and Kolopak looked at each other curiously.

A moment later, Tom raced back out of the bedroom carrying a photo album.

"Oh no. What do you have there?" Kolopak asked cautiously.

"Blackmail material." Tom said as he opened the book.

Kolopak hesitantly peeked in the book and cringed when he realized what he was looking at.

"Kole, when you were about Koty's age, you got the idea that you and Denise were twin sisters." Tom said as he tried to restrain his chuckles.

Kolopak looked at the picture again and saw that he and Denise were wearing identical dresses, identical makeup and had their hair styled the same way.

"Kole, listen." Tom said at the crestfallen look on his son's face.

Kolopak hesitantly looked at Tom.

"You turned out fine." Tom said seriously.

Kolopak looked at the picture again, then back at his son who was oblivious to what was happening in the hallway.

"Thanks Papa Tom." Kolopak whispered, then started walking back down the hall.

Tom glanced at Chakotay and raised an eyebrow.

Chakotay nodded, then ran to get the camera.

* * * * *

"Thanks for coming. You two made this the perfect anniversary." Tom said happily.

Denise kissed and hugged Tom, then said, "Drag Papa Gene out here so I can give him a kiss. I haven't talked to him all night."

"You got it." Tom said then gave a quick hug and kiss to Kolopak before he retreated.

"How's my girl?" Gene asked in a gentle voice.

"I'm good. I just didn't have a chance to visit with you tonight. How are you doing?" Denise asked with a content smile.

"I'm having a good time working with Tom and Lou on redesigning the simulators for Starfleet. It keeps me sharp." Gene finished with a smile.

"I'm glad. Do you have a kiss for me before I leave?" Denise asked quietly.

"I always have one for my girl." Gene said, then gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek.

"Thanks Papa Gene." Denise said with a loving smile.

"I agree with what Tom was saying earlier. I'm proud of you, both of you." Gene said as he looked at Kolopak seriously.

"I know Papa Gene. You don't say it a lot, but I know." Kolopak said peacefully.

Gene nodded, then said, "I love you both. You'd better get your kids and get out of here now so Tommy and Chakotay can bump uglies."

Kolopak broke out into laughter as Denise turned away to hide her embarrassed smile.

"Should I tell them what you do on the holodeck besides working on simulators?" Chakotay asked Gene carefully.

"Fine, fine. I'm outta here. I was just trying to help." Gene said with an unrepentant smile, then faded.

"How rude." Tommy said as he suddenly found himself thrust into control.

Chakotay pulled Tommy to his side and gave him a slow, gentle kiss.

"I think that's our cue to leave." Kolopak whispered.

Denise nodded her agreement and followed.

* * * * *

Before Tommy and Chakotay knew what happened, Kolopak and Denise had gathered their children and were ushering them out to the cars.

Tommy and Chakotay held each other in the slight chill of the Dorvan evening as they watched their children drive away.

"Chak." Tom said hesitantly.

"Tom." Chakotay responded quietly.

"It's just as beautiful as the first time I saw it." Tom said as he looked at the setting sun.

"So how does this compare to your vision of the future?" Chakotay asked gently as he held Tom close.

"It's better in more ways than I could have imagined back then. I love our kids, our friends... our life." Tom said peacefully.

"I agree. That night on the holodeck, I really believed that I couldn't achieve the level of emotional intimacy to have a relationship with a man, little did I know that I was going to be having a relationship with four of you." Chakotay finished with a smile.

"And you've done it perfectly Chak. We all love you and are completely happy here." Tom said in a dreamy whisper as he looked at the darkening Dorvan sky.

After a long moment of silence between them, Chakotay quietly asked, "Do you think the old woman back on that planet had any idea something like this would come from you finding clarity?"

Tom considered the question for a moment, then said, "I don't know Chak. But I hope that she helped lots of people the way that she helped me. I can't think of any other way I'd want to be."

"I agree. You're perfect just the way you are."

The End